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Higher Education, Professionals and Employers: A Case Study of Work-Based Learning Programme in England

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Background

Background Knowledge

This paper is an empirical case study of the experiences of skilled professionals returning to higher education institutes (HEIs) to study after having practical experience in their areas. It is based on a work-based learning master programme (WBLMP) at a university in England. The WBLMP is not only a work-based but also an online Masters programme aiming at providing flexible learning environment to professionals with significant work experience in the creative and media industries. A WBLMP in creative and media industries is rare in HEIs in England. It is designed, as a part-time MA programme, to run over a fifteen-month period. Considerable commitment from students and the support of employers are required. It is in its third year of operation and has enrolled 40 students in total. These features make this programme a mixture of work-based learning, on-line and life-long learning. Therefore, WBLMP is worth of studying.

Research Questions

Research Questions

Different professionals may have different approaches to WBL. There are various case studies related to WBL in the field of social work, health studies and education studies. However, there is no relevant study in the area of creative and media industries.

This empirical study investigates learner's experience of balancing study and work and their feedbacks to the programme and the online learning environment. Moreover, this study incorporates the tutor's reflection.

The aims of this study are stated as follows:

1. The reasons why these media professionals would like to return to higher education;
2. The perceived benefits and limitations of WBLMP;
3. How professionals can be better supported by employers while they learn;
4. What lessons can be learned from this case study.
5. The reflection from WBLMP tutor.

Methods

Methodological issues:

1 The participants:

A total of 9 participants agreed to be interviewed. The effort to make a balanced view of WBLMP can be found from the interviewees' various backgrounds. Moreover, these interviewees are chosen from different cohorts so that a broader picture can be presented from those who have already completed the programme, those who are currently doing it and those who are going to embark on it. Therefore, this study can present a more balanced view of the expectations and personal feeling of professionals in their various stages of studying.

2 The data collection:

The data-collection method was a set of in-depth and semi-structured interviews which included specific discussions of their experiences of the programme. This interview method was chosen to gain data from the WBLMP students because it provided a very good opportunity to interact with them and to extract their experiences. Interview data is the outcome of human interactions and is not like that obtained from documents and visual images, which are external to individuals (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000).

The conducted interviews were between 30 minutes to 40 minutes depending on their responses. The interviews were recorded. This also allowed for, their broader life-world such as work and the support of their employers to be explored. These interviews were analysed according to the key themes that had previously been identified.

3 Ethical issues:

In the beginning of this project, we contacted 16 possible interviewees and secured 9 in the end. For ethical consideration, we contacted the potential interviewees through email and telephone. Once permission was obtained, an exact interview date was agreed between interviewer and interviewees. This ensured we had the participants' consent.

Mapping of Literature

The literature will come from three different dimensions including: 'Work-based and online learning', 'Work-based and lifelong learning' and the 'characteristics of Work-based learning'.

Frame

Analytical framework

With a textual analysis of the curriculum, instructional medium, programme design and implementation, the initial attempts of setting up this Master programme can be explicitly stated. The readers will have a better understanding of this programme.

This is an action research because two of the authors are involving in this Master programme. This research serves the function of reflecting on the implementation as well as an evaluation of this Master programme. From the interview data, various main themes relevant to our research questions will be identified. We will focus on the participants' feedback on the on-line based WBL programme, the employer-employee relation during their study, and their feedback and reflection of the whole learning process.

We (two of the author) also reflect on the programme based on the participants' responses and our own experience. Meanwhile, the leading author who is not involving in this Master programme but has reasonable understanding about WBL and the creative and media industries plays a crucial role of providing outsider's perspective. It is a way of avoiding the possible insider's bias. Our attempt is to provide a various perspectives from different angels.

Research findings

Possible contribution to the field

As Boud & Solomon (2001, p. 215) points out, 'it is clear that although work-based learning represents a substantial and provocative innovation, it has not been the subject of much research'. Therefore, the contribution of this paper is, firstly, on enriching the current research in WBL, especially in the field of creative and media industry.

Also, how the new technology functions and enhances learning in WBL is another key dimension that will be addressed in this paper. Our research and reflection will offer a useful case study in exploring the complicated relationship in WBL programmes. Finally, the tutor's reflection is incorporated as a response to the learners' feedbacks to the programme.