



**Accreditation and Recognition of Prior
Experience and Learning**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Aim of this Study

- To provide an accessible insight into current practices in order to inform the direction of future JISC projects and studies in this area.

Methodology

- Contacted universities, further education colleges and community-based contacts informing them of our research and inviting interested parties to participate
- Conducted telephone interviews with a representative from each of the identified programmes and created short vignettes/case studies to illustrate the practices and processes

Terminology – A/RP(E)L

For the purposes of this research we will refer to the ‘Accreditation and or Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning’ using the acronym A/RP[E]L as we feel that this best represents the range of activities we wish to record and discuss.

Summary of Key Findings

- No standardised use of terms either across or within sectors. This acts as a barrier to individuals, employers and staff within institutions to using processes confidently and effectively, decreasing the impact of A/RP(E)L potentials.
- Within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). A/RP(E)L is characterized by inconsistency and lack of coherence. Both in terms of defining and understanding the term and the systems in place to process claims.
- The number of learners in Higher Education (HE) wanting to make claims for A/RP(E)L (or as is generally the case in HE APL/APEL) is increasing year-on-year. This increase is most identifiable in relation to Work Based Learning (WBL) and learning through Work Study Programmes.

- The Further Education (FE) Sector continue to use APL/APEL in the context of current competencies accreditation.
- There are notable examples of A/RP(E)L good practice to be found in the Voluntary and Community Sector Organisations. This good practice is not however being shared with other sectors.
- Within WBL A/RP(E)L is often seen as part of the wider process of Personal Development Planning (PDP).
- The incorporation of Information Communication Technology (ICT) within HEIs, to support the A/RP[E]L process shows that its introduction can help to create a more centralized understanding of APL/APEL, thus improving processes for both staff and learners.
- There is a clear need for the linking and sharing of A/RP(E)L understanding, system and tools between employers, WBL and HEIs. This could make processes more transparent, increase understanding amongst all parties. Importantly it also means the process will be more effective and less time consuming as work will not have to be repeated from one system to another.
- There is a significant amount of interest across sectors, in integrating peer support into their A/RP(E)L processes and in exploring the potential and value this may offer to processes.

Recommendations for Further Research

- Further research into projects and initiatives developed within the VCS.
- Research into the emerging use of ICT in Personal Development Planning (PDP) and the part A/RP(E)L processes play in this.
- Research around peer support and A/RP(E)L.
- Further research into good practice in the use of ICT to support A/RP(E)L with the aim of disseminating examples of good practice.

- Creation of a suite of tools available across sectors that would be complementary. This would take the form of a set of tools that covers the whole A/RP(E)L process but allows single elements to be used as required.

GLOSSARY

ACC	Accreditation of Current Competencies
ACL	Adult Community Learning
APEL	Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning
APL	Accreditation of Prior Learning
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
FE	Further Education
HE	Higher Education
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEI	Higher Education Institutions
IAG	Information and Guidance
ICT	Information Communication Technology
LSC	Learning and Skills Council
LtW	Learning through Work
NVQ	National Vocational Qualification
PCDL	Personal and Community Development Learning
PDP	Personal Development Planning
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
SCQF	Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework
SHA	Strategic Health Authority
VLE	Virtual Learning Environment
WBL	Work Based Learning
WBS	Work Based Studies
VCS	Voluntary and Community Sector

1. INTRODUCTION

The following report, *Accreditation and Recognition of Prior Experience and Learning*, sought to provide an overview of practices in place within the UK for recognising prior experience and learning.

The reason for the study was to provide an accessible insight into current practices in order to inform the direction of future JISC projects and studies in this area.

The purpose of the report is three-fold: Firstly it aims to illustrate the understandings of and terminology used within UK adult education to deal with prior learning. Secondly, it aims to gain an insight into actual practice and systems used by educational institutions and organisations. This overview will look at an example of the accreditation and recognition of prior experience and learning in practice in Work-Based Learning (WBL), Further Education (FE), Higher Education (HE), and the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS). In particular we will look to identify existing mechanisms for supporting learners and advisers in accreditation and recognition of prior learning. This will encompass identifying good practice as well as highlighting problems and constraints encountered when implementing and running processes that recognise prior learning.

Thirdly we will look at how technology is currently being used, within these processes, and how it could be used to overcome some of the problems identified.

This research was funded by the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) and carried out over a period of two months, concluding in July 2008.

2. METHODOLOGY

We set out with the aim of selecting a minimum of six examples of practice in the UK. In order to identify the examples we contacted universities, further education colleges and community-based contacts informing them of our research and inviting interested parties to participate. From this we were able to identify at least one example from each sector.

We then conducted telephone interviews with a representative from each of the identified programmes and created short vignettes (or case studies) to illustrate the practices and processes.

3. CASE STUDIES – OVERVIEW

Below is an accessible overview of the ten case studies collected for the research. They are labelled A to J and each letter will be used to identify examples when referring to them in the report. As can be seen below, acronyms have been placed in parenthesis to signify the sector to which the case study belongs. There are two examples from the Work-Based Learning sector (WBL); three examples from the Higher Education (HE) sector, four examples from the Voluntary and Community sector (VCS) and one example from a Further Education (FE) institution.

CASE STUDY A (WBL)

Case study A is a work-based studies (WBS) programme within a ‘new’ university. It offers flexible work-based learning routes to both graduate and post-graduate qualifications.

Across the university as a whole there is no consensus in regards to A/RP(E)L and more than one term is in use. The WBS programme has chosen to use the term (and encourages the use of) **APL** as an umbrella term covering both experiential and certificated learning.

An **APL** route is open, without charge, to all prospective students, though there is no support offered by staff. Instead support to potential claimants is offered in the form of an **APL** module entitled ‘Make Your Learning Count’ (MYLC), for which a fee of £95 is charged.

Staff involved in the WBS programme are supported through an induction process for **APL** assessors. The assessors are teaching staff across departments who are the only staff involved directly in the APL process unless the MYLC course is taken.

The assessor role is not designed to offer guidance so is not iterative. though this can depend on the discretion of the assessor.

ICT is not currently seen as playing an integral part in supporting the programme's or the university's **APL** process but it has been identified as a key area for future development, in particular around the identification and verification of HE equivalences. A virtual learning environment (VLE) is, however, used to support the MYLC module.

CASE STUDY B (WBL)

Case Study B is a toolkit entitled 'Getting the Credit' used by health and social care professionals, which was designed and is supported by a Strategic Health Authority (SHA) in partnership with two 'new' universities. It aims to offer support and guidance in the compiling of an ongoing log of work-based learning in a format that will provide social care professionals with a transferable portfolio of recognised prior learning.

The 'Getting the Credit' tool employs the term **AP(E)L**. This is felt appropriate as the tool is designed to act as a Personal Development Plan within the working environment that allows the recording of experiential learning for future use in a formal **AP(E)L** claim.

The tool is currently not widely used within the SHA, although it was designed to be used not only for those looking to go onto further study (although this was the primary aim) but also for internal staff appraisals, job applications and interviews. It is now used predominantly in conjunction with two new universities who have become partners in its further development.

No formal support is offered as part of the process as the tool is designed to be standalone. If used for a formal **AP(E)L** claim it is however felt that support will be sought from the APL coordinator at the institution chosen for further study.

CASE STUDY C (HE)

Case Study C is a HEFCE (Higher Education Funding Council for England) Foundation Degree Centre for Excellence based within a 'new' university.

Within their A/RP(E)L work, the centre employs the terms **APL** and **APEL** interchangeably and under these two terms recognise both experiential and certificated learning.

Staff at the centre see support as being at the heart of its AP(E)L processes. It provides AP(E)L support to potential and existing students through physical and virtual centres, which provides a blend of campus-based and e-learning support.

The centre does, however, see support in the wider context of Personal Development Planning with AP(E)L provision being just the start of a student's reflection and recording of learning. This allows continuity of support and processes from A/RP(E)L through the PDP during their study.

Staff within the centre are continuously supported and trained in regards to AP(E)L, and also in supporting the professional development of learners on foundation degrees.

CASE STUDY D (HE)

Case study D is an 'old' university which has recently seen an increased demand for **APEL**, particularly through its Learning through Work (LtW) programme. The university has developed an e-APEL tool, which is also being piloted by a 'new' university and two industry based partners.

The university as a whole use the terms APL and APEL interchangeably but the LtW programme use **APEL** to cover both certificated and experiential learning, it is this acronym that has been used for the electronic online tool.

Current **APEL** practices within the university were identified as being inconsistent and increasingly labour intensive. The use of e-assessment technology is seen as allowing students to self-assess their prior experiential learning and receive an indication of the credit they might be able to claim.

CASE STUDY E (HE)

Case study E is a traditional 'old' university.

The university uses both the terms **APL** (to refer to certificated learning) and **AP(E)L** (to refer to experiential learning).

AP(E)L is not widely used across the university as a whole and is seen as most appropriate as an access route for health studies professionals, and entrance to diploma or certificate courses related to professional practice.

ICT is not currently used in a specific way but it is something the university would like to develop along with the standardisation of **AP(E)L** provision across the university.

The university has specialised **AP(E)L** members of academic staff within a number of departments with an **AP(E)L** specialist being available across the three university sites. Specialised staff can advise other staff and continuously take part in CPD in relation to their **AP(E)L** roles.

There is no charge for an initial **AP(E)L** consultation or for direct credit transfer, but there is a charge of £75 for the assessment of an **AP(E)L** portfolio.

CASE STUDY F (VCS)

Case Study F is a Refugee Assessment and Guidance Unit linked to a large 'new' university.

The centre uses the term **APEL** to designate the 'Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning'. They use the word assessment rather than accreditation as they concentrate on the recording of skills through a process of reflection and identification rather than setting accreditation as the final objective.

Their APEL process is offered through a ten-week (or four month) course consisting of three modules: portfolio building, essential skills development and access to HE and the labour market. At the end of the course a validated certificate is awarded. This is a certificate level award that carries 30 credits.

ICT is utilised very little within the process other than basic IT skills, which the course supports and which are utilised in compiling a paper-based portfolio. However, research is currently taking place within the centre and the wider university into the benefits of creating online **APEL** resources with the potential of standardising and clarifying the understanding of **APEL**.

CASE STUDY G (VCS)

Case study G is a regional partnership of agencies and organisations, based at an 'old' university, which provides support and programmes to employers and individuals in regards to the employability of older people.

The partnership received funding to develop an e-portfolio action project. The partnership did not employ any acronyms in the project to denote the A/RP(E)L element because it was felt that incorporating acronyms served little purpose.

Within the project emphasis was placed on it being a process of reflection leading to the recognition of skills and learning. The approach was seen as being biographical and developmental.

Support was built into the e-portfolio, but further support was given through workshops. Value was also placed on peer support, which was encouraged during the project.

CASE STUDY H (VCS)

Case Study H was a group of voluntary organisations in partnership with a research centre at an associate college of a 'new' university.

Together the group produced a toolkit, or practical framework. The aim of the toolkit is to recognise, record and measure soft outcomes from informal learning with learners in the voluntary sector.

No ARP(E)L terminology is used as it was not felt appropriate. The toolkit is instead called the SOUL (Soft Outcomes Universal Learning) Record.

The toolkit is made up of a series of questionnaires and other resources. There are two main features entitled 'Getting to know you', which acts to recognise in a positive way what learners already know, and 'Getting to know you better' which can be used to measure and record continued learning and the achievement of goals.

The SOUL Record has been successfully trialled as a paper based system, but has now been computerised. It is available to trained users and their organisations on CD Rom.

All staff who want to use the SOUL Record have to do a one day training session at a fee of £150, which also includes the SOUL Record CD to use in their organisation.

Trained staff will support the learners in the use of the toolkit, though there are no formal recommendations as to the form this will take, since the toolkit is designed to be flexible to individual learner/client needs.

CASE STUDY I (VCS)

Case Study I was a Scottish Centre for Excellence in Volunteer Development.

The centre adopted an evidence-based approach with the aim of assisting others in maximising the impact and opportunities of volunteering. In order to support their existing volunteering scheme, funded by the Scottish government, they produced an online passport and personal development plan.

The volunteering passport is a free online personal resource for volunteers aged 16-25 where one can record, track and reflect on experience gained through volunteering.

The centre does not employ A/RP(E)L terminology although they do acknowledge how the passport can be used in this way. They see the passport as part of an ongoing process rather than an end in itself. The passport is regarded as consisting of the following elements: capturing and interpreting learning through volunteering, being self-aware and developing confidence and direction.

Attempts have been made to make the passport as self-explanatory as possible. However, the passport is supported through the youth development worker network. There is also an initiative being set up to encourage peer support in the use of the passport.

Support is offered to staff through the national volunteer development organisation and through the youth development network. This takes the form of informal one-to-one sessions or more formal group-training sessions.

CASE STUDY J (FE)

Case study J is a large general Further Education (GFE) College in England.

The college uses the term **APL** and **APEL** interchangeably, but also uses the term **ACC** abbreviated from the 'Accreditation of Current Competence'. The overall college policy is referred to as the **APL/APEL** policy.

The **APL/APEL** process is seen as consisting of four elements: reception and initial enquiry, registration and production of an action plan, process and production of a portfolio of evidence, and accreditation of evidence. The initial stage is free of charge but applicants are then required to enrol and pay the appropriate fees before they can receive any further support from college staff.

There is a small number of staff at the college who are considered specialists in the APL/APEL process.

4. OUR UNDERSTANDING OF PRIOR LEARNING

As the value of learning, as opposed to formally recognised education and training, is increasingly recognised through the promotion of lifelong learning, social inclusion, wider participation and employability it has been increasingly acknowledged that adults have ‘prior learning’ that is of value to individuals, companies and society at large. Prior learning can be learning acquired formally, non-formally and/or informally¹, however it is learning that has not been fully acknowledged or accredited. Subject to reflection, articulation and/or accreditation this learning may be recognised and/or accredited. This recognition might take the form of awarding credits that count towards a qualification, or it might refer to a simple acknowledgement that such learning has taken place, thereby allowing the learner to be admitted to a programme of study or employment. It could also be a process that leads to an individual recognizing their own experiential learning in order to support them in building confidence and working towards identified goals.

The main term used in the UK, when acknowledging adult learners’ prior experience is APEL. APEL usually stands for the ‘Accreditation of Prior and Experiential Learning’, but in some instances it is understood as the ‘Assessment of Prior [Experiential] Learning’. The term ‘accreditation’ is seen as describing the ‘process of identification, assessment and formal

¹ **Formal learning** consists of learning that occurs within an organised and structured context (formal education, in-company training), and that is designed as learning. It may lead to a formal recognition (diploma, certificate). Formal learning is intentional from the learners perspective

Non-formal learning consists of learning embedded in planned activities that are not explicitly designated as learning, but which contain an important learning element. Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner’s point of view.

Informal learning is defined as learning resulting from daily life activities related to work, family, or leisure. It is often referred to as experiential learning and can to a certain degree be understood as accidental learning. It is not structured in terms of learning objectives, learning time and/or learning support. Typically, it does not lead to certification. Informal learning may be intentional but in most cases, it is non-intentional (or ‘incidental’ /random). These definitions insist on the intention to learn and the structure in which learning takes place. The intention to learn explains the centrality of the learner in the learning process and the structure refers to the context in which learning takes place.

acknowledgement of prior learning'², whereas the use of the word assessment tends to be used in processes where the emphasis is not so strongly focused on a hard-outcome.

The term APL, is also used widely within the UK, particularly within HE. It is on occasion used interchangeably with APEL but is generally used in order to make a distinction between the assessment and/or accreditation of prior experiential learning and the assessment and/or accreditation of prior certificated learning. Certificated learning, we understand to refer to learning, which has been assessed and accredited by an academic institution. In this sense, we can differentiate between APL and APEL, since the latter is most often associated with the recognition of uncertificated, experiential learning.


The term RPL (recognition of prior learning), the designation used in South Africa and Australia, is also increasingly acknowledged in the UK. Since 2005 the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) has used the term RPL to describe their methodology for recognising informal learning. Within the SCQF, RPL encompasses two 'types' of recognition: RPL for personal/career development (formative recognition) and RPL for credit (summative recognition). The appeal of the term RPL is that recognition (as it is used by the SCQF) can helpfully be used as an overarching term for the recognition of prior learning as a multi-faceted process made up of different steps, of which each is important, valuable and valid in different ways. Thus, recognition is a flexible process that can be adapted to less traditional learning environments. It can be contrasted with the more specific term 'accreditation', encapsulated in APEL and APL. The SCQF highlights the more limited use of the term APEL by using it interchangeably to deal with summative recognition. In other words, APEL covers only one side of the RPL coin.

However, APEL still seems to be the most widely used acronym, having become something in itself rather than that for which it specifically stands. It appears to be used by different organisations to describe A/RP(E)L processes, even if they do not culminate in formal accreditation or 'summative recognition'.

For the purposes of this research we will refer to the 'Accreditation and or Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning', which we will term A/RP(E)L. We

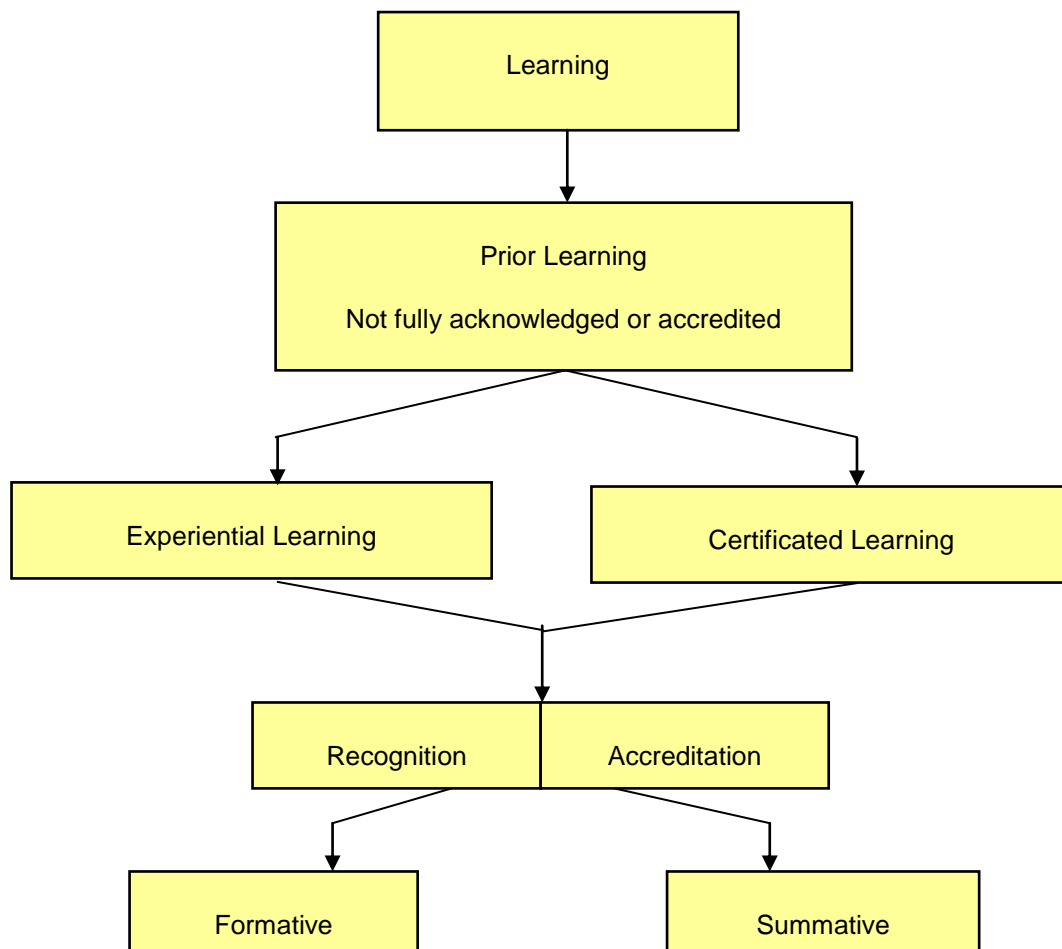
² Guidelines on the accreditation of prior learning, The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, September 2004

are aware that it is not necessarily helpful to throw yet another acronym into what is already a confused pot but it best represents the range of activities we wish to record and discuss. What this does highlight however is that a common understanding of all of the above terms is currently lacking. This in itself acts as a very real barrier to both the uptake and success of the recognition of prior experience and learning.



5. CATEGORIES OF THE ACCREDITATION AND RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING

The most important and salient commonality when considering the different labels and approaches to the recognition and accreditation of prior and experiential learning is *learning* this is the one thing that they all have in common. It is not simple acknowledgement of 'a life led' but the accreditation or recognition through reflection and identification, of identifiable learning. This needs to be stressed as, without acknowledgement of this fact, it runs the risk of delegitimizing itself, blurring its own margins and becoming un-identifiable. Thus, despite the inclusion of experience in the title of this research we will look to the identification of learning having taken place. This will, however, also include the recognition of soft outcomes and not just hard-outcomes



As the diagram above illustrates, the first point of learning which then becomes an instance of prior learning. As part of A/RP(E)L processes learning is identified as either certificated or experiential. For the purposes of this research we will be concentrating on the accreditation or recognition of prior experiential learning, thus what is generally termed APEL as opposed to APL. We can then see from the diagram that once a process of reflection and identification of learning has taken place (this being the first stages of an A/RP[E]L process) it can lead to either recognition or ultimately to accreditation. To take the lead from the SCQF we will talk of the A/RP[E]L process as either formative or summative, this being either recognition or accreditation.

Thus, A/RP(E)L is a process of self-evaluation in which experiences are not simply described, but analysed with a view to extracting the learning achieved through them. As we discovered through our vignettes/case studies, the practice of A/RP(E)L can vary considerably in terms of what happens and how formal a process might be. The issue of formality is an important one for; in order to identify processes of A/RP(E)L, there has to be a degree of formality in the sense that the process is recorded in some way. Without this recording, it is simply not possible to say that AR/P(E)L is taking place. For the purposes of this research, therefore, there are two defining features of AR/P(E)L - firstly, A/RP(E)L refers to the accreditation or recognition of prior learning which is recorded in some way; secondly, A/RP(E)L refers to the active process of reflection, analysis and self-evaluation that allows learning outcomes to be extracted and identified from personal experience.

One of the defining features of A/RP(E)L for the purposes of this study is that the activity must be recorded in some way so that it is possible to identify that it is occurring. In this sense, our definition may be such that it excludes activities, which constitute A/RP(E)L but which are not identifiable as such. This level of informality may involve one-to-one encounters between tutors and learners in which they discuss the learner's experiences and the learning gained from it, but because this encounter is not recorded as A/RP(E)L activity, we are unable to identify it as such.

6. A/RP(E)L AS A PROCESS

The full A/RP(E)L process can be seen as existing of seven stages. However, as we will see from the case studies, some of these stages can be omitted or just the first few stages may be covered. Importance and emphasis may also be attributed to different stages within different organisations and for different purposes.

The Seven Stages

1. Initial guidance
2. Reflection and the recognising and identifying of skills
3. Relating these skills to an agreed set of outcomes or criteria
4. Gathering evidence of these skills
5. Documentation of evidence
6. Assessment of the evidence
7. Accreditation

For the purposes of the research we will use this seven-stage model to highlight the stages of the process focussed on in each case study and the stages to which value is attached in the different learning sectors.

7. A/RP(E)L IN A UK CONTEXT

Within the UK context there are a number of factors and initiatives in place that impact on how A/RP(E)L is awarded and processed. These factors affect the perspective in which it is seen and what is and is not offered. We need to consider some of these in order to establish what aspects in the current environment are most important or most salient and which frameworks can be utilised to support and enhance A/RP(E)L

7.2 A/RP(E)L AND CREDIT AND QUALIFICATION FRAMEWORKS IN THE UK

England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales have all developed, or are in the process of developing, new credit and qualification frameworks. Potentially, these frameworks provide a single overarching structure for recognising formal, non-formal and informal learning in each UK country. The qualification frameworks that have been or are being developed in each UK country are all 'credit' frameworks, which include a number of similarities. They all adopt a common currency whereby 'units of learning' can be assigned a 'credit value'.

In this sense, Credit and Qualifications frameworks can be seen as having positive implication for A/RP(E)L. By using this system of awarding and assigning credit, it is possible to recognise learning outcomes achieved in any environment. Credit frameworks provide a common and consistent way to recognise, measure, value and compare achievement.

A major use of credit is to enable progression and transfer. Arguably, this offers the potential to enhance transparency, flexibility and accessibility of units and qualifications. Credit allows learners to achieve qualifications and units through gaining credit at a time, place and pace which suits their needs. It also allows learners to gain credit for their learning to suit individual or employer needs if the achievement of a full qualification is not appropriate or possible.

7.3 RARPA AND A/RP(E)L

As stated in the introduction, this study aims to assert the importance of recognising the A/RP[E]L outside of formal educational institutions and, more specifically, within adult community and voluntary sector provision.

RARPA, which stands for the 'Recognition and Recording of Progress and Achievement' (specifically in non-accredited learning) sought to develop a broad and coherent set of measurements of success which can properly recognise and celebrate all learners' achievements across the learning and skills sector.

The RARPA approach was primarily developed to support the recognition and recording of progress and achievement in circumstances where no external qualification or certification is offered to learners. The RARPA approach was developed to meet the needs of adult learners, as the majority of such 'non-accredited' programmes in the learning and skills sector are aimed at adults.

The RARPA approach has been particularly appropriate to the curriculum offered by Personal and Community Development Learning (PCDL) providers, (formerly known as Adult and Community Learning or ACL) where the majority of learners are studying on non-accredited programmes. However, the RARPA approach is relevant to all non-accredited provision and has also been demonstrated as appropriate in the following contexts:

- Entry to Employment (E2E) centres
- LearnDirect and UK Online centres
- specialist colleges for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities
- family learning
- Offender Learning and Skills (OLAS)
- neighbourhood renewal provision
- provision offered by voluntary organisations

Although the RARPA approach was initially developed to raise the credibility/quality assurance of 'non-formal' learning, the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) have agreed that the RARPA approach should be developed to support learners transferring from 'non-formal' to more 'formal' learning. The obligatory use of RARPA in England since January 2007 should therefore help widen participation in formal learning and work to enhance the recognition of informal learning by helping learners to form a structured approach to the recognition and understanding of learning and its recording.

The RARPA staged process consists of the following five elements:

1. Aims: The setting of aims appropriate to an individual learner or groups of learners.
2. Initial Assessment: Reflecting on and establishing a learner's starting point.
3. Learning Objectives/Outcomes: The identification of appropriate and achievable objectives for the learner.
4. Formative Assessment: The recognition and recording of progress and achievement during a programme of learning.
5. Summative Assessment: Learner self-assessment and tutor review, at the end of a programme of learning, to measure overall progress and achievement.

8. A/RP(E)L IN DIFFERENT ADULT LEARNING CONTEXTS

8.1 WORK- BASED LEARNING

Work-based learning (WBL) is generally used to refer to learning that involves work-place knowledge and skills either in the university or in the workplace often including a level of involvement from an employer or employers. The WBL experience may, however, also include activity that is not paid employment.

There appears to be no agreed term used amongst WBL providers to refer to A/RP(E)L. What is clear however is that they recognise both certificated and experiential learning within the terms that they use. Indeed both are seen as important to the aims inherent in WBL. We can see, nonetheless, that within WBL there is significant interest in recognising experiential learning.

The received view of A/RP[E]L in WBL is that it is focused more on the latter stages of the seven stage process (documentation of evidence, assessment of the evidence and accreditation) identified in section 6³. The concentration on this part of the process is seen as meeting the need of finding swift progression for people who already have some recognised competence but need to match this to a legitimising framework in order to facilitate professional progress.

From our research we can see that there is a clear interest and engagement with A/RP(E)L in WBL. It is in this area that A/RP(E)L routes appear to be both the most popular and clearly identifiable. This can be assumed due to the similarities shared by A/RP(E)L and WBL - the learning and assessment process of WBL also draws on experiential learning, and experiential learning is largely identified as learning that takes place in the work place. Brennan and

³ Maggie Challis, *Introducing APEL*, London: Routledge, 1993

Little (2006)⁴ corroborate these findings, highlighting the importance that is often attributed to A/RP(E)L within work-based learning programmes.

The fact that there is a degree of overlap between our WBL and HE case studies shows that, with the development of work-based studies as a subject area in its own right within HEIs, it is within the WBL or Learning through Work (LtW) programmes that a lot of the more innovative and consistent thinking about A/RP(E)L is taking place.

FINDINGS

What became most apparent from the case-studies here considered, and those looked at through our wider research, is that A/RP[E]L within work-based learning is no longer concentrated on a simple auditing exercise in order to award advanced standing or a quick qualification to legitimise existing skills. Instead it has come to be seen as an important process in its own right rather than simply a means to an end.

This can be seen from case study A where there are two parallel APL (case study A's choice of acronym) processes at work. In one the emphasis is on recognising prior learning for advanced standing or credit, which is offered with no support (due to financial constraints). The other involves a more invested APL process designed as a means of fully recognising, recording and assessing experiential learning delivered through a module, entitled 'Make Your Learning Count' (MYLC). It is stressed by the provider that this module, should be seen as a learning process and experience in itself. Whilst it concentrates on producing an APL claim and an APL portfolio it also aims at getting learners to develop a wider conceptual understanding of work-based learning and to develop skills of critical engagement and reflection. The final part of the module is a 3000-word reflection on the learning experience of the module itself.

What we can therefore see in case study A, in relation to the recognition of prior experiential learning, is a move away from concentrating on stages 5,6 and 7 of the process, and towards not only incorporating the value of the whole process but seeing it as a cyclical and ongoing process. This can be

⁴ Brenan, J. and Little, B, *Toward a Strategy for Workplace Learning*. London: Centre for Higher Education Research and Information, 2006

seen as an important development in light of its potential contribution to the lifelong learning and employability skills agendas.

Case Study B can also be seen as a tool that promotes APEL as an ongoing process, seeing it as part of Personal Development Planning (PDP). The 'Getting the Credit' tool is an ongoing log of learning in a format that provides the learner with a transferable portfolio of recognised prior learning.

Thus, what we can identify from our WBL case studies is a redefining of APEL in light of 'Personal Development Planning'. This redefinition of traditional uses of APEL, moves from a process characterised as an act of looking back, a synonym for the reviewing of past learning, to a focus on APEL as an element in the experiential learning cycle (Kolb 1984)⁵. That is, on how it informs future learning – utilising, building on recognising the value of the process itself. This characteristic of APEL as a bridge between existing learning and future learning goals endows it with great potential in a lifelong learning context.

Secondly, our research has highlighted the perception that the greatest APEL expertise can be found in WBL programmes. As previously mentioned this is due in part to the close relationship between WBL and APEL. However, it is also partly due to a perceived reluctance, observed by a number of tutors and staff throughout the wider university, towards WBL and therefore APEL. In this sense the WBL tutors felt that APEL was ghettoised within their programmes teams or centres. This is something that can also be seen within our HE case studies that are in the main located within WBL. In the least, the wider view of the university is that these are the areas in which APEL is most appropriate.

This failure, within the wider university system to recognise and accept the value of A/RP[E]L and the correlative lack of strategic importance given to it means that WBL processes often find themselves limited by wider institutional practices, policies and systems, and in particular financial systems. Case study A found that it was unable to offer any initial guidance or support to potential claimants as it could not guarantee that a potential claimant would pay any fees, which led to the chargeable module as a way of offering support.

⁵Kolb, D, *Experiential learning: experience as the source of learning and development*, London:Prentice-Hall,1984

However, the two case studies we considered could be seen as complimentary, insofar as case study B may offer a solution to the problem outlined above. Based on an understanding of educational issues, accreditation processes and promotion of a developmental approach, case study B's tool identifies the key aspects and issues that must be considered when preparing a claim for accreditation. This could therefore be utilised within the workplace before applying to the educational institution therefore removing the burden of free guidance prior to an APEL claim being made.

However, it has been pointed out by a member of staff involved in the piloting of case study B that the problem arises of most HEI's having their own documentation for APEL, which would therefore produce a lot of repetition for claimants.

What this shows is a need for joined-up systems for WBL between private and public sector employees and HEIs. This would spread the workload, help to create a wider understanding of the APEL process, and help to facilitate the kind of process or developmental thinking that case study A and, to an extent, case study B see as increasingly important to foster.

Thus, from the case study examples we have looked at, we can see that, within WBL, ICT is (and can be further used) to improve APEL processes, though it is currently in an isolated and limited manner.

Within case study A, a VLE is utilised to make all necessary resources available to students, though this is used only as a support for the face-to-face course. Blackboard acts mainly as a repository (as it does on many other modules). However, in the case of the MYLC module the VLE is also used to encourage peer support, which is an area a lot of the sectors are looking to encourage with regards to A/RP(E)L.

Case study B demonstrates a more systematic way of using ICT through creating an online toolkit. This allows the toolkit to be used within a workplace where there is little money or time for support. It also has an impact in beginning to develop a culture of reflection, recognition and progression.

However, the ability to share electronic tools and resources and, through this, forge a shared understanding between employers, WBL and education institutions or accreditation boards is not being utilised to as large an extent as possible.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- Within WBL APEL is often seen as part of the wider processes of 'Personal Development Planning'.
 - Limited support is offered to learners in the APEL process due to the cost implications.
 - There is a clear desire within WBL to explore ICT related solutions to the increased demand for APEL, and for exploring the potential of ICT to help create a centralised definition and greater understanding of A/RP(E)L.
 - There is a need for greater support and inclusion of the APEL systems and processes used and developed within WBL programmes in HEIs.
 - There is a need for the linking of A/RP(E)L systems and tools between employers, WBL and HEIs.
 - There is a significant degree of interest amongst those working in WBL into exploring the potential value of peer support in A/RP(E)L processes.
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8.2 HIGHER- EDUCATION

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) were arguably at the forefront of A/RP(E)L as they became interested in widening access and so recognising non-formal learning as a route for those with relevant knowledge and experience but no traditional qualifications to gain access to HE. It was hoped that the widespread modularisation and credit rating⁶ of academic programmes in the 1990s would be a clear step towards a consistent and understandable approach to A/RP(E)L.

However, our research has shown that HEIs' approaches to A/RP(E)L differ considerably, both internally between departments and externally amongst different HE providers. This appears to be the case despite the development of documents such as the QAA (Quality Assurance Agency) for Higher Education's Guidelines to support HEIs in accrediting prior learning⁷. Such efforts appear to have provided little impetus for the clarifying and consolidation of actual A/RP(E)L implementation. Therefore, the way in which A/RP(E)L is supported and handled within HEIs may be termed as inconsistent.

The introduction of work-based learning in the 1990s does, however, appear to have made a difference insofar as APEL has become more visible in the construction of work-based programmes. This is indeed what we have found to be the case in our research.

As can be seen from our HEI case studies APEL processes within HEIs are largely focused around work-based programmes or LtW programmes. During our research it proved difficult to identify examples of consistent APEL systems within HEIs where there was an appointed APEL advocate or expert who was willing to talk to us, other than those situated in LtW or WBL

⁶ The credit involved in CAT schemes is recognition given to a learner on the basis of demonstrated learning outcomes related to specified learning programme or qualification. The scheme is based on the principle that each programme of study within the institution is broken down into units, each of which is a self-contained section of study. Typically, a three-year degree course is deemed to be worth 360 credits. Credit can be awarded equally for study or for learning from experience.

⁷ Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for Higher Education, *Guidelines on the accreditation of prior learning*, September 2004

programmes. Cases where, initially, this did not appear to be the case transpired to show that it was the WBL and LtW areas of the university where the expertise and innovation in regard to A/RP(E)L actually lay.

FINDINGS

HEI's appear to use the terms APL and APEL interchangeably but, within these terms, recognise both certificated and experiential learning. However, the systems they have in place are often largely undefined and inconsistent, with responsibility often lying within departments. This leads to a highly subjective process that can only cope with an APL/APEL claim as an exception, particularly if it is a request for the recognition of experiential learning.

However, over the last two to three years, with the establishment of WBL and LtW programmes, HEIs have seen a large increase in the numbers wanting to pursue an APEL route. This increased demand placed on the APL/APEL processes of HEIs has highlighted two things:

1. Due to a lack of demand, HEIs have never really needed rigorous structures through which high demand could be managed. Increased demand has highlighted the need to define an institution wide understanding of A/RP(E)L and the need to reconsider current processes.
2. WBL and LtW programmes are working with systems that cannot cope with the numbers of claimants because existing A/RP(E)L processes are too time-consuming. It is these areas (WBL and LtW programmes) of the universities that are left with the need to innovate and seek alternatives (as in Case Study D)

These findings are clear from our case studies. Indeed, Case Studies C and D have noted an increase in demand for APEL within their institutions, specifically within WBL and LtW. This brings to light one of the most fundamental issues around A/RP(E)L within HE: inconsistency and a lack of common understanding of what is meant by APL or APEL throughout institutions. Both Case Studies C and D have opted to apply technology innovatively as a way of coping with this increased demand and to overcome what they see as some of the problems inherent in the university systems.

It is also felt by both these institutions that there are difficulties in enabling learners to understand the APEL process, which results in a very time-consuming support process where the learner requires a significant amount of guidance. It is felt that online tools can assist in relieving this burden by working towards providing learners/potential claimants with guidance, around APEL processes, and helping them to think about their prior learning in a structured manner. It is felt that this results in - and findings of Case Study D's e-APEL project so far support this - an ease on demand on staff time and the empowerment of the learners in the APEL process, helping to build their self-confidence as part of the process.

Contrastingly, in Case Study E, we see an overview of a university wide policy. As with most of our examples the institution in case study E has outlined two routes for APEL: direct credit transfer and an experiential portfolio. The university currently has a university wide list, called the current credit exemption list, which details which courses have been verified for credits. Other than this, an APL/APEL process has not been defined across departments and despite the existence of the credit exemption list if you consult with the individual department to which one is applying, one may still be able to use credit towards courses not on the list. Thus, there is no defined and so there is no defined system in place, and this works to inhibit transparency and leads to a highly subjective and difficult process for both staff and students. Likewise, there is no institution wide format for the portfolio, as this is also dependent on the requirements of a given department, or even a given course. Thus, Case Study E serves to highlight the inconsistent and subjective nature that A/RP(E)L processes can often take within HEIs.

In conclusion, we can use Case Study D as an example of good practice showing how, through the problems highlighted by the increased APEL demand emanating from a LtW programme, an ICT related programme can be initiated to manage this challenge. Moreover, the e-APEL project has also been used to open up a process of institution wide reflection on A/RP(E)L by recognising the need for a shared understanding of A/RP(E)L as being at the heart of an effective system.

Summary of Findings

- There is identifiable inconsistency and lack of coherence around A/RP(E)L processes within the HE sector.

- The most consistent and innovative practices taking place within HEIs can be found in WBL and LtW programmes.
- The number of learners in HE wanting to make APL/AP(E)L claims is increasing year-on-year, particularly in relation to WBL and LtW study programmes.
- Current APL/AP(E)L systems within HEIs find it difficult to cope with the increased demand that is being placed on them.
- Learners new to HE lack understanding of APL/AP(E)L processes which creates a demand for Information and Guidance (IAG) prior to entry on to courses.
- Within Foundation Degrees AP(E)L support is increasingly seen as part of a wider Professional Development Planning (PDP) process.
- ICT can be used to help create a centralised understanding of APL/AP(E)L within HEIs, and to enhance and support the processing of APEL claims.

8.3 VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY SECTOR

The use of A/RP(E)L in Adult Community Education and Voluntary sector settings tends to concentrate primarily on the first two or three stages in the seven stage process we have identified. This is because the clientele with whom tutors are working and for whom A/RP(E)L may be seen to be appropriate are often those people who would find direct entry into mainstream education, training or work difficult, or not initially appropriate. They have often had negative experiences at school, which may have left them perceiving themselves as unqualified failures.

Typically, the first stages of the process have been found to be extremely effective in job search activities and assertiveness training and with individuals with disabilities or other special needs. Work has also been done with refugees and ethnic minority groups, where it is possible to recognise and value skills gained in other cultural contexts and thereby assess the relevance and applicability of their skills in Britain.

Of the four Case Studies we looked at in the voluntary and community sector only one used the term APEL. The others felt that the term APEL was not appropriate, with some even going as far as suggesting the terminology to be unconstructive. The organisation that did use the term APEL used it to represent the '*Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning*' rather than accreditation as it felt it was important to concentrate on valuing experiential learning, and understanding its value in terms of the wider UK societal context, rather than looking to accredit it against a pre-defined framework. The overall feeling was that within the voluntary and community sector many APL/APEL processes, as used in other sectors, were limiting and not appropriate. Projects in VCS organisations appear designed towards a less specific end-point, and such labels as APL and APEL seem detrimental to this. With reference to the SCQFs division, of the recognition of prior learning (RPL) into summative or formative, the A/RP(E)L processes and practices within VCS may be identified as formative.

Thus, it is in the voluntary and community sector that we see most clearly the 'formative' side of the RPL coin. The VCS is a sector which deals almost exclusively with informal and non-formal learning, and there is therefore an

emphasis on recognition for a multiplicity of purposes, not only for the exchanging of informal learning for formal recognition.

The emphasis within the voluntary and community sector is thus on the first stages of the process, in particular stages 1 (Initial Guidance), 2 (Reflection and the recognising and identifying of skills), and to an increasing extent 4 (Gathering evidence).

In section 6 A/RP(E)L as a process was discussed. It is when looking at the VCS sector that the idea of A/RP(E)L as a process can perhaps most productively be drawn upon to explore the implications of understanding it and using it in this way.

By a process, we essentially mean something composed of stages that are undergone to bring about change. By using the word process however, we are highlighting that it is made of different elements, not all of which are compulsory, and which can be stopped and started at different times and in different places.

By considering examples from the VCS that cover different elements of our identified A/RP[E]L process we may also be able to highlight the ways in which practices used in the VCS sector may be suitable for application in the HE, WBL and FE sectors, thereby easing their deficiencies and supplementing their existing systems. We will look at the extent to which this may be possible if their importance was more widely recognised and practice was more joined up between sectors.

FINDINGS

Our case studies show that the A/RP[E]L initiatives and processes, identified within the VCS organisations and partnerships, often start out life as a funded project (European Social Fund, EQUAL, The Big Lottery Fund, Regional Governments), which often incorporated a research element. However, due to the nature of the funding, the projects are often time-bound. In order for good-practice from the VCS sector to be shared more effectively the momentum needs to continue and dissemination of their work needs to be more fully supported.

One issue around the sharing of good practice from the VCS projects, that can be discerned from our case studies is that these projects are often not specifically focussed on A/RP[E]L, with the funding often linked to other policy

or focus areas (guidance, soft-outcomes, RARPA). This raises the issue of sector-specific discourses, which can amplify a lack of sharing and utilisation of ideas between different sectors.

In contrast to the case studies we have looked at from other sectors (HE, WBL, FE) our VCS case studies show emphasis and resources being directed towards the Information and Guidance (IAG) side of the process (stages 1 and 2). In all four of our VCS cases studies access to the support, guidance and tools was free of charge. Due to the allowance made in funding personalised and intensive support was offered to clients using the A/RP(E)L tools.

There is also another defining feature of the A/RP(E)L provision within VCS. Due, in large part, to the targeted nature of funding the A/RP(E)L provision is catered specifically for particular groups who are identified as having particular needs. This can be seen in our case studies in their focus on refugees, people with learning difficulties, young-people and older people. They are also dealing with much smaller numbers, in the main, than the other sectors and so do not face the same sort of difficulties. Interestingly, A/RP(E)L within the VCS sector often appears linked to employment and employability.

With the one exception, what we see in our VCS examples, is a purposeful avoidance of the use of A/RP(E)L terminology. They show us that without the confines of the current terminology the processes can be more forward looking. The A/RP(E)L processes identified in the VCS examples are holistic processes that provide a structure for reflection and, most importantly, work with individuals to recognise their own learning. Within our VCS case studies the presentation of evidence to others for accreditation is a secondary step. The importance of this process for learner confidence and, indeed for the lifelong learning agenda is something we have also seen in our WBL case studies.

What is also interesting is the way in which a lot of these VCS processes are about helping clients understand their learning experience, with tools being designed to help structure learning experience(s) – an important step in its being recognised by others.

We also see evidence amongst staff in the VCS sector of the need for A/RP[E]L provision to be included in its provision and understanding in a wider process of – prior to entry to work or education, job recruitment and in job appraisals. This is akin to the thinking identified in WBL settings that were moving to see A/RP(E)L as part of a wider process of PDP. Within the VCS

case studies this trend can perhaps be seen most clearly in Case Study G. Case Study G was based around the development of an e-portfolio with older learners, both employed and unemployed. Within case study G it was felt that a successful portfolio should be portable and serviceable throughout a working life. Those involved in the design and evaluation of Case study G felt that 'a supportive environment in which to reflect and then build an e-portfolio can be a life changing experience that can enhance employability'. This clearly links it to the wider ideas of PDP and that of an e-portfolio acting as an ongoing process. However, despite the increased use of e-portfolios within formal educational institutions such as the HE and FE sectors, the VCS sector highlights an importance difference. Within a formal educational institution it is easy for learners to see them as bound by the institutional context and the time limits of a course. Within the voluntary sector, specifically Case Study G, it appears that perceptions are different, with a greater level of ownership taking place. The e-portfolios are seen as the property of the learner and the idea of using it continuously seems more appropriate.

This brings us onto a discussion of A/RP(E)L and ICT in the VCS. Case studies G, H and I all use technology as a way of providing templates to be used to help learners think about and structure their prior and experiential learning. Case studies H and I are not e-portfolios in the fully-developed sense found in case-study G and, instead, have a narrower focus: Case Study H focusing on soft-outcomes of both prior and current experiential learning and Case Study I focuses on the experiential learning that young people have achieved whilst volunteering. In the case-studies here considered, ICT has, importantly, allowed the tools to be available to learners from home and other settings. It is also felt that information recorded using the tools can be changed into different formats and used for a variety of purposes, with the main purpose being seen as job applications or entrance into a more formal learning context.

In case study F, however, because they are not dealing with large numbers, the utilisation of ICT did not seem so imperative. However, now they belong to an academic department within a HEI their expertise is being called upon to further APEL provision more widely. In this role the two issues we have already highlighted as being assisted by the use of ICT have become apparent:

1. The need for consistency and an institution wide understanding of APEL

2. The need to disseminate and share resources widely, including making them accessible to a much larger number of learners, primarily to support point one above.

Those working on the programme in Case Study F also acknowledged that, as a London based organisation, ICT could help disseminate their expertise around working with refugees to other regions and institutions.

Thus, what we can see from the case studies we have looked at in the voluntary and community sectors is that there is a lot of good practice around A/RP(E)L taking place in the areas that are perhaps weakest in the other sectors. However, there needs to be some building of networks between VCS and formal learning institutions. Firstly, as a means of sharing, but secondly, and perhaps most importantly, in order to make it as easy as possible for learners to transfer their recognised learning from informal settings to the formal learning or work environment.

Summary of Findings

- The A/RP[E]L good practice that can be identified in VCS organisations needs to be shared more widely with other sectors – HE, WBL and FE.
- Within the VCS A/RP(E)L practices tend to place emphasis on the IAG elements of A/RP(E)L.
- VCS provision of A/RP(E)L caters for specific groups with an identified set of needs, such as refugees, those with learning difficulties, older people and young people.

8.4 FURTHER EDUCATION SECTOR

Further education colleges are becoming an increasingly important sector within the lifelong learning agenda following various government reports on social inclusion, widening participation and lifelong learning. Colleges obviously vary in size. The larger colleges offer a wide range of academic, vocational and leisure provision either part-time or full-time. Moreover, no two colleges are identical in terms of their curriculum, since they tend to specialise in certain areas. Over the past ten years FE colleges have changed tremendously in relation to their role and mission and, indeed adults are now the dominant student group in many colleges.

The FE sector has traditionally been linked with A/RP(E)L processes, which, in the main, is attributable to the adoption of APEL by NVQ (National Vocational Qualification) providers to meet some of the assessment requirements of their qualifications. NVQs were introduced in 1986⁸ and from that time APEL was seen as a valid form of demonstrating competency against National Occupational Standards for the award of NVQ. This development was taking place at the same time in FE as APEL began to be taken up as an admissions tool for HE programmes. However, it was seen to be much more popular in the context of NVQS and the FE sector, with many HEIs (according to Costly et al.) rejecting APEL processes as irrelevant to their provision.⁹

When approached to take part in our research, however, some of the FE colleges said that they felt unable to take part as they do not offer a systematic APEL process due to its proving too costly in terms of resources and time. It therefore appears that APEL is not as widespread within FE as it had previously been assumed.

Findings

Despite being able to conduct only one case study in the FE sector it is immediately recognisable from their use of terminology that they link of A/RP(E)L processes with frameworks of competencies. This can be seen from

⁸ C Costly, J. Garnett, D Portwood,

⁹ Ibid.

the college's use, not only of the terms APL and APEL, but also ACC (Accreditation of Current Competencies).

Unlike other sectors, a coherent, college-wide APL/APEL policy is generally present in FE. In this case there was a process clearly divided into four sections that cover all 7 stages of our identified process. Moreover, the college has designated members of staff who are APEL specialists. The focus of this APEL provision is to use prior learning towards the qualification on which the learner has enrolled. This process occurs on entry to a course of study and is seen as being a competency based system that is clear and structured. APEL advisors take this process very seriously and look to help learners weigh up the advantage and disadvantage of pursuing an APEL route. For example, APEL is often seen as too time consuming and therefore learners may be better off completing the learning at the college where s/he may benefit from the support of other learners. In this way it is assured that the learning is both current and valid. The length of time and amount of support needed for those seeking an APEL route is in part attributed to a lack of understanding of APEL by potential applicants, along with a lack of the necessary skills to compile sufficient evidence.

The college does not currently utilize ICT in a systematic way as part of this process. In the current process claimants do not receive an interview until they have enrolled in a course, and initial A/RP(E)L guidance is limited. Due to APL/APEL processes are not being used by a large number of students, it is acknowledged that the limited use of APEL is due, in part at least, to a lack of knowledge and understanding of APEL by applicants.

In light of this, the college believes it would be beneficial to utilise ICT to raise awareness of the APL/APEL processes they offer. Representatives suggest they like to do this to encourage more and different learners to participate. By implication, with more APL claimants it would become a priority to develop a system to guide applicants through the initial stages of the process, particularly as a preliminary means of mapping equivalences and increasing learner confidence about the value of their prior learning.

Notably, in light of the findings from the other case studies, this college does not see its APL/APEL policy as part of a wider process, but merely as an alternative for students on entry. Thus, it does not link its process in any way to Professional Development Planning (PDP).

Summary of Findings

- The FE sector uses APL/APEL in the context of current competencies accreditation.
- ICT is not currently utilized due to low numbers seeking APL/APEL accreditation.
- Interest in using ICT in the APL/APEL processes in order to raise awareness and understanding of APL/APEL policy to improve access for and different learners

9. CONCLUSION

It is clear that there is no definitive understanding, or, for that matter, terminology, within UK adult education to adequately deal with A/RP(E)L. From our case studies we can see that the most innovative and focused engagement with A/RP(E)L is taking place within the WBL and the VCS sector.

Previous assumptions have understood the formal educational environments of HE and FE to be the natural home of A/RP(E)L practice due to the move in the 1980s and 1990s towards a focus on competencies and credit systems as a way of widening access. However, it appears that as a result of the perception of APL and APEL processes as overly bureaucratic and time consuming, the momentum has dissipated and left a legacy of inconsistent and subjective systems with institutions unable to finance the necessary support structures that are required.

Our research shows, however, that the momentum gaining pace within WBL and VCS is linked to a redefining of the old understanding of APEL (as a simple auditing exercise) in order to award advanced standing or credit, characterized as an act of looking back. It has also involved a move towards a focus on APEL (A/RP(E)L) as an experiential learning cycle, that is, an important process in its own right rather than simply a means to an end. This represents a move on from issues solely of access to a concern with wider processes of 'Professional Development Planning' and the language of lifelong learning and employability. However, whilst the new agendas span all sectors, a significant commitment and forward-drive is to be found only in some.

Nonetheless, our research demonstrates that many of the initiatives being undertaken by the WBL sectors are being noticed by and are impacting on wider HEI A/RP(E)L practice. This is because of the increased situatedness of WBL provision within HEIs. However, due to the limited and discrete nature of partnerships between employers, WBL and HEIs there is no tool or process in place that can be used by employees that can then automatically be recognised by, and be transferable to, a range of HEIs.

A more entrenched problem may be the lack of recognition given to the work taking place in the informal learning sector by formal learning institutions. Whilst funding to the VCS sector has supported the exploration of A/RP(E)L

as a way of recognizing and recording soft skills and other forms of informal and non-formal learning these practices are not widely disseminated and their relevance and value is not acknowledged within the other sectors.

FE on the other hand, admittedly an insight garnered from our very limited research within this sector, appears to be struggling with the legacy of seeing A/RP(E)L as an auditing system that creates a bureaucratic and time-intensive burden. Innovation appears to have stalled on this perceived barrier.

What our research has shown is that the introduction ICT systems and tools, to support A/RP(E)L processes, often provide an impetus for re-evaluating the understanding of A/RP[E]L within institutions by demanding an agreed understanding to form the basis of online tools or templates. This is particularly apparent in HEIs and has several positive effects. Not only does it create a shared understanding within the institutions for staff, but it conveys more coherently this understanding to potential claimants and learners.

By creating a shared, organisation-wide understanding that is linked to defined and coherent processes, all of the adult education sectors we have case-studied benefit. This consensus would foster a clearer understanding of the expectations of HE, FE and WBL, and therefore the transfer of learners from informal learning to formal learning and the enhancement of employment through learning.

Other findings that our research has thrown up and which are worth reflecting on include the concern amongst those working with APEL tools in the workplace and voluntary sector about the lack of transferability between the tools they have developed, and work with, and the expectation of formal learning institutions. National credit frameworks may play a part in lessening this problem, though when considered against the horizon of the redefinition of APEL, there needs to be an understanding of A/RP(E)L as a process in which all the sectors can play an equally valuable part. This could be fostered through the creation of a complementary set of online tools, reflecting the different stages of the process.

Secondly, within both WBL and VCS there is a very apparent interest in the potential of using ICT tools to develop mechanisms of peer support to enhance and aid processes around the recognition of prior experiential learning. This is perhaps something that would warrant further exploration and support.

Lastly, there is the acknowledgement of the need to focus on A/RP[E]L as a process of recognition, with accreditation only being one part of this process.

Perhaps the SCQFs appropriation and use of the acronym RPL (Recognition of Prior Learning), and its understanding of RPL as being composed of both formative and summative recognition, goes some way towards this. However, if we are to look to design new systems and tools for enhancing and supporting A/RP(E)L it would be most productive to create a system that allows for assessment and accreditation but that allows and encourages the formative elements to remain ongoing. It is here that we come back round to professional development planning, the experiential cycle and e-portfolios. Importantly, however, we must not forget to highlight the need to provide claimants and learners with a clear understanding of the value of prior learning and with a structure through which to reflect on and record this.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Conducting of further research into projects and initiatives developed within the VCS around A/RP(E)L. Research would need to look specifically at their applicability to, and the potential benefits for, formal learning institutions and employment settings.
- Further research into the emerging use of ICT in Professional Development Planning (PDP) and the part A/RP(E)L processes play in this. In particular, to gain further understanding of their potential to be mutually beneficial parts of the same learning cycle.
- Conducting of further research into the value and potential of peer support and A/RP[E]L, including the type of social software that can best contribute to and support these practices. Research around informal social network systems and communities of learning should also be explored in relation to A/RP(E)L.
- Further research into good practice in the use of ICT to support A/RP(E)L with the aim of disseminating good practice examples.
- Further research into clearly identifying the elements of the 're-defined' understanding of APEL as an experiential cycle linked to PDP (reflective engagement with learning, past, present and future), with a view to creating a suite of tools available across sectors that would be complementary. This would take the form of a set of tools that covers the whole process but allows singular elements to be used as required. This would allow transferability and sharing of workload, as in the possibilities of a complimentary relationship between case studies A's and B's processes.

APPENDIX ONE - CASE STUDIES/VIGNETTES

CASE STUDY A

Teesside University Business School [Work Based Studies]

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The Work Based Studies (WBS) programme within the University of Teesside Business School offers flexible work-based learning routes to both graduate and post-graduate status. The aim is to provide learning opportunities for employed learners and to recognise the valuable learning that takes place in the work place, allowing learners to use this as the basis of an individual course of study.

Learning on the work-based degree schemes may be a combination of:

- accreditation of in-house company training
- existing modules offered by the Teesside Business School
- bespoke modules developed by the Business School to meet an employer's specific needs
- credit for previous learning
- work-based studies

Through the WBS route degrees are available in the following areas:

- Business
- Combined Sciences
- Engineering Studies
- Graphic Design
- Humanities
- Law Enforcement and Investigation
- Professional Studies in Education
- Psychological Studies
- Social Studies
- Sports Studies

WBS responds to the individual circumstances of each student meaning the method and timescale for students to complete levels 1-3 and gain 360 credits is different from the conventional three year route.

Recognition and Accreditation of Prior Learning

Aims and Objectives

The WBS programme sees APL as supporting students' aspirations through the recognition of learning already achieved and by supporting students' entry onto degree courses at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. It also aims to support employer and employee led workforce development and to engage with and support the socio-economic development of the Teesside region.

Terminology

Across the University of Teesside as a whole the use of terms, to describe processes for the recognition and accreditation of prior learning is inconsistent, problematic and confused. Because of this there is no University wide system in place.

The WBS Programme, within the Business School has chosen to use (and encourages the use of) APL as an umbrella term for the 'Accreditation of Prior Learning' and sees this as composed of:

- AP(E)L; to designate the claiming of credit for experiential learning which is evidenced and verified through portfolio submissions; and
- AP(C)L for certificated learning which covers the accreditation of awards that have (or are given) HE credit equivalence.

Background

The University of Teesside's Business School's APL process originated in the development of a Negotiated Learning Scheme (NLS) operated through the Centre for Lifelong Learning (CLL) 1999-2000. This was part of the University's widening access programme.

NLS moved to Teesside Business School (TBS) in September 2007 and was re-titled Work Based Studies (WBS) in January 2008.

The APL process was initially funded through awards given to the University for widening access. No fees were charged to students for either AP(C)L or AP(E)L credit claims. However those claiming AP(E)L credit were encouraged to do so through a gateway module to NLS called 'Make Your Learning Count', which carried a charge of £95.

From January 2008 WBS replaced NLS and now exists within the normal funding arrangements of all School based programmes and the same fee rates as outlined above remain in place. However a proposal for changing this is processing through the University Senior Management team. The proposals are as follows:

1. Certificated Learning: No fees
2. Experiential Learning: Flat rate charge of £100 per credit claim irrespective of amount of claimed credits.

It is believed by the work-based studies programme manager that this proposal will be returned for reconsideration as there are 2 strong opposing schools of thought within the university that are opposed to this: those that wish to implement a sliding scale for AP(E)L credit – 25% of normal module fees and those that wish to charge a flat rate but want that fee to be around £500 - £600.

A/RP(E)L process and the stages it covers

The focus of the APL process for the university is stages 6 and 7 (assessment of the evidence and accreditation). Students are personally responsible for stages 1-5 themselves unless they opt to take the 'Make Your Learning Count' module.

It is the MYLC module that functions primarily to support and enable students with APL: both AP(C)L & AP(E)L. The module consists of 18 contact hours (5 x 3 hr seminars held on alternate weeks. Each student then has 2 private tutorials prior to submission date.) It is a 20 credit module awarded at levels 1 and 2, offered at a charge of £95.

The MYLC module is supported by a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) (Blackboard) that contains:

- Learning materials
- All templates required
- All MYLC seminar PowerPoints
- Reading List
- All administration documentation
- Announcements
- Discussion Board

Within the MYLC module students are also encouraged to develop group identity through the Discussion Board and support each other in the AP(E)L process.

Assessment tasks for the module are based around:

- Personal Statement
- Reflective CV
- Reflective Job Description
- Audit & claim construction of AP(C)L where appropriate
- Provisional Areas of Learning for potential AP(E)L submissions
- 3000 word Reflective Essay on the module experience

The module is not designed to function purely as a mapping / auditing exercise of prior learning. It supports students in their own knowledge acquisition, conceptual understanding and critical engagement with both prior learning and 'Work-based learning' in general.

Thus the MYLC module moves to include stages 2-5 and also acknowledges the importance of the skills required by and developed in APL processes.

The process of assessment and accreditation is not however iterative, it is very much summative. If credit is not awarded there is no appeals procedure in place.

Demographic

The APL process is not targeted or marketed towards a particular demographic. However, since 2007 it has been marketed to corporate businesses as well as individuals.

Generally those that take up the APEL process tend to be between the ages of 25-45.

Numbers

Approximately 30 students go through the work-based studies APL process each year. However, the popularity of the APL option is growing and it is believed these numbers will increase year-on-year.

It is becoming the case that all students seeking APEL accreditation begin their studies, in the WBS faculty, with the 20 credit MYLC module as well as a 10 credit module, entitled, 'Learning Skills for Work Based Studies'.

University wide information, in terms of the numbers claiming APL credit, is not available due to the lack of institution-wide consistency around the recognition and accreditation of prior learning.

Support Available to Learners

There is no independent support available to learners wishing to use the APL process. Learner support is available through provision offered within the module 'Make Your Learning Count' [MYLC].

Support Available to staff

The main support available to staff within the APL process has been the provision of an Assessor's Guide document for APL assessment. However, in May 2008 the WBS programme began to provide some induction for new APL assessors and followed this a moderation and discussion session at the end of the assessment process.

On 17th June the University, as a whole, launched a consultation exercise into the training needs of staff. This consultation will also look at training needs surrounding APL processes.

Technology/ICT

The use of ICT is not currently seen as an integral part of the APL process, but it is considered to be a key area of development that both the WBS programme and the University as a whole intend to look at over the coming academic year. In particular, the increased use of ICT is seen as being potentially useful for the identification and verification of HE equivalence. ICT is, however, employed throughout the 'Make Your Learning Count' module in the development of student portfolios and in the use of Blackboard as a resource repository and communication space for peer support.

Staff Perceptions and suggestions

- Staff within the WBS Programme believe that the APL process, particularly the AP(E)L aspect, can have a profound and life changing effect on the student in terms of self-image and sense of worth. They also see it as feeding back into the work-place and raising learners' levels of engagement, understanding & efficiency.
- When supported through the MYLC module staff see AP(E)L as potentially making a significant contribution to the development of reflective practice and reflective work places.
- WBL staff believe there to be a lack of understanding, amongst colleagues in other departments, regarding the value and worth of prior experiential learning. They do, however, see this to be slowly changing.
- Staff also acknowledged that securing AP(E)L assessors, when there is no structure in place to compensate them in terms of hours or payment, often proves very difficult.

Additional Information

A University wide commitment to work based learning, including APL, is now underway and the next 12 months should see major developments in these areas.

CASE STUDY B

Getting the Credit – A work based learning toolkit

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The North West Strategic Health Authority, known as NHS North West, was created in July 2006. NHS Northwest has been involved in developing a number of e-learning initiatives, including the creation of a database to share good-practice within the NHS.

Accreditation and Recognition of Prior Learning

Aims and Objectives

To enable staff, seeking to further their educational and career development, to identify how and to what extent they might be able to obtain academic credit for any prior learning they have undertaken and to reflect on gaps in their learning.

Terminology

Within the context of the 'Getting the Credit Toolkit' the term AP(E)L is used. It is felt that this term is adequate to cover all varieties of prior learning.

Background

To support the delivery of two major local Workforce Development Projects the Cumbria and Lancashire and Greater Manchester Strategic Health Authorities (SHAs) collaborated and commissioned a major project to provide guidance and recommendations on how the NHS can support greater use of the accreditation of WBL. The University of Central Lancashire were commissioned to deliver this project.

An output from this project was the design of a 'Getting the Credit' toolkit. Based upon an understanding of educational issues, accreditation processes and promoting a developmental approach the tool identifies the key aspects

and issues that need to be considered when considering a claim for accreditation.

A/RP(E)L Process and the stages it covers

The '*Getting the Credit*' tool for AP(E)L has been developed with the aim of facilitating health and social care professionals in compiling an ongoing log of their work based learning in a format which will provide them with a transferable portfolio of recognised prior learning and facilitate them in seeking accreditation for their learning if applying to a HE or FE course.

The tool can be used to help produce a personal development plan or as a tool to develop learning. It is designed as a guide through the main steps in using prior or work-based learning to:

- Show what you have achieved
- Show how ready you are for a new role or new responsibilities
- Agree the learning you still need

The tool is split into 3 main sections:

Section A prompts you to think about your decision to claim for accreditation, what you may want to seek accreditation for and if you need further advice from an APL coordinator at the educational institute of your choice. It also prompts you to start thinking about what learning you may already have undertaken and helps in the gathering of evidence to support the claim, ensuring that it is relevant and valid.

Section B helps you to develop your claim and gather evidence.

Section C prompts you to think about an action plan to actually go ahead and submit a claim for accreditation.

Emphasis here is placed on stages 2, 3 and 4 of our identified seven stage process.

The tool is available online at:

www.northwest.nhs.uk/documentuploads/creditproject/index

It is available as a downloadable word document, along with examples of completed tools.

Demographics

No information available.

Numbers

No information available

Support Available to Learners

The tool is designed as a standalone guide for use in the workplace. It is available as a downloadable word document that also provides access to examples of completed tools. It is also recommended that support should be sort from the institution to which a claimant applies.

Support Available to Staff

It is felt that support will come from the educational institution to which those seeking recognition are applying. Therefore no specific staff support exists that relates directly to the use of the 'Getting the Credit' Toolkit.

Technology/ICT

The tool is a solely online document. It uses fairly basic technology and is in short a word document that provides information, guidance and structure to support those seeking the recognition of their (prior) learning.

Staff Perceptions and Suggestions

- One staff member felt that it needs to be taken into consideration that most HEIs have their own documentation for APL/APEL and therefore there may be a lot of repetition for individuals using this tool.
- The tool was seen as being very useful for health care professionals who are not familiar with APEL terms. However, it was felt that the tools documents did require some knowledge of how to evidence learning.
- Overall, staff saw the tool as straightforward to use and believe it will help people to think in a structured way about what they have already learnt. Some staff, however, felt that for those not used to reflective thinking it may be a difficult process.
- The majority of staff agreed that the tool will make it easier for health care staff to update their skills.

CASE STUDY C

Foundation Direct - University of Portsmouth

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The University of Portsmouth is a major provider of foundation degrees within the South East region. Foundation Direct supports the University's growing number of foundation degree students.

Foundation Direct is a Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) funded Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning that builds on the University of Portsmouth's practice developed in student support, the careers service and work-based learning.

Foundation Direct offers students, potential students and mentors many services and advice resources.

Accreditation and Recognition of Prior Learning

Aims and Objectives

Foundation Direct sees APEL as helping learners to:

- Gain in confidence
- Recognise the skills and learning they already possess
- Acquire the skills to be a lifelong learner
- Improve their employability

Terminology

Foundation Direct employs the terms APL and APEL interchangeably. Within the terms APL and APEL they recognise both certificated learning and experiential learning.

Background

Foundation Direct was established in March 2005 with the aim of providing a support service for all University of Portsmouth foundation degrees students. Support is delivered by tutors at a 'Drop-in' and 'Virtual Centre'. In the three years in which it has been in operation, AP(E)L guidance has been an important part of its work.

A/RP(E)L Process and the stages it covers

The APL process is identified as consisting of five steps:

Step One – APL Pathways

Understanding APL and what credit one may be able to claim for.

Step Two – What Prior Learning Counts

Finding out what learning is required for the chosen course of study, which is established by checking against unit descriptors.

Step Three – Review what you already know

Reviewing the unit aims, syllabus and learning outcomes of each of the units that make up the chosen course of study. If an applicant has already achieved the stated aims, has learned how to do the things stated under learning outcomes, and knows and understands the items mentioned in the syllabus, s/he should be able to claim credit for this prior learning. At this stage the applicant needs to go through each of the units one at a time and to ascertain where they might claim and use the provided claim form to note down prior learning.

Step Four – Evidence

A collection of materials put together to describe and evidence the learning achieved. Claims for prior learning can involve evidence of two different types: certificates and portfolio evidence of experiential learning

Step Five – Submitting a claim

The finalised claim should contain the following:

- a front sheet
- an APL claim form for each of the units claimed against
- for experiential learning a description and explanation of the learning

The APL assessors want to know what the claimant has learned and how it matches the learning outcomes of the units against which they are claiming.

Demographic

No information available.

Numbers

Approximately 12% of students entering onto to foundation degrees with the University of Portsmouth do so through the AP(E)L process.

Support Available to Learners

Support is at the very heart of all of Foundation Direct's work and so support is acknowledged as essential in the AP(E)L process. Support is provided to students through both physical and virtual centres, which provide a blend of campus-based and e-learning support.

Support structures are, however, seen as part of a wider process of Professional Development Planning (PDP) that offers structured support through the students' lifecycle with pre-entry activity, on-entry assessment, self-progress reporting, professional skills development and career and progression planning.

Support available to staff

APL/APEL workshops are offered to university staff working on foundation degrees.

Technology/ICT

ICT is used in a number of ways. Information about the APL/APEL process is offered online in both written and podcast format. Support and guidance, in making a claim, is available virtually through email and discussion forum.

Staff perceptions and suggestions

- Staff at Foundation Direct think it is important to raise awareness of APEL as many tutors within the university as a whole, are believed to be reluctant to award credits for experiential learning.
- Staff acknowledge an increased interest from learners in the APL/APEL process and feel it to be of vital importance that Foundation Direct continues to support and manage the growth in APEL claims and ensure that adequate provision is available.
- It is felt that the online tutor service works very well. In particular, it is seen as taking a lot of the time consuming work away from tutors.
- Through the offering of APL/APEL support and provision it is thought that the Foundation Direct Centre has the potential to play an important role in facilitating access and retention for widening participation, work-based students and, through this, contribute to the University's commitment to increasing the relative number of these students.

CASE STUDY D

The contact interviewed in case study D requested that the details of the institution not be included in the study.

Accreditation and Recognition of Prior Learning

Aims and Objectives

- Potential students will be able to assess quickly and easily the credit they may be able to claim for their prior experiential learning which will assist them in making decisions about their future education.
- Applicants for APEL will be given an easier, faster and better supported process for preparing and submitting claims for credit.
- Staff who manage APEL systems will be better informed of the relevant experience of enquirers and will be able to offer a better service

Terminology

The University, as a whole, use the terms APL and APEL interchangeably. It is recognised that APL is perhaps a better umbrella term and when it is used it is used to mean both prior certificated learning and experiential learning. However, it is felt that APEL is preferable as it more obviously addresses, the recognition of experiential learning, which the University actively seeks to promote and support.

Background

Case Study D in common with many other universities in the UK, is seeing rapid growth in demand for its LtW programmes. 85 to 90 % of individuals enrolling for LtW programmes also request APEL. Currently, it is felt, that this is a very labour intensive process, requiring a lot of attention from experienced advisers.

As a result of this the university is piloting an e-APEL tool. The e-APEL project uses e-learning technologies to automate aspects of the APEL process and thereby enhance the service offered to students. The project aims to use e-assessment technology to allow potential students to self assess their prior experiential learning and receive an indication of the credit they might be able to claim.

A/RP(E)L process and the stages it covers

The project is currently focusing on developing 3 related services:

- The Estimator
- The Adviser
- The Claims Service

The Estimator is the core service that will assist students in identifying and defining their prior learning experiences.

Once a profile has been compiled, learners can then submit this in order to be provided with an indication of the credit they can claim. This response is generated from the Adviser.

The Adviser is a tool for the University's APEL-advisers. It allows them to evaluate and comment on submitted proposals from the Estimator, and return these to the student. Individual learning experiences defined by learners can be commented on and, further defined in terms of the type and amount of credit that might be claimed for it.

The Claim Service consists of an integrated portfolio, which will take the learning experiences from the Advisor and translate them into a framework within which students can evidence their claim. The e-portfolio software 'PebblePad'¹⁰ is currently used to support the Claim Service.

Demographic

No particular demographic can be identified

Numbers

The vast majority, 85 -90%, of students on the LtW Programmes claim some form of APEL. This may be attributable to the active encouragement and awareness raising within the University's LtW provision. This percentage has grown dramatically within the last two years.

Support Available to Learners

The University has a number of APEL experts, particularly within the LtW programme, who offer face-to-face support and guidance.

Support, is also offered through the Adviser Service of the e-APEL tool and the Estimator Service which supports face-to-face meetings by providing a set of information to allow a well informed discussion to take place. By allowing potential students to self assess their prior experiential learning the cost of advising individuals on the likely outcome of an APEL claim are largely alleviated. Learners also gain knowledge and understanding of how APEL works.

Support Available to Staff

Staff are offered support from colleagues who have experience of APEL. Staff are however not always keen to act as assessors due to what they feel is a lack of support and financial remuneration.

¹⁰ PebblePad is a 'Personal Learning System' being used in learning contexts as diverse as schools, colleges, universities and professional bodies; by learners, teachers and assessors; for PDP, CPD and L&T. It is similar to an e-portfolio and provides scaffolding to help users create records of learning, achievement and aspiration and has a reflective structure underpinning all of its core elements.

The e-APEL tool will act to support staff by decreasing the work load related to APEL and improving the quality of their intervention by giving them advanced knowledge of the APEL applicant's before they meet with them. Also the e-APEL system will, however, act to raise both the knowledge and understanding of staff and claimants.

Technology/ICT

The University's process of APEL, is largely a manual one at present however as mentioned above the demand on their current APEL system has significantly increased. In light of this the University, and particularly the Learning through Work provision, has looked towards the potentials of ICT. In 2006 they were successful in winning a JISC funded bid in partnership with another University and two commercial partners.

The e-APEL tool uses Open Source products and has made the tool available under an Open Source licence, in accordance with JISC's Open Source Policy. The APEL claim support service (*Claim Service*) is underpinned by the e-portfolio system 'Pebble Pad'.

Staff Perceptions and suggestions

- Staff within the University see the e-APEL project as having the potential to positively impact on their lifelong learning goals.
- Staff think the use of technology to support the APEL process is having positive benefits for the whole university in regards to APEL, as it has required the university's APEL processes and practices to be reconsidered and redefined. By doing so it is felt the university's APEL processes are maturing and improving, making them more transferable, consistent and efficient.
- Staff see the e-APEL service as having the potential to become the core of a much broader set of services that can support lifelong learning, including needs analyses and career planning services.

CASE STUDY E

The contact interviewed in case study E requested that the details of the institution not be included in the study.

Accreditation and Recognition of Prior Learning

Terminology

The university uses the term APL to refer to certificated learning and APEL to refer to experiential learning that has not been formally assessed or certificated.

Background

N/A

A/RP(E)L process and the stages it covers

The focus is very much on stages 6 and 7 – the assessment of evidence and the accreditation of learning in the form of advanced standing and the awarding of credits. However, there is initial guidance available to potential claimants on a departmental basis.

The universities APL and APEL routes are as follows:

1. Direct Credit Transfer

Courses which have been verified for credit are listed on the 'Current Credit Exemption List', which was compiled in 2000. If a course is not on the list a learner may still be able to seek credit for it but will need to contact the department to which they are applying.

2. Experiential Portfolio

Requirements for the presentation of evidence depends on the course applied for and so a claimant would need to speak to a departmental APEL advisor.

The assessment of evidence for awarding credit is undertaken by a group of appointed assessors.

There is no charge for initial guidance in the APL/APEL processes, or for direct credit transfers. The assessment and accreditation of an APEL portfolio carries a fee of £75.00. The APEL process is not iterative and once the portfolio has been submitted there is no appeal process open to claimants.

Demographic

Information not available

Numbers

Information not available

Support Available to Learners

The university has a number APL/APEL advisors, who are specified members of academic staff. There is an APL/APEL advisor available on each of the universities three sites. He/she is allocated to claimants to provide initial guidance in the preparation of an APL/APEL claim.

Support is also available from individual departments and course conveners.

Support Available to Staff

Staff who are members of the APL/APEL sub-board are given time to attend APL/APEL meetings.

APEL specialists work to support colleagues who need to deal with APEL claims. All academic staff, if it is considered to be relevant, are supported in engaging in APL/APEL related CPD activities.

Technology/ICT

ICT is not currently used in the universities APL/APEL processes. It may, however, be the case that personal and departmental systems are in place to support APL/APEL processes.

Staff Perceptions and Suggestions

No information is available.

CASE STUDY F

RAGU – The Refugee Assessment and Guidance Unit

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The Refugee Assessment and Guidance Unit (RAGU) was set up in 1995 in order to improve the employment prospects of refugees and asylum-seekers with higher level education or professional qualifications from their own countries.

RAGU's range of services is focused on identifying individual strengths and abilities and providing support towards achieving realistic and relevant educational and employment goals. These services include: specifically targeted training programmes, individual advice and guidance sessions and help into employment through long term support.

RAGU's aim is to provide an environment in which refugees can enhance their language skills, build self-confidence and find routes into appropriate education, vocational training or employment.

In July 2006 RAGU became part of The Department of Applied Social Sciences (DASS) at London Metropolitan University.

Recognition and Accreditation of Prior Learning

Terminology

RAGU use the term to designate the 'Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning' rather than the 'Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning'. This acronym was chosen because they wanted to concentrate on the process of recognising and recording skills through reflection and identification, and support and guidance. It is, therefore, the assessment of skills and not the accreditation of prior learning within a framework of equivalences. What RAGU work towards producing is a portfolio of prior learning and current skills.

Background

RAGU's APEL process began as a support course in 1995 that was open only to refugee women. This group was seen as having particular needs (a gap in understanding between where they were, in terms of skills and qualifications,

when they came into the country, and how these could be translated within the UK context). The course soon grew to include any refugee from a professional or graduate background.

The course started off as a ten-week course, but soon became a six-month process, which also included information on the labour market, higher education system, and on developing ICT skills. The course became a whole package built around RAGU's APEL work, which aimed to help refugee professionals gain employment or access to HE. It has taken this form, unchanged, for the past 10 years.

The course culminates in the awarding of a validated certificate of professional development from London Metropolitan University. The accreditation is at certificate level and is achieved by through the completion of the following three modules.

1. Portfolio Building
2. Essential Skills Development – focussing mainly on communication skills
3. Access in to HE and the labour market

The portfolio module is considered to be the central component of the course, with a portfolio generally consisting of a CV, identification of skills, abilities and experience, and a statement of future goals.

RAGU's APEL process was, since its inception, funded by the European Social Fund, although in more recent years the money has come to RAGU from the European Social Fund via both the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and Job Centre Plus.

From this year onwards, however, the course will cease to run. This is seen as being due to a diversion of funds away from refugees to immigrant communities more widely defined.

A/RP(E)L Process and the stages it covers

RAGU's APEL processes cover stages 1 (Initial Guidance), 2 (Reflection and the Recognising and Identifying of Skills), 4 (Gathering Evidence), 5 (Documenting Evidence) and, to some extent, stages 3 (Relating Skills to an Agreed Set of Outcomes or Criteria) and 6 (Assessment of the Evidence).

RAGU's APEL process is embodied within its three-module certificate course, which is supplemented by the wider guidance and support it offers.

There is no charge for learners to access either initial guidance or to enrol in the certificate course.

Demographic

No information available.

Numbers

About 30 learners successfully complete the process per year and so, over the 10 years the programme has been running, about 300 individuals have benefitted from the process.

Support available to Learners

The APEL process involves intensive Information and Guidance (IAG) support. RAGU has a dedicated team of five advisors for their APEL process. Each student is assigned his/her own advisor who will see them regularly throughout the time of the course and, when funding was adequate, s/he would continue to see the learners after the official end of the course. Support extends beyond the APEL certificate course to guidance on applying for jobs and continued action planning on goals learners want to work towards. In some cases this support could last as long as three years.

Support available to staff

All staff are trained in-house and have their own specialised areas including communications skills, language tutoring, professional development and personal development with the learners, and ICT and portfolio development.

Technology/ICT

ICT was only used in the production of the portfolio. However, staff are currently working on an electronic APEL guide which is intended to be used not only within RAGU but by London Metropolitan University as a whole. This is being designed as a self-access tool that will support learners wanting to take an APEL route. It is acknowledged that this may prove an expensive development process but that it will offer APEL support without the need for as many dedicated personnel. It is also hoped that in time this will include portfolio examples.

It is also a possible that there may be potential for creating an online APEL course for refugees, since RAGU acknowledge that there is a lot of expertise around refugee support within London that it would be beneficial to be able to share. Ideally, this could be accessed by advisors and clients in all parts of the country, with support from RAGU and London Metropolitan University.

Staff Perceptions and Suggestions

- Staff agreed that the success of their APEL process was due to its being so learner focused. They understood that it was designed to leave it to the individual to set the pace and course of support.
- Staff acknowledged that within the University as a whole there is no agreed approach to APEL, and felt that this should be addressed. 'There needs to be APEL staff in all departments and there needs to be a system that is coordinated between them. If we wanted to transfer people from RAGU to a course within university this caused enormous problems and the same problems are faced when seeking to transfer them to courses at other universities'.
- Staff acknowledged the need to build a shared understanding of APEL within the university in general and felt that technology could assist this process. There was a keen interest in utilising technology to create a centralised set of documents to explain what is understood by APEL. However, staff generally agreed this would be a large and expensive undertaking.

- RAGU staff perceived different university departments had different needs and approaches to APEL. They felt that some departments were enthusiastic about APEL, whereas others 'will not touch it with a barge-pole'. Thus, they felt that 'It would take a lot of groundwork, a lot of meetings to come to an agreement'.

CASE STUDY G

SWOOP – South West Opportunities for Older People

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SWOOP (South West Opportunities for Older People) started as a £2m EQUAL project, that ran until December 2007, to support individuals suffering discrimination within and outside the labour market based on their age. It can now be described as a regional partnership of agencies and organisations based at the University of Exeter that provides guidance and support to employers and individuals in regards to the employability of older people.

Its remit is to:

- empower older people in representing their experience and aptitudes to enhance their employability
- assist employers to understand and act positively regarding employing and supporting older workers
- ensure age demography issues have direct influence on the regions key strategic agencies
- promote the productivity and competitiveness of the SW region

The SWOOP e-Portfolio Action Project looked to develop e-portfolios to support the process of representation and recognition of older peoples' experience, capacities, aptitudes and attainments so that the process of gaining and or developing employment is enhanced for the benefit of the individual and the employer.

The project was piloted within a local authority, community learning centre, FE sector and voluntary sector.

Recognition and Accreditation of Prior Learning

Aims and Objectives

See above.

Terminology

The SWOOP e-portfolio action project does not use any of the acronyms or labels associated with the recognition and/or accreditation of prior learning. Instead it sees itself as offering a more holistic process that provides a structure for reflection and, most importantly, works with individuals to recognise their own learning and the value that this learning offers the labour market. The presentation of this to others is then the secondary step. It was felt, by SWOOP, that incorporating labels and acronyms served little purpose in meeting their aims and objectives.

Background

The SWOOP project was established to test out a number of activities that could contribute to the continued employability of people in the South West of the UK over 45 years old, and to conduct research into the effectiveness and viability of these activities. SWOOP also wished to contribute additional relevant research and comment to the demographic debate. This testing involved a range of different support services to individuals and sought to engage both those employed and unemployed. As part of the SWOOP project an internet based e-portfolio was tested as a tool in this process. Various scenarios were tested where individuals could use the e-portfolio tool along with information and guidance (IAG) support.

A/RP(E)L Process and the stages it covers

The e-portfolio Action Project covers stages 1, 2, 4, 5 and to some extent 3 and 6.

Firstly, the structure of the portfolio and the face-to-face support offered is aimed at supporting and guiding older learners to reflect on prior learning that had been gained either formally or informally. The portfolio tools were then used to help learners record and evidence their learning.

They then move to recording and evidencing their learning within the portfolio. Stage 3 is covered in that the portfolio is designed to provide a resource of information that can be used for more specific purposes such as a job application or entrance on to a course of study. Having gone through the reflection and the evidencing of learning individuals can select aspects relevant to a specific set of criteria.

The portfolio is also designed not only for the recognising of prior learning but also for reflecting on skills gaps and future learning goals.

Demographic

No information is available

Numbers

Seventeen people took part in the SWOOP forward workshop pilots.

Support available to learners

Though it is an electronic tool the SWOOP e-portfolio was never designed as a stand-alone tool. Learners were, however, encouraged to work on it independently.

One of the aims of the project was to look at different support models and it was found that the most effective model was its use in a designated workshop setting, where face-to-face support was also available. Within these workshops support from peers as well as workshop leaders was encouraged. Support, not just from workshop leaders but from peers was also encouraged.

Support available to staff

Staff training was not part of the project however, it was felt it was a necessary part of using the tool effectively. From the research, the following question was felt to be pertinent 'Who do you really have to get into the system, the staff or the users?' The answer from the pilot phase research was the staff.

Technology/ICT

The programme used the 'vanilla' version of a commercial system called **Vitaevity™**, developed by Arc Software Consultancy. The product was used for formative (i.e. to support reflection and learning) and 'marketing' or recording and recognition purposes. It did this by supporting three activities: introspection, action and reflection, self-assessment, and the creation of a record of achievement. The latter was compiled through the use of workbooks and other interactive tools resulting in a flexible personalised repository based around a digital progress file whereby achievement and qualification records, presentation documents (such as a CV) and personal profiles could be stored.

Partner and client perceptions and suggestions

- Those working on the project felt that within organisations and institutions the tool and process needs to be part of the mainstream system. 'It needs to be a part of the system and have the sort of organization wide acknowledgement that comes with that. Trying to work this on the peripheries is really difficult. It needs to be overarching.'
- Project evidence showed that the tutors, or the intermediaries, supporting the use of the tool were often not comfortable with some of the concepts or with the idea of the technical interface.
- It was felt that A/RP(E)L needs to be part of a wider system of pre-entry, recruitment, and in-job appraisals.
- Existing A/RP(E) terminology was seen to be unhelpful and it was felt that by not using an existing label the specific requirements of the client group were looked at, and dealt with, more fully.
- Project staff felt that existing APEL systems, used by other organisations and institutions, were poor at representing soft skills, and that a good e-portfolio could more adequately represent soft skills.
- The project reported the following response as a common one from staff who were asked to work with the tool in the pilot phase 'we don't have time to do that. I'm sure it is terribly clever but we don't have time'

- Using an e-portfolio in a community setting was seen to be a good idea as it also helped develop ICT skills in a purposeful way.

CASE STUDY H

SOUL (Soft Outcomes Universal Learning) Record

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The SOUL Record is supported and administered by both Norwich and Norfolk Voluntary Services and the research centre at City College Norfolk. Norwich and Norfolk Voluntary Services (NVS) is a major local development agency. They work to promote and develop volunteering and the work of voluntary organisations. Research Centre City College Norfolk offers an eclectic range of methodologies specialising in qualitative data gathering techniques particularly action research, case study and evaluation. Projects receiving European, national or regional funding have been carried out, by the Research Centre, in areas such as social policy, education and training, business and management, information technology, organisational restructuring and small business development.

The SOUL Record is a practical framework for measuring informal learning. It is learner centred and focuses on solutions rather than problems. The system concentrates on what an individual can do, rather than things they have been unable to achieve and it is intended as a positive experience for learners.

Recognition and accreditation of prior learning

Terminology

The SOUL record does not employ any of the terms associated with the recognition or accreditation of prior experience or learning. Instead it talks in terms of recognising and measuring informal learning and helping individuals to map where they are and where they want to go.

In this respect it maps itself to the RARPA (Recognising and Recording Progress and Achievement) process.

Background

The SOUL Project grew out of a need identified by the Norfolk voluntary and community sector to evidence their clients' informal learning. This is learning which does not lead to a recognised qualification and takes place in a wide variety of settings. For the purposes of the project, the term included personal

development initiatives and situations where an individual might not even appreciate at the time that they are learning.

A group of voluntary organisations in Norfolk, headed by Norwich and Norfolk Voluntary Services, therefore took the initiative of devising a research project with The Research Centre, City College Norwich, to achieve a number of objectives, one of which was the development of a system to monitor and measure the achievement of progression in 'soft' outcomes. The SOUL Project received funding from The Big Lottery Fund (formerly the Community Fund) and commenced in September 2003, continuing to the end of February 2006.

A/RP(E)L Process and the stages it covers

The SOUL Record focuses mainly on stage 2 (Reflection and the recognising and identifying of skills) of the A/RP(E)L process and goes some way to working towards stages 4 (Gathering evidence of skills).

The tool provides a range of questionnaires for advisors to select from, along with worksheets and observational sheets, so that they can use the resources best suited to an individual client's needs. These questionnaires divide soft skills into three main areas: 'attitude', 'personal / interpersonal' and 'practical'. The idea is that the tool, along with tutor support, allows adults to recognise what areas they currently have strength in and what prior experience has allowed them to learn and develop in this area. It also allows learners to reflect on areas they may like to develop and how they could go about doing this.

The Soul Record Toolkit also allows the measuring of change in these areas over time. In this way organisations are able to show the distance that learners, or groups of learners, have travelled. A Spreadsheet Results Package (SRP) helps organisations collate their results and graphically display them.

Organisations who trialled The SOUL Record reported that the framework provides a valuable diagnostic tool and helps workers to '*get to know*' new service users as well as allowing the service users to get to know themselves and build their confidence and self-esteem.

Demographic

No information available.

Numbers

Since its launch in February 2006 600 users from across the UK have been trained. However, there are no figures to indicate the numbers of clients/learners who have so far used the tool.

Support available to learners

The SOUL record is designed as a process to be carried out in a dialogue with a learner, with a tutor guiding and supporting the learner at all stages.

Methods of learner support are covered in training events however the specifics will be amenable and flexible to the needs and resources of the organisation using the tool.

Support available to staff

All staff that want to use the SOUL record have to do an initial training course, for which they are charged a fee of £150. This £150 pounds gives them a one day training session and access to the SOUL record and resources to share with their organisation. After this they are offered ongoing support to adapt it to the purposes of their organisation. Staff at the research centre are happy to do this as it also helps them to further develop the SOUL record and supports the dissemination of its use throughout the UK.

Technology/ICT

The SOUL Record has been successfully trialled as a paper based system which includes a software spreadsheet results package but it has now been developed as a fully electronic package.

The electronic version has been produced as software on CD, and is in the process of being made into an interactive, password protected website.

Staff perceptions and suggestions

No information Available.

CASE STUDY I

MV Volunteering Passport – Volunteer Development Scotland

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Volunteer Development Scotland is Scotland's Centre for Excellence in Volunteer Development. They provide a leadership role which supports decision makers in identifying ways in which volunteering can help them achieve their objectives. Through their knowledge, tools and services they seek to continually enhance the quality of the volunteering experience. By adopting an evidence based approach they look to assist others in maximising the impact and opportunities of volunteering.

The MV Volunteering Passport is an extension of the MV Awards, a free national awards scheme open to all 16 to 25 year old volunteers in Scotland. The awards are presented at the completion of 50 hours, 100 hours and 200 hours of volunteer work.

The Scottish Government funds the MV awards and, as part of this, have funded the development of the MV volunteering passport and the online personal development plan, which has been funded from 2004 to 2008. VDS have now entered their next phase of funding with the Scottish Government, which will run to 2011. Within this, they have certain commitments to making the passport and the personal development plan accessible to young people and supporting them to use it.

The passport is freely available online and there is no cost involved in using it.

Recognition and Accreditation of Prior Learning

Terminology

Voluntary Development Scotland (VDS) use the term APEL but do not formally recognise the MV passport as APEL. Rather they see it as a link in the wider APEL chain, whilst at the same time being a more holistic approach.

A/RP(E)L Process and the stages it covers

The MV passport emerged from research carried out on work involving the Curriculum for Excellence in Scotland, which is based around the capacities that young people should have in order to be confident individuals, successful learners, effective contributors, and responsible citizens.

The passport is made up of three interrelated elements:

1. Considering and reflecting with support on volunteering experiences and the learning that has been achieved through these.
2. The mapping of prior learning to future development.
3. The recording of experience in a way that gives it recognition and legitimacy.

The process involves recording volunteer hours online, keeping an electronic diary, and sharing volunteering experience with others.

Demographic

No information available

Numbers

No information available

Support available to learners

Within the passport online information there is an attempt to make it as self-explanatory as possible so that a young person can immediately start using it independently. The passport is supported through the youth development worker network, of which young people involved in voluntary work are made aware. There is also an initiative being set up in which volunteer roles are created for young people who are already involved in the process to support other young people with the personal development process. This has two benefits insofar as it not only adds to support available to young people using the MV Passport, but it offers a valuable volunteering opportunity to young people in itself. It is hoped that support will also be offered from the organisation in which they are volunteering.

Support available to staff

Support is offered to staff through the national organization and through the youth development workers network. This can be informal one-to-one sessions or more formal group training sessions.

Technology/ICT

The MV Volunteering Passport is an online personal resource. It allows volunteers to record, track and reflect on both prior and current volunteering experiences.

Technology is also used, through an interactive template that allows volunteers to share stories and experiences.

(It should be noted that the interviewee was unable to provide any technical information regarding the software used in the development of the MV Passport)

Staff perceptions and suggestions

- Staff are currently involved in developing the Passport into a more integrated Personal Development Planning (PDP) tool.
- Staff are considering working further to support existing processes by encouraging more peer support. Their aim is to create an online community of MV volunteers.
- The Passport is seen as an important move away from recognising achievement based solely on time logged to a process that identifies the learning that has taken place through a process of reflection.
- VDS staff acknowledge that some of the voluntary organisations with whom they work still prefer a paper-based route, as they do not anticipate themselves working with the Internet and online methods with their volunteers. However, it is felt amongst VDS staff that a move to online resources is needed to fall in line with how young people work and communicate in their lives, and in order to overcome geographical barriers.
- Staff have embraced the online passport because it suits their desire to offer a more systematic form of recognition, rather than just an award. Moreover, they feel this more fully recognises the value of young people devoting time to volunteering. It feels that offering adequate support is one way of recognising the contribution that they are making by volunteering.

CASE STUDY J

Stephenson College

The representative interviewed requested that we did not include their details in our research.

Stephenson College is a large general further education (GFE) college situated in Coalville, in North West Leicestershire. The college has a centre of vocational excellence (CoVE) status in construction and motor vehicle engineering.

Accreditation and Recognition of Prior Learning

Aims and Objectives

To enable individuals to:

- obtain qualifications without necessarily undertaking formal training and/or sitting examinations
- identify their own training and development needs and be in control of their progress
- demonstrate their skills against national standards to achieve qualifications

Terminology

The college uses the terms APL and APEL interchangeably, but also uses the term ACC standing for the Accreditation of Current Competence. The overall policy is referred to as the APL/APEL policy.

Background

N/A

A/RP(E)L Process and the stages it covers

The APL/APEL process within the college is seen as consisting of four stages:

Stage 1 – Reception and Initial Enquiry

Stage 2 – Registration and Production of an Action Plan

Stage 3 - Process and Production of a Portfolio of Evidence

Stage 4 – Accreditation of Evidence

From the College's four stage process we can see that it covers, to some degree, all the stages identified as making up the A/RP(E)L process.

In *stage one* learners are entitled to a free interview with a member of college staff where they get a brief overview of the college's APL/APEL process, as well as being made aware of any cost implications

In *stage two*, once a registration fee has been paid a formal interview will be arranged with a specialist member of staff during which an action plan is produced.

In *stage 3* a specialist member of staff will provide advice and guidance on the development of a portfolio of evidence. The advice and guidance provided will ensure that if followed the evidence produced by the applicant will be of an acceptable standard with respect to the qualification being sought

In *stage 4* the applicant will be required to pay the costs of any registration or other fees requested by the College for the qualification being sought.

Demographic

No information available.

Numbers

No information available.

Support available to learners

The applicant is offered a free initial guidance interview and once they decide to enrol and seek APEL accreditation they are given a one hour interview with a specialist member of staff and further support to develop a portfolio of evidence.

Support available to staff

There is a small number of staff at the college who are considered specialists in the APEL process, it is these members of staff who carry out most of the APEL related work. They are encouraged to do CPD in relation to this role and also share their knowledge with other members of college staff where appropriate.

Technology/ICT

There is currently no significant use of ICT in the APEL process but it is something the college would like to look at, particularly as a way of applicants being able to effectively map their own equivalences.

Staff Perceptions

- Staff see the current process as working well but admit that it is not as well used by learners as it could be. They believe prospective applicants to be put off by the time needed to provide portfolio evidence.
- Staff perceive potential applicants as not being confident enough as to the value of their prior experiential learning.