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Work-Based Learning Symposium Proceedings 2009

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Edited by Irene Sheridan
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Foreword

The Education in Employment project funded through the HEA's Strategic Innovation Fund represents a significant development for Cork Institute of Technology (CIT) and its partner institutions. The project itself was a natural progression for CIT; building on its leadership in career-focused education and delivering on the lifelong learning agenda that is fundamental to economic and social progress.

The main aim of the project is to enable the provision of educational opportunities to those in the workplace in a relevant, flexible and negotiated way. The project recognises the importance of the three-way relationship comprising the employer, the learner and the higher education provider in facilitating the design and provision of learning opportunities and support for the learner. One of the key outcomes of the project is the exploration of work-based learning processes and methodologies and the identification of reforms of structures and systems necessary to further enable this partnership approach to learning.

The Work-Based Learning (WBL) working group includes members from Athlone Institute of Technology, Dublin Institute of Technology, Dundalk Institute of Technology, Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology, Institute of Technology Sligo, Letterkenny Institute of Technology and University College Cork. The group has completed a review of work-based learning practice within the partner institutions and has shared policy and practice in relation to the workplace learner. One of the enablers in building capability and capacity for WBL has been the sharing through a series of symposia of experiences and expertise from the learner, employer and academic perspectives.

This second WBL Symposium was hosted by University College Cork (UCC) and was very well-received by a wide range of participants. It built on the themes explored at the 2008 symposium hosted by Institute of Technology Sligo and added an international flavour to the work. All of the presentations were very well-received and the lively discussions that ensued paid tribute to the variety of presentations and presenters.

As with all such events a considerable effort is required to ensure that it is successful and particular thanks must go to the team in UCC for their planning and organisation of the event. On behalf of all who attended on the day I'd like to extend a sincere thanks to all contributors for their willingness to share their views and experiences so openly.

As the end of the Education in Employment project approaches we are confident that these symposia have contributed to the development of work-based learning opportunities within the partner institutions and beyond and will help to ensure that the project outcomes are embedded within the institutional structures and processes.

Irene Sheridan
Head, Strategic Innovation Projects Unit,
Cork Institute of Technology.

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Prof. Michael Ward
Head, Department of Food Business and Development
University College, Cork

I am honoured to have been invited to chair this morning's session. My day job is here in UCC where I'm the Professor and Head of the Department of Food Business and Development and the Director of the Centre for Co-operative Studies. I've a particular interest in this work-based learning symposium because I, with my colleagues in both the department and the centre, have been involved in Work-Based Learning initiatives of various kinds over the years. So it is a great pleasure to be invited to chair this morning's proceedings. This work-based learning symposium is being hosted by CIT in association with UCC.

The focus of this Higher Education Authority Strategic Innovation Fund project is on work-based learning opportunities through partnership, which is a particularly important focus. Certainly for any of us who have been involved in this type of activity, we know you're not going to go far without that focus on partnership and getting the various actors to integrate and work together. The focus is very much on education for those in employment, which might sound very strange this morning in the context of when we turn on the radio we hear all of the people who are unemployed or are losing their jobs on a continuous basis. But, in fact when you think about it, it makes very great sense indeed, because the only way we are going to, "create jobs" is to maintain the jobs that we already have. That can only be done through a focus on upskilling, on training, on preparing for a different world, competitiveness and so on.

So, as I said the focus is on partnership, and no better person to welcome us all here this morning than someone who is very much involved in partnership and that is Dr Tom Mullins. Dr Tom Mullins is the Director of the Centre for Adult Continuing Education here in UCC. Prior to taking up that position a little over a year ago, Tom spent most of his academic career in the Department of Education.

Dr Tom Mullins
Acting Director, Centre for Adult Continuing Education
University College, Cork

It is a great pleasure for me to welcome you all to UCC for this Symposium on Work-Based Learning. The list of presenters and the topics of their lectures promises to be full of interest and enlightenment for us all. The expertise of the presenters and the range of professional experience they bring from their fields of practice and interest will no doubt make for lively debate throughout the day. I would like to extend a particular welcome to the speakers from the UK and thank them for sharing their expertise and insights with us in this increasingly critical field of educational development. You have been much more active in that field than we have been for many years, and I'm sure we can learn from your experience and achievements. Thank you very much for attending the conference.

It is a particularly happy occasion for me to welcome the many speakers from the Institutes of Technology around the country. The fact that CIT took the lead in organising this seminar makes a significant statement of new relationships between the third-level sector colleges in Ireland. For many years, there was an unhealthy and unwelcome distinction between the work of the Institutes of Technology and the work of the Universities. It was a reflection of an overarching paradigm about the value and nature of knowledge. That paradigm has bedevilled Irish education at all levels for many years, and in my view has inhibited initiatives in many educational contexts, undermining curriculum development and the introduction of new pedagogies. I haven't time to specify these today but I'm ready to share my experience with anyone who is interested in those particular fields.

The paradigm I'm referring to is the distinction between theory and practice, the distinction between what has been traditionally called "pure" knowledge and applied knowledge. The distinction establishes a hierarchy in the value of knowledge, where those engaged in the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake were seen as somehow doing something better, pursuing a more superior goal than those in pursuit of knowledge that had more practical and applied purposes. The origins of this distinction are tied up with both theological and philosophical traditions whose day is long past and whose power, I have to say thankfully, is now in decline.

In any change, people may say, there are losses and gains, but in my experience of educational theory and practice, I see in this change of paradigm as a marvellous opportunity for developments that could enrich all of our academic, educational and social contexts. Freedom to think more creatively about education, learning and working in new ways is now what our challenging and troubled times require. The mission of lifelong learning needs to be carefully developed, applied and eventually embedded in new social contexts which are worker-friendly and student-friendly, and bring the domains of theory and practice, of research and development, together in a new, mutually enriching dialogue.

Clearly the challenges that we see, to bring about such a desirable and necessary outcome, are many and varied, and it will be interesting to hear from the papers being presented today how these challenges were managed in the different areas in which people work. From my perspective, the greatest challenge to be faced in this context of developing work-based learning would appear to be establishing a sustained relationship between the working world and the world of academia. Understandably these two worlds have always mixed rather uneasily in the past. Recently I asked a friend of mine who happens to be business consultant for some help in finding a job for a recently graduated PhD student. His quick and dismissive response amounted to, "God protect me from PhDs". If such a stance is representative then there are serious problems of credibility arising in relation to some approaches to post-graduate studies in professional areas.

Another challenge to be faced in developing successful partnerships must be the nature and flexibility of the provision. The need for more varied approaches to suit workers' time and employers' needs will necessitate a new willingness to change and adapt in all kinds of ways. There is a traditional image, whether it's appropriate or not to this gathering, of professors and lecturers sitting comfortably in their office, researching and giving lectures and not going out to meet the real world. I think those days are over, and that academics must now interact in a new dynamic way with the world of work.

Finally, a serious and sustained rethink about pedagogic approaches in third level is required. They have traditionally been rather authoritative in their pedagogical stance, and such a stance would be both unacceptable and unwelcome in a work-based learning context. Something that might be described as opening a dialogue between innocence and experience, in developing appropriate pedagogical approaches and equally important assessment procedures will be required if the enterprise will survive.

These, then, are some of the problems that arise in bringing together, the culture of work and the culture of study. I am looking forward to hearing today how these issues have been resolved in various places; I'm sure many more of these issues that I can't even imagine arise in the context being addressed today.

Again, a warm welcome to you all and my best wishes for a successful symposium.

Irene Sheridan
Head, Strategic Innovation Fund Projects Unit
Cork Institute of Technology

This particular project, the Education in Employment project, is now two years in existence and it is a three-year project, so it is a good point in time to look at what we've achieved to date and how what we've achieved fits our original objectives and where we're going from here.

The Strategic Innovation Fund is a fund from the Department of Education, administered through the Higher Education Authority, with a number of very clear objectives. The key thing that we pick out from those objectives is that this project-driven funding mechanism is around reform. It's not about research and reporting on what we're doing or analysing ourselves, it is about reform within the higher education sector, and making a meaningful and sustained change to what we are doing.

Sustainability was a very key part of original project proposals – building on what we were proposing would change, in an ongoing way, what was happening within the institutions. The project proposals had to be collaborative, and that is proving two years into the project to be something that I think might make the most significant change to the sector – not just the substance of the projects but that collaboration and sharing in practice. The Education in Employment project is headed up by CIT but there are a total of nine partners in the project – seven institutes of technology and two universities. It is quite complex both in its structure and in what it's trying to achieve.

In deciding on a project to propose, CIT looked very carefully at where we wanted to position ourselves, because the call for proposals under the Strategic Innovation Fund represented a new opportunity for the Higher Education sector. For CIT, it was important to us that our focus was around our engagement with the workplace and our career-focused mission. The climate and context in which the project was devised, in the summer of 2006, was very different, from the current situation we find ourselves in. But we have found that makes no difference to the relevance – in fact, it makes an even more compelling argument for what we are doing in terms of building capability and capacity for learning and development within our workplaces and the higher education sector.

The current economic difficulties place an even greater onus on us to ensure that the funding is well-spent; that it makes a real and lasting difference, the entire value of this Education in Employment project throughout its five strands is €5.2 million, half of which was to come from investment from the HEA; the other half comes from us, from the partner institutions. If we're doing what we recognise as important, and investing our own funding and our efforts, in making a change, then the project will represent value for money.

Our partner institutions are diverse: geographically diverse, diverse in terms of size and there is a rural-urban spread. We had to recognise that there is a variety of practice spread throughout those institutions. The project team took the approach that much could be learned from identifying examples of good practice and exploring them.

One of the strands, in the Education in Employment project is focused on work-based and blended learning. The planned duration is three years and the aim is to look at processes, methodologies and practice and explore how we would move these forward, throughout the sector. Initially we spent a lot of time considering workplace

learning, workplace training, in-work learning, through-work learning and other related terminology. But we recognised that work-based learning is underpinned – genuinely underpinned – through partnership between the academic institution and the workplace. And that's further recognised in the Cycle 2 Strategic Innovation-funded project that CIT is leading called the Roadmap for Employer-Academic Partnership.

It is recognised that work-based learning is underpinned by partnership. We also understood that a learning planning exercise had to be facilitated, that those learners and potential learners in the workplace needed tools, mechanisms or techniques to assist them in planning their learning, and we understood that in the higher education sector there was a challenge for us to build capability and capacity in learning engagement that was appropriate to the workplace learner. Rather than saying, we have the blueprint, we know what best practice is, we'll apply that everywhere, we're looking at taking incremental steps to move the discussion forward through collaboration and discussion. When we look back at these projects what we will see is that one of the main benefits came from that building of trust and sharing of information across the sector. We found very early on that sitting nine institutions in a room and taking the time to allow the discussions and to build up some agreement and to look at what we're doing was one of the key drivers of change.

The identification of barriers and the development of systems for reform will prove to be something that will take more time to achieve. We've certainly found, and there are good examples of this in Ireland and elsewhere, that it is relatively easy to be flexible and responsive in a small unit and to a particular need. What is more difficult is to move larger organisations and institutions, to embed those notions of flexibility or what a colleague of mine calls 'agility' into the larger organisation. I liken it to the difference between turning around a speedboat or a jet ski and trying to turn a liner. It takes that bit longer but it makes a difference to more people.

We have, under this strand of the project, achieved a considerable amount of progress to date. We've published a significant report around work-based learning within the partnership pointing out both the existing good practice and the challenges of work-based learning in Irish higher education institutions. One of the building blocks of work-based learning will include recognition of prior learning, and it's important to point out that one of the most significant strands of the Education in Employment Project deals with recognition of prior learning.

Partnership is another key enabler and we're sharing views and opinions on barriers and enablers for partnership. In addition we're linked with a number of other SIF-funded projects. It is important for ourselves and for the HEA that the work on these various projects is not seen as disconnected from the whole, that we see ourselves as contributing in a real way to a national objective. A number of the projects funded through the Strategic Innovation Fund impact on this notion of the workplace learner in one way or another. We view the workplace learner as being in some ways at the centre of a tripartite arrangement, where the employer, the learner, and the higher education provider should be part of that partnership, yielding a three-way negotiated learning pathway. And I express it like this, that yesterday's experience – in terms of what the learner knows and what they're bringing to the table – plus today's learning, in terms of a relevant package that relates to themselves and/or their employment and/or their aspirations – then will be tomorrow's worker..

Many different reports such as the Enterprise Strategy Group reports and Forfás and Engineers Ireland, point to the need for workforce development or upskilling– the country has committed itself, verbally at least, to making some difference in this space. Within Ireland, there is a disparity as the full-time, undergraduate learner doesn't pay a tuition fee. For the most part, the learner who's in the workplace who is accessing education on a part-time or in a flexible learning way, either through the government-funded higher education or through private providers, pays, or their employer pays, or somebody pays. So that's a question we have to ask ourselves – is policy in line with practice?

Personally, I see the access for this workplace learner to education as an access issue, whereas traditionally when we talked about access issues in the third and fourth level sector we were talking about the underprivileged or the underrepresented groups or those with a learning difficulty or a disadvantage in some way, and we weren't talking about this workplace learner all the time. But I see this workplace learner as being a central part of that access agenda and part of what we've done in this project is tried to raise that at a national level.

In 2006 when the project was proposed most observers would argue that workers needed more of the same type skills. Now we must consider if upskilling or reskilling is required? If we agree that re-skilling is required, then what are the right skills that we should be aiming people toward?

There's also an inequity in different sectors within the employment situation in the sense that large multinational corporations generally have funding for training and development, and the smaller indigenous Irish company or the SMEs tend to have less access to that kind of funding. So that's another issue in terms of equity of access.

So, workforce development for economic good or for social good, or are these complementary agendas? In summing up – challenges for the higher education provider; learner-led versus provider-driven is something that we've been talking about throughout the project; negotiated learning, partnerships in education; being flexible and responsive; and making sure that what we do is relevant.

What are the next major steps? This is the final year of this particular project– and there are important outcomes from this project that will feed into the other Strategic Innovation Fund projects. The real challenge for us in this particular year, in drawing this project to an end, is looking at the structures and processes within our higher education and trying to effect sustainable change there. And the key challenge for us is about sustainability. Will what we have done make a difference in the long run?

Challenges Facing Delivery of Work-Based Learning to SMEs in the Midlands

Kieran Doyle
WBL/RPL Learning Development Executive
Athlone Institute of Technology

I have been working in Athlone Institute of Technology (Athlone IT) for the last 12 months as part of the Education in Employment project.

Work-based learning has existed, particularly in the institutes of technology, for quite some time. However the Education in Employment project proposes to systemise approaches, make better use of resources, and to make sure there are sufficient resources in the future to ensure the success of work-based learning.

The partnership concept is very important. It has been mentioned here previously today but it's important to realise that this is a coming together of a number of different agencies, and unless they're all benefitting from the relationship, the potential will not be reached. In Athlone IT, I'm starting on what is a greenfield site with regards to the strategic implementation of a work-based learning capacity. Initially, I analysed the environment that's out there in order to ensure that Athlone IT pitches itself appropriately to respond to the needs of the market in a way that doesn't overpromise – with the aim of over-delivering, rather than overpromising.

I looked at the existing work-based learning models, Forfás reports, OECD reports, including the EGFSN report which outlined the fastest growing occupations until 2020. I also looked at the European picture. The trend is upwards. There are going to be fewer opportunities for people without qualifications. We have started a programme in Athlone IT to respond to the needs of people that have just been made unemployed, and this type of intervention is proving necessary.

The OECD report on Recognition of Prior Learning, mentions that larger businesses, sectors with high paces of innovation, and sectors short on qualified workers will be the first to adopt flexible forms of learning and the recognition of prior learning. The particular challenge for Athlone IT is that the vast bulk of industry in the Midlands region is SME in nature.

Some of the recommendations of the OECD report are that you mainstream RPL methods and you create a knowledge centre for RPL. They indicate that obtaining substantial results may take 5-10 years. The Australian experience, where they had significantly more experience of RPL, has seen benefits in facilitating progression to third level. However, in Australia, the overall level of participation has not been as expected and there was a need for greater promotion of practical case studies.

I looked at the generic work place skills emphasised by Forfás reports and others including a Midlands Skills Audit, commissioned by the Midland Gateway Chamber. These skills are also mentioned by business when I visit them – technical skills are very important, they say, but it's the generic competencies that are making the difference.

Mark Fielding of ISME confirmed recently that large enterprises train more than small enterprises, foreign enterprises train more than indigenous, and most training is concentrated on those who already have qualifications. Fielding said that the managers have difficulty aligning shop floor practices with the overall corporate agenda. That's where the mismatch can be. Employees know what the company wants them to do but it can be difficult to operationalise.

One of my goals was to investigate the potential for work-based learning and identify key barriers to the growth of work-based learning in the region. The methodology that we used was to identify all SMEs in Athlone IT's catchment area – by size and purpose. We found that there are almost 45,000 employees working in the Midlands region – comprising 2,055 companies. The breakdown of that shows that only 83 companies employ between 150 and 200 staff.

I decided to access the smaller companies, through engagement with the professional bodies, including the Construction Industry Federation. There are eight Skillnets operating in the Midlands region and the bulk of the organisations that deliver training, offer it at below FETAC Level 5 and Level 6. During the interviews that we conducted, it was identified that companies recognised the importance of good relations with the college, wanted learning to be matched to the company's requirements and were aware of the potential of partnership.

Some training barriers identified are:

Lack of finance - Very often it's not really a lack of finance; it's a lack of willingness to pay for training. There's a significant amount of training out there that's already state-sponsored and if you approach a company with a costed-out programme, often they can get a similar offering from a different agency that's completely free.

The nature of the industry sector - High cost-based companies were more likely to engage in a work-based learning environment.

The lack of motivation of employers - Employers will cite a lack of time and inflexible training schedules; asking themselves do they really need to do this?

The location - In the Midlands, broadband has been an issue and will continue to be an issue for quite some time.

Lack of motivation and interest by the employees - For example, Laois and Offaly have the lowest number of participants in science subjects at second level in the country. This naturally feeds its way into the pursuit of knowledge based agenda at adult level.

Higher Education Institute strategies for integration of learning are very important. Some key success factors are: leadership and involvement in training by managers; careful analysis and targeting of industry sectors by the college, and flexibility of approach in a course design. It takes a significant amount of work in order to react in a flexible manner to what a company needs.

ISME mentioned the importance of emphasising and articulating a return on investment. If you are to sell a work-based learning programme the calculation of the benefits should include:

- Change in management mindset;
- Competencies that it gives a person;
- Improvements in performance.

ISME also mentioned the concept of a training champion in each organisation. We have an RPL Mentoring Programme in Athlone IT, which is very useful in creating support within an organisation – the goal is to train people in each organisation who then are able to assist in the interpretation of informal learning into formal learning through RPL.

The training champion concept helps bring the notion of partnership to a much deeper level. I would describe the work-based learning partnerships under three Rs: resources, relationships and realistic or relevant aims.

Each partnership can operate under those headings – that adequate resources are given to the partnership, that time is spent developing relationships between the three stakeholders of the learners, the employers and the academic institute. With realistic and relevant aims – you ensure the content is relevant and exactly as required by the employer. Documentation is completed, including a complete memorandum of understanding, prior to the delivery of learning.

One of the programmes that is being delivered by Athlone IT is a Higher Certificate in Business, which we deliver to Regional Operations Leaders (foremen) in Bord na Móna. It was a one-to-one partnership model which developed following a tender process. The objectives were to upskill regional operations leaders to Higher Certificate level. Four of the modules were assessed through RPL: Participants completed RPL portfolios on the following electives modules - Computer Applications, Marketing, Insurance and Banking, and Financial Accounting & Quantitative Techniques.

A recently developed programme in Athlone IT will integrate RPL assessment of generic work-based competencies into a programme developed for the unemployed. The programme is designed to facilitate the passage of newly unemployed people with supervisory management experience into third level education. The RPL element is based on assessing the participants' generic work-based competencies as outlined in the All-Island Skills Report including communications, leadership, problem solving and customer service. That is an interesting development for us, and the RPL phase will be delivered in a workshop type scenario. The remainder of the programme will introduce participants to different academic disciplines (including Humanities, Science, Business and Engineering) and develop their ability to learn at third level.

Work-based learning has potential as an instrument of Human Resource Development Companies can integrate work-based learning and RPL into their HRD practices in order to develop its staff. This, aligned with the elaboration of an individual learning plan, allows a person to draw a line in the sand with regards to their professional learning and facilitates personal growth as they go through their working career.

My future plans for Athlone IT are to create a work-based learning centre to develop a fully integrated but specialised extension to college services. Previously in Athlone IT, we conducted a competition inviting staff to make proposals for work-based learning projects. This attracted a reasonable response and a number of substantial projects have emerged. The value in developing a centre is that it provides a physical space where interested staff can discuss and develop common understandings and practice. The centre should not become another appendix onto the college, but be embedded practice within departments, allowing a cross functional community to develop.

There are additional challenges for advertising and marketing WBL and ensuring that it is widely understood. To market WBL, successful case studies can be of benefit to make the concept real for the employer.

Barbara Workman
Director, Centre of Excellence in Work-Based Learning
Middlesex University

While I'm here, I am going to flag up two of our publications of the year, both sponsored by the Centre for Excellence in Work-Based Learning at Middlesex University. 'Journeys to the Core of Higher Education', which looks at the range of work-based learning across subject disciplines in Middlesex University, and covers a wide range, from education, health, computing, science, business, foundation degrees, and part-time work. A second book 'Getting Started with University-level Work Based Learning' has just been brought out by my colleagues. This is a student companion, aimed with the student in mind.

To give you a bit of context about work based learning at Middlesex. We have been around for a long time, over 16 years; in the early 1990s, Middlesex University did a research project that investigated people's experience of learning at work, and discovered that people got jobs because of their qualifications, but once they were in post they learnt things of far more significance. The next step was to provide some sort of educational qualification for those people who have learnt at work, and Middlesex University Work Based Learning was born. In 1996, the university received a Queen's Anniversary Award. In 2005 we were awarded a Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, along with 73 other university centres of excellence across the UK and one of 5 in work-based learning. Then in 2007, the Institute of Work Based Learning was taken from one of the schools and made a separate entity as a service within the university, and that has changed our perspective quite considerably. In 2008, we were awarded £8 million from the Higher Education Funding Council for England to introduce our Middlesex Organisational Development Network project, which aims to turn the university to become more employer-facing. Having been in work-based learning for the last 16 years, you would have thought that we'd already been moving in that direction, but one of the biggest challenges that we've found is the infrastructure. We thought we were pretty clever in the way that we validated work-based learning – we have a particular scheme of validation with project modules, negotiated pathways – which I'll talk a bit more about; but the rest of the university is still looking at the traditional student. And that is one of our big challenges, to turn the whole university to think about where are these students going, and what is it all about, why are we teaching them, what is the purpose of it.

In the Institute of Work-Based Learning, our aim is to develop the innovation and development of organisations and individuals, it is very much about organisational learning, and the Centre for Excellence enables that teaching and learning aspiration and it aims to be a catalyst for dissemination. One of the reasons I am here is because of my role in the Centre for Excellence. Also within the university, my challenge has been to spread work-based learning into all the schools across the university – that includes Health and Social Sciences, where it is already been fairly well embedded. It includes Criminology, Natural Sciences, and a wide range of other science-based such as Sports Science and also the other schools of Engineering Information Sciences, Business, Arts and Education. There's a very eclectic mix there, and we have been trying to infiltrate and win hearts and minds. Obviously in some places we have done better than in others, but that's the nature of the beast - work-based learning fits some, but not all. So you have to start where people are at, and at the point where people can envisage that they can grow and develop.

In all good academic parlances you begin with your definition. I want to flag up that the learning was integral to higher education programmes, and primarily we are talking about higher education. Part of the ModNet project

that we've been awarded funds for is about incorporating further education as well but primarily the focus is higher education. It's designed around an individual's occupation, similar to your SIF project, but the key thing that I am going to be talking about in terms of models, is about the mode of study leading to a field of study, and I'm going to be looking at that in a bit more detail. I think probably most of your experience would be currently within a mode of study – the way that people learn at work.

A few more definitions of Work-based Learning include learning through paid and unpaid work. The other element that we've always included in Middlesex is the unpaid work. We recognise work that's occurred on a voluntary basis, or even as home workers. This is an area that many people don't assume is work. We also include people who work for voluntary agencies. There is a significant learning to be had through doing the job, and it is about recognising that and unearthing it. Within the institute, for WBL, Professor Garnett's definition is about the university-level critical thinking. It is not just the accreditation; it includes a critical perspective and facilitating the recognition of that learning through acquisition and application of the individual and collective knowledge. We are talking about extracting tacit knowledge of an organisation which goes beyond the individual – we have an organisational impact.

There is a tripartite element, because it affects the learner and their work. Therefore, it is their employer, their organisation, and the university, there's that tripartite stream that comes through all the time. So nothing is in isolation. Yes you can learn in a traditional programme, and it's just you and the textbook. But this one is far more complex because it's about the human nature, the human element, as well as the organisation and the subject discipline immediately adding dimensions.

To give a flavour of our current activity: we have about 1,100 students engaged in work-based learning, including about 500 at degree level. We have just gone up to over 50% of the university's doctorate provision. This is what we call a Doctorate in Professional Studies, and I'll touch on that again in a bit more detail. It is our fastest-growing area; it is an area that people really, really want to know about. None of this is a PhD that is stuck in a library which employers say, oh, save me from PhDs – none of that. It's about doctorate-level activity at work in what you're doing and it can be very powerful for the organisation and individual.

We work with all sorts of organisations – there are some big names like Marks & Spencer who were one of our partners. We are moving on to other people now through the ModNet project – but some organisations like the NHS we've worked with, on and off for a long period of time. We have a number of international centres, including Ireland. You have got a lot of expertise on your doorstep. The other key thing is we have a comprehensive range of qualifications. We have a range from certificate level, which is Year 1 undergraduate – through to degree and masters and doctorate qualifications, so the full gamut is available.

In terms of the types of work-based learning, there are a number of strands and I've identified here at least six different types that may not be credit-rated: they may be part of a university programme, but they may not carry credit. This is everything from the sandwich year to the in-house vocational training, vocational placements, vocational courses – by placements I'm talking about things like education, and social work.

I was talking at a university just a year ago in Scotland, and they were very proud of the fact that they had managed to identify placements within every programme, or some kind of work-based learning within every programme and had recognised it in some credit, shape or form. They were talking about sending people out and have work experience, and it turned out that they didn't know what those learners were going to learn on that work experience. So I said, well that rather defeats the purpose, doesn't it? If you don't know what your

learners are going to learn out there, why are you sending them out there? And if we don't know what people are learning at work, why are we looking to see what's going on there? We know they learn things at work. So, if we're going to give people work placements, then there must be a purpose in it, and we as academics must recognise that purpose, and make it a meaningful learning experience. Otherwise, when people get out into work they will not know how to learn. That is one end of the spectrum that I'm going to be talking about.

But a lot of these types of work-based learning will not be credit rated, or recognised, and the question is, is that a wasted learning experience? Why are we putting people through it? Things like part-time work – I don't know about over here but certainly in the UK a lot of our students work, part-time or even full-time to support themselves through their degree programmes - particularly the type of learners that we have - and if we don't recognise those skills and help them to draw on that then it is a missed opportunity. Likewise, on a lot of courses it is recommended to get some work experience.

So we need to make it a valuable experience. If we are going to have learning through work then let's make it meaningful, and these three other types of work-based learning programmes that I have here are much more the type that I would say might make learning at work more meaningful. They tend to be all part-time study, so if you've got a full-time worker who is taking time out to study, these are usually credit-rated. For example, with part-time study where the higher education provider specifies content, you're much more likely to have something like an MBA. Somebody, for example, wants to develop themselves, to upskill, to complement what they're doing at work. They may be getting a degree in, say, Hospitality and Tourism and be working in the trade. But the key thing is the academy is determining the knowledge that is to be learnt; we are transferring this knowledge from us, it is research-based, you're going to take it and use it in your workplace.

Then there is the other side of part-time study, and that's where the employer contributes to the content. And this could be, for example, one end of the spectrum where you've got the national vocational qualifications, the competency frameworks, where the professional bodies have said what you must learn at and for work, perhaps as a competency framework in management capabilities, for example that is backed up perhaps by higher education courses. So you are introducing some kind of management programme relevant to the learner's work. The employer will contribute to that, for example, it might be lab work or technical work. But it's specified by the employer and is what the employer wants.

On the far end of the spectrum is part-time study where the content is negotiated by the learner, and this is where Middlesex sits, in the majority. We do have a foot in the other camps a little bit, but this is where the learner comes along and says, this is what I know, this is what I need to know. So we then say, let's work together to help you know this. That's probably the radical bit. And this is what Middlesex also terms the 'field of study' or the subject discipline of work-based learning.

One of the things that we have been looking at within Middlesex University as part of our research has been work-based learning continuums. Both myself and my colleagues have looked at work-based learning continuums from different perspectives. I've talked here about prescribed learning, where the employer or the university prescribes what you have to learn, versus the negotiated learning, where the student determines the outcome. As you can see from these two perspectives, there are different emphases within that, and different kinds of approaches. For example, at one point you have a specific knowledge base in the prescribed learning, but under the negotiated learning we're encouraging transformational learning through reflection. So while you may have access to new knowledge, it's what you do with it and how you use it in your own practice that provides the transforming nature of learning which becomes much more part of the learner themselves. As you know, we've

all swotted up for exams and forgotten the content the next day, but when you are learning at work it is much more about the learning that changes your practice.

All Middlesex University's work-based learning programmes that are negotiated with a student come under one work-based learning title. We have a lot of programmes throughout the university that are about work-based learning or workplace learning or similar that do not come under our institute, Those are different so I'm talking purely about the negotiated learning and there are 1,100 students on work-based learning titles.

In negotiated learning the workplace becomes the curriculum. We have specific assessment criteria that describe the academic levels that we're looking for, so right the way through from the certificate-level first years to doctorate level; we use the same assessment criteria both for assessing accreditation through to assessing pieces of work. The university does not become the holder of the knowledge; the knowledge is generated from practice, and this is one of the things that people find most uncomfortable and most challenging, because academics traditionally have taken that knowledge generated from practice – ask any lawyer or medic. We have taken that knowledge generated from practice, we have done the research in the academy, and we have come out with the new knowledge that needs to be inculcated into the new recruits. But work based learning is different.

One thing we have discovered is that in the world of work, knowledge changes so fast that you nail it down for a while but then the organisation moves on, and with it the knowledge base. This has been particularly noticed in the Irish centre for WBL. Our colleagues in Ireland were saying that in their experience, the university comes along after the new theories, the new knowledge has been generated and put into their programmes, whereas the organisations have moved on – Been there. Seen it. Done it. Tried that theory, adapted it, moved on, and have another theory, but it is not being captured. The wonderful thing about work-based learning programmes is you capture that knowledge as it's created and then you're able to build up, and you're able to articulate that. So often that knowledge is not articulated, it's not captured at that moment. So it's very practice-based.

The mode of study, as in placements, vocational courses and suchlike, the award is in the subject. So I had placement learning as a nurse, I came out with that nursing qualification. So it uses the subject curriculum, what I learnt was described in the nursing curriculum, and therefore it uses those assessment criteria, and the university provides the knowledge, stating that this is what you should learn. So it's discipline knowledge-based.

They are at quite different ends of the spectrum. In terms of specific pedagogic elements, there are certain things that we've teased out from our programmes, or rather that our programmes are built on. First of all, it recognises experiential learning at higher education level. It is not just recognising it, it's accrediting it, and allowing it to be built into the programmes. For example, I looked at our accreditation of prior experiential learning module at undergraduate level as part of my own doctorate programme. I looked at how we facilitated that learning, how we could get our students to articulate their own knowledge more effectively and gain more credits through it. One of the things that we do with experiential learning is that we don't match it to current programmes already in the university; we match it against our level descriptors. Is this learning at certificate level, is it at graduate level, are they articulating where it's coming from? That is one of the radical moves.

We facilitate learning from reflection. We are trying to encourage a reflective practitioner, a professional practitioner looking at their practice, reviewing what they've done and how could they have done it differently, what could they have done in any other way. By using Kolb's learning cycle, we encourage the process of looking at the concrete experience, reflecting on it and doing work-based learning projects or activities through the programme and that is how they test out their new theories, their new approaches.

We use adult learning theories, for example, Carl Rogers, a humanistic approach – whatever you bring is acceptable, where you're at; Social Constructivism, your knowledge is constructed from your social environment; the community of practitioners - we have done quite a lot of work in developing post-graduate programmes for new professions, in particular, for example, for general-practitioner vets, who take a different route from extending their clinical practice – it's much more about how they become GP vets.

The student is the knowledge-holder, as I indicated before – they bring their knowledge to us, it is knowledge generated from practice – and our role as teachers is to facilitate the extraction of that knowledge, the articulation of that tacit knowledge, and give them the skills to learn how to learn. When they finish their programme, they should know how to find out new knowledge for themselves. Because knowledge doesn't stay still, you cannot wrap it up and say, you have completed your degree, that will do you for the next number of years – it doesn't work like that, particularly in this knowledge society where you just tap into Google and you can come up with anything. So we have to teach them how to learn.

We have to take into consideration the context of learning – that is so important, because it's not just about the context, it's about the culture. It's about the complexities of learning, it's about real-time problems. What are the things that are exercising you, your team, and your department, at this current moment? It might be how to save half a million pounds so you don't go under, but it might just be how to radicalise your processes. And as I say, the knowledge is generated from the workplace.

Our typical work-based learner is mature, well-established at work, and may have very few traditional qualifications. Some of them don't even have A-levels or equivalent school leaving certificate; and certainly quite a lot of our master's students don't have primary degrees. What they come to us with is considerable pre-understanding and knowledge. If you are working at a management level within an organisation, responsible for a number of departments, and you are overseeing graduates – you can't say, you have got to sit in year one, day one of a first-year undergraduate management programme because you know they could be teaching the teacher more. It would be very inappropriate. But for them to be able to articulate what they do know, and for us to recognise it is far more powerful. So, the work-based learning puts the learner at the interface between work and the university to explore those issues that are causing them real interest.

I'd like to introduce you to Bob. He is one of our more unusual learners – I have a photograph of him with an alligator. Bob is a typical work-based learner: there are not many programmes that recognise the kind of learning that he came to us with. He worked in Heathrow in the Animal Reception Centre and had a lot of experience in a number of zoos, and his programme was building on his learning. But one of the problems that we had with him was that we didn't know quite where to pitch it – he didn't have A-levels, he didn't have a first degree, but he'd been running zoos, he was running the Animal Reception Centre – so we said to him, well Bob, who comes to you for advice? So he said, well I've been asked to sit on the National Commission for some process, is that the sort of thing that you're looking for? And we said yes that's exactly the sort of thing that we're looking for, because that immediately moved him into the master's category, because he's obviously a master: people want to know about his skills. And so this was his route to his work-based learning masters in animal husbandry. Now, there are not many programmes in animal husbandry, but because he could negotiate his title, that's what he chose to have.

We represent WBL here as a triangle at the bottom, the recognition and accreditation of learning, and that's where all our students start, whatever programme they're on: we recognise and accredit their learning. And that can be experiential learning, it can be organisational learning – we do a lot of accreditation of in-house company

training, and people can move onto our programmes from that basis. People can bring in up to two-thirds of their total award through accreditation – that is quite radical, because once you take the premise that people can enter a degree programme for example with a Higher National Diploma (HND), which is year one and year two of a degree programme, and top up, then you can extend that to people bringing in accredited learning to that credit amount. That is followed by a research and development module – at the moment it's fairly social-science oriented, because you're dealing with people, but with the help of our Irish centre colleagues we're looking much more into business research approaches and other types of research approaches and we're reviewing that as part of one of our projects.

Alongside that, we look at programme planning, including a learning agreement. This learning agreement takes into consideration that tripartite relationship with the university and the employer as well as the learner, and this is where the learner argues for their title and also compiles their programme. Some of that programme might include taught elements, so they can do taught elements elsewhere, but most of it is through work-based projects. We have validated a whole suite of work-based projects of different sizes, ranging from 20 credits to 60 credits, ranging from certificate level upwards. People can build their programme and decide what they want to study in this project. That's where the negotiated learning bit comes in. They move on to an award at that point.

Work-based learning projects are very powerful. They are the thing that really makes people experts in their field and they really embed learning, because it's what they're doing for the day job. We also use assessments that have a lot of application of both theory and practice. We use portfolios and case studies. But in work-based learning projects, again it's very much about what they need to do in their real time for their real work. If somebody is working in an organisation, and has to do a certain amount of deliverables, from their project work, then that becomes their work-based learning project. What we add to it is the academic rigour and the critique.

Inevitably, out of work-based learning projects, there is a change agent element in it. This is linked very much to the practitioner-researcher, the insider researcher. Anybody who is at work who's introducing a project inevitably there is some movement, there's some change. Your own SIF project that's going on at the moment, you are changing hearts and minds. To whatever extent, you're working on those areas.

But along with change, you immediately hit the ethical issues, and one of the things that we found is the fact that ethical issues raise their ugly head, and they are considerations that you might not have even thought of before because you're working with colleagues and you're working with 'taken-for-granteds' and you're working with assumptions, and that's quite a sticky place to be in because suddenly not only do you have to look at your own practice and the practice of others, you have to question whether your approaches are ethical, and by investigating what your organisation does, is that in alignment with your own personal values? And sometimes, particularly at the higher levels, masters/doctorate level, people come out and say, I need to leave this organisation when I'm finished this programme, I'm so uncomfortable with its ethical values. Now that's a radical change. You become your own internal change agent as well.

The WBL topics are highly original – you won't find the kinds of things you're used to researching in university, because they're totally relevant to the culture of the workplace. And it has a major impact on the organisation; again the Irish centre – they realised they'd cracked it when one of the students came in and said, I've just saved our organisation a million pounds! And that was by doing their work-based learning project. Now, anybody that can say that is obviously on a winning streak. And the practical application sells it to people.

The projects that people have undertaken indicate the range of activity from education through management, health. But as you can see it's about what people do in the day job – for example, preparing a college for investors and people, how many people have had to do that kind of thing? But it's about the processes, the investigation that somebody has had to undertake.

As I indicated, this framework is very transferable across disciplines. For example, the framework has been very helpful to us to identify new roles in healthcare; at one time when the Labour government was putting a lot of money into the NHS and turning out a lot of specialists, there was no specific programme for clinical nurse specialists.

We have got a very successful programme at the moment, a top-up programme for performing artists, a lot of whom have done college diplomas – equivalent to the first two years of a degree – but they want a degree, many of them are getting into that stage of their career where perhaps they're getting into teaching, choreography, whatever – they're not purely on the back row of the chorus line and they need some evidence of their learning. So a top-up programme is very valuable. I mentioned GP vets earlier; coaches and counselling are two very strong areas – they are emerging professions, they are trying to identify their own body of knowledge and this is a very good way for them to do it.

We've had cohorts come to us and we've accredited the core of their programme, they're not coming in with experiential learning, they've had training, and that's been accredited. So again in the NHS we had Leadership London – it was a big range of programmes where all the hospitals and trusts had their clinical directors skilled up in management programmes. The Metropolitan Police; we've had specialist training that has been accredited and they can top it up to a master's programme. In our engineering and information science school, they have designed a programme for professional networking – they have been able to use part of our framework and build on taught elements, and that's very flexible.

So the work-based learning framework offers a lot of programme opportunities, combining taught modules with distance learning; all our work-based learning modules can be done by distance. I had a student in Scotland who I never met until graduation.

We build partnerships with organisations; a lot of people come to us to change career direction. They have a specialist area but they want to develop into perhaps training or management, and by recognising that development area in their programme they can then get a master's programme, for example, in education, and can go and train. For example, developing reflective practice in a discipline – one of the subjects that Middlesex teaches is traditional Chinese medicine, and I was able to work with them to develop a reflective component. Traditional Chinese medicine has a particular way of learning – you go and learn it by the side of the expert – but this was about learning to reflect on it, using a focused method of reflection, so that they learn from their own practice as well, so adding to their expert knowledge.

There is also the debate about the professional doctorate route versus the PhD – but increasingly in the UK there are low levels of completion in the PhD. People drop out, it doesn't suit them, and they just lose the will half-way through it. Whereas our professional doctorate people are those who are at a high level in their organisation, they are doing projects that are major pieces of work and they need recognition for that. And because we accredit at doctorate level as well, we can accredit work that they have done before – so if they are organisational developers, it suits people very well including those with previous publications.

Very briefly – the Doctorate in Professional Studies; we have a generic programme that is based in the institute but we also have specialist validated pathways, for example in the School of Health we have a pathway of Risk, a pathway of the Environment, and of Health. It is just that we're reflecting the practice elements more fully, rather than perhaps the more generic consistent elements in the institutes programme. We also have a doctorate in Public Works, which is a sister to the doctorate in Published Works. Very often we find for example our doctorate candidates are working in organisations that have a public face, or they've done a lot of research in a particular area, and rather than make them jump through hoops again, they gather their evidence and do a critical commentary. And that can be done in a year. Obviously a highly challenging year, not an easy option, but for some who've got a prodigious output but have never managed to nail it down in a PhD it's a very good opportunity. As I've said, this includes recognition and accreditation at Level 7 and Level 8 – for you that would be Level 9 and Level 10 in which we use level descriptors to help us assess.

Just to capture the distinctive elements: our doctoral candidates are engaged in advanced work-based learning, which involves major organisational change and/or excellence in professional practice. So, original work comes out of it, and sometimes that is taking an old theory or an old concept and using it in a new way, it can be as simple as that. Although it is a research-based degree, it's very practical, and from the impact study that the Higher Education Academy did about work-based learning, it's considered to be very prestigious and sought-after by organisations.

To summarise, using negotiated work-based learning in higher education, there is an increased focus on work. While in this day and age, employability is important, it's also about maintaining employment – making yourself too valuable to the organisation to be let go. So we do have people who are currently in work coming to us to say, I need to have recognised what I've learned, I need to have this acknowledged. It's trans-disciplinary, and we recognise that it's the learning at work, it's very rarely siloed in any one subject area, for example, you might have engineering in management or nursing in education, or performing arts and management - you know, you've got the mix all the way through. It's responsive to workplace developments, so there's a lot of currency in it. The negotiable content within the projects is very powerful and very useful and because we accredit, that means that people don't have to jump through hoops twice - they don't have to sit in a classroom listening to stuff they already know.

Flexible deadlines - now this is a very useful one to know; we have built this into our programme because this responds to work schedules. If you ask Marks & Spencer or Thornton's when their peak time of work is going to be they'll say Christmas and Easter, so you do not want them to have to submit work on Christmas Eve: you're not going to get it. So by having flexible deadlines you can work around those so that people can meet the needs both of their organisation and of the academy.

The emphasis is on reflection and teasing out the tacit knowledge and transferring that reflection and new knowledge into work, and sharing it with others, allowing new knowledge to be created within the organisation and that means it's captured, it is not lost for good.

Lucy Fallon Byrne
Director, National Centre for Partnership and Performance

Today I am going to talk to you about innovation and particularly the importance of innovation in a time of crisis.

Firstly, let me introduce you to the National Centre for Partnership and Performance (NCPP). We are a government agency set up in 2001 by the Department of the Taoiseach. The NCPP primarily promotes workplace partnership and improved organisational performance but increasingly it is seen as an agency that is concerned with the wider areas of workplace development. We research and promote best workplace practices and we develop systems and frameworks to help make our workplaces become more agile, more flexible and more suited to the modern knowledge-based economy. We have a very distinct role in the national system of innovation. We are uniquely concerned with all areas of workplace change and development, including workplace relations, communications, employee involvement, diversity in the workplace, dispute resolution, and the broader areas of workplace innovation and learning.

In other countries, in recent times there is a growing recognition of the need to invest in workplace development as it is critically linked to national competitiveness and improvements in productivity. For example in Finland, investment in workplace development and workplace innovation has increased because of the need to build knowledge workplaces and knowledge organisations in higher value added industries. They also have an ageing population, so a key national goal is to improve the quality of working life for all employees and particularly for older workers to enable them to stay at work for longer. We can learn from these models from abroad and although we are in the maelstrom of a crisis at the moment, nonetheless, we need to keep our focus on these longer term issues.

Among the highlights of the NCPP work to date is the development of a National Workplace Strategy which is a comprehensive, integrated strategy for workplace development in Ireland. We have also secured a Workplace Innovation Fund which we co-manage with Enterprise Ireland. It is a fund available to private sector companies to support the practices which increase capacity for innovation and learning.

Much of our work in the NCPP relates to organisational learning and innovation both of which are inextricably linked. A learning organisation is an innovative organisation. They both involve opening up companies, organisations, workplaces, colleges and government departments to new learning, to new ideas and developmental approaches. At the heart of innovation is the challenge of sharing and exploiting knowledge and continuously searching for new knowledge. Innovation is also about looking for new opportunities that add value. In this respect, it is a little different from creativity and invention, which are the first steps in innovation, because it also requires a search for new areas that will add value to your organisation.

It is a very well-known fact that innovation increases in a time of crisis. We are all open to change. We have to be. But in a time of crisis, we are capable of absorbing changes that we would never have imagined previously. Since the beginning of the recession, we are all looking at things in a completely different way. Exploiting this increased potential for innovation is therefore a critical response to the current national economic crisis.

At the outset, it is also important to emphasise that innovation is as important in low-tech industries and firms as it is in the high-tech sectors. Again we seem to associate innovation with the very big pharmaceutical and computer companies in Ireland and the high-tech and high-value-added industries. Of course, it's hugely important there but it is as important in the small indigenous SME as it is in those sectors. It is as important also in public sector organisations as it is in the private sector.

We need to look for innovative and creative solutions to our current difficulties. **A partnership approach facilitates this process.** It helps us to tackle the challenges of change, restructuring and cost-cutting together and it also consistently delivers better outcomes and more long-term solutions. If radical change is needed in the organisation, then the principles of partnership should be applied in order to ensure successful implementation of change and sustainable outcomes. What are these principles? Firstly, **share information** with people early. Trust people; spend time communicating the details of the changes and the rationale for change. Impart information fully as it unfolds. Then **consult widely** and intensely with those who are affected by the proposed changes. Make sure people have an opportunity to give their views on where the changes should be made or where the cuts should fall. And believe me, when you do that you get answers. You get very creative solutions. You bring people with you. **Open communications, sharing information, consulting meaningfully, trusting people, providing opportunities for feedback and new ideas, and truly listening to and valuing the responses.** These are the underpinning principles of partnership and if you apply these principles in your organisation, then there is a very strong chance that you will survive through the crisis.

Through this partnership approach, innovation increases in a time of crisis because people are more open to change. They are open to giving their ideas, but they need to be respected and to be given the relevant information. They need to be afforded the opportunity to input their ideas and to be given an opportunity to provide solutions. And you might find that this particular crisis really opens up areas of development and activity that you could never have imagined before.

Innovation and partnership require a new style of management: **a participatory management and leadership style.** We need to develop this new kind of management in the public service because traditionally, we have inherited a hierarchical management style in many areas of the public service. Many of the management approaches in Ireland are still embedded in the old scientific model of management, which is hierarchical, with change coming exclusively from the top. On the contrary, participatory managers are always opening up opportunities for new ideas to emerge from their employees, opportunities for learning, getting people involved, building a learning culture within the organisation.

In building a learning organisation **management belief,** and the **management vision** for the organisation is critical. Therefore it is vital that the CEO or the top management team is really committed to learning. That's really where it starts. If they are not committed to learning, and not committed to using every opportunity to promote learning, then it won't happen. There has to be visible leadership and an absolute belief on behalf of the CEO and top management team.

As well as participatory management, **flexible and organic organisational structures** are far more conducive to learning and innovation than the old hierarchical models of the past. For managers, Gareth Morgan says that the way your organisation behaves depends on what your vision of your organisation is and what metaphor you use to describe your organisation. Do you regard it **as a machine?** The scientific management model and the industrial model of the past envisaged the organisation as mechanised, machine-like and this gave rise to assembly-line production systems. People were seen as factors of production and that model has prevailed for years, generations, even centuries now. But if you look at your **organisation as a brain** or **as a culture,** you start thinking about it differently. You start saying, if it's a brain then it needs to be stimulated, it needs to be activated, it needs to learn new things, it needs to have opportunities for growth, enjoyment, even fun. The brain metaphor is a good metaphor for re-imagining your organisation. Many of the traditional organisations in the public service would have developed as machine-like organisations. In contrast some of the new information technology companies have deliberately developed cultures which are more vibrant, young and dynamic.

Google is a good example. I visited Google in Dublin recently. It is a very open, unstructured, campus-style environment, and they are really driving innovation all the time. But there is control there as well. The reason they have control is because they work their performance management system around what they want to achieve in the organisation. Google is highly innovative and its performance management system is designed around innovation outcomes. Innovation is measured, valued and rewarded. Performance management systems are a powerful way of achieving organisational goals.

One of the difficulties we face in Ireland is convincing SME managers that learning is good for their business and that it is an investment and not a cost. SME managers and owners are sceptical about training their employees as they fear that their key employees will move on to their competitors. Our experience shows the opposite. When an organisation invests in its people, they stay with that organisation. They respect the fact that they are valued and that they are given developmental opportunities. In convincing owner managers we need to stress that learning and innovation are **critical elements of performance.** Peter Drucker says that innovation is 'change that creates a new dimension of performance'.

Knowledge management

The biggest challenge for organisations today is how to successfully exploit and utilise knowledge. This requires a recognition that there is a lot of tacit knowledge embedded in the organisation and that this knowledge needs to be tapped in order to sustain the organisation's future. Knowledge must be valued and recognised. The organisation must find ways to share and to grow that knowledge and to exploit it in the process of learning and innovating. Much of knowledge is tacit and is based on experience and this gives rise to experience-based innovation. Innovation happens when you re-configure existing knowledge. But the organisation must also develop new knowledge. The really smart companies are able to go out, search, scout and create systems which develop new knowledge. In this way they are opening up new platforms and new opportunities. There are also different ways of configuring and re-configuring existing knowledge. Some take globally available knowledge and then re-configure it in their local organisation in a new way and that creates a whole new area of innovation.

Team building and team learning are critical to knowledge management and knowledge evolution. Teams are not just groups working together. They need to be given autonomy and ownership over what they're doing in order to learn from their knowledge and experience. The dynamic in the team has to allow for experimentation and reflection and the team must be afforded different developmental and learning opportunities if innovation outcomes are to be achieved.

Empowerment and employee involvement is also a critical platform for knowledge sharing and knowledge development. This is at the heart of what the NCPP advocates for in workplace and organisational development. The business case for employee involvement is absolutely compelling. And yet despite this, many managers and leaders in public and private sector organisations in Ireland are still sceptical. Many organisations still run on very traditional lines but our surveys are showing that this is changing, even if it is taking time.

The rate of learning in your organisation must be equal to or greater than the pace of change in the external environment. If your organisation is changing more slowly than the external environment, then you are in trouble. For a private organisation, you will certainly not survive.

Taking risks and making mistakes is also an important part of the innovation and learning process. This is because organisations need space to experiment and try out new ideas and new processes. The process of

experimentation is one of trial and error where there is risk involved. The mantra should be, don't fear mistakes because there are none! If we are going to be innovative we have to allow some tolerance for mistakes. There is always margin for error in the private sector but unfortunately there is very little margin for error in the public sector. Mistakes are publicised and punished severely, and there is often little room for the celebration of success. This needs to change.

A culture that enhances learning also **balances the interests of all the stakeholders,** customers, suppliers, staff, and focuses on people. It helps people believe that they can make a significant contribution, improve their organisation and change their environment. But more importantly, it offers them the opportunity to do so. It makes time for learning and reflection. It takes a holistic approach to problems, encourages communication, believes in teamwork, and has approachable leaders – managers who are hands-on and very visible.

At national level the learning challenge is considerable when you consider where we are placed in international benchmarks and particularly our position relative to our competitors. For example, in international league tables we are ranked as follows:

■ 17th out of the 22 OECD countries in terms of the number of hours spent on on-the-job training;
■ 20th out of 33 OECD countries in expenditure per student on education;
■ Of the original EU 15, we were ranked 8th in relation to lifelong learning in 2004;
■ 7th in terms of the proportion of workers that are deemed to be highly-skilled;
■ 80% of the current workforce will still be in the workplace in 2016 and 30% of those don't have a Leaving Certificate.

So we have a considerable challenge ahead and this is very comprehensively outlined in the National Skills Strategy.

In addition in 2004, the NCPP conducted a major national workplace survey. The second survey in this series is being conducted again this year. It is a very large survey comprising 5,200 employees, 2,000 employers from the private sector and 700 public sector managers. The statistics on training and workplace learning from the 2004 survey are relevant for today's discussion:

■ 48% of employees had participated in training in the past 2 years;
■ more men than women were offered training opportunities;
■ younger workers received more training than older workers.

Most importantly however, our findings show that training and learning in the workplace is linked to existing levels of educational attainment. Those with higher levels of education and holding senior positions in the organisation got twice as much training as those who had low levels of formal education and were in junior grades in the organisation. So we have uncovered what we call an opportunities divide, or a knowledge divide in our workplaces. It seems that there is inherent unfairness in our workplaces regarding training and learning opportunities. Those who have a lot of education get more opportunities and those who have less are disadvantaged even further by being afforded only half the training opportunities of their better educated colleagues. That's a very big challenge and one that I believe initiatives like this WBL symposium and this project can hopefully address. To finish on a hopeful note, I like Peter Senge's optimism when he says that:
'Learning organisations are possible because deep down we are all learners!'

Anne-Marie Frampton
School of Business
Waterford Institute of Technology

My purpose here today is to go through our experiences in delivery and design of the Fáilte Ireland Tourism and Learning Networks. I, along with my colleagues at Waterford Institute of Technology and Cork Institute of Technology have designed and implemented the Fáilte Ireland Tourism and Learning Networks across the South East and South West regions on behalf of Fáilte Ireland.

I would like to speak to you about our experiences in the evolution of this programme and the opportunities it has afforded us to generate academic-industry partnerships, both formal and informal, and also to implement a blended learning approach to this type of programme, with a strong focus on the whole area of peer-to-peer learning. One of the key outcomes from our whole experience over the last four years has been to look at the whole area of recognition and accreditation for prior learning.

My session today will take you through the various steps that we have taken and the experiences we have gained since 2006. My presentation will focus on four key areas:

(i)   the networks themselves;
(ii) the key success factors from our perspective;
(iii) further developments that we have planned over the next two years;
(iv) and most importantly, the lessons learned from our experiences in managing and designing the networks.

What are the networks? Many of you may not have never heard of these before. They were instigated by Fáilte Ireland in a response to a strategy document, developed by them in 2003, titled "New Horizons in Irish Tourism: An Agenda for Action". I'm delighted to say that these learning networks are one of the key actions from that New Horizons document.

The document was developed in consultation with all of the industry stakeholders, from the practitioner on the ground to government support agencies such as Fáilte Ireland, Tourism Ireland, the Irish Hotels Federation - input was taken from these different stakeholders, and one of the key areas which the industry practitioners really wanted to focus on was the development of an accessible, relevant training programme for their peers within the industry. Fáilte Ireland took that on board and went to tender at the end of 2005, looking for suppliers to design and deliver such a network across the 26 counties. Waterford Institute of Technology was successful in its tender, and was fortunate to be partnered with Cork Institute of Technology and supported by one of Cork's very own leading leader groups, a West Cork leader group under the Fuchsia brand. We designed an innovative programme, action-orientated programme, and kick-started that in January 2006.

We are in our fourth cycle of a twelve-month programme at the moment – so the first contract with Fáilte Ireland lasted from 2006 to 2008. We are now in our second contract at the moment: we re-tendered for it in November 2008 and again were successful with our partners CIT.

We have had 552 businesses involved to date and they are very reflective of the Irish tourism industry at present. In 2006 there was probably a 60:40 weighting towards accommodation providers, which would have been reflective of the traditional tourism product in Ireland at the time, or the awareness of the tourism product. I am delighted to say that now in 2009 the balance has completely shifted and we are probably at 30:70, with

30 accommodation and the other 70 constituting culture, heritage, attractions, activities. They range from such businesses as potters – Kinsale Pottery, for example – Giles Norman photography, Ballymaloe, Rory Allen – a very broad gamut. So in a sense, when we had to design the programme we had to very much listen to what the participants needed. I think that was one of the key drivers of us winning a second contract.

The programme itself has different and varied structures. We looked at the opportunity to introduce a blended learning approach for our participants, and that idea came from our experiences in delivering a previous related programme which focused on the development and marketing of sustainable tourism within the South East of Ireland. We looked at what worked for us in that programme in 2004 and 2005, and decided to further advance the blended learning element of that programme, and introduced a very clear focus on the whole area of learning sets, or local networks as we call them, but a large emphasis on peer-to-peer learning.

We felt that, typically, the expertise in the industry - the practitioners were the key experts in the industry, and we as trainers or teachers had as much to learn from the participants as they had to learn from us, and I think that could have been one of the key drivers. So much so that after the first iteration in 2006, 63 of the 120 participants came back to us and said "Please, we don't want this to end, is there any way that you can look for additional funding from Fáilte Ireland to prolong our experience or our first step into lifelong learning." And again, here we are with Fáilte Ireland as a fantastic funder and promoter of this programme, where they came back with additional funding and we designed and delivered what we called a Tourism Learning Network Xtra programme, with 168 businesses coming back to us, saying, 'we'd like to stay on board'. So another endorsement from a government agency there, reflecting their commitment to the life-long learning element.

I have identified four key elements of the programme structure. The first one is the learning events, and these are your typical face-to-face learning interventions with the programme participants. They have four key elements to them: the first one is a network briefing which kick-starts the entire year-long programme, and that network briefing is about building confidence in the participants, to encourage them to understand that they are bringing experiences which are valued by everyone else in the room and particularly by ourselves at CIT and at WIT. It is also to try and encourage them to give as much as they receive from the programme and to realise that a lot of the learning is self-directed learning, and a lot of the learning will evolve from their peers. We encourage them to develop, and support them in developing, their networking skills – but very much their confidence to network.

There is also an introduction into the structures of the programme, and I'll speak a little bit later on about the accreditation element of the programme which was introduced in 2006. The next structured event is online marketing, and here we are back to understanding the learning needs of the participants. And from speaking with not just the tourism stakeholders across the regions, but more importantly the individual participants themselves, both verbally and formally through a learning needs analysis which they complete at the beginning of the programme, we identified a need for lab-type online marketing training. From our perspective, if we are looking at end result, the end result the participant wanted was of course an upskilling, greater knowledge, a different attitude to how they run their business, but they also needed to see an effect on the bottom line. It was one of the core elements of the programme.

We liaised with the Irish Internet Association, and we worked for the last four years with the CEO of the Irish Internet Association to design a bespoke training programme based directly on the learning needs of the participants as stated by them. As a result, we run five different levels of training in a small learning lab with ten participants at each of these different interventions. The big winner here was that each of those ten participants

in the room was at the same level, so there was quite a considerable amount of peer-to-peer learning where the individuals themselves had come across various challenges, either themselves in trying to maintain their websites, or with their web suppliers. They were able to interact with each other and come up with their own solutions from experience, supported obviously by the trainer, and drive the solutions back into their business.

That programme, in 2006 and 2008, was so well received by the participants – again, Fáilte Ireland listened to the success elements of the programme and took that element of our programme on board and rolled it out nationally under the WebCheck banner. We are glad to see that it is a continuous 360 degree learning process for all of the stakeholders involved in the networks, from the participant to the institutes involved and back to our funder again. From our perspective that is one of the successes of the programme.

We also have residential events. Speaking with the participants, because they're predominantly hospitality- and tourism-related businesses, they work 24/7. They do not have the luxury of having perhaps two days together to take time out of their businesses to logically think and reflect on how their businesses are being run, or where there are opportunities for improvement. From our perspective we decided to run two residentials as part of the one-year programme, a spring and an autumn residential. At these residentials, we look at the key operational areas – we run two hour workshops; typically in the areas of Human Resources, Public Relations, Health & Safety, and Marketing. Two hours in duration again because the Tourism and Hospitality industry, by its nature, is one that does not sit down, so to get these people to engage in learning, two hours seemed to be the optimum unit through which they could focus and concentrate and enjoy the learning experience.

We have worked very closely with our own colleagues in WIT and CIT to ensure that the training we provide is very relevant. And because of that we use a mix of our own colleagues in the Institutes but also industry practitioners – and I move from the word 'expert' to 'practitioners' – who bring with them real-life case examples, which the participants can relate to during the learning.

There is a very well-documented process, not just to recruit participants but to develop lesson plans with the presenters to ensure that the learning is relevant to the participants. We would also ensure that there are at least two exercise components within those two-hour workshops, to ensure that people engage. So the problems that are thrown out to the participants are reflective of the industries that are in attendance at the workshops – in fact, two weeks in advance, we provide the full listing of those who will be in attendance to the trainers. Their materials would be in with us one month in advance, and there would be a slight tweak to the material to ensure that each of the participant sectors represented at any workshop would be included in those examples.

We introduced learning sets in 2006 based on our experiences on a previous programme that we had run, and these, I believe, are very much the core to reflective learning, peer-to-peer learning amongst the participants themselves. We call the learning sets 'local networks' and they comprise of up to ten participants who would work together with a trained facilitator. We are very fortunate to have colleagues from both our institutes involved as facilitators on our programmes, and also external business consultants involved, so there is a great mix, a huge learning opportunity, and in fact its own network for learning among each of the facilitators. They meet with the participants up to six times throughout the programme and that can increase to eight to ten times throughout the programme. Of our 552 participants, they would typically range anywhere between thirty up to seventy. So you are looking at a very broad spectrum of learning styles as well as confidence levels.

The learning sets are core to building up the confidence levels of the participants. They are core to addressing individual business and learning challenges that the individuals face, and finding solutions among their peers to those individual and business challenges. There may also be personal individual challenges that they may feel are inappropriate to discuss in the groups. In 2007, we introduced a principle of one-to-ones, where the facilitator would have an opportunity to meet personally with those members in their local network for more sensitive challenges that they may face in their business.

Those learning sets or local networks also afford the participants an opportunity for reflective learning. They would typically take place after our structured events and it gives an opportunity for the individuals who have attended a workshop on Human Resource management to discuss the learning from those workshops. As you all know, as educators, what I take from a workshop and what my colleague takes from a workshop may have two completely different slants.

It is that element of shared learning and peer-to-peer learning that has proved hugely successful. Every intervention that we deliver or organise is evaluated and it gives us an ideal opportunity to continually improve what we are doing and gives the participants an opportunity to buy into the process, because what they see is when they evaluate and perhaps mention an opportunity to improve any aspect of what we are doing, that is taken on board and the next iteration reflects those suggested improvements. So it is the buy-in – it appears like a win-win for all the parties involved.

The online support tools – back to the blended learning approach, we very much appreciate that hospitality and tourism is 24/7, not everyone is available when we are available in the office from 8a.m. until 6p.m. We need to make sure that there are other avenues for learning for the participants, and to support that we developed a programme, Extranet, which took time to introduce to the participants – it was a new style of learning. We incorporated an entire toolkit for businesses into the Extranet, and it includes not only the workshop materials – tools, templates, tips, guidelines in the different operational areas – but also in addition any useful information that we would pick up throughout the week that we felt was relevant to the practitioners, be it new funding streams, new training opportunities, new marketing opportunities overseas, was loaded up to the Extranet. It was a new type of learning approach or avenue or channel for the participants. We were very aware of the fact that they needed hand-holding so at all the structured events we organised helpdesks to support people. The facilitators were available at the network meetings to go through access, etc. to the website. In Ireland, there is a broadband challenge for many of us, including myself, based on where you live, and that was one of the considerations we had to focus on because the rationale behind this was accessibility to learning. From that perspective we also had a post-out service, so we posted new materials to those participants who selected for post-out.

From our perspective we tried to make sure that what we delivered accessible to everyone. The important thing about the online support was the whole area of sharing the learning with colleagues back in the organisation, where – I mentioned we would upload all of the learning material. We encouraged participants to download that material and to share it with their businesses. We also provided them with the opportunity that if they wanted to come into the office and bring some of their team in with them that we would go through that material with them.

Research is the fourth and last key element of the programme structure: for many of the micro, small- and medium-sized enterprises that we are working with, they are working in isolation, they may be the only person

in the business, and being the only person can be extremely lonely, especially when you have a list of to-dos of 500 items and you never get to item number 10. We wanted to ensure that the participants themselves felt that they had other supports, other than the face-to-face learning, the learning-set meetings, the online supports, that they could pick up the phone and ask us to research secondary information for them.

We set up a research portal for the participants, where they would either route research or information requests through their facilitator at their local network meeting, or directly into the office. Over the last three years we have had over 450 such research requests. They can range from enquiries about soap moulds (because we had a soap maker), to things such as funding to an activity centre which wanted to look at the whole area of education in activity, what the regulatory requirements would be for that; so a very broad range of research requests. The answers to these requests were shared among the network unless, obviously, there was something that was quite specific to an individual who requested it not to be shared.

We are very fortunate with the link with Fáilte Ireland in that they recognise the benefit of research – not just direct industry but also academic research, and we have what started out to be two masters students funded through the programme but now they've moved into their PhDs, and they assist us in this element of the programme, which works very well.

The outputs to date – if you're looking at it from a statistics perspective, which I know some organisations need to do, I mentioned that we have 552 businesses involved to date; we have 210 businesses in the first three years, 112 of those have already been awarded a Special Purpose Level 6 HETAC award – it is a certificate in Tourism and Business Practice. I think this has to be one of the key outputs to date, from all of us involved, both the businesses themselves and the academics, because for many, it is their first step on that fantastic path to lifelong learning. It has been a huge builder of confidence for many of the participants, most certainly for those who have only reached Junior Certificate level; typically they are in the demographic where their children are graduating from college. That sense of pride for the participants has been absolutely huge. We have another 92 who will graduate at the awards ceremony at Waterford Institute of Technology in October and that will bring it to 210.

The interesting point about this is that it is a Special Purpose award, so it is very much work-based. They need to submit four documents in total for the award. Each of which is very relevant to their businesses and how they will apply the learning – either through the peer-to-peer learning, through the structured events, or through the online elements. To have 210 is a fantastic success for the participants themselves and it is lovely to see the increments: the first year we had 42 and this year we have 92, so over three years it is great to see that. It is the original participants from 2006 are encouraging the 2007, 2008, and 2009 participants to submit.

I suppose a by-product of all of that are the learning networks that have been established. What we have seen is the development of sustainable networks, without the supports of the programme team, where the groups have come together with the facilitators initially, they have broken down the barriers of co-operation which would have previously existed amongst themselves in the business. They have learned to trust each other. They have done this through facilitated sessions, but the reality is the facilitated sessions have now ended and these groups are still together through co-operative movements. An example of this is 'Explore Baltimore', where five of the 2007 participants decided that it was time to get together and do something positive with the Baltimore area, They now have 84 businesses involved in a co-operative initiative. There is also a group in Wexford who have stayed together as a learning group, and that is replicated across the seven counties that we are working with in the South East and South West. It shows that there is a hunger there, a realisation that working cooperatively

– be it either through marketing or from a learning and business development perspective – is important, and I would see that as one of the key outputs as well.

In addition, there are numerous other by-products from our perspective, and one of them is the development of Extranet which has become a fantastic business support tool for past and current participants.

The key success factor from the programme design is the relevance and reliability. When people register to come on the programme the first thing that we ask them to do is to complete a learning needs analysis in their own business, so it is a more reflective process. This is key to what we deliver as part of the programme; we have the core elements, but the content of each of those workshops is very much driven by the needs analysis as defined by the participants and is also linked into what are the perceived industry requirements.

This year we have seen a large shift and a focus on the whole area of competitive pricing, negotiation skills, customer service, and we have tailored our programme to ensure that they are incorporated into the programme. During the year we tweak the programme based on the feedback – every intervention is evaluated, and we also roll out a 360 degree evaluation six months into the programme, where our facilitators, who look after the local networks, and the participants evaluate how the programme is going. Again, that will determine how we structure and deliver the remaining six months of the programme.

The course implementation is about accessible learning, which we looked at from two different angles. We looked at it from the logistics, because many of the tourism providers felt that all of the training is in Dublin, and they cannot leave their business for a day to get to Dublin to attend training – because in some cases, for them to leave their business means it's 50% of their staff. And everyone needs to remember that - that we're dealing with micro and small and sometimes medium enterprises.

We looked at those local networks rotating around the participants' businesses, and it provided a fantastic opportunity for the individuals to showcase their business and use it as a case study. We're back into this whole area of peer-to-peer learning where the individuals themselves may have had a challenge within their business and now they have a group of ten experts in the industry assisting them in overcoming the challenge. In regards to the structured events, we run them in the South East and the South West and we rotate them around the counties, but the participants themselves are given an option as to which region they attend, depending on their shift rotas.

All documents are uploaded to the Extranet, but in addition to that we had to look at the literacy levels amongst our participants; obviously with the broad age range we had to look at sight and vision as well. We audio-text enabled our website using a product called Browse Aloud, which enables those who have literacy or sight problems to highlight text and it reads it out. Also we audio-recorded a lot of our functional workshops and uploaded those to the website as well. We try to look at new ways to make the learning materials accessible to people.

The action-orientated approach – again, it's back to work-based assignments. All of the assignments the participants get throughout each of the workshops and back in their business are all work-based assignments – for example, we would ask them to write a press release, it needs to be about something within their industry and within their own businesses, which they can use. So they're carrying out their own assignments but it is useful and tangible – for example a risk-assessment for a Health & Safety statement, they need this as part of the regulatory requirements and they'll do it in our workshops. So it's very much work-based focused.

The multiple access points for information, it is back to this 24/7, we needed to make sure that people focused on access to information. In order to generate a true blended-learning environment for a participant it requires multiple levels of support which reflects the different learning styles that individuals may have. Our facilitators, office, trainers are accessible to the participants either through email or the website. After sessions, all of our trainers are committed to staying on after the sessions for one-to-one with the participants and many of those give a six-week email contact after the event so when the participant goes back and tries to apply the learning, if they come across a challenge they may contact the experts.

A huge benefit of this entire programme was the whole area of the academia interface, and the facilitation of learning by WIT and CIT. It started with the facilitation of the learning networks, but also it focused on the development of the workshop content. The relationship built between the participants, industry and the academics, and the openness of industry to offer their businesses as case studies for post-graduate and undergraduate students has been phenomenal.

For example, the businesses typically will explain a scenario from their own business, and the students will work towards solutions for it. There is also the Special Purpose award, this was a challenge for everyone involved in the team, and it was the first Special Purpose award for WIT. From our perspective, it was promoting the whole area of a blended learning approach to a programme and the key focus of peer-to-peer learning and we were very fortunate to be awarded that in 2006.

All of this gives a view of what I've been speaking about to date with our approach on the blended-learning aspect and there's one other aspect, and from my perspective and I hope that my colleagues would endorse this – it's all based around the whole needs-identification of the participant group, and trying to develop a programme that meets and exceeds their needs, and continually having them involved in the design of the content of the programme. Obviously, within limits, but very much having it reflected on them as their programme and their learning and they having ownership of it, so it becomes in a sense, a self-directed learning process. We focused on making sure that we delivered a blended-learning approach for the programme.

Back to communications again, if you are looking at that blended-learning approach communications are essential. There needs to be open communication across each of the stakeholders in the programme, because open communication leads to trust and therefore you get a much more realistic picture of what the participant needs, what their business needs, and how we can deliver on those needs and ensure that at the end of the process the individual sees it as a beneficial experience, with a view to continuing life-long learning, rather than a negative experience and again the door closes on them for further education. So again, communication is one of our key focuses from the very early stages of the programme.

Keep in mind the sector we are working with, where the communication is not two-way during the peak season. We need to make extra effort during July, August, and September to keep these participants involved and make them aware that we are there to support them.

Finally, further developments for this year - 2009, it is the second contract from Fáilte Ireland and there are two new strategies from Fáilte Ireland. It is in Ireland Southwest which focuses on adventure and food and Ireland East which focuses on heritage and cultural. Fáilte Ireland were looking to evolve the networks and they asked, instead of having all of our local networks – the smaller groups – divided geographically, would we look at some of those being thematic. As a result we developed three thematic networks and three geographic networks. From our perspective, we are evolving the networks but it is a learning experience for us as well because

obviously the needs of a thematic network which focuses only on adventure – their needs are quite different to a general network. We need to also keep in mind that while we have a thematic focus in a network there is also a very strong focus on the reflective, self-directed, peer-to-peer learning. The next step for us is in how we manage the focus on the peer-to-peer learning element while we have more external factors influencing how we run our local networks.

Everyone here today has spoken about the whole area of recognition and accreditation for prior learning, and this is one of the key areas that colleagues of mine are looking at in WIT. Fortunately in this tender, Fáilte Ireland said they would like to continue with the tourism learning networks, they would like all counties in the country to benefit from the opportunity to gain a certificate in Tourism Business Practice, which WIT is currently looking at the feasibility of that. Most importantly Fáilte Ireland wants to support the focus on lifelong learning, and it is funding the school of business in the Institute to look at the development of a BSc in Small Enterprise Management. Again this is adopting a blended-learning approach and I am very pleased to say it is looking at the feasibility of recognition for prior learning in addition to obviously credits for the certificate in Tourism Business Practice. Again, this is very much student-centred learning and it would be blended learning with key elements of e-learning included in that, peer learning, networks etc. It is an evolution of what we are doing at the moment at Level 6, and this would be a Level 7.

So the lessons learned from our perspective, it is key to understand the participant needs. Particularly in the sector we're working in, it is not just the learning needs but the accessibility to learning as well, and ensuring that we continue to incorporate that in everything that we do. Also the whole area of recognition of prior learning, and this as I have mentioned, has been incorporated in the development of the BSc, and once the feasibility is completed on that area of the development of the BSc, we would look to also including that as part of the Certificate in Tourism Business Practice, the Level 6 that currently exists.

Oran Doherty
RPL/WBL Facilitator
Letterkenny Institute of Technology

I am responsible for promoting recognition of prior learning and work-based learning at Letterkenny IT. We mainly concentrate on employees as opposed to registered students. The job involves visiting companies throughout Donegal and offering employees an opportunity to get skills acquired in the workplace accredited with a third level qualification. We started off by offering people single-subject certificates in areas like customer care, computers or communications, but we've gone from that two or three years ago to delivering full programmes like high research degrees and now even masters, tailor-made for companies. So we've come a long way in the last few years.

In 2006, LYIT participated in a Líonra led project, aimed at recognising learning in the workplace. Now specifically it aimed at recognising learning in business and computing, so any employee who had gained learning in business and computing would have a chance to get that learning accredited with a third-level qualification such as a single-subject certificate, a minor award, a diploma, or exemptions on a degree if they ever wanted to come and obtain a degree. But most of them used it just to get single subject certificates in their area of expertise.

Before we could go out promoting this to the companies, there are a number of steps we had to take. The first step was to train our staff in how to deal with work-based learning, because it was new to most of them. We provided a three-hour workshop on what is work-based learning, what is recognition of prior learning, how to assess work-based learning, guidelines from the NQAI, and guidelines that HETAC currently had. That involved the three to four-hour workshop, and approximately sixty staff attended those workshops. We then identified suitable modules that local employers could apply to have their employees' learning accredited in. Most of the companies in Donegal are call centres, financial institutions or software-development companies, so we offered a number of modules in business, IT, and communications that employees could apply to obtain their learning in that area accredited. Only then did we start promoting the WBL and the RPL to the employers and to the employees.

Examples of those modules include the following: Computer Applications, Managing People, Business Management, Customer Care, Office Administration, Office Management, and Communications & Marketing – they are the popular modules that people from local companies were applying to. A lot of people had skills in those areas from working in call centres; they had skills but no qualifications, therefore we had to develop some kind of mechanism where they could get those skills accredited with a qualification.

We got the learning outcomes from each of those modules, wrote them up in a way that an employee could show evidence that he or she had the skills in that area, and they'd put together a portfolio, that was assessed by the lecturer. The lecturer also interviewed the employee and if they were successful, they received their single-subject certificate which also entitled them to an exemption on that module if they decided to go back and complete the remainder of the programme.

How do we promote it to the employers? We put together a database that contained details of all the employers throughout Donegal – their email address, phone numbers, contact person – and sent out a personalised email to each of these companies, explaining what RPL and WBL was, what the advantages were, what was the process involved, the costs, the timelines etc. We made presentations to the following: the Chambers of Commerce, FÁS, Údarás na Gaeltachta, groups such as Donegal Women in Business, Donegal County Enterprise, IBEC, Skillsnet – all of those groups that, I would call them umbrella groups – they passed the word on to their members then.

I attended the LYIT employer's fair promoting the advantages of WBL and RPL. I also attended the Donegal Adult Education fair, which had a large attendance with an interest in some courses but they were even happier to hear that they could get what they know already accredited with a third-level qualification without coming to do a course – they could put a portfolio together in their own time without ever having to do a course in Letterkenny IT, and get their qualifications. I also went on the two local radio stations, there were numerous press releases and regular information sessions in LYIT that would explain WBL and RPL to potential applicants.

Just to give you an idea of how it worked, if you were an employee with good customer care skills, and you wanted to get a qualification for what you know. What was the procedure, how would you go about doing it? Every module has an assessment e.g. customer care. If you were learning customer care in a business degree (it's one of the subjects in our business degree), that module has seven learning outcomes and is taught over 12-14 weeks. So I approached the lecturer of that module and said, there's a lot of people in employment who know these seven learning outcomes already, therefore they don't want to come into class and do it but they want an opportunity to show you they can do it so they can get their single-subject certificate in customer care. So for each of the learning outcomes, I'd ask the lecturer, what evidence would an employee need to provide to show that he/she already has these skills and therefore deserves the qualification?

For each of the learning outcomes the lecturer responded for the first learning outcome a learner/employee would have to explain:

- What is customer care?
- Describe the importance of customer care;
- How is customer care managed in their organisation?
- What are the consequences of good and bad customer care?

For each of the learning outcomes, the lecturer required answers to show that the learner has knowledge, skills and competencies in each of those areas.

At the beginning, the lecturers were rather sceptical of this RPL and WBL idea, and they were very strict on the way they were going to assess it. The learner, or in this case, the employee, would put together a portfolio that demonstrated knowledge for each of those learning outcomes. We have a portfolio template that an employee would complete for each module. There is a cover sheet for each portfolio with their name, their PPS number, module title, degree title, applicable date, table of contents, and seven learning outcomes.

A lot of the material that they put into their portfolio is material on their computer, from, for example, questionnaires they give out to customers or reports from some surveys they've done among customers – half their portfolio could be completed before they sit down and write it. A typical portfolio would be about 15-20 pages long; they're usually given 4-5 weeks to do it. We give them a two-hour training session and demonstrate to them what RPL is and what a portfolio should look like. We also have progress sessions where we find out how they are progressing and if they have any queries.

On completion of the portfolios, I would collect and deliver them to the lecturer. Up until two or three years ago, the lecturers had no experience in assessing WBL or RPL portfolios. So we introduced a mechanism for assessing the portfolios with each learning outcome worth five marks. Combining the portfolio and the interview results ascertains if the learner is justified in received a single-subject certificate.

The smaller companies came to me for the information, progress, and training sessions, however, with the larger companies we do the training and progress sessions at the company's premises. Interviews were also conducted at the employer's premises at a time that suited the employer. The call centres especially were very interested in this idea. This would cause the minimum disturbances for the employers and the employee in putting together their portfolio.

There are big benefits of WBL and RPL to employers, and you have to stress that to them because otherwise they won't promote it. I stress the following advantages: companies that promote WBL and RPL to their employees will find it easier to attract new staff because they can say, 'we are an employer that promotes learning within our company, and if you do the training with our company you will also get a third-level qualification', so that is a big card for many employers to promote to their employees. It is also good for keeping existing employees motivated. Before they offered this WBL and RPL opportunity, staff were learning new skills but they were getting nothing for it, no piece of paper, they were getting nothing new on their CV. Now they are being motivated to learn and do as many training courses as possible because they have a chance to get all that learning accredited with a qualification. It is also good PR – there was one insurance company in particular that put 15 of their staff through the customer care module. The fifteen of them passed with flying colours and graduated with their certificates in October. The company placed a photograph in the newspaper showing that 15 of its staff recently received a third-level qualification in customer care, so that was good PR for the company.

They are the main benefits that companies need to be told about WBL and RPL. The main concern that employers have is time. 'If you are going to come to our organisation and give a one-hour training session and come back next week and give a one-hour progress session, that is two hours of our time taken up already'. You have to be flexible, is it possible to do training after work or during the break?

Another problem area is trying to get someone in the company who will take responsibility for promoting RPL or WBL within the company. Even a practical problem such as getting a free room to deliver a presentation can prove difficult. Some employers said 'if we offer this to our employees, they are going to get a qualification in it and will look for a pay rise, so we're not doing it' – so that was another practical problem.

So in practice, it works as follows:

Week 1	A presentation is given to the staff on WBL and RPL and assessment forms are distributed. From that training session they should be able to begin their portfolio;
Week 3/4	Progress session;
Week 5/6	Collection of portfolios;
Week 7/8/9	Interviews and the assessments take place.

Every October there is a graduation ceremony and the graduates receive their single-subject certificates.

Because of the increased demand we developed a Level 7 mentoring programme made up of two modules; managing people module, and a mentoring module. The people who could do this programme were people in a managerial position – HR managers, training managers, supervisors, team leads. The first module, the managing people module, they all did that module through RPL. They compiled an RPL portfolio that demonstrated that they knew the five learning outcomes. The second module was mentoring people and that was done over seven Monday evenings from 7.00pm to 10.00pm.

Upon completion they were able to do the mentoring in their respective companies. We had 20 people from large organisations throughout Donegal who completed it last December which very successful.

Regarding the learners, as I say, the learners that completed that programme can now promote WBL and RPL within their companies. Just to give you an idea of how we have progressed from offering single-subject certificates. Currently, we are working with a company called Pramerica, probably the largest company in Donegal, and it has two sections: a call centre and a software development centre. To work in the call centre all you typically will have completed is your Leaving Cert and probably 1-2 courses on computers, to work in the software development centre you needed at least a Higher Certificate in Computing. Pramerica had a big problem; a lot of the people working in the call centre section were leaving after a year or two, and they were losing a lot of good staff. These were staff that didn't have their Higher Certificate in Computing, so what Pramerica wanted us to put together a Higher Certificate in Computing that would train the people in the call centre so they could go and work in the software development side of the company.

We already had a Higher Certificate in IT Support that was an 18-month, full-time course made up of three semesters – 6 months in LYIT, six months work placement and then a further six months back in LYIT. They were happy enough with most of the existing Higher Certificate, but they wanted to change three or four of the modules to suit them. We were able to offer that course over sixteen months, part-time, once a week, due to a combination of RPL, WBL, web CT and mentoring. We cut an 18-month full-time programme down to a 16-month part-time programme, which was good. We achieved this because of RPL, employees from the call centre knew a lot of the modules on the programme already. A lot of the material on the programme they were applying in work. We set up a web CT and the mentoring aspect of it was that every one of the applicants on the programme would have one-to-one support from an employee who currently worked in Pramerica that already had a degree in computing. We interviewed that person and made sure they were capable of providing good mentoring. The first two modules were done through RPL. The only people who could apply for this had to have certain basic skills anyway. The computer applications they did through RPL, interpersonal communications again through RPL – they did the portfolios, they were interviewed, and for the communications section, they had to give a presentation as well. The next four modules they completed by attending class; they were exempt from the six-month work placement as they worked in an IT environment anyway; and the training support module was again through RPL, and then the final four modules were done through conventional class attendance. That programme was very successful.

We recently developed a partnership with IBEC Retail Skillnet; the company wants a degree in Retail Management. So most of last year I worked with a representative from the Retail Skillnet, and we put together a retail degree for people that currently worked in retail, and about 30-40% of the programme is WBL and RPL. They are expecting about 30 people a year on the programme, and one of the reasons it is going to be so successful, we believe, is the WBL and the RPL aspects of the course.

Dr Jen Harvey
Head of Lifelong Learning
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Today's event focussed on Work Based Learning within the context of the SIF Education in Employment project. We have had the opportunity to hear about some of the ongoing work as part of the project and to meet colleagues with similar interests. We have also explored the concept of partnerships – often fundamental to the support of learning in the workplace. Partnerships that might be between industry and higher education institutions, partnerships between universities and Institutes of Technology and partnerships between colleagues who are perhaps working and/or learning together. By exploring our very different established and developing project Industry /HEI partnerships that function to support learning in whatever form, we have been able to look at the very different ways that these partnerships might be sustained into the future. More importantly, we have looked at strategies that can be used to support learning. Learning, for example as part of formal programmes of study within the workplace or learning within virtual learning environments as part of online collaborative learning sets.

Work based learning is also about recognising and valuing different kinds of learning, and this morning we captured various issues related to how we might best set the context for learning within our various organisations and better address a possible need for our institutions to foster an openness to change. It was interesting to hear Barbara's presentation about using projects and the individuals involved in those projects as change agents – such a strategy is exciting and quite dynamic in terms of changing practice. Many colleagues for example who appear quite resistant to change might also be quite traditional in their selection of learning, teaching and assessment methods and might not want to move to what they view as new and innovative strategies to accommodate these new learners: more familiar exams or essay based assessments might be preferred over more appropriate evidence-based methods. Face to face lectures preferred over the creation of virtual learning sets used to encourage learners, based in different locations, to engage and take ownership over their learning. It is only by having role models and successful case studies as exemplified throughout our conference, that we can help to build up confidence of colleagues, of learners and enthuse other practitioners to change. Today we've got lots of evidence that these ideas we might have previously talked about are possible, and I think we should try and make sure to take that message away with us and back to our respective institutions.

Some of the other issues we have discussed today related to the applied nature of WBL and how we might convert and apply theory from professional disciplines into practice within the workplace. We have talked about the importance of valuing individuals and the richness of knowledge and experience that they might bring to the workplace. It is recognised that as institutions we need to put into place frameworks and pathways through which we can value this diversity in an appropriate and meaningful way: perhaps through negotiating different learner access and progression pathways that can be of benefit to both industry and higher education institutions. During this afternoon the practicalities and barriers and challenges of undertaking such tasks were articulated.

Over the day, we've managed to cover a broad range of topics related to WBL from effective learner induction, use of new technologies, learning support, reflection, mentoring, negotiation, building learner autonomy and building confidence. I think that building confidence is fundamental for our institutions, ourselves and also for our learners – building up confidence in our abilities and our self-esteem in a way that we are creating an integrated support infrastructure that's there for everyone – where learner's experience is valued and developed, and it is possible for learners, irrespective of their current situation, to get to where they want to go. The concept of personal development planning and the negotiation of learning agreements, I feel, is a key part of that whole process and putting into place processes that encourage dialogue and communication by opening up opportunities for discussion. It is about empowering both ourselves and our learners.