



## Supporting the co-generation of work-based learning designs

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Through workforce development policies, universities are being encouraged to develop flexible support and delivery mechanisms. This includes moving from university-led curricula to demand-led and co-generated curricula. The University of Gloucestershire, in partnership with the University of Winchester and Pebble Learning Ltd, is developing mechanisms and tools to enable such approaches. These include the development of a vocabulary to bridge occupational and academic standards and a toolkit to support curriculum planning. This paper reports on this project and the innovative approaches that are being implemented to create new curriculum development opportunities.

Keywords: work-based learning; work spaces; demand-led; co-generated curriculum; e-portfolios

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### Introduction

Recent changes in UK workforce development policy are reinforcing pedagogical processes within higher education that place greater emphasis on constructivist learning philosophies and widening participation (Walsh, 2008). These changes are encouraging demand-led and co-generative curriculum developments, in addition to traditional university work-based learning (WBL) provision, which have focused on providing accredited programmes for individual learner needs (Tallantyre, 2008: 3). So, given the recognition for increasing WBL opportunities through demand-led provision, there is a need to develop flexible support and delivery mechanisms (King, 2007), to achieve what Walsh (2008:15) identifies as *'supporting the learner in 'translating' their prior and current achievements outside the university into a discourse whereby they can be recognised by the academic community'*.

This paper reports on how the University of Gloucestershire is establishing processes to support flexible delivery of WBL. This is being achieved through the development of an accreditation framework and a set of tools to support the generation of negotiated curricula. The development of the tools is being undertaken through the JISC-funded Co-genT (Co-generative Toolkit) project led by the University of Gloucestershire in partnership with the University of Winchester and Pebble Learning Ltd (<http://resources.glos.ac.uk/tli/lets/projects/cogent/>). Informed by learning design literature, Co-genT will provide an interface to support the development of negotiated curricula and make representations of learning designs available to students.

### Supporting work-based learning

Higher education provision for WBL has been dominated by university-led provision. This has tended to follow a traditional paradigm and has been criticised by employers for not demonstrating any understanding of their needs and language. This action-research project will seek to implement flexible delivery, in the broadest sense, through co-generated curricula and to investigate the processes involved. At the core of this project is the desire to encourage innovative curriculum development and delivery within the recognised quality assurance frameworks demanded by higher education.

Willis (2008) identifies the need for higher education institutions (HEIs) to establish a framework 'designed to facilitate the accreditation, within higher education, of work based and work-related learning' as a means of ensuring academic integrity and flexibility within the system. Recognising this need the University of Gloucestershire validated its own accreditation framework, called the Gloucestershire Framework for Personal and Professional Development, early in 2009 (Figure 1). This framework is designed to allow maximum flexibility for employers and learners whilst maintaining academic standards. It has the capacity to have nested within it small and distinct learning events such as continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities, standard module length credits and the ability to accommodate Employer Based Training Accreditation (EBTA). Awards can then be built up to include certificates and diplomas, Foundation Degree, Honours top-up and Masters level qualifications.

The Framework includes generic material, the outer *shell modules* in Figure 1, which are necessary to meet the requirements of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's regulatory Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) (Quality Assurance Agency, 2008) and allow for the delivery of named awards. The Framework does enable assessment and 'delivery' through a mixture of WBL based on employment-related material, accreditation of prior-experiential learning (APEL) and off-the-shelf modules. These elements can be delivered via relevant departments in the University of Gloucestershire, other higher education providers, or employers. Co-genT is developing mechanisms to support the design and delivery of these flexible curricula.

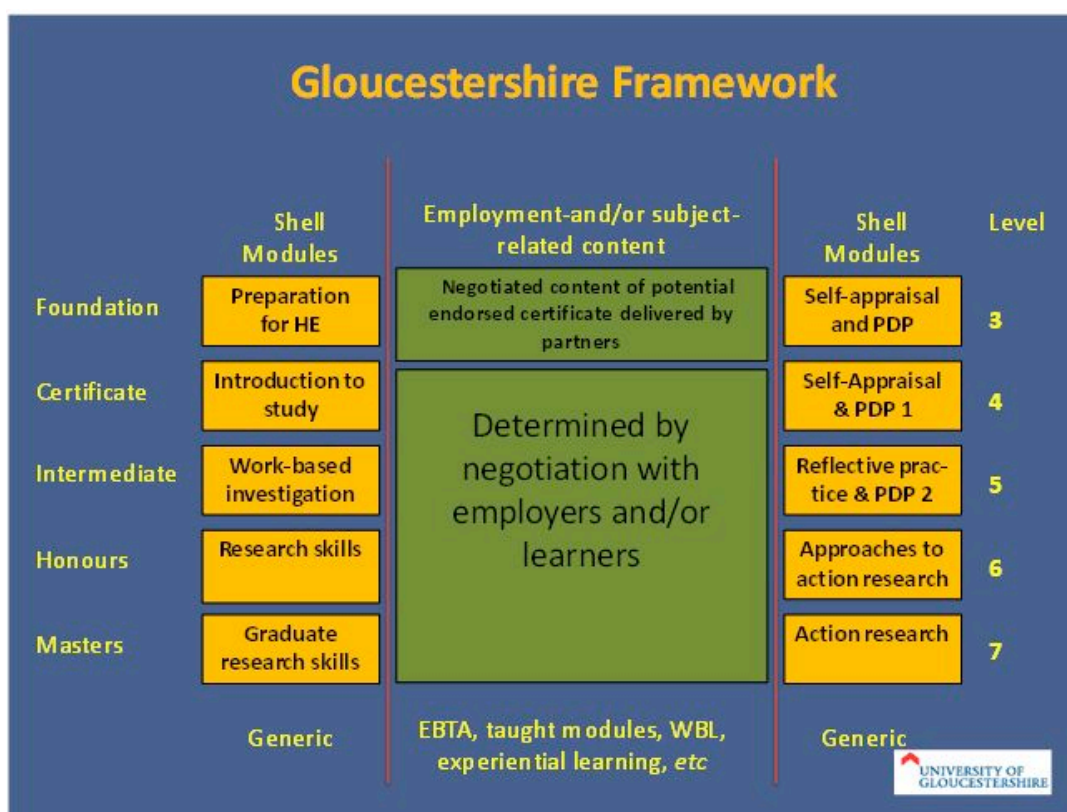


Figure 1: Gloucestershire framework

## Co-generating curricula

Having established an accreditation framework to enable flexible delivery there is an important challenge in supporting the development of demand-led, negotiated curricula and managing the interface between academia and employers. The development of negotiated WBL presents quality assurance issues regarding the need to ensure a comparable learning and assessment experience. The Co-genT project, funded as part of JISC's Work-based Learning and Workforce Development strand, aims to develop tools to enable interaction between academia, employers, support staff and students in the development and delivery of negotiated curricula. Key elements within this overall process that will be developed through the project are:

- Creation of a vocabulary that maps and aligns academic and professional standards, thereby allowing employer needs to be mapped to academic learning outcomes.
- Developing the use of portfolio-based learning and integrating personal development tools such as ELLI (Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory).
- Development of a simple configurable toolkit which enables curriculum designers, working with employers in a co-generative curriculum design process, at both course/programme and module level, to select skills, attributes, and/or outcomes that are automatically translated into learning profiles for curriculum design and personalised pathways for curriculum delivery.

### **Establishing a vocabulary**

The development of a negotiated curricula that meets both the quality assurance demands of higher education and specific needs of employers requires an ability to bridge two very different vocabulary sets. Employers in the UK have established a comprehensive set of National Occupational Standards for all employment areas, whilst academia has its own language defined through quality assurance mechanisms such as programme specifications and the FHEQ (Quality Assurance Agency, 2008). An important element of this project therefore is the establishment of a vocabulary that provides a bridge between the two. Linking employer demands, expressed in the language of National Occupational Standards, to the FHEQ will ensure equality of academic standards. At the time of writing this is under development.

### **Portfolio based learning**

Developing negotiated curricula demands personalised forms of assessment; providing a means of assessment that can accommodate the flexibility and personalisation inherent in such designs. Sutherland (2005) conceives e-portfolios as personal spaces for learning which can be used to support multiple stories of learning, and can therefore provide a means of capturing and encouraging reflection on authentic activities, such as WBL. This approach, which also places the development of personal attributes rather than disciplinary knowledge at the centre of the learning design, encourages recognition of personal development. To further facilitate this, Co-genT will integrate ELLI with the PebblePad e-portfolio system. ELLI is a personal development tool based on a questionnaire developed by the University of Bristol that is designed to find out how learners perceive themselves in relation to seven 'dimensions of learning': Changing and Learning, Meaning Making, Curiosity, Creativity, Learning Relationships and Strategic Awareness. The resulting ELLI profile gives information which can be used to indicate how a learner, or a group of learners, may develop their learning capacity.

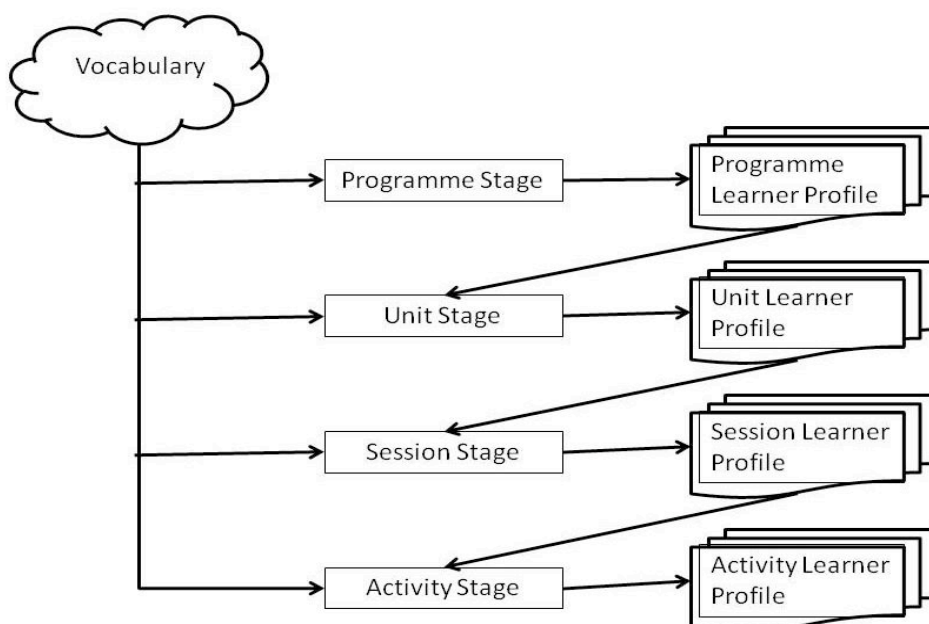
### **Supporting the creation of co-generated curricula**

Ensuring the consistency of the student learning experience in WBL requires new approaches. The Co-genT project will address this through both support for development of the learning design and by making explicit to students what is required of them and what they can expect in return. This will be achieved through the development of a configurable toolkit which enables curriculum designers, working with employers in a co-generative curriculum design process at both course/programme and module level, to select skills, attributes, and/or outcomes which are automatically translated into learning profiles for curriculum design and personalised pathways for curriculum delivery. These will provide coherent intention frameworks which can be selected to generate *Learner Profiles* and *Personalised Pathways*.

The toolkit will provide a scaffolded curriculum planning tool that will allow academic staff to generate overviews of units of learning; these can be at programme, course, module/unit or activity level. Within each of these stages the planning tool will be able to be used to generate an overview which contains: title, description, developer, outcomes etc. (Figure 2). They are then guided to the next stage to provide more detailed 'overviews'. This planning tool could also be used to provide staff development support, in particular in helping to promote 'constructive alignment' (Biggs, 2003) between the outcomes and the planned activities. In this way it also helps build in greater detail through the levels; a lack of detail has been a criticism of some learning design models (Falconer *et al*, 2007). This will be an important consideration given that many academic staff will be unfamiliar with developing personalised negotiated curricula for WBL.

From the overview generated through the planning tool it will then be possible to generate *Learner Profiles*. These will be provided through the e-portfolio and make explicit to students what skills, attributes and knowledge they will gain from specific modules and provide a means for self-auditing, evidencing and subsequent assessment.

*Personalised pathways* will be made explicit through an ‘Explain and Share’ presentation tool, which will provide a visual representation of the learning design. Drawing upon research into learning design representations (AUTC, 2003; Falconer *et al*, 2007) it will provide a means of making explicit the activities that students are expected to undertake to complete the assessment identified through the *Learner Profile* and the support and resources that will be available. In this way it provides a timeline for the student and shows the inter-relationships between the activities, supports and resources. In doing so it helps to provide comparability of the student learning experience by making explicit the activities that the students are required to engage in and the resources and support they can expect access to.



**Figure 2: Planning stages**

## Conclusion

WBL developments present a challenge to existing higher education provision, to introduce innovative curriculum design and delivery within current quality assurance frameworks. This action-research project is seeking to develop a set of processes to help address this challenge based on the development of vocabulary database to facilitate discussion and a software tool to help co-generation of the curriculum.

This paper has sought to share developmental ideas for how HEIs can respond to policy initiatives for increased personalisation and demand-led WBL opportunities. It recognises the role that technologies can play in enabling learning in this *work space*, moving beyond traditional WBL provision which relies on HEI generated curricula to be delivered to employees, often at set times and places.

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