

**An investigation of university and employer perceptions  
of barriers and enablers of work based learning (WBL)  
partnerships in the tourism sector in Scotland.**

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requirements of Edinburgh Napier University,  
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## **Declaration**

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I hereby declare that the work presented in this thesis has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification, and that it is the result of my own independent work.



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Date: April 2020

## **Abstract**

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The purpose of this study is to enhance understanding of how universities and employers in the Scottish tourism sector collaborate when developing work based learning (WBL) partnerships and the associated barriers and enablers. The findings aim to inform practice on how collaboration in this area can be enhanced.

The impetus for the research arose from the requirement for universities to develop and enhance links with industry, in line with government policies linked to driving graduate employability. WBL is identified as having a key influence on how well graduates are prepared for the world of work. Consequently, effective university/industry WBL partnerships are essential in providing opportunities for university students to develop their employability skills in order to enhance their future graduate employment prospects. The issue of university/industry partnerships is documented in academic literature; however, there is a lack of research with a focus on the particular and complex characteristics of WBL partnerships. Furthermore, this issue in relation to the tourism sector is not well represented in the literature.

The study adopted an interpretivist ontology and an epistemology of phenomenology. A purposive sampling approach was undertaken to identify employees with responsibility for industry liaison in Scottish universities who offer Tourism and Hospitality degree programmes with a WBL offering. This approach was also adopted to select employers from the Scottish tourism sector with experience of developing WBL linkages with Scottish universities.

In-depth semi-structured interviews enabled respondents to provide detailed accounts of their experiences of how WBL partnerships are developed and managed around the themes drawn from the literature: characteristics of successful university-employer partnerships; employer engagement in the WBL relationship; barriers to achieving effective employer/university partnerships; expectations; enablers of positive university/employer relationships and best practice in university/employer relationships.

The main output from this research is a practice- based framework which outlines key elements for effective relationship management of WBL. The framework

provides universities and employers with valuable guidelines on how their practice in this area may be enhanced. Key findings indicate the need for an increased level of priority for developing WBL partnerships with clear aims and objectives to be established at the outset; enhanced communication between universities and employers; additional resources for universities in terms of staffing and funding and more flexible WBL opportunities to meet the needs of employers. For employers in the tourism sector, it was found that a more proactive approach to WBL partnerships may be beneficial as part of their recruitment and retention strategies.

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# **Chapter 1: Introduction**

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## **1.1: Outline and purpose of the research**

This study explores the barriers and enablers of work based learning (WBL) partnerships, from the perspective of university employees involved in industry liaison, and employers in the Scottish tourism sector who recruit university students for work placement opportunities. This study adopts an interpretive research paradigm and qualitative approach to gathering data which investigates the perceptions of universities and employers of their lived experiences of developing WBL partnerships. The main purpose of the study is to contribute to understanding of the barriers and enablers of WBL partnerships from the perspective of universities and employers in the Scottish tourism sector, and to develop a range of proposals for practice in this area.

The following sections provide context for the study as well as the rationale for the research. The aim and objectives for the study are also provided. Finally, an outline of the structure of the thesis is presented.

## **1.2: Study background**

In the UK, a key focus of the government is on Higher Education (HE) and graduate employability as a means of meeting the skill requirements of industry and the economy as well as developing their academic reputation (CBI, 2018). The introduction of higher student fees in most of the UK and associated commercialisation of HE that has resulted in students being more likely to seek value for money and enhanced career prospects, is viewed as a key driver of the focus on employability (Blackmore, Bulaitis, Jackman & Tan, 2016). This focus may also be linked to a shift in government policy towards more vocationally oriented education, which is also regarded as having an impact on the employability agenda (Wilton, 2014). This focus on employability has positioned the concept of WBL at the heart of the HE experience and consequently, there is an increasing expectation and requirement for HE to offer work based opportunities for students, which will enable them to develop the vocational skills necessary for careers in areas such as business and management (Wilton, 2014).

Thus, it may be suggested that an increase in the number of quality work experience opportunities for students will be required. This is as a result of the government focus on employability, and the expectation that employment opportunities will be available as part of HE degree programmes. Consequently, it has been argued that there is a need for universities to develop effective partnerships with employers and to treat this issue as a priority (Wilson, 2012). Formal opportunities that are a core element of HE programmes, such as WBL, are a key driver of graduate employability as the primary outcome is focused on enabling students to develop a range of skills sought by employers which include team-building, negotiation, communication and interpersonal skills (Huq & Gilbert, 2013).

The Wilson Review (2012, p.8) stresses that the government, universities and businesses should work in partnership to “ensure graduate skills and employability meet the needs of business; to maximise the university sector’s capabilities in business-led research and innovation; and realise the benefits of a strong HE role in development of its local economy”. The review emphasises the importance of work experience in enhancing graduate skills and ensuring a smooth transition between university and business environments and recommends that the number of opportunities should be increased (Wilson, 2012). HE is therefore under government pressure to develop effective links with industry and this is regarded as being essential to enhancement of graduate employability (Blackwell & Higson, 2014; BIS, 2016).

From an industry perspective, there are an increasing number of roles which require high-level skills, but that there will be a lack of sufficiently skilled individuals to fill these roles (CBI, 2018). Improving student and graduate employability is therefore a key issue for UK universities (Prospects, 2018). As part of the framework for embedding employability in the curriculum, the HEA (2015) suggests that this issue might be ameliorated through universities increasing WBL opportunities through more effective collaboration with industry as a key recommendation for universities.

These skills and employability related issues are of key concern to the UK tourism sector. Tourism has been one the fastest growing industry sectors in the UK in

recent years in terms of number of employees, with growth expected to continue in the medium term (People 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016). It is anticipated that the sector will need to recruit an additional 1.3m more staff by the end of 2024, with 75% of this figure to replace existing staff and the remainder as a result of continued growth in the sector (People 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016). As a result, there is a need for the tourism sector to increase recruitment. Of key relevance to this study is the specific need for the sector to attract candidates with higher-level skills for managerial, professional and technical roles (People 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016). This also applies to the tourism sector in Scotland, with jobs requiring high-level qualifications at SCQF levels 7-10, projected to experience a large increase from 26% of jobs in 2012 to 41% in 2022. For jobs within the accommodation sector, the projected figure is even higher at 45% of jobs requiring these higher-level qualifications (Skills Development Scotland, 2016).

Added to this, is a skills gap in the tourism sector relating to interpersonal and employability skills such as time management, prioritising tasks, customer service and team working (People 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016). There are also difficulties relating to recruitment and retention of managers in the UK sector (People 1<sup>st</sup>, 2015), as well as in Scotland where attracting and retaining talent continues to be a major challenge (Skills Development Scotland, 2016).

As a result of the combination of increasing levels of recruitment and the perceived gap in skills, a priority for the tourism sector is to develop recruitment strategies which will ensure that graduates are not only attracted to the industry, but also possess the correct skills and knowledge. It is argued that WBL is therefore a component in addressing these issues and many employers in the sector are now considering how best to work with universities, for example through formal employment opportunities, as part of their recruitment and retention strategies (People 1<sup>st</sup>, 2015).

However, it is identified that there are a range of barriers for both employers and universities to developing effective WBL partnerships. For employers, issues such as lack of awareness of WBL, unfamiliarity with university processes, lack of time and resources to devote to supporting and supervising WBL students and difficulties in recruiting suitable students, are identified as some of the barriers to participation in WBL partnerships (Jackson, Rowbottom, Ferns & McLaren, 2017; Atkinson, 2016; McEwen, O'Connor, Williams & Higson, 2010). For universities,

barriers may include difficulty in identifying and maintaining correct employer contact information, lack of time and resources to devote to developing WBL relationships, resistance from employers to become involved in WBL and a lack of flexibility due to rigid systems and processes ( Basit et al.,2015; Wedgewood, 2008; Reeve & Gallacher, 2005; Jackson et al.,2017).

### **1.3: Rationale for the research**

Within the existing academic literature, research on the issue of university-industry collaborations is dominated by studies which focus on research and innovation or technology transfer partnerships (Plewa & Quester, 2007; Palmatier Bruneel, D'este, & Salter, 2010; Tudor & Mendez ,2014; Tartari, Salter, & D'Este, 2012; Frassetto, Calderón, & Cervera, 2012). These studies generally adopt quantitative or mixed methods approaches and are not focused on the tourism sector.

A range of studies have been conducted across a range of disciplines and industry sectors or overseas, where much of the research has been conducted in Australia (Jackson, 2015; Jackson et al., 2017; Atkinson, 2016). These studies do not focus on the tourism sector but are conducted across a range of industry sectors. A small number of studies on the research topic have been conducted in the UK but as in the previous example, these are not focused on the tourism sector (Basit et al., 2015; Wedgewood, 2008; Reeve & Gallacher, 2005; McEwen, O'Connor, Williams & Higson, 2010). It is also recognised that studies in the tourism literature may no longer be current or may only have limited relevance (Solnet, Robinson, & Cooper, 2007; Zehrer & Mössenlechner, 2009). It is therefore proposed that a gap exists within current academic literature on this topic.

A current priority for UK universities is graduate employability, with WBL as a key component of the student HE experience. There is an expectation and requirement for HE to offer an increased number of high quality work based opportunities for students as part of their degree programmes. Also, government policy has recommended that a priority for universities is to develop effective partnerships with employers (Wilson, 2012). A range of studies on the topic of graduate skills and employability from an industry perspective, emphasise the increased requirement for universities to increase engagement with industry



(CBI, 2016 & 2018; UKCES, 2014, & 2016; BIS 2012). However, it is proposed that these studies do not represent the HE perspective, and do not provide data on the role of employers in developing these partnerships. It is therefore suggested that research from the perspective of both universities and employers will be valuable.

Due to the range of barriers to developing WBL partnerships for both employers and universities, reaching a deeper understanding of these issues will therefore be valuable in identifying how partnerships can be enabled. It will also be of value in developing proposals for enhancement of practice in terms of how WBL relationships are developed and managed.

Employers in the tourism sector will benefit from the findings of this research, as it will enable them to enhance their practice with regard to their relationships with universities. This may impact on their ability to attract individuals with higher-level skills into their organisations, which could have a positive impact on recruitment and retention. For universities, the benefits of the study will be in relation to developing an understanding of the employer perspective which will enable them to facilitate more effective WBL partnerships. It is hoped that this will lead to an increase in the number of WBL opportunities, as well as development of graduate employability, which can be linked to academic reputation. Additionally, students will benefit in terms of an increased number of WBL opportunities which offer a quality learning experience. This will enable them to develop their employability skills which will enhance their employment prospects as graduates.

The findings of this research may be transferable to WBL partnerships in other academic disciplines and industry contexts, and may also be applicable to other forms of inter-organisational collaboration.

To conclude, qualitative research to develop a deeper understanding from the perspectives of both stakeholders will therefore be valuable to development of practice, and will make a valuable contribution to academic knowledge on the subject of collaborative practice.

#### **1.4: Research aim and objectives**

Given the rationale for this research, the following aim and objectives are developed in relation to the purpose and context of this study:

The aim of this research is to critically evaluate perceptions of barriers and enablers of effective work based learning partnerships, from the perspectives of universities and employers in the tourism sector in Scotland.

In order to achieve the research aim, the following research objectives are identified.

- To critically review the literature relating to developing Higher Education/industry relationships in relation to WBL.
- To gain a deeper understanding of the barriers experienced when developing WBL partnerships from the perspectives of university staff and employers in the Scottish tourism sector.
- To identify enablers of effective WBL collaboration between universities and employers.
- To suggest a practice based framework to inform management and development of WBL partnerships between universities and employers.

#### **1.5: Research Approach**

This study adopts an interpretivist ontology and an epistemology of phenomenology. This allowed the researcher to gather rich data on participants' perceptions of their lived experiences of specific WBL partnerships that exist in their organisations. The data collection involved semi-structured interviews with university employees who are involved in industry liaison, and employers in the Scottish tourism sector who recruit university students for work placement opportunities. A purposive sampling technique was used to identify participants with relevant experience and expertise on the research issue, which enabled the researcher to elicit in-depth responses on the topic.

Thematic analysis was conducted using the qualitative data analysis software, NVivo 12. This approach identified three main themes: developing and managing

WBL relationships; challenges for WBL relationships and effective relationship management approaches and opportunities. The primary data was further analysed in relation to the three themes and was linked to previous studies in the area identified in the literature review. This process enabled the researcher to develop a range of conclusions on the research issue and to make recommendations for practice and further research.

## **1.6: Thesis structure**

The thesis is structured as follows:

### **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

A review of the existing theory and literature in relation to development of university-industry collaboration is presented. Contextual data is provided concerning the key policy drivers for the research as well as factual data on the tourism sector and skills requirements for the industry. Key issues relating to challenges of university-industry collaboration with a focus on WBL, as well as a range of best practice initiatives for engagement are examined. This chapter provides a conceptual framework which underpins the subsequent data collection, findings and analysis.

### **Chapter 3: Research Methodology**

This chapter discusses the research approach adopted in the study. The guiding research philosophy is discussed and justified. The study adopts a qualitative approach which is explained, as well as the procedures for sampling, data collection and data analysis. Finally, considerations regarding an ethical approach and issues relating to validity and credibility of the research approach are presented.

### **Chapter 4: Discussion and Analysis of Findings**

The findings from the primary research are presented and are examined in relation the literature review. The findings are structured according to three main themes resulting from a thematic analysis and consideration of the research questions for the study. The main themes identified are as follows:

1. Developing and managing WBL relationships
2. Challenges for WBL relationships
3. Effective relationship management approaches and opportunities

## **Chapter 5: Conclusions and recommendations**

In this chapter, the researcher considers and reflects on achievement of the research aim and objectives. Conclusions are drawn regarding the findings of the research and the potential contribution to academic knowledge. A series of recommendations for universities and industry practitioners on how practice within the area of WBL partnerships can be enhanced are proposed. Proposals for future research are also identified. Finally, limitations of the study are discussed.

## **Chapter 2: Literature review**

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### **2.1: Introduction**

The aim of this chapter is to investigate university and employer partnerships in relation to WBL. Barriers to achieving successful WBL environments and factors influencing successful relationships and best practice are investigated in order to develop in-depth knowledge of the subject area. This review of literature also creates awareness of the type of research that has already been undertaken in this field, research approaches that have been utilised by others and identification of gaps in the research. This review concludes with outcomes providing direction for this study and identification of key research questions.

According to Universities UK (2018), there are 2.34 million registered students in the UK HE sector which highlights the significance of the role of HE in contributing to the national economy and UK workforce. As a result, the UK government has identified the development of supporting HE to develop graduate employability as being a key part of the policy agenda (Bryson, 2013; Universities UK, 2013). As part of the government focus on employability, an increase in the number of quality work experience opportunities for students and consequently, the need for universities to develop effective partnerships with employers is identified as a priority (Wilson, 2012). This can be linked to WBL, which is a key driver of graduate employability in terms of its primary outcome of enabling students to develop a range of skills sought by employers which include team-building, negotiation, communication and interpersonal skills (Huq & Gilbert, 2013).

Due to the differences between industry and educational environments, there are a number of factors which can affect employer engagement in WBL initiatives and how students are supported in the workplace and consequently, their employability (Kettle, 2013). Therefore, in order to develop positive WBL based learning experiences for students, it is necessary to investigate and to understand the perspectives of those involved in the process of establishing work based learning opportunities. This chapter explores the literature relating to the issues in developing and maintaining effective partnerships around WBL from the perspectives of employers and universities.

This research considers WBL in the tourism sector in Scotland and how university/industry partnerships can be developed more effectively to ensure that students have positive WBL experiences and are developing skills which meet the needs of tourism employers. The focus is on how effective partnerships contribute to ensuring that students are engaging in WBL which contributes to their employability.

## **2.2: Policy background**

This section provides contextual background on UK graduate employability and skills and impacts on the tourism sector in the UK and Scotland.

### **2.2.1: Drivers of graduate employability in the UK**

Currently in the UK, a key focus of the government is on HE and graduate employability (CBI, 2018). This has been influenced by the view that HE has a key role in providing highly skilled employees for an internationally competitive knowledge-intensive UK economy (CBI, 2018). Furthermore, the introduction of higher student fees in most of the UK and associated consumerisation of HE, with students now seeking value for money and enhanced career prospects, is also viewed as a key driver of the focus on employability (Blackmore et al., 2016).

Additionally, there has been a shift in government policy towards more vocationally oriented education to subjects such as business and management and away from the social sciences and the arts, which is also regarded as having an impact on the employability agenda (Wilton, 2014). As a result, the implication for HE is the need to offer work based opportunities for students which enable them to develop the vocational skills necessary for careers which are relevant to these subjects.

The policy goal of social mobility can also be viewed as having an influence on graduate employability (Artess, Hooley & Mellors-Bourne, 2017). It is suggested that employers have a key role in improving social mobility with evidence pointing to socio-economic background as being the most important factor influencing a graduate's career, irrespective of the university they attended (Artess et al.,

2017). There is therefore a link between WBL as an opportunity for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to enhance their employability skills for graduate employment (Artess et al., 2017). Consequently, there is a requirement for enhanced collaboration between universities and employers, with work needed on improvement of inclusivity of recruitment practices to enhance employability of graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds (Universities UK, 2016).

The introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) may also be an influencing factor. This initiative was introduced by the UK government in 2017. The purpose of the framework is to provide information to students on teaching quality in universities and to raise the level of importance of teaching excellence, with universities across England and some in Scotland and Wales participating (OfS, 2019). The TEF rates universities on a range of performance metrics, one of which is employment outcomes (OfS, 2019). The implication for HE is that graduate employability will continue to be a key priority in order to demonstrate high TEF ratings to prospective students and to remain competitive in an increasingly commercial HE environment.

As a result of the increased focus on development of graduate employability, it has been identified that universities and their partnerships with employers require an enhanced role in the development of higher-level skills (Devins, 2013; BIS, 2016). The Wilson Review (2012, p.8) stresses that the government, universities and businesses should work in partnership to “ensure graduate skills and employability meet the needs of business; to maximise the university sector’s capabilities in business-led research and innovation; and realise the benefits of a strong HE role in development of its local economy”. The review emphasises the importance of work experience in enhancing graduate skills and ensuring a smooth transition between university and business environments and recommends that the number of opportunities should be increased (Wilson, 2012). HE is therefore under government pressure to develop effective links with industry and this is regarded as being essential to enhancement of graduate employability (Blackwell & Higson, 2014; BIS, 2016).

From an industry perspective, there is a viewpoint that the HE sector needs to make significant changes as the current model of delivering education is not

consistent with the needs of industry and that this needs to change for more effective engagement (QAA, 2014). It is clear that collaboration needs to be a higher priority for universities but also for employers (UKCES & UUK, 2014).

### **2.2.2: Skills and the UK graduate labour market**

It is expected that jobs requiring higher-level skills such as managers, technicians and professionals will continue to grow and in an environment of rapid technological change and advancing digital economies, the types and level of skills across many different jobs and sectors will be affected (CBI,2018). Key skills that are now most relevant include learning to learn, foreign language ability, entrepreneurial skills, IT, elearning and numeracy (Rhisiart, Störmer & Daheim, 2017).

It is suggested that there is a gap between the skills required in the workplace and the knowledge and skills developed through HE which potentially has a negative impact on productivity levels as well as reducing the potential of the UK labour market (BIS, 2016). This is supported by Prospects (2018), who suggest that on the surface, the graduate labour market appears to be buoyant, however, skills shortages exist in some professions as well as skills mismatch, which are therefore identified as key issues that need to be addressed. It is suggested that this data is from the industry perspective and alludes to HE having responsibility for development of graduate knowledge and skills, without reference to the role of employers. As this is a key issue, strategies which can enable HE and industry to collaborate more effectively to develop students into employable graduates would therefore be valuable.

According to CBI (2018), there has been an increase in the number of organisations who expect to increase the number of highly skilled roles in the coming years, which accounts for 79% of those who participated in the research. However, there are also key concerns that there will be a lack of sufficiently skilled individuals to fill these roles with two thirds of employers expressing this as an issue (CBI, 2018). As a result of increasing demand from employers and concerns over skills shortages, student and graduate employability is a key issue for UK universities (Prospects 2018). Work within the HE sector has focused on embedding employability within the curriculum as a vehicle for developing



employability skills (QAA, 2016). As part of its framework for embedding employability in the curriculum, HEA (2015) emphasises the need for increased collaboration with industry as a key recommendation for universities.

Therefore, in relation to the employability agenda, it can be seen that HE/industry collaboration in relation to WBL is a critical issue and is one that requires attention on the part of both universities and employers.

### **2.3: Higher education environment**

This section provides contextual background on the UK and Scottish Higher Education environment.

#### **2.3.1: UK higher education sector**

Higher education courses are programmes leading to qualifications, or credits which can be counted towards qualifications, which are above the standard of GCE A-levels or other Level 3 qualifications. They include degree courses, postgraduate courses and sub-degree courses such as those leading to HNCs or HNDs (HEA, 2015)

In 2016-17 there were 162 higher education institutions (HEIs) in the UK in receipt of public funding via one of the UK funding councils. A total of 2,316,475 students were enrolled in these HEIs (UUK, 2018).

Since the year 2000, HEIs in the UK have been required to publish and report on a range of performance indicators and measurements relating to graduate employability and student satisfaction (HEA, 2015). In an environment of intense competition, key strategic aims of HE's are therefore to identify and satisfy the needs and expectations of students by providing high quality learning experiences and enhancing their employability skills (HEA, 2015). In the move towards a more knowledge-driven economy, it is therefore necessary for HE to develop curricula that will build highly skilled graduates who will contribute to the UK's ability to compete in the 21st century globalised market (HEA, 2015). Key priorities with regard to employability relate to providing access to high quality work based and work related learning opportunities, engaging students with work related learning opportunities and developing effective links with employers (UUK, 2018).

### **2.3.2 : Higher Education in Scotland**

In Scotland, there were a total of 241,935 students enrolled in HE programmes for the academic year 2016-17, across 19 HEIs which include the Open University in Scotland, a college of higher education, an art school, and a conservatoire (UUK, 2018).

Scotland has a distinctive higher education system and also operates under a devolved government, which includes devolved responsibility for HE (Scottish Government, 2016). HE in Scotland is funded by the Scottish Government via the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), which is responsible for distributing funding to individual institutions for teaching, research and associated activities. Tuition fees in Scotland are also different from other parts of the UK. First degree students from Scotland and presently, the rest of the EU studying in Scotland are entitled to have their tuition fees paid by the Student Awards Agency for Scotland (SFC, 2018).

With regard to skills needs, including those expressed in Skills Investment Plans, such as the plan developed for the tourism sector in Scotland (see 2.4.2), Scottish universities are obliged to report on progress regarding graduate employability. This requires them to provide evidence of and demonstrate the extent and effect of employer engagement in course and curriculum design and delivery, and how this engagement positively impacts student experience and employability (SFC, 2018).

## **2.4: Industry Sector Context**

### **2.4.1: UK Tourism Sector**

According to Deloitte (2013), tourism has been the fastest growing sector in the UK in employment terms since 2010 and is estimated to be worth over £257 billion by 2025. In the UK, Payne and White (2014, p1) advise that the numbers working in tourism “increased at nearly double the rate of the rest of the UK labour market between 2009 and 2013 (5.4% increase, rising 143,000 from 2.66 million to 2.81 million)”. It can therefore be inferred that this increase raises the significance of the sector in political, economic and social terms at a local and national level (Baum, 2015). The UK hotel and restaurant sector is identified as

one of the largest sub-sectors of the industry and has a skills gap of 7.2 % of its workforce which represents one of the highest levels in the UK, second only to the manufacturing sector (UKCES, 2016).

With regard to projections, the sector will need to recruit an additional 1.3m more staff by the end of 2024, with 75% of this figure to replace existing staff and the remainder as a result of continued growth in the sector (People 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016). It is projected that tourism needs to attract candidates with higher level skills for managerial, professional and technical roles and this represents 24% of the growth in numbers of staff required (People 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016). Skills shortages are identified as a result of low numbers of applicants with the required skills, lack of applicants generally and unsociable hours. Added to this is a skills gap whereby mainly interpersonal and employability skills such as time management, prioritising tasks, customer service and team working are identified as skills required (People 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016).

With issues in the tourism sector relating to difficulty in recruiting and retaining managers, widening participation in HE in recent years has led to an increase in the pool of potential managerial candidates. Many employers in the sector are now considering how to work effectively with universities to support their management recruitment; however, there is debate as to how relevant the courses offered by universities are to the industry (People 1<sup>st</sup>, 2015). Therefore, further engagement with employers within the tourism sector is necessary to ensure that graduates are being equipped with the skills required.

The tourism industry needs graduates who are able to think critically and to solve real world problems facing the tourism and hospitality sectors. Lack of these attributes along with limited work experience has led to a perception that graduates are considered unprepared for the industry (Walters, Burns & Stettler, 2015). It is also argued that many tourism employers are not equipped to offer roles to new graduates which enable them to bridge the gap between university and full-time employment (Walters et al., 2015). It can therefore be seen that there are potential advantages for tourism employers from collaboration with universities on WBL in order to ease the transition for graduates into full-time employment in the industry.

As a result of sector growth and significant skills gap, key issues relating to employment in tourism are in the public spotlight (Baum, 2015). Walters et al., (2015) suggest that concerns about people resourcing are the highest priority issues faced by managers in the industry. However, according to Baum (2015), despite this growth, the skills gap in the industry and the rapidly changing environment that tourism businesses are operating in, there has been very little progress in tackling these issues in recent years. Furthermore, Baum (2018) indicates that the workforce is an area of tourism that has been neglected and requires attention to sustainable human resource planning and practices. Enhancement of university-industry WBL partnerships could therefore be considered as part of a sustainable recruitment strategy in order to increase and maintain the numbers of graduates entering the sector.

#### **2.4.2: The Scottish perspective**

In Scotland, there is some recognition of the issues facing the tourism sector with the devolved Scottish government working collaboratively with Skills Development Scotland and the Scottish Tourism Alliance to devise a Skills Investment Plan for the sector. In terms of skills, jobs requiring high-level qualifications, identified as Scottish Curriculum Qualifications Framework (SCQF) levels 7-10, are projected to experience a large increase from 26% of jobs in 2012 to 41% in 2022, with an even higher prediction of 45% of jobs within the accommodation sector. Conversely, and in line with the UK situation, it is predicted that there will be a decline in the number of jobs requiring no or low-level skills (Skills Development Scotland, 2016).

The graduate skills identified by employers in the sector as having highest priority are digital skills, management and leadership and the skills required to deliver a high-quality customer experience. These skills encompass business skills, particularly marketing and financial management, human resource management, project management, supply chain management, destination and industry leadership, stakeholder management and developing more sustainable ways of doing business. Attracting and retaining talent continues to be a major challenge for the sector. It has been identified that many graduates are leaving the sector within the first two years after qualifying (Skills Development Scotland, 2016). This therefore highlights the need for Scottish tourism employers to develop

approaches which will enable them to understand the reasons for this and to devise more effective approaches to recruiting and retaining graduates. It is therefore argued that employers in the Scottish tourism sector may wish to consider ways of collaborating effectively with universities on initiatives such as WBL, to help enable them to meet the skills requirements of the industry and to enhance their recruitment and retention strategies.

As in the UK sector, employers in the Scottish hotels and restaurants sector are experiencing a range of skills shortages and gaps. 41% of employers in this part of the tourism sector have staff who are working in roles for which they have excess qualifications and skills. This is well above the rate for all industries which is 31% (UKCES, 2016). The high levels of staff turnover are likely to be a contributing factor to the issue of skills gaps. Additionally, it is inferred that one of the key issues is not only a skills gap, but also that employers in the sector are not effectively taking advantage of the skills of their employees and that a 'mismatch' of skills is taking place (UKCES, 2016).

The issues identified suggest that it is necessary for employers in the Scottish tourism sector to adopt a more strategic approach to employee development, a part of which is to recruit and retain employees with higher-level skills. Significant change in terms of recruitment practices and working conditions is required. Engagement with universities should therefore be a priority for employers within the sector or the situation will remain unchanged (Lashley, 2011). Development of WBL partnerships in order to increase the number of opportunities for students which will contribute to development of the higher-level skills required in the sector, is potentially part of a solution to deal with this issue.

## **2.5: Work based learning**

The concept of WBL has been defined in a number of ways. According to QAA (2010), work based learning:

Includes a wide range of provision where the focus is on situations where the main location for the student is the workplace. The curriculum meets the needs of both HEI and employer and is jointly planned, delivered and assessed. It uses the immediacy of the work context to provide practice and

to encourage reflection on real issues leading to meaningful applicable learning (p3).

WBL is also referred to as any learning and knowledge that is acquired in a workplace which focuses on issues related to it and which may be formal or informal and may lead to qualifications (Basit et al., 2015). Other key elements include development of lifelong learning skills and integration of higher level HE and workplace learning (Flanagan, Baldwin & Clarke, 2000).

WBL is “used to describe a class of university programs that bring together universities and work organizations to create new learning opportunities in workplaces” (Boud and Solomon, 2001, p. 4). Therefore, WBL refers to learning through work and/or at work (Feldmann, 2016).

WBL is therefore influenced by the context in which it is taking place (Helyer & Lee, 2014). It can therefore be argued that as WBL takes place in range of contexts, it is not only experiential but is a situated learning experience which is influenced by the student, university and employer. It is therefore necessary to consider the workplace and educational environments of WBL students in order to facilitate an effective learning experience for students which will contribute to their employability (Helyer and Lee, 2014). It is suggested that proposals which can promote collaboration between employers and universities would therefore be valuable in enhancing the learning experiences of students and in developing their employability skills.

There are numerous definitions of WBL within the literature and arriving at a single one is not possible. This view is supported by Brennan et al. (2006, p4) who state that “there can be no single or simple definition of what work-based learning entails beyond the notion that it is about learning (not teaching) and occurs in the workplace (rather than on the campus).” It is also relevant to consider both formal and informal work related learning activities which develop knowledge, skills and attitudes that have an impact on students’ present and future personal and professional development and consequently, the performance of organisations (Doyle, Reid & Young, 2008).

A definition which has been identified as relevant to HE WBL is that “learning that is integral to a higher education programme and is achieved and demonstrated through engagement with a workplace environment, the assessment of reflective practice and the designation of appropriate learning outcomes” QAA (2007, p.4). In order for students to learn from and in the workplace, they need to actively engage. As suggested by Cooper, Orrell & Bowden, 2010,p.62) “learning is the product of students’ efforts to interpret, and translate what they experience in order to make meaning of it”. This requires them to engage and develop skills in reflection on what they have learned from the experience (Helyer & Lee, 2014).

It might therefore be argued that the key aim of WBL in HE is to develop and enhance graduate employability which will meet the needs of industry and the economy. Employability is viewed as a complex concept which is difficult to define however, the most widely accepted definition in the sector is that it is “a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy.” (Yorke, 2006, p8).

WBL is therefore concerned with developing graduates who not only have the attributes for particular jobs but who are able to adapt to changing economic situations and job markets (Lumley & Wilkinson, 2013). Consequently, in a strategic context, the aim of successful WBL is to foster lifelong learning in graduates, which will contribute to ways of addressing social change and changing skills requirements in a constantly evolving and global employment market (Hurtz & Williams, 2009).

As this study relates to the HE context with a focus on WBL initiatives that are embedded in degree programmes and which encourage students to reflect on and make meaning from their learning, the definition offered by QAA (2007) is therefore regarded as most relevant.

## **2.6: Characteristics of successful university-employer partnerships**

There are several key elements which characterise successful education-industry partnerships which include: an environment which fosters learning; recognition of prior competencies; project - based learning in the workplace and assessment of

the learning outcomes against a trans-disciplinary framework. Additionally, commitment to learning and development should be demonstrated at all levels of the organisation and it should be prepared to commit resources and to invest in effective support for learning (Boud & Solomon, 2001). These criteria suggest that in developing WBL partnerships, universities should be seeking those employers who have a vision of systematic support for learning throughout the organisation and who have also achieved commitment to this at all levels and that if these criteria are not met, it will be difficult to develop effective WBL partnerships (Reeve & Gallacher, 2005). The prevailing culture within many tourism organisations may not support such a vision, which may be a barrier to successful relationships (Lashley, 2011; Baum, 2015; Roberts, 2009).

These criteria set the scene for the ideal WBL environment but it cannot be ignored that they are ambitious. Given the nature of some of the challenges facing universities in their delivery of WBL, this suggests that a lot of work is required to implement it successfully in many universities. Furthermore, according to the literature, many of the expectations of employers do not relate to fostering a learning environment for the student and are more concerned with commercial value and universities doing more to ensure that students are prepared for work (McEwen et al., 2010; Wedgwood, 2008; Reeve & Gallacher, 2005). This therefore highlights a gap in expectations on both sides of the university-industry relationship. The issues of how the differences in expectations can be addressed is re-emphasised.

## **2.7: Employer engagement in the WBL relationship**

The term 'employer engagement' in relation to university-industry relationships is defined by Kettle (2013) as:

a range of activities, initiatives and approaches which are best conceptualised as a continuum. It includes responsive teaching and learning developments for up-skilling and developing people already in work as well as fostering capability and attributes to enhance the employability of students in higher education (p.4).



### **2.7.1: Importance of engagement**

According to QAA (2014), the area of employer engagement is becoming increasingly important to the strategic development of universities. The need for higher level skills as well as future demographic changes means that universities are becoming more flexible in terms of the types of learner they are recruiting, the scope of learning opportunities and different study modes that they are now offering (QAA, 2014).

There are clear links between employer engagement and student employability. Opportunities to engage in the challenges of workplace settings enable students to develop the skills to adapt to the world of work as graduates (Feldmann, 2016). In relation to design and delivery of the curriculum, engagement with employers is viewed as essential for enhancing and supporting student employability, as it will enable graduates to develop the necessary skills required by employers. Input from employers is fundamental to ensuring that HE programmes continue to be relevant, valid and current (QAA, 2014). However, it is not only universities who need to treat this agenda as a critical issue, but employers also need to commit to partnerships with universities (Atkinson, 2016).

Stakeholders in employer engagement and who are active participants in the tripartite relationship are identified as key stakeholders (employers, businesses and industry; universities and students) and secondary stakeholders (employees, the local community and the economy) (QAA, 2014). The emphasis on the importance of the employer as a major stakeholder with a critical and active role in ensuring an effective WBL environment and one that needs to be recognised by HE is a key theme emerging in the literature (Yorke, 2006; Wedgewood, 2008; McEwen et al., 2010; Sheridan & Linehan, 2013; Atkinson, 2016).

### **2.7.2: Benefits of engagement**

There are a range of benefits of employer and university engagement in WBL. These include enhanced student and graduate employability; development of graduates who are equipped with the skills, knowledge and experience required for the workplace; study opportunities for existing employees resulting in skills development and opportunities for research, collaboration and consultancy as part of income generation and knowledge transfer (QAA, 2014).

This is supported by Wedgewood (2008) who claims that when universities commit to developing active relationships with employers, opportunities can arise which may not have otherwise been possible. HE is able to offer industry a range of unique selling points such as their knowledge and skill base and the ability to link learning with career development and deliver higher skills to the emerging knowledge economy and consequently contributing to business development. A weakness identified is that universities are not good at promoting and articulating the benefits of collaboration to industry and that improvements in this area are required (Wedgewood, 2008).

For employers, engagement in WBL partnerships may offer a range of benefits such as a solution to recruitment needs both in the short term and medium to long term. They can also work towards achievement of corporate social responsibility objectives by giving their time and expertise to developing talent for the future. There is also the opportunity to take advantage of new skills and energy from students and improved links with universities enabling them to benefit from academic expertise and consultancy in relation to other aspects of their business (Sheridan & Linehan, 2013; Atkinson, 2016).

A further advantage to employers may be that of enhanced learning. When employers and students view WBL as an active exchange where co-construction of knowledge takes place (Lave & Wenger, 1991), there are benefits to employers in terms of learning from students' ideas and academic knowledge, as well as opportunities to take stock of and refresh practices in line with current thinking (Scott & Richardson, 2011; Ruhanen, Breakey & Robinson, 2012).

A common viewpoint expressed in the literature is that employers view the main benefit as being commercial; they are seeking value for money and a positive impact on their organisation's performance through WBL involvement (HEFCE, 2008; Wedgewood, 2008). However, awareness of this perspective on value may not be shared by universities in their partnerships with employers (McEwen et al., 2010). Additionally, the benefits can often be intangible which makes it difficult for employers to measure them in financial terms and to establish a return on their investment (Atkinson, 2016).

Whilst some employers are aware of the value of WBL to their organisations, many others are not (Atkinson, 2016). It can therefore be seen that consideration of the benefits of university/industry engagement requires further attention and that universities need to do more to focus on and to promote the value that such engagement in WBL can offer employers when establishing partnerships.

## **2.8: Barriers to achieving effective employer/university partnerships**

Due to the differences in culture and working practices of universities and industry, there are a range of challenges for both stakeholders in achieving effective engagement.

### **2.8.1: Barriers for employers**

Despite calls for HE to engage more effectively with industry to increase the number of WBL opportunities, there are a range of barriers which may limit employer engagement in WBL. It is reported that employers lack understanding of the process of WBL and how to get involved (Gibbs, 2013). Added to this is the challenge of lack of time and resources required to administer work placements and to supervise students in the workplace (Jackson et al., 2017). A further issue identified is that some employers have found it difficult to recruit suitable students either due to lack of skills required or due to the timing of the placement not meeting their business requirements (Jackson et al., 2017). There may also be differences between employer and university expectations on the purpose and nature of the WBL experience (Atkinson, 2016).

Other issues include difficulties in working with the unfamiliar processes of HE, with employers experiencing lack of flexibility and responsiveness as well as high levels of bureaucracy (McEwen et al., 2010). There may also be issues of communication, differences in terminology and programmes which may be perceived as lacking relevance (Atkinson, 2016).

Other factors which are reported in the literature as posing a barrier to employer engagement in WBL relate to the nature of the organisation. For example, SMEs may have specific issues; organisations in rural settings may not be able to recruit students from universities which tend to be located in cities; and the nature and culture of the disciplines and employment sectors involved may not support WBL (Sheridan & Linehan, 2013). These factors may be relevant to employers within

the tourism sector in Scotland which is fragmented in nature, with a broad geographical spread as well as high numbers of SMEs (Skills Development Scotland, 2016).

Wedgewood (2008) refers to the challenges amongst employers of operating in an environment of constant change which makes it difficult for them to cultivate a climate of learning within their organisations as well as working within the constraints of the academic year. There are also difficulties in being able to clearly evidence the commercial benefit of WBL to the organisation (Wedgewood, 2008).

Atkinson (2016) advises that the academic year in universities is not conducive to effective engagement with employers and suggests that universities should adopt a more flexible approach by enabling WBL students to start at any time, 52 weeks a year. Given the existing structures in universities, this requires a long-term vision and a cultural shift to implement such a change and is likely to meet with resistance (Atkinson, 2016).

Jackson et al.,(2017) established that employers had very little or no understanding of the WBL initiatives on offer and a key difficulty arose when recruiting suitable students (60% of employers). Students demonstrated weakness in areas such as oral presentations, grammar and spelling, attention to detail and business report writing which participants felt may be due to a reduction in university contact hours or universities not listening to employers and responding to their needs. This differs from the findings of CBI (2016) where employers were generally satisfied with graduates' basic skills and readiness for employment, with more than four in five organisations reporting satisfaction. It is argued that this data relates to graduates and not students and therefore raises the question of unrealistic expectations of employers in relation to students being work ready and also their expectations of the role of HE in developing these skills. It re-emphasises that more communication is required between employers and universities to manage these expectations and to clarify the objective of WBL in developing students' employability skills and the corresponding responsibilities of each stakeholder.

The findings from the literature in this section provide insight into the issues faced by employers but it can be seen that many of the studies have limited data from the employer perspective. There is also a lack of studies relating to employers in

the tourism sector. Therefore, further research with employers within specific industry sectors will add to the body of knowledge in this area and may lead to better comprehension of how these barriers can be overcome by universities when dealing with particular programmes of study and industry sectors. It is clear that many of these issues are not easy to overcome but in relation to support for learning, if progress can be made in addressing some of the related issues, this may have a positive impact on engagement.

### **2.8.2: Barriers for universities**

According to McEwen et al.,(2010), there is an issue of staff feeling that they do not have opportunities to interact with employers and to establish longer-term relationships. As with issues reported by employers attempting to make contact with universities, there can be problems for universities when attempting to identify the appropriate employer contact with whom to establish and maintain a partnership. A problem can often be that the employer contact responsible for supporting students is often not the same person who has established and maintained contact with the university, and who may have a different outlook on WBL and its importance; or may not feel supported by their employer in terms of training and skills to mentor WBL students (Wedgewood, 2008).

According to Kettle (2013), much of the focus of the employability agenda relates to larger companies but that it is also important for universities to be aware that the majority of businesses in the UK are SMEs. Kettle (2013) goes on to suggest that employer engagement is not an activity that can be standardised and that universities need to adapt their approach which is dependent on factors such as geographical context, the nature of the organisation and the purpose of the collaboration. This flexibility is therefore likely to be a key factor in development of successful partnerships with employers in the tourism sector in Scotland.

Delivery of WBL modules generally involves the teaching and assessment of reflective practice, as well as the being able to offer solutions to problems in the workplace experienced by students. Therefore, many academic staff who are more familiar with academic subject-based teaching or who lack industry experience may not be best placed to support these students (Basit et al., 2015). Due to the fast pace of change within many industry sectors, academics who have not had recent relevant industry experience may be out of touch with current

developments (Millar, Mao, & Moreo, 2010). The issue of lack of skills may therefore have a bearing on the quality of teaching and support provided to students as well as issues of credibility with employers.

A skills issue may also arise in terms of having the appropriate staff expertise to be able to work effectively across a diverse range of employers with a broad range of requirements (Basit et al., 2015). There is an uneasiness amongst some staff of working with industry, outside of their familiar working environment of academia and due to the fact that working with employers and work placements is perceived as being very demanding (Solnet et al., 2007). For universities, resistance from employers to become involved in WBL partnerships can also be an issue. Due to the cultural differences between industry and academia, communication problems relating to language and terminology is a barrier and one which consequently, can have a negative impact on the quality of the student's learning experience (Reeve & Gallacher, 2005; Jackson et al., 2017). The issue of lack of time to devote to WBL is also identified as a challenge with many academic staff already working beyond their agreed working contracts (Wedgewood, 2008; Basit et al., 2015).

A key theme emerging from the literature is that one of the major challenges to HE engagement with employers in relation to WBL is due to a culture within many institutions that is reluctant to embrace WBL. Some academics view the concept as vocationally oriented and are unwilling to accept it as part of an academic programme of study. They believe that they are educators and that WBL comes under the realms of training and not education (Basit et al., 2015). Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that there is a view that universities should not be influenced by employer-driven agendas and should offer education based on research and academic values (Gibbs, 2013). There is a feeling that applying academic theory and knowledge to the workplace takes place after the student has graduated and WBL is therefore not the concern of universities (Reeve & Gallacher, 2005). This may be a contributing factor to the lack of priority afforded to WBL in some institutions and one which requires strong leadership and vision if positive changes are to be made. However, a change in how WBL is viewed can only happen over time and is not possible in the short term.

Additionally, this raises the issue of a conflict between HE and industry in relation to responsibility for developing graduates who are work ready. There is a

recurring viewpoint within the literature from the employer perspective that this is somehow the responsibility of HE (UKCES, 2016; BIS, 2012). More emphasis is needed on the role of partnership in this endeavour and on the accountability of employers. Therefore, greater mutual understanding of the perspectives of each stakeholder is required if successful partnerships are to be developed.

Another concern of university staff is a lack of resources and funding devoted to engaging with employers and in relation to supporting WBL students (Edwards, Perkins, Pearce & Hong, 2015; McEwen et al., 2010; Basit et al., 2015). This may be connected to a focus in many universities on academic staff delivering a high research output in order to optimise research funds and enhance external reputation for research. This focus on research output may be a contributing factor with regard to the level of priority assigned to WBL (Wedgewood, 2008). This also emphasises the point that whilst government stresses the importance of WBL and the role of universities in contributing to higher level skills in industry and the economy, the funding required to enable universities to deliver WBL effectively may be lacking (Kettle, 2013). This issue of priority for research is also evident in relation to how WBL is perceived by academics in terms of their career progression. There can be reluctance to become involved as there is a perception that there is little career advantage and professional recognition for those who devote their efforts to WBL initiatives (Solnet et al., 2007).

There is a view expressed in the literature that, although there are employers within the sector who are supportive of WBL, there is a culture amongst many tourism employers which looks upon employment of placement students as a short term solution to recruitment needs and does not value supporting them with learning nor engaging with universities. There is a myopic view that short-term operational and commercial considerations take precedence over the benefits of skills development of employees (Lashley, 2011; Baum, 2015; Roberts, 2009). Furthermore, the issue of high staff turnover within the tourism sector adds further difficulty for universities to establish and maintain long-term relationships due to established contacts moving to new roles or the appointment of new management who do not support WBL (Lashley, 2011).

## **2.9: Expectations**

It is important when considering how WBL partnerships are developed to investigate expectations of both stakeholders in order that this awareness can be used to enhance practice in this area.

In relation to WBL, there is an expectation from employers that universities should do more to prepare students for the workplace in terms of their confidence and the skills they need (McEwen et al., 2010). It could also be argued that this is may be an unrealistically high expectation and that whilst universities have an input on skills development, they do not have sole responsibility for this and that employers should also share this obligation (Lashley, 2011). However, this also draws attention to the issue of how universities can improve in this area and what more can be done to identify the competencies and skills needed and how universities can facilitate student development.

In terms of communication, employers expect that there will be meaningful dialogue with universities in relation to provision for tutor visits and training for members of staff who are supporting students. They would also like regular and systematic communication with a clearly named point of contact in the university who has relevant industry experience and is able to respond promptly to any problems that arise (Huq & Gilbert, 2013). Employers would like more information on courses and their relevance to the placement as well as information in a clear and easy to understand format (Basit el al.,2015). They would like to have information on the learning objectives for the period of work based learning to be detailed in a learning plan or contract to ensure that relevant information is readily available when required (Atkinson, 2016). It is therefore clear that communication is a priority for employers, however, it is likely to be challenging for both employers and universities to ensure that effective communication is taking place throughout the period of work based learning. Although the expectations of employers are identified in the literature, it is noted that there is little reference to the needs of universities and their expectations of how employers should communicate. There is also a lack of discussion which relates to practice and the ways in which both partners in the relationship can ensure that good communication is taking place. It is therefore argued that further research in order to reach a deeper understanding of how both stakeholders can enhance communication would be valuable.



Wedgewood (2008) suggests that employers want to generate added value to their business when recruiting WBL students; they would like universities to focus more on how students may impact on business performance and productivity and a commercial business-like approach. However, the benefits to employers are often intangible and difficult to measure in terms of impact. It can therefore be seen that employers have high expectations which may be difficult for universities to satisfy in a climate of reduced resources and in a setting which may involve dealing with large numbers of employers from various industry sectors.

According to Zehrer & Mössenlehner (2009) in their study of competencies required for the tourism sector in Austria, activity and action-oriented competencies such as initiative, problem solving and handling conflict seem to have the greatest importance for tourism-related jobs, followed by social and communicative, personal and professional and methodological competencies. This suggests that universities delivering tourism education should be focusing on development of these skills to ensure industry relevant programmes, however, again the question of the employer role in relation to skills development requires greater attention. This quantitative study is based solely on internship partner companies of one university with a relatively small sample size which means that the results cannot be generalised for the tourism sector. Although it does provide some interesting findings, more in-depth qualitative research may add to the body of knowledge in this area.

The study by Zehrer & Mössenlehner (2009) also reveals that employers expect to have a greater involvement in curriculum design and feel that this would enhance relevance of educational programmes with students better equipped for a career in tourism. This finding is supported by Atkinson, Misko & Stanwick (2015) in their study of STEM disciplines in Australia, which suggests that employers across a range of industries and countries may have this viewpoint. However, the concept of involving employers in curriculum design conflicts with the academic outlook of many universities and suggest that a lot of work is needed to bridge the gap between employer expectations and what universities deliver (Reeve & Gallacher, 2005; Wedgewood, 2008; McEwen et al., 2010; Basit et al., 2015).

It can be seen from the literature that employers have high expectations of universities regarding WBL relationships. Whilst there are some interventions that

may be possible to improve on such as enhancing what is communicated and how and also in terms of having specific contacts, there are other areas which may be more difficult to satisfy given the range of challenges faced by universities in delivering WBL provision. A developing theme is that there is a gap between employer expectations and what is possible for universities to deliver and that work is needed for a closer, mutual understanding of what is realistic and possible.

## **2.10: Enablers of positive university/employer relationships**

According to Plewa & Quester (2008, p.212) university - industry relationships should be “trusting, committed and interactive relationships between university and industry entities enabling the diffusion of creativity, ideas, skills and people with the aim of creating mutual value over time”. Due to the importance of successful WBL partnerships to all stakeholders, it is important to consider the factors relating to how relationships can be established and enhanced in order to develop practice within this area. A relationship management approach which is defined as a process to “establish, maintain and enhance relationships with customers and other partners” (Grönroos, 1994, p.9). This is therefore relevant in this context in order to understand and maximise engagement.

### **2.10.1: Factors influencing effective relationships**

The theory of collaborative advantage (Huxham & Vangen, 2005) is identified as a valuable framework for analysing factors which may influence WBL partnerships as it refers to a broad range of themes that may be relevant to this type of collaboration. Huxham & Vangen (2005) contend that the purpose of collaboration is to achieve collaborative advantage, which relates to developing synergy between organisations. It refers to any activity that involves working across organisational boundaries towards common goals that individual organisations could not achieve independently, as in the context of university-industry WBL partnerships. This discussion focuses on three key themes identified by Huxham & Vangen (2005) which relate to issues of developing successful partnerships, namely, agreement on aims, trust building and cultural diversity.

It is proposed that agreement on aims is a useful first step in successful collaboration, however, due to differences between partner organisations, this may be problematic in practice (Huxham & Vangen, 2005). Although there may not be full agreement on aims, sufficient agreement should be sought to facilitate progress in the relationship. This is supported by UKCES & UUK (2014), who advise that establishing clear organisational goals, outlining what each organisation will contribute and achieve through the collaboration are necessary in the initial stages with roles and responsibilities clearly laid out. Within the context of WBL partnerships, it is therefore suggested that agreement on student learning objectives and the roles of all stakeholders should be agreed upon at the outset.

Building trust is also identified as a prerequisite to successful collaborations (Huxham & Vangen, 2005). Initially, as partner organisations may not be familiar with one another, trust is likely to be weak and there is therefore a need to consider how it can be developed. These authors argue that there are two factors in building trust. The first relates to formation of expectations for the future of the collaboration and the second involves risk taking. This means that partners take a risk by having sufficient trust to initiate the collaboration. If both of these are possible, trust can be built gradually with small, realistic aims which are achievable. This reinforces trusting attitudes (Huxham & Vangen, 2005). This may be possible with WBL partnerships by gradually increasing the level of commitment of employers with regard to their engagement in WBL activities.

As universities and employers operate in different environments, a high level of unfamiliarity and uncertainty may be associated with developing partnerships. The development of trust reduces perceived risk and encourages partners to commit and freely interact and share information (Palmatier et al., 2006). A partner's perception that communications from the other party have been relevant, timely and reliable will generate trust in that partner (Mora, Montoro & Guerras, 2004). Furthermore, academics who have relevant previous industry experience is noted as a factor which may promote mutual trust (Tartari et al., 2012; Bruneel, D'Este, & Salter, 2010). An issue, which may arise in practice, is that trust can only be achieved over time and therefore, development of university and employer partnerships requires long-term planning and vision.

The differences between partner organisations in a collaboration may be attributed to cultural diversity relating to the different professional and organisational cultures in which the partners operate (Huxham & Vangen, 2005). Developing an awareness of how the other partner operates is key to managing the partnership. This may include differences in communication styles and professional etiquette. Flexibility is also regarded as being imperative to successful collaboration and part of this understanding of differences between partners (Huxham & Vangen, 2005). In WBL partnerships, there is therefore a need for both partners in the relationship to develop awareness and understanding of the practices of the other partner.

Plewa & Quester (2007) propose that communication is the core factor in successful university-industry relationships and can be related to factors of trust, commitment and integration involving the sharing of information and participation in processes. It has been identified that issues of communication are a challenge for both universities and employers in WBL partnerships, therefore given that this is of key importance to the relationship, how communication can be enhanced between universities and WBL employers requires further attention.

Jackson et al., (2017) consider WBL relationships between a range of employers across various sectors and three universities in Australia and found that there can be a lack of two-way communication. Employers refer to universities' lack of understanding of their business needs (Mann et al., 2014; Palmatier et al., 2006). It is noted that these studies do not consider the reasons for the lack of two-way communication or lack of understanding of their needs and are from the viewpoint of employers. It is therefore argued that a deeper understanding of this issue from both employer and university perspectives would be advantageous when considering how effective WBL relationships can be developed.

It is argued that commitment demonstrates investment in the relationship based on an interest in maintaining it and suggests that a committed stakeholder puts effort into developing a relationship and is more likely to be proactive in participating in that relationship (Plewa & Quester, 2007). In order to establish a successful, long-term relationship, senior management must support the idea of relationship building and a supportive organisational structure and culture will have a positive impact on building relationships (Boud & Solomon, 2001). A

culture which is not conducive to working with employers may be an issue in some universities whilst some employers are not committed to engaging in WBL (Reeve & Gallacher, 2005). Therefore, senior management in universities and in industry should be confident of the ability and willingness of members of staff towards building effective relationships (Plewa & Quester, 2007).

A study by Frassetto et al.,(2012) whose quantitative research is based on WBL partnerships in Spain, can be aligned to the findings already discussed in this section, which supports the belief that there are similarities across different types of university-industry collaborations. This study is based on a relatively large sample size of employers within the social sciences (n.322) and their partnerships with one university. These authors also propose that as well as communication contributing to increased trust, commitment and integration that it enables partners to deal with any conflicts in a healthy and constructive manner.

Frassetto et al.,(2012) suggest that communication helps employers to understand and trust the university as well as helping to deliver appropriate levels of satisfaction with the relationship. Their results also point to improved communication and a link between any conflicts between both stakeholders being of a functional nature, i.e. disagreements are constructive and not harmful. They suggest that satisfaction with the relationship leads to increased commitment and trust, with satisfaction being based on the foundation of open communication. These findings, although quantitative, are valuable in identifying the importance of different factors in establishing effective WBL relationships and point to the need for qualitative research to reach a more in depth understanding of specific issues and for research within other industries, countries and with a broader range of universities.

According to Plewa & Quester (2008), the prior experience of individuals working in education who are involved in facilitating the relationship, does not have an impact on developing communication and satisfaction. It is their commitment to the relationship and their understanding of the industry and the needs of the individual organisation that has emerged as being most important. Thus, within universities, it is crucial that these members of staff are adequately supported in their role. As this study is not concerned with WBL and investigates research partnerships, although there are similarities, there is a conflicting viewpoint expressed in the literature, which suggests that academics supporting WBL

students may be more effective if they have recent industry experience (McEwen et al., 2010; Millar et al., 2010). This is also suggested as a factor in generating the trust of the industry partner (Tartari et al., 2012; Bruneel et al., 2010).

From the literature, it is suggested that for successful relationships, effort is required on the part of universities to develop accessible communication systems and to focus on building trust and satisfaction with employers. This requires prior knowledge of the needs of organisations and that university staff must demonstrate raised awareness of the importance of establishing links based on trust, commitment and mutual knowledge (Frasquet et al., 2012). This is supported by Tudor & Mendez (2014), who suggest that a win-win situation is desirable whereby relationships are mutually successful for both universities and employers. These relationships are characterised by “focused discussions to meet the needs of both organisations; latent needs are identified and agreed; leadership is required to drive the WBL agenda in both organisations; access is provided to influencers and decision makers and broad links are developed throughout with multiple representatives from the organisations and measurable input by both organisations into the other’s aims, mission and values” (Tudor & Mendez, 2014, p.219). This can be therefore be linked to the conditions for effective collaborative advantage, whereby clear agreement on the aims of the partnership are necessary, as well as building of trust and understanding of the organisational culture of the WBL partner (Huxham & Vangen, 2005).

Furthermore, it is noted that many of the studies relating to successful industry-university relationships are quantitative and are based on research and knowledge transfer partnerships. Although these collaborations may have some similarities to WBL partnerships, there may be also key differences in terms of communication and commitment of stakeholders and in terms of the financial value to both parties. Therefore, this indicates a research gap within the area of university/employer partnerships associated with WBL, as well as a requirement for qualitative research in order to reach a deeper understanding of the issue.

### **2.11: Best practice in university/employer partnerships**

In this section, examples are provided which universities and employers can learn from and implement as part of a strategy for developing WBL partnerships. An emerging theme is that universities can engage in a number of ways in order to

develop connections and relationships with employers. Examples of best practice are drawn from a range of contexts in the UK and overseas. As this is an under researched area within the tourism literature, some examples may not relate specifically to this subject area but may be transferable to enhancement of WBL partnerships in the tourism sector.

#### **2.11.1: WBL partnerships in a range of sectors**

Employers can be involved in contributing to curriculum delivery and in supporting students in a number of ways. Suggestions include pre-placement presentations and workshops and increased employer involvement in providing student feedback on workplace performance and relating to WBL assessments (Huq & Gilbert, 2013). Debriefing students at the end of the placement; issuing evaluation questionnaires; and attending class assessment sessions to hear students' experiences is another approach offered (Atkinson, 2016). These initiatives are also supported in the tourism literature as being effective (Roberts, 2009; Millar et al., 2010; Zehrer & Mössenlehner, 2009).

Furthermore, employers suggest that more involvement in agreeing individual student learning outcomes would be beneficial and would allow them to target their support for student learning to best effect. McEwen et al.,(2010) express the view that more dialogue should take place between universities and employers at the university or at the workplace, or if this is not possible given time or travel restrictions, universities could make use of technology in engaging employers such as virtual online advisory sessions.

WBL should not be seen as a supplementary pursuit, rather as an integral part of university activity. It is suggested that promotion of WBL activity is needed at senior level as a key driver throughout the organisation in order to make employer engagement a strategic priority (Basit et al., 2015). This is supported by Atkinson (2016) who suggests that 'champions' of WBL from industry and HE are an effective way to drive promotion and uptake as well as encouraging community engagement through a collaborative approach between leaders from industry and HE. For the tourism sector, this may involve engagement with high profile

organisations within the sector who can raise the profile of WBL and the need for other employers to make WBL a priority.

In Scotland, the 'Making the Most of Masters' project is a "strategic collaboration between employers, universities, enterprise agencies, and post-graduate masters levels to disseminate the MMM model of credit-bearing Work Based Projects as an alternative to a traditional masters dissertation" (Making the Most of Masters, 2019). The initiative has been rolled out across a range of Masters programmes in Scotland with 1500 projects between 2010 and 2016, with key stakeholders reporting on a range of benefits. As result of the project, a toolkit with a range of resources has been developed to assist universities in engaging with employers. However, there is little reference to this project being applied to tourism related degree programmes. Given that higher level skills are in demand in the Scottish tourism sector, this type of project may be of value in this context.

In Northern Ireland, Ulster University is featured by the Higher Education Academy as a case study of WBL good practice (HEA, 2017a). In line with Northern Ireland 2020 strategy which expects all HE students to have the opportunity for work experience, Ulster University decided to make this an assessed, accredited and compulsory part of every full-time undergraduate course from 2015. This required an innovative approach and to move beyond the longer-term work placement concept to a more flexible approach involving other forms of WBL in order to meet the needs of all stakeholders.

The university collaborates with businesses across all sectors on a range of placement experiences including long and shorter term and part-time opportunities as well as live projects, inputs to courses, contributing to events, supporting committees, providing presentations etc. Additionally, the SME Centre at the Ulster University Business School works with many small to medium sized businesses, providing them with access to a range of services including engaging with students on projects, networking and placements. Placement partnerships are celebrated annually at the Placement Employer of the Year Awards, which recognises the dedication of local businesses, across all sectors, for providing students with the skills that allow them to apply their academic knowledge to real-life practice.



A further case study of good practice promoted by the Higher Education Academy is that of Leeds Trinity University (LTU) (HEA, 2017b). LTU was one of the first universities to develop compulsory professional work placements within every degree course. Strategies around engaging with employers include involving them in delivery of professional workshops and presentations for students to assist them in preparing for their placements, with a focus on the types of skills employers are seeking. Examples include Social Media for Business; Project Management; and Confidence, Resilience and Wellbeing. Other ways in which engagement with employers takes place is by reviewing students' work and giving presentations on their role and company. Additionally, LTU run the Leeds Trinity Business Network which facilitates knowledge exchange as well as enabling local businesses to make connections with the university and other businesses. The university is also committed to offering approximately 20 placements internally each year across a range of departments which may demonstrate commitment to WBL at a senior level.

An additional example from the UK is the approach taken by Reading University who engage with employers across a range of activities (Stanbury, 2009). These include employer advice on the curriculum which encourages in-depth dialogue with middle and senior management representatives from selected organisations. Advantages include enhancing the industry relevance of the curriculum as well as the opportunity to develop and strengthen relationships with industry. Work experience in the form of volunteering which enables employers to participate in lower commitment, short-term activities whilst still contributing to student employability is encouraged.

Employer mentoring, particularly with university alumni, is advocated as a powerful way in which to build employer links. As well as offering a non-financial contribution to the university, mentoring is a flexible and time efficient way of engaging employers and students which does not have implications for the university teaching timetable. However, in terms of resources, this approach requires effective management to facilitate active links with employers and effective matching with student mentees. Lastly, engagement with employers with regard to sponsorship and scholarships may be an effective way of attracting

students to a particular degree discipline. Given the recruitment and retention issues in the tourism sector, this may be a valuable approach for employers in the sector who wish to recruit suitably qualified individuals.

Opportunities to enhance engagement with employers may lie in the use of third parties as intermediaries (Atkinson, 2016). These may include such organisations as industry bodies and associations who can facilitate promotion of WBL amongst employer members through activities such as sponsorship, offering scholarships and running programmes for students and employers. In the UK, organisations such as the Council for Hospitality Management Education (CHME), The Tourism Alliance, British Hospitality Association (BHA) and Hospitality Industry Trust Scotland (HIT Scotland) offer such opportunities, however, in some universities, increased engagement with these types of organisation may be advantageous in facilitating WBL partnerships, especially in those where a centralised approach is undertaken with careers advisory staff as opposed to academics (Blackwell & Higson, 2014).

Tudor & Mendez (2014) found that administering an annual focus group with WBL employers which focused on how employers and universities can work closer together was an effective way to enhance employer engagement. The principles underpinning this focus group were efficiency in terms of employers' time and results driven with a strong emphasis on both the university and employers to report back on outputs. The advantages of this approach over time were that employers began to witness their recommendations being put into action which in turn had an impact on rapport between them and the university. This encouraged employers to strengthen the relationship and engage more with the university. Seven employers across a range of industries participated in the focus group which reported that five from the group increased their level of engagement across a range of collaborative initiatives. Although it is clear that the focus group may have had a positive influence on engagement with these organisations, there may have been other factors and experiences of working together that also had a positive influence on the findings. It is also based on a small number of employers and is resource intensive, therefore it may not be possible to administer across a larger number of organisations.

### **2.11.2: Best practice in the tourism sector**

Given the vocational nature of tourism education, the viewpoint that employers should be more involved in curriculum design is expressed in the literature (Solnet et al., 2007; Roberts, 2009; Millar et al., 2010; Zehrer & Mössenlehner, 2009). Roberts (2009) reports of success in a tourism education setting which saw an enhancement of employer perceptions of the value of WBL via a constructive consultation process. Involvement in student research projects is also identified in the tourism literature as an effective way of enhancing engagement (Roberts, 2009; Ruhanen et al., 2012).

Scarles (2011) advocates the use of applied dissertations as a mechanism for developing connections with industry as well as delivering opportunities for students to learn effectively from the workplace. In this study, students from MSc tourism programmes in a UK university were offered the opportunity to complete their dissertations based on projects selected and devised by industry partners. Students were required to attend the workplace for two days per week, over a period of eight weeks in order to conduct their dissertation research. Outcomes highlighted the benefits to students in terms of applying theory to practice, developing greater awareness of future career paths and enhancing their professionalism as a result of engagement in real working situations. This initiative was also well received by employers which suggests that this type of arrangement could offer universities an opportunity to establish connections with employers who do not wish to commit to traditional work placements, but who are still willing to engage with universities in offering work related learning opportunities for students. This example may also be linked to the 'Making the Most of Masters' project which could be advantageous for employers in the Scottish tourism sector.

Solnet et al., (2007) cite an example of innovative practice regarding a radical change in strategic direction in relation to WBL and employer engagement at the University of Queensland. Part of this new strategy involved creation of a dedicated industry partnerships team and a revised approach to work placements. The partnership team involved appointing academics with strong industry ties whose specific remit was to develop links with industry. This

represents a move away from administrators being responsible for this activity and the need to engage industry at a more senior level. Next, the traditional work placement model was completely replaced by an initiative involving high achieving students being given the opportunity to shadow a senior industry executive for a period of 60-80 hours. The rationale was to provide students with an appropriate level of industrial experience; to showcase good students to enhance reputation; and to facilitate fast track career opportunities for students. This study is based on the experiences at one university in Australia; but may also be transferrable to other countries. Additionally, it represents the view that a profound change in how universities manage engagement may be necessary and that a move away from an approach based on the number of hours spent in industry as a defining factor to more emphasis on the quality of the student experience is necessary.

### **2.11.3: Section summary**

It is clear that these interventions require high levels of communication and commitment from both universities and employers which supports the findings of studies relating to the factors in successful relationships (Plewa & Quester, 2007 & 2008; Frassetto et al., 2012; Tartari et al., 2012; Bruneel et al., 2010). There is a need for a long-term strategic approach to WBL as well as debate amongst government policy makers, universities and employers about the best ways in which the objective of developing higher-level skills via WBL can be achieved. The issue of the range of resources that can be made available to universities, employers, and students also requires urgent attention (Wedgewood, 2008; Basit et al., 2015).

### **2.12: Conclusion and key research questions**

This chapter explores literature from the UK and overseas relating to barriers and enablers of positive WBL partnerships between universities and employers, which has emerged as a complex issue.

The literature emphasises the importance of university–industry collaboration for successful work based learning which can also be linked to the employability of students as a key theme, however, there are a range of barriers from both stakeholder perspectives affecting the implementation of successful partnerships. As this study focuses on the tourism sector in Scotland, a range of

specific issues within this sector are identified which need to be addressed if enhancements in engagement are going to be possible.

A key theme emerging in the literature is that communication between stakeholders is identified as the most significant factor in building successful university-industry relationships, and one on which other success factors are based. However, communication issues often linked to differences in culture and organisational practices are cited as a key issue and a barrier to successful WBL relationships.

Furthermore, the literature highlights the need for increased strategic commitment on the part of both employers and universities for successful engagement but that this will require long term planning and vision, as well as investment in time and resources. Successful university-industry relationships require effort from both parties and a standard approach is not possible due to the diverse range of needs and issues across a range of industries.

It is identified that there are many studies on WBL partnerships from the perspective of universities and students; however, there is a lack of research into how universities can engage with employers more effectively in order to promote positive WBL experiences for students. It has also emerged that many of the existing studies have not been conducted in the UK. There is also a dearth of knowledge on the topic specifically in relation to the tourism sector, and the few studies that do exist are not recent. The majority of studies identified focus on STEM subject areas or have been conducted across a range of sectors.

Additionally, there are a range of quantitative studies on building successful university-industry partnerships which are mainly focused on research and knowledge transfer partnerships with a gap in the research on partnerships relating to WBL. It is also noted that the literature points toward a need for changes in priorities and practical solutions, however, there is little work done on how this can be implemented. Consequently, there is a requirement for practice based proposals for development and management of WBL relationships that can be implemented by universities and employers. It is recognised that there is a gap in the current literature regarding development of WBL relationships within the tourism sector in Scotland and that this study will be valuable in addressing this research gap.

It is also proposed that qualitative research within the area of developing effective university/employer WBL partnerships is needed. This will be valuable in reaching a deeper understanding of the issues and what can be done to enhance university partnerships with employers, which will contribute to the body of academic knowledge in this field and will also offer a valuable practice based contribution.

As a result the literature review, the following key research questions which are specific to the chosen study are identified:

- How do Scottish universities and employers in the tourism sector in Scotland build partnerships in relation to supporting students undertaking work based learning placements?
- What barriers do Scottish universities and employers in the tourism sector in Scotland experience when developing WBL partnerships?
- How can WBL partnerships be enabled in order to promote positive WBL experiences for students?

The following chapter discusses how the research was designed in order to answer the research questions and achieve the objectives of the study.

## **Chapter 3: Research Methodology**

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### **3.1: Introduction**

This chapter discusses the philosophy, research design, methods and analysis to meet the aim and objectives of this study. The philosophical position of the researcher and the use of phenomenology as the methodology in this study are confirmed. Qualitative data collection, the use of semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis are explored as well as the ethical considerations. Lastly, issues relating to validity and credibility of the research approach are considered in relation to the study.

### **3.2: Philosophical approach**

When discussing research philosophy, it is necessary to consider assumptions regarding the nature of society and the nature of science (Crotty, 2009). According to Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill (2015), there are two main philosophical approaches when conducting research which are identified as objectivism and subjectivism. Associated with each of these approaches are a range of paradigms which can be described as broad approaches to research which use common terminology and theories based on agreed assumptions, methods and practices (Grix, 2010).

It is therefore important to consider the concepts of ontology and epistemology which relate to the assumptions and beliefs of the researcher and which have a key influence on how the research is conducted (Saunders et al., 2015).

#### **3.2.1: Ontology**

Ontology is concerned with the nature of existence and social reality (Crotty, 2009). Benton & Craib (2011, p.4) attempt to clarify this concept by suggesting that the term 'ontology' will answer the question "What kind of things are there in the world?" A researcher's ontological position will therefore shape how they view and study their research objects and thus the choice of what to research (Saunders et al., 2015) and is considered to be the starting point for their research (Grix, 2010). According to Niglas (2010), there are a wide range of philosophical perspectives which are spread along a continuum between the two opposing ontological positions of objectivism and subjectivism.

Objectivism in its extreme form is concerned with an objective reality and takes the view that “objects have an existence independent of the knower” (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2013, p.7). The assumption is that the physical and natural world as well as human behaviour are independent of conscious thought, meaning or experience (Crotty, 2009), and that research is conducted from a detached, objective perspective through experimentation, measurement, cause and effect and statistical analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008).

Conversely, subjectivism asserts that social reality is attributed to the perceptions and actions of individuals. It contends that social phenomena are created by researchers and other social actors (Saunders et al., 2015). Individuals experience and perceive reality differently, therefore, from a subjectivist standpoint, there are multiple realities rather than one reality experienced by all individuals as in the objectivist stance (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). As a result of these multiple realities, there is a requirement to conduct in depth research in order to understand how these realities are experienced. Therefore, a subjectivist researcher is interested in different opinions which will account for different social realities of individuals. They believe that they are not detached from the data but bring their own pre-conceptions which influence the data collection and interpretation (Saunders et al., 2015).

Given that the aim of this study is to critically evaluate perceptions of barriers and enablers of effective WBL partnerships between university staff and employers, it might be argued that an objectivist ontology is not appropriate. This position considers that there is one reality that is experienced by all participants rather than multiple perspectives and that interpretations and experiences of individuals have no influence on reality (Saunders et al., 2015). The researcher is investigating the individual perceptions of university staff and employers of their experiences of WBL partnerships and therefore, multiple realities of the research topic are explored. Each individual participant may therefore have a different perspective on how WBL partnerships are developed as a result of their own experiences and perceptions. A subjectivist ontological perspective is therefore regarded as applicable to achieving the aim of this study.



### **3.2.2: Epistemology**

Epistemology relates to the theory of knowledge and informs and guides the knowledge gathering process (Grix, 2010) and is, according to Crotty (2009, p.8), “How we know what we know.” A researcher’s epistemological position will therefore lead them to view a study through a specific lens and suggest a range of approaches to gathering and subsequently dealing with data (Grix, 2010). Saunders et al., (2015) contend that for each of the two main ontological perspectives of objectivism and subjectivism, that there are associated epistemological perspectives which are identified as positivism and interpretivism.

The positivist philosophical position focuses on explanation rather than understanding (Crotty, 2009). Precision, exactitude and prediction are key features as is the belief that there are patterns and regularities, causes and consequences in the social world as there are in the natural world. It examines relationships between social phenomena by using existing theory to develop hypotheses which can then be tested. The interpretation of the researcher is not recognised (Grix, 2010).

Thus, positivists aim to formulate laws as a basis for prediction and generalisation and a deductive approach to research is undertaken (Creswell, 2013). This epistemological approach is value neutral in which the researcher takes steps to ensure that the research is objective and based only on factual data, thus the knowledge generated is value neutral and the researcher and the researched are independent entities (Cohen et al., 2013).

Quantitative research relates to any data collection or analysis technique that generates and uses numerical data (Saunders et al., 2015). Thus, quantitative research is associated with positivism, is objective in nature and uses highly structured data collection techniques such as questionnaires, using a deductive approach with the focus on testing theory (Grix, 2010).

The alternative to the positivist position is interpretivism which can be aligned to a subjective ontology (Grix, 2010). According to Saunders et al., (2015), interpretivism considers that knowledge is created as a result of the meanings

formed by individuals and how they interpret their own social realities. It rejects the positivist stance that there are universal laws that can be applied to everyone and takes the view that rich insights into reality are lost if they are reduced to a series of generalisations, as associated with positivism (Saunders et al., 2015). The emphasis is on understanding as opposed to explanation and the belief is that the researcher is part of the social reality being researched (Grix, 2010). Furthermore, interpretivists do not subscribe to the testing of theory and are more interested in building theory from the data (Grix, 2010).

Qualitative research is aligned to the interpretive tradition. It is subjective, is concerned with understanding, and employs an inductive research strategy (Grix, 2010). It is exploratory in nature, and allows how and why questions to be asked in order to generate a deep understanding of individual experiences (Creswell, 2013). As this is an exploratory study concerned with reaching an understanding of the perceptions and experiences of the participants, a qualitative approach, specifically, semi-structured interviews was therefore employed.

Therefore, a positivist approach is not applicable to this study as the researcher is not seeking explanation, nor to make generalisations. The knowledge in this context is not measurable, but is concerned with understanding of the perceptions of university staff and employers of their experiences of WBL partnerships and the meanings they attach to them. Knowledge is created as a result of the researcher's interactions with the participants. Therefore, interpretivism is identified as the philosophical approach adopted in this study.

### **3.2.3: Phenomenology**

Methodology refers to the approach that underpins the research and is closely linked to the philosophical stance of the researcher (Bryman, 2012). Within the interpretivist paradigm, there are a number of methodologies which can be considered when undertaking research (Crotty, 2009). One such methodology is phenomenology, which is regarded as a qualitative methodological approach concerned with the lived experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2013).

The aim of phenomenological inquiry is to obtain descriptions of experience. It is not concerned with causal factors, generalisation, establishing relationships or

development of theory as in a positivist study (Creswell, 2013). Phenomenology aims to explore and understand people's everyday lives and is used to unveil description, meaning and deep understanding of their experiences (Salmon, 2012). Norlyk & Harder (2010) suggest that when collecting data in a phenomenological study, the narrative data should reflect participants' first-hand accounts of their experiences and what these mean to them in their own particular contexts. The role of the researcher is to seek and to also derive meaning from these accounts (Creswell, 2013).

In a phenomenological study, an inductive approach is necessary to help develop or contribute to theory and to make sense of the data (Creswell, 2013). Phenomenology is applicable when the research concerns understanding common experiences of a phenomenon, which can be relevant to developing practices, policies and developing a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). It is therefore suitable for gaining deep insights into management practices (Anosike, Ehrich & Ahmed, 2012).

In this study, an interpretive phenomenological research design is used to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of the participants when developing WBL partnerships. This approach was developed by Heidegger (1962) who suggests that this process involves the researcher acknowledging that their own perceptions and experiences will have a direct influence on the research process. This is in contrast to other phenomenological approaches which involve the researcher systematically setting aside their own preconceptions, commonly referred to as 'bracketing' in a phenomenological study (Finlay, 2009). This process requires the researcher to detach themselves from any prior knowledge of the topic in order to prevent their own personal biases from unduly influencing the findings (Finlay, 2009). As the researcher has extensive experience of the topic under investigation, therefore has their own preconceptions, and can demonstrate empathy with the experiences of the participants, interpretive phenomenology is selected as a relevant approach.

Furthermore, phenomenology is regarded as being consistent with the subjective ontological position and interpretivist philosophical assumptions of the researcher. In the context of this study, phenomenology is suitable as an approach to developing a deep understanding of the lived experiences of

employers and universities in relation to development of effective WBL partnerships. Investigation and description of the meanings of these experiences will enable the researcher to reach a deep understanding of the key issues. This will be valuable in developing a range of proposals on how universities can enhance practice in this area and to build on existing academic knowledge within this field. This study therefore lends itself well to phenomenological inquiry.

### **3.2.4: Axiology**

Axiology is concerned with the values and beliefs held by the researcher (Creswell, 2013). Through consideration of axiology, the researcher is able to move beyond regarding research as a technical process, to understanding how they view their own world, how they perceive understanding and what is valuable to them (Cohen et al., 2013).

The positivist position assumes that only observable phenomena can lead to the generation of credible data and that research is value neutral and conducted from a detached standpoint (Cohen et al., 2013). Alternatively, interpretivist research is subjective with a focus on richness of the data, multiple interpretations and meaning making. The implication is that the researcher must recognise that their own values and beliefs will play an important role in the research process (Saunders et al., 2015). This study adopts an interpretivist approach, therefore, the values and beliefs of the researcher are recognised.

A key feature of the interpretivist approach is that the researcher should adopt an empathetic stance in order to closely identify with the experiences of research participants, which will enable them to understand the world from their point of view (Saunders et al., 2015; Creswell, 2013). This positioning of the researcher can be considered in terms of insider research. Hellowell (2006) contends that insider research does not only take place when the researcher is inside the organisation but also when the researcher and participants are members of the same community of practice.

In this study, the researcher has seventeen years' experience of working within the field of WBL in Higher Education in both an administrative and academic role. Both roles have involved development of relationships with employers with regard

to work placements and industry project opportunities. It is therefore suggested that the researcher is adopting an insider perspective as they are part of the same professional community of practice as the participants in relation to WBL in HE. Furthermore, some of the participants are colleagues from within their own organisation. This allows the researcher to display empathy with the participants as their background and experience of the topic enables them to position themselves in the study. It also facilitates a deep understanding of experiences and associated meanings. Thus, the researcher is bringing their own opinions and beliefs with regard to the topic, which influences the way in which data collection is administered as well as interpretation of the data (Saunders et al., 2015).

Equally, as the researcher is close to the topic under investigation, it is necessary to take steps to mitigate bias in the collecting and reporting of the data (Saunders et al., 2015). The researcher was very aware of this issue when interviewing participants and was mindful to word questions in a neutral manner and to use a neutral tone of voice to reduce the risk of unduly influencing responses. It was made clear to participants that the researcher was performing in this role, with the key purpose of eliciting responses on the research topic, as opposed to discussions within the context of their day to day professional role. Additionally, interview transcripts were emailed to participants to confirm that accurate responses of their experiences were recorded (Cousin, 2009).

The researcher's axiological stance will not only influence how the research is conducted but also what is valued (Cohen et al., 2013). In the context of this study, the researcher places a high level of value on generating rich data from the participants and is thus interested in reaching a deep understanding of their experiences. In this respect, a large sample using quantitative methods would not align to the value that the researcher places on production of knowledge generated through interacting with research participants. Furthermore, the researcher believes that examining the meaning of university/employer WBL partnerships to participants to be of great value in developing proposals for enhancement.

### 3.2.5: Summary of philosophical approach

The philosophical approach discussed in this section is summarised in the research string in Figure 3.1. This research string illustrates the research approach covered thus far and will be extended later in this chapter to include the methodology and methods employed in the research.

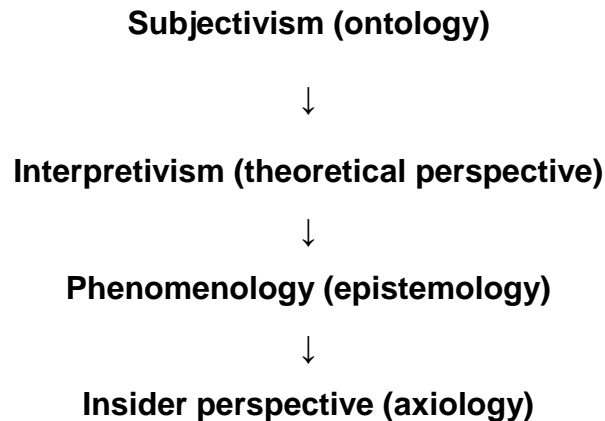


Figure 3.1: Research string 1. Adapted from: Crotty (2009)

## 3.3 Research strategy

### 3.3.1 Qualitative research

Saunders et al.,(2015) suggest that quantitative research relates to any data collection or analysis technique that generates and uses numerical data. Qualitative research, on the other hand, generates and uses non-numerical data. This distinction is viewed as being narrow as the decision to use one approach over another, or to combine both as in a mixed methods research design is closely linked to the researcher's philosophical assumptions (Saunders et al., 2015).

Quantitative research is associated with positivism, is objective in nature and uses highly structured data collection techniques such as questionnaires, using a deductive approach with the focus on testing theory (Grix, 2010). Qualitative research is aligned to the interpretive tradition. It is subjective, is concerned with understanding, and employs an inductive research strategy (Grix, 2010). It is exploratory in nature and allows how and why questions to be asked in order to generate a deep understanding of individual experiences (Creswell, 2013).

In this study, the researcher sought to investigate the perceptions of WBL partnerships from the perspectives of employers and university staff, therefore a quantitative approach was deemed inconsistent with the aim of the study, as numerical and quantifiable data would not allow for an exploration of the issues and would not enable the researcher to achieve this aim. The use of a mixed methods design, which would also generate both quantitative and qualitative data, was therefore also rejected. As this is an exploratory study concerned with reaching an understanding of the perceptions and experiences of the participants, a qualitative approach, specifically, semi-structured interviews was therefore employed.

### **3.3.2: Qualitative data collection tools**

According to Denzin & Lincoln (2008), in-depth interviews, focus groups and observations are suitable methods for collecting qualitative data. Prior to a decision to utilise semi – structured interviews in the study, alternative qualitative data collection tools were considered. These alternative approaches are now discussed with justification of why they were not selected.

Focus groups are a type of group interview in which the emphasis is on interactive and collective discussion between the participants, rather than responses to a set of questions posed by the researcher (Cohen et al, 2013). According to Cousin (2009, p.51), rich data can be elicited in focus groups due to the interactivity of the group and that “their contributions will be enriched by the group dynamic.” The focus group method is suitable for obtaining rich data as individuals are enabled to share their views in a group setting and in the consequent discussion (Cousin 2009). However, due to the profile of the participants in this study who are working in demanding and professional roles and are located across Scotland, it would have been impractical for participants to join a focus group at a specific time. Furthermore, in terms of confidentiality, there is a risk that participants would not have been comfortable expressing details of their practices to other organisations in a group setting. The focus group method was therefore rejected.

With regard to interviews, this data collection tool enables the researcher to gather in-depth information on the individual’s perspective on the research topic (Creswell, 2013). As interviews can be conducted on an individual basis,

participants are more likely to provide details of their own personal experiences (Creswell, 2013). A further advantage is that interviews can enable the researcher to ask questions on issues raised by participants, which may not have been previously taken into account by the researcher when designing the interview schedule (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) .

Interviews may be structured, unstructured or semi-structured (Saunders et al., 2015). As structured interviews are conducted using a pre-determined set of questions, this would not be a suitable data collection tool for this study as it would prohibit the ability of the researcher to elicit rich data on a range of lived experiences of the participants. Each participant would be limited to responding to the same set of questions which would not allow them to express an in-depth account of their own individual perspectives. Furthermore, given these limitations and the epistemological stance of the researcher, this data collection tool would not enable the researcher to reach a deep understanding of the individual lived experiences of the participants and to achieve the aim and objectives of the study.

Unstructured interviews, on the other hand, do not rely on a list of questions and interviewees are free to discuss their experiences in their own way and order (Saunders et al., 2015). This type of interview lends itself to studies where the researcher is able to benefit from immersion in the research setting such as in an ethnographic study, however, a disadvantage is that a large amount of irrelevant material can be gathered (Saunders et al., 2015). In this study, although the researcher is interested in capturing rich data on the lived experiences of the participants, WBL is a complex issue and it is likely that unstructured interviews would lead to generation of a large number of responses that are not focused on the specific research topic. Furthermore, immersion in the research setting was not possible for the researcher due to the range of settings, as well as the ongoing and intermittent nature of developing WBL relationships. It is also suggested that this was not necessary as the research was not focused on developing an understanding of the day to day roles of the participants or on the culture within their organisations as in an ethnographic study (Creswell, 2013). This type of interview was therefore judged as being unsuitable for the study.



To conclude, given that the aim of this research is to critically evaluate perceptions of barriers and enablers of effective work based learning partnerships, from the perspectives of universities and employers in the tourism sector in Scotland, the range of alternative data collection tools discussed in this section have been rejected as they would not enable the researcher to effectively achieve this aim. Therefore, semi-structured interviews are considered as being the only appropriate method for this study.

### **3.3.3: Semi-structured interviews**

The most common data collection tool in phenomenology is the in-depth interview (Creswell, 2013). Semi-structured interviews are a suitable method for obtaining in-depth accounts of perceptions and experiences and can produce rich data about the lives and perspectives of participants (Cousin, 2009). Participants can respond in detail, which can enable the researcher to elicit in-depth information on attitudes, values and as well as generating responses, which explain and contextualise issues (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). In line with the researcher's theoretical perspective of interpretivism, semi-structured interviews provide an opportunity to probe deeper and to encourage participants to explain and build on their responses. This facilitates a deeper understanding of the meanings they attach to various phenomena (Saunders et al., 2015).

In a semi-structured interview, the questions are set according to themes identified in the literature review, which the interviewer must be sure of in advance (Saunders et al., 2015). Flexibility is a key feature as the interviewer can modify questions according to how the interview progresses and to change the order of questions or topics should the interviewee's responses require it (Cousin, 2009). An interview schedule guides the process but the researcher and participants will be able to veer from this in order to describe and explore responses and interpretations in detail (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). This process is interactive and collaborative with participants working with the researcher to attach meaning and understanding to their experiences (Cousin, 2009).

When conducting semi-structured interviews, it is necessary to consider issues of data quality. Interviewer bias may occur from the tone, comments or non-verbal cues which may cause participants to respond in a particular way or it may be

demonstrated in the way in which the interviewer interprets the responses (Saunders et al., 2015). Interviewee bias may also be present if a participant chooses not to divulge certain aspects of the topic under investigation, perhaps due to sensitive issues, and may therefore only reveal an incomplete view of the situation (Saunders et al., 2015). Cultural differences may also exist between the interviewer and interviewee which may cause issues relating to true accounts of experiences, for example, in some cultures where it is commonplace to respond only by agreeing or by being positive (Gobo, 2011).

Steps to mitigate interviewer bias relate to how the questions are framed with attention to using clear phrasing, neutral tone of voice and open questions (Saunders et al., 2015). Additionally, developing an awareness of the participants may enable the interviewer to engage in conversation prior to the interviews in order to create rapport and trust to ensure that the participants will feel comfortable discussing the issues. This may include conducting prior research on potential cultural differences that may have an impact on their responses. Additionally, assurances on confidentiality and anonymity may encourage participants to provide true accounts of their experiences (Saunders et al., 2015).

Semi-structured interviews are deemed appropriate as a data collection method in this study as a way of capturing rich data from a group of individuals who have all had experience of university/employer WBL partnerships. The following sections provide detail on how the interviews were administered.

### **3.4: Research design**

In this section, the pilot study is reviewed followed by discussion of the data collection and sampling procedures employed in the final study.

#### **3.4.1: Pilot Study**

The pilot study was conducted in May 2017 with the aim of pre-testing the interview, data collection, analysis and findings process and to identify and correct issues and problems prior to the main study taking place (Cohen et al., 2013). The objective was to improve the research process and increase the probability of success of the main study.

For the pilot study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with academics involved in delivery of WBL modules at Edinburgh Napier University (n2) and with employers who recruit Edinburgh Napier University work placement students (n3). Two employers were from the education sector and the other was from the charity sector. Purposive sampling was used to select interview participants, as it would be necessary for participants to have direct knowledge and experience of the research topic (Saunders et al., 2015). Participants were selected due to their expertise and experiences of participating in WBL initiatives and were therefore regarded as being equipped to participate in in-depth discussion on their experiences of how WBL relationships are developed.

On reflection, the researcher believes that overall, the pilot study process worked well with only minor adjustments required for the final study. From a practical perspective, the researcher identified that several weeks' notice for interviews would be required for the final study, as well as consideration of timing with regard to participants' workloads. Additionally, it was recognised that for the final study, face-to-face interviews would not be possible for some participants as they would be located in other parts of Scotland. A decision to use telephone/Skype interviews was made as an alternative for those interviewees located out with the local area.

In terms of interview questions, it was recognised that more discussion and deeper probing in relation to employer objectives and motivations for recruiting WBL students, as well as the views of employers with regard to their role in terms of developing effective WBL relationships would be necessary.

Lastly, the researcher found the process of data analysis challenging due to the volume of data, even from a small number of interviews. Given the larger number of interviews in the final study, the researcher recognised that the use of data management software would be beneficial for the final study.

The data collection and sampling methods for the final study are now discussed in the following sections.

### **3.4.2: Sampling method**

As in the pilot study, this research utilises purposive sampling which is a method used to identify respondents with in-depth knowledge of the research topic from within the target population (Palys, 2008). This method is a non-probability sampling technique, whereby participants are selected based on their knowledge, relationships and expertise regarding the research subject (Saunders et al., 2015). This sampling method is often used when working with a small sample of participants who are required to be very informative on the research topic (Neuman, 2014).

In the context of this study, the members of the sample were required to have knowledge and experience of WBL university/employer relationships within the context of the tourism sector in Scotland. For universities, participants were required to be involved in developing WBL relationships with employers as part of their current role. For employers, the selection criteria were that participants should be employed in the Scottish tourism sector and have current responsibility for recruitment of WBL students from tourism related programmes. Additionally, a balance was sought with regard to employers from the hospitality sector and those from travel/tourism in order to provide insight into different parts of the industry.

Initially, it was envisaged that participating universities would identify and recommend employers who could comment on their experiences of working with those particular universities with the aim of gaining a deep insight of employer experiences across participating universities. However, this approach was not effective with only two universities from the sample fulfilling this request. Consequently, using knowledge of specific employers, the researcher was able to target those who employ WBL students from more than one Scottish university. However, prior to this issue emerging, the researcher had already conducted interviews with two employers linked only to her own institution. Therefore, the perceptions of two employers in the study were limited to their experiences of working with one university and not across a range of universities. The data generated from both participants was significant as it provided deep insights into WBL relationships. This data was therefore included as it provided a valuable contribution to the study.

### **3.4.3: Interview questions**

In a semi-structured interview, the questions may be broken down into three categories namely, main questions, probes and follow up questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Two separate interview schedules were designed; one for universities and the other for employers, based on a series of themes derived from the literature review (see appendices C and D). Open questions were developed to allow participants to respond from their own perspectives, to facilitate conversations on the topic and to prevent the interviews from becoming interviewer-centred and too structured (Cousin, 2009). The main questions were not necessarily asked in the order presented but were varied according to the flow of the conversations with participants. Additional probes and follow up questions were used when required to elicit further responses and to allow deeper understanding of the participants' perceptions of their lived experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

### **3.4.4: Interviews with university staff**

In this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six members of staff employed in five Scottish Universities who offer Tourism and Hospitality degree programmes with a WBL offering as part of these programmes. This may take the form of an accredited WBL module, which is integrated into the programmes of study, or non-credit bearing, flexible WBL options, which are recognised as a valuable part of the curriculum.

The researcher identified key contacts in universities across Scotland who offer tourism related degree programmes which offer WBL opportunities. This was done initially by identifying colleagues in the researcher's own institution and in others where the relevant people were already known to the researcher. Further relevant connections were developed using the online networking tool 'LinkedIn', which enabled the researcher to contact those with direct responsibility for WBL partnerships in universities where the contacts were unknown. An initial message was sent to these new connections via LinkedIn for permission to contact them by email and to invite them to take part. All participants, including those known to the researcher, were emailed an invitation to participate which included

information on the study as well as an informed consent form (see appendices A and B).

From those participants who responded, face to face interviews were conducted with three participants within their places of work, however, due to their location, the remaining three interviews were conducted by telephone, which was their preferred communication method. With the permission of participants, all interviews were recorded in order to enhance accurate transcription of data. The interviews took place between February and April 2019, with each one lasting 45-60 minutes.

Responsibility for developing WBL relationships with employers can vary between universities, with academics taking on this role in some universities whilst in others, it is the responsibility of professional staff employed within a central placement or careers team. The interviews therefore took place with either academic staff or professional staff with responsibility for WBL recruitment processes and initiatives, depending on the process within each university. See table 3.1 for an overview of the participants.

<b>Institution/Grouping/size</b>	<b>WBL Profile</b>	<b>Face to face/telephone interview</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Code</b>
Large Modern University (10-15,000 students)	Accredited WBL module	Face to face	Academic	U1
		Face to face	Professional services	U2
Medium Sized Modern University (5-10,000 students)	Accredited WBL module	Face to face	Academic	U3
Large Modern University (10-25,000 students)	Accredited WBL module	Telephone	Professional services	U4
Large Chartered University (10-25,000 students)	No accredited WBL module. Offers a range of flexible WBL opportunities.	Telephone	Academic	U5
Medium Sized Modern University (5-10,000 students)	Both accredited and flexible WBL opportunities.	Telephone	Professional Services	U6

Table 3.1: Profile of university participants.

Source: The Complete University Guide (2019)

### 3.4.5: Interviews with employers in the Scottish tourism sector

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven employers from the tourism sector in Scotland. Employers were identified from the researcher's own professional network as well as recommendations from the placement team within her own institution. For those connections provided by the placement team, permission was sought prior to the researcher making contact. All participants were emailed an invitation to participate as well as information on the study and an informed consent form.

The employer interviews were conducted between March and May 2019, with each interview lasting 45-60 minutes. As with the university sample, due to the location of some employers it was not practical to conduct face-to-face interviews. These interviews were therefore conducted by telephone according to the preference of the participants. The face-to-face interviews were conducted on the premises of the employers. All interviews were recorded with the permission of the respondents. See table 3.2 for an overview of the employer sample.

Multinational/ National/ Independent/ No. of employees in Scotland	Sub sector	Role	Recruits WBL students from several Scottish universities	Face to face/ telephone	code
Independent/ 500+	Hospitality	Recruitment/ Senior HR Manager	Y	Telephone	E1
Multinational/ 300+	Tourism	Recruitment/HR Manager	Y	Face to face	E2
National/ 30+	Tourism	Company Director	N	Face to face	E3
Multinational/ 200+	Hospitality	HR Director	Y	Face to face	E4
Multinational/ 350+	Hospitality	HR Manager	Y	Telephone	E5
Independent/ 40+	Tourism	Senior Manager	N	Face to face	E6
Multinational/ 100+	Tourism	Senior Manager	Y	Face to face	E7

Table 3.2: Profile of employer participants.

### 3.4.6: Data Saturation

Interviews were conducted with both sets of participants until the researcher believed that data saturation was achieved and any further data would not have provided new information or new themes (Saunders et al.,2015). This became

apparent when the researcher was aware of repetition in the responses to the interview questions and a lack of new data. A decision was therefore made to cease the interviews at this point in the data collection process.

#### **3.4.7: Limitations of the sample**

Data was collected from specific university employees and a small number of specific employers. It is possible that if different employers or university employees had participated, this may have generated a different range of responses. It is also possible that the organisations who participated may not be representative of organisations across the tourism sector in Scotland. For example, the findings do not relate to SMEs which account for a high proportion of organisations in the Scottish tourism sector.

Additionally, although the research was conducted with the majority of universities in Scotland who offer tourism related degree programmes, there were two universities who did not participate. It is suggested that their input may have been valuable to the findings.

#### **3.4.8: Summary of Research Approach**

Following on from section 3.2.5, the research string for this study is now further developed to include the data collection methods employed in the research. See Figure 3.2.



Figure 3.2: Research string 2. Adapted from: Crotty (2009)



### **3.5: Data analysis**

A range of alternative data analysis tools were considered for the study prior to reaching a decision to use a thematic analysis framework. The approaches considered by the researcher were narrative analysis, discourse analysis and content analysis. These are outlined in this section with justification of why they were not selected, followed by discussion of the use of thematic analysis which is the framework selected in this study.

#### **3.5.1: Data Analysis Approaches**

According to Allen (2017), narrative analysis is conducted when researchers interpret stories within the context of the research topic. The analysis focuses on aspects such as story structure, purpose and how the story is told. In this study, although the researcher wanted to elicit details of participants' lived experiences, the focus was not on storytelling nor did it relate to the structure of the participants' accounts and how they were delivered. This method of analysis was therefore not used in this study.

Discourse analysis can be used when the focus of the analysis is on the use of written and spoken language in a social context (Salkind, 2010). The focus of this study was on the actual lived experiences of the participants rather than the language used by participants to describe them. This method of analysis was therefore not appropriate to the study.

According to Byrne (2017), content analysis involves calculating the frequency of occurrence of certain words and phrases in the data and is used as a measurement tool. In this study, the researcher was not seeking to quantify interview responses in any way but to reach a deep understanding of individual perspectives. This type of analysis was therefore judged as being unsuitable.

#### **3.5.2: Thematic analysis**

This study adopted a thematic analysis framework to analyse the data gathered from the semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis is a method of identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data and is not tied to any particular epistemological or theoretical perspective, which allows it to be used across a range of approaches (Clarke & Braun, 2013). It can be used for larger and smaller data sets and can enable the researcher to understand a large volume of complex

data and “to develop and test theories and explanations based on apparent thematic patterns or relationships and to draw and verify conclusions.” (Saunders et al., 2015, p.579). Although the data set in this study was small, it provided a large volume of complex data. Thematic analysis was therefore judged as being a suitable approach. Additionally, in line with the aim and objectives of the study and themes identified in the literature review, this was an appropriate method to enable the researcher to establish relationships with themes emerging in the primary data and to reach a deep understanding of the research topic.

### **3.5.3: Transcription and coding procedure**

The first stage of analysis involved manual transcription of the interviews by the researcher. Although this can be described as a laborious process, it has the advantage of developing familiarity with the data, which is a key aspect of enabling the researcher to engage in the analytical process (Saunders et al., 2015). Following this, the process involved reading and re-reading the interview transcripts to develop further familiarity with the data and to identify interesting sections and statements (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Codes were then attached to the data. This process involves assigning codes to extracts of data that summarise their meaning (Clarke & Braun, 2013). Coding enables the researcher to make sections of the data accessible for further analysis and to understand the meanings in these sections. It is a way in which the data can be arranged and retrieved during later stages of the analysis (Saunders et al., 2015). At this stage, the researcher read participants’ comments and considered issues that the comments related to and then assigned provisional labels to the issues that were identified (Cousin, 2009). A large number of codes were initially generated with some sections of interview text allocated to several codes (Cousin, 2009).

In this study, the researcher made the decision to use Computer Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS), specifically NVivo 12, to aid the process of coding due to the volume and complexity of the data. Bryman & Bell (2015) emphasise that the researcher still has to read, reflect, interpret and code the data but qualitative software packages can assist with the laborious task of cutting and pasting extracts of text according to codes and then into themes. As an inductive approach is relevant to this study, the research questions provided a

focus for decisions on which data to code (Saunders et al., 2015). A large number of codes were identified initially which is to be expected at this stage (Saunders et al., 2015).

#### **3.5.4: Identification of Themes**

Once the initial codes are established, the researcher is able to proceed with identifying themes in the data. Searching for themes involves re-immersing oneself in the data and seeking key concepts, recurring information, patterns and relationships between codes (Saunders et al., 2015).

Braun & Clarke (2006) suggest that there are two levels of themes: semantic and latent. Semantic themes may be identified initially when the researcher is not looking beyond what has been said. The next stage of analysis moves beyond this to establish latent themes, whereby the researcher is involved in interpreting the data to examine “underlying ideas, assumptions, conceptualisations and ideologies that are theorised as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data.” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.84).

NVivo 12 allowed the researcher to view the interview extracts attached to the codes identified, which assisted with the process of deeper immersion in the data. In NVivo 12, the material was arranged in terms of interview extracts assigned to codes. By selecting an individual code, the researcher was then able to view all interview extracts associated with that particular code. This enabled the researcher to interpret the data to reach initial semantic themes and using the software, relevant pieces of text from the initial coding were copied into the initial themes.

The researcher considered the overarching aim of the study, namely, to critically evaluate perceptions of barriers and enablers of effective work based learning partnerships, from the perspectives of universities and employers in the tourism sector in Scotland. This was done in conjunction with reflection on the three research questions for the study which then allowed three main themes to emerge from the data. The initial themes discussed above were then attached to the three main themes identified according to judgements made by the researcher on their relevance. This data reduction process resulted in identification of the three main themes and a range of supporting sub-themes

(Thomas, 2006). See table 3.3 for an overview of the research questions, main themes and sub-themes identified. The next chapter in which the findings from the study are presented and analysed will use the three main themes and corresponding sub-themes as a framework for the analysis.

Research Question	Main Theme	Sub-themes
1. How do Scottish universities and employers in the tourism sector in Scotland build partnerships in relation to supporting students undertaking work based learning placements?	Developing and managing WBL relationships	Aims of WBL partnerships; establishing and building relationships; development of trust; managing expectations.
2. What barriers do Scottish universities and employers in the tourism sector in Scotland experience when developing WBL partnerships?	Challenges for WBL relationships	Lack of employer awareness; resistance from employers; support for WBL; time and resources; university processes.
3. How can WBL partnerships be enabled in order to promote positive WBL experiences for students?	Effective relationship management approaches and opportunities.	Employer involvement; holistic approach; investment in WBL; placements with added value; connections with key influencers; effective approaches and further opportunities.

Table 3.3: Research themes

### 3.6: Ethical Considerations

The research adheres to the principles outlined in the Edinburgh Napier University Code of Practice on Research Integrity (2018), which stipulates an ethical code of practice for those undertaking any research associated with the university.

In advance of the research, ethical approval has been granted by the Edinburgh Napier Business School Research Integrity Committee, which confirms that consideration has been given to informed consent, confidentiality, and risk and harm to participants (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

In accordance with this code of practice, a participant information sheet and an informed consent form were sent with an initial email invitation as a means of ensuring that participants were provided with sufficient information to enable them to make an informed choice to participate (see appendices A and B).

Study information and consent forms were issued again at the start of each interview to ensure that they had been read and to allow participants to ask any questions. The informed consent form assures participants of anonymity and confidentiality. In accordance with the Data Protection Act 2018, GDPR and Edinburgh Napier University Code of Practice on Research Integrity (2018), participants were advised that the data would be stored securely on the H:Drive of the researcher's university PC, which has secure data encryption software installed. The data will be retained until the researcher has completed the DBA programme and will then be disposed of securely and permanently using Eraser software for Windows PCs.

For universities, any identifiers such as reference to name, job title, academic programme, school or department, campus, type/name of industry partners and quotes relating to issues associated with particular employers has been omitted in all reporting of the data. For employers, name, job title, name of organisation, University contacts/departments that they work with, reference to recruitment of students from specific academic programmes has been excluded.

In reporting the data, participants are referred to using code names and professional roles are generalised in order to maintain anonymity. However, there is a risk that individuals may be identified via interview transcripts. This is mitigated by only including short interview extracts within the thesis. Furthermore, interview recordings will only be accessible by the researcher and will be disposed of upon completion of the DBA programme.

The researcher considers the risk of harm to any individuals to be low but has considered that there may be a risk to professional reputation if participants do not have the required level of knowledge to participate fully or if they provide

inaccurate information. Additionally, there may be a risk if details of negative practices are disclosed.

Participants were advised that they were under no obligation to respond to all questions and if there were any that were not relevant to their practice or that they did not wish to answer, that this would not affect their participation in the study in any way. They were also be informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time, without any negative consequences ensuing.

### **3.7: Validity and credibility of the research approach**

This is a qualitative, interpretive study, therefore, validity is concerned with the perspectives of each individual being equally as valid as those of others and relates to accounts and meanings of experiences rather than data or methods, whilst reliability is regarded as how accurately the data has been recorded and its comprehensiveness (Cohen et al., 2013). In a qualitative research study, the purpose is to study a specific issue in a particular context, therefore generalisability is not a feature (Leung, 2015).

According to Silverman (2010, p. 275) “validity is another word for truth”, whilst Lincoln et al., (2011) contend that it concerns the level of rigour applied. As advised by Cousin (2009), one way of achieving this is to take steps to ensure that the data is accurate. In this study, participants were therefore emailed transcripts of their interviews to check for accuracy and trustworthiness and that the reported data represented a true account of their responses.

Furthermore, with regard to rigour, a comprehensive pilot study was undertaken in summer 2017 to ensure that the interview questions and research design were appropriate (see section 3.4.1). Minor modifications were identified and actioned in the final study, thus enhancing the level of rigour applied to the main study.

Creswell (2013) suggests that researcher reflexivity is also an important element in achieving trustworthiness of the data. The researcher therefore recognises that due to her professional role working within the area of WBL, that the results may be influenced by her own personal opinions and biases. It is therefore valuable to reflect upon and acknowledge these pre-conceptions when conducting the research.

Bryman and Bell (2013) also consider the concept of transferability. They suggest that the aim of qualitative research is to provide a rich description of the data and that this can result in depth of analysis which may be applied in other contexts. The findings may be therefore be transferable to other industry sectors and other types of university/industry collaboration.

### 3.8: Conclusion

This chapter considers the research methodology for the study and the research design employed in order to meet the aims and objectives of the study. Justification of the subjectivist and interpretivist philosophical position which underpins the study with phenomenology as the guiding methodology is presented. The associated research design involving semi-structured interviews with universities and employers within the Scottish Tourism sector is detailed with due consideration of ethical implications. Issues pertaining to trustworthiness of the approach are also discussed. An overview of the philosophical underpinning of this study and associated methodology and research design is presented in table 3.4.

Ontology	Theoretical Perspective	Epistemology/Methodology	Methods	Analysis
Subjectivism	Interpretivism	Phenomenology	Qualitative	Thematic analysis
			Semi-structured interviews	Use of NVivo 12 software
			Inductive	Influenced by researcher interpretation

Table 3.4: Research philosophy, methodology and research design

The findings from the study are now presented and analysed in the next chapter.

## **Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis**

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### **4.1: Introduction**

In this chapter, discussion and analysis of the findings is presented. According to Cohen et al.,(2013), in the process of analysing qualitative data, “the researcher “interprets data from participants who have already interpreted their world, and then relates them to the audience in his or her own words” (p.540). As this is a qualitative, interpretative study, the researcher’s interpretations are subjective based upon reflections on participants’ subjective accounts of their experiences.

In this chapter, the discussion is set around the themes identified from analysing the data from the semi-structured interviews and the findings from the literature review.

#### **4.1.1: Summary of research interviews**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the following participants:

- Seven employers from the tourism and hospitality sectors in Scotland.
- Six employees from five Scottish universities which offer work based learning opportunities as part of their Tourism and Hospitality degree programmes.

With regard to retaining anonymity, employers are referred to as E1-E7 and university employees as U1-U6.

See tables 3.1 and 3.2 in the previous chapter for an overview of both sets of participants.

#### **4.1.2: Aim and research questions**

The aim and research questions developed from the literature review provide a basis for the main themes and discussion and analysis in this chapter.

- **Aim**

To critically evaluate perceptions of barriers and enablers of effective work based learning (WBL) partnerships, from the perspectives of universities and employers in the tourism sector in Scotland.



- **Research questions**

- How do Scottish universities and employers in the tourism sector in Scotland build partnerships in relation to supporting students undertaking work based learning placements?
- What barriers do Scottish universities and employers in the tourism sector in Scotland experience when developing WBL partnerships?
- How can WBL partnerships be enabled in order to promote positive WBL experiences for students?

#### **4.1.3: Main themes**

As a result of analysis of the primary data and linkage to the aim and research questions for this study, the following three main themes are identified:

1. Developing and managing WBL relationships
2. Challenges for WBL relationships
3. Effective relationship management approaches and opportunities

These themes and corresponding sub-themes (see table 3.3 in previous chapter), as well as findings from the literature review, form the basis for the following discussion and analysis.

#### **4.2: Theme 1: Developing and managing WBL relationships**

This section discusses how universities and employers manage and develop WBL partnerships. Four sub-themes are identified for discussion: 1. Aims of WBL partnerships; 2. Establishing and building relationships; 3. Development of trust and 4. Managing expectations.

The discussion is structured around these four sub-themes, which are relevant to the main theme of developing and managing WBL relationships and will contribute to answering the first research question as follows: How do Scottish universities and employers in the tourism sector in Scotland build partnerships in relation to supporting students undertaking work based learning placements?

#### 4.2.1: Establishing aims of WBL relationships

Prior to discussion of how universities and employers develop relationships with regard to WBL, it is valuable to consider the aims of what is to be achieved by such alliances. The findings show that there was consensus from each of the universities on the aim of WBL partnerships and they were clear in what they were hoping to achieve which is summed up by participant U1 below:

*“What we’re trying to achieve is a partnership model that works well for students and employers. It also lets the university be given this role in industry which is more sustainable and which is more about exchanging ideas and developing our ability to educate students. The bare minimum expectation is just this duty of care and providing an environment where they can realise their learning objectives with support.”(U1)*

As can be seen from the university perspective, they have a vision which extends beyond work placements and impacts on driving an industry informed curriculum, of which WBL is a part. They view it as a partnership, which implies that all stakeholders in the relationship have an obligation to contribute to its success. Sustainability is also a feature in which it is hoped that the partnership will continue over a period of time, leading to employment opportunities for students once they have graduated. Universities are also seeking a supportive learning environment for students during placement.

The employers in the study were less clear about the aim of the relationship. However, all employers with one exception were clear that they do view WBL as a means of developing talent for the future. For example, one participant was of the opinion that this was the start of a long-term process and felt that:

*“People you can see who engage who might come back to more senior roles in the future.” (E1)*

Participant E2 also shared this view:

*“We want people who want long term careers with us. It works well for our retention.” (E2)*

It can be seen that some employers in this study are considering employment of WBL students as part of their longer-term recruitment and retention plans.

However, their aims with regard to the WBL relationship with universities are less clear. It is possible that these employers are focusing on the importance of WBL, but less on how relationships with universities can be developed.

According to Huxham & Vangen (2005), agreement on aims is a useful first step in a successful collaboration. The findings in this study suggest that more clarity is required with regard to the aims of the WBL partnership from the employer perspective. UKCES & UUK (2014) advise that establishing clear goals for the relationship and outlining what each organisation will contribute and achieve through the collaboration are necessary in the initial stages. As two independent organisations are working together in a WBL partnership, each with their own agenda, this adds to the complexity of the relationship (Huxham & Vangen, 2005). Therefore, setting clear aims and identification of roles and responsibilities at the outset can assist in reducing the complexity and facilitate the initiation of a relationship. Thus, it is therefore suggested that more focus on the aims of the WBL relationship and agreement on roles would be advantageous when initiating and developing partnerships with universities.

Although employers in the study did not focus on the aim of WBL relationships, the findings suggest that tourism employers regard WBL as part of recruitment and retention strategies by considering it as a way in which to recruit graduates in the future. This was also a finding of Jackson et al., (2017), who contend that a key motivation of employers across a range of industry sectors is the long-term benefit to their organisations. However, the finding is in contrast to the findings of Baum (2015) who suggests that employers in the tourism sector have a short-term view of work placements and use them as a means to deal with temporary staffing issues.

#### **4.2.2: Establishing and building relationships**

##### **4.2.2.1: Face to face communication**

The findings indicate that taking the time to meet face to face can facilitate the process of establishing a relationship as it enables both stakeholders to discuss their requirements and perspectives with regard to the WBL partnership. Three

universities in the study commented on this. The quote below sums up their experiences.

*“We had an employer who we had contacted several times by email and who didn’t engage but when our employer engagement consultant went out for a visit, this made all the difference and they came on board and offered us four twelve month placement opportunities. We’ve been asking them to work with us for ages and as soon as they get a visit they want to work with us!” (U4)*

Two employers also commented that this type of communication benefits their relationships with universities. The following quote from industry participant E2 illustrates this point.

*“When I first started I had meetings with all my universities. We sat down and had a good chat about how we could tailor our programmes to the students. This worked really well for us as it gave us a good insight into making our offering attractive to students.” (E2)*

The findings show that that face-to-face communication can be beneficial when initiating the relationship by enabling partners to become clear on each other’s objectives and requirements. It also demonstrates commitment to the other partner by devoting time to meet with them face to face and indicates the value being placed on their involvement in the partnership.

This can be aligned to a key theme in the literature which emphasises the importance of employers as key stakeholders in ensuring an effective WBL environment for students and that this needs to be recognised by universities (Yorke, 2006; McEwen et al., 2010; Sheridan & Linehan, 2013; Atkinson, 2016). This may therefore be demonstrated by universities taking the time to meet face to face and to show their appreciation of the participation of employers in WBL.

Furthermore, this finding is consistent with those of Plewa & Quester (2007), who contend that commitment demonstrates investment in the relationship and that a committed stakeholder puts effort into its development and is more likely to be proactive in participating. It is therefore suggested that this initial step is valuable to initiating and facilitating WBL partnerships and may lead to active participation by both stakeholders.

In contrast, a finding from one university where industry liaison is managed by a central placement team, demonstrates that face-to-face communication is not always possible. In this context, email contact with existing employers takes place early in the placement process, with a follow up email in a few months if no initial response is received. Furthermore, there is no opportunity to contact and develop relationships with potential new employers. This may be due to lack of resources as can be seen in the following quote.

*“It’s difficult because if we do develop more opportunities, we don’t have the staff to promote those opportunities, manage the recruitment and manage the paperwork and then the more we have, we don’t then have the resources to ensure that the students are supported and developed properly.” (U2)*

Indeed, this approach seemed to be poorly viewed by employers who might find this approach to be distant and unmemorable. This was succinctly articulated by one employer who suggested that:

*“It sometimes feels quite anonymous. It’s as if they haven’t worked with us before or appreciate what we do every year.” (E2)*

Therefore, the findings from this study would indicate that this approach may not be conducive to developing effective relationships with employers. However, universities may be experiencing challenges in relation to support, time and resources which may be a contributory factor.

One academic is of the view that due to lack of time and resources, the placement team within their institution is not able to focus on relationship management. They are of the opinion that academics have a different approach and perceive links with industry as a partnership which can result in other opportunities and an industry informed curriculum.

*“They think of it as placement but I see it more as a partnership model that can help bring employers brought into the curricula, teaching modules and that kind of thing.” (U1)*

Lack of awareness amongst staff responsible for developing work placements may therefore be a factor in how relationships are approached. It was also a finding of Basit et al.,(2015) that universities may lack appropriate staff expertise

to be able to work effectively across a diverse range of employers, with a wide range of requirements. It does however, highlight that there is a training need in universities to enhance awareness of university objectives and strategies for developing linkages.

#### **4.2.2.2: Communication channels**

The findings show that in terms of communication methods, employers' needs may not always be considered by universities. This is highlighted by employer E2.

*"Email communications work best for me whereas university x tends to phone me a bit more. I do a lot of interviews so phone doesn't work for me so well due to my schedule."* (E2)

This may be due to differences in culture and priorities between universities and employers who may be operating in a fast-paced environment. Understanding of the needs of employers therefore may need to be developed if universities are to develop sustainable partnerships. In line with findings of Kettle (2013), a standardised approach to developing links is not effective and universities may need to adapt their communication approach to the individual needs of the employer.

#### **4.2.2.3: Frequency of communication**

Employers in the study agreed that they would like more communication from universities before, during and after the placement. There is a feeling that they are left to their own devices after the placement starts and that they receive very little or no contact.

*"It would be good to get almost like an introductory email with here's everything you need to know for your student starting next week. A reminder of what we need to do."* (E7)

*"I wrote a massive 6 month placement report because I thought someone would contact me for that but they never did. We fill in all the paperwork and then we hear very little from then on. We get an email halfway through but it would be good to have more."* (E5)

One employer stated that they felt that communication should come from universities

*“I think it’s up to the universities to be communicating to say this is what we need and this is when we’re coming out to do visits. It shouldn’t really be up to us to be chasing this up”. (E1)*

In contrast, one employer referred to initiating regular contact with the universities they deal with.

*“A large part is maintaining these relationships. Our goal is to speak to our universities every 60 days. It’s the way we get the best hires. It’s really important to keep it going throughout the year. It’s a two way relationship.” (E2)*

There is a perception that by spending time and effort on maintaining relationships, that they are able to recruit the best students. The same employer views the relationship as a holistic process and is involved in other activities with universities such as delivery of skills sessions, involvement in case studies and as a guest speaker. This is in line with findings of Plewa & Quester (2007) who suggest commitment is a key factor in developing effective relationships and that a committed stakeholder puts effort into developing a relationship and is more likely to be proactive in participating in that relationship.

This view was not supported in the comments from the other employers. It is therefore suggested that employers could take more responsibility for contacting the relevant university whenever they feel that it is required. It can be inferred that the employers in the study may expect universities to have sole responsibility for this, as they have not considered that they could make contact with universities when required (Yorke, 2006; McEwen et al., 2010). This viewpoint is also represented in the findings of Lashley (2011) who suggests that employers should share the obligation for the relationship. There may be a need for employers to be made aware that they should also be in regular contact with the university. This can be linked to the importance of establishing clear aims and responsibilities at the outset.

From the university perspective, if they are to be successful in developing partnerships with employers, regular communication is key at each stage of the

WBL process. As in the findings of Huq & Gilbert (2013), more emphasis on regular communication could therefore be a priority for universities before, during and after the placement.

#### **4.2.2.4: Speed of response**

Employers in the tourism sector may be operating in a fast paced environment and expect a quick response from universities, which can be an important factor in developing and maintaining a relationship (Ruhanen et al., 2012). In practice, this can be difficult for universities due to issues such as bureaucratic systems and lack of time and resources, which may make this challenging (see sections 4.3.4 and 4.3.5). This highlights the issue of both partners operating in different types of environment which can add complexity to the relationship.

Employer E2 stated that this can be an issue for them:

*“Sometimes I don't get responses as quickly as I would like. If I agree to do an event and don't know the date and time and then don't get a response for a couple of weeks, my calendar can then be booked up by that point. I always get back to people within 24 hours. That's just the way I work but if someone doesn't do the same with me, it can be a problem as I need to book my diary out 90 days in advance. If it's something in the short term it's unlikely I can do it. Seems just like a delayed response.” (E2)*

University participant U2 is aware of the issue:

*“Occasionally, employers will contact an academic about offering a placement but it might not be a priority for them so there's a delay before they pass the lead on to our team to follow up. We're under-resourced so we might not get the chance to respond right away. I can see that this delay could be an issue for some employers”. (U2)*

This finding is linked to those of Huxham and Vangen (2005) who highlight the importance of flexibility and developing an understanding of the differences in ways of operating of the other partner. It is suggested that work may be required in universities in terms of ensuring that WBL enquiries are given priority. This may involve communication with all stakeholders to ensure that this takes place in a timely manner. It could also be advantageous to make it clearer to employers from the outset as to expected length of time for a response and to ensure that



this is fulfilled. This can be linked to development of trust in the relationship (see 4.2.3).

#### **4.2.2.5: Correct contact information**

Within the WBL relationship, having the correct point of contact is seen as important to facilitating the relationship. Three of the employers in the study stated that they will often initiate contact with universities. This is viewed as a positive way in which to engage and it is suggested that this should be encouraged. However, the findings suggest that employers may find it difficult to identify the correct point of contact in universities.

*“When you look at websites it’s quite hard for employers to find the relevant person. Sometimes you can get lost. It would be good if they had a part of their website devoted to placements so we’d know who to contact. I think it all comes back to the relationship. If you’ve already established who the right person to speak to is then you’ve got that dialogue, it just makes it fine. You feel comfortable contacting them if there’s a problem because a relationship has been built up.” (E1).*

Having up to date contact information may also be an issue.

*“One issue is that we’ve changed contacts. As line manager, my colleague gets communication checking everything’s all right. As I’m the original contact, I get different communication. For example, I was invited to an awards ceremony at one university whereas my colleague wasn’t. It’s not a major problem but it seems as though there might be an issue with their admin procedures.” (E7).*

This can also be an issue for universities. As highlighted by participant U5, within the tourism sector, there can be a high turnover of staff so it can be difficult to keep track of employer contacts.

*“With the bigger organisations, I’m constantly emailing, chasing this person and that person. It is very time consuming. The high turnover of staff can also be an issue. Just when you have built up a good relationship with a manager, they move on. It can be really frustrating, especially as it might have taken such a long time to build up.” (U5).*

The findings can be linked to those of Huq & Gilbert (2013) who suggest that employers would like a clearly named point of contact in the university who has relevant industry experience and is able to respond promptly to any problems that arise (Huq & Gilbert, 2013). From the university perspective, the findings are in line with McEwen et al., (2010), who found that a problem can often be that the employer contact responsible for supporting students is often not the same person who has established and maintained contact with the university. A further issue is that they may have a different outlook on WBL and its importance; or may not feel supported by their employer in terms of training and skills to mentor WBL students (Wedgewood, 2008).

As can be seen above, by knowing the correct contacts, this can facilitate the development of relationships over time which has a key benefit to universities in that it enables them to provide a higher level of service to these employers. When employers are aware of the correct individuals to contact if there is an issue, this may contribute to development of trust, which over time, may contribute to sustainable partnerships (Plewa & Quester, 2007).

With regard to WBL partnerships in the Scottish tourism sector, it may be suggested that this issue needs attention. Setting clear aims and roles and responsibilities at the outset (see 4.2.1) could help to resolve this issue. Additionally, stakeholders could be committed to ensuring that partners are kept up to date with regard to current contact details.

#### **4.2.3 Development of trust**

As universities and employers are operating in different environments, unfamiliarity and uncertainty may be associated with developing partnerships. The development of trust can facilitate the relationship by reducing risk and enabling partners to feel confident in the relationship (Palmatier et al., 2006).

Trust and confidence in the relationship can develop over time when each partner has become more familiar with the practices of the other, as outlined by participants U2 and E3.

*“I think we’re lucky that we work with the businesses year in year out. I think when they’ve already recruited from us, they’re fairly confident in terms of what’s expected of them and what’s expected of us.” (U2)*

*“Because we’ve done it for so long we’ve got a really good relationship. We’ve got an established relationship. We’re well aware of what’s required and happy to support the students.” (E3)*

University participant U4 also made the point that having knowledge of the sector is advantageous.

*“We have a member of staff who deals with the Hospitality & Tourism students. She used to work in the sector so she knows it really well. It means if there’s a problem she has a good understanding and so it gives our employers confidence when she is able to sort it out. It also gives both the university and our employers a bit of stability. It gives us a chance to look after the sector.” (U4)*

Developing a trusting attitude may also involve going above and beyond what is required which may involve an element of risk as expressed by E2.

*“I will do things that might not be relevant to me but I know that it’s good for maintaining the relationship. I know that if I need something that I can then come back to the university that I’ve helped. It’s a two-way thing. It’s all about helping each other.” (E2)*

The findings demonstrate that trust is built over time and that this is a factor in reducing perceived risk as partners become familiar with each other’s ways of working. This is in line with Huxham & Vangen (2005), who found that trust is built over time once expectations are formed and familiarity is achieved. There is also a difference in terms of a partner’s perception that communications from the other party have been relevant, timely and reliable will generate trust in that partner (Mora et al., 2004).

As in the experience of E2, this employer is comfortable in their relationships with universities and has developed trust in the university partners that they deal with. This may be aligned to the findings of Palmatier et al., (2006), who suggest that trust in the relationship reduces perceived risk and enables partners to freely interact.

The finding in relation to academics who have familiarity with the industry being a facilitator of trust are in line with those of Tartari et al.,(2012) and Bruneel et al.,(2010). It may therefore be advantageous for universities to seek members of

staff involved in developing WBL relationships who have prior knowledge and experience of the industry sector.

A further finding of the study relates to trust and development of personal connections. Employer E6 and university U3 both commented on this.

*“We know X. She’s a lovely person, she knows the business, and it’s a personal connection. She’s taken the time to build her knowledge and build on the relationship.” (E6)*

*“We’re happy to meet up for a blether. It sounds informal? Yes – the more you work with people the more informal it becomes and that as it should be. So much of it is built on trust and recommendation.” (U3)*

According to this finding, in the longer term, once familiarity and trust have been achieved the relationship may become informal. These positive social behaviours which are based on personal connections may also contribute to facilitating effective relationships for the benefit of all parties. This can be related to findings of Palmatier et al.,(2006) who suggest that the development of trust reduces perceived risk and encourages partners to commit and freely interact and share information. In line with Frasquet et al.,(2012), this enhanced communication promotes satisfaction and commitment to the relationship and develops understanding from both perspectives. It is therefore suggested that it is development of these informal relationships and personal connections that universities and employers could be aiming for in order to facilitate effective partnerships.

#### **4.2.4: Managing expectations**

Managing expectations is a key element in managing and facilitating relationships (Plewa & Quester, 2007). In this study, there is consensus amongst the universities who participated that employers may have high expectations which could be managed effectively to facilitate the WBL relationship.

All of the employers in the study had an expectation that visits would take place during the placement. However, due to resource issues within some universities, this is not always possible. As illustrated in the quote below, employers may feel that they are delivering a service and therefore expect a high level of service in return.

*“We’re doing a service so it would be good to have face to face contact. We have a great relationship with the student and he’s integrated into the team. Regular Skype calls are ok but would be really good to meet face to face with university contacts”. (E4)*

As some universities may be experiencing resource issues (see 4.3.4), it may therefore be difficult for them to meet this expectation. It is possible that employers are unaware that this is an issue that universities are experiencing. This can be aligned to findings of McEwen et al.,(2010) who state that a barrier to employer engagement in WBL initiatives is their unfamiliarity with universities. There is a view that universities have complicated systems and high levels of bureaucracy (Reeve & Gallacher, 2005). According to the findings of Frassetto et al.,(2012), communication helps employers to understand and trust universities as well as delivering appropriate levels of satisfaction with the relationship. It is suggested that when developing links with employers that universities could provide information on the systems and issues they are experiencing in order to better manage employer expectations which can also be linked to developing trust (Palmatier et al., 2006)

Two employers in the study highlighted issues with recruitment and retention, which may be related to how their offering is perceived by WBL students. This may relate to those who are located in rural areas or are overseas in locations which may not be attractive to students. They have an expectation that students will apply.

*“The only thing is we feel that we don’t get as many students as we would like. E.g. at Blair Castle and Balmoral we could have had six placements but we weren’t able to fill them. These are great opportunities with great prospects. For example, that last placement student we had at Blair Castle is now our Events Manager there. I’m not sure why they don’t apply.” (E5)*

Expectations of employers in terms of their offering was also observed by universities in the study.

*“It’s a challenge to manage expectations of hosts that they’re not going to get hundreds of applicants. We also get fluctuating class sizes from year to year. We have a hotel in Chile and it’s taken time to convince students to go. It’s*

*taken time to nurture the relationship and explain that not a high number will apply. (U4)*

This is consistent with the findings of Sheridan & Linehan (2013) who found that organisations in rural settings may not be able to recruit students from universities, which tend to be located in cities. This issue may apply to many employers in the tourism sector in Scotland which is fragmented in nature, with a broad geographical spread (Skills Development Scotland, 2016). It could therefore be advisable for employers in these locations to offer incentives to attract students and to discuss expectations with universities.

Employer E5 did not appear to be aware that this is an issue as they stated that they were offering good opportunities. On the other hand, employer E6 was aware of the problem but appears to accept that it is an issue. It may be advisable for universities to bring this to their attention when establishing WBL relationships and to offer advice and work with these employers on how to encourage students to apply.

In terms of student skills, one employer in the study had high expectations of students and may not appreciate that they do not have the level of experience they require for certain roles.

*“We only recruit if they tick all the boxes.”(E6)*

However, the majority of the employers in the study were happy with the students they had worked with and the skills they demonstrated.

*“The student brought a different dimension. He had the skills we wanted. Plus he’s international – well from the EU so he can see things from an overseas perspective. He brought a creative mind to the team and opened our eyes to show that we have a gap. If we recruit next year, we’d like someone with a similar skill set.” (E7)*

This finding is inconsistent with those of Jackson et al., (2017) and Walters et al., (2015) who suggest that students often do not have the correct skills set to undertake the work required during placement and that recruiting suitable students is a key issue. This therefore suggests that universities in Scotland may have an awareness of the skills required and are working well to ensure that most students have the skills and attributes that employers are seeking. This is in line

with findings of the CBI (2016), who contend that employers are generally satisfied with graduates' basic skills and readiness for work.

From the university perspective, another issue is that there is a feeling that some employers expect students to work in lower level roles or on an unpaid basis. This is reported by two universities.

*“Employers are disappointed when I tell them that if you’re just going to offer an F&B placement here, our students are not going to pick it.”(U3)*

*“There are some SME and micro businesses who think that this is free resource.” (U1)*

For employers within the tourism sector, particularly within hospitality related organisations, where recruitment and retention of high quality staff is an issue, greater awareness of how their WBL offering is perceived by applicants could therefore be beneficial as part of their recruitment strategy. Baum (2015) suggests that employers in the tourism sector have neglected their workforce in recent years and that a sustainable recruitment strategy is required. The recruitment packages on offer by tourism employers for WBL students as well as graduates may therefore be an important factor in terms of attracting talent to the sector. However, as identified by SDS (2016), there are high numbers of SMEs in the Scottish tourism sector which may pose a barrier in terms of the costs of recruiting WBL students and /or graduates as well as time available to support them (Atkinson 2016).

One participant from a university also made the point that employers may have a low level of awareness of the nature and objectives of WBL within an HE setting. They expect students to work but may not appreciate that there is also a learning and theoretical element which relates to students' academic programmes.

*“Some are very ambitious. We have to put brakes on. I only have so much space to fit them in. We have to argue that it is a learning environment and not just a working environment.”(U5)*

This finding can be aligned with those of Wedgewood (2008) and Jackson et al., (2017) who suggest that employers have a poor understanding of the role and value of higher education and that working in a constantly changing environment

can make it difficult for them to cultivate a climate of learning. The focus is on the job roles that students perform rather than how their learning can be facilitated. This type of expectation may not fit with university aims for WBL relationships and it is therefore suggested that dialogue takes place early in the relationship to ensure that all stakeholders are in agreement.

Most of the employers within the sample did not appear to be concerned with the degree subject of graduates and seemed more concerned with experience, skills and practical/industry qualifications.

*“We don't care about the course. It's the skills that are more important”. (E2)*

In some universities, there is an awareness of this to an extent. In line with findings of People 1<sup>st</sup> (2015), there is debate as to how relevant the courses offered by universities are to the industry.

*“In the tourism sector, there's less call for degree level qualifications and employers are more interested in experience or qualifications they might get as part of their degree programme. This is could be add-ons such as practical industry qualifications, for example, Hospitality Industry Trust (HIT) Scotland or Wine & Spirit Education Trust (WSET) qualifications.” (U6)*

However, for specific roles, the degree subject is important

*“They have to be studying HR. They need to have an interest or at least some element of HR”. (E4)*

These findings reinforce the suggestion that the specific needs of employers may require further understanding by universities. Additionally, as in the findings of Atkinson (2016), opportunities to enhance employer engagement may lie in the use of third parties as intermediaries such as industry bodies and associations. These third parties can facilitate promotion of WBL amongst employer members through activities such as vocational programmes for students. Encouragement of students to take up these opportunities may be valuable in making them attractive to employers and hence, may be a factor in developing partnerships.

In conclusion, it can be seen that employers may have certain expectations, which do not necessarily meet with those of universities. In order to facilitate high quality WBL opportunities, expectations could be discussed and managed early



in the WBL process to ensure that all stakeholders have a good understanding of what is to be achieved.

#### **4.2.5: Theme 1 summary of findings**

The findings in relation to theme 1 demonstrate that it is important for both partners to agree on aims, roles and responsibilities for the relationship at the outset. Face to face contact, communication channels, regular communication and a quick response may be important factors in facilitating the relationship. It was also found that development of trust and managing expectations may have an impact on establishing and maintaining WBL relationships. Awareness of these issues may be helpful in understanding the nature of such relationships and therefore enhancing practice in this area.

The following section will now discuss the perceived challenges experienced by universities and employers when developing WBL relationships.

#### **4.3: Theme 2: Challenges for WBL relationships**

In this section, the challenges which can impact on the collaboration are examined. Five sub-themes are discussed: 1. Lack of awareness; 2. Resistance from employers; 3. Support for WBL; 4. Time and resources and 5. University processes

The discussion will contribute to answering the second research question as follows: What barriers do Scottish universities and employers in the tourism sector in Scotland experience when developing WBL partnerships?

##### **4.3.1: Lack of employer awareness**

###### **4.3.1.1: Employer awareness of academic requirements**

All employers in the study agreed that they lack awareness regarding the academic requirements for work placements, which can make it difficult for them to support students with their academic work during placement. All of the employers in the sample stated that they had not received information on this aspect from any university that they deal with. This suggests that this is a key issue that needs to be addressed.

*“It’s definitely an issue for us because I didn’t know what the requirements were from the academic side.” (E2)*

Timing may also be a factor. As illustrated below, employers require this information at specific times so this should also be a consideration for universities.

*“I don’t think anyone told us and it wasn’t clear at the time when we needed it.” (E7)*

The universities interviewed all stated that they have provided this information, however, as awareness amongst employers is low; this demonstrates that the way in which the information is communicated may not be effective. It may also indicate that universities may not have awareness or understanding of the needs of employers regarding how they can support students.

The findings indicate that, despite the importance of the academic element of WBL placements, universities may not be giving priority to ensuring that employers are well briefed. It appears that there is lack of clarity on responsibilities for ensuring that this takes place. This differs from the expectation that universities have that employers will support students with their learning.

*“I probably haven’t looked at this closely enough. I think the placement team do this well independently”. (U1)*

However, professional services staff do not view this as their responsibility and are relying on academic staff to provide the information. This suggests that some universities may have a lack of awareness of responsibilities for this important task

*“We provide limited information on the academic side. It would be good if the module leader were to put a pack together that we could give to employers.” (U2)*

This also aligns to the findings of Basit et al., (2015) who found that employers want more information on courses and their relevance to placement and in a clear and easy to understand format. It is therefore suggested that if universities are expecting employers to provide a supportive learning environment for students, that providing information on academic requirements is given priority and is communicated clearly to them in a timely manner. Furthermore, it is suggested

that universities should focus on ensuring that clear responsibilities for communicating the academic requirements to employers are identified.

#### **4.3.1.2: Employer awareness of their role in the relationship**

A finding of this study is that most of the employers may not have considered the relationship or their role within it. There may also be a lack of awareness of how employers can develop the relationship further by becoming involved in other aspects of the curriculum, which may have an influence on their ability to recruit good candidates. Indeed one industry participant demonstrated their attitude to the WBL relationship with universities in what may be suggested as an off-hand manner and stated.

*“I haven’t thought about this.” (E5)*

However, it was evident that other industry participants had given some thought to the relationship but were feeling frustrated regarding progressing the relationship. Succinctly articulated by E6 who stated.

*“I don’t really know what other things we could do with universities.” (E6)*

These statements are in contrast to the findings of Zehrer & Mossenlehner (2009) and Atkinson et al, (2015) whereby employers in the tourism sector expect to have greater involvement in curriculum design in order to enhance relevance of degree programmes to better equip students for a career in tourism. As can be seen in this study, the majority of the employers did not consider this aspect.

However, when employers were asked if they felt that more could be achieved through effective participation, the responses were wholly positive when employers recognised the potential opportunities to increase collaboration. The quote below reflects the viewpoint of all employers in the study.

*“It’s a keen interest of mine to share my experiences and tell students how valuable it is. The workplace is very different from the theory. If I can be of help I’d be more than happy to do that.” (E3)*

The findings indicate a lack of awareness from employers in this study on their contribution and how it can be enhanced. Therefore, it might be suggested that there this is an opportunity for universities to provide clear information to employers on their role and responsibilities and to make them aware of other

opportunities to engage with students and the curriculum. In line with the findings of Jackson et al.,(2017), employers may demonstrate willingness to increase their levels of participation if they are aware of how this can be done.

#### **4.3.2: Resistance from employers to engage in the relationship**

With regard to the benefits that WBL students can bring to the workplace, the findings from employers were mostly positive.

*“Students bring a different dynamic, new energy. People you can see who engage who might come back to more senior roles in the future. They do come back quite often. (E1)*

However, one employer in the study did not share this viewpoint

*“To be honest, it’s not a top priority for us. We don’t spend too much time on it. Our young people get bored so we have a high turnover. Retention is difficult but we want highly intelligent people. They don’t stay”. (E5)*

From this perspective, it is suggested that although many employers may demonstrate willingness to engage, it may still be challenging to change the perceptions of others. As identified by Jackson et al.,(2017), resistance from employers to become involved in WBL partnerships can be an issue. In the quote above, the employer has not prioritised the relationship with the university but has a retention issue. According to People 1<sup>st</sup>(2015), it is vital that the tourism industry takes action on such problems with increased and improved collaboration with universities and effective WBL being part of a longer-term solution. Therefore, communication with employers regarding their experiences and needs as well as highlighting industry issues may enable universities to assist employers to recognise this issue.

Another finding is that a further benefit to employers is the opportunity to give something back and to contribute to their corporate and social responsibility policies.

*“It’s great for us to be able to give something back to the community and to play a part in the careers of the next generation”. (E4)*

*“One of our core values is learning which is one of the reasons young people like to work with us. This is because we do a lot of training and we’re always*

*looking to improve. Being in contact institutions that focuses on learning is good for us.” (E6)*

This is in line with findings of Sheridan & Linehan (2013) and Atkinson (2016) who found that engagement in WBL can facilitate the achievement of corporate and social responsibility objectives of employers. This benefit could also be brought to their attention when designing communications aimed at employers.

As part of promoting this aspect to employers, the benefits of engagement could be brought to their attention. This includes the creativity and energy that students will bring to the workplace and the opportunity to fill short-term recruitment gaps. The majority of the employers in the study viewed the benefits as being longer term and recruitment of placement students as a way to recruit highly skilled individuals in the future.

#### **4.3.3: Support for the WBL relationship**

##### **4.3.3.1: Support from Management**

All of the employers in the study reported that they do feel supported by their managers with regard to recruiting and supporting WBL students. Responses on this issue were generally positive as can be seen in the following employer quote.

*“Our department is very supportive and our director even suggested it .HR had had one before and they gave me lots of advice. Everyone we approached was very supportive. Senior management are pretty responsive. We got really positive feedback.” (E7)*

The findings of Baum (2015); Lashley (2011) and Roberts (2009) suggest that employers in the tourism sector view the role of placement students as a solution to short-term recruitment needs and do not value supporting them or engaging with universities. However, from the findings of this study, the majority of the employers are supportive. The employers in this study may be biased as their participation may demonstrate an interest and a positive outlook on the topic.

From the university perspective, two of the universities in the sample indicated that they do not feel supported by senior management with regard to development of WBL relationships with employers. As per the following quote, one of the participants does feel very strongly about this issue.

*“Do I feel supported by the university? No! Does the university have clear policies around supporting students? No! Does the university have clear policies around lots of issues that can affect any student leaving the university whether its placements or study abroad? No! I think more support should be available. There is no support from senior management – no support whatsoever.” (U2)*

As illustrated by the wording in the quote above, the frustration experienced by the individual can be sensed. They feel unsupported by senior management in terms of lack of priority given to be WBL as well as lack of policies and direction. Furthermore, the participant felt that the resources allocated to managing WBL are inadequate.

The need for priority to be given to work placements is reinforced by another participant:

*“It’s increasingly going to be THE measurement by which people judge us – students and employers and it does have this strong impact on league tables. I think it’s got to be one of the top priorities.”(U1)*

This was not the case in all universities, with some respondents citing positive experiences.

*“They (senior management) come to me with ideas or if they’ve been approached. They will sit in meetings if I need it. They arrange class cover as well. They’re really helpful.” (U5)*

Universities with clear ambitions and objectives with regard to developing links with employers and increasing the number of placement opportunities may wish to consider the level of priority given to supporting staff in this type of role. A factor which may be relevant to this issue is that there may be a lack of understanding from senior managers in relation to WBL, which may only be part of an overall strategy on employability.

*“I get ratty when senior management think it’s an easy process to find placements and support employers.” (U6)*

As this was not reported as an issue for four of the other universities in the sample, this would suggest that this has been recognised by some universities

who have invested in the resources allocated to WBL development. However, there is clearly a problem for some universities where there has been a lack of investment and allocation of resources in this area (Edwards et al., 2015; McEwen et al.,2010; Basit et al.,2015).

#### **4.3.3.2: Support from academic tutors**

The findings suggest that there may be some uncertainty amongst employers regarding support from academic tutors during placement.

*“Is there communication from the tutor? I haven’t had any contact from a tutor.” (E6)*

They are unsure of who the tutors are or if visits are required.

*“I expected that there might be a visit from the lecturer and I was surprised that there wasn’t more structure around that aspect. We’re left to our own devices to help the student get the most out of the placement. I was in some ways I was slightly surprised that there wasn’t more input from the programme team. It may be just the way it’s structured.”(E7)*

Three employers also stated that they do not feel involved and that visits can be arranged between tutors and students with them being excluded. Industry participant E2 states that this has been their experience.

*With university x, the placement tutor will visit twice throughout the year. Once in the first semester and again in the second semester. It’s a formal meeting but we were kept out of it, which was disappointing. It would have been good to meet the tutor and to discuss the students’ progress and to find out if there was anything else we could be doing to support the students.” (E2)*

From the university perspective, there is a belief that employers are advised of the support from academic tutors.

*“We offer support through well briefed academic tutors who can connect with businesses and students at opportune times near the outset. We do let all the businesses we talk to know about the arrangement when an academic tutor is assigned. ” (U1)*

Participant U4 views the role of academic tutors as being a key part of the relationship.

*“Our academic tutors also build the relationship with the host; we try to have the same academic paired up with the same host from year to year so they can build that relationship. It doesn’t always work if people leave etc., but overall, it works well. We’re just trying to get that continuing relationship going. We discuss issues with academics. They know the sector. They give us back up.”(U4)*

Since employers are providing opportunities for students and universities are expecting a supportive learning environment, this issue clearly requires attention. This highlights that there may be an internal communication issue within universities in terms of ensuring that academic tutors are well briefed on the objectives of establishing sustainable partnerships with employers. Universities may consider providing clear guidelines to academic tutors on how to approach employers during the placement and the importance of their contribution in maintaining these relationships.

Furthermore, in line with the findings of Solnet et al.,(2007), there may be uneasiness amongst some academic staff of working with industry and the perception that it is very demanding. As identified by Basit et al.,(2015), academic staff who are more familiar with academic based teaching or who lack industry experience may not be best placed to support WBL students. This is supported by McEwen et al.,(2010) and Miller et al., (2010) and is also suggested as a factor in developing trust in the industry partner (Tartari et al., 2012; Bruneel et al., 2010). This suggests that universities may consider that when selecting academic tutors, that attention is paid to their suitability for this important role.

In one university, there is no formal process for linking employers and academic tutors.

*“We do let all the businesses we talk to know about the arrangement if an academic tutor is assigned. We let the business know but it’s not done formally in writing. It’s also up to the student to let the employer know that they have an academic tutor. No names are given. We encourage students to get in touch with academic tutors. It’s not formally given to the business and we have no involvement.” (U2)*



It is suggested that providing employers and academic tutors with the necessary contact information is valuable in facilitating the support provided, and that the onus for this task should not be left to students who may not see the value or take any action. Awareness of the importance of all stakeholders in the arrangement is therefore necessary. It is suggested that employers should be made aware of the academic tutor(s) assigned to their student(s) and that the responsibility for initiating contact may come from the tutor but that both parties should be actively communicating with one another during the placement.

The findings in this section suggest that attention is required with regard to the role of academic tutors and that formal procedures would be advantageous to ensuring that all stakeholders are aware of the process and support available.

#### **4.3.4: Time and resources**

Lack of time and resources is identified as a challenge for universities when developing WBL relationships, however, employers in the study did not identify this as an issue. All university participants stated that lack of time is an issue. The following quotes represent the general viewpoint.

*“Do I feel I should spend more time on it? Yes! The reality is that there isn’t enough time. It’s about good will. We work Saturdays and Sundays.” (U3)*

*“There isn’t enough time. I’d like it to be a third but it’s probably more like 10%. One problem can take up 90% of your day. You’d like to give the time, but it’s not always possible. It’s frustrating.”(U4)*

In line with findings of Basit et al.,(2015) and Wedgewood (2008), there is consensus amongst universities in the study that they do not have enough time to focus on developing employer relationships and they are working beyond their agreed working contracts.

The time required to develop relationships should not be underestimated with university staff spending time on continually following up on communications within larger organisations or providing high levels of individual support to SMEs. These high levels of individual support to SMEs are identified as a particular challenge for the tourism sector in Scotland (SDS, 2015; Sheridan & Linehan, 2013).

Several universities in the study reported that they do not have time to conduct visits, which is in contrast to employer expectations that they will be visited.

*“We don’t conduct visits – we don’t have time. I’d love to do it because most of our students go to America. I’d love a trip to America but the Dean said no”. (U3)*

*“I only do telephone meetings. If an employer agrees to meet on campus, I can do that but otherwise, I have no time to go out and meet employers which is a shame because I think we could do more”. (U2)*

As in the findings of Basit et al.,(2015), it can be seen that it may be difficult for universities to meet these expectations. This may also have an impact on employer decisions to offer a placement opportunity if they feel that the university is not making the effort to meet face to face. By conducting a visit, this may be a catalyst in terms of initiating and developing the relationship.

In terms of resources, this is also a key challenge for some universities. It is difficult for them to develop relationships as much as they would like.

*“From our point of view, our team’s resources are stretched. I think sometimes it’s difficult because if we do develop more opportunities, we don’t have the staff to promote them, manage the recruitment and manage the paperwork. The more opportunities we have, we don’t then have the resources to ensure that the students are supported and developed properly. Additional resources need to be provided across the team so that we can manage the impact of more placements.” (U2)*

This finding can be aligned to several studies which suggests that lack of resources allocated to developing WBL relationships is a key issue (Edwards et al.,(2015); McEwen et al.,(2010); Basit et al.,(2015). This therefore may have an impact not only on the number of placement opportunities but also on the development of sustainable partnerships with employers. This may be connected to a focus on research output in some universities, which may have an impact on the level of priority assigned to WBL (Wedgewood, 2008). This can mean that less time and resource is allocated to WBL (Basit et al., 2015). Although universities have key objectives regarding employability and development of

WBL partnerships, it is important for decision makers in universities to recognise the importance of these partnerships and to endeavour to ensure that adequate resources are in place to develop them effectively.

#### **4.3.5: University processes**

A finding of the study is that timing of university WBL recruitment processes and lack of recognition of the recruitment needs of employers may be an issue.

As universities are restricted by academic deadlines, timetables and fluctuating student numbers, this can be an issue when dealing with employers.

*“March is a good start time for us. The university recruitment start date in September doesn't really fit with us. It's a big risk for us”. (E6)*

*“I tried to work with university x but their placement was for a year. This didn't work for us because we don't have enough work for a year. The other option was to have students for a week or for two or three months, which also didn't fit in with what we need”. (E5)*

*“An issue is when the tourist season lands due to location .E.g. Florida, it's all year round but country clubs in New York are closed for half the year. And it's when we're looking for placement.” (U4)*

As these restrictions are part of the degree process and are set by central university departments, there may be limited flexibility in terms of placement dates. This lack of flexibility may also be a barrier for some employers in the sector. This can be aligned to the findings of Reeve & Gallacher (2005), which point to the issue of difficulty for employers and universities when working under the constraints of the academic year. However, these authors also suggest that universities should adopt a more flexible approach by enabling WBL students to start at any time, fifty two weeks a year. Given the existing structures in universities, this may require a long-term vision and a cultural shift to implement such a change and may meet with resistance. This could potentially require changes such as reviewing existing deadlines for academic marks and student progression, as well as structural changes to academic programmes to fit around flexible WBL initiatives. There may also be an impact on other university administration processes.

#### **4.3.6: Theme 2 summary of findings**

The findings in this section indicate a range of barriers for WBL relationships. These include a lack of employer awareness of their role in the relationship as well as the academic requirements for WBL students. Although most employers in the study viewed involvement in WBL positively, one employer stated that it was not a priority. This highlights that resistance from employers to engage can be an issue in the WBL relationship.

A lack of support from senior management was also identified by some universities as an issue. From the employer perspective, more clarity in terms of the terms of the support from academic tutors is required.

Lack of time and resources were also found to be a key challenge for universities as well as bureaucratic university systems and processes, which limit the level of flexibility that can be offered to WBL employers.

The following section discusses the findings in relation to effective approaches and opportunities for WBL relationships.

#### **4.4: Theme 3: Effective relationship management approaches and opportunities**

This section discusses findings in relation to the approaches that universities and employers have found to be effective in developing and managing WBL relationships as well as other opportunities identified for enhancement. Six sub-themes are identified for discussion: 1. Employer involvement; 2. Holistic approach; 3. Investment in WBL; 4. Placements with added value; 5. Connections with key influencers and 6. Further opportunities. The discussion will contribute to answering the final research question as follows: How can WBL partnerships be enhanced in order to promote positive WBL experiences for students?

##### **4.4.1: Employer involvement in a range of activities**

Findings from the study demonstrate the various ways in which universities have worked with employers in other ways which then strengthen their links with them. Examples include inviting placement employers to be guest speakers in relation to industry related issues or at conferences, to promote part-time job

opportunities, to offer academic assignments to students and to participate in research projects.

The employers in this study confirmed that they would like to do more in terms of engaging with universities.

*“We’re always very open to being involved. Our door is always open to things that will be beneficial for both parties.” (E1)*

*We could possibly give guest lectures. I’m sure we’d have willing members of staff. It would depend on how busy they are. Universities just need to let us know. We’re open to projects as well. (E4)*

This finding demonstrates that employers may be willing to engage but may be unaware of the opportunities that are available, even if they have worked with a university over a period of time. As in the findings of Huxham & Vangen (2005), achieving mutual understanding can be challenging for collaboration but it is helpful in facilitating successful outcomes. In line with findings of Wedgewood (2008), it is suggested that universities may not be good at promoting and articulating the benefits of collaboration to industry and that improvements in this area are required. In the context of this study, it is suggested that universities could do more to promote the range of opportunities for collaboration to industry.

There is consensus between employers and universities that recruitment events are an effective way to establish and maintain links with employers. Employers in the study have experienced positive outcomes from these events in terms of the number and quality of students they have been able to recruit as a result.

*“The recruitment days are always really well organised. The set up works really well and we’ve always had really good students.” (E3)*

*“We also do a speed dating event where we get a whole bunch of employers in. The students get 2 minutes with each employer and then they move on to the next one. They interview the employer and the employer interviews them and we do a matching. Who fancied who? Employers like it because they get to meet a lot of people and they’re also recruiting for p/t vacancies at the same time so it’s a good opportunity for them. “(U3)*

Industry participant E1 also suggests that student site visits can be effective.

*We've had visits from university x so students can see the business. This is a head office so there's more to see because it's not just a hotel. I don't think that students are aware of what's on offer. Once they see the place and the opportunities, we find that they want to come and work with us. It's worked really well."* (E1)

By involving employers in more activities, it can be seen as a way to introduce employers slowly to an institution in the hope that they will offer placement opportunities and potentially graduate opportunities.

#### **4.4.2: Holistic approach to developing WBL partnerships**

The findings in this study suggest that universities are seeking to achieve sustainable partnerships with employers. For several universities, it is viewed as a holistic process which requires time and effort, regular and tailored communication not solely around placements but involving employers as much as possible in the curriculum. This is highlighted by university participant U6.

*"There are a multitude of ways we can work with employers. There's sometimes a quite naïve view that placements are most important. It's a holistic package. We're looking at how we can work with employers on project-based work; we look at how we can bring them into the curriculum to do mock interviews and to set projects to classes. All the shopping basket of ways we can interact with employers."* (U6)

This type of approach has also been found to be effective in the cases of Ulster University (HEA, 2017a) and Leeds Trinity University (HEA, 2017b).

The initial contact may not necessarily be placement related but some universities recognise that this can develop into other opportunities such as placements.

*"I'm trying to get the team on the ground as a ten year contact and how to develop the relationship over a ten year period. It might start small and we can then grow the relationship year on year."* (U6)

Additionally, as noted by participant U1, another benefit of this approach is that it may lead to other opportunities to engage with employers such as involvement in

research projects, sponsorship of higher-level degrees and more involvement in the curriculum ensuring that the needs of industry are incorporated into teaching.

*“Employers could get involved in things like projects and I definitely think that that’s the kind of thing that can stem from it. Also research such as DBAs, PhDs, and Masters Etc. So I think the more contact you have with industry, particularly in our industry, I think the better.” (U1)*

These findings are in line with the QAA (2014) who found that beyond WBL, there are a range of further opportunities that can result from enhanced employer engagement such as study opportunities for existing employees, opportunities for research, collaboration and consultancy as part of income generation and knowledge transfer. There may therefore an opportunity for those university staff involved in developing WBL relationships to consider other opportunities with less initial commitment and to build on the relationship for future opportunities for collaboration.

#### **4.4.3: Investment in industry liaison specialists**

In three of the participating universities, specialist industry liaison staff have been recruited to provide support to careers/placement teams. This has been viewed as an effective way to develop links with employers with all three universities reporting that it has had a positive impact. These roles involve connecting with employers on a range of opportunities of which placements are a part. These individuals can facilitate initial connections and as their role is specifically employer engagement, they are not distracted by the additional administrative tasks that placement teams are required to deal with.

*“This is a new post in the last year. I’d say we’ve seen dividends. This is why we’re paying the money for this person because they’re getting physical opportunities. It’s definitely proved to be worthwhile.” (U4)*

These specialists are employed to actively engage with employers which can complement the work of placement teams.

*“We had an employer who we had contacted several times by email and who didn’t engage but when our employer engagement consultant went out for a*

*visit, this made all the difference and they came on board and offered us four year long placement opportunities.” (U4)*

Potentially, when universities invest in resources to develop employer relationships, this may have a positive impact. However, despite government emphasis on the importance of WBL, the funding required to enable universities to deliver WBL effectively may be lacking (Kettle, 2013).

#### **4.4.4: Placements with added value**

As a strategy for dealing with recruitment issues, placements which offer added value to students have been an effective way for one university to assist employers who find it difficult to attract students. It is also regarded as an effective way to ensure a quality placement experience for students. The process involves the university establishing the needs of the employer and then negotiating the details of the placement.

*“It’s a way for us to regulate what students actually do when they’re on placement and therefore we can be more certain of what they’re getting from an educational perspective. If there’s a distinct offer, the students are more attracted by that than other offers overseas. It’s a way to try and get the employers here a better bite at the pie.” (U3)*

As discussed in the findings of Reeve & Gallacher (2005), more effective engagement with employers can be achieved if universities seek organisations who have a vision of systematic support for learning and who have achieved commitment to this. It is therefore suggested that employers in the tourism sector should consider this as a mechanism for attracting placement students, which may impact their ability to recruit highly skilled individuals in the longer term.

#### **4.4.5: Connections with key influencers**

A point that has been raised by two universities in the study is that forming partnerships with high profile employers in the sector can be an effective way to encourage others to buy in and follow suit. It is therefore suggested that this could be part of a structured approach to developing relationships. This can be aligned to the findings of Atkinson (2016) whereby a system of champions of WBL from business, education and government collaborated to raise the value of WBL and



to promote its value amongst employers. This may form part of an overall strategy for engagement.

However, within the tourism sector it is observed that some high profile organisations may not be willing to participate.

*Visibly supporting students can lead to others buying in. Visit Scotland have a lot of properties. I just wish they'd do it. As a taxpayer funded organisation, they could recognise that they have a commitment to the next generation. It would be good if they said at board level, "this is what we're going to do". Historic Environment Scotland are the same. I'd love it if they took a strategic decision that they're going to start doing it." (U3)*

In the case of some larger organisations who are reluctant to become involved, there may be opportunities for universities to initiate connections with regard to other activities, which require a lower level of commitment, and to then build on these connections over a period of time.

#### **4.4.6: Further opportunities for WBL relationships**

##### **4.4.6.1: Funding Opportunities**

A finding of this study is that funding opportunities may be available which can strengthen university links with industry.

As identified in the work of Edwards et al.,(2015); McEwen et al.,(2010) and Basit et al.,(2015), lack of funding in universities is a key concern. In response to this issue, one university in the study has been successful in securing funding from an employer and a grant making trust, whose interests lie in supporting students who are studying on tourism related courses.

*"This year we have an employer in America who set up a £10,000 internship programme where they pay all the expenses for students to go out to the States. So all the expenses of those students who go to the States are paid for. We got a big grant from X a few years ago which pays for a big chunk of it every year. Our students aren't rich. I went out and did some grant applications and was lucky. So we can afford to pay for it." (U3)*

This demonstrates that additional sources of funding may be available to universities but they may not be aware that this opportunity exists. According to

the findings of Stanbury (2009), sponsorship and scholarships can be an effective way for employers to attract suitably qualified individuals. Given the recruitment and retention issues in the tourism sector, this may therefore be a valuable approach for tourism employers and could be encouraged and facilitated by universities. This may be an opportunity for further investigation by universities when developing links with employers.

#### **4.4.6.2: Further WBL opportunities with existing connections**

Two of the larger employers in the study suggested that there could be further WBL opportunities within their organisations but that universities do not explore these. These suggestions were from industry participants E4 and E7, both of whom are large, multinational organisations with more than one hundred employees.

*“I wouldn’t have known the scheme existed if the other team hadn’t had a student before. I think more departments could offer placements. I think as an employer we could offer more opportunities.” (E7)*

*“If we were aware of other courses, I think we could do something similar. There’s a bit of a guilt thing where other departments ask where their student is. I’m not really aware of the other types of placement on offer.” (E4)*

Thus, there appears to be a missed opportunity for universities to use connections within organisations to develop further links. As it is larger organisations who have observed this, there could be scope to extend the number of opportunities not only at local level but also nationally and overseas. This would appear to be an obvious pathway to increasing the number of WBL opportunities for students and strengthening links with organisations. A more proactive approach on the part of universities may therefore be suggested as being valuable.

It is suggested that employers could also take more responsibility for cascading information on WBL schemes to colleagues in other departments and to other branches within their organisations. This may be linked to the perception that employers view universities as having the main responsibility for the WBL relationship (UKCES, 2016; BIS, 2012). This may demonstrate that both universities and employers could be more proactive and could seek opportunities

to communicate beyond the department offering the placement and to formulate procedures for further exploration. It is suggested that development of longer-term relationships may facilitate this process.

#### **4.4.7: Theme 3 summary of findings**

The findings in relation to this theme indicate that there may be a range of relationship management approaches that are viewed as being effective. These include: involving employers in a range of activities connected to the curriculum; adopting a holistic approach to developing relationships; investing in specialist industry liaison staff; offering placement opportunities with added value and developing connections with key influencers in the tourism sector. The findings also indicate that there may be additional opportunities to develop relationships that universities could take advantage of including sources of funding and further WBL opportunities with existing connections.

#### **4.5: Conclusion**

This chapter presents discussion and analysis of the findings from this study around three key themes: developing and managing WBL relationships; challenges for WBL relationships and effective relationship management approaches and opportunities. The findings are discussed and analysed according to the researcher's interpretation of the data as well as the findings of the literature review.

The findings suggest that it is important for both partners to agree on aims, roles and responsibilities for the relationship at the outset. This is viewed as one of the main characteristics of developing a good relationship which can reduce complexity and facilitate success. A clear communication strategy is also identified as an enabler of successful relationships. Industry and university participants agreed on the importance of face-to-face communication which may demonstrate their commitment to the relationship and the value placed on the input of the other partner. The importance of the correct communication channels, accurate contact information, frequency of communication and speed of response may also be recognised as important factors in developing and managing the relationship.

It was also found that development of trust can be a key enabler of WBL relationships. It is argued that trust is developed over time once familiarity with the practices of the other partner has been established, thus reducing the level of risk in the relationship. The development of trust can lead to informal ways of communicating and development of personal connections which can encourage partners to freely interact and share information, thus facilitating a successful relationship.

Managing expectations is identified as an important element of developing and maintaining relationships. The findings indicate that employers may have high expectations of universities regarding visits but are unaware of resource issues in some universities, which may make it difficult for them to meet this expectation. A finding was that enhanced communication when establishing the relationship with each partner making the other aware of what is possible for them, may facilitate trust in the relationship. The research also revealed that employers may have high expectations regarding the WBL opportunities that they are offering, and may not be aware that these are unattractive to students, due to reasons such as rural locations or low-level roles. It was also noted that some employers have a focus on the job roles performed by students rather than providing a learning environment. These issues could form part of initial discussions with universities in order that employers are aware of what to expect in the relationship.

A challenge for WBL relationships is identified as a lack of employer awareness of academic requirements for WBL students. It was found that information regarding academic requirements may not be communicated effectively by universities and that this therefore requires attention. It was also found that employers may lack awareness of their role in the relationship and may not have considered this or how it can be facilitated. However, several employers displayed a willingness to engage with universities. There may therefore be an opportunity for universities to develop links with employers and to make them aware of the opportunities to become more involved in university activities.

It was also found that resistance from some employers to engage may be an issue in the WBL relationship. For others, they view the benefits of the creativity and energy that students can bring as well as the longer term opportunity to

recruit highly skilled individuals. By promoting the key benefits of WBL to employers, universities may be able to enhance engagement.

A lack of support and awareness of WBL on the part of senior management was identified by some universities as an issue, however, this did not apply to all universities which suggests that this has been recognised in some institutions. However, for those where the problem exists, clear direction and leadership in terms of the ambitions for universities to enhance links with industry may be required as well as adequate support for university employees in industry liaison roles. From the employer perspective, there was uncertainty regarding the role of academic tutors and the support available from them. Therefore as part of a strategy to facilitate a learning environment for students, universities may consider devoting attention to establishing formal procedures to ensure that all stakeholders are aware of their roles and the support available.

Lack of time and resources were also found to be a key challenge for universities in the study which can have an impact on the number of placement opportunities available to student as well as a being a barrier to developing sustainable partnerships with employers. This may be linked to the lack of support for WBL in some universities in which priority has not been given to how WBL relationships can be initiated and managed. It is therefore suggested that decision makers in universities may consider how adequate resources can be put in place.

It was found that bureaucratic university systems and lack of recognition of employer recruitment needs can be an issue for the WBL relationship. This was identified as a limiting factor in terms of the level of flexibility that can be offered to WBL employers. Changes to these systems may require a long- term vision for progress in this area to be made. Offering flexible WBL opportunities to students which meet the needs of employers may therefore be difficult to implement.

It was also found that there are a range of relationship management approaches that are viewed as being effective. Such approaches could involve employers in a range of activities connected to the curriculum such as guest speakers at conferences or in lectures as well as developing opportunities for them to develop a presence on campus at recruitments events which are viewed by both sets of participants as being effective.

It was found that for several universities, development of WBL relationships is seen as a holistic process which can lead to other opportunities to engage with employers such as involvement in research projects and sponsorship of higher-level degrees. This approach has led to several universities investing in specialist industry liaison staff whose role it is to develop this holistic approach. In universities where these staff have been employed, there has been a positive impact on employer engagement across a range of opportunities. Other effective approaches are identified as offering placement opportunities with added value and developing connections with key influencers in the tourism sector. The findings may also indicate that there are additional opportunities to develop relationships that universities could take advantage of including sources of funding and further WBL opportunities with existing connections.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusions and recommendations**

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### **5.1: Introduction**

The aim of this study is to critically evaluate perceptions of barriers and enablers of effective work based learning partnerships, from the perspectives of universities and employers in the tourism sector in Scotland. In line with this aim, the conclusions and recommendations that have been drawn from the data gathered during the study are presented in this chapter. Firstly, the conclusions developed in relation to the key findings of this study are discussed. This is followed by a series of practice recommendations for employers and universities when developing and managing WBL relationships, which will provide them with valuable guidelines on how their practice in this area can be enhanced. The value of the research in terms of its contribution to practice and to knowledge is then considered as well as limitations of the research. Finally, proposals for future research and a reflective discussion on how the study has met the research aim and objectives is presented.

### **5.2: Key findings and implications**

This section presents conclusions for the study, resulting from key findings from the primary data. The conclusions are framed around the three research questions identified in chapter 2.

- **Research question 1 - How do Scottish universities and employers in the tourism sector in Scotland build partnerships in relation to supporting students undertaking work based learning placements?**

The first conclusion relates to the importance of both the university and the employer establishing a partnership with clear aims, roles and responsibilities for the WBL relationship at the outset. The results of the interviews in this study concluded that universities have a clear view that the WBL relationship is a partnership which will impact on driving an industry informed curriculum. However, this vision may not be communicated to employers who, it was found were uncertain as to the overall aim of WBL relationships as expressed by universities. Worryingly, it was also found that this overall aim was not clearly articulated to internal stakeholders within universities, for example professional services staff or academic tutors. This resulted in a lack of awareness of what is

to be achieved. From the employer perspective, the study found that they are aware of what they would like to achieve from recruitment of WBL students in terms of developing talent for the future, but are less aware of development of WBL relationships with universities.

Establishing clear aims, roles and responsibilities is viewed as one of the main characteristics of developing a good relationship which can reduce complexity and facilitate success. The findings suggest that although there is some awareness of this approach, that it may not always be implemented when relationships are being initiated.

The findings also reveal that development of a clear communication strategy is an enabler of successful relationships. Industry and university participants agreed on the importance of face-to-face communication which demonstrates their commitment to the relationship and the value placed on the input of the other partner. The importance of the correct communication channels, accurate contact information, frequency of communication and speed of response were also recognised as important factors in developing and managing the relationship.

It is also concluded that employers have a crucial role in facilitating the WBL relationship; however, this is not widely acknowledged by them. Although some employers may initiate contact with universities when they require WBL students, it was found that after this initial contact, they do not appear to be proactive in terms of facilitating the relationship on an ongoing basis. The employers in the study appeared to view their role as being a passive one with universities having the main responsibility for the relationship. It is therefore a conclusion of the study that employers in the Scottish tourism sector could consider how they can be more proactive in WBL partnerships in terms of communicating with universities and in demonstrating higher levels of initiative and responsibility for the partnership.

It was also found that development of trust is a key enabler of WBL relationships. It is argued that trust is developed over time once familiarity with the practices of the other partner have been established, thus reducing the level of risk in the relationship. The development of trust can lead to informal ways of communicating and development of personal connections which can encourage



partners to freely interact and share information, thus facilitating a successful relationship.

Managing expectations is also identified as an important element of developing and maintaining relationships. From this research, it can be concluded that employers in the Scottish tourism sector have high expectations of universities. There are expectations that universities will conduct visits during placement, however, this may not be possible due to resource issues. A finding was that enhanced communication when establishing the relationship with each partner making the other aware of what is possible for them, may facilitate trust in the relationship.

The research also revealed that employers may have high expectations regarding the WBL opportunities that they are offering, and may not be aware that these are unattractive to students, due to reasons such as rural locations or low-level roles. It was also noted that some employers have a focus on the job roles performed by students rather than providing a learning environment.

- **Research question 2 - What barriers do Scottish universities and employers in the tourism sector in Scotland experience when developing WBL partnerships?**

A key finding from this study is that there is a lack of employer awareness of academic requirements for WBL students. This applied to all employers who took part in this study. It might be concluded that there is a requirement for universities to do more to ensure that information regarding academic requirements is communicated effectively to employers to ensure that students are being well supported in the workplace. It was also found that employers lack awareness of their role in the relationship and have not considered this or how it can be facilitated. However, several employers displayed a willingness to engage with universities. There is therefore an opportunity for universities to develop more effective links with employers with the aim of making them more aware of the opportunities to become more involved in university activities.

It was also found that resistance from some employers to participate in WBL can be an issue in the WBL relationship. For others, they view the benefits of the creativity and energy that students can bring as well as the longer-term

opportunity to recruit highly skilled individuals. By promoting the key benefits of WBL to employers, universities may be able to enhance engagement.

A lack of support and awareness of WBL on the part of university senior management was identified by some universities as an issue. In universities where the problem exists, clear direction and leadership in terms of the ambitions for universities to enhance links with industry is required as well as adequate support for university employees in industry liaison roles. From the employer perspective, there was uncertainty regarding the role of academic tutors and the support available from them.

A lack of time and resources was also found to be a key challenge for universities, which can have an impact on the number of placement opportunities available to student as well as a being a barrier to developing sustainable partnerships with employers. This can be linked to the lack of support for WBL in some universities in which priority has not been given to how WBL relationships can be initiated and managed

It was also a finding of the study that bureaucratic university systems and lack of recognition of employer recruitment needs can be an issue for the WBL relationship. This was identified as a limiting factor in terms of the level of flexibility that can be offered to WBL employers. Changes to these systems may require a long- term vision for progress in this area to be made as they would require changes such as a review of academic programmes and progression, online systems and workloads. Offering flexible WBL opportunities to students which meet the needs of employers may therefore be difficult to implement and will require an innovative approach.

- **Research question 3 - How can WBL partnerships be enabled in order to promote positive WBL experiences for students?**

It has been concluded that that there are a range of relationship management approaches that may be viewed as being effective. Such approaches involve engaging employers in a range of activities connected to the curriculum such as guest speaker opportunities at conferences or in lectures. This may also involve increased presence on campus, for example, at recruitment events which is viewed as being an effective approach.

A further conclusion is that a relationship management approach is effective. This involves a holistic approach, which begins with low commitment engagement such as the initiatives outlined above, which can develop over time into further opportunities to develop sustainable relationships. This may develop as a result of nurturing of the relationship through regular, tailored communication and development of trust. Examples of increased commitment may include initiatives such as research projects, sponsorship of higher-level degrees and WBL opportunities for students. This type of approach requires well developed interpersonal and relationship building skills. A key finding of this study is that when universities have invested in specialist industry liaison staff, whose role it is to develop a relationship management approach, this has been effective in increasing employer engagement in a range of initiatives and specifically, the number of WBL opportunities for students.

It has also been found that when employers are able to offer placement opportunities with added value, for example, providing students with additional responsibilities during their placements, that this can be an effective way to attract WBL students to an organisation. This may offer employers an opportunity to enhance their reputation and may form part of a longer- term recruitment and retention strategy.

Developing connections with key influencers in the tourism sector was also identified as an effective way for universities to encourage other employers in the sector to participate in WBL. This concept suggests that when high profile organisations are seen to be participating in WBL, that others will follow suit. It is therefore suggested that universities could adopt this as part of a strategy for developing WBL relationships.

A further finding is that universities may be able to take advantage of funding opportunities for WBL. This may include funding from WBL employers who use this technique to pay student expenses and therefore attract students to their organisations. Alternatively, funding for WBL may also be available from other sources such as grant making trusts associated with the tourism sector.

Finally, the findings also indicate that there are additional opportunities for universities to develop further WBL opportunities with existing connections. This would involve seeking additional opportunities within existing WBL organisations

which may not only increase the number of WBL opportunities available, but may strengthen links with these employers and lead to other opportunities to engage.

### **5.3: Recommendations for professional practice**

From the findings, it is recommended that universities and employers should adopt a partnership approach which aims to develop sustainable relationships. In this section, a range of detailed recommendations are identified which can apply to both stakeholders. Further specific recommendations for employers and universities are proposed.

#### **5.3.1: Recommendations for both stakeholders**

- Initial face to face meetings to discuss roles and responsibilities

Where possible, face-to-face meetings and agreement on the aims, roles and responsibilities of both partners should take place in the initial stages of the relationship. If it is not possible to meet in person, then the use of technology such as video calls is suggested. Discussions and agreement should take place around the communication channels that will be effective for each partner, as well as agreement on frequency of communication. Honest and open communication regarding what is feasible for each partner to contribute to the relationship should be emphasised in order to manage expectations. Furthermore, agreement with regard to facilitating a learning environment for students should also be reached.

- Formalised agreements

It is suggested that the agreement should be formalised in writing to ensure that all stakeholders are aware of their contribution to the relationship. As it is a partnership with commitment from both stakeholders, it is suggested that both the university and employer should have a role in facilitating communication and that roles for this are specified. This may be a factor in ensuring that expectations of each partner are managed more effectively, contributing to trust in the relationship.

- Regular communication

It is recommended that regular communication between both parties in the relationship should take place at key points before, during and after the placement. Prior to the placement commencing contact should be made during

the recruitment phase and shortly before students commence their work placements to ensure that employers are well prepared. During the placement, contact should be made in the first week to ensure that all parties have clarity on requirements and then at regular intervals as agreed on at the outset, depending on the length of the placement. It is suggested that a minimum of two contact opportunities are specified when formally agreeing on the partnership. It would also be beneficial for communication to take place at the end of the placement in order to review the outcomes of the placement and as an opportunity to secure future placement opportunities. As face-to-face communication has been found to be an enabler of WBL relationships, it is suggested that video calls should be made if visits are not feasible.

- Maintaining accurate contact information

In relation to dissemination of correct contact information, both parties should commit to ensuring that contact information is accurate and current, particularly with regard to staff changes. This should form part of the initial agreement.

### **5.3.2: Recommendations for universities**

- Responsibility for developing formal documentation

It is proposed that universities should develop formal documentation specifying aims, roles and responsibilities of stakeholders in the relationship. This includes identification of specific roles within universities for professional services staff involved in industry liaison, WBL module leaders and academic tutors. The role and responsibilities of employers should also be made explicit in terms of providing a supportive learning environment and their responsibilities for communicating with universities. It is also suggested that the responsibilities of students should also be made clear.

Additionally, clear information on academic requirements should be developed and consideration given to timing of dissemination of this information. It is suggested that employers should receive this information during initial discussions and that there should be follow up communication at the start of the placement to ensure understanding and clarity. It is also recommended that universities assign clear roles for developing these guidelines and for follow up.

- Priority for WBL at an institutional level

It is recommended that decision makers in universities should ensure that WBL is given priority and that it is well resourced. It is proposed that universities should employ industry liaison specialists with relationship management skills and industry links, who complement the work of placement teams. It is also essential that decision makers should provide clear leadership and goals for increased employer engagement.

As part of this approach, universities should demonstrate their commitment by offering internal WBL opportunities for students. For tourism related degree programmes, they could offer opportunities within hospitality and events departments as well as WBL opportunities for students from other disciplines.

Universities should seek to increase visibility of WBL by celebrating successes such as awards for WBL students and employers or by hosting a post placement event to thank employers for their support. This could also lead to future WBL opportunities.

Networking events for tourism employers may also be an effective way to engage employers in WBL or possibly in other activities. This may be viewed as an opportunity to increase the profile of WBL within the tourism sector and for academics to engage with industry on a range of university activities.

It is also recommended that training for professional services staff with regard to the aim of developing partnerships would be advantageous to ensure that they adopt an approach that is conducive to partnership development. Academic tutors should also be made aware of aims to develop partnerships and the importance of their role within the relationship. They should also be given guidance on expectations with regard to communicating regularly with employers as well as ways in which they can offer support to employers. Universities may also wish to consider how academic tutors are allocated to employers. This may relate to matching tutors with employers whose activities reflect their research interests, as well as allocating them to the same employers where they have conducted WBL supervision previously, in order to develop familiarity and trust in the relationship.

- Further opportunities

As resistance from employers to engage in WBL can be a challenge for universities, a relationship management approach involving promotion of lower commitment opportunities to engage such as guest speaker opportunities or participating in student projects should be adopted. It is suggested that this type of approach can lead to further opportunities and increased commitment. It is also advised that universities could be more proactive in emphasising the key benefits of engagement to employers. This may involve development of promotional materials using employers and student testimonials to promote the benefits.

Additionally, consultation with employers regarding flexible WBL opportunities is recommended. Flexible academic modules in which students reflect on their learning and development from these experiences should be adopted as part of a curriculum that meets the needs of both students and employers. For example, modules that enable students to use vacation or part-time work to reflect on and develop their employability skills. It is suggested that this could be incorporated into existing degree programmes and would enhance student and graduate employability.

It is also suggested that universities should seek opportunities to develop connections with high profile organisations within the tourism sector, which may encourage buy-in from other employers. This could involve development of links with large organisations such as Visit Scotland. Due to the reluctance of some organisations to engage, an initial low commitment approach may be beneficial such as inviting representatives from these organisations as guest speakers.

Funding opportunities from grant making bodies associated with the tourism sector and from employers who wish to attract talented individuals should be investigated. Universities should also seek opportunities such as sponsorship of students or WBL events and awards, which may be mutually beneficial for all parties.

Universities should also seek opportunities for further engagement with existing connections. This may involve a proactive approach regarding further WBL opportunities within the organisations where a relationship already exists. It may also entail promotion of other university activities such as research projects or continuing professional development opportunities. It is suggested that existing

employers could become involved in delivery of professional skills workshops to assist students in preparing for placement.

### **5.3.3: Recommendations for employers**

- A proactive approach to developing WBL relationships

It is a finding of this study that most of the employers who participated, lacked awareness of the WBL relationship and their role within it. It is therefore recommended that employers should adopt a more proactive approach to developing WBL partnerships with universities. This should entail taking initiative for regular communication and ensuring that they have the necessary information to support WBL students effectively. Employers should view their role as being key to development of WBL relationships. Employers should also be active in seeking other opportunities to engage with universities, rather than adopting a passive approach.

- WBL as part of a sustainable recruitment and retention strategy

It is proposed that it is vital that tourism employers consider WBL as part of their overall recruitment strategy and should consider the long terms benefits and as opposed to viewing WBL as a short-term staffing solution. Greater attention is required with regard to facilitation of WBL relationships with universities in order to attract talented individuals to the sector. It is also recommended that tourism employers should develop awareness of how WBL students perceive their offer and if necessary, offer placements with added value such as opportunities for increased responsibility or promotion.

- Sponsorship and scholarships

It is recommended that larger organisations in the tourism sector could offer sponsorship of students during their placements such as providing financial assistance with travel and accommodation. Alternatively, scholarship opportunities for the duration of their degree programme may be a further option. This may be an effective way to attract talent to the organisation and to the sector.

- Further WBL opportunities

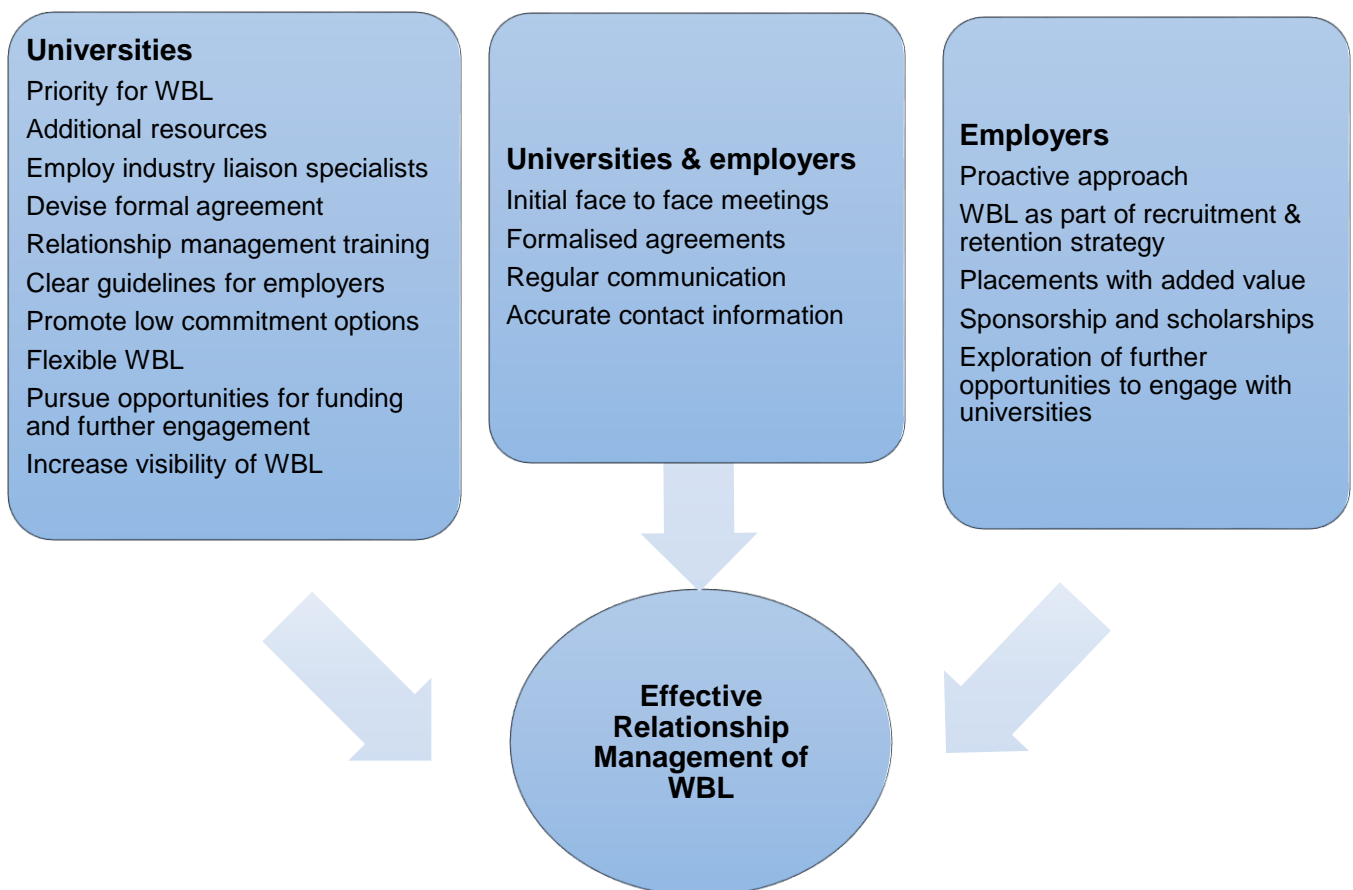
For larger organisations, communication with other departments or branches within the organisation regarding further WBL opportunities is recommended.



This should entail communication with colleagues within the same organisation regarding WBL opportunities that are available with universities and the benefits to their departments. Furthermore, it is suggested that senior management within the organisation would be best placed to cascade this information, in order to demonstrate support for WBL and to develop a workplace culture that supports learning.

#### 5.3.4: Framework for effective relationship management of WBL

Based on practice recommendations discussed in this chapter, the researcher has developed a framework which outlines the key elements for effective relationship management of WBL. See figure 5.1.



**Figure 5.1: Framework for effective relationship management of WBL**

#### **5.4: Contribution to practice**

A key purpose of this DBA study is to develop a contribution to professional practice. The value of the research may be considered to be in terms of making recommendations on the development of effective WBL relationships between universities and employers in the Scottish tourism sector. This research provides specific proposals that may aid universities and employers with regard to initiating, developing and managing their WBL process. This may be regarded as a novel aspect of this study, as a set of practice-based proposals for WBL partnerships has not been previously documented. This is achieved through developing a greater understanding of the barriers and enablers to the relationship, as a means of enhancing practice in this area. It is suggested that the beneficiaries of the results of this study are university staff who have responsibility for industry liaison as well as employers from the tourism sector and their stakeholders. Furthermore, it is also suggested that students may benefit from a greater number of WBL opportunities and enhanced learning experiences as a result.

It is also suggested that the results may be transferable beyond the research context and may be of interest those involved in WBL in other educational environments and industry sectors. Potentially, elements may also apply to those involved in other types of university-industry collaboration and industry engagement activities such as knowledge transfer partnerships. There may also be scope to use elements as a guide to identify areas of improvement and enhancement for organisations and individuals seeking to establish inter-organisational partnerships in a range of settings.

#### **5.5: Contribution to knowledge**

This study adds to the existing body of literature on the topic of collaborative practice in relation to WBL, by providing a set of guidelines on how these specific relationships may be enhanced. Building successful WBL collaborations is an under-researched topic within the literature and it is therefore suggested that this research is innovative in its approach to addressing issues of key concern within the research context. This is demonstrated through development of a framework for effective relationship management (see figure 5.1). It is suggested that the study also makes a valuable contribution by developing a deeper understanding

of the issues under investigation. The contribution of this study may be extended beyond the research context to other academic disciplines and inter-organisational collaborations.

### **5.6: Reflection on achievement of research aim and objectives**

The aim of this study was to critically evaluate perceptions of barriers and enablers of effective work based learning partnerships, from the perspectives of universities and employers in the tourism sector in Scotland. This aim was achieved as a result of a critical review of the literature; primary data collection with employers in the Scottish tourism sector and university staff involved in industry liaison in relation to WBL; analysis of the primary data in conjunction with the literature and development of detailed proposals on how effective WBL relationships can be developed.

The following summary provides an overview of the achievement of the objectives of the study:

- To critically review the literature relating to developing Higher Education/industry relationships in relation to work based learning.

This objective has generally been achieved through a comprehensive review of the academic literature on the topic of relationship development within university-industry WBL relationships. The extant literature on the topic has been examined; however, the researcher identified limitations with regard to the extent of the literature which focused on WBL relationships. As a result, literature which focused on university-industry collaboration within other contexts was also critically reviewed to provide insights on the topic under investigation.

- To gain a deeper understanding of the barriers experienced when developing work based learning partnerships from the perspectives of university staff and employers in the Scottish tourism sector.

This objective was met as a result of conducting thirteen semi-structured interviews with university and industry participants from the Scottish tourism sector, based on perceptions of their experiences of participating in WBL relationships. The findings from the primary data have revealed a series of

challenges from the perspectives of both sets of participants in the study, with regard to the research topic.

- To identify enablers of effective WBL collaboration between universities and employers.

A range of ways in which effective WBL collaboration may be facilitated have been identified through consultation with the academic literature, practice based examples and from the findings of the primary research.

- To suggest a practice based framework to inform management and development of WBL partnerships between universities and employers.

A framework has been developed which outlines a series of practical recommendations to assist universities and employers who participate in WBL to enhance their practice when developing and managing WBL relationships. It is hoped that through improved practice in this area that this will lead to enhancement of student WBL experiences in industry.

### **5.7: Limitations of the study**

In this section, limitations of the research are identified. Firstly, this study adopted an interpretivist, phenomenological approach to investigate the perceptions of employers and universities of their lived experiences of developing WBL relationships. It is argued that in this type of study, a weakness is that it is not possible to assess the extent to which the lived experiences of the participants have been adequately recorded. The study is subjective in nature and may not demonstrate the level of rigour associated with a quantitative methodology.

Due to the nature of the research, a limitation of the sample is that data was collected from specific universities and a small number of specific employers and relates only to WBL partnerships within the tourism sector. As the research approach is subjective, it is possible that if different employers or university employees had participated, this may have elicited a different range of responses. There is also a possibility that the findings may not be applicable to WBL partnerships in other industry sectors. Furthermore, the findings do not relate to SMEs which account for a high proportion of organisations in the Scottish tourism sector.

It is recognised that the findings from this study cannot be viewed as generalisable. However, it is proposed that they may be transferable to other inter-organisational relationships and may be valuable to both universities and employers engaged in any type of WBL. It is suggested that given the interpretive nature of this study, a strength of the findings is that they represent the viewpoints of individuals who deal with WBL relationships as a key part of their professional roles, and are therefore both relevant and valuable to this topic.

This study is also geographically limited. The findings are confined to data collected from a small number of employers within the tourism sector in Scotland. Therefore, different findings may have been generated if the research had been conducted in other regions of the UK or overseas where there may be differences in HE systems, in the characteristics of tourism employers and in economic factors in those areas.

Although valuable insights have been achieved, the organisations who participated may not be representative of organisations across the tourism sector. Furthermore, although the research was conducted with the majority of universities in Scotland who offer tourism related degree programmes, there were a further two universities who did not participate. It is suggested that their input may have been valuable to the findings.

### **5.8: Proposals for further research**

Although this study provides valuable insights into development of WBL relationships in the Scottish tourism sector, it is proposed that there are further opportunities for research. This is supported by the findings from the academic literature that this is an under-researched topic within the field of WBL, and more specifically, within the context of the tourism sector.

Firstly, it is suggested that research conducted with a larger sample of tourism employers would be valuable in confirming the results of this study. The results of this study are based on a small sample of employers, therefore, views from a broader range of employers may be valuable in establishing deeper insights on the topic. Furthermore, the adoption of a mixed methods approach with the addition of quantitative methods may provide valuable data on the extent to which the issues identified in the study are experienced in the tourism sector in Scotland. In particular, this may highlight the extent to which employers in the

tourism sector are considering their recruitment and retention strategies and how they can engage effectively with universities on WBL.

According to Skills Development Scotland (2016), the majority of employers in the Scottish tourism sector are SMEs. The employers who participated in this study did not represent this category. Therefore, research with this particular group could enable deeper understanding of the specific issues which affect these employers when developing WBL relationships with universities, thus enhancing practice.

Furthermore, it is suggested that further research with participants from sub-sectors of the tourism sector such as the hotel and accommodation or visitor attraction sectors, could develop deeper understanding of the particular issues which are affecting employers within these categories.

As the research focused on universities and the tourism sector in Scotland, further research could be conducted with universities and tourism employers in different regions of the UK, or potentially, in relation to other types of degree programme and other industry sectors where the results might be different with regard to collaborative practice. It is also suggested that comparative research could be conducted to review WBL collaboration from an international perspective.

It is hoped that the findings and recommendations and any future research resulting from this study, will contribute to understanding of the barriers and enablers of WBL relationships and will enhance the current body of academic research on this topic.

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## Appendix A: Informed Consent Form

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### Edinburgh Napier University Research Consent Form

Edinburgh Napier University requires that all persons who participate in research studies give their written consent to do so. Please read the following and sign it if you agree with what it says.

1. I freely and gladly consent to be a participant in the research project on the topic of ***'An investigation of barriers and enablers of effective partnerships between university staff and employers in the tourism and hospitality sector in relation to recruiting and supporting work based learning students'*** to be conducted by Lynn Waterston based at The Business School, Edinburgh Napier University.
2. The broad goal of this research study is to explore how university staff and employers perceive Higher Education/employer partnerships in relation to cultivating positive work based learning experiences for students. Specifically, I have been asked to participate in an interview which should take no longer than 45 minutes to complete.
3. I have been told that my responses will be anonymised, unless I waive my right to anonymity. My name will therefore not be linked with the research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in any report subsequently produced by the researcher.
4. I also understand that if at any time during the interview I feel unable or unwilling to continue, I am free to leave. That is, my participation in this study is completely voluntary, and I may withdraw without negative consequences. However, after data has been anonymised or after publication of results it will not be possible for my data to be removed as it would be untraceable at this point.
5. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline.

6. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions regarding the research and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.
7. I have read and understand the above and consent to participate in this study. My signature is not a waiver of any legal rights. Furthermore, I understand that I will be able to keep a copy of the informed consent form for my records.

Participant's Signature

Date

I have explained and defined in detail the research procedure in which the respondent has consented to participate. Furthermore, I will retain one copy of the informed consent form for my own records.

Researcher's Signature

Date

### **Contact details of the researcher**

Lynn Waterston

Lecturer

The Business School

Edinburgh Napier University

Craiglockhart Campus

Edinburgh EH14 1DJ,

Tel. [REDACTED] Email. [REDACTED]

## Appendix B: Information Sheet for Participants

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### Information Sheet for Participants

***An investigation of barriers and enablers of effective partnerships between university staff and employers in the tourism and hospitality sector in relation to recruiting and supporting work based learning students.***

My name is Lynn Waterston and I am a Lecturer in The Business School at Edinburgh Napier University. I am currently undertaking this research for my doctoral thesis as part of my Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) course.

The research will investigate how university staff and employers perceive Higher Education/employer partnerships in relation to cultivating positive work based learning experiences for students. The findings will enable the researcher to make recommendations to universities on how they can enhance development of effective work based learning partnerships with industry.

Members of university staff and employers who are involved in work based learning/work placement initiatives are invited to participate. You have been selected to take part as a result of your experience of work based learning initiatives and the issues relating to supporting and recruiting work placement students.

If you agree to participate in the study, you will be asked to take part in an individual interview with the researcher. The interview will be recorded and transcribed, and the responses that you provide will be anonymised so that no clues to your personal identity will appear in any written document.

The researcher considers the possibility of any risks associated with the interview to be low. Participation should take no longer than 45 minutes and you will be under no obligation to answer all of the questions. You will be free to withdraw

from the study at any stage; you would not have to give a reason and there would be no negative consequences.

All data will be anonymised with any possible identifiers removed in the reporting of the data gathered.

All data collected will be kept confidential and in a secure place on a PC that is password protected to which only the researcher has access, and which has secure data encryption software installed by the University. This will be kept till the end of the research process, following which all data that could identify you will be disposed of securely.

Findings will be made available in the researcher's DBA thesis which will be published on the Edinburgh Napier University research repository, as part of conference presentations and the possibility of publication in academic journals.

If you have any questions about the research project, please contact the researcher, Lynn Waterston, email [REDACTED]

If you have read and understood this information sheet, any questions you had have been answered, and you would like to be a participant in the study, please now see the consent form.



## **Appendix C: Interview schedule for universities**

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### **Questions to be discussed with university staff:**

Please would you give me a brief outline of your role in the organisation

How long have you been involved in dealing with work placement students?

Do you deal directly with employers as part of your role? Do you deal with a broad range of different organisations? What kind of issues have you encountered?

What are your thoughts on employer expectations of the university when recruiting placement students?

Do you feel that you have adequate opportunities to interact with employers and establish longer-term relationships?

Can you give an outline of how you communicate with employers before, during and after the placement period?

Do you have ongoing communication or is it only during the time that the placement is required?

Are there any approaches that work well?

Have you encountered any particular issues when establishing and maintaining connections with employers?

What is your experience in terms of time and effort devoted to this aspect of the role?

What do you expect from employers in terms of supporting students in the workplace with their learning outcomes?

Do you provide any help and guidance to employers on how they can assist students with learning outcomes? What form does this take?

In your experience, to what extent do employers provide a supportive learning environment?

For those who provide a supportive environment, what works well/what are the key factors to success?

For those who don't, what do you see as some of the issues? How do you think these issues could be overcome?

To what extent do you feel supported by the University when dealing with placement employers? How does the University support you? Is there anything else that could be done?

Finally, do you have any other comments relating to working in partnership with work placement employers?

## **Appendix D: Interview schedule for employers**

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### **Questions to be discussed with employers:**

Please would you give me a brief outline of your role in the organisation

How long have you been involved in dealing with work placement students?

Do you deal with more than one university?

What do you see as the benefits of recruiting placement students for your organisation?

What were your expectations of how the university would communicate with you/support you when you decided to recruit placement students?

How easy was it to establish an initial connection with the university/universities?

How was the connection made?

Tell me about your experiences of communicating with the university/universities when recruiting placement students:

What has been good about the way(s) in which the university/universities communicate with you?

Have you encountered any issues relating to how they communicate with you? If so, what were these issues? How did this impact on you/your organisation?

What do you see as your role in establishing and maintaining the relationship with the university/universities?

Is there more that you or your organisation would like to contribute to working together with the university/universities?

If so, how could you contribute more?

Do you have information on what your placement students are studying at university? How important is this to your organisation?

When recruiting placement students, were you made aware of what they could be doing in the workplace in order to achieve their learning outcomes and how you could facilitate this?

How comfortable are you in supporting placement students to achieve their learning outcomes?

If comfortable, what contributed to this?

Are there any factors which make this difficult for you?

To what extent do you feel supported by the university/universities in facilitating achievement of students' learning outcomes?

What have they done to support you?

Is there more that the university could do to assist you?

What would help?

Do you feel supported by your employer in providing learning opportunities for students? Is there anything more that your employer could do?

Are there any particularly positive experiences you have had of working together with the university/universities? What made them work effectively?

Finally, do you have any other comments relating to working in partnership with the university when recruiting and supporting work placement students?