

# Learning *from* Experience Trust

## Student Driven Learning Contracts

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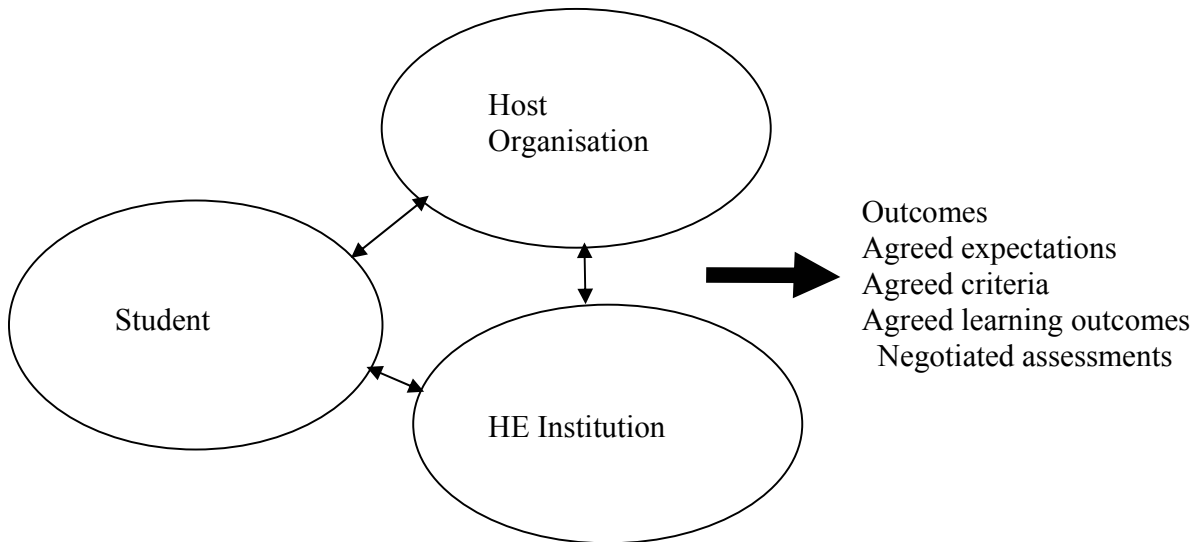
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## INTRODUCTION

Undergraduates on Sandwich Courses at Napier Polytechnic in Edinburgh are collaborating with teaching staff and employers in developing Learning Contracts which earn academic credit towards their degree. The Training, Enterprise and Education Directorate are funding the refining of a student-driven model which can be used in a variety of institutional contexts.

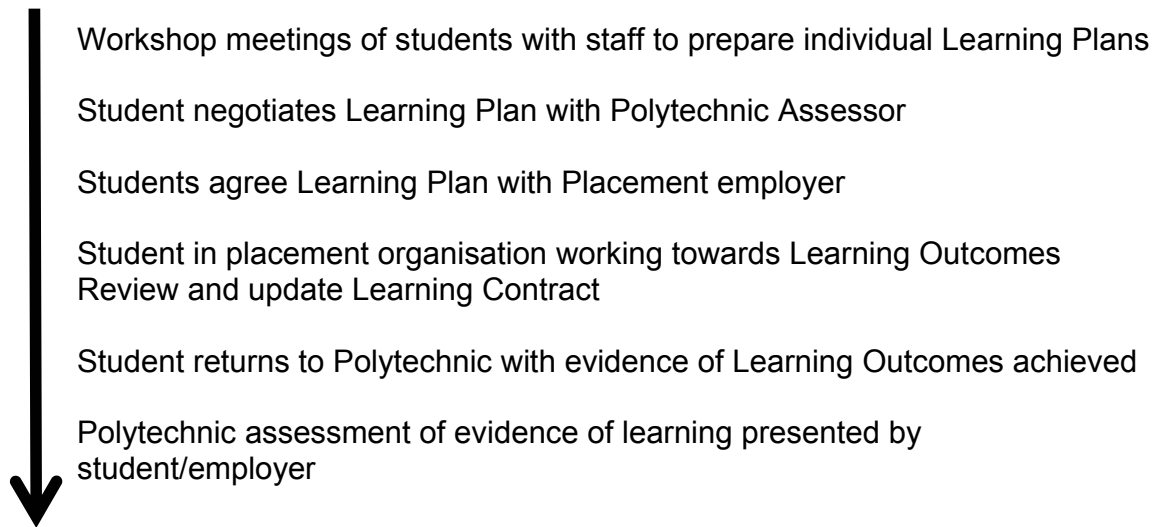
Model of Student Driven Three-Way Learning Contract



By encouraging the students to take a large measure of responsibility for identifying what they want to learn from the experience of sandwich placements, the motivation of the learner is harnessed to achieving agreed learning outcomes. The model encourages ongoing re-negotiation by all three partners. Once they get the hang of it students are keen to turn learning which they value into academic credit towards their honours degree.

Academic staff tend to find the focus on the outcomes of learning somewhat tricky but the students and the employers can be very helpful!

## MODEL OF WORK-BASED LEARNING PROCESS FOR STUDENTS



Employers of our sandwich students, especially small and medium-sized companies, greatly appreciate students negotiating what they hope to learn from placement experience in advance. It saves time and money by avoiding inappropriate matching of student and placement. Students are glad to have the chance to turn relevant learning from experience into real academic credit towards their degree.

Of course, this approach raises a whole range of staff development issues for the polytechnic as it shifts the role relationship between staff and student towards greater learner autonomy. However, a possible bonus to the academic institution is to shorten legitimately the overall length of a course by offering academic credit for a previously 'dead' period.

There are three good reasons why systems and procedures must be developed which allow students to earn credit which counts towards their degree from work-based learning.

- In academic institutions there is a distinct tendency for resources to follow the award of credit.
- Many of our students have an instrumental approach to course work. The award of marks or credit influences the effort they are prepared to put into an assignment.
- Where employers are participating actively in the process they express the view that students should be rewarded for achieving relevant learning outcomes.

.Assessment of the evidence submitted by the student is central to the award of credible academic credit.

In the Learning Contract model being developed in Napier Polytechnic the following principles and conditions are emerging:

## ASSESSMENT OF WORK-BASED LEARNING

Some general principles:

1. That assessment be collaborative rather than unilateral.
2. That assessment be constructive and responsive to learners' needs.
3. That the conditions necessary for good assessment must be given priority in the allocation of time and other resources.

Some necessary conditions:

1. That there be clear learning outcomes which are agreed between learner and assessor to be relevant to the qualifications sought and valued by the learner.
2. That the credit awarded for evidence of learning should fairly reflect the quality of that learning.
3. That there be a policy regarding the nature of evidence of learning and a readiness to explore different instruments of assessment.
4. That there should be mechanisms which take account of the views of the learner and the employer in arriving at a collaborative assessment.
5. That there should be a policy for the professional development of teaching staff and of employer 'mentors' in support of the work-based learner and in the assessment of the evidence of learning which is submitted.
6. That there be a structure within an institution where the Academic Board of Studies can evaluate its success in achieving its own stated aims and adjust its practices appropriately.

## THE LEARNING OUTCOME

The fundamental element of the Napier model of Work-Based Learning is the learning outcome. By encouraging the learner to reflect on learning which they have already achieved or identify learning they will attempt to achieve attention is paid to specifying learning which is supported by adequate evidence.

Students are encouraged to group learning outcomes they plan to achieve from placement under three headings:

- Job-related outcomes.
- Personal development outcomes.
- Course related outcomes.

During the planning phase prior to going on placement the developing list of learning outcomes is negotiated with staff in the polytechnic. A major consideration is that the learning outcomes should be judged to be meeting the aims of the degree. Each student negotiates with a member of the polytechnic staff who will be the polytechnic assessor of the evidence the student will *offer* in support of the agreed learning outcomes. The list of learning outcomes proposed by a student is used as part of the agenda during placement interviews with potential employers. Invariably, further negotiations occur which have to satisfy all three partners - the student, the company mentor and the polytechnic assessor.

Throughout the placement experience the list of learning outcomes is regularly modified and renegotiated between all three partners to the learning contact. One month *before* the student is due to finish the placement they confirm the list of learning outcomes they wish to be assessed against.

The company mentor receives a printout of this list in the form of an assessment grid which asks the mentor to confirm whether or not the student in each case:

- Has indeed accomplished the learning outcomes.
- Has provided evidence of *understanding* against a scale 1-4.
- Has provided evidence of *adding* value.

This assessment by the mentor is invariably discussed with the student and sent to the student's polytechnic assessor who has his/her own assessment grid which is asking similar questions of the portfolio evidence the student submits in support of their claimed learning outcomes, and arrives at a considered judgment as to the credit to be awarded.

By developing professional judgment through experience gained with polytechnic assessors and students, the question of quality and standards are continually reviewed and refined.

Napier is moving towards a credit-based system which will incorporate work-based learning, but at present undergraduates still have to achieve a number of marks from a variety of instruments of assessment which determines their honours degree classification.

In developing appropriate systems and procedures at Napier Polytechnic it is seen as crucial that the staff who are to operate the scheme are satisfied that they have developed a workable scheme. Where schemes are responsive to needs they are liable to vary between one course and another. This will be particularly noticeable in the early stages until examples of 'best practice' emerge.

In the BA/BA (Hons) Hospitality Management a proportion of third-year marks are allocated to work-based learning. This total available mark is broken down as follows:

- 20% for the quality of the learning plan
- 30% for the assessment by the employer
- 20% for the portfolio evidence assessed by polytechnic staff assessor
- 30% for the *viva voce* by polytechnic staff assessor.

In the case of the BA (Hons) Commerce the course team have identified 'core' learning outcomes which the student should attempt to achieve with additional self-selected learning outcomes submitted by the student. The three categories of learning outcomes are retained, and an agreed number of marks are allocated as follows:

- 30% for evidence of job-related outcomes.
- 30% for evidence of personal development outcomes.
- 40% for evidence of course-related outcomes.

It is interesting to note that these schemes attempt to record evidence of learning, and will discriminate between differing levels of achievement of relevant learning outcomes.

A danger in the move towards a credit-based scheme is that where units of credit are based on units of time, ie 1 credit = 8 hours of appropriate activity, then the discriminatory power of the model is lost. To be regained it seems that we must move on from the simplistic time-based unit of credit towards an acknowledgement of the relevant learning outcomes which can be realistically achieved and demonstrated by a learner. This would allow students to earn more or less credits towards their degree by way of work-based learning. Where courses are *explicit* about the learning outcomes which are at present *implicit* within the syllabus, the issue of credit transfer, based as it would be on credit for learning outcomes achieved, is greatly facilitated.

A significant point which should not be overlooked is that the BA Commerce course team have devised an assessment scheme for awarding academic credit and communicating both the procedures and the credit weighting to the students *before* they go on sandwich placement. This clearly has implications for the positive motivation of both Polytechnic staff and students involved. By comparison, the BA Business Studies staff and students are much less clear, and one consequence of this uncertainty is some evidence of confused and demotivated students on placement. A lesson being learned by the Business Studies staff is that the students benefit from knowing in advance what they have to do to earn academic rewards for providing evidence of learning.