

Introduction: the context of work based research in higher education

With the advent of a global, knowledge-driven economy, conditions for higher education have changed. Universities now face a proliferation of expectations and demands. Higher education's contribution to the socio-economic success of both developed and developing nations and of individuals has been widely recognized, marked by its inclusion in the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS). Moreover, the World Bank (2000) sees development of the knowledge economy being led by tertiary education, encouraging the European Union to develop both European higher education and research areas. These trends in massification, accountability, privatization, marketization and an unprecedented level of participation¹ have caused a shift in the boundary between the public and the private sectors (Altbach, 2002). This shift has seen the university, according to Bleiklie and Kogan (2007), move from a republic of scholars to a stakeholder organization.

In higher education during the 1980s, the emphasis on human and social capital grew, as did the emphasis on related concepts of entrepreneurship and enterprise. For individuals, the financial benefits of higher education may be measured in terms of anticipated lifetime income and access to interesting jobs. These changes have brought a need for educational institutions to adapt to a competitive world through embracing that in which they operate. This has led to an increased desire for academia to be relevant to our everyday lives, explicitly to be relevant to work (Elliott, 1999).

As well as government-funded work based learning initiatives, work based learning is seen as a way to widen participation in higher education and, in particular, to focus learning in the projects of individuals and groups doing work, paid or unpaid. Work based learning can offer project research and learning that reflect the interests of a wide range of people and is not instrumental in serving the economy, but is socially significant.

Higher education is changing in response to new work practices and social, economic and cultural changes within societies (see Schmidt and Gibbs, 2009, for a discussion of these changes in the UK). Arising from this are new ways of making meaning, and new ways of framing questions and making enquiries into meanings. Multi-disciplinary approaches to knowledge are now necessary to answer the questions of complex societies. It is with this background in mind that work based learning as a field and mode

of study in higher education took up in the UK in the early 1990s a unique approach to programmes of study or individual work based modules. Many programmes or modules were developed from a perspective other than subject discipline, used generic assessment criteria and focused on practice that had a particular work context. Work based and professional studies, which developed most rapidly in the former polytechnics, usually have a multi-disciplinary and inter-professional approach to their learning programmes, reflecting an increased responsiveness and accountability of new universities to the wider market.

In the context of knowledge economies, the role of knowledge based on a binary distinction between creator and users has become blurred. This is the central premise in Gibbons et al.'s (1994) notion of a distinctive 'mode 2' knowledge which is produced and valued outside the university and is not discipline based. The significance of mode 2 knowledge is taken up in a growth of interest in knowledge management and intellectual capital in the business literature. Gibbs and Garnett (2007) have argued that the university in the past has concentrated on human capital which has the potential to be transformed through employment to structural capital of the organization and that the changing missions and business models of universities mean that they share a responsibility to enhance the practicality of institutional learning.

The recent turn to work based research and experiential knowledge in higher education indicates the significance of these debates and how they have impacted upon its curriculum, hence the need for a book on work based research.

The emergence of work based learning

The background of work based projects is that it has partly emerged from independent study, which in the 1970s and 1980s drew upon a humanistic educational tradition that emphasized participants on university courses taking responsibility for their own learning, choosing and initiating their study.

Project activities often include those undertaken through work experience, work shadowing, mentoring schemes or the conventional placement period. While there are many varieties of work-related, workplace or work based learning in higher education, this book focuses more on existing workers who wish to undertake higher education study drawing on their own working environment. These modules and programmes take research projects firmly outside the university, and acknowledge existing expertise and self-directed learning.

Despite the differences in the implementation of work based learning across the UK and internationally, programmes that include elements of work based learning as a mode of study still have much in common with those that treat it as a field of study (Costley and Armsby, 2006; Gibbs and

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Garnett, 2007; Helyer, 2010). There are shared or similar approaches to knowledge and understanding as generated outside of the university in a context of practice. There are similar pedagogical approaches, where students are 'experts' in the sense that they are or have been in a particular work situation and have understanding of its nuances, micro-politics and so on. Students researching their own practice are common in work based learning programmes of study.

Practitioner-led research and development has become a principal means of developing organizational learning and enhancing the effectiveness of individuals at work (Costley and Stephenson, 2008; Rhodes and Shiel, 2007). Change in organizational practices has meant flatter management hierarchies and individual practitioners taking greater responsibility. A higher education response is to construct programmes of learning that enable practitioners to take a critical, reflective and evidenced-based approach to change and development at work. Practitioner-led research and development is now an essential capability for people at work.

The curriculum in work based learning is a new and emerging field of study in higher education (Boud and Solomon, 2001; Gibbs and Costley, 2006). Universities are now beginning to establish a research infrastructure that promotes and develops excellence in practitioner-led research and development and to apply quality assurance to the delivery mechanisms of research and development at work. To this end, there has been a steady growth of undergraduate awards, Master's degrees and Professional Doctorates (Scott et al., 2004) that focus on professional areas of learning. This book has been devised to meet the needs of people undertaking professional courses in higher education that have a professional orientation—that is, the course is related to work. As part of a work-related programme of study, there is usually a focus upon work based enquiry. The enquiry, or piece of research, is focused on real-time work practices.

About the book

The main focus of the book concerns the nature of the work based project and a particular approach to work based research and development that has a wide relevance to many other programmes in the higher education sector (Boud and Costley, 2007). The book emanates directly from the higher education curriculum, principally in the field of work based learning and professional studies, and focuses on the continuous learning of people already at work. This is because experienced practitioners provide a rich source of data that informs the 'real time', 'real world' projects that form the subject of this book. Superficially, it relates to the growing interest in practitioner-led research and also builds on the body of work that has been undertaken on reflective practice. Recent research across the university curriculum (Costley and Armsby, 2007) has shown that many subject

areas are involved in practitioner-led research. Participants on courses with placements use work experience for reflective practice and practitioners who are in work use their unique knowledge to drive their work based projects. Professional practice can be enhanced by practitioner-led research (Bourner et al., 2000) and by the ability of practitioners to evaluate research and to take an ethical stance (Costley and Gibbs, 2006; Gibbs et al., 2007).

The authors have a particular interest in work based research. They are all higher education practitioners who work in this area and have research interests in the field.

The book is in the multi- and often trans-disciplinary field of work based learning. It identifies not just research methods and methodologies used by practitioners doing research and development projects undertaken at work, but the contexts that surround the research site and the nature of academic engagement in the workplace.

The book has 13 chapters which offer a comprehensive approach to work based research within an academic context. Chapter 1 introduces key concepts for the insider-researcher and provides a general orientation and induction into work based research, focusing on the characteristics that make it both distinctive and powerful. Chapter 2 deals with issues of knowledge and information, how to find what you need and how to use it in an appropriate manner for work based research. It deals with the often problematic issue of a literature review where the relevant literature is not always, or often, in the standard form of academic authority, and it explores how a whole range of literature that is relevant to the nature of the enquiry can be used to contextualize your work based study.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 deal with ethical issues central to undertaking a work based research project. The first of these deals generally with the ethical issue of being an insider-researcher, and the next deals specifically with privilege, power and the politics of the workplace. The third in this trilogy considers access to the research site. Within all three is an overriding ethos of care and gratitude for the workplace participants in the research. These themes are a thread linking all the chapters of the book. We then move on to Chapter 6 which looks at one of the mechanisms that enable workplace research to be effective: the learning agreement and what this entails and contains.

The next three chapters are the core of this work. They present research approaches which address how people with expertise and contextual knowledge can best develop and research a project in their own site of work. In Chapter 7, we use the intellectual capital in universities and organizations outside of higher education to introduce practice-based methodologies, develop a useful resource and build a theoretical framework for the teaching and learning of practice-based research and development projects. Chapter 8 illustrates how many research projects at work seek to find the potential of a system and collaboration and in so doing enable the researcher to take immediate reflective, practitioner-led action. Chapter 9 seeks to demystify reflective practice

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and shows how work based research can lead to useful theory building, and the steps involved in this.

Chapter 10 then offers practical examples drawn from live, work based research projects. These illustrate many of the issues and dilemmas facing the insider-researcher. It helps to bring everything together by presenting a window on key aspects of real workplace studies with a commentary and advice on the approaches employed.

The next three chapters build on the understanding you have developed and show how you can use this to write a research proposal (Chapter 11), understand and develop outcomes for the research (Chapter 12) and, finally, make recommendations to others based on the research (Chapter 13). The making of recommendations that will lead to action and impact is distinctive of work based research.

Although the book is structured linearly, each chapter is designed both to fit the pattern of the book and to be read separately. The order of reading each chapter could be approached in many different ways, depending on what you are looking for and the preconceptions you have when you come to the book. For example, if you want to know outcomes to help understand the beginning, it may be better to start with Chapter 11. Alternatively, you may wish to start with Chapters 10 and 12.

Each chapter contains discussion questions to help you reflect on what is being presented and to locate it in your own research practice.

The readership

This is a book that is for people doing research at their own sites of work. It is therefore aimed at the 'insider-researcher' and the kind of research that includes a substantial amount of development along with the research process. Specifically, the target readership is the postgraduate level learner undertaking a research project based on their work practice as part of their award. The learner is likely to already have some expertise in the work area in which they are doing their research and have insider knowledge and understanding of that particular context. They may be studying for a professional Doctorate or a Master's degree. The book is also highly appropriate for those in the final year of a Bachelor's degree who are undertaking project work through investigative methods. The book is also relevant to people doing research whilst on placement and those researching whilst reflecting on work with which they have had first-hand experience.

Note

- 1 The Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) estimates that UK growth in participation in higher education between 2007–8 and 2029–30 will be between 8 and 25 per cent (HEPI 2009).

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