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LET Downloads Introducing Learning from Experience

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Paper 1.

Survey of APEL in English Higher Education

Based on material produced in: **Mapping APEL: Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning in English Higher Education**

Report by Dr Juliet Merrifield

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Edited and updated 2014 by Dr Mike Field OBE

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1.1 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 (CNAA, 1988).

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).

1.2 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 of 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.

1.3 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.

1.4 Effective Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) practices

1.4.1 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.

1.4.2 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.

1.4.3 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.

1.4.4 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.

1.4.5 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.

1.4.6 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.

1.5 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.

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

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.

1.6 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.

Paper 2

AP(E)L Some Questions & Answers

An Overview of the Theory & Practice

A LET Discussion Document

Original Paper by Mike Field & Richard Heeks

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1. Introduction

For those of us who have enjoyed a traditional education, namely GCSE/O-Level, A-Level and University Degree in quick succession, the concept of the Accreditation of Prior (Experiential) Learning is baffling to say the least. For the uninitiated, the problem in understanding AP(E)L is twofold: first, it seems to be a complex concept, with an acronym whose meaning escapes all but the most hardcore educationalists; second, even when the concept is understood, the typical response is one of 'nice in theory, impossible in practice'. The aim of this guide is to explain clearly the concept of AP(E)L, and to show that is not only relatively easy to understand, but also perfectly possible to implement.

The basic principle of AP(E)L is that previous *learning*, no matter how, when or why it is acquired, can and should be accredited within the framework of formal education or training through a systematic and valid assessment process. AP(E)L can therefore be very useful for those who have acquired *skills* and *knowledge* through their work or life experience that has not been accredited anywhere, or those who have formal qualifications from one institution that are not recognised by another. This situation is potentially applicable to many sections of society, including (but by no means limited to) those applying for vocational qualifications, those applying to work in institutions with their own training framework, mature students and those with qualifications gained abroad which are not recognised in the UK.

One thing that AP(E)L does *not* give is credit for life experience alone. People do not receive recognition merely for their experiences in life, but rather for what they *learn* from those experiences. The distinction between experience and learning is an important one, for it is a misunderstanding of the aims of AP(E)L that leads some to believe that the process is an easy option which gives people credit and, ultimately, qualifications for doing little more than living their life. That AP(E)L is not a 'soft option' to enable layabouts to claim a formal degree from the University of Life will hopefully become clear in the course of this guide.

The final point to make in this brief introduction is that the concept of recognising and accrediting prior learning comprises two constituent parts: the Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) and the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL). Though for simplicity's sake I have hitherto made no distinction between the two, preferring to lump them together under the convenient umbrella term AP(E)L, it is important to understand the difference between APL and APEL, because AP(E)L can only be implemented successfully if both its fundamental elements are understood.

1.1 APL

The Accreditation of Prior Learning, or APL, is probably easier to understand and implement than APEL. APL is the recognition of formalised learning that has previously been assessed and/or awarded credit. An example of APL familiar to many with a traditional education is that of the university credit system, whereby a student wishing to transfer from one university to another halfway through their course can transfer course credits to their new university.

These credits recognise the learning assessed at the student's previous university and allow the student to start their course at their new university at an appropriate level, thereby removing the need for them to repeat material with which they are already familiar. Indeed, any form of certificated learning has the potential to permit access, with advanced standing, to a particular course or programme. APL is therefore not particularly difficult to implement, because a potential APL student's learning has already been subject to external scrutiny and nationally regulated procedures through the original awarding body.

It is not just students who can benefit from APL. For example, a doctor who has trained abroad may find that his or her medical degree is not officially recognised in the UK, yet clearly he or she possesses the necessary formalised training to work as a doctor. Though additional training may be required in some areas, for example to educate the doctor in matters relating specifically to the medical profession in the UK, it would obviously be ludicrous to require the doctor to start undergraduate training from scratch at a British university so that he or she could obtain a British medical degree. With APL, all the doctor's formal learning would be recognised, thus allowing him or her to complete the remaining necessary training and begin practising in the UK in a far shorter time span.

In short, APL is a well-established and accepted practice, not only in the academic world but also in the workplace. Its benefits are clear, and there is no reason why it cannot be implemented more widely. Discussion of APL's implementation can be found later in the guide.

1.2 APEL

The Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning, or APEL, is the award of credit for learning based on prior experience. This learning 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, by means of an assessment regime which has the same rigour as that applied to any other learning at the appropriate level. As explained in the initial introduction, credit is not awarded on the basis of experience per se, but rather on the basis of what is learnt from the experience. Individuals can often share the same experience but derive entirely different learning as a result, so it is the evidenced *learning*, rather than the experience, that potentially attracts credit.

The concept of APEL can be made clearer by giving an example of how it can be put into practice. Suppose Tim leaves school with A-levels in Maths, Physics and Design & Technology and goes to work for an engineering firm making machinery for use on building sites throughout the UK and abroad. He spends five very enjoyable and fruitful years with the firm, during which he learns all the engineering techniques associated with the building and testing of the machinery. There comes a time, however, when Tim feels that he is capable of taking on more responsibility, but finds that his lack of a degree counts against him when applying for a higher position in the firm. He wants to obtain an engineering degree, but because of family and financial constraints is unable to take several years off work to complete a university degree. APEL will enable Tim to gain credit for a substantial part of his degree, in recognition of all the engineering knowledge he has gained over the past five years, and thereby enable him to obtain his degree over a much shorter period of time while still retaining his job. Although the firm has never formally assessed Tim's knowledge, he has clearly learnt a great deal from his five years of experience. APEL rewards this learning and enables him to complete a degree which, in spite of his knowledge and intellect, he would otherwise have been unable to obtain.

The difference between APL (the recognition of learning that has been formally assessed and certified) and APEL (the recognition of learning gained from experience) is hopefully now clear. As stated in the introduction, the principle of AP(E)L is fairly straightforward. In theory, it is a perfectly logical and just system that rewards less conventional learning in the same way that an A-level rewards classroom learning. The problem for most newcomers to AP(E)L, though, is what exactly counts as prior learning and how precisely it can be implemented and used. These questions are answered in detail in the following pages.

2. How can AP(E)L be used?

The theory behind AP(E)L has been explained, but for many the fundamental question will still remain: how does this theory work in practice? Indeed, one of the main problems with using AP(E)L is that even if both parties – the student/applicant who could benefit from AP(E)L and the tutor/employer trying to implement it – are aware of AP(E)L's existence and the theory behind it, a great deal of uncertainty often remains regarding how it works in practice. This uncertainty often discourages institutions from offering AP(E)L and discourages those who have a potential AP(E)L claim from embarking on the AP(E)L process.

2.1 General points about AP(E)L usage

APL can be used by anyone with formal qualifications, irrespective of when, where or why they were taken. APEL is often used by a wide range of adult learners, particularly those who have little or no formal education. AP(E)L is often used by the following groups of learners to help them to regain entry to formal learning or as a contribution towards a programme of study:

- undergraduate and postgraduate students
- people wanting to improve upon existing qualifications
- people who left courses before achieving the formal qualifications
- people who have been out of the education system for a long time and who may lack formal qualifications
- those wanting to re-train or change careers
- women returning to education
- unemployed people seeking accreditation for past skills or informal learning
- people who have disabilities of some kind
- minority ethnic groups and asylum seekers

AP(E)L can be used in two ways. Provided that an applicant's learning claim is formally recognised by an educational institution or employer, it can be used:

1. **To gain entry** to a programme of study offered by the educational institution or to the employer's training programme
2. **To gain credit** towards the completion of a programme of study or training

The concept of AP(E)L and who stands to benefit from it are hopefully now clear. The next two sections explain the practical considerations of AP(E)L, both for students/applicants and for tutors/employers.

2.2 AP(E)L from the applicant's perspective

The first stage in the AP(E)L process is reflection on your life. 'Reflection' means looking back at your experiences so far, stage by stage, and thinking about them and what you have learnt from them. It is absolutely central to the concept of AP(E)L that you take time to think carefully about your present situation and also about the past events of your life, both positive and negative. In so doing, you can understand what you have learnt and how different experiences have contributed to your learning. Going through this process can help you to:

- understand what you have learnt in a range of positive and negative situations
- recognise your strengths and weaknesses
- be clear about what you would like to do next
- be clear about what steps you need to take to get there
- build your self confidence

It is also important to consider any formal qualifications you have achieved, and to question whether they are potentially relevant to the course or training programme you wish to pursue.

Once you have reflected on your life, your first question is likely to be '**How do I know whether or not I qualify for AP(E)L?**' If you have completed some kind of formally assessed work, such as an NVQ or HND, then it is highly likely that you would qualify for APL recognition at a participating institution. The answer to this question is less clear cut in the case of APEL. As a general rule of thumb, if you have had some form of experience that has enabled you to learn something which seems relevant to your chosen course/career, then it is likely that you would qualify for APEL recognition at a participating institution. For a more detailed discussion on what counts for AP(E)L recognition, see the section entitled 'What kinds of thing count?'

Assuming there is a case for AP(E)L recognition, the next question to be answered is '**How do I provide evidence of my learning?**' Providing evidence of learning for an APL claim is usually not difficult, because formal, assessed learning has already taken place, which can be presented to the institution to support the claim. Assessed learning may take the form of examinations, essays, reports, skills tests etc. Providing sufficient evidence for an APEL claim is a little trickier, but by no means impossible. There are perhaps six main ways in which an APEL claim can be made, though there is no reason why a different method cannot be implemented by mutual agreement. A claim can be made by:

- **assessment on demand**
You may be asked to undertake the existing assessment course or training programme for which you are seeking credit. This assessment usually takes the form of a written examination or assignment. It is also possible that you will be asked to undertake some form of assessment that has been specially devised.
- **an interview**
You might be asked to attend an interview as part of the process of making an APEL claim. This form of assessment is considered to be more accessible and egalitarian than other forms of assessment, such as written exams. The theory behind interviewing is that it can enable learners to express the full extent of their prior achievements without being constrained by the boundaries of conventional assessment. The interview may be conducted on a group or individual basis.
- **direct observation**
Direct observation involves demonstrating certain techniques or skills that you have learnt so that they can be assessed. This approach is particularly suitable for claims involving special practical skills, such as laboratory work, and is used to reveal the extent of your understanding of key areas in relation to your claim.
- **a structured project**
This project might be similar to those undertaken by conventional students. It would,

however, contain direct reference to your experiences or current working practices, thereby enabling you to convey what you have learnt from your experiences.

- **a portfolio**

A portfolio is a collection of suitable pieces of evidence, usually compiled in a folder, which demonstrate your strengths, skills and experience. This evidence may take the form of something you have produced, such as letters, accounts of relevant learning experiences, reports or leaflets. Alternatively, it may be something that someone else has said about you in relation to your strengths and skills, such as written testimonials from employers or colleagues, the opinions of fellow team or committee members or feedback by others on, for example, some presentation or task you have undertaken. In other words, the portfolio describes the learning that has been gained through experience and matches your learning with the skills that you are required to possess for entry onto a programme or for credit within that programme. Put simply, it is used as proof that appropriate learning has taken place.

A portfolio is the most flexible form of assessment and can be very rewarding, but it also tends to be the most time-consuming. If it is agreed that a portfolio is the best way for you to make an APEL claim, you will be provided with detailed guidance on how to produce one.

- **a personal development plan**

The concept of a personal development plan, or PDP, is new in the UK. Systems for implementing PDPs for students in further and higher education are currently being developed, and will be in place by 2005. The PDP system is already in use in Finland, and is the accepted basis for APEL claims there. The personal study scheme is usually agreed at the beginning of the programme through collaboration with a teacher or a tutor. The scheme is flexible and you can come back to it to evaluate your studies. When you are forming your PDP, previous studies, experiential learning and knowledge in the relevant field will be taken into account. In Finland, this study scheme is widely in use in new universities, vocational education and adult education.

Once you have provided evidence of your learning, it is then reasonable to ask **'How will my learning be accredited?'** For APL claims, the process is simple – if your qualifications are relevant, you will be awarded an appropriate amount of credit for your course. The process of recognising and accrediting APEL claims varies between institutions, but in all cases the claim will be assessed by an expert or experts at the institution. If the assessor is satisfied that you have already acquired sufficient knowledge either to gain entry to the programme or to complete a certain module of that programme, then you will be awarded entry or appropriate credit.

Another question central to the AP(E)L process is **'What kind of support can I expect to receive?'** Firstly, it is important to realise that although an APL claim can be made and assessed fairly simply, the process of making an APEL claim can be somewhat protracted. The support given varies from institution to institution, but you can expect that tutors who are experts in providing APEL support will work with you either individually, in a group or both. You are likely to be offered group support, which enables you to receive support from others in the group as well as from your tutor. You should also have access to learner handbooks and APEL guides, which may well be computer based. If you are making an APEL claim with respect to employment, your employer will also be able to offer you support.

Finally, it is always important to ask **'How much will my AP(E)L claim cost?'** There is no definitive answer to this question, but it is a simple case of economics – the greater the time required to assess your claim, the more it will cost. Any initial cost, though, is more than likely to be outweighed by the money that an AP(E)L claim is likely to save, for example by

shortening the study period and potentially avoiding the need to withdraw completely from paid employment while studying.

2.3 AP(E)L from the assessor's perspective

It is not only the applicants who stand to benefit directly from AP(E)L who have reservations about the process. Assessors, even when convinced of the benefits of AP(E)L, can be unsure of how to implement it in their institution and how to assess any AP(E)L claim that is made. It is neither practical nor within the remit of this guide to give a highly detailed description of the implementation of AP(E)L in academic and business institutions, but the following overview will hopefully demonstrate that it is eminently possible to offer AP(E)L to potential candidates.

It goes without saying that the most primary task for institutions offering AP(E)L is to **publicise** that the AP(E)L process is an available option for potential candidates. A recent survey by the *Learning from Experience Trust* revealed that there are probably fewer than 100 students per year gaining credit through the AP(E)L route. Though lack of publicity was not necessarily the only cause of this disappointingly low figure, the same survey found that many who could benefit from the AP(E)L process were simply unaware of its existence. Moreover, those who *were* aware of AP(E)L were often dissuaded from considering it as a viable option because of a lack of information and support. It is vital that institutions convinced of the benefits of AP(E)L and keen to attract candidates through this route publicise that AP(E)L is offered, explain its benefits and give assurance that support is readily available.

Another concern for tutors/employers is how to **assess** an AP(E)L claim, and how to be (and indeed how to be seen to be) fair to both AP(E)L and non-AP(E)L candidates. The issue of fairness does not really arise with APL claims, because most people are comfortable with the well-established idea of formal, certificated qualifications being taken into account when a candidate applies for entry to or credit towards a programme of study or training. There is more of a potential problem, however, with the use of APEL, for some (particularly younger) candidates may feel that others are being given unfair preferential treatment simply for claiming life experience. Obviously it is no use attracting a few APEL candidates if bad feeling is created among the non-APEL majority, which perceives them to have an unfair advantage. This situation can be avoided by publicising the APEL route openly, as described above, and by making crystal clear the criteria for recognition under the scheme, namely that APEL recognises *learning* rather than *experience*. How to assess an AP(E)L claim depends on the particular requirements of the individual institution. An APL claim is fairly easy to assess – all that is required is a clear set of guidelines, specific to the institution, explaining which qualifications count towards certain programmes, and to what extent, and which do not count.

Assessing an APEL claim is more difficult. As with APL, how to assess an APEL claim depends on the requirements of the individual institution. Obviously, an institution wishing to implement an AP(E)L system needs to develop a clear and detailed assessment framework. It is not possible to give such detailed examples in this overview, but the following represents a useful set of generic criteria to guide assessors. You should consider:

- **Authenticity:** *that the student really did what is claimed in the proposal*
- **Directness:** *that the focus of learning was sharp rather than diffused*
- **Breadth:** *that the learning was not isolated from wider consideration*
- **Quality:** *that the learning had reached an acceptable academic level*
- **Currency:** *that the student had kept up to date with recent developments*

When devising an AP(E)L framework for use in your institution or workplace, the following points should be considered...

...with regard to the institution as a whole:

- Your institution's policy needs to support the use of AP(E)L within its programmes. The value of AP(E)L as a tool for facilitating the transition from informal to more formal learning opportunities should be actively promoted.
- In order to for the learners to achieve their full potential, advice on the accreditation process should be given through egalitarian and democratic dialogue.
- You should make applicants aware of the availability of group support and assessment, which may seem less intimidating and more accessible than individual interviews.
- Learners should be allowed to undertake systematic reflection on all their relevant experience. Simply attending interviews or filling out questionnaires does not necessarily allow people to articulate fully the knowledge, skills and understanding they have gained through their experience.
- It is important to make applicants, particularly those who have experienced social exclusion, aware that the AP(E)L process is entirely egalitarian and that everyone is equally welcomed and valued.

...with regard to the specific programme of education or training:

- Tutors should realise that many candidates will experience initial uncertainty and confusion about the AP(E)L process. It is therefore important that high levels of support and guidance are made available to learners, particularly at the beginning. Furthermore, you should be aware that adult learners in particular often lack confidence in themselves as learners.
- It is necessary to provide a structured framework of support and assessment within which learners can develop their AP(E)L claims. Most learners prefer a prescriptive rather than an open-ended approach to the content of their AP(E)L claims.
- The importance of reflection (discussed in section 2.2) should not be underestimated, so it is necessary to provide explicit support in developing the skills of reflection. This support is best provided through group sessions (which promote peer support) and supplemented by written or computer-based materials.
- Learners themselves have expressed the view that all types of knowledge and skills (i.e. not only academic) should be valued, so this sentiment should be expressed clearly in the course literature you produce.
- The process of AP(E)L needs to retain a degree of flexibility, for example in the schedule and timing of the process, to be appropriate to the learner. The AP(E)L process by its very nature cannot be as rigid as more formal learning processes.
- You should consider the possibility of providing information about the process in different languages, including those spoken by minority ethnic groups.
- Learners and tutors involved in the process need to have an equal relationship.
- To make learners feel more at ease, it is necessary for the process to retain a degree of informality. Hierarchies and inequality will make some learners feel uncomfortable.
- The AP(E)L process must take into account the learner's broad range of skills and abilities and give him or her an opportunity to express those skills and abilities.
- The learner must be encouraged to engage actively with the AP(E)L process.

- Feedback from learners who have already undergone the AP(E)L process should be taken into account so that the process can be improved continually.
- It is important that learners should be able to share their experiences with others who are undergoing the AP(E)L process.

For more detailed information on the ways of implementing and maintaining AP(E)L in your institution and on devising a framework for supporting and assessing AP(E)L claims, see the books listed in the bibliography in section 5.2 of this guide, or consult the *Learning from Experience Trust*

3. What type of learning counts?

The standard answer to this question is that any type of learning counts, no matter how, when or why it is acquired. It goes without saying, however, that although all kinds of learning can potentially form the basis of an AP(E)L claim, what actually counts for an individual's AP(E)L claim is dependent largely on the institution and the intended programme of study or training. For example, whereas years of experience working in a hotel would be very useful when applying for an HND in Leisure & Tourism, it is highly unlikely that a GNVQ in Woodwork would be much use when applying to study for a qualification in Social Work. The following section gives an overview of the sort of learning that can form the basis of an AP(E)L claim.

3.1 For APL claims

If you are making an APL claim, any kind of formalised learning can potentially count. Formalised learning is learning for which a mark or grade (and usually a certificate) has been awarded. It includes, but is not limited to, the following:

- GCSE
- GNVQ
- A vocational course such as ECDL (European Computer Driving Licence)
- A certificate of competence in a certain area, such as First Aid at Work.
- AS-Level
- A-Level
- AS/A2
- AVCE
- ASVCE
- AVCEDA
- NVQ
- Degree

3.2 For APEL claims

What counts towards an APEL claim is harder to categorise, for an APEL claim naturally rests on a far less formalised kind of learning than an APL claim. Broadly speaking, though, it is possible to place the basis for an APEL claim into one of three categories – life experience, voluntary work or paid work.

3.2.1 Life experience

You may have had life experiences, either negative (such as civil war, imprisonment, separation from your family and friends or removal to a new country of residence) or positive (such as bringing up children) from which you feel you have learnt a great deal. Obviously, you may wish not to discuss this part of your life. What you include in your claim is entirely up to you – there is no obligation to include anything that you do not want to mention.

Example of the way that life experience can count towards an APEL claim:

Anwar leaves school at 16 and goes to work as a secretary in a busy office. At the age of 18, she meets Emad, and it is not long before the couple announce their engagement. They are married shortly afterwards and, following the wedding, Anwar returns to work. It is not long, however, before she finds that she is pregnant. She continues her job until it is necessary to take maternity leave, and intends to return after giving birth. Shortly after New Year, she gives birth to twin sons, and finds looking after them to be far more rewarding than the salary she receives from her office job. The family's financial position is relatively secure, and Emad suggests that she resigns and stays at home to look after their children. The next 18 years are tremendously rewarding for Anwar, and she never regrets her decision to leave work, even though the family's finances have suffered as a result. Both sons leave home at the age of 18 to go to university, and Anwar is incredibly proud of them, but she soon feels a void in her life. She only sees her sons during university vacations, and is bored with spending most of the day alone at home. Although she has worked in an office, she does not want to apply for a similar job, because she knows from experience that she does not find the work particularly rewarding. Anwar feels that she would get a great deal of satisfaction from working with children, perhaps those who are disadvantaged or have been abused. Unfortunately, despite 18 years' experience of caring for children, she has no formal qualifications, so finds it difficult to get a job. Emad's salary is not sufficient to support their sons at university as well as paying for her to go to college and, moreover, she does not have the confidence to embark on a full-time course. The process of APEL assessment would recognise all that Anwar has learnt from her years of experience with children and enable her to acquire a qualification in Social Work much more quickly.

3.2.2 Voluntary work

Any voluntary work that you have undertaken, either in the UK or abroad, can be a useful learning experience, and is likely to be appreciated by future employers and other interviewers. If you worked in the UK, you have the added advantage that you are familiar with the UK working environment, so it is a good idea to write an account of this experience and explain what you learnt from it. It is up to you to decide what is relevant to your claim, but the following is a useful generic guide to how you can make your learning count:

- If you are looking for a job, emphasise your knowledge, skills and abilities in your chosen field, in addition to your general working skills
- If you are aiming to complete studies you started at home or in another country, give a detailed description of your previous studies and demonstrate your commitment and skills as a student
- If you are applying for postgraduate study, emphasise your knowledge of the specific area you wish to study, as well as your potential as a postgraduate student and a researcher

Example of the way that voluntary work can count towards an APEL claim:

Rob has always been interested in charitable work, and has gained experience working as a classroom assistant in an inner-city school. He hears about a programme called Youth for Development, which is run specifically for young people by the charity Voluntary Service Overseas. In recognition of his willingness to undertake voluntary work and his experience in a school, he is given a summer placement working as an English teacher in a school in the disadvantaged Shaanxi Province in China. Although it is hard work, Rob is used to working in a disadvantaged school, and manages to win the support of the pupils he is teaching. He thoroughly enjoys his time in China, and is sorry when he has to return to the UK. When he reflects on his experiences in China, he feels increasingly strongly that teaching is his vocation. Unfortunately, despite leaving school with good A-levels, including one in English, he was unable to go to university for personal and financial reasons. With APEL, however, he could compile a portfolio documenting his experiences both in the inner-city school and in China, and include an APL element which made reference to his A-Level qualifications. This

portfolio would prove to an assessor that Rob has both ability in English and knowledge of how to teach, thereby enabling him to gain a PGCE in a shortened time-span.

3.2.3 Paid work

Any paid work that you have undertaken can be a useful learning experience.

Example of the way that paid work can count towards an APEL claim:

Claire leaves school and goes to work in her family's modest but successful hotel in Llandudno. On her father's advice, she gains experience in as many areas of hotel work as possible, starting at the most lowly position and working her way quickly through the ranks. Before long she is working on reception, and after a few years is promoted to assistant manager. She is very good at her job, not least because her experience of several areas of hotel work means that she can empathise with the staff working under her. Unfortunately, her father's ailing health and her mother's loss of interest in the business mean it is no longer viable for them to continue running the hotel. Much as Claire has enjoyed working in the hotel, she feels limited by the small size of the establishment and the seasonal nature of the resort. Moreover, her fiancé lives in Manchester, so she decides to try to get a job as a manager in a Manchester hotel. When she applies, however, she finds that her experience is not enough to secure her a job, for most large hotels require applicants for managerial positions to have formal qualifications in Tourism and Management. Both Claire and her fiancé are keen to start a family, so Claire has neither the time nor the money to go to college. More to the point, even if time and funds were available, Claire would not want to go to college to relearn what she already knows. APEL assessment would recognise all that Claire has learnt from her years of experience in her parents' hotel and enable her to acquire the requisite qualifications much more quickly.

3.3 General points

Remember that **any** form of learning can potentially count towards an AP(E)L claim. The important thing is to reflect on your life, document what you feel you have learnt from your experiences/employment, and to present this information in such a way that its relevance to your intended programme of study or training is clear. Don't worry if this sounds daunting: your chosen institution should offer you professional support.

4. Perceived problems & their solutions

Although I have attempted to explain the theory and practice of AP(E)L in clear terms, dealing with any problems as they arise, it is perhaps inevitable that the newcomer will still harbour some misgivings about the concept and process. There is certainly no harm in an initial dose of healthy scepticism, but I hope that a section dedicated to identifying and solving perceived problems will help to allay any lingering confusion or doubts.

4.1 Problems for applicants:

▪ I have no idea where to start

You have already made a start by reading this overview. Now that you have a better understanding of what is involved in making an AP(E)L claim, reflect on your life and determine what you have learnt from your experiences that could be useful to gain entry to/credit towards your chosen course. Once you have done that, make a list of suitable institutions based on factors such as courses offered, geographical location etc, and see which of those institutions offer AP(E)L assessment. Request literature on AP(E)L assessment from your chosen institutions, and see which course and which institution appeals to you the most. Then make contact with your chosen institution, which should offer you advice and support. If you want to use AP(E)L to gain entry to/credit towards a potential employer's training programme, ask the employer directly whether or not AP(E)L assessment is offered. If it is, the employer should offer you advice on what to do next.

- **I have lost my confidence in my abilities**

A large proportion of AP(E)L applicants have little confidence in their abilities – see section 2.1 for a list of the sorts of people who can and do benefit from AP(E)L. Any institution with good AP(E)L practices will be well aware of the need to offer you support and encouragement.

- **I don't know what's expected of me**

The precise way that you are assessed (see section 2.2) will depend on what you agree with your assessor. Once the method of assessment has been agreed, you will need to work towards that assessment, for example by compiling a portfolio. At all stages, you should be supported, both individually and in groups, by the institution, which should make clear precisely what is expected of you.

- **Making a claim will involve too much time and money**

Obviously, making a claim will involve both time and money, for you will need to research your options and prepare yourself for assessment. You will also be required to pay the institution for your assessment in recognition of the extra resources required to support you and to assess your claim. Don't forget, though, that a successful AP(E)L claim will potentially save you a lot of time and money, by shortening the length of your programme and possibly by allowing you to continue paid work while studying. When the initial cost is weighed up against the potential saving, you will most probably find that making an AP(E)L claim will ultimately save you a great deal of time and money.

4.2 Problems for assessors:

- **AP(E)L is too expensive to implement in my institution**

When implementing AP(E)L, there will obviously be initial costs involved. It is important to remember, however, that the cost of assessing an AP(E)L claim is met by the student. In order to implement and maintain a successful and cost-effective AP(E)L system, your institution will need to review and analyse all relevant cost factors in order to develop a strategy for setting fees. For example, the initial costs may involve staff development, professional advice, technical expertise, advertising, equipment and accommodation. Some of these costs, though, such as accommodation, may already be paid for by other services, so you need to identify what *new* costs are involved. It is also important to analyse the costs involved with the delivery of the service, which include:

- Staff, such as advisors, assessors, a co-ordinator and support staff
- Accommodation, i.e. the rooms that are set aside for AP(E)L work
- Equipment
- Consumables
- Advertising
- External validation and/or verification

Ultimately, whether or not AP(E)L assessment is too expensive for your institution depends on the outcome of a comprehensive cost/benefit analysis. It is important to note, however, that although start-up costs may be high, they are often outweighed by long-term benefits to students/employees. You will probably find that the pros of implementing AP(E)L outweigh the cons.

- **AP(E)L is too bureaucratic**

Implementing and maintaining an AP(E)L system is only bureaucratic if you make it so. If done properly, AP(E)L assessment is no different from any other form of assessment. You will obviously need to spend time reviewing and analysing costs to determine whether or not AP(E)L is viable for your institution, and it is likely that staff will initially spend longer with AP(E)L students than is strictly necessary. Having said this, as your staff gain experience and AP(E)L becomes an accepted practice in your institution, you will find that the whole operation becomes much more streamlined, and is no more bureaucratic than your existing assessment procedures.

- **Implementing and maintaining AP(E)L assessment is more trouble than it's worth**
 As with any new system, AP(E)L requires time and effort. Most time and effort, however, is spent in the initial stages of implementing AP(E)L – for example in determining whether or not the scheme is financially viable, creating a clear framework for assessment and training staff. Once AP(E)L is in place and both applicants and staff are familiar and comfortable with the practice, it should not cause your institution any particular 'trouble'. On the contrary, you should see that AP(E)L is worth its while, because it allows your institution to attract good candidates who would otherwise have been dissuaded from applying. If you are an employer using AP(E)L to allow applicants to bypass certain modules of your institution's training scheme, you will find that skilled people can take up their positions more quickly and that your institution no longer needs to waste resources on giving them unnecessary training.
- **An AP(E)L claim is impossible to quantify**
 It's not impossible. An APL claim is actually quite easy to quantify, because it is based on work that has already been formally assessed. Providing your institution has clear guidelines on which qualifications are valid for which courses, quantifying an APL claim should be fairly straightforward. Naturally, an APEL claim is more difficult to quantify, because it is based on much less formal learning. However, as demonstrated in sections 2.2 and 2.3, accepted systems for assessing APEL claims already exist. Further information on how to assess APEL claims can be found in the books listed in section 5.2, or obtained from the *Learning from Experience Trust*
- **AP(E)L gives applicants credit simply for their life experience**
 No it doesn't. As stated in the introduction, one thing that AP(E)L does *not* give is credit for life experience alone. Applicants do not receive recognition merely for their experiences in life, but rather for what they *learn* from those experiences.
- **Awarding applicants entry or credit for an AP(E)L claim will cause bad feeling among conventional (non-AP(E)L) applicants**
 Unfortunately, a lack of awareness/understanding of AP(E)L and what it involves, together with the common misconception that AP(E)L gives applicants credit simply for their life experience, may potentially cause bad feeling among non-AP(E)L applicants. It is for this reason that it is vitally important not only to advertise openly the availability of AP(E)L assessment, but also to offer anyone who is interested a clear explanation of both the theory and the practice of AP(E)L. By doing so, you will help AP(E)L to become 'mainstream', i.e. a widely accepted alternative to traditional entry/credit assessment, and hopefully avoid creating bad feeling among non-AP(E)L applicants.
- **No-one's ever heard of AP(E)L – my institution wouldn't receive (m)any AP(E)L applications, and my staff wouldn't be comfortable dealing with them**
 As stated earlier in this guide, one of the problems identified in a recent survey by the *Learning from Experience Trust* was that probably fewer than 100 students per year are currently gaining credit through the AP(E)L route, and that many students who could benefit from the AP(E)L process are simply unaware of its existence. Furthermore, even those who *are* aware of AP(E)L are often dissuaded from considering it as a viable option because of a lack of information and support. For this reason, it is vital that your institution makes a concerted effort to publicise the availability of AP(E)L assessment and offers information and support to any applicants who are interested. With regard to your staff, it is vital that they too are given training and support, so that they understand the process and feel comfortable with it. Any new system is bound to cause some initial confusion and discomfort, but provided that a clear framework for AP(E)L assessment is in place and support for both applicants and assessors is readily available, these problems can be overcome.

5. Conclusion

It is my fervent hope that this short overview of the theory and practice of AP(E)L constitutes a useful and readable guide for applicants, assessors and interested educationalists alike.

5.1 Final words

The concept of AP(E)L is not a particularly easy one to grasp, especially for those who only have experience of traditional education and are perhaps naturally sceptical towards apparently 'new-fangled' and 'trendy' educational ideas. The point with AP(E)L, though, is that the concept is far from new. In fact, the basic premise of AP(E)L, namely that people learn by doing, has existed since time immemorial. This belief was documented by many Greek philosophers and also featured in the works of later philosophers such as Locke and Mill. Many twentieth century thinkers have also stressed the critical importance of experiential learning to human growth and development. The concept, therefore, is ancient – all that has changed is the nomenclature and the amount of recognition it is now afforded. When considered logically, AP(E)L makes absolute sense: if you have learnt something that is relevant to the programme of study or training you wish to follow, then you should receive recognition and credit for what you have learnt. The reason that some people have a problem with AP(E)L is that it requires a different mental approach. No-one questions the practice of universities admitting students on the basis of their A-Level (or similar) results, so why the problem with institutions giving credit for less formal learning? I suspect that the problem lies in a widespread lack of awareness/misunderstanding of the AP(E)L process. Hopefully this overview of both the theory and practice of AP(E)L has dispelled some of the myths surrounding the process and will, in some small way, help AP(E)L to gain the recognition it deserves.

5.2 Useful bibliography

Much of the material used in this guide was taken from papers produced by the *Learning from Experience Trust*, which has 17 years' experience in this field. The following books were also used:

Harris, J (2000) *RPL: Power, Pedagogy and Possibility*, Human Sciences Research Council, Pretoria

Simosko, S & Cook, C (1996) *Applying APL Principles in Flexible Assessment: A Practical Guide*, Kogan Page, London

Both books explore the theory and implementation of AP(E)L in much more depth than is possible in this short overview, and should provide a very useful point of reference for those interested in pursuing their own AP(E)L claim or in implementing an AP(E)L system in their institution. Furthermore, both books contain very comprehensive bibliographies.

For a personal service, including advice for individuals and institutions, the *Learning from Experience Trust*

Paper 3

A Selected Bibliography on Learning from Experience

A LET Discussion Document

Original Paper by Dr Mike Field OBE

Published by: The Learning from Experience Trust

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