



# **Working towards a Definition of Work-based Learning Evidence Paper**

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HNVQ Policy Team

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# Introduction

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*There is no single definition of what WBL entails beyond the notion that it implies two characteristics: learning in a work context and learning through practice.*  
(Mari-Hall, Ulicna and Duchemin 2013)

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Lemanski and Mewis (2011) highlight that various work-based learning (WBL) terminology has appeared across literature, industry and academia. They emphasise that WBL is often too complex for a clear and concise definition; particularly when conceptualising, designing and implementing it.

This research aims to inform potential aspects that can help define WBL, what it does and who it impacts. This will involve analysing literature on WBL, various countries' relationships with WBL, information from other awarding bodies and national skills or technical organisations, along with government guidance on WBL. We conducted desk research across mediums, including websites, books, journals, articles, guidance documents, podcasts and blogs. It is important to note that only information published online has been sourced as evidence for this paper.

Based on the findings, this report has been divided into four main themes:

1. What is WBL?
2. WBL, the learner and society
3. Types of WBL
4. WBL assessment

This report also provides information on decision making with evidence across the four themes, which informed internal and external stakeholder engagement and actions in line with SQA's WBL strategy.

The terminology in this report was identified across several pieces of literature. The main terms are: vocational qualifications; work placements; workplace learning; National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs); internships; employment-based learning; enterprise-based learning; job shadowing; simulations; mentorships; traineeships; BTECs; SVQs; work experience programmes; work tasters and volunteering experiences. The use of these terms is influenced by the bias and experience of the authors, country and organisation behind the publication, often aiming to expand or restrict the scope of WBL, which makes it difficult to define an objective view or clear criteria of WBL.

## What is WBL?

Kommers (2019, p81) states that 'The closer our training and qualification is to the real world of work, the more successful the integration of participants into the labour market is', showing that the focus of WBL in Germany is on vocational education. Schneider and Schneider (2018) document that vocational education in the further education sector has traditionally prepared learners for the labour market. The [OECD](#) (2022) also notes that WBL 'is often seen as a powerful vehicle for developing workplace skills and promoting

productivity of the labour force'. Skills are valuable both to learners and the economy, as they fill skills gaps and allow employers, industries and countries to keep up with emerging skills markets. The Scottish Government's Future Skills Action Plan (2019) highlights the role of job-related training in addressing skills gaps, while also noting that between 2014–2018, job-related training showed a continual decline for employees aged 16–64. This is in direct contrast with formal education increasing over that same period.

Latvia introduced WBL into its education system in 2015, viewing the purpose as purely connected to economic enhancement, ensuring a quality labour force with educational organisations and employers involved in design and development of curriculum (Briza & Pipere 2021).

WBL in the US was also linked directly to vocational education in early 20th century (Kaarby & Lindboe 2016, Raelin 2008, McCormack et al 2010), with an emphasis on the inclusion of suitable learning contexts and social interaction. Briza (2021) highlights that WBL is closely connected to vocational education; it has developed into a more flexible form of teaching through a dual education approach between vocational education institutions and the workplace, with the employer directing the necessary knowledge and skills of the learner.

Germany and the Netherlands are two of several European countries to favour the dual approach of workplace and institutional learning (Kommers 2019). Kaarby (2016) states that WBL is formed from a link between work and situated learning; this is also confirmed by many other sources (EDSI 2021, Angove 2019, Kommers 2019, QAA). However, while the majority of literature connects vocational learning and WBL, Kommers (2019) also points to the European Commission (2013), which notes that presence in a workplace (that is, apprenticeships and job placements) should not be a requirement of WBL. Kommers argues that WBL doesn't always have a placement in a workplace but in fact can occur in educational establishments through simulation. However, Mari-Hall et al (2013) note that although simulation can be a useful teaching method, as it does not take place in a real working environment, it falls between WBL and school-based learning.

Across multiple literature sources, there was a clear consensus that situated workplace experience was a key part of WBL. [QAA](#) describes WBL as 'authentic activity [...] supervised in the workplace', and the [European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training](#) defines WBL as 'all forms of learning that takes place in a real work environment'.

Angove (2019), in reference to WBL in higher education, mentions that experiential and active learning should be delivered through educational practices and establishments combined with situated learning. This is somewhat related to Raelin's (2008) thoughts that experiential learning can play a valid role, provided it is a foundation to learners undergoing situated WBL. This aligns with Lemanski and Mewis's (2011; p28) view that WBL incorporates two key aspects:

1. 'Learners are engaged in real-work problems.'
2. 'Existing knowledge is activated as a foundation for new knowledge.'

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Finnish WBL principle: *to gather and enhance knowledge and skills in an authentic working environment.* (Kommers 2019, p23)

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Murtazin, Oleg and Piho (2020) also highlight the dual learning approach, defining WBL as a method of teaching and learning where the learner participates in practical education with both employers and teachers, who are jointly educating and evaluating learners. Briza and Pipere (2021, p832) argue that this approach ‘promotes motivation to acquire the skills necessary for the relevant profession and ensures that specialists meeting the requirements of employers enter the labour market’. Kommers (2019) agrees that WBL supports the economy by preparing learners for global, national, and regional industries, through experience in education and working environments, highlighting that WBL is mandatory in high school education in Italy to focus studies around a future career vision.

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*‘Effective, work-based learning strategies build a bridge between learning and real work experiences.’ EDSI (2021)*

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However, Raelin highlights that WBL is in fact a framework that covers different learning processes and strategies, not simply a means of benefitting the economy; rather these evolve from conjunction with work practices and learning can arise informally when learners experience different situations (Kaarby & Lindboe 2016).

## **WBL, the learner and society**

Many authors link WBL with economic or organisational benefits, that is, productivity (Briza 2021, Boud and Solomon 2001, Sodiechowska and Maisch 2006, Gorard 2003) and highlight learning how to do the job by actually doing the job.

However, referring to Gray’s elements of WBL, McCormack, Pancini and Tout (2010) and Warwick University highlight three different approaches to WBL: learning for the workplace, learning through the workplace, and learning in the workplace. Mari-Hall et al (2013) also supports that the focus should be on the learner, and learning to learn rather than learning to work. This is derived from Raelin’s emphasis on a shift towards the learning process as the focus, rather than economic impact to keep organisations relevant, ensuring the rate of learning ‘should equal or exceed the rate of change’ (Kaarby & Lindboe 2016, p108). This is in line with Finland’s approach to WBL, which focuses on individual needs through flexible qualifications, learning in a workplace, education establishments, and online learning (Kommers 2019).

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*All vocational learning should privilege experiential and active learning in real-work environments. It should provide opportunities to engage in authentic tasks and to encounter and learn from experts within communities of practice. This gives learners access to personal and vocational growth alike. (Huddleston 2023, Edge Foundation)*

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Modern industry and society require more than learners with competent technical skills, and WBL equips individuals with technical, personal and social competences through experience of a real work environment (Mari-Hall et al 2013). City and Guilds, Pearsons and other Awarding Organisations deliver WBL programmes designed to enable better opportunities for people, organisations and wider society through training and re-training to build skills throughout different stages of life.

To ensure learners are equipped to deal with modern industry and society, Kaarby and Lindboe (2016, p108) state that ‘metacognition is fundamental in WBL as it is characterized first and foremost by conscious reflection on actual experience’, which stems from Raelin’s stance that theory can only be understood if put into practice, but also practice must be reflected upon in line with theory (Raelin 2008).

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*Work-based learning expressly merges theory with practice, knowledge with experience. It recognises that the workplace offers as many opportunities for learning as the classroom. Such learning, however, needs to be centred around reflection on work practices. (Raelin 2008, p2)*

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This is known as Raelin’s meta-competence of learning — learning to learn rather than learning to work — with a focus on situation specific learning rather than job role specific learning (Raelin 2008, Mari-Hall 2013). Incorporating reflection into WBL enables learners to inform their decision making (Kanwar, Balasubramanian & Carr 2019, Mari-Hall et al 2013).

This is what differentiates WBL from conventional education according to Raelin (2008) and equips learners to question existing workplace practice through reflection and reframing. He finds that WBL produces reflective practitioners as it develops both professional practice and an enquiring culture, which she deems a key purpose of WBL. This relates to Friere’s earlier theory of a problem-posing approach in teaching and learning, where qualifications are designed to ensure learner engagement and involvement in the qualification design and offer. As a result, it incorporates their background, identities and experiences into the qualifications and learning experience. Challenging learners through the problem-posing approach develops critical thinking and societal awareness (Maylor 2022).

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*WBL learners have an opportunity to develop such skills through their involvement in actual production, their informal and formal interaction with colleagues, management and customers, and through resolving the real-life challenges they encounter every day at work. Thus, work experience can also help young people to develop self-evaluation skills and build the confidence they need to reflect on and learn from experience. (Mari-Hall et al 2013)*

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The analysis of Murtazin et al (2020) of existing literature concluded that WBL is highly personalised and can provide learners with industry and real-life experiences that can help them in the future, while making them recognise the necessity of lifelong learning. Kommers (2019) highlights that Finland’s practice-orientated approach to WBL can motivate individuals for lifelong learning. [Erasmus](#) agrees that Vocational Education and Training (VET) is a key element of lifelong learning, which may begin during school education but ultimately continues throughout a learner’s working life.

Schneider and Schneider’s (2018) analysis highlights that Ireland is aiming to position WBL as the main contributor to their economic and societal growth. Kanwar et al (2019) observe that education plays a key role in boosting individuals’ skills along with the economy, but it should also contribute to developing global citizens — rather than simply focusing on individuals gaining skills for employment, a holistic education (skills and capabilities) should be ensured and benefits both the individual and society. Mari-Hall et al (2013) agree that soft skills gained through WBL can equip the learner outside of work and assist lifelong learning.

This links with the CDN and Colleges Scotland report (2022) addressing the role colleges play in local communities by addressing poverty and creating a more inclusive society. The [European Commission](#) states that VET enhances employability and encourages active citizenship, with [City and Guilds](#) terming this ‘lifelong employability’, combining both the concept of employability skills and the need for this to be a lifelong process.

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*Learning is crucial for life, work and society. It can help people find work, progress in or change careers, support health and wellbeing, promote social integration, and many more benefits besides. Lifelong learning will only grow in importance as the UK's population ages, people have longer working lives, and our economy and society changes. (Learning and Work Institute 2023, p5)*

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Links can also be made closer to home with the launch of Adult Learning Strategy for Scotland 2022–2027 by the Scottish Government. This strategy emphasises that learning is lifelong, should be centred around the learner and available to all. It further expands on the potential social benefits of lifelong learning in Scotland;

- ◆ Improve mental health and wellbeing.
- ◆ Lead to employment or up-skilling — increasing quality of life.
- ◆ Improve links between colleges, universities and community-based adult learning.
- ◆ Enhance digital skills.

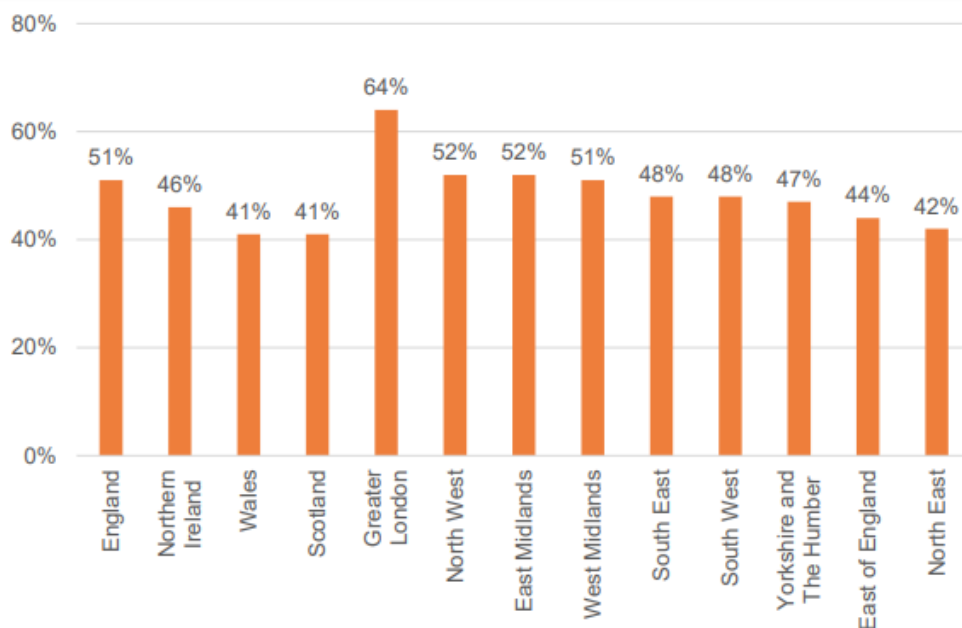
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*Students are expected to learn a concept and apply the concept in an authentic or real-world way. These real-world projects may be focused on a community need, a challenge from a local business or industry, or a project for a non-profit organization. (Lane 2021)*

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The Learning and Work Institute (UK) issues an annual survey focused on [Adult Participation in Learning](#). The 2023 result findings noted the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on increasing the number of adults (aged 35–44 and 55–64) involved in learning, aiming to re-skill for a career change or up-skill within their current occupational area. However, the overall trend of participating in learning declining with age continues, with 77% of 17–19 year olds and 76% of 20–24 year olds participating in learning in the last year. The 2023 results also show that Scotland and Wales have the lowest participation in learning across the UK.

**Figure 1: Participation in learning by region and nation (Learning and Work Institute Adult Participation in Learning Survey results 2023, p17)**



In Germany, there is disparity of high school students progressing to vocational training based on educational qualifications, gender, regional, ethnic and social background (Achatz 2022). Modern WBL can be inclusive to those facing learning barriers by enabling career opportunities, advancement and achieving qualifications. Mari-Hall et al (2013) provide examples from several European countries demonstrating that WBL appeals to both the unemployed and marginalised youth who did not enjoy traditional learning environment, indicating there was also a connection with practically focused community-based learning initiatives. Kommers (2019) also highlights that Finnish WBL approaches can help reduce marginalisation in society. This is one of the principles of Scotland's Adult Learning Strategy 2022–2027; to reduce barriers to learning and close the learning gap caused by poverty and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

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*Work-based learning promotes adaptive behaviour as well as the more traditional technical skills, encouraging employees to face the challenge of working within a diverse workgroup head-on. (Raelin 2008, p30)*

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Despite evidence to indicate that learners in VET programmes are prepared for the workplace, in many European countries there is a stigma attached that vocational learning is less valuable than the higher education route (Mari-Hall 2013).

As the workplace is ever evolving and complex, workplace learning should not produce individuals that are only capable of habitual reproductive learning. Rather, it should produce individuals who can use their practical judgement and who are 'open to engaging productively with a world of complexity and change, not only in workplace or institutional contexts, but across all domains of social life' (McCormack et al 2010, p41). Raelin (2008) also notes that WBL can occur spontaneously; it is not something that is accepting of existing processes and continuing to repeat.



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*Work-based learning, then, is mindful and situated learning in the sense that it does not view pre-existing knowledge as fixed, but rather as provisional until tried out in a given context or in practice. (Raelin 2008, p48)*

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Mastering organisational processes, the political and atypical aspects of the workplace, forming a community of practice, and interactions with other peers are key aspects of informal learning that can only happen in everyday working situations (McCormack et al 2010, Lemanski and Mewis 2011). Lane (2021) agrees that experience in authentic situations equips the learner with skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, teamwork, and project management — which [SDS](#) terms ‘meta-skills’.

These informal learning factors are often captured under the banner of lifelong learning, which Kanwar et al (2019) deem to be essential to learners in technical and vocational education and training (TVET) programmes, instilling a positive attitude towards re-skilling and up-skilling in industries. They further expand on this, noting the role that a holistic approach to WBL and Competence-Based Learning can play in promoting a lifelong learning journey. This has previously been referred to as vertical and horizontal aspects; an individual's vertical learning (intellectual capacity) should develop as they progress their studies, but their horizontal learning (immersion into different environments) should also be taken into consideration, ensuring a holistic experience (Guille & Griffiths 2003).

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*Work-based learning aims to use real-life practical work scenarios to develop skills and competencies, with a focus on informal and non-formal learning opportunities. (Kanwar et al 2019, p57)*

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In connection to lifelong learning, Goh (2022) refers to the concept of a learning journey, as opposed to the historical workplace learning approach of providing education and training, and then assuming it will be sufficient for a lifetime of practice in a linear career path. Instead, the learning journey considers individual growth throughout the different roles in their career, through informal and formal methods, which is relevant in a modern world with significant technological advances, economic unpredictability, and persisting disruption from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Raelin (2008) also conceives that a linear career path is less likely in a modern job market; individuals could experience up to six or seven careers, each with different skills needed, so continual learning in the workplace is crucial. WBL in the Netherlands recognises that, to successfully put into practice the knowledge gained, it should be used through both practical learning and personal experiences for learners of all ages and in all stages of their education (Kommers 2019).

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*To engage more adults in learning, policymakers, commissioners and those working in learning providers need to look at people's motivations for learning. The biggest reasons adults give for not taking part in learning are cost, feeling too old, time pressures and also not wanting to / not seeing the benefits. That points to the need to build a culture of learning and offer people a range of flexible learning options. (Learning and Work Institute 2023, p5)*

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WBL's connection to lifelong learning is particularly important as Scotland is the only UK country where the population is predicted to both decline and age over the next quarter of the century. The [Scottish Public Health Observatory](#) forecasts that the population over 65 will increase to almost 1.4 million (from 1.1 million in 2024) and children under 16 predicted to decrease to 714,000 by 2045 (from 826,000 in 2024), with [Scotland's 2022 Census population estimates](#) confirming an increase in older adults and a reduction in people under 15 years old.

In 2003, Gorard stressed that lifelong learning is crucial to the economy with the traditional jobs for life no longer the norm; with the population predictions for Scotland now, the role of lifelong learning and WBL should not be understated or seen as a popular trend. The European Union indicates how seriously they have taken the importance of WBL by placing a clear 2025 target of VET learners experiencing at least 60% of their education as work based.

## Types of WBL

Although there is no global consensus on types of WBL, Guille and Griffiths (2003) note two different versions:

1. Workplace learning determined strictly by employer requirements
2. Work-related learning determined by individual and societal requirements

Schneider and Schneider (2018) analysed six European countries' approaches to WBL, noting that practice-based learning was traditionally central to vocational education but has recently become commonplace in higher education.

Warwick University notes that WBL is more focused on learning in the workplace than work-related learning, as it incorporates developing competences and knowledge from within a work environment. This is achieved through authentic structured learning opportunities within the workplace.

EDSI (2021) states that WBL takes many forms under four main types:

1. Internships
2. Apprenticeships
3. Paid work experiences
4. On the job training

This list is very specific and excludes some aspects of WBL that other authors include in their definitions, which, in addition to the list above, would also include unpaid work placements and SQA qualifications such as Scottish Vocational Qualifications, Professional Development Awards and Higher Nationals.

Guille and Griffiths (2003) put forward that WBL should not focus on where the learning takes place; instead the emphasis should be on the work process and learning through work.

Incorporating this approach, CTE (2022) adopts the WBL continuum model with four stages based on the learner's journey specifically during secondary education:

1. **Awareness** — learning about work (awareness of career and postsecondary education options)
2. **Exploration** — learning about work (exploring options to inform secondary school subject choices)
3. **Preparation** — learning through work (practical experience to build knowledge and skills)
4. **Participation** — Learning for work (training to gain employment or further and higher education)

The [Learner-Centered Collaborative](#) highlight a WBL continuum with slight differences:

1. **Learning of work** – Industry and Career Awareness (Elementary school)
2. **Learning about work** – Industry and Career Exploration (Middle school)
3. **Learning for work** – Career preparation (High school)
4. **Learning through work** – Career training (Post Secondary school)

Although there are differences in these models and continuums, the overall aim is to provide a definition and visual to clarify and explain the wide surround of WBL.

## WBL assessment

Warwick University highlights that the main benefit of WBL assessment is that it can assess both content (mostly through learning outcomes) and learner reflection on their learning experience (process of learning). This determines that WBL requires different methods of delivery and assessment approaches that not only meet the needs of the learner, but also of the workplace employer that 'resembles real-world challenges as closely as possible' (JISC).

Therefore, WBL assessment requires multiple assessors collaborating in their understanding of assessment criteria and standards. This includes placing value on collaborative and reflective practice on authentic workplace issues along with a more flexible and collaborative approach to the timing, location, and mode of assessment.

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*Promote learner employability by assessing authentic tasks and promoting ethical conduct ([JISC](#))*

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What is assessed;

- ◆ competences and skills of subject or sector area
- ◆ knowledge and understanding of subject or sector area
- ◆ merging of theory and practice
- ◆ application of concepts and principles
- ◆ knowledge of enquiry methods and problem solving skills
- ◆ self awareness of how they learn and limits of their knowledge, skills and abilities
- ◆ transferable skills

- ◆ assessment judgements are reached by using objective criteria which is linked to sector norms and reliable, fair, transparent

Modes of assessment (physical and digital):

- ◆ self, mentor and peer assessment
- ◆ assignments or projects
- ◆ reports
- ◆ portfolios
- ◆ learning journal or log
- ◆ dissertations
- ◆ oral presentation
- ◆ posters
- ◆ learning contracts

(QAA, OECD/ILO, Warwick University, JISC, Advanced HE assessment)

# Considerations for internal and external engagement and wider strategy

## Point 1

Previous sections show a consensus that WBL involves practical activities in a work environment, with limited literature suggesting that simulated environments on their own are a suitable alternative to the workplace.

To help understanding and provide SQA's definition and categorisation of WBL, we should consider if products under the WBL banner ensure practical experience in the workplace, possibly combined with simulation, as evidence suggests that simulation on its own is not adequate even if there are ample centre facilities.

Based on the evidence in this paper, it is not suggested that a solely simulated learning experience would be adequate for WBL, regardless of how ample some centre facilities may be. There should be a partnership with an employer or third sector organisation to ensure learners get direct live experience of unpredictable working environments.

## Point 2

SQA should consider if it wishes to approach a WBL strategy from mostly an economical position. While the benefits to organisations and the wider economy have been documented in literature, there is growing evidence that WBL benefits both the learner and society. As Scotland's main awarding body, SQA must reflect on its role in supplying products that deliver learners who are ready for the workforce and able to contribute to society.

While the SQA Corporate Plan 2020–23 focused on its role in successfully contributing to the economy, SQA also aligns itself to the National Performance Framework (NPF), tackling economical aspects. It acknowledges that education is a public good and aims to produce members of the public that are 'well-educated, skilled and able to contribute to society' (p7).

[SQA's Prospectus for Change](#) also aligns to the NPF; in addition it outlines the plans for transition to Qualifications Scotland with an aim of ensuring that sustainability and equality is central to qualifications and learners.

Evidence provided throughout this report demonstrates the role that WBL fulfils within lifelong learning and its connection to society and the economy.

Based on this, we should consider if SQA's WBL strategy and definition should focus on:

- ◆ the economic role of WBL
- ◆ the socio-economic role of WBL

If SQA were to adopt a socio-economic approach, the draft WBL strategy would need to be reviewed to include the approach more, and SQA would need to consider referencing it in the definition.

### **Point 3**

Occupations involving manual labour or basic technical tasks are often linked to work-based education. This, along with the stigma attached to vocational education often being viewed as a lesser route than academic education, can influence learners' education pathway (Osborne, Ackehurst, Chan and Polvere 2020; Mari-Hall et al 2013). However, as evidenced in this report, WBL is more than just vocational — it plays a role in lifelong learning and creates adaptive, reflective and experienced learners that can link theory with practice.

We should consider:

- ◆ Should the word 'vocational' be incorporated into our definition?
- ◆ Would incorporating the word 'vocational' into our definition limit the reach of WBL?

### **Point 4**

Clear understanding of what SQA products fall into the WBL banner will reduce any uncertainty or ambiguity within our own staff; that is, we should ensure Qualifications Development staff involved in developing and maintaining qualifications have clear understanding and direction. A mapping exercise to display the suite of SQA product types would be beneficial and could also be used to show cross-qualification pathways for learners.

We should consider:

- ◆ Would categorisation be as simple as by product type?
- ◆ Or would categorisation be subject specific?

### **Point 5**

Do we need different definitions for different audiences? Consider learner, parents, internal and external level of detail and phrasing required. Engagement with stakeholders and liaising with marketing colleagues should evidence decision making.

### **Point 6 — consideration for wider strategy**

To provide clarity around SQA products and WBL, we should consider adopting a continuum, diagram or stages of WBL. This could help define what WBL is for SQA, and identify clear WBL products that contain an element of workplace experience or those that are more on the periphery and feed into WBL.

### **Point 7 — consideration for wider strategy**

Meta-skills and acknowledgement of informal and formal learning should be included more in the overall strategy — currently there is only one mention in reference to Future Skills: Action Plan 2021 (Scottish Government policy). Evidence throughout this paper clearly demonstrates the importance in the modern learning and work environment. If this is to be included, then we should consider whether it would be incorporated in the definition or throughout the strategy.

## Internal engagement (workshop) findings

These initial engagement sessions took place in 2023, across 5 internal workshops with 59 staff members from across 7 of our 9 directorates. Most attendees were from Qualification Development and Policy, Analysis and Standards.

The workshops were 90 minutes in duration. They focused on introducing the background of, and identifying the need for and importance of the WBL strategy, particularly in the current educational landscape, as well as the progress to date and the intention moving forward. They also provided staff with key information from the scoping research, focusing on:

- ◆ purpose of WBL
- ◆ attributes of WBL
- ◆ developing WBL
- ◆ delivering WBL
- ◆ assessing WBL
- ◆ terminology connected to WBL

Based on analysis of the scoping findings, seven key considerations were identified and put to workshop attendees for consideration. See appendix 1 for all charts related to the internal staff polls.

### 1 Use of the term ‘vocational’ in our WBL definition

In our desk research, we found evidence that highlighted some disparity in the culture and attitudes within the UK and some European countries regarding vocational education versus academic education. In the UK, vocational routes were often viewed as less valuable, whereas in some European countries this was not the case. We asked workshop attendees if SQA should incorporate the term ‘vocational’ into its definition of WBL, or if doing so would limit the reach of the definition. We also highlighted to staff the interim Hayward review, which notes that the language of academic and vocational should be reconsidered.

#### Findings

70% of attendees indicated that they did not think we should use the term ‘vocational’ in our WBL definition. Discussion supported this and most agreed that while vocational qualifications are extremely valuable, the terminology is seen as out of date and connected to technical skills, which doesn’t reflect the current climate of re-skilling and changing careers through transferable skills. To move forward, we should refrain from using the terms ‘academic’ and ‘vocational’ to ensure all qualifications are seen as valuable — qualifications are simply qualifications.

21% of attendees believed that we should use the term ‘vocational’, with some stating that changing language was a wider societal issue and would not be enough to achieve parity of esteem. Some noted that vocational qualifications were established and, in some areas, well received. Some attendees suggested that it could be an opportunity to embrace and reinvent attitudes to vocational qualifications.

Discussions identified that there are opportunities to promote the importance of the HNVQ portfolio internally as well as externally, to ensure that all qualifications are seen as equal.

## **Recommendations**

Internal feedback is consistent with the wider scoping findings. Excluding the term 'vocational' may not be enough to solve the parity of esteem issue, but it does link in with the recommendations of the Hayward review and ensures that WBL is not limited to what has traditionally been deemed as vocational qualifications. Based on these findings, it is recommended that the term 'vocational' is not used in the definition of WBL.

## **2 WBL and a real work environment**

Findings from our desk research suggested that WBL involves practical activities that take place in a work environment, with limited literature suggesting that simulated environments on their own were a suitable alternative. We asked workshop attendees to consider if WBL should require an element of learning being based in:

- ◆ real work environments
- ◆ only simulated environments
- ◆ a combination of both real work environments and simulated environments

### **Findings**

80% of staff believed that WBL should include a combination of real work environments and use of simulation. This was followed by further discussion clarifying that simulation should be used to develop skills and learning in the initial stages of a qualification. As the qualification and SCQF levels progress, there should be a natural progression to exposing the learner to real work environments. This would enable learners to apply their technical skills and knowledge in an unpredictable workplace environment, bringing added value to the learner's journey.

Attendees also noted that simulation can be particularly relevant to creating an inclusive working environment for those with disabilities, who may face barriers in accessing a work placement that will meet their needs.

18% of staff stated that while they see benefits to simulation generally, with regards to WBL qualifications, they must include experience in a real work environment. A few noted during discussions that these types of qualifications should be distinguished by inclusion of experience in a real work environment.

## **3 WBL and socio-economic links**

The role of work-based learning and its connection to lifelong learning evidenced from scoping findings were highlighted to attendees. They were then asked if they thought this was important enough to reflect in the definition.

### **Findings**

90% of attendees agreed it was important to reference lifelong learning in the definition. The other 10% noted that there was a connection between lifelong learning and WBL, but that it was not necessary to include this in a definition. One staff member highlighted that lifelong learning is bigger than WBL, as it applies to all qualifications.



During discussion there was vast support for the inclusion of lifelong learning in our definition. Some attendees noted that general SQA messaging around the link between lifelong learning and all qualifications could be enhanced. The importance of re-skilling and up-skilling within the modern career was also discussed, and attendees agreed that a culture of lifelong learning through WBL qualifications is key to navigating career pathways. A couple of attendees highlighted that lifelong learning may appeal to adult learners but not school learners.

## **Recommendations**

We should consider audiences when highlighting lifelong learning. Lifelong learning should be referenced across all types of qualifications, not only WBL qualifications. There is a further need for consideration on how lifelong learning links to the Hayward and Withers recommendations, for example, to digital learning diploma. While feedback from the workshop polls was to incorporate lifelong learning into a definition, this was contradicted by discussion around lifelong learning applying to all qualifications. It is recommended that we consider including this in the wider strategy to highlight its importance in all learning, but not as part of the WBL definition.

The second aspect of this consideration asked attendees to consider if the WBL strategy should focus on economic benefits or also include societal benefits. Scoping findings were summarised around the clear connection of WBL to the wider economy, while also noting the growing evidence that WBL does provide advantages for both the learner and society through inclusivity, enabling career opportunities and advancement, achieving qualifications, appealing to marginalised youth, and community-based learning initiatives. This was then linked back to SQA's role in supplying products that deliver learners ready for the workforce and able to contribute to society.

## **Findings**

92% of attendees indicated that it was important to reference the connection between WBL and its socio-economic benefits. Some attendees expressed that reference should sit within the wider strategy and not within the definition. Others noted that benefits to the economy may not be engaging to learners, whereas societal contributions may be more appealing.

## **Recommendations**

Internal feedback provided overwhelming support for including the societal as well as economic benefits of WBL qualifications in our definition. We should consider messaging for external communications and how this may need to be adapted for different audiences, as well as engaging with the Business Development Directorate on their messaging around this. We should engage with external stakeholders and gather feedback on what aspects would be appealing and important to them.

## **4 Prioritising key criteria of WBL**

We provided attendees with a list of eight criteria connected to WBL identified from scoping activities, and asked attendees to rate them in order of importance from an SQA product perspective. Attendees ranked them in the following order (from most to least important):

- ◆ At least some learning occurs in the workplace.
- ◆ An element of assessment occurs in the workplace.
- ◆ Individual achieves a recognised qualification.
- ◆ Evidence should be provided of merging theory and practice.
- ◆ Combines and evidence technical, personal and social competences.
- ◆ Incorporates and recognises formal and informal learning.
- ◆ Opportunity for different experiences for each learner (flexible and personal learning).
- ◆ Links to addressing Scotland's skills gap.

## Recommendations

This could also be tested with external audiences to gauge any similarities or differences in priorities and understanding.

## 5 SQA products and WBL

We asked attendees to consider types of SQA qualifications and to state which they would categorise as WBL.

**Table 1: Percentage of attendees identifying each product type as WBL**

Product type	% identified as WBL
Scottish Vocational Qualification (SVQ)	56%
Professional Development Award (PDA)	46%
Skills for Work (SfW)	39%
Higher National Qualification (HNC and HND)	31%
Alternative Competence-Based Qualification (CBQ)	26%
Street Works Award	26%
National Progression Award (NPA)	17%
Advanced Certificate and Advanced Diploma	9%
National Certificate (NC)	4%
Advanced Higher	2%
Scottish Baccalaureate	2%

During further discussion, attendees noted uncertainty in whether each product type can be clearly categorised as WBL or not WBL. This discussion centred around qualification design principles, as most attendees agreed that if these incorporated an element of learning in a real work environment, then the qualification could be categorised as WBL. For some qualification types, such as HNC and HND, there was more uncertainty and may depend on the subject area. Attendees also noted that they were unfamiliar with some qualifications, and therefore they were unable to determine if it was WBL. SfW was an example of this, with a couple of attendees noting that SfW qualifications sound like they should be WBL but do not always include a real work environment and are currently certified as National 4.

Therefore, it is possible that learners are not aware that they have studied SfW, which should be addressed as part of our work to achieve parity of esteem.

NPAs also divided opinion as to whether they were WBL qualifications, with some attendees raising the point that the design principles state that an employer should be involved in design and maintenance.

## **Recommendations**

This information highlights focus areas for engaging with staff around what WBL is and what it is not, clarifying our criteria and product types through engagement and internal documentation. If there is uncertainty within the organisation, that will also exist amongst external stakeholders, and clarity is also required externally. Our work will include designing infographics customised to SQA products and testing these on an internal audience.

## **6 Categorisation in WBL**

Three examples were provided from the scoping activities and put to attendees. We asked them to determine whether these would be useful for SQA products in providing clarity and understanding via a visual diagram. Responses were in favour of this approach; however attendees did highlight that out of the three examples provided, none were an ideal fit for our WBL products and we would need to form our own model.

## **Recommendations**

We should design visual models defining different types of WBL that are customised to SQA products, and test these on external audience.

## **7 Test definitions**

Four definitions were provided for attendees to comment and feedback on. A summary of discussion themes is as follows:

- ◆ Consideration of learners, that the definition should speak to learners of all ages (now and in the future), avoiding the use of complex ideas and wording.
- ◆ The definition should make WBL qualifications appealing to learners.
- ◆ The definition should not be too long, use jargon or use terminology that does not connect with all audiences.
- ◆ There were conflicting views on whether there should be different definitions for different audiences. Some supported this, while others noted a good definition should be clear for all and it could be insulting to provide different definitions to different audiences.
- ◆ Include mention of development in collaboration with employers and experts.
- ◆ Focus the definition on qualifications and not learning in general.
- ◆ Ensure the definition is specific and not trying to encompass all that WBL can be.

## **WBL model engagement workshops (internal and external stakeholders)**

In 2023, we took the findings of our internal workshops, scoping results and general work to date to various external stakeholders through attendance at Advisory Council, ETP forum and Qualifications Committee. We gathered input and initial thoughts around the general WBL strategy and presented potential definitions and the use of a WBL model. This feedback was combined with internal findings and informed the next stage of how we shape our model and marketing campaign.

Subsequently, four more engagement sessions took place in January 2024 and followed up on recommendations made in the initial workshops in 2023. Three different models and criteria, along with some WBL strategy promotional materials, were shared with participants, who provided their feedback and suggestions. One of the sessions was an internal stakeholder workshop; and the other three sessions engaged with external stakeholders such as the Scottish Government, Skills Development Scotland, Scottish Training Federation and their members, Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework and Education Scotland.

### **Internal workshops**

From the internal workshops, much of the discussion centred around where our qualification types fit in the model. Some noted that design principles should be used; however, based on our research, there is some variation from the design principles for certain products. We also noted that some products such as Higher National Qualifications are varied in their qualification requirements, with sectors such as Construction having practical workplace learning and/or assessment requirements in mandatory units, but others such as Social Sciences not containing a mandatory unit which requires experience in the workplace.

Internal feedback also highlighted that one of the models could indicate that the size and location of the circles which contained the different categories of WBL may indicate importance to one over the others.

There were also some suggestions regarding the types of WBL:

- ◆ work preparation learning
- ◆ work-related learning
- ◆ workplace learning

Some discussion addressed that perhaps only two are needed, that work-related learning could be combined into work preparation learning. Others indicated that the three types are required to cover all our range of products. However, as previously noted, our products are varied in their requirements and having three categories ensures that all products available to learners are clearly represented.

It was also noted that the criteria could be useful for educators but may be too detailed for learners. This is something HNVQ Policy Team will consider and discuss further. Colleagues agreed that linking to case studies and providing pathway information could be beneficial in providing further context to the model.

## External workshops

Generally, the idea of the model was well received, and participants commented that it could play a key role in highlighting the importance of demonstrating the options available to learners. When looking at the different stages of the WBL model, participants suggested that three stages were required but further refining of 'work preparation' and 'work-related' is essential to show key differences.

External stakeholders welcomed the inclusion of qualification types (as general examples) and provided general feedback on which model style was preferred, citing reasons such as not indicating any type of learning is more important than others. Feedback was also provided on the criteria for each type; this feedback has been noted and adjustments to the criteria have been made accordingly.

The use of case studies was again welcomed with suggestions to show industry progression examples, and some participants offered to provide potential case study options.

There was some discussion around virtual learning and what constitutes real workplace learning. Education Scotland believe that online learning is real workplace learning. This is an area that we have considered before but further research is required.

Participants provided suggestions around changing the wording of WBL 'stages', as it indicates learners must go through one stage to progress to the next. This has since been changed to 'types' instead.

In June 2024, we collaborated with the Learner and Parent Engagement Team and the Learner Panel, who facilitated workshops in two high schools, presenting the model and corresponding criteria to learners, checking awareness of our WBL qualifications. The learners provided key feedback on the definitions and asked for SQA to use simple, concise language. We took that on board and updated the definitions and criteria for each type of WBL. Learners commented that the colours should be updated to be more visually engaging and appealing.

Learners also noted that pathways to college or university, apprenticeships or employment, along with learning and assessments demands of the qualifications would be useful information to know. This is something that HNVQ Policy Team will investigate further as we develop information around our WBL qualifications.

## Summary

Our initial literature review played a key role in informing a potential need for a WBL definition and model. This in turn helped shape our internal and external engagement workshops, which welcomed the introduction of a WBL model and using criteria for different stages as SQA's WBL definition. The proposed development of case studies, pathways and a model with interactive functionality was widely welcomed by a variety of stakeholders. Feedback on the visual aspects of the model was noted and used to make initial adjustments before presenting to learners.

These workshops also facilitated networking opportunities and awareness of our stakeholders' and partners' work, encouraging collaboration and a joined-up approach.

Based on the feedback we received, we have identified two models and made adjustments to the WBL criteria. We will take these forward with Communications and Marketing colleagues to draft content for our website, social media channels, marketing campaigns and publications.

In March 2024, we provided an update to the Qualifications Committee, which included a presentation of the preliminary models of WBL. The committee was supportive of the WBL strategy and noted that the model gives clarity. There was discussion of the word 'vocational', of where it is appropriate to include simulation, and of the need to ensure that the visual model presents the types of WBL equally.

We responded to this feedback by exploring the use of the word 'vocational' further through an internal article aimed at staff.

Learner engagement informed our final version of the visual model, definitions and criteria, which has been published externally on [our website](#). We have engaged extensively with Communications and Marketing colleagues to ensure case studies will be adopted and added to our website in 2025. As SQA transitions to Qualifications Scotland, we are hoping to remove some of the limitations to the existing website and build on it to ensure a positive and interactive experience for all stakeholders.

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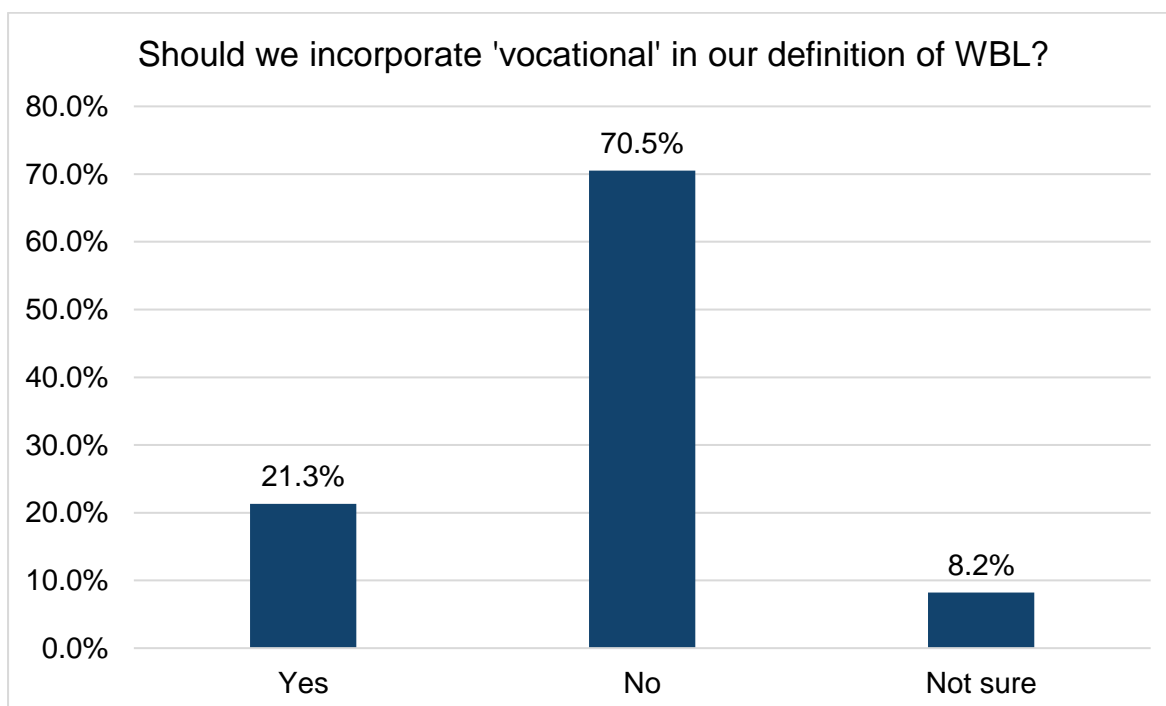
## Appendix: Internal engagement poll results

**Table 2: Number of attendees in initial engagement sessions in 2023**

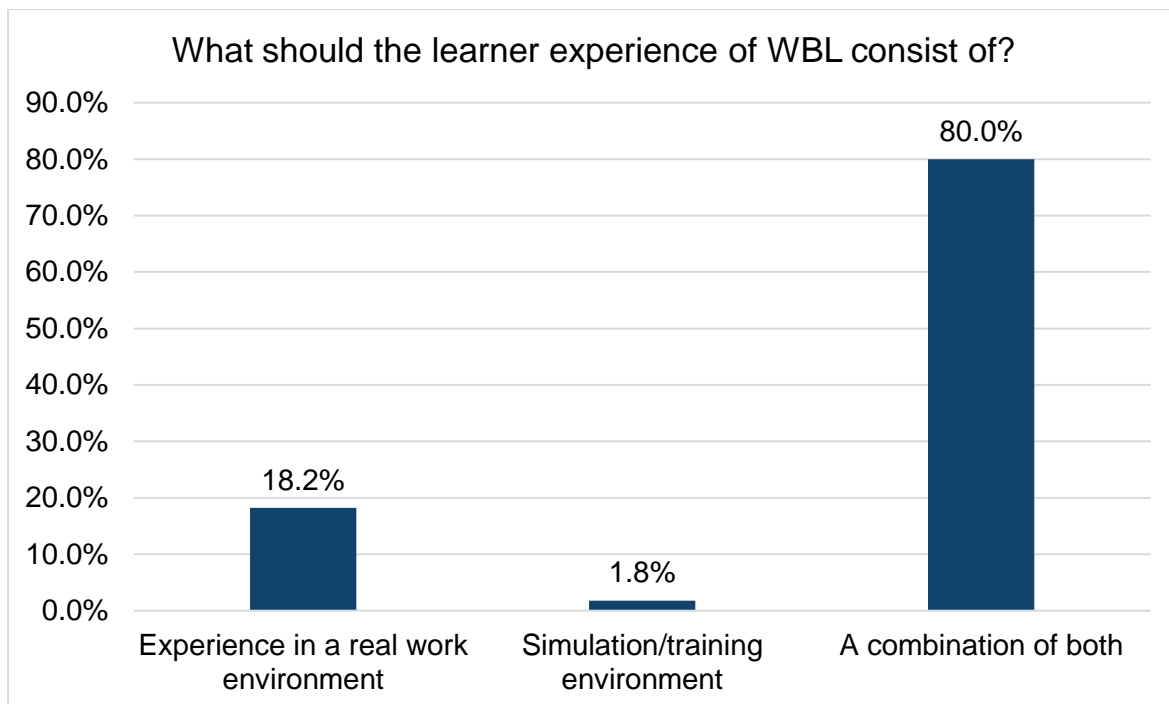
Directorate	Number	%
Policy, Analysis and Standards	25	42%
Qualifications Development	26	44%
Operations	0	0%
Communications	1	2%
People	0	0%
Business Development	4	7%
Finance & CS*	1	2%
Business Systems	1	2%
Corporate Office	1	2%
<b>Total attendees</b>	<b>59</b>	

\*This directorate was renamed in 2024 and these two business areas separated into two different directorates.

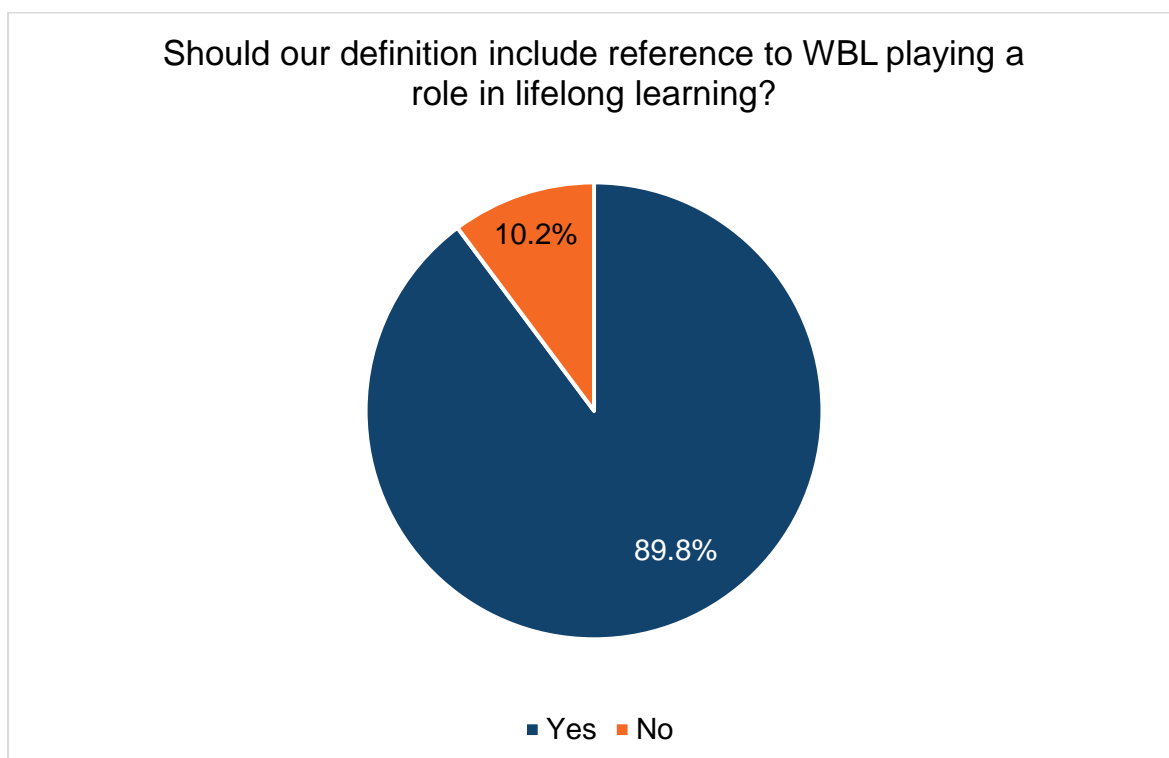
**Figure 2: Use of the word 'vocational' in the definition of WBL**



**Figure 3: Real work environment (RWE), simulation/ training, or a combination of both**



**Figure 4: Reference to lifelong learning in our definition**



**Figure 5: Importance of including socio-economic benefits from WBL in our definition**

