LET Downloads 5

LET Download papers:
Learning in Organisations & Groups

Paper 15
Assessing Work-Based Learning

Paper 16
Crediting In-company Training Schemes

Paper 17
The roles of Employees, Employers and academic staff in work-based learning

Paper 15
Assessing Work-Based Learning
A LET Discussion Document

There has been much discussion on the assessment of work-based learning and of the work experience placements on which they are based. Some innovative models of work experience have been developed which have led to a more fundamental examination of the objectives and aims of work placements, and whether and how they should be assessed.

One claim can be made with certainty – work-based learning is increasing both in volume and scope. Many long established professional courses, such as degrees in medicine and teacher training, have contained elements of this mode of study for a long time and this has spread to other vocational programmes.

In the past one of the differences between the 'work-based' elements of vocationally based courses was that students were paid by the employer during the placement. In fact many of the students on the early vocational courses were already work-based, ie employees, who were encouraged to obtain further qualifications, returning to their employer for their 'placement'.

Today, very few of the students are employees of companies and only about a quarter are sponsored, but nevertheless students are often paid by the employers during their placements. In fact many courses make a virtue out of this necessity of being a temporary employee for all the benefits of the employer-employee relationships which follow.

Following the recent growth of modern apprenticeships many courses contain elements of work-based learning, be they from a series of visits, short placements of two to four weeks, or projects, and this will surely grow as more funding is put into programmes which support growth in the economy.

In all of these examples the work placements are a necessary and integral part of the study programmes and an essential contributory part to the ethos of the course. There is, therefore, *no* case for the learning derived from the placement *not* to be assessed. interesting question then becomes what models of assessment should be used, how should it be integrated with college-based assessment procedures, and how should the results be used?

The next and more radical step is the recognition of work-based learning in lieu of college-based learning (ie what differences, if any, are there between the two?). This opens the door to the awarding of a qualification to those who can demonstrate the acquisition and understanding of sufficient learning at an appropriate level irrespective of where they obtained that learning.

The options of assessing the learning acquired in a placement need to be looked at, and also what can be done with that assessment.

The work-based learning element has three essential components:

1. Pre-placement preparation.
2. The placement.
3. Post placement debriefing/reflection.

Pre-Placement Preparation

Preparation covers a number of activities which clearly include those concerned with obtaining placements, such as the negotiation of learning contracts, CV preparation and interview techniques. They also include students' understanding of the objectives of the placement component of the course, both those which are course-dependent and those which are course-independent; being aware of how the learning potential of the placement can be realised; and how they can cope with the enormous amount of often unstructured resource and material available to them on placement in order to help them develop as professionals in their field of study.

The fundamental ideas and concepts of 'personal skills and qualities' and 'transferable skills' fit naturally into the pre-placement preparation of a courses and most programmes are now developing pre-placement preparation as a formal, timetabled element of the course which can easily contain units suitable for (traditional) assessment.

The Placement itself

The basic questions concerned with assessment of placement are "by whom", "from whose point of view", "against what criteria" and "how should it count?"

The pattern which developed earlier in most universities and colleges from integrating work placements into their courses was that evidence was collected from an industrial supervisor, often the line manager, by pro-forma; a report was made by the visiting tutor; and a report/logbook was presented by the student.

This evidence was invariably used to identify placements which had been unsatisfactorily completed, although very rarely were the criteria for this determined, or even discussed, never mind made known to the students. The remaining placements were, by definition, completed satisfactorily.

It was the case that the number in the former category was sufficiently small for students to believe that if they completed the placement then they would complete it satisfactorily. Some students did vote with their feet during the placement, for a variety of reasons, and some of these, if they had completed, would have been found to be 'unsatisfactory'.

The argument that formative assessment was taking place on a regular basis and so, with appropriate adjustments, satisfactory summative assessment was highly likely has been put forward. But I believe it has no more validity in placement than it should have in college-based parts of the course, and yet students still seem to fail the latter. The options were thus:

- maintain the then existing situation
- refine the existing situation to the point where the outcome is 'excellent', 'good', 'satisfactory' and 'unsatisfactory', as opposed to just the last two
- introduce a marking system with some numerical outcome
- specify a range of objectives, both discipline-dependent and discipline-independent, which provide a framework within which an assessment can be made
- predetermine tasks which the student is expected to fulfil on placement and to

assess the results
- produce lists of skills/competences developed by the student and use these to make profiles/records of achievement

With respect to the use of the assessment the options were to:

- proceed/to not proceed to the next stage of the course
- include on the degree certificate a qualitative comment on the placement assessment
- include, in the totaling of marks, at an appropriate stage of the course, a mark for placement
- produce a separate certificate
- produce a profile/record of achievement
- identify certain classifications of qualification as a combination of certain marks during college-based components and certain grades of placement assessment.

There has been much discussion of these options and the following observations seem to have enjoyed considerable support:

- significant dissatisfaction with the then existing situation
- any system adopted had to give credit to those students who did well on placement, without unduly penalising those for whom the learning potential of the placement was limited
- a general unease in adopting a mark-based system
- existing models of assessing college-based components, be they projects or examinations, were far from perfect and not 'objective', in the strict meaning of the word. This suggested we could accept a mark/grade for placement which is not perfect, but that its lack of accuracy is about the same as that which exists in most other marking schemes which we quite happily use in a fairly sophisticated way.

One view expressed by those opposed to inclusion in the award questioned whatan academic qualification actually represents. If, or so ran the argument, an academic qualification is a comment on certain kinds of similar (and academic) parameters, a number of which are independent of the parameters which would probably arise in placement assessment, then inclusion would lead to confusions and inconsistencies. This very conservative view is based on the assumption about what an academic qualification actually is, or represents, never mind the general perception of the same.

It is surely about time that *all* courses become much more explicit about their purposes and their objectives, be they in academic/intellectual developmental terms, or in skills/competencies possessed by their graduates. A little more openness and honesty in these areas would at least allow a more sensible and informed debate!

It would be wrong not to make some comment on the particular models of assessment of work-based learning, but I hope it is not too cynical an approach to suggest that once two important decisions have been made, namely what measure is to be adopted and what is to be done with the outcome, then these can have most significant implications on the assessment model itself.

The actuality of discovering where convergence and divergence of views on the placement exist is an important exercise in itself, and this is one of the many reasons why the monitoring of placements is perhaps a more rigorous and sophisticated exercise than many academics think.

It is clear that the major partners in the placement (student, employer and institution) approach it with some, hopefully considerable, overlap in understanding of the objectives and the potential of a placement, but it would be wrong not to recognise that there will also be differences of view. In fact how students are able to recognise and accommodate these differences will be one of their major learning experiences. These differences may become clearer in times of pressure or crisis. If, for instance, there is sudden acute pressure to finish a particular piece of work and the student knows how to make his/her contribution to the work without fully understanding it, then their role as employee may have to take precedence over their role as learner!

These three partners should all have a role in the assessment process both in discussions with the other parties as well as their own ideas. Students using self-assessment, employers using employee appraisal, and visiting tutors making academic value judgments in some not too prescriptive manner, will all make a contribution.

Of course assessments have to meet other technical criteria such as validity, reliability and comparability, and only time will tell whether the various models satisfy them. The concern that suggests that assessment, once introduced, can dominate and become an end in itself, is a danger, but it can be avoided if the whole exercise is developed with care and thought.

Clearly the fundamental purpose of assessment is to recognise achievement or attainment of an objective(s) in some qualitative way, but it follows from this that a secondary purpose is to separate and distinguish one achievement from another and recognise them differently. Those of us who have had the unfortunate privilege to sit through hours of exam board meetings have experienced the early problems with group projects which satisfied the former but not the latter in that most of the grades/marks obtained were closely bunched together. Fortunately experience has now resolved these problems. It is also the case that mark-based systems seem to lead to almost unending discussions on so-called borderline cases. Any additional assessment regime must take account of these experiences and not add to the problems.

Post-Placement Debriefing

If 'integrated' is the right word to use to describe the role of the placement within the course, then the post-placement academic period should recognise this. Not only is there opportunity for the student to reflect systematically on the experience and place it within the total learning experience, but the debriefing process itself is a necessary activity. Debriefing can, and should, occur at both individual student level and at cohort level. It is clearly a valuable resource to use the collection of individual experiences as a means of developing a collective experience. The individual level should be used to debate attainment of objectives, assessment as well as technical and personal qualities/competences observed and obtained.

The increasing maturity, regularly commented on by academic staff, of final year student who have undertaken work-experience, as opposed to final year full-time students, must be turned into a dynamic and productive part of that final year. Post-placement briefing is the vehicle for achieving this. A number of elements of this process are assessable in a variety of ways.

The issue of difference between full-time mode and work-placement mode can now be addressed not just in 'ethos' and 'content' terms but in structural terms. If the truth of the situation is as it has been outlined above, namely that there are three essential components involving work-placement, all of which are capable of some assessment, then it would be natural to suggest that the assessment of the work-based element *over and above* that of the full-time course is an assessment of these additional packages. One particularly important consequence of adopting this suggestion is that the actual placement, with or

without its assessment, is not a part separable from the rest of the course. The one remaining principal issue is whether such an assessment should be contained within, or be additional to, the final award.

There is an issue that the reliability of the assessment will be partially determined by the 'quality' of the available placements. By quality I mean that the placement is academically judged to have a suitable learning potential. The other factor is the number of such 'quality' placements and whether this number compares with the number of students seeking such placements.

The availability of work-placements is affected by a number of factors, the principal of which are firstly the economic well-being of the particular sector of industry in which the placements are being sought and then, secondly, the enthusiasm and ability of those seeking out placements following the expansion of modern apprentiships. During this period there was initially a suspicion of a number of 'dubious' placements. This moved on to there being more high quality placements than there were students, and now a return to an excess of students over placements.

It is difficult to make comments on the quality of available placements because there are no well-defined parameters or a framework to use when making such comments. Suffice it to say that, as the range of placements continues to increase, there will still be the outstanding, the good, the less than ideal and the poor. This distribution seems to be not dissimilar to what it has been for the last twenty years, but the numbers keep on going up and up. One can only assume that the numbers of placements which are not of appropriate quality are few.

In a short paper it is not appropriate to discuss the finer points of assessment, whether formative or summative is more sensible and how each contributes; whether assessment and employee appraisal are similar or radically different; or even whether assessment adds to the quality of an exercise or detracts from it because it assumes an undue importance. Neither is the view being developed "If it moves then measure it", but the simplistic view can best be summed up by two observations; firstly, "If work-based learning is important then why shouldn't it be assessed and count towards the award?", and secondly, "Who is afraid of it anyway!!"

Paper 16
The Accreditation of In-Company Training
A LET Discussion Document

Introduction

The term 'Work-Based Learning' embraces all forms of paid and unpaid work including areas such as charitable work and housework. This discussion paper, however, restricts itself to what is often called 'in-company training' and its accreditation.

Within the management education field there are frequent discussions of the precise meaning of terms like 'training', 'learning' and 'development'. For the purposes of this paper the word 'training' will refer to teaching someone to do their current job more effectively, and 'development' to preparing them for future jobs.

Learning may take place as a result of, but not solely because of, training or development and it has to be admitted that attitudes to training and development in British industry vary considerably between companies and sectors.

Such training embraces everything from one or two-day modules to courses extending over several months and from distance learning to on-the-job training and the types of training offered will vary with the size of the company, its training policies, resources, and the needs of the company and its staff. In some companies the training courses may be similar in content to traditional degrees, diplomas and certificates. Others may be highly specific to a particular company or even to a particular job or system within the company.

The Place of Experiential Learning

Apart for the newest recruits, no-one in industry will have spent anything like the amount of time in formal training that they have spent in learning by experience: and industry rewards experience. Managers are promoted or headhunted to other companies on the basis of experience. This is not to say that experience simply comes with the years.

Whilst people learn from their experience, others do not and there is a saying in industry that one can tell the difference between a person with five years' experience and one with one year's experience repeated five times!

Experiential learning is very important in industry; indeed it is the chief method of learning. Thus in-company learning is completely acceptable for credit towards academic awards, and should be - not "could be" or "may be" - given such credit, provided it can be assessed.

There is often suspicion of experiential learning, an unstated view that it is somehow second-rate. Certainly one factor contributing to this is doubt about how, and even whether, experiential learning can be assessed. However, even when the principle of experiential learning has been conceded, there still remains reluctance to accept it fully. This is clearly shown when discussion turns to how much of an award can be gained by experiential learning. Should it be fifty per cent? Forty? Sixty? It is rarely conceded that it could, in certain cases, be one hundred per cent.

Why Do Companies Want Accreditation?

There are many reasons why companies like BT, IBM, Sainsbury and many others are interested in the accreditation of their in-company training and the following list is by no means exhaustive.

Many medium-sized and large companies run their own internal courses on such topics as finance, computing, statistics, interpersonal skills, management techniques and so on. These courses are comparable in content to what is covered in the syllabi of degrees, diplomas and certificates. Staff who have already acquired these skills by experience do not attend their internal courses.

However, companies also sponsor members of their staff to attend external courses in management, engineering and other topics. This sponsorship means paying the course fees, the student's salary for the period of absence, extra travel and subsistence costs incurred by the student, books, stationery and other related items. Additionally, the student is absent for a considerable portion of the working time available, and the work must still be done. In the light of such expense it is reasonable for companies to ask why their students should have to repeat topics they have already covered through their experience.

Those companies which run internal courses usually devote considerable resources to them. For example, on BT computing courses staff are trained with the most recent releases of hardware and software. There will be a dedicated terminal for each student and the normal tutor-student ratio is 1:8. And on some specialised courses it may be 3:8. Companies are aware that most educational establishments do not have equivalent standards.

Examples could also be quoted of staff working on particular projects who have, of necessity, had to acquire learning by experience in order to make an effective contribution. The only evidence for this learning may be an internal report produced for management. Is this in any way inferior to a dissertation produced on a case study?

It is questions such as these which prompt companies to look for accreditation of their courses. Similar questions prompt company staff to seek accreditation for their own learning.

The Question of Assessment

Arguments against the idea of giving academic credit for in-company training appear to rest on the belief that very little formal assessment of learning takes place within companies, at least in a way which would be recognised in an academic context. However, this is not to say that there is no assessment.

The most obvious form takes place within the structure of the company appraisal procedures when an individual's performance is reviewed in some fashion to determine such things as their suitability for promotion, their future salary, their performance in the past assessment period, required performance standards or targets in the future period.

An assessment of job-related learning is implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, made as part of this process. It is also part of this process to identify the individual's future development needs, and these are almost invariably expressed in terms of gaining further experience and undertaking further training, with the emphasis usually being on experience. In some companies this may be the only form of assessment of training or learning.

When a company runs internal courses there will generally be some assessment. With practical subjects or when dealing with procedures this assessment will usually be made by either a practical test or by tutor observation. If the planned outcome of the course was that by the end of it the student should be able to wire a switchboard, then they will be asked to do so. If it was that they should be able to manipulate a computer spreadsheet to achieve

certain functions, then they will carry out those functions during the course while being observed by the tutor.

Other courses present different problems. Examples are the personal skills areas such as recruitment interviewing or team building, in both of which BT runs both classroom and distance learning courses. Classroom courses present less of a difficulty since again one can rely on tutor assessment, peer group assessment, and in some cases, with the use of video camera, recordings of the students' self-assessment.

The growth of web-based technologies and inter-active distance learning may well provide a new way forward. However, it remains true that the chief form of assessment of learning in most organisations has been until recently the judgment of the student's supervisor or manager.

New Approaches to Assessment

Training is seen by the majority of British companies as a cost or an expense rather than an investment and in times when it is important to reduce costs, training is one of the first areas to be examined. Even those companies who do regard training as an investment want to know what the return is on their investment. Since the fall-out from late in 2008 in-company trainers have been seeking ways to demonstrate the value of training. Assessment of training and, to a lesser extent, learning was quickly seen as one such way.

There are several areas of interest to the assessor of training. The first is, of course, the training event itself. Here assessment must concentrate on the quality of the event, on feedback to the students on their learning progress, on feedback to the trainers on learning methods and training design, and on some assessment of competence at the end of the event.

Given that assessment in the workplace is especially important from the company viewpoint, it can cause conflict when considering its increased use in academic awards. Here the company assessor will examine how well the learning outcome from the training event matched the original needs of the trainee and their manager as the learning acquired has in fact been used in the work: and what factors have affected the use of the learning in work.

A third way may be assessment in the context of the organisation as a whole, and may involve such aspects as cost-effectiveness of training, and to what degree training reflects the organisations strategies and mission statement. This approach demands more than simply asking course attendees to complete a 'happiness sheet' and then wait until their next appraisal to find out if any learning has been seen to have taken place.

An approach used within some parts of BT has the training events beginning with a briefing session between the prospective student and their manager about the course, why the student is attending it and what he or she is expected to gain from it. Where the course is one for which such preparation would be useful there may be pre-course reading or even pre-tests to be completed before attending the course.

During the course itself any available and appropriate methods to facilitate learning are employed, ranging from practical tests to presentations, group discussions and tutor observation. Back at the job there will be a debriefing, and this may result in the formulation of an action plan based on applying learning gained to the actual job. While this approach is effective for traditional types of courses, it cannot be said to be inexpensive in the short term and it requires considerable commitment from management. It also concentrates on the area where the least learning actually takes place. The current view in many companies is that training and learning should take place as close to the job as possible, thereby ensuring increased management involvement.

In BT, as elsewhere in industry, the greatest part of learning takes place on the job. This has been recognised by the company and acted upon by reducing formal classroom teaching wherever possible by increasing the amount of distance learning and also by improving the standard of on-the-job training by introducing local trainers and workplace trainers. A local trainer is a member of the training function. His or her task is to identify local training needs, in association with management, and to arrange for necessary training to be delivered locally. This may be done in a variety of ways, such as by using external trainers, by bringing in-company specialists to deliver courses, by distance learning, by the local trainer personally, or by a workplace trainer. The means will vary with the type of training required.

A distinguishing feature of the local trainer is that they must themselves be accredited. The BT Central Training Unit insists that all local trainers are not only trained as trainers but are accredited to deliver individual courses. There is a clearly defined process for becoming accredited to deliver, for example, a course on team building skills. Once accredited, local trainers are subsequently monitored regularly to ensure that they are continuing to deliver the course to the required standards.

The commonest form of training in industry is the 'sitting with Nellie' method of on-the-job training. For those who may be unfamiliar with the term, it means learning the job by watching and working with a more experienced worker. A weakness of this method has always been the fact that ability to perform a task is not the same as the ability to teach another person how to do it. The idea of workplace trainers is that they will be experienced workers, but will also be trained in instructional techniques and will be responsible for training new staff with the support of the local trainers and management if required. The intention is that every unit should have one or more workplace trainers.

In parallel with this 'localisation' of training, all managers are receiving training in identifying training needs so that they will be better able to determine the training their staff require. This training will be given by means of distance learning. Additionally, a further distance learning package on personal development planning has been prepared for use by all staff, and this includes personal identification of training needs.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that experiential learning does occur in the industrial environment and that it can count towards academic awards. The problem, if there is one, is with accreditation or assessment of the learning. However, the methods which industry can, and should, use to monitor and control the quality and effectiveness of in-company training can also be used to satisfy the education sector that in-company experiential learning is valid.

Paper 17
The Roles of Employers, Employees & Academic Assessors in Work-Based Learning
A LET Discussion Document

1. Introduction

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. 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.

1) Existing qualifications at a lower level or at the same level as the one being sought.
2) In-house training provided by the employer.
3) Day-to-day experiential learning at the workplace or through leisure pursuits.
4) 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.

1) They can be largely work-based, require minimal release in working hours, and make a positive contribution to enhanced performance at work.
2) They can be seen as addressing simultaneously the needs of the employing organisation, and the career aspirations and prospects of the employee.
3) 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.
4) 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 which has to be paid for.

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.

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

---

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

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, e.g. 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.

a)   Formal education from age 16 (if any).
b)   Academic and training qualifications gained (if any).
c)   Any other courses of study including non-award bearing ones (if any).
d)   Details of employment and work experience.
e)   Additional information about learning from experience in a   variety of roles not necessarily in the narrow work context.
f)   Subject areas or themes which the applicant wishes to study and for which a qualification is sought.
g)   Preferred modes of study, e.g. full-time: part-time: evenings only: mixed mode: distance learning: paired learning.
h)   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 and difficult to assess.

Fundamentally the sequence of activities is to provide an opportunity
a)   To reflect systematically on past experience.
b)   To identify significant and relevant learning and achievements to date.
c)   To build up a comprehensive picture of evidence that the learning claimed has really been acquired.
d)   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.

- a) Testimonials and references from appropriately experienced referees covering specific areas of enquiry for which evidence may be required.
- b) Listing past achievements and the learning sequence which was essential before they could be successfully completed.
- c) Producing monographs, articles from periodicals etc, written by the claimant.
- d) Listing artefacts or other tangible evidence of learning and skill.
- e) Undertaking simulation exercises to illustrate mastery and/or understanding.
- f) Offering to sit written challenge tests or undertake practical problem-solving.
- g) Offering to be interviewed by specialists in the relevant disciplines.
- h) 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 Assessors 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.

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

---

[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.

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 CNAA) 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.