



wexhe

Integrating Entrepreneurship and Work
Experience in Higher Education

Work-Based Learning: A Policy Note of the WEXHE Project

Prepared by the Groningen WEXHE team / Robert Wagenaar, project coordinator

Groningen, 2020



Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

PROJECT PARTNERS



This publication is a result of the project that is funded by the European Commission's Erasmus+ Programme, Key Action 2, Knowledge Alliances Projects (Grant agreement: 575683-EPP-1-2016-1-NL-EPPKA2-KA)

The European Commission's support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents, which reflect the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Work-Based Learning: Policy Note of the WEXHE Project

Prepared by Robert Wagenaar, WEXHE project coordinator

Introduction


During the years 2006-2008 the European Commission in conjunction with a group of international experts and in consultation with national authorities, developed the *European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning* (EQF). Its aim and outcome was offering a framework of statements which encompasses all formal but also informal and non-formal learning. It should serve as a key instrument for recognition of what had been learned and could be applied. Initially the framework distinguished three types of learning: 'knowledge', 'skills' and 'competences'. Because the last category led to misunderstanding – since also the first two can be perceived as competences, the third type was renamed 'autonomy and responsibility'.

The EQF levels 1 to 8 and its statements reflect progression of learning. Each next level assumes that the previous ones are achieved. The framework is purely outcome based, focussing on the achieved levels of learning. In contrast to the Bologna Process European Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area, which is very much based on the learning process in HE education itself, the EQF focusses on what has been learned to prepare for the world of work.

The EQF was and is meant to bridge basic, vocational and higher education. Toward that objective also a number of international conferences were organised in the years 2006-2008. These did not have the results hoped for. The division of vocational and higher education proved to be highly structural, formally shaped in the bureaucratic internal structures of ministries of education and economy and employment, but also at EU level in the DGs Education and Culture and Employment. While it was observed in practice that vocational education and training was offering more attention to theoretical knowledge and higher level skills and higher education (HE) had started introducing vocational elements in some of their degree programmes and learning components, such as work placements, this was not reflected in formal structures.

Background

Already around the turn of the last century concern was expressed about the employability of HE learners. The question was raised in a number of countries, such as the UK and the Netherlands, whether the learning needed by society was actually reflected in the degree programmes on offer. It was a point stressed by the European Commission in several reports published in the second half of the 1990s, which highlighted that the EU countries were moving towards a new type of society, the knowledge society, reflecting the third industrial revolution, that of the information technology. A revolution which required high flexibility of learners and a new type of skills and competences. It was concluded that HE should extend learning from knowledge transfer and acquisition towards application of what is learned. In 2001 the Tuning Educational Structures in Europe project was launched having as its main objective to prepare students / graduates better for their role in society. It introduced the concept of generic and



subject specific competences, encompassing knowledge, skills and attitudes and values (wider competences). Skills and competences were perceived as essential for making the step from theoretical knowledge to the application of knowledge. It also introduced the concept of student-centred and active learning highlighting that the focus should be on the learner and the learning process, not on the knowledge transfer by academic staff only. Besides developing an approach to reform higher education (HE programmes) in the direction outlined, it also defined reference points, e.g. standards, for individual subject areas / disciplines. These resulted in competence frameworks which express the level of learning in learning outcomes statement: What will the learner know and be able to demonstrate by the end of a course or programme. Essential here is that the student/graduate can apply the knowledge and skills obtained in practical situations. To develop this level of higher learning it was thought essential that the student should be trained on the basis of assignments of increasing complexity as the basis of the learning process. Research implemented by the Tuning project in numerous EU countries in the years 2016-2018 showed that HE institutions had great difficulties to move from expert-driven towards student-centred education. The main reason for this was lack of training and examples of good practice easy to implement. From the research it also became clear that the actual training of what had been learned in practice did not take place in the vast majority of countries. The conclusions of Tuning – insufficient practical training – were confirmed by other research projects and by employers. This mismatch of what is learned in academia and what is required in society, in particular the workplace, has been called the ‘skills gap’.

WEXHE Initiative

During the last decade, EU countries have experienced a substantial increase in graduate unemployment and a decrease of quality of their employment. Very recently the situation has further deteriorated as a result of the global COVID-19 crisis. European graduates report continuously that they are worried about their careers, while employers voice concerns about increasing difficulties in finding graduates with the right skills. Within this context, the Knowledge Alliance, *Integrating Entrepreneurship and Work Experience into Higher Education*, abbreviated as WEXHE, has responded to the concerns expressed by students, staff, graduates, companies and policymakers on the shortcomings in the labour market orientation of HE. The WEXHE project has focused on the balance between practical and theoretical learning in HE and on the mismatch between the skill sets of graduates and the skills they require in their early careers.

The three main goals of WEXHE have been the following:

- to increase the capabilities and competences of staff in universities and enterprises to provide high quality work experience and entrepreneurship,
- to support the accreditation of work-based learning (WBL) through ECTS and effective quality assurance,
- to ensure that the skills needs of employers are understood.

The project reviewed existing policy developments with regard to WBL and supports further policy development in this field.

WEXHE Approach

In WEXHE, enterprises, associations and HE institutions from 8 different EU countries were brought together to identify and analyse good cases of work-based learning (WBL). WBL is an educational strategy that provides students with real-life work experience to apply academic knowledge and understanding. WEXHE partners generated 77 Case Studies of WBL involving all four types of disciplinary sectors (hard-pure, e.g. natural sciences; soft-pure, e.g. humanities and social sciences; hard-applied, e.g. medicine and soft-applied, e.g. social work) in three modes of delivery covering work placements, traineeships and entrepreneurship.

Besides preparing case studies, the WEXHE team has produced 7 national literature reviews and national reports that give insight into the current status of WBL activities (work placements, traineeships and entrepreneurship) in 7 EU countries well spread over Europe, supplemented with an EU literature review.

The countries involved are a good representation of the EU, covering the main educational models (Napoleonic / Humboldtian / Anglo-Saxon). The reviews show huge differences between countries. Some have clear WBL models in place, while others have none at all, due to limited or very limited experience with WBL. This also affects the capacity and competences of staff involved in WBL. The reviews and reports clearly show the need for applicable models and toolboxes.

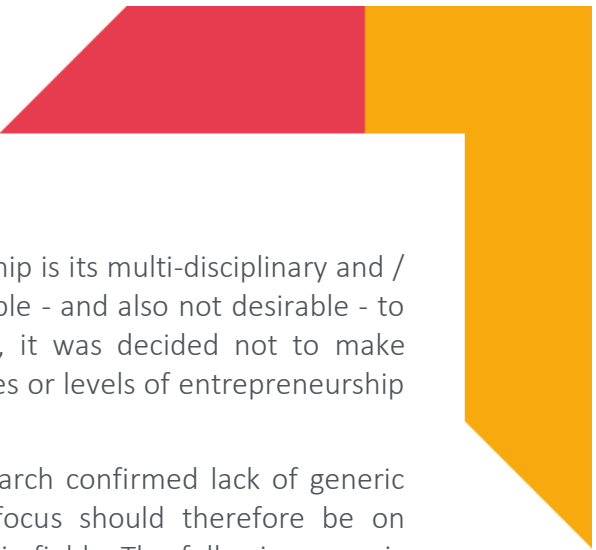
The core of the project's activities has been the identification and development of the Case Studies. As said, a total of 77 case studies were produced – on average some 11 per country – well spread over the three modes of delivery: placements, traineeships and entrepreneurships, and the four disciplinary areas. The production of good case studies has proven to be a challenge, in particular in countries with less(er) experience in WBL. Additionally, the partner in Cyprus struggled because of the country's limited size, while Poland had to deal with identifying relevant cases and in particular the UK encountered companies and HEIs with confidentiality issues. In Germany, Slovenia, Spain and The Netherlands fewer challenges had to be met.

The Case Studies have been used to create 9 comprehensive Packages of WBL and three additional Summary Reports covering the three modes to be used by all stakeholders of HE. These have been discussed and validated at national workshops bringing together WBL experts from the HE and the business sector. In addition two international workshops were organised, one focussing on entrepreneurship and another one on work placements and traineeships to make a group of (potential) users of WBL acquainted with the WEXHE materials that have been developed.

WEXHE Findings

The WEXHE findings have resulted - besides the reviews and national reports - in a number of analytical and synthetical papers. The research shows that the implementation of WBL in Europe is rather uneven. This is the case for all three modes of learning: work placements, traineeships and entrepreneurship.

The outcomes of the research resulting in the case studies prove to be very interesting and revealing. They showed that for entrepreneurship there is no clear distinction between the



disciplinary sectors and areas. The strength of entrepreneurship is its multi-disciplinary and / or inter-disciplinary character. Therefore, it proved not possible - and also not desirable - to produce cases for individual disciplinary areas. As a result, it was decided not to make 'modules' or Packages for academic sectors but for three types or levels of entrepreneurship learning instead.

Regarding both work placements and traineeships, the research confirmed lack of generic competences / transferable skills among graduates. The focus should therefore be on development of generic competences in relation to academic fields. The following generic competences were identified as the most important ones by employers: Problem solving and decision making; IT skills; Initiating creative and/ or innovative ideas; Team work and networking; Communication, social relation and negotiation; Entrepreneurship and leadership; Independent learning and working, capacity and enthusiasm to learn.

In addition a substantial overlap between disciplinary sectors was identified in terms of all aspects of WBL, both content and practice wise. What was noticed in addition was, that in some countries, placements for the Humanities and Social Sciences are common practice, while in others they are nearly absent. As a result the Consortium decided to slightly re-divide the type of cases to be produced in the countries / by the Consortium partners, with one country or partner compensating for another. The results and experiences have been summarized and documented in National Reports.

Based on a deep analysis of the case studies produced, of which a set of good practices (21 cases) has been published in a special paper, it was decided to deviate from the initial plan to make 'modules' / comprehensive Packages for four different academic sectors. This analysis has been outlined and explained in the strategic paper *From WBL cases to Applicable Packages*. The paper concludes that it would be much more useful – also to limit the size of the Packages – to prepare Packages for users' groups (HE institutions and employers) instead. In this way substantial overlap could be avoided and more attractive and tailored Packages could be produced. The three times three Packages resulting, covering the three modes of delivery, have been supplemented by attractive Summary Reports, for work placements, traineeships and entrepreneurship respectively. Each Package covers the following items: I. Learning and Teaching Arrangements; II. Organisational Arrangements and Learning & Training Procedures; III. Financial Management; IV. Quality Assurance, Evaluation and Accreditation; V. Annexes (Not applicable for the Entrepreneurship Packages). In addition a paper was prepared, entitled *TEN STEPS. Setting-up, validating and evaluating work-based learning modules and work experience using ECTS-credits focussing on work placements*. This paper should help HE institutions to implement WBL by offering a well-thought through implementation approach. It includes guidelines for the use of ECTS credits and Quality Assurance. The WEXHE research has confirmed that there is real and urgent need for such an approach.

Another outcome of the project is a report made by ENQA on quality assurance mechanisms for WBL in Europe. The report concludes that at present there is little to no quality assurance for WBL in Europe, with the exception of the UK. Therefore, an extra effort was required to develop these mechanisms. This has resulted in the paper, entitled *FILLING THE GAP. Defining a Robust Quality Assurance Model for Work-Based Learning in Higher Education*. This paper has been presented at the annual conference of QA experts in Europe, EQAF, and was well

received. It offers a model for QA for WBL meeting the requirements of the Standards and Guidelines for QA endorsed by the Bologna Process.

WEXHE Tools

WEXHE project has resulted in nine comprehensive Packages of WBL and three additional Summary Reports covering the three modes. Each Package includes guidance on learning outcomes, management and strategies of learning, quality assurance, funding and accreditation. They cover and support all disciplinary areas, are tailored to the different users' groups and can be accommodated to national contexts. As a result, the 9 Packages offer a toolbox for reforming degree programmes that are re-balancing theory and application of knowledge. They should in particular enhance the employability of graduates of academic fields, such as social sciences and the humanities.

WEXHE has published the following full Packages and Summary Reports:

Work placements

- *Work placement Package: Integrated Approach*
- *Work placement Package Clearing House / Intermediary Approach*
- *Work placement Package – Corporate Approach*

Traineeships

- *Traineeship Package for Higher Education Institutions*
- *Traineeship Package for Small and Medium Size Companies*
- *Traineeship Package for Governments, Governmental Agencies and NGO's*

Entrepreneurship

- *Entrepreneurship Package Promotion Approach*
- *Entrepreneurship Package Business Creation Approach*
- *Entrepreneurship Package Innovation Enhancement Approach (Intrapreneurship)*

Summary Reports

- *Work placements*
- *Traineeships*
- *Entrepreneurship*

All materials can be downloaded from the WEXHE Website / Resources: <https://wexhe.eu>

The materials should also facilitate cooperation between HE institutions and enterprises, making it much easier and more attractive. To enhance their acceptance, both in academia and the world of work, the Packages are quality assurance assured and ECTS credit based. They also contain detailed guidelines for WBL supervisors in HE institutions and companies. A unique feature of the Packages is that they clearly indicate which competences should be developed at what intended level. These competences are defined in terms of learning outcomes. Additionally, easy-to-use contract templates have been provided to be signed by all parties involved, including the student / graduate (in case of a traineeship), to clarify and (legally)

ensure the responsibilities of all parties. Thus, the paperwork involved in WBL - one of the present obstacles particularly for SMEs to be involved in WBL - is largely covered.

WEXHE Policy message

The main message resulting from the WEXHE project is that in most countries in Europe the integration of WBL in HE programmes is at an initial stage. This is the case for all three modes of learning.

The project shows obvious added value for all stakeholders.

HE institutions will benefit from better aligning their curriculum to the demands of practice, from opportunities to improve accreditation of informal learning, better positioning with students recruitments and improved relationship with industry.

HE staff will obtain access to validated work experience models, which can be adapted to their needs in the given University. Staff will enhance their professional capability, gain recognition and obtain formal accreditation.

Students will obtain greater access to high quality work experience. Elaborated models will increase their chances for obtaining access to work experience integrated with their studies, better accredited and better supported and organized.

Graduates will benefit through greater access to high quality internships, closely related to their career paths. Internships would provide them with appropriate specialized and generic competences and would facilitate their employment.


By applying WBL enterprises will obtain high quality staff, with practical experience, which would significantly cut adaptation and training costs of employed graduates. Enterprises staff would gain guidance and quality tools, designated to support their role in providing work experience for students and graduates. Enterprises will be involved in training to improve the quality of work placements.

Policy makers are expected to benefit from the outcomes of the WEXHE, which should lead to a better understanding how work experience can contribute to the modernization of HE, enhance its value and its contribution to employment, economic growth and social goals.

WBL requires a robust national/regional regulatory framework to make the HE and business sector take WBL more seriously. It has to be stipulated that from the WEXHE research it can be learned that the situation regarding WBL implementation in Germany, the Netherlands and the UK is more favourable because of the *alignment with market needs* and the attention that is offered to the development of generic competences as part of the learning process.

For the Netherlands, an important additional driver is the *close cooperation between the higher education sector and the employment sector*, both in terms of design and delivery of programmes. This is, in particular, the case for Universities of Applied Sciences, but also (although more limited) for degree programmes offered by traditional universities. In Germany, university-industry collaboration is often formalized in dual programmes.

The UK shows a positive reception of WBL, which has inspired the QAA to *develop guidelines for QA* based on elements such as learning objectives, work conditions and support given to learners.



Finally, in most countries, there is a lack of informed staff, responsible for WBL, such as tutors and mentors. This implies the *need for the training of trainers*, who will be able to train and instruct this staff.