

Learning *from* Experience Trust

The Assessment of Prior Learning

An introduction for employers, employees and academic assessors

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FOREWORD

Employers can help themselves to enhance the skills and knowledge of their workforce by taking seriously the possibilities offered by the assessment of the learning that arises from experience by the Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL). This is quite simply a means of enabling individuals to demonstrate, first to themselves, and then to others, how much they have learned, and what skills they have acquired, no matter how they acquired them. Since most people know more than they assume they know, revealing it through systematic reflection on experience can not only tell employers all manner of things about their employees that they had no idea about, but it also can be a powerful motivator for spurring individuals to learn more. And that is what many employers need.

All employers know the importance of having employees who continue to learn. Often profitability depends on it. Changed procedures and new techniques lead to different requirements, and increasingly mean that many employees simply have to learn more in order to meet them. Updating skill enhancement is now obligatory in most sectors of business and industry.

Part of the continuing problem, however, of retraining, updating and skill enhancement is persuading sufficient numbers of the workforce that going on learning is not only essential as part of their work, but is directly connected with their own self-interest.

For both employers and employees, APEL can offer some response to that problem at higher education level. This is because learning from experience, and some qualifications gained already, can count towards a diploma, degree or post-graduate qualification as a result of schemes of credit accumulation and transfer established both nationally, and in many parts of the country. To tell employees that what they have learned on the job in their workplace can count towards a qualification can be a powerful encouragement to get going and learn more to achieve that desired qualification. When they also realise that they may get further recognition for what they have learned from the company's in-house provision then the motivation can be stronger.

Credit accumulation and transfer means that someone who has learned from a variety of places and in a variety of ways, say from the Open University, adult education classes, university, polytechnic or college following part of a degree course, or say a NVQ, or from work experience, or private reading and study, can claim formal recognition for any of that learning which meets the necessary academic requirements. For employers, the vital point to note is that work-based experiential learning - what someone has learned from their employment - becomes potentially recognisable, or credit. This is why it is possible to recommend to employers that they take APEL seriously as a useful addition to their existing range of retraining initiatives.

Employers who see their employees as their most important investment may well be attracted to the idea of APEL, and interested in developing schemes in collaboration with a university, polytechnic or college which not only gives proper recognition to work-based learning, but also enables programmes of study to be negotiated as a route

towards academic qualification whilst reducing the amount of company time for that study.

This paper has been written to explain to employees and their employers how the assessment of prior and experiential learning can be used for career and personal advancement by contributing towards academic qualifications. It outlines how individuals wishing to gain a new academic qualification, or improve on an existing one, can have all their relevant learning assessed, however it was acquired. The paper is also intended to help academic staff in institutions who wish to develop this approach to collaboration with employers.

After a general introduction the early sections, 'The Relevance of APL for Employers and Employees' and 'Assessment for Academic Credit - The Learner's Part' are written with employers and their employees in mind. The final section - 'Assessment for Academic Credit - The Assessor's Part' will be of particular interest to academic staff who may consider working as assessors. However, it is hoped that all readers will find something of interest to them in each section.

As this paper shows, the individual learner is responsible for making a claim for learning, and for producing evidence to support that claim. The paper is designed to help employers, line managers and training officers, as well as employees and academic staff, to identify and describe learning which may be considered for academic credit, and to produce evidence for detailed evaluation showing not only what skills have been acquired but what knowledge and conceptual bases lie behind these skills.

It is now possible for employing organisations to take advantage of the benefits offered by APEL in higher education by establishing working partnerships either with a university, polytechnic or college which has developed a CAT scheme. These arrangements can be negotiated on a consultancy basis.

As APEL in higher education can apply equally to learning from day-to-day work, learning from in-house training or learning from formal work-based agreements, the academic credit generated for some men and women can be considerable, so providing a powerful motivation for further self-development.

ASSESSING PRIOR LEARNING

Currently both employers and employees are aware of the need for a systematic approach to the development of a highly qualified and skilled work-force, and to the parallel development of a similarly qualified and skilled management of human resources. Both these developments can be facilitated by a whole-hearted commitment at employer and employee level to acquiring skills in the recognition and assessment of prior and experiential learning as a means of promoting effective human resource management.

APEL is now an accepted acronym. Assessment implies a professional judgment about the level and content of the knowledge being claimed by a learner. Prior refers to the fact that the learning being assessed has been fully acquired before the time of the assessment itself.

The term experiential needs rather more explanation. In one sense all learning is experiential, but the term is here used to describe learning which has not been formally assessed for, or towards, a recognised qualification. The distinction is therefore between “certificated” and “uncertificated” learning, where the former term implies a qualification and the latter the absence of one. This means that a mere certificate of attendance for a course of study which has not been formally assessed does not make the learning “certificated” - it is classified as experiential.

Much experiential learning is informally and perhaps incidentally (or accidentally!) acquired. It is nonetheless valid but it needs to be precisely identified and described before it can be assessed for credit in an academic or professional sense. It is also important to recognise the potential of such assessed learning in enhancing the learner’s sense of self-esteem and achievement.

Learning is therefore a comprehensive term. It does not matter why, how or where learning took place provided it is real and effective - part of “the furniture of the mind”. It can matter when it occurred because there can be what the jargon calls a “shelf-life” problem. Learning may become less than clear with the passage of time. It may even have been superseded or discredited. APEL is essentially concerned with experiential learning that is both reliable and valid, both for the learner and for those interested in the learner’s performance and potential.

The use of the allied acronym APL, as is perhaps now clear from the above, refers to all prior learning, certificated and uncertificated, brought forward at the time of assessment. Many candidates for assessment of academic credit toward a qualification claim learning of both types, and for them the process begins with the academic evaluation of their certificated learning, and moves on to the assessment of their uncertificated or experiential learning. The reason for this sequence is to ensure that uncertificated learning is additional to that which was acquired for any qualification gained, and for which credit has been awarded. In other words, it is important to avoid double counting, ie the awarding of credit twice for the same learning.

THE RELEVANCE OF APL AND APEL FOR EMPLOYERS AND EMPLOYEES

As already stated, the development of a highly qualified and skilled workforce at all levels of employer/employee is generally recognised as an important priority, especially in view of current trends (increasing applications of high technology at a time when the number of new young recruits to employment is going to decline substantially). For employers this emphasises the need for retraining, updating and motivating employees to meet the new challenges and to enhance career opportunities. In this context it is obviously an attractive proposition to acquire credit towards a higher education qualification (certificate, diploma, degree, honours degree, post-graduate diploma or master's degree) from one or more of at least four different sources.

- Existing qualifications at a lower level or at the same level as the one being sought.
- In-house training provided by the employer.
- Day-to-day experiential learning at the workplace or through leisure pursuits.
- Work-based learning agreements negotiated between employer, employee and an accredited academic institution to achieve academic credit for individual employees.¹

Qualifications obtained in this way have several advantages.

- They can be largely work-based, require minimal release in working hours, and make a positive contribution to enhanced performance at work.
- They can be seen as addressing simultaneously the needs of the employing organisation, and the career aspirations and prospects of the employee.
- The modes and pace of the learning involved can be negotiated (and, if necessary, renegotiated) to suit the changing needs and circumstances of the employer and employee.
- The employing organisation works in close partnership with a higher education institution, but as the latter does not prescribe the syllabus or the modes of assessment to be used there is a commitment to a negotiated outcome.

Where the assessment of prior learning and achievement is concerned, a whole range of methods is available. Nevertheless, it is possible to suggest basic guidelines which can be applicable to all cases. What follows is an attempt to establish those guidelines.

Inevitably some of the procedures, particularly when negotiation is involved, take company and academic staff time. As a rough guide it takes one hour for a member of academic staff to scrutinise an application for initial assessment and a further hour or two of discussion with the candidate to agree the content of a learning claim and its supporting evidence. Final assessment can take another hour or so. In all this amounts to between four and five hours' time.

Sometimes several individuals can be treated as a group with consequent reductions in costs. The section 'Assessment for Academic Credit - The Assessor's Part' outlines recommended procedures which are designed to limit costs.

¹ Work-based learning agreements are fully described in 'Learning While Earning: Learning Contracts for Employees'. Gerald Dearden, Learning from Experience Trust, 1989.

Experience has already shown that the cost is less than that of undertaking a formal course of study awarding equivalent credit, especially where the academic credit gained is reasonably substantial. In addition, successful claimants save considerable time, in effect gaining a qualification through an accelerated route and, because time off for study is also reduced, without interruption to the normal rhythm of working. Furthermore, there are clear benefits in terms of personal, academic and career development because individuals making successful claims get a considerable boost to self-confidence when they find they are already well on the way to a higher qualification.

ASSESSMENT FOR ACADEMIC CREDIT - THE LEARNER'S PART

The process essentially begins and ends with the aims and intentions of the individual learner. Each needs to decide, with help and counselling if necessary, what qualification is sought and what existing knowledge, skills and understanding might contribute toward it. A sensible starting point, therefore, is a decision on the part of the learner, with help if necessary from the line-manager and/or counselor, about the suitability of the subject area for any future learning/training programme, eg will it be in business and management studies, or computer science, or other technical studies, or communication skills, training process skills, or the financial services area etc? By dialogue, general objectives can be agreed and the encouragement of reflection on future learning intentions can produce some constructive ideas about the outlines of a suitable programme. Only then is it time to reflect on the past in order to discover what existing knowledge, skills and understanding can already contribute to the likely learning programmes and the qualification sought. The result may well be a claim on the part of the learner to relevant learning which can be evaluated by qualified academic assessors, for credit toward the qualification. This claim to relevant learning may well include that which has already been formally assessed as well as that which has not ie experiential learning.

A good way for a learner to set about this task of preparing a claim which includes both formally assessed and unassessed learning is to fill in as fully as possible an application form which asks (among other things) for the following information.

- Formal education from age 16 (if any).
- Academic and training qualifications gained (if any).
- Any other courses of study including non-award bearing ones (if any).
- Details of employment and work experience.
- Additional information about learning from experience in a variety of roles not necessarily in the narrow work context.
- Subject areas or themes which the applicant wishes to study and for which a qualification is sought.
- Preferred modes of study, e.g. full-time: part-time: evenings only: mixed mode: distance learning: paired learning.
- What events in personal and working life have led the applicant to want to return to study, and what contribution to career and personal development is this study intended to make?

Filling in such a form enables an applicant first to see whether any prior certificated learning may contribute toward the qualification sought, and secondly to consider whether any additional uncertificated learning has been acquired which is likely to be relevant.

Providing additional information requested in the fifth point is an opportunity

- To reflect systematically on past experience.
- To identify significant and relevant learning and achievements to date.
- To build up a comprehensive picture of evidence that the learning claimed has really been acquired.
- To assess the claim and the learning with a view to recommending the award of

academic credit.

The first three activities are essentially the responsibility of the learner, who may benefit from help in the processes of reflection, identification and synthesis. The fourth activity falls to an academically qualified and experienced assessor whose recommendations will require suitable professional confirmation before an award of academic credit is made. The assessor's role is outlined in the following section, but the learner's sequence of activities deserves further consideration here.

It has already been mentioned that before experiential (uncertificated) learning can be assessed it must be properly identified and accurately described. Furthermore, evidence must be provided that the learner possesses, and can apply, the knowledge, skills and understanding claimed. The onus is on the learner to provide both the claim and the evidence but he/she will often need help in doing this to the satisfaction of the assessor/s.

A good starting point is to look at a typical degree syllabus, especially of a modular type covering the disciplinary area/s involved in the learning claim. The applicant can then reflect on his/her familiarity with the content of each option or module of the syllabus. The next step could well be to review specimen past examination papers to see which of them could be answered with confidence. This facilitates the identification and description of relevant learning.

The question then arises as to how a claim to have acquired that learning will be substantiated. Evidence will vary according to the disciplinary area/s involved, and one or more of the following may prove helpful

- Testimonials and references from appropriately experienced referees covering specific areas of enquiry for which evidence may be required.
- Listing past achievements and the learning sequence which was essential before they could be successfully completed.
- Producing monographs, articles from periodicals etc, written by the claimant.
- Listing artefacts or other tangible evidence of learning and skill.
- Undertaking simulation exercises to illustrate mastery and/or understanding.
- Offering to sit written challenge tests or undertake practical problem-solving.
- Offering to be interviewed by specialists in the relevant disciplines.
- Participating in peer group dialogue, discussion and exploration of relevant fields and issues.

Demanding though this process is, it has often resulted in a real boost to the self-confidence of the applicants, to a fuller awareness of their own learning experience, and to a clarification of their future learning objectives.

The procedures described in this section have sought to highlight the part that a learner (employee) has to play in making a claim for an award of academic credit toward a desired qualification. In the next section the role of the academic assessor who will evaluate this claim for credit is outlined.

ASSESSMENT FOR ACADEMIC CREDIT; THE ASSESSOR'S PART

If a participating employee submits in the first instance an application form, completed as fully as possible, on the lines already suggested, then the assessor can make a number of preliminary and provisional judgments.

- 1 The likely academic credit arising from formal qualifications, i.e. certificated learning, e.g. a relevant HND, normally gives credit at least equivalent to the first year of a three-year degree, ie 120 credits at level one in the CNAA scheme.²
- 2 Whether any additional credit is likely to arise from uncertificated learning, e.g. a claimant may have significant additional learning from in-company courses which have not hitherto been assessed but could qualify for academic credit at undergraduate (or postgraduate) level.
- 3 What additional information would be needed before any relevant uncertificated (experiential) learning could be assessed, e.g. a claimant may have referred to work-based learning, perhaps in computer studies, without giving enough detail or evidence for an assessor to be able to make a judgment.
- 4 How much of the total (general) credit arising from 1 and 2 above is likely to be relevant to the qualification being sought, ie how much specific credit is likely to arise, and from which areas of the applicant's prior learning?³

Procedure 1 is becoming more and more straightforward as case law is created through credit ratings being established for existing qualifications.

If procedures 2, 3 and 4 are relevant the process becomes more complex and involves the following stages.

- a) Identify experiential learning which could be relevant for the award of general academic credit.
- b) Identify within it experiential learning which is directly relevant for specific academic credit, i.e. in relation to the particular learning programme envisaged.
- c) Ensure that none of this experiential learning is "double-counting" and has already been granted as credit within any formal qualifications held by the applicant.
- d) Judge whether further detail is needed about the experiential learning claimed, which is necessary before it can be academically assessed.
- e) Check that adequate evidence for the experiential learning has been provided.
- f) If necessary, write to the applicant seeking any further information required under d) or e) and arranging an interview if this seems appropriate.

² Alternative and more detailed approaches to APEL are covered in two LET publications: 'A Learner's Introduction to Building on Your Experience'. John Buckle, Learning from Experience Trust, 1988; and 'Handbook for the Assessment of Experiential Learning', County of Avon Education Department and Learning from Experience Trust, 1987.

³ The term 'general credit' applies to the whole of an applicant's prior learning which qualifies for an award, whereas specific credit applies only to prior learning which is directly relevant to the intended learning programme of the applicant, e.g. general credit for prior learning in music and drama might not give any specific credit toward a degree programme in computer science.

- g) Make a provisional assessment of the likely academic credit arising from the experiential learning for which sound evidence has been provided. This is done by assessing its equivalence to known components of relevant courses which lead to formal qualifications. Similarly, its level can be assessed.
- h) Forward all relevant papers and evidence to an appropriate specialist assessor for an independent and detailed assessment.

The specialist assessor goes through essentially similar evaluating procedures to those involved in the initial assessment, preferably without knowing what recommendations the first assessor is making. The two sets of recommendations are compared when the specialist assessor's evaluation has been completed and an agreement is reached about the final recommendation for amount, level and grade of the specific academic credit arising from the applicant's prior learning.

Finally, the recommendations are forwarded to an appropriate validating body (a university, polytechnic, college or CNAAs) which makes a firm decision about the amount, level and grade of the academic credit to be awarded for prior learning, whether certificated, uncertificated, or both.

CONCLUSION

In these ways APEL can make a valuable contribution to retraining and updating for employers, and correspondingly be an important addition to the ways higher education can collaborate with the world of work. APEL can be equally effective at senior and middle to lower levels of employees within companies because it speaks to the motivation and self-esteem of individuals and so relates to their performance. It is one of those rare and happy cases where it can be accurately said that everyone wins and no one loses.