



TEN STEPS

Setting-up, validating and evaluating work-based learning modules and work experience using ECTS-credits focussing on work placements

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Setting-up, validating and evaluating work-based learning modules and work experience using ECTS-credits focussing on work placements¹

Robert Wagenaar and Ivan Svetlik²

Introduction

Setting up a placement, traineeship or entrepreneurship modules or learning units require a clear procedure. This paper offers a step-by-step approach to define, validate and evaluate both the design and its implementation. It offers insight how to select the set of competences and to formulate these as measurable learning outcomes for a specific mode of work-based learning (WBL), to relate these to the set of activities available and required in a practical setting, e.g. the work place, to validate / check the match between learning outcomes and assignments and to evaluate the experience. Key in this process is the need to design the experience in such a way that students can achieve the intended learning outcomes in the time reserved for this mode of learning expressed in ECTS credits.

The focus in this guideline paper is on the work placement and in particular the integrated approach. The integrated approach is the most advanced form of a placement model, because it makes the WBL experience a regulated part of a degree programme.

This tool should be read as an introduction of the much more comprehensive WEXHE work package report on work placements / integrated approach.³ This document and other relevant ones have been published on the WEXHE website and can be downloaded at <https://wexhe.eu>. In particular the full work package report offers the detail which is absent in this short guideline.

Ten Steps

The tool distinguishes ten steps for the successful introduction and implementation of work placements as an example of WBL:

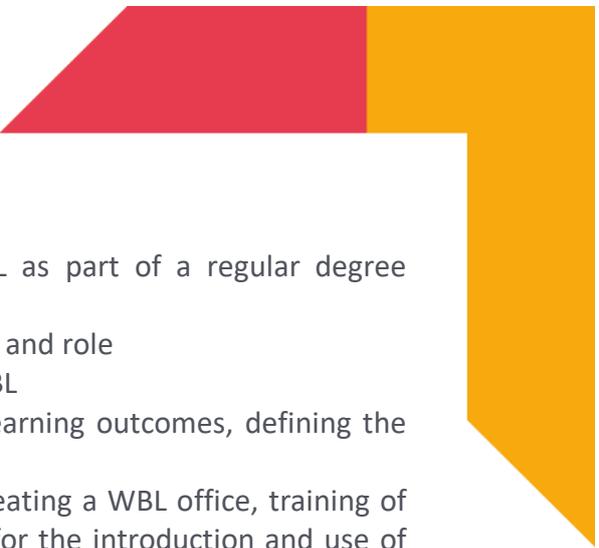
Step 1: Creating a robust basis for the introduction of WBL

¹ The authors are very grateful to dr. Maria Yarosh, researcher at the International Tuning Academy (University of Groningen), for substantially enhancing an earlier version of the text.

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Ivan Svetlik is a professor of Human Resources at the Faculty of Sociology at the University of Ljubljana. His research is in Public Administration, Public Policy and Political Economy. He has been Minister of Labour, Family and Social Affairs of Slovenia (2008-2012) and Rector of his University (2013-2017).

³ The full WEXHE work packages reports for all three modes of WBL, that is work placements, traineeships and entrepreneurship (including the sub-package on work placements / integrated approach which are the basis for this short guideline), have been prepared by prof. Ivan Svetlik (University of Ljubljana) as the principal author with contributions of dr. Tomaž Deželan (University of Ljubljana), André Perusso (MUAS), Anna Silvius, Ingrid van der Meer and prof. Robert Wagenaar (University of Groningen).

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- Step 2: Raising awareness about the added value of WBL as part of a regular degree programme
- Step 3: Positioning the WBL window in the programme: place and role
- Step 4: Deciding the number of ECTS credits to allocate to WBL
- Step 5: Composing the list of competences and intended learning outcomes, defining the assessment model and criteria
- Step 6: Preparing the staff, e.g. appointing special staff / creating a WBL office, training of mentors and tutors and producing support documentation for the introduction and use of WBL, for HE staff, students and WBL providers
- Step 7: Designing the course unit meant to prepare students for WBL
- Step 8: Including the WBL component in the degree programme and informing students about this option/programme element.
- Step 9: Implementing the WBL component, e.g. identifying and approving placements, instructing supervisors of WBL providers
- Step 10: Assessing WBL and Evaluating the WBL component done by staff, students and providers.

Step 1: Creating a robust basis for the introduction of work-based learning

Before starting a discussion about WBL it is important to confirm that there is a robust basis for its implementation. Such a basis is highly facilitated by programmes which have made explicit that:

1. generic competences / skills are trained and developed alongside subject specific knowledge and skills;
2. they focus on the learning of the student, which implies the paradigm change from expert driven education (knowledge transfer and acquisition) to the student-centred and active learning approach has been made.

Such programmes are outcome-based and intend to combine the learning of knowledge and skills of a particular field of study with the development of generic competences – those relevant for all graduates, regardless of their specialisation. The focus is on the relevance of learning to make the learner competent to operate successfully and appropriately in society, always respecting the joy of learning.

From outcome-based degree programmes it is expected that the knowledge and skills acquired are practiced by offering tailored tasks and assignments as part of the learning process. This training takes place in the setting of the higher education (HE) institution, but might involve external experts.

The full work package report for work placements / integrated approach offers an overview of generic competences to develop and the actual means required in the setting of a HE programme. See table 4: <http://wexhe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Work-Placement-Package-Integrated-Approach.pdf>.

WBL represents a next step: practicing/integrating what has been learned in an actual workplace, that is outside the HE institution.

Summing up, a robust basis is created when a programme aims to equip students with generic competences (alongside subject-specific ones), adopts a student-centred approach in curriculum design and implementation, and seeks to provide students with opportunities to consolidate/further practice the target behaviours beyond those already offered through focussed tasks and assignments carried out within the setting of the HE institution and thus reach the associated intended learning outcomes.

Step 2: Raising awareness about the added value of WBL as part of a regular degree programme

The introduction of WBL requires awareness of its added value among academic staff, supporting staff and students. The full WEXHE work package report on placements offers the arguments why WBL is a real contribution to the learning process of individual students.

To assure the level of awareness and a positive mindset, it is thought necessary to establish a common understanding of WBL and to define what it implies for the degree programme(s) involved and more specifically for preparing the graduates for their societal role. Work placements can be part of a bachelor and/or a master programme. These will have different intended learning outcomes because of the difference in level of learning involved. WBL requires active support from its organisers/coordinators, but also from the academic staff that will act as tutors/mentors of the students.

Work placements are meant to give students opportunities to apply in a workplace environment what has been learned and practiced in the higher education setting. Such learning corresponds to the components of *skills* and of *autonomy and responsibility* as included in the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF for LLL, see below).

Summing up, the added value of WBL is to permit students to truly achieve and demonstrate the achievement of intended learning outcomes corresponding to the skills and the autonomy and responsibility levels as defined in the EQF for LLL. It is crucial for all those who must make this experience a success – academic and supporting staff, as well as the students themselves – to be fully aware of what WBL contributes to the general goal of reaching the intended programme learning outcomes, of students attaining the desired graduate profile by the end of their degree.

Step 3: Positioning the WBL window in the programme: place and role

The inclusion of WBL as a core component requires a formal decision process which involves different decision making bodies of the higher education institution. An important decision to be made is whether the WBL unit / module will be defined as *obligatory* or *optional*. It is advised to position the work placement in the final year of the programme, and, preferably – where this exists – just before the time reserved for preparing a final thesis or report. As other learning units, the WBL experience can be perceived as input for the final paper to be prepared as the last capstone of the programme. The work placement should also be perceived as a capstone programme element, contributing significantly to the achievement of the programme learning outcomes.

Summing up, it is important to conceptually define the role of the WBL in relation to other programme elements, such as the programme learning outcomes and the final thesis/report, where this exists. Accordingly, the place of the WBL in the sequence of the programme elements is to be decided, as well as the nature of WBL as a programme element: obligatory or optional.

Step 4: Deciding the number of ECTS credits to allocate to WBL

Related to the inclusion and positioning of the work placement in the programme, is the number of ECTS credits to allocate to this mode of learning. In deciding the number of credits the length, but also the nature (e.g. a professional or research driven) of the programme plays a role. A three or four year bachelor programme (180-240 ECTS credits), allows for allocating more credits than a one year master. A factor to take into account is also how much practical learning can already be done in class as an introduction to the actual work experience.

It is suggested to make the unit not smaller than 10 ECTS and not larger than 30 ECTS. Below the minimum number of 10 ECTS credits, the contribution towards the learning outcomes will be very limited. 10 ECTS credits reflect approximately 275 working hours, which involves 6 working weeks, plus the preparation of the placement before its start and of a report to be drawn up by the student afterwards to reflect on the experience and consolidate/evidence the learning. A timeframe of less than 10 ECTS credits should be perceived as an introduction towards the working environment, and should not be named work placement.

A placement of more than 30 ECTS credits (equal to approximately a full-time placement of 6 months including holidays) will contribute to work experience, but – depending on the type of programme – might not add very much anymore to the progress towards the learning outcomes that have been defined. Experience shows, that the generic competences identified (see step 5), and the learning outcomes intended, can be achieved in a fixed amount of time. In case the WBL exceeds 30 ECTS credits, a hybrid model of learning and working is applied, which is called dual learning.

As an alternative to the hybrid model, the space reserved for WBL in a programme can be more than 30 ECTS, but in such a case it is suggested to make a distinction between an introduction towards the work environment and the actual work placement. One can also imagine two work placements, which are scheduled in different (academic) years; the first work placement concentrating on knowledge and skills related learning outcomes/competence elements (earlier in the programme) and the second on further skills development and autonomy and responsibility (at the end of the programme).

Work placements having a workload of 10 to 15 ECTS credits can be characterized as short, 20 ECTS credits as typical and 25 to 30 ECTS credits as substantial. When deciding on the size of the unit, it has to be realized that there is a one to one relationship between time – that is the actual working hours spent in the workplace – and the number and level of the learning outcomes that can be planned and intended.

Summing up, it is strongly advised to design WBL experiences with the total student workload of 10 to 30 ECTS credits, including the preparation for the work experience, the work experience and the post-experience reporting. Such WBL will both reflect the effort of all those

involved and remain within the limits a HE programme can accommodate without becoming a hybrid learning experience. It must also be remembered that the total number of ECTS credits allocated to WBL will determine what can and cannot be expected of this programme component in terms of the learning outcomes to be achieved by the students.

Step 5: Composing the list of competence and intended learning outcomes, defining the assessment model and criteria

The WEXHE project has prepared two separate tables – one for the bachelor and one for the master – of generic competences which are perceived by employers as the most important ones in the work place. The tables for work placements / integrated approach both lists the following seven competences, which are related to the Dublin Descriptors (Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area): problem solving and decision making; IT-skills; initiating creative and innovative ideas; teamworking and networking; communication, social relation and negotiation; entrepreneurship and leadership; and independent learning and working, capacity and enthusiasm to learn.

In the tables, drawn up according to the European Qualifications Framework for LLL, three levels of accomplishment are defined for each of the seven generic competences based on the categories *knowledge, skills (application) and autonomy and responsibility*. These categories express progression of learning. The table contains seven times three, that is 21 level statements or standards, which can be applied as the basis of intended learning outcomes in actual degree programmes.

The set should be seen as aspirational. This implies that in practice a selection has to be made. For making this selection the number of ECTS credits should be used as a basis. A placement of 10 to 15 credits can only include learning outcomes statements related to the categories knowledge and skills, because it takes time to simply get acquainted with work and workplace/ working environment, building relations with colleagues and the like. A work placement with a typical length can hold a mixture of learning outcomes of all the three categories. A substantial work placement will allow to cover the highest, most advanced, levels of competence application as included in the table.

When selecting the learning outcomes statements from the table not only the total length of the WBL will be decisive in terms of feasibility. The other key criterium is that of the nature of the tasks and roles students can be expected to perform during the WBL in their particular field of studies. Being informed about the potential employability field and the potential work placements available, it is important to include only learning outcomes statements which can be developed and trained on the basis of tasks and assignments that can be offered. The full work package on placements report offers in table 5⁴ an overview of the means of generic competence development while on placement. It is important to stress that it is presumed that only work placements are approved that can guarantee that the competences and learning outcomes identified and agreed, can actually be developed in the regular tasks / project work to perform at the work place and therefore add substantially to the learning. This implies they are of the appropriate level and sufficiently challenging.

⁴ <http://wexhe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Work-Placement-Package-Integrated-Approach.pdf>.

Therefore, it is important to develop clear guidelines of what is expected from the work placement provider and the supervisor. From a supervisor it is expected that regular meetings take place, starting with an introductory meeting, followed by regular meetings to discuss the experience of both parties, and finishing with a concluding meeting. The placement should allow for full integration in regular work processes and interaction with regular staff.

Be aware that in the context of a work placement, ECTS credits cannot be linked to single learning outcomes because it would be very artificial; they will always reflect a combination of learning outcomes to be achieved, because the key competences to be trained are highly interrelated.

Learning outcomes for WBL are the foundation for what will be assessed. The list of learning outcomes are in practice the assessment criteria. A sophisticated assessment model is based on data/evidence that can be gathered in the meetings to take place before, during and at the end of the WBL experience as well as on the written (intermediate and final) reporting by the stakeholders – the student, the supervisor at the workplace and the mentor/tutor of the HE institution. Other assessment instruments that have been identified are for example: students' records/ diaries/ personal journals on daily/ weekly activities students' physical/ oral/ video presentations of project results and reports and students' self-assessment and peer assessment.

Summing up, as with any other programme element, WBL should be linked to the competences the programme aims to help students develop and the WBL contribution to the whole programme should be expressed in intended learning outcomes (linked to the programme learning outcomes and the learning outcomes of earlier and subsequent programme elements). While WBL brings with it unique developmental opportunities for developing competences employers value most, the question of feasibility – both in terms of the time given to WBL and the exact learning opportunities available in specific work places in which WBL takes place – must not be forgotten. It has to be clear from the onset that the work to perform by the trainee will add substantially to his/her learning. Guidelines should be developed for the placement provider and the supervisor at the work place which guarantee full integration in regular work processes. Once realistic learning outcomes are formulated, they need to be translated into an assessment plan, in which more detailed information about how assessment will be organised is provided (when evidence will be collected, using which tools and who will be assessing the learning with the use of which supporting assessment criteria, as well as how the different assessor's inputs will be brought together to arrive at the final assessment decisions).

Step 6: Preparing the staff, e.g. appointing special staff / creating a WBL office, training of mentors and tutors and producing support documentation for the introduction and use of WBL, for HE staff, students and WBL providers

When a work placement is made an integral part of a degree programme either as an obligatory or as an optional part and is related to ECTS credits, it implies that staff time can be made available and be paid for. If this new mode of learning will involve substantial number of students, it is advised to create a supporting professional infrastructure, such as a WBL office. This office can support a wide range of degree programmes, both at bachelor and

at master level and can be organized at the level of a Faculty or School. Such an office can (and should) work closely together with work placement coordinators appointed for programmes as well as mentors and tutors, who are active as teachers in the programmes involved. The office also develops a relationship with (regular) placement providers. In cases where small number of students will opt for a work placement, the role of coordinator can be taken up by the student advisor.

After the HE staff to be involved is appointed, this staff needs to be made familiar with procedures to apply as well as the documents made available. It is suggested that staff takes notice of the relevant WEXHE documentation related to the type of placement that will be implemented. Procedures as well as documentation should be discussed in staff development workshops involving both teachers – who will act as mentors and/or tutors – and supporting staff who are responsible for the organization and administration.

It is thought important that a shared understanding is developed about what makes a potentially good / high level work placement, in terms of criteria to apply for accepting or refusing a placement proposal. When approving a placement plan there should be guarantees that the intended learning outcomes can be met in the tasks the trainee will be expected to perform and the responsibilities he or she will be offered and that the required setting and facilities are available both organisation (e.g. the availability of a supervisor) and content wise.

Besides preparing staff, it is necessary to make a set of guidelines / brochures for three groups: HE staff, students, and (potential) placement providers. These guidelines offer detail about what is expected from each stakeholder. The documentation should offer clarity about the number of ECTS credits reserved as well as the intended learning outcomes. It might also contain (a) form(s) to complete by the student / HE staff / provider, which can serve as a basis for the work placement plan (contract) to be signed by the stakeholders. Examples of these materials are offered by the WEXHE project at <http://wexhe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Work-Placement-Package-Integrated-Approach.pdf>.

Summing up, it is important to formally appoint members of HE institutions who will be responsible for the WBL – both academic and supporting staff, make provisions for these persons to be paid for this work (to be considered part of their full workload) and for all those involved to be clear about their own tasks and the structure put in place to support WBL implementation. It is strongly recommended to also set up a dedicated WBL office, where the number of students involved in WBL is high. To get all the stakeholders onboard, both staff development sessions and clear guidelines for each stakeholder group have proven key. WEXHE website makes available examples of supporting documentation HE institutions can build on.

Step 7: Designing an introduction programme/course meant to prepare students for WBL

It is suggested to establish a short introduction programme/course (as part of the work placement programme component) to prepare students for a work placement. Such a course should not only explain the added value of WBL to the degree programme, but also include a discussion of the intended learning outcomes, the tasks students are expected to take on, before, during and after the placement experience, and an explanation of the administrative and assessment procedures. As part of the course, students should be asked to formulate



their strengths and weaknesses in terms of self-reflection, and identify a potential labour market area on the basis of their interests. To be able to reach out to potential placement providers, they should be trained in composing a curriculum vitae and in writing a letter of application (motivation). To practice application writing students can be asked to respond to a self-selected job advertisement.

Summing up, to be successful the WBL programme component should start with a preparatory short course which permits to (1) identify the best match between students' strengths, weaknesses and personal interests, on the one hand, and the placements to identify, on the other; (2) prepare students to this new mode of learning and set them for success in getting the most of it; and (3) give students the necessary support in initial communication with placement providers (creating CVs and writing motivation/application letters).

Step 8: Including the WBL component in the degree programme and informing students about this option/programme element

This step is included to remind HE institutions that they need to overtly 'publicise' inclusion of the WBL component into their programmes. This implies including the WBL component in the course catalogue and ensuring students are well aware of the existence of this programme element. It is also strongly advised to prepare and publish a detailed course syllabus, which not only offers a description of what is aimed and intended by the work placement, its learning outcomes, but also mentions the number of ECTS credits allocated, the staff members involved and their specific roles, an outline of the introductory course, general information regarding what is expected from the student in finding an appropriate placement and the assessment model (e.g. intermediate and final oral reporting and a written final report) including the assessment criteria.

Summing up, the WBL component, once designed and introduced, needs to be featured in all programme documentation and every effort should be made to ensure that (prospective) students are fully aware of both the existence and value of and the requirements associated with WBL programme component.

Step 9: Implementing the WBL component, e.g. identifying and approving placement plans, instructing supervisors of WBL providers

There are mainly two models for finding a work placement. The first one is by establishing a work placement bank from which students can select placements which suit their interests and needs. Such a bank is based on pre-arrangements made between the HE institution and placement providers. Depending on the area and type of studies, it might require a considerable investment of the HE staff to collect appropriate placements by contacting enterprises, institutions and organisations. A second model, easier to organise, is to ask students to find a placement themselves by approaching potential placement providers directly, responding to announcements of placements offered and/or by using the social and professional networks of their own, their friends' and relatives'. Going through the process of finding a work placement this way will facilitate finding a job later. Experience shows that HE institutions that have used the learning mode of work placements over a longer period, apply

a mixture of both models, because the work placement bank results from work placements that have successfully been taken by students in the past. It creates itself over time.

For securing appropriate work placements, of crucial importance is the approval procedure of placements and the arrangements made with the providers are of crucial importance. As stated before, there has to be full clarity about what a work placement encompasses. Therefore the intended learning outcomes have to be known to the student when searching / organizing a work placement and have to be shared and discussed between the HE institution representative and the provider / supervisor of the student at the work place at an early moment, but for sure before signing the contractual arrangement - which is based on a work place plan - between provider, HE institution and student. The learning outcomes should be an annex to this contract. They state what is expected to be learned and will be assessed. The placement provider guarantees that the conditions for this learning experience are present.

At this stage also arrangements should be made about financial compensation for the trainee from the provider. In particular for typical and more substantial work placements it is reasonable to compensate a student for additional cost to be made (travel / housing). A fair amount is 50% of the minimum wages.

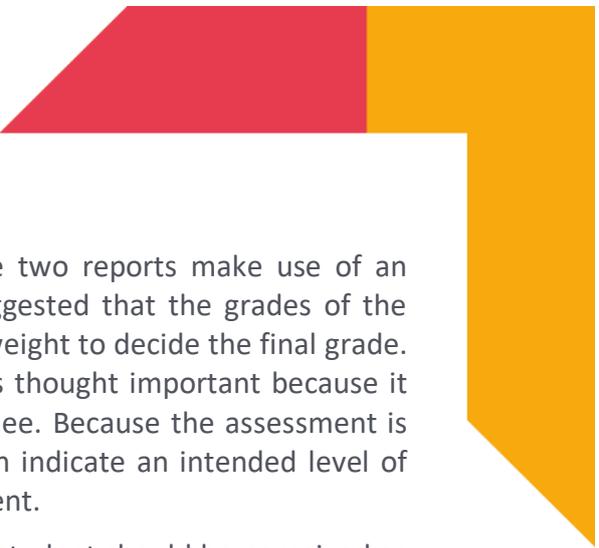
Details and models again are offered by the WEXHE project, and included in the full work packages reports.

Summing up, it is necessary to be clear about the mechanism(s) used to identify suitable placements and about the contractual arrangements that will guarantee – to the extent possible – the learning value of the WBL component and specify the question of the financial compensation for the students for their work.

Step 10: Assessing WBL and Evaluating the WBL component done by staff, students and providers

Distinction has to be made between the assessment of the performance of the trainee and the follow-up evaluation of the work placement experience, although assessment is part of the input for the latter. Both in terms of assessment and evaluation it is strongly advised that at least three meetings take place between the supervisor at the workplace, the teacher acting as mentor/tutor and the trainee: before the start of the work placement period, half way and after finishing the period at the workplace. The first meeting is used to discuss the precise tasks/assignment having the intended learning outcomes in mind. The intermediate meeting is used for progress reporting and to check whether the arrangements made initially are honoured by all parties. The final meeting is used to discuss the work placement experience and is based on a report prepared by the trainee, which follows an agreed fixed format. In this report the student outlines his/her work achievements, checks these against the intended learning outcomes agreed and comments on the cooperation with and support of supervisor and mentor/tutor.

The report and the discussion are the basis for the assessment of the trainee by the mentor of the HE institution. In addition the supervisor at the workplace assesses the performance of the student, using the learning outcomes as a basis. This results in two short assessment



reports. As in the case of the report of the trainee, these two reports make use of an assessment model prepared by the HE institution. It is suggested that the grades of the supervisor and the mentor of the HE institution have equal weight to decide the final grade. Offering an actual grade instead of a fail/pass assessment is thought important because it offers an indication of the level of performance of the trainee. Because the assessment is based on the intended learning outcomes to achieve (which indicate an intended level of performance) there are sufficient indicators for fair assessment.

The final discussion between the supervisor, HE mentor and student should be perceived as a first step in the evaluation of the work placement experience. It can be followed-up by questionnaires tailored towards the three parties involved: students, provider/supervisor and HE institution mentor/tutor.

Reports of trainees and supervisors and mentors of all placements implemented during an academic year, as well as the outcomes of surveys, are input for the evaluation of the WBL experience at macro level. Because use is made of fixed formats for the reporting, work placement experience allows not only for comparison but also for analysing all its aspects. For this analysis, use is made of the Standard and Guidelines for Quality Assurance. See for an explanation of its use the WEXHE website. The macro-analysis will offer indications for success factors and weaker aspects, which can and should be used for strengthening the model applied.

Summing up, it is important not only to assess each WBL experience, but also to evaluate it. While assessment is focused on how well the student has achieved the intended learning outcomes for the WBL component, evaluation focuses on the feedback for those responsible for the WBL at HE institution and the workplace.

In conclusion

In practice, it is important for all the 10 Steps to be observed for a quality WBL to be responsibly incorporated into a HE programme. The order in which a HE institution will need to engage in the process, might, however be different – e.g. starting with Step 1, proceeding to Steps 4 and 5, and then moving forward through Steps 3, 6 and 7, to Steps 2, 6 and 8, and finally 9 and 10. This will completely depend on the current experience of WBL at the level of the HE programme and institution, as well as on internal rules and regulations related to curriculum re-design at organisational and national levels.