

# Corporate capability: Implications for the style and direction of work-based learning

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## Individual and corporate capability

The concept of capability - of individuals and organisations - has emerged in the past 20 years as a useful construct for examining a range of issues related to education, training, and business success. In the UK and Australasia it has contributed to debates about the nature of learning, the design of the curriculum and our understanding of the basis for effective performance in the work-place.

### *Individual capability*

Individual capability as an educational concept appeared in 1978 (Burgess) when the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA) launched a national campaign to redress what they identified as a harmful and unnecessary imbalance 'in the full process' described by the two words 'education' and 'training'.

Stephenson (1992) elaborated this concept of capability as

'an all round human quality, an *integration* of knowledge, skills, personal qualities and understanding *used appropriately and effectively*- not just in familiar and highly focused specialist contexts but in response to *new and changing* circumstances.'

To be capable, Stephenson argued, people need *justified* confidence, based on real experience, of their

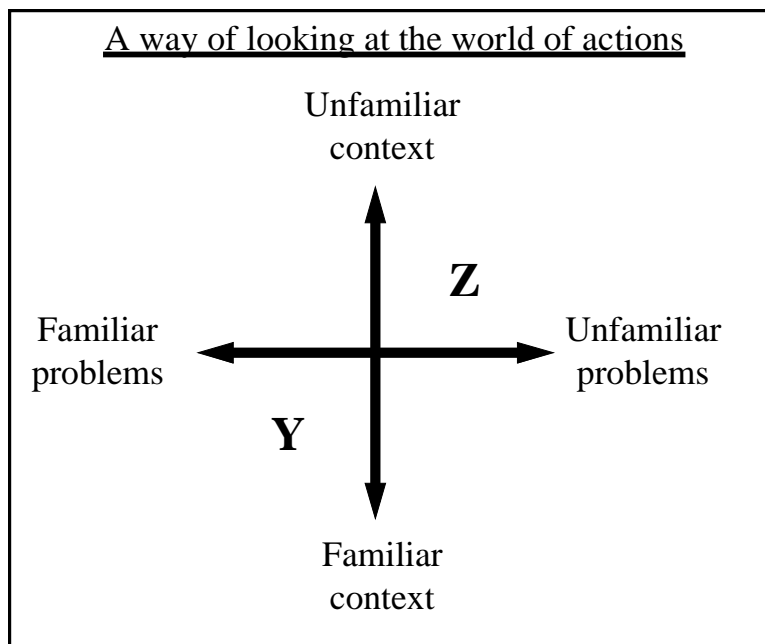
- specialist knowledge and skills;
- ability to manage their own learning and to learn from experience;
- power to perform under stress;
- communicate and collaborate effectively;

- capacity for dealing with value issues - their own and other people's

The concept of capability has been at odds with a parallel development, the emergence of competence, and their components 'competencies' as the basis of Government policies of vocational education and training. In the context of work-based learning, competence usually refers to the possession of specialist knowledge and skills relevant to a specific context. Components of competence - usually referred to as 'competencies' which can be measured - are used as pre-determined learning outcomes for vocationally oriented training programmes. In the UK, Australia and New Zealand, Governments have established national frameworks of vocational qualifications based on industrial standards of competence and these are welcomed by some major companies as a way of bench-marking the standards of their own work-force (CBI, 1998).

The concept of capability challenges and extends this notion of 'competence'. Here is one way which I have found useful in trying to tease out the differences between competence and capability in individual. (Figure 1)

**Figure 1: Positions Y and Z in the world of Actions.**



Most of us operate, for much of our time, in Position Y. In position Y, we are dealing with familiar problems for which we have learned familiar solutions. The context in which we are

operating is also familiar. Position Y can apply to the work-place, the home, community activities or artistic pursuits. Our concerns are for reliable delivery, performance standards, error elimination, technical expertise and the mastery of established procedures. The prevailing culture is one of **training**.

But Position Y is not the whole of our experience. Many more of us will be spending more of our time having to operate in Position Z. In Position Z, we have less familiarity with the context and we have not previously experienced the problems with which we are faced. The slavish application of solutions perfected for familiar problems may have disastrous effects in Position Z. To a large extent we are on our own, either individually or collectively. Very often, what distinguishes effective pilots, effective surgeons, effective social workers, effective teachers, effective builders and effective accountants is that they perform as well in Position Z as in Position Y.

When taking action in Position Z, our exposure means we are on our own, i.e. with no ready-made solutions to buy. We use informal networks for support. Problems must be formulated before they can be solved. In these circumstances, taking effective action requires courage, planned risk-taking, imagination, intuition and creativity. With no track record to guide us we rely heavily on our values when judging what is appropriate. Specialist knowledge and skills are still relevant, but they are insufficient by themselves. It is necessary to appreciate their potential inadequacy, and to have the skills and confidence to enhance them. The solutions devised for the problems which are formulated will be essentially propositional in nature, developments from existing understanding. Evaluation of the consequences of actions taken in Position Z will enhance our understanding of, and perhaps even improve our performance in Position Y.

Personal qualities associated with capability - such as courage, risk-taking, intuition, sharing, acceptance of personal responsibility, flexibility, initiative, self-confidence and values - are easier to describe than to measure and so, for those concerned with competencies, must take a back seat or be ignored. Competence is about delivering the present based on past performance; capability is about imagining the future and bringing it about. Competence is about control; capability is

about learning and development. Competence is about fitness for (usually other people's) purpose; capability is also about judging fitness of the purpose itself.<sup>1</sup>

### *Corporate Capability*

The concept of personal capability can also be extended to organisations. Based on a review of the literature from USA, UK and mainland Europe on corporate capability<sup>2</sup> Williams et al (1997) concluded that

an organisation can be described as capable if it embraces the intrinsic, ***conscious and continuing capacity to survive, grow, improve and transform*** achieved through a positive commitment to developmental learning and relationship with its environment. It is a synthesis of process, outcome and culture, encompassed in the notion of ***flexible capacity***. (p6).

Williams' list of key characteristics of a capable organisation chime with those of the capable individual: a concern for ***values, flexibility, openness, responsibility and continuous learning***. Williams et al concluded that as long as it is currently surviving, an organisation can be considered capable, even if it is not currently as effective or successful as it might be, as long as it is ***consciously building its collective capacity to be successful and effective in the future***'.

The capable organisation, like the capable individual, has an all round quality, an integration of technical expertise, belief in its capacity to perform in changing circumstances, confidence in its ability to learn and , and the capacity to make appropriate judgements within an explicit and relevant set of values.

The management guru Arie de Geus (1997) likens corporations to individual living beings. Whilst working at Shell, he participated in a major study of the world's most enduring corporations - those that had survived the commercial equivalent of the great flood - many times. The key characteristic of the living company is its commitment to placing long-term survival ***consistent with its developing identity*** above the short-term maximisation of returns to shareholders.

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<sup>1</sup> A capable person also has culture, in the sense of being able ***to decide between goodness and wickedness or between beauty and ugliness*** (Weaver, 1994).

Such companies, de Geus argues, have four factors in common (pp. 12 - 16). I have brought them together in Table 1.

**Table 1: De Geus's common factors for corporate survival**

Common Factor	Meaning
1. Sensitivity to the environment	An ability to learn and adapt
2. Cohesive, a strong sense of identity	An ability to build a community and persona for itself
3. Tolerance of ambiguity, initiative, at the margins	A company's awareness of its ecology, networking with others, inside and outside
4. Conservative financing - i.e. had reserves to take initiatives when they needed to.	The ability to provide for and govern its own growth and evolution.

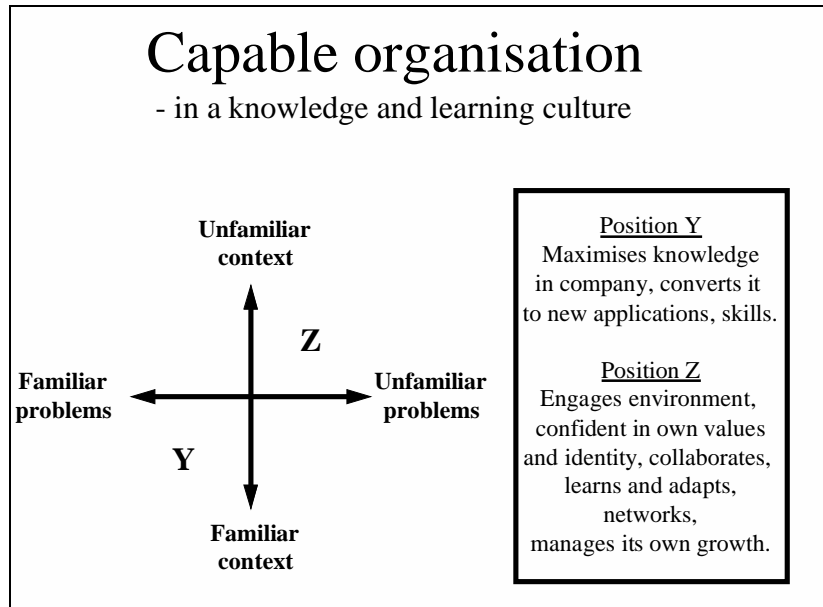
A close reading of de Geus's elaboration of factors such as 'sensitivity to the environment' and 'tolerance of ambiguity' shows remarkable similarity between his perception of the living company and the characteristics of the Capable individual.

A further trend is towards the notion of intellectual capital, or knowledge management. Like individuals, organisations build up their store of knowledge and technical expertise, and in an information age, this knowledge becomes their most precious asset. When related to de Geus's notion of the living company, the competence - capability continuum might look different (Figure 2). In this version, position Y - the familiar domain - shows a concern for internal *knowledge management* systems leading to more intelligent and effective operations. Progress is by incremental and planned enhancements in the pool of corporate skills and intelligence. In Position Z, the capable corporation activity engages with external emerging trends, has confidence in its own identity and values, imagines possible futures based on those trends and formulates potential roles for itself within those futures.

**Figure 2: Capability within a knowledge culture**

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<sup>2</sup> Including Bloom et al, 1994; Beddowes, 1994; Kanter, 1984; Mayo & Lank, 1994; Pedler et al 1996; Sadler, 1993; Senge, 1992; Stahl, 1993



This notion of a capable organisation embraces but goes beyond that of the learning organisation. A company could be described as a learning company entirely within the context of position Y, learning from and about its current activities. As argued by Cairns (1998) a capable organisation also has 'a focus on both the present and the future', operates within 'a values bounded system', relies on competition via collaboration and consciously fosters capability in its members and its organisation.

Therein lies the challenge and the opportunity for work-based learning. If individual learners and organisations need the same qualities to survive, grow, improve and transform, a common approach to work-based learning based on openness, a concern for the future, responsibility and continuous learning would appear to make sense for both parties. To achieve this synthesis, organisations should create a culture which looks after its own long-term survival through the effective management of, and explicit support for, the autonomous development of all its members within the corporate context.

#### *Process as outcome*

From the above it is apparent that a capability-focused work-based learning programme should aim to develop people's

- a) confidence in their ability to manage their own learning in response to changing circumstances in the work-place,
- b) belief in their power to perform effectively under conditions of risk;

- c) ability to engage effectively and constructively in the formulation and solving of operational problems related to the organisation's business;
- d) habit of sharing ideas and learning with others;
- e) ability to judge the effectiveness of their own performance and its contribution to the performance of the organisation;
- f) capacity to contribute to the shared values of the organisation.

These learning outcomes are additional to the development of specialist skills and knowledge, and can be achieved through the *nature of the process* by which those specialist skills and knowledge are acquired. When those responsible for formal training and education policies disregard the significance of *outcomes from the process*, preferring to focus exclusively on the achievement of their predetermined learning objectives imposed at the outset, a number of **negative consequences** might follow:

- a) managers of the system might believe that because their predetermined specialist outcomes have been met the work-force is well prepared for the future,
- b) valuable personal skills and qualities might not be explicitly developed and recognised,  
and
- c) a culture of top-down control of standards which precludes bottom-up development of potential might be reinforced.

Moreover, top-down work-based learning programmes run counter to the informal processes by which people learn through work. Eraut et al (1998) show that formal education and training provides only a small part of the whole. Achieving personally set goals formulated within everyday work-place problems contributes both to the work itself and the vocational development of the learner (see Slotnik, 1999). In these informal situations, learning-goals are not pre-determined but are identified by *?a combination of self-directed learning and exploiting learning opportunities as and when they appear*(p1)

Much of the knowledge gained through informal learning is **tacit** in nature (Polanyi, 1967). Learners unconsciously or incidentally accumulate specialist knowledge and skills through experience. This tacit knowledge can take three forms: situational understanding; routinised procedures based on experience of what normally works well; and intuitive decision-making, usually in response to 'hot action' under pressure (Eraut 1999).

If informal work-based learning is 'normal' and leads to much relevant tacit knowledge, how can those of us with responsibility for work-based learning 'go with the flow'? How can we make explicit the *process* by which tacit knowledge is accumulated so that we might facilitate its development, help improve the quality of people's performance, spread valuable knowledge throughout the organisation and prepare new recruits for a life-time of effective learning through work?

Recent research into learning through work emphasise the importance of interaction with others and support from supervising staff and significant others. de Geus likens this to 'flocking' - a form of behaviour which helps blue tits to master and share the technique of opening milk bottles. Alderton (1999) identifies the importance of a 'micro-culture' of friends and colleagues which supports the taking of responsibility and sees 'failures' as opportunities for learning and the improvement of quality. Williams et al (1997) describes the informal 'learning milieu' of social contacts as being more relevant to advancing the capability of organisations than competency-based programmes. Both reports emphasise the crucial role of the organisation itself in providing space, time and recognition for informal learning, particularly through the formal management structure.

From the above it is apparent that a successful work-based learning strategy would be one which goes beyond the delivery of pre-determined specialist outcomes related to immediate needs. It needs to focus on *processes* which:-

- are consistent with *informal patterns* of learning through work;
- help people to be *explicit* about their learning *goals* and experiences;
- relate to people's *longer term personal development* needs;
- engage people with the learning potential within the problems they face at work;
- accommodate and exploit informal *networks* of support;
- build confidence in people's belief in their *power to learn* and perform;
- engage people in *exploring value* issues in the work they do;
- provide an informal *culture of support* and official recognition of achievement

Exposure to the above *processes* in real work situations under conditions of challenge or risk will help people develop those same characteristics as learning *outcomes*.

One experience which illustrates the effect of such an approach is reported by Judith Evans, Director of Personnel Policy for Sainsbury's Supermarkets Ltd. Describing the processes and value of self-managed learning within a fiercely competitive industry, Evans concluded:

?self managed learning has given us much more than a traditional training course. As well as people with more skills, it has given us more confident and able individuals who have the courage to tackle the many tough issues brought about by a changing organisation.. (Evans, 1997)

The inescapable conclusion to all of the above, I would argue, is that if work-based learning is to contribute effectively to corporate capability, that is to help the organisation survive, grow, improve and transform, then it must be based on **the conscious management of the autonomous development of each member of the organisation within the context of the organisation's current and potential activities.**

### Trends in UK University-related Work-based Learning

In their review of current trends in UK university-related work-based learning? Foster and Stephenson (1998) identified three significant trends:

- *in terms of benefit*: from improved economic performance towards learner development;
- *in terms of culture*: from a control culture to a development culture; and
- *in terms of responsibility*: from university/employer to learner.

These trends are elaborated in Table 2.

**TABLE 2. Key variables in university-related work-based learning (Adapted from Foster E & Stephenson, J, 1998)**

<b>FEATURE</b>	<i>Trend from...</i>	<i>Trend towards...</i>
Primary location of learner	<b>University</b> University-registered student,. pursuing university agenda; serviced by workplace (additional learning environments, application/testing of campus knowledge; specialist inputs and resources from workplace)	<b>Workplace</b> Employee; agenda controlled by employment needs; serviced by university (distance materials, supportive modules, part-time enrolments, supervision, accreditation frameworks)
Intended benefit	<b>Economic performance</b> Enhanced performance; corporate profitability; international competitiveness; public service effectiveness	<b>Learner benefit</b> Enhanced specialist expertise via application of knowledge; intellectual development; awareness of abilities, needs and aspirations; personal skills; and general worldliness
Dominant	<b>Control</b>	<b>Development</b>

culture	Predetermined outcomes to meet current standards and needs	Outcomes emerging from the learning experience, going beyond immediate needs
Responsibility for program	<b><i>University/employer</i></b> University or employer determines the purpose, activities, program and outcomes	<b><i>Learner</i></b> Learner determines or negotiates the purpose, activities, program, outcomes and assessment

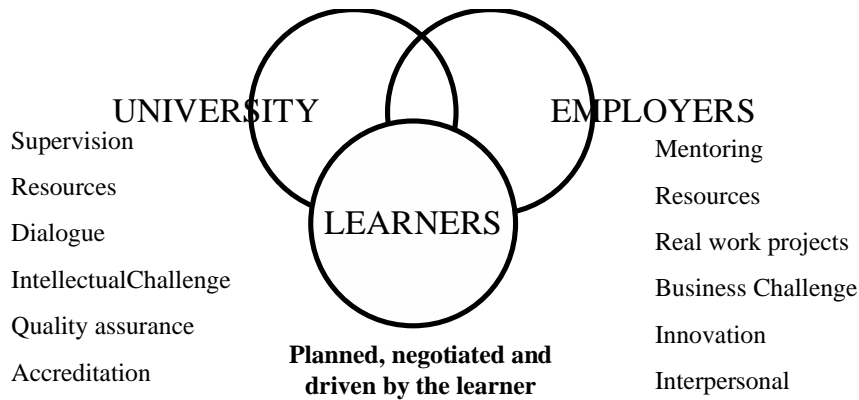
### *The Growing Importance of Learner-mediated Partnerships*

Current trends in UK university-related work-based learning indicate the growing importance of learner mediated partnerships between university and company.

The emerging model is one in which the autonomous development of the learner is the unifying element, with the university supporting the learner's self-expressed development in the context of the employer's business. (Fig 3). Programmes are invariably based on the pursuit of real-time projects formulated by the learners themselves according to their own longer term goals, with the company's benefits being both immediate through the completion of current tasks and, more crucially, long-term through the creation of a collective capacity to manage change within a changing environment. The respective interests of the three parties in these partnerships is protected by the use of three-way learning contracts negotiated by the learner with the university and the employer.

In these partnerships, the learner negotiates the purpose, direction and content of the learning, the university provides specialist supervision and access to accreditation, and the employer provides opportunities to learn through work with access to resources and help.

### **Figure 3: Learner-led university -employer partnerships**



### Challenges posed by certification

One feature which differentiates informal from formal work-based learning is certification. Certification can take the form of *internal* certificates of completion of training programmes, and can be used for internal audits, personal portfolios and performance appraisal systems or *externally recognised* awards such as diplomas, degrees or vocational and professional qualifications. Those who invest in learning - including governments, companies and learners themselves - need reassurance that learning has in fact taken place. As companies become more conscious of the value of their intellectual capital, entries will appear in annual balance sheets. Inevitably, comparisons will be made - by recruiters (is this candidate's skill and knowledge comparable to that candidate's?) - by companies (are we up to scratch with our competitors?) - by providers (are we as effective as alternative providers?) - by learners (how am I doing compared with others?) - by clients (is this person up to the job?). In the UK, public funds are channelled to programmes which comply with national standards - to protect the interests of the taxpayer. These are the drivers towards the use of standardised competencies tested by common means in the interest of 'fairness' and accountability.

Formal assessment for external awards presents the biggest challenge of all. How can we establish benchmarks and standards which accommodate the widest range of learner interests and company needs? One solution which is gathering momentum in university-employer work-based learning partnerships is the use of generic level indicators to ensure comparability of outcomes whilst accommodating the maximum range of individualised content, format and mode (Foster, 1998; Osborne et al, 1998; Shaw et al 1998)). The University of Leeds, for instance, devised a matrix between 5 *fields of activity* related to work-based learning and six *key variables* which

indicate the *levels* at which university students can work (see Table 3). In the matrix, each field of activity is defined at each university level (i.e. year 1, year 3, post-graduate). For instance level 1 problem formulation would show less complexity, autonomy etc. than would be expected at level 3. Since the level indicators were drawn from the tacit understanding of key university academic gate-keepers, it was possible to argue that work-based learners presenting work which met those levels were comparable, though different, from campus based students working at the same level.

**Table 3: Components of the University of Leeds generic level criteria**

<b>Fields of activity</b>	<b>Level variables</b>
Formulation of the problem	<b>Complexity</b> of concepts, variables, influence
Generation and design of possible solutions or responses	<b>Autonomy</b> and control;
Implementation of solutions or responses	<b>Relevance</b> and impact;
Evaluation of outcomes	<b>Integration</b> of content, skills;
Organisation and presentation of all activities	<b>Abstractions</b> , generalisations and transfer;
	<b>Creativity and innovation.</b>

The Leeds and similar schemes also use learning contracts as a way of reconciling in advance any tensions between the learners' specific intentions and the assessment requirements of the awarding body.

### **Some examples**

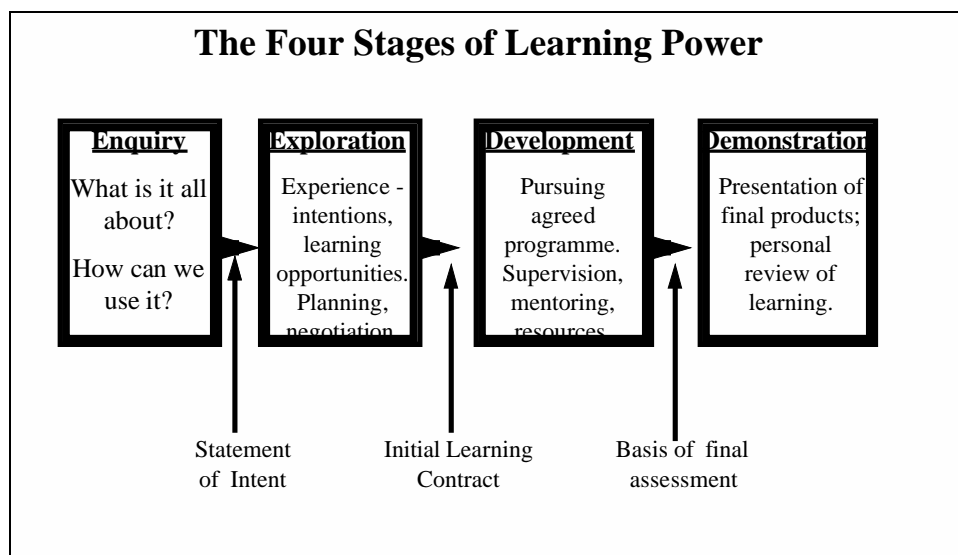
#### *Learning Power*

In 1997, the Leeds Training and Enterprise Council (TEC) sponsored a work-based learning scheme in association with local small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and the two universities in the city (University of Leeds and Leeds Metropolitan University). In the Learning Power Scheme (as it was called - Stephenson, 1997), the SMEs provided the focus, projects and in-house support, the universities provided specialist supervision and accreditation. The programme was almost entirely work-based except for some group sessions on campus and the occasional one-to-one support for work-based projects from tutors. By the end of year one, the scheme had attracted 100 learners interested in work-based learning in the fields of business, computing, health-care and multi-media.

The Learning Power scheme has 4 stages - enquiry, exploration, development and demonstration (Figure 4) - interspersed with formal control procedures based on the scrutiny and registration of student negotiated scrutinised and registered by the university.

**The Enquiry Stage** This is an open-ended stage which helps potential participants to find out what is on offer and to prepare a Statement of Intent setting out their ideas on how they would like to use the Learning Power programme. This Statement of Intent needs the support of the organisation (i.e. employer) within which the proposed study is to be set. It also enables the universities to decide whether the applicant understands the nature of the

**Figure 4: The Leeds Learning Power Scheme**



programme and whether they can provide appropriate expertise in the likely area of study. The Enquiry Stage may involve two or more twilight meetings at the TEC offices and will require some thoughtful planning at work.

It is on the basis of the Statement of Intent that applicants may or may not be offered a place on the programme.

**The Exploration Stage.** This is a more substantial stage, lasting perhaps anything from 10 to 12 weeks depending upon the rate of progress and level of intended award. Learners are helped to explore their likely area of study, assess their previous experience, identify a suitable major

project and prepare a detailed learning contract for their main programme. This Stage will involve some meetings at one or other of the universities, probably in learning sets, background reading, putting together reading lists and exploring resources and learning opportunities in the university and at work. The Learning Contract which emerges must have supporting signatures from the learner's organisation and the supervising University.

**The Development Stage** This is the longest stage, where the programme is progressed according to the terms agreed in the Learning Contract. Typically, this will involve learners pursuing their project(s) in their place of work with supervision from a university specialist and a work-place mentor, supported by access to relevant university library materials and workshop facilities. Learning sets - groups of students - will continue to meet for peer support, either in the university or, if numbers allow, in the place of work. The duration of the Development Stage will be part of the Learning Contract and will depend upon the learner's starting level and the intended level of award. For an Honours degree, for instance, the duration would normally be up to three years or more; this could be less if credit is given for relevant prior experience.

At the end of the Development Stage, learners will be asked to present a Final Learning Contract setting out in more detail the basis on which they wish to be assessed.

**The Demonstration Stage** This stage is the preparation of material for final assessment. Typically, this Stage could last three months, depending on the complexity of the products being presented for assessment. All participants will also be asked to prepare a Personal Review of Learning.

In their preliminary evaluation of Learning Power, York Consulting (1999) concluded, despite some teething troubles related to the initial unfamiliarity of the procedures and culture shock for some university tutors, that *Learning Power has made a very worthwhile local contribution to the development of new forms of delivery of higher skills to the work-force*. Despite frustrations with the pace of the exploration stage and the availability of support when needed, students remained 'enthusiastic' about their participation, whilst employers reported high motivation of their employees, satisfaction that the content was directly relevant to their own needs and, overall, found

'The programme offers excellent value for money; accreditation of prior work is very important - from my limited experience of the programme I have been impressed; flexibility is very important' (p8).

### *Other examples*

In addition to the Learning Power scheme, two other major university-related work-based learning initiatives also utilise learner negotiated learning agreements leading to formal university awards but are organised in different ways. In **Portsmouth University** the range of university departments providing work-based learning is prescribed. Students demonstrate their APEL by mapping their experience and knowledge against existing modules, select and follow some existing university modules and determine their own work-based learning research-based project (amounting to some 60% of their overall program). **At Leeds**, the Work Based Learning Project programs are individually validated against common, generic criteria and may bear no relationship in curriculum content to those of any other student, although students may elect to follow any number of campus-based modules. The guiding force for a program's acceptability is its relationship to the circumstances and aspirations of the student, their employer and the university partner. **At Middlesex University**, work-based learning students follow a fully modularised program which enables students to construct their own program, as at Leeds University, according to their own needs and aspirations..

### *The rise of ICT*

Probably the most significant development, however, is the rapid growth in the use of information and communications technology (ICT) for learning. One immediate and obvious effect is that 'just-in-time' access to specialist material in support of work-based problem solving is greatly enhanced. But ICT has the further potential to provide

- a smoother engagement with the formal process of negotiation and registration of programmes
- on-line demonstration of performance
- immediate access to personal specialist support,
- interactive learning materials designed to facilitate reviews of experience, planning and monitoring processes; and
- access to an on-line lifelong learning portfolio.

The main difficulties expressed in the Learning Power project concern access to advice, the different rates at which learners can progress compared with the normal academic cycle and the

apparent complexity of procedures. Despite these concerns all the participants remain enthusiastic. What will it be like if ICT can minimise these frustrations? The UK Government is investing heavily to find the answer. Its University for Industry project (Ufi) is a national on-line service aimed at, amongst others, work-based learners. At the time of writing, Ufi is putting together an on-line programme to provide ready-to-desk specialist interactive support for self-managed work-based learners - in partnership with the major quality assurance and funding agencies - for launch in mid-2000. Time will tell if it fulfils its promise.

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