Sustainable workplaces: the impact of workplace learning.

Martin Locock

Faculty of Business & Management, University of Wales Trinity Saint David, Carmarthen SA31 3EP, UK.

Summary - *Crynodeb*

The Wales Institute for Work Based Learning provides modular courses for learners in employment. For the last two years the Institute has been running two ESF projects under the pan-Wales Work-Based Learning (WIWBL) programme 2007-2014. WIWBL developed a suite of courses aimed at raising awareness of sustainability and the environment among the workforce and the corporate responsibilities for managers. As part of each course, the learners were required to examine an issue at their workplace, and in many cases this has led to the company changing its working practices to reduce waste. The legacy of the learners within their organisations is having a direct impact on the environmental effects of their activities. On the other hand, there were some disappointing lessons learned. Many companies saw sustainability as a 'nice to have' part of Corporate Social Responsibility, and were not thinking strategically about the future. The ability of learners embedded within organisations to initiate change with direct practical results in the short term is an area where the University is having a visible positive effect on the Welsh economy for the future.

Mae Athrofa Cymru ar gyfer Dysgu Seiliedig ar Waith yn darparu cyrsiau modiwlaidd ar gyfer dysgwyr sydd mewn cyflogaeth. Dros y ddwy flynedd ddiwethaf mae'r Athrofa wedi bod yn cynnal dau brosiect Cronfa Gymdeithasol Ewrop dan raglen Dysgu Seiliedig ar waith Cymru Gyfan 2007-2014. Datblygodd yr Athrofa gyfres o gyrsiau a anelai at godi ymwybyddiaeth ynghylch cynaliadwyedd a'r amgylchedd ymhlith y gweithlu a'r cyfrifoldebau corfforaethol i reolwyr. Yn rhan o bob cwrs, roedd yn ofynnol i'r dysgwyr archwilio mater yn eu gweithle, ac mewn nifer o achosion mae hyn wedi arwain y cwmni i newid ei arferion gwaith er mwyn lleihau gwastraff. Mae gwaddol y dysgwyr o fewn eu sefydliadau'n cael effaith uniongyrchol ar effeithiau amgylcheddol eu gweithgareddau. Ar y llaw arall, dysgwyd rhai gwersi siomedig. Ystyriai llawer o gwmnïoedd gynaliadwyedd yn rhan 'hyfryd ei chael' o Gyfrifoldeb Cymdeithasol Corfforaethol, ac nid oeddynt yn meddwl yn strategol am y dyfodol. Mae gallu dysgwyr o fewn sefydliadau i gychwyn newid gyda chanlyniadau ymarferol uniongyrchol yn y tymor byr yn faes lle mae'r Brifysgol yn cael effaith gadarnhaol weladwy ar economi Cymru i'r dyfodol.

Keywords: Work-based learning; Sustainable Development; workforce development; corporate strategy; organisational maturity

Introduction

This paper discusses the recent experience of the Wales Institute for Work-Based Learning (WIWBL) in running a project aimed at enhancing the performance of businesses in Wales, in terms of both their environmental and social sustainability. WIWBL was officially launched by the University of Wales Trinity Saint David in 2014, having been set up within its School of Business in 2008. It offers a range of qualifications under its Professional Practice Framework running from level 4 of the Qualifications and Credit Framework (entry-level undergraduate) to Level 8 (professional doctorate). The courses are designed for learners who are in employments, and each course relates the topic to their own workplace.

The awards in Professional Practice given by WIWBL include the Certificate in Higher Education, Bachelor of Arts, Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education, Master of Arts, and Professional Doctorate.

WIWBL has been running two programmes funded under the European Social Fund's Work-Based Learning Programme, 2007-2014. This was a pan-Wales programme covering the entirety of the Convergence Area, managed by the University of South Wales, intended to improve the competitiveness of private sector enterprises through enhancement of the skills of the workforce (see Appendix 1). The individual strands which were funded for activities at the University were Elevate (West) and Safe Workforce: Sustainable Workplace (SWSW).

The Elevate project was part of a pan-Wales partnership with other Higher Education bodies in Wales, aimed at general improvements to the performance of businesses by addressing skill gaps in management and administration. The southwest Wales hub managed by WIWBL developed a successful module in 'Mindfulness in the workplace'.

SWSW was a project aimed specifically at Health and Safety and environmental impact, complementing the existing accreditation schemes in the domain such as the Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (IOSH 2015), National Examination Board in Occupational Safety and Health (NEBOSH 2015), and the Institute of Environmental Management & Assessment (IEMA 2015). The project was intended to address the need for non-specialists within an organisation, especially at managerial and supervisory levels, to have some awareness of these topics in order to develop a more responsible culture. Stakeholders consulted in the bid development process had highlighted the significance of the 'human factor' – the need for employees to become engaged with new procedures if they are to deliver the predicted benefits.

In 2009 the Welsh Assembly Government had published One Wales: One Planet, its Sustainable Development Scheme, showing how it proposed to address sustainability in Wales. This included an explicit commitment to the adoption of sustainability criteria in public procurement (Welsh Assembly Government 2009, 57). It was expected that this provision would be carried forward into the Future Generations Bill and would require private sector suppliers to demonstrate that they had put in place their own sustainability policies in order to be eligible to tender for public contracts. In turn this would require businesses to either seek external advice or develop inhouse capacity. In the event the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act imposed a duty on public bodies to carry out "sustainable development, the process of improving the economic, social, environmental and cultural well-being of Wales" in their operations (Legislation.gov.uk 2015), but there was no explicit mention of procurement. (It is likely that public bodies will increase the emphasis on sustainable procurement over time but there was no 'Big Bang' implementation on a specific date.)

The SWSW project developed and validated a range of modules which would help businesses to meet Sustainable Development goals, including 'The environment and the workplace', 'Effective environmental management', 'Environmental performance within the organisation', and 'Waste minimisation', covering environmental sustainability, and also courses on managing stress in the workplace aimed at social sustainability.

The most popular course developed was the 'Leadership in Health and Safety' programme, which was run across the SWSW and Elevate projects as two 15-credit modules. It covered a range of techniques and applied them to a health and safety topic raised by the learner, bringing in factors including the Insights psychometric tool, mindfulness, team dynamics and communication skills. This course was developed in response to a specific request from one of the employers, and it was rolled it out successfully there and elsewhere, creating a significant impact on the way that the companies work. Many of the learners had limited previous education, and there was a social as well as economic impact in developing the skills of the workforce.

Impact on employers

There are a series of measures that can be used to quantify the direct effects of the project on employers. In terms of the numbers of students: the 'Environment and the workplace' module was followed by 24 students, 'Effective environmental management' by one, 'Environmental performance within the organisation' by five, 'Managing stress in the workplace' by five, and the 'Leadership in Health and Safety'

programme by 81 students. It is significant that the expected demand for management courses at Masters level to allow managers to understand strategic issues did not prove very popular.

Most of the students were part of cohorts at the same workplace – five companies took up the opportunity to have courses delivered at their workplace. These cohorts make up a significant proportion of the companies' staff (see Table 1). The highest proportion, 19%, was a small employer where the manager had specifically decided to send his entire management team on the course together so they would share, on completion, an understanding and language to address workplace issues, and had the effect of transforming the workplace culture:

> "I decided this was the right course for me and my team because I was intrigued with the idea of combining Insights with Health and Safety at work. The new skills I was hoping to develop together with my team was for everyone to understand their responsibilities for Health and Safety within the organisation. I liked the idea of it being work based, very practical, and addressing a specific concern. We've been using Insights explicitly in work since the course has been completed. I guess the key skills that I learned in particular were the reflection aspect so consciously thinking about what's happened, how you could have done it differently and how you would do it better in the future. I felt one of the key benefits of the course was being able to have the entire team participate, learn together, and using Insights to understand each other and how we can work more effectively in the future. I think the demands of the course are absolutely workable, and that's testament that of the 9 people from my team who started the course completed the course, and the feedback has been very positive from them. One of my expectations for the course was for people to take on a practical issue that we had, and to provide a realistic solution. Some of those are already in place and others need further work and we're working through them as part of our safety priorities throughout the plant, instigate the change and make that improvement happen."

> Paul Wallis, 3M

Table 1 - Participants as proportion of total staff by company.

Company id	Staff	No. learners	%
1	4473	86	1.9
2	524	18	3.4
3	134	8	6.0
4	130	12	9.2
5	47	9	19.1

Impact on learners

Another type of impact is that on the individual learners. There is limited quantitative data since the intervention has only just ended, but a rich source of qualitative data is their comments on the course:

> "This module has been thought provoking (and worrying), but has highlighted my organisation's responsibilities, not only to the local community, but to the globe as a whole." Wade Christensen, Tata Steel

> "Prior to studying this module I didn't understand the impact we make on the environment. I didn't understand the   bio/geo cycles and ignored warnings about global warming. I will definitely take more notice to the news and take more care in how I conduct my life with regards to the environment." Jeremy Elward, Tata Steel

"This module has opened my eyes to a number of things, especially in the workplace. We all have a part to play in   creating a sustainable environment for our children. I have really enjoyed this module and it has definitely opened my eyes. At the end of the day it is our children who will have to pay for our mistakes, so let's try and put some things right while we can." Rebecca Evans, Tata Steel

"Thanks for offering the 'Communication and Leadership in Health and Safety Workplace' course to me and my colleagues. I have found the course useful and it has helped me focus some of my time on health and safety concerns around the site. The approach to tackling health and safety concerns was particularly useful and helps us use a logical, methodical way of dealing with these things. The communication, reflection, leadership and mindfulness modules were good, because I could expand on some of the knowledge that I already have about different models, but also helps me back-up some of my actions in positive and negative experiences. Overall the content, presentations and lectures were well prepared and presented to us, which is a credit to you and your colleagues. I hope to be involved with more courses of this type to help further my development." Peter Yip, 3M

"Having researched the topic I can see the massive moral and social dilemma of balancing profits with environmental concerns, legislation should be viewed as continuous improvement and provide basis of everything we do in order to contribute towards a sustainable society." Kate Jenkins, Tata Steel
"The knowledge that I have gained during this assignment could be essential for all workers within the Industry and hopefully strive towards a sustainable and safe environment for many years." Daniel Melindo, Tata Steel

"The author now understands the importance of looking after the environment in the workplace and at home." Wayne Taylor, Tata Steel

Clearly these students had a profound change of awareness in relation to their companies' and their own activities and its relation to sustainability. It is surprising to note that these learners were working within organisations which had already implemented environmental management systems and at the strategic level were fully publicly committed to sustainability.

Promoting sustainability in the workplace

The lessons that we would draw from marketing and delivering these courses are: firstly we found no strong push of demand arising from the prospect of implementation of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act (Legislation.gov.uk 2015). The scope and nature of the public sector duty and bits implications for businesses in the supply chain had been the subject of widespread consultation and media comment, and we were surprised to find that those we talked to were not just ignoring that provision; they were completely unaware of it.

Secondly, in talking to companies there seemed to be a general lack of strategic thinking. Whenever we talked to them about their plans, they were very much focused on the next year and current profitability. This ran across the board, covering not just issues of sustainability but also succession planning and staff development: all planning is very short-term. One factor explaining this was the long shadow cast by the economic crisis of 2007-8; although the economy had largely recovered, the mindset of austerity remains in place. This is reflected on a wider scale by a survey by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development of the attitudes of UK employees, in which net satisfaction for the statement "My organisation gives me the training I need to do my job" averages +17 but "My organisation gives me the training I need to get a higher-paid job" averages -20 (CIPD, 2014, 30), showing that long-term development and readiness for change is not seen as a priority.

The generic courses that we developed were intended to provide an introduction for staff on the issues, addressing the knowledge gap that stakeholders had highlighted as concern. There proved to be very little demand for these courses from employers or employees unless there was an immediate relevance to the workplace.

We also encountered the issue of basic compliance – many companies responded that since they had a system in place to satisfy their legal obligations, they were already covered, and there was no desire to do anything further.

We found consistently that it was very difficult to engage managers in undertaking training themselves, even though that skill gap was one of the triggers that led to the project, and they were willing to send their staff to be trained. We had identified that some managers felt that they lacked the knowledge and skills necessary to deal with environmental and safety portfolios, since they had not come up through the safety officer route, but despite the fact that gap existed, they were unable or unwilling to address it by taking time out of work.

We were surprised by the low level of existing knowledge. Although sustainability and climate change are very high on the news agenda, it had little impact on people's understanding of the issues.

The most surprising thing was that when we talk to companies who had environmental management accreditations such as ISO14001 (International Organisation for Standards 2015) and Green Dragon environmental management standard (Green Dragon 2015), they did not have the level of commitment and awareness that those schemes would expect. These standards have a core component of leadership and communication as part of their structure, but it appears that often, the system has been put in place but the other developments have not followed.

Modelling organisational maturity

In reviewing these lessons we have drawn up an organisational maturity model to try and map out which parts of companies are engaging with the sustainability agenda.

Many companies are signed up to Sustainable Development through their Corporate Social Responsibility programmes. These programmes are beneficial but they are often treated as part of the marketing and public relations for the company, and have no effect on the day-to-day running of the rest of the organisation.

Table 2: Organisational maturity model: Stage 1.

Corporate social responsibility	Strategic planning
	Senior management
Staff	
Compliance	

Perhaps the most common pattern we see is where an organisation is signed up for corporate social responsibility and is also investing significant resources into environmental compliance (Table 3). The company is therefore ready to roll out sustainability throughout the organisation through engagement of staff at all levels

Table 3 - Organisational maturity model: Stage 2.

Corporate social responsibility	Strategic planning
	Senior management
Staff	
Compliance	

What we might expect from a Green Dragon company is that they would make the initial decision at the level of strategic planning that leadership would then filter down to staff. We did not see many examples of this, and instead what we seem to have is this pattern where the staff learn and they are compliant but still without full engagement of senior management. Clearly a mature sustainable business would have senior management on board.

Future impact

The project has now ended and but there will be a lasting impact. Some of the learners (10%) will continue through the Professional Practice Framework to develop their skills that eventually reach an academic qualification. For the companies where we have been delivering cohorts of different courses, we are in discussions to continue to roll them out to the remainder of their staff so that they share an understanding of the issues.

The fundamental impact of these courses has been on the learners who have engaged with Higher Education and the content around sustainability, and it has changed their lives. Video case studies have been prepared which show the effect (WIWBL 2015).

Acknowledgements

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Appendix 1: Wales, showing Unitary Authorities within the Convergence Region