

the Learning from Experience Trust

Effective Practice in the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL)

Based on material produced in: *Mapping APEL: Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning in English Higher Education* by The Learning from Experience Trust (LET), March 2000

[APEL defined](#)

[How credit principles enable the award of APEL](#)

[Institutional arrangements for APEL within HE](#)

[Effective accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning \(APEL\)](#)

[Information](#)

[Guidance](#)

[The learning claim](#)

[Assessing prior learning](#)

[Validation and Quality Assurance](#)

[Equity Issues](#)

[Centralising vs devolving APEL procedures](#)

APEL Defined

The accreditation of prior **experiential** learning (APEL) is the award of credit for learning based on prior experience. This may be learning derived from work, community or volunteer experience, which **has not previously been assessed and/or awarded credit**. APEL has potential significance for those who, through life and work experience, have developed knowledge, skills and analytical abilities that are comparable to those which may already exist within recognised awards. APEL offers the possibility of recognising learners' prior knowledge, within an assessment regime which has the same rigour as that applied to any other learning at the appropriate level.

Appropriate learning wherever it occurs, provided it can be assessed, may be recognised for academic credit towards an award

Credit is not awarded on the basis of experience per se: it is awarded on the basis of what is **learned** from the experience. Individuals can often share the same experience but derive entirely different learning as a result. It is the evidenced learning that potentially attracts credit, not the experience.

It is important to note that the terms APL (Accreditation of Prior Learning) and AP[E]L (Accreditation of Prior & Experiential Learning), which are also widely used in relation to learning recognition claims, are more generic than the definition given above, in that they also embrace learning which has been acquired and evidenced prior to study on a particular programme of learning. For example any **certificated** learning (such as HNC or HND qualifications) which has been accepted as sufficient to permit access, with advanced standing, to a particular course or programme would involve an entirely separate process from that involved in APEL. This is because such awards have already been subject to external scrutiny and nationally regulated procedures through the original awarding body. The issue for institutions, in such cases, is of finding a match between the prior certificated learning and the learning necessary for full achievement of the designated award (which the applicant wishes to achieve at the end of the programme).

How credit principles enable the award of APEL

APEL and credit are intrinsically linked, because any system which places emphasis on prior accreditation must have clear and transparent standards against which to develop the evidential portfolios which form the basis of APEL claims. In credit based systems learning outcomes are specified in coherent groups to form units or modules. Each of these units carries within it clearly specified learning outcomes with their associated assessment criteria. This provides an **explicit description** of both the nature of learning required and the manner in which it must be evidenced. These units of assessment do not stipulate either the mode of learning or assessment to be applied but the required outcomes of the learning and the standards of performance against which it must be assessed. They can thus embrace the full diversity of ways in which learning is achieved.

The application of credit principles within all learning design, therefore, establishes clear and unequivocal statements of requirement (or standards), for which the learner must accumulate appropriate evidence. Hence, it is normally the case that institutions, which apply APEL procedures, also organize their curricula within a modular or unit structure, which allows for coherent accumulation of discrete credit towards awards. The same structures can similarly enable the other APL award types described above, by providing the explicit information against which comparisons can be made.

Key elements of APEL practice and procedure, which were identified within LET's 'Mapping APEL' report, are outlined below and provide useful guidelines on good practice in the development of APEL within HE institutions. The principles described will also be of relevance to other learning providers.

Institutional arrangements for APEL within HE

LET (2000) noted the following common attributes in APEL procedures across their case study institutions:

- All have ways of **informing students about APEL opportunities and providing initial advice.**
- All **offer guidance in preparing an APEL claim.**
- Each claim is assessed and, in most institutions, there **is full separation of the advisor role from the assessor role.**
- Each institution has designated **a formal body, which is responsible for the award of credit.**

They also identified important differences in the ways in which institutions approach the above tasks. These reflect the particularities of institutional missions, markets and philosophies of learning, and, in part, the choices they have made about APEL arrangements.

The survey report suggests that there is no single approach to APEL, but some 'bottom line' practices exist which are essential for ensuring transparency and accessibility. These are outlined below.

Effective Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) practices

Information

It is essential to make widely available information about the potential for APEL and what it requires.

Students cannot demand what they do not know exists. While the survey by Merrifield et al indicated that 74% of institutions claimed that APEL is included in prospectuses and catalogues, a cursory review suggested that APEL is not highly visible in many of these. The survey showed that special APEL student guides were provided by 35% of respondents, but most HEIs placed a heavy reliance on students asking admissions officers or faculty for information. The survey showed that there was no independent source of information for mature students about the potential for APEL, so students are very dependent on institutional information.

Effective communication tools are clear, accessible and targeted to the audience.

The case study research collected examples of written information and guides for students, including examples of good practice. Guides should be clearly written, illustrated with drawings and cartoons, have a 'frequently asked questions' section and give a clear account of the evidence requirements for APEL awards.

Dissemination of information to potential students needs to reach out to where they are.

The case study revealed that the most effective dissemination of information to potential students about APEL is targeted to specific populations and reaches them where they are. In CPD programmes this means advertisement mailings to professional organisations and their employers. Promotional efforts include the possibility for credit to be gained on the basis of prior learning. In widening participation efforts there may be outreach staff in community-based centres who disseminate information about the university and provide initial information and advice to potential students about APEL, so that they can decide if it is an appropriate route for them.

Guidance

Most students require some level of guidance in order to meet HE expectations for APEL.

The survey revealed that most HEIs provide APEL guidance on an individual basis. Some offer group workshops or a module, which may carry its own credit (in addition to the credit for prior learning claimed). Some institutions are developing on-line and CD-ROM approaches to APEL guidance. However it is offered, guidance is an essential element in opening APEL to larger numbers of students.

Group guidance provides peer support and is cost-effective for institutions, but some individual support is also necessary for many students.

Group, rather than individual, guidance is generally cheaper to provide. It may also have other virtues:

- it helps overcome the isolation of students working on APEL;
- provides peer support; and
- helps integrate students new to higher education.

Some level of individualised support is also likely to be needed, especially for students who have little experience with courses and academic writing.

While it is probably simplest to offer group guidance sessions to cohorts of students with some commonality of experience, for example, professional or work-based groups, a number of institutions offer APEL modules to mixed groups of students. Some of these are part of outreach efforts to educationally excluded populations. The modules focus on:

- identifying learning that has taken place and reflecting on it to deepen insights;
- developing a portfolio of evidence for learning; and
- writing a reflective learning statement.

This approach to guidance is seen as a learning experience in itself and, because reflective learning is a difficult process, it is often regarded as appropriate to award credit for completion of such a module, over and above the credit claim based on prior learning.

The learning claim

Flexible learning options require approval of students' proposals for their learning programme

The survey showed that institutions either agree the amount and level of credit to be claimed before a claim is submitted, or determine this in the assessment process. Those institutions with the most flexible learning opportunities for students, including negotiated awards and a variety of options, approved plans before students invested a great deal of time and energy in developing their claim. They required students to put in an initial proposal for the learning that they intended to claim, and have that approved as part of their overall learning programme. In other institutions students match APEL claims to the learning outcomes of specific modules and there is no requirement for a proposal stage.

Where portfolios are the vehicle for the learning claim, transparency and structure are needed to clarify expectations for the student and simplify assessment procedures

The survey revealed that portfolios are commonly used for APEL. It appears that more tightly structured portfolio design criteria, in terms of defining what materials should be included and how they should be organised, ease the processes of both preparation and assessment. Transparency about what is expected in a portfolio helps avoid the risk of students arriving with boxes of materials.

Assessing Prior Learning

Assessing prior learning requires transparent and agreed parameters for assessment, arrived at through analogy with taught courses.

In some respects assessing prior learning is no different from assessing any other kind of learning; assessors measure the evidence presented against the learning outcomes claimed. In many institutions, however, APEL assessment is seen as more difficult than assessing taught courses. Part of the difficulty is gauging the volume of credit points that are appropriate, and sometimes the level.

Equity between APEL and taught course assessment is essential.

Assessors need transparent and agreed parameters for volume and level of credit (often arrived at through analogy with a taught course) and a tightly organised, clear learning claim. These can only be arrived at through comparison with the more familiar assessment of taught courses, and it is essential that there be equity (for example in expectations of how many of the learning outcomes must be met, and what is the threshold achievement level). Gauging volume and level of credit takes practice, which comes with experience.

A variety of assessment tools expands the flexibility of a learning programme.

The APEL review revealed that, while the portfolio dominates, oral examinations (interviews or vivas) are also reasonably common, either in addition to or instead of the portfolio. Interviews and vivas were used in 54% of institutions surveyed. The interview or viva is used in different ways as part of assessing learning. It may be used when assessors have questions about certain written claims, and it allows candidates to support their claim further. It may also be used as an alternative to written claims; for example, the survey revealed that, in one case study site, vivas were used with students who had considerable recent HE course experience. In such cases the viva was seen as a quick, and relatively easy way, for them to evidence claims for learning in particular learning areas. Use of a variety of assessment tools appears to expand the flexibility of the programme.

Validation and Quality Assurance

Validation and quality assurance of APEL must parallel that for taught courses, but there may be specialised bodies involved.

The survey revealed that quality assurance (QA) procedures for APEL are not substantially different from those for taught courses. The key QA elements are:

- validation of credit (by committees and external examiners);
- monitoring the consistency of application of APEL regulations and case law; and
- regular review of claims, approvals, and appeals.

APEL assessments are most often validated by departmental or faculty committees. Institutions with centralised APEL procedures have a specialist committee that reviews and validates all APEL claims. Devolved institutions bring APEL claims to the regular examination boards of different subject areas.

External examiners should play the same role with regard to APEL accreditation as with taught courses, but the differences mean may necessitate additional staff development.

Within HEIs examination committees (devolved or specialist) can be expected to have external examiners attached to them. The survey showed that only 38% of respondents said that external examiners reviewed APEL assessments. LET concluded that possible explanations for the latter finding were that:

- APEL claims are most often made at level 1 where external examiners seldom play an active role; or
- external examiners oversee the processes but not the specific claims.

Equity issues

APEL advocates in most institutions fear criticism and skepticism from their academic colleagues on quality issues, and, perhaps as a result, have established highly rigorous assessment and validation procedures. Consequently, it can appear that APEL students must achieve a higher standard than students on taught courses.

Many institutions expect APEL students to match all learning outcomes and at a high level, but do not expect taught students to do so.

In taught courses students are commonly assessed on only a sample of the learning outcomes for the programme and a pass mark is applied. While some institutions apply the same expectations to APEL, many expect APEL students to provide evidence for 100% of the learning outcomes.

APEL credit, unlike taught credit, is often ungraded.

The survey revealed that most institutions do not give grades to APEL credit. This can limit its usefulness to students in, for example, an honours degree programme. While academics may argue that it is difficult to grade an APEL claim because there is, usually, no norm reference point, the most experienced APEL staff suggest that it is not very different from grading student papers.

In contrast with their taught courses, many institutions do not agree the amount of credit to be claimed until assessment is completed.

Inequity may also arise when there is no prior agreement of the amount and level of credit that can be claimed. Most students enter taught courses with a clear concept of the volume and level of credit that may be awarded at the end of the course. Yet many institutions determine the volume and level of APEL credit that can be claimed at the assessment stage of the process.

Centralising vs devolving APEL procedures

The survey revealed that HEIs are spread on a rough scale from centralised to devolved in terms of how APEL procedures are organised.

<i>Centralised</i> <i>Devolved</i>
Institutions with strong central control structures, in which APEL is administered by central staff and common procedures	Institutions in which many APEL functions are devolved to the level of faculties and schools. with some central QA

At the centralised pole, APEL guidance, assessment and accreditation are co-ordinated from a central institutional unit (which may be a special APEL co-ordination unit or part of another unit supporting flexible learning paths). Academic staff in departments are involved as subject assessors, but most of the activity is at the central level.

Devolved APEL structures move responsibilities for guidance, assessment and accreditation to the level of school or department. There are still some responsibilities for the central institution, particularly quality assessment, but most APEL activity happens at the 'local' level.

Centralised structures offer the most streamlined organisation, are strong on consistency and reliability and need little staff training and support since a small number of staff are involved in APEL. When delivery systems are centralised each staff member gathers more experience and gains expertise. When assessment and validation are centralised the institution can be sure of consistency and reliability. Operations can be monitored because they are happening in fewer places and records are together.

But there are also problems associated with the centralised model. There is the problem of ownership, in that academic staff may view APEL as the 'property' of a central body. Dependency on the resources of a central unit may also limit the growth and spread of APEL. Centralisation may raise difficulties with: reaching every student; incorporation in every programme; and customisation. If APEL does not become fully incorporated within the life of the institution, it may remain somewhat at the margins.

Decentralising offers the potential for widespread ownership, for APEL 'being on every lecturer's desk'. But deliberate effort is required to maintain consistency and validity and there is a need for considerable investment in staff training and support. Because staff members only deal sporadically with APEL they do not build up the level of expertise and confidence of a central APEL adviser. There are also accountability issues such as the assurance of quality and the monitoring of equity and consistency. The evaluation process also becomes more difficult when all processes and records are maintained at departmental level.

It appears that both extremes, of devolution or central control, create organisational problems and incur costs. The survey indicated that none of the case study institutions is situated at either pole. Rather, each institution has struggled with the opposing tendencies and has come to different solutions.

Conclusion

The examples of institutional practice illustrated above provide valuable information for those wishing to implement APEL practices and procedures. In advising and assessing on claims for credit for prior learning, delivery institutions will benefit from the clarity of standards which is provided by applying credit principles to all learning provision. This is best achieved by adopting a curriculum design framework which includes coherent units of assessment, made up of clearly specified learning outcomes and associated criteria for assessment, which will provide clarity of expectation (of necessary learning and appropriate evidence) for learners, advisers and assessors who are involved in the APEL process.