Workplace support for higher level learning
An introductory guide for advisers

Higher learning at work series
www.higherlearningatwork.org
This introductory guide is for people with a role to play in advising existing or potential work-based higher level learners – those studying at university level whilst working. It is particularly relevant if you are advising students undertaking a programme of study (or maybe just a module) that directly relates to their work.

Many work-based learners find that the support that they get in the workplace can make a positive difference to their studies.

This is where this guide comes in. It provides some pointers and information to help you to advise learners on how to get the support they need for their studies within the workplace.

It can be the case that employers have a particular perception of university study, perhaps seeing it as not especially relevant or beneficial to their organisation. This might be because they themselves did a very traditional university course or that they think that ‘university course’ just means ‘academic’ and ‘theoretical’.

Employers can be pleasantly surprised when they discover how relevant and useful work-based higher education can be, particularly when the learning is tailored to the specifics of their business.

So often what is useful is a focus on how higher level learning can address the real business needs of the workplace as well as the learner themselves – the win-win of work-based learning.

A detailed guidance document has been developed for learners. This includes practical information on the types and sources of workplace support that might be available and how to identify and ask for the right kind of help. It includes helpful checklists and templates and links to further useful sources of information. It is called Workplace Support for Your Studies and can be downloaded at: www.higherlearningatwork.org/workplace-support-for-your-learning

There is also a very comprehensive, free online resource available for people who are at the stage of thinking of embarking on work-based learning at HE level. This resource, Build on Your Experience: Introducing Higher Education at Work, provides a wealth of information, activities and links to relevant websites. It is designed to help prospective students draw out and build on the skills and competences used in the workplace to prepare for higher level learning, and can be downloaded at: www.ltww.ui.com/ufiresources/startinghighereducationatwork

Either or both of these resources could be extremely useful to recommend to learners or prospective learners.

“I’m more aware of particular issues in my job now and my employer’s benefited 100 per cent from it – everything I’ve done has been ploughed straight back into the service.”
What is meant by work-based learning at higher education level?

Work-based learning (WBL) that is part of a higher education programme is usually achieved and demonstrated through engagement with a workplace environment. These days, many universities allow, or even require students to incorporate work-based learning as part of a range of different qualifications within many occupational areas. Many part-time courses encourage students to draw on their ‘day job’ for learning opportunities, including work-based projects.

What kinds of workplace support can typically be made available?

Work-based learning covers a wide range of scenarios and this means that the nature of learners’ relationships with their employer varies too. The relationship can vary in terms of the nature of the learning opportunities provided and in terms of the kind of support provided.

Often the level of the employer’s involvement in the provision of work-based learning will influence the support provided. For example, an employer that has worked with a university to develop an ‘in-house’ course to help improve the skills and knowledge of its workforce may have a different relationship with the learners to one providing industrial or clinical placements for students, and to an employer who has a member of staff taking a course on their own initiative.

Learners doing a course independently are likely to have to ask for support from their employer rather than expect for it to be provided as a matter of course. This doesn’t just mean time off for study or financial support with fees. Here are some examples of support often provided by employers:

- flexibility in working patterns to enable study
- paid study leave
- unpaid study leave
- course fees – employers will often pay course fees if they see the benefit to the organisation
- provision of specialist equipment or materials
- access to specialist advice and information and to in-house expertise
- help and advice in planning work-based projects
- access to relevant in-house training provision
- opportunities to work-shadow or spend time with relevant people
- basic encouragement and support as and when needed – when learners and tutors were surveyed, this was the aspect that came out with the highest rating.

Before starting a major activity, investigation or project it’s important that learners have access to the required resources, whether physical, such as materials and equipment or finance and study time, relevant information or permission to work with or talk to relevant people or organisations. They should ensure that any required permission and funding is agreed at the outset.

In the Workplace Support for Your Studies [website] there is a checklist to help identify the kinds of support that would be useful in individual cases. It also includes advice on identifying useful sources of information and asking for and making the best use of study time.

“It is easier for your employer to offer you support if you set out a clear plan for your studying at the start.”
How can workplace mentors help?

Work-based students often find it extremely useful to have a mentor to provide on-going support. Because mentors can be so useful, it is worth learners looking at this option at an early stage.

A mentor, in this context, is a person who can act as supporter, challenger and friend.

As a supporter they will be there to guide and advise in general matters and possibly to assist in gaining wider support and assistance from the workplace such as time and resources.

As a challenger they may expect to play the role of a critic, who might discuss and challenge ideas and approaches, as well as expectations or assumptions.

As a friend they may listen, discuss and generally provide encouragement and support.

It is usual to think of a mentor or line manager as the primary source of support and, although this is often the case, there can be other people within the workplace who are well-placed to provide help and advice.

If a learner needs to make the case for a mentor to be provided, it is worth mentioning that taking on a mentorship role can often be a useful staff development opportunity for the mentors themselves.

In the Workplace Support for your Studies www.higherlearningatwork.org/ workplace-support-for-your-learning learner guide there is advice on making the best use of a mentor.

Supporting Workplace Study http://sws.oucpld.com is a free online resource for workplace mentors available as part of a suite of online IAG resources.

What about union learning reps?

In organisations where a trade union is recognised for collective bargaining purposes, there is likely to be one or more union learning rep (ULR) who will have been specially trained to offer support to members of staff (and to the employer itself) on education and training.

The union learning rep’s role is protected by statute and trade union members are entitled to take time during the working day to meet with their ULR to talk about their learning. The ULR role includes:

- identifying learning or training needs
- providing information and advice about learning or training
- arranging learning or training
- promoting the value of learning or training
- consulting the employer about carrying out such activities.

The kind of support a union learning rep might be able to offer ranges from help with selecting an appropriate course and making an application to help with making a case to an employer and support with study skills.

“A colleague who has done a degree gave me some useful advice and support regarding research and also read through some of my assignments.”
Why should employers provide support to work-based learners?

Experience tells us that employers are more likely to be supportive if they see that what students do will result in real, tangible benefits to the organisation. Some of the benefits appreciated by employers include:

- Projects are done that directly relate to the real development needs of the business and can result in improved efficiencies.
- Learners plan and implement projects, investigations and activities more thoroughly because they are using them towards a qualification, and usually commit non-work time to the activities.
- Learners become more interested and focused on the organisation and its business drivers.
- Relevant programmes can be taken with minimum need to take time out of work to attend university or college.
- Supporting employees learning and professional development can help with succession planning and staff retention.
- Many WBL programmes can help employers to ‘grow their own’ managers and professional level staff, saving time and money on recruitment and induction.
- Learners develop relevant skills and knowledge that can be used immediately and in the future by the business.
- Learners can take on activities that otherwise would be outside of their normal work – bringing fresh and up-to-date ideas to the work by applying the learning from their studies to the business.
- Supported learners often develop increased loyalty to the organisation and become freshly motivated.
- Assessment is often based on real workplace development activities such as projects, leadership and management initiatives, and the development of protocols and technical processes.

For further case studies and examples, follow up some of the links at the end of this guide.

“From the company’s point of view, they got value for money, which of course is part of the reason they sponsored me. They recognised that what I was studying would benefit not only me but also the organisation. It’s all relevant.”
What’s the best way of making a case for support?

Most work-based learners are able to include within their programme projects and activities that will make a real difference to their work and could result in direct business benefits for their employer.

In making a case to an employer for funding, time off or other kinds of support for studies, the focus should be on these business benefits.

Learners can be encouraged and supported to develop a rationale to present to their employer outlining the benefits of their proposed learning.

A rationale should contain a convincing argument for what is planned and needs to explain enough to convince an employer of the value of what is planned – to put it bluntly, the employer will need to know what’s in it for them.

Detailed advice on presenting a rationale together with examples of learning activities that benefit employers can be found in the Workplace Support for Your Studies www.higherlearningatwork.org/workplace-support-for-your-learning learner guide.

Whether learners are negotiating support themselves or with your support, thought needs to be given to:

- what to ask for
- who to ask
- when to ask and
- how to ask.

Learners will find some ideas on all these issues – essentially a set of tips on negotiation skills – in the Workplace Support for your Studies www.higherlearningatwork.org/workplace-support-for-your-learning learner guide.

“I think that those who did the programme almost immediately began to think in a new way about their work, and started to take things further. While their projects did have to be relevant to work, I think the real value of the training will come in the expertise that will underlie all their future projects.”
Where can learners find further information?

Workplace Support for your Studies [www.higherlearningatwork.org/workplace-support-for-your-learning](http://www.higherlearningatwork.org/workplace-support-for-your-learning) is a detailed guidance document for learners. It includes practical information on the types and sources of workplace support that might be available and how to identify and ask for the right kind of help. It incorporates helpful checklists and templates and links to further useful sources of information.

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National Careers Service
Provides free information and personalised advice and guidance for adults. You can contact the advice line on 0800 100 900 (8am to 10pm) or visit [https://nationalcareersservice.direct.gov.uk](https://nationalcareersservice.direct.gov.uk)

Student finance
Guidance for part-time students can be found at [www.direct.gov.uk/studentfinance](http://www.direct.gov.uk/studentfinance)

Foundation degrees
Available in a range of occupationally relevant subject areas that combine academic study with workplace learning and they can be particularly relevant for people already in work. To find out more go to [www.direct.gov.uk/foundationdegrees](http://www.direct.gov.uk/foundationdegrees)

Open University
Free advice for those interested in their courses [www.open.ac.uk/careers](http://www.open.ac.uk/careers)