



Project Document Cover Sheet

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# **PINEAPPLE APEL Project**

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## **1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The aim of the PINEAPPLE project is to use technology to academic and support staff with the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) within University of Plymouth Colleges Faculty (UPC) partner institutions. APEL has benefits for learners, institutions and employers as it recognises and allows students to use their existing knowledge, skills and abilities to gain entry to courses they might otherwise be unqualified to take. It may also be used to confer exemptions from some parts of a course.

There is a lack of awareness about APEL among learners and employers, and this is exacerbated by lack of clarity, understanding and advocacy on the part of many institutions. Yet there are numerous reports and bodies offering guidance and models of implementation.

It is evident from this report that though institutions differ in the detail of their processes, there are many commonalities. Thus to create a technology enhanced process that will provide step-by-step guidance and take account of differences would benefit the sector. Such a tool would give potential APEL advisors and assessors an overview and for those who are taking learners through the process it will give detailed guidance.

## 2. INTRODUCTION

The PINEAPPLE project is concerned with supporting the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) through the use of technology. Its chief task will be to bring clarity to the process and to assist academic and support staff within the University of Plymouth Colleges Faculty (UPC).

Individuals learn throughout life, not always in a formally assessed way at school, college or university but through, for example, jobs, life and voluntary work. APEL is about making this informal learning visible so that it may be used to exempt learners from part of a formal course of learning such as a Foundation or Honours degree. It is not sufficient only to record such experience, but a process must occur to demonstrate that this experience has led to learning.

*"people do not receive recognition merely for their experiences in life, but rather for what they learn from those experiences" <sup>1</sup>*

APEL is complemented by APCL, the Accreditation of Certified Learning which may be defined as 'previous learning which has been accredited' <sup>2</sup> and is regarded as less problematic as it uses a 'tariff' system to recognise learning <sup>3</sup>. The process by which

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<sup>1</sup> Learning From Experience Trust (2003) *The Accreditation of Prior (Experiential) Learning An Overview of the Theory & Practice of AP(E)L*, page 2. <http://www.learningexperience.org.uk/downloads/apel-overview.pdf> accessed 16.04.09.

<sup>2</sup> Merrill, B. (2001). *Social inclusion through APEL: the learners' perspective.*, page 3. National Report for England. Warwick: University of Warwick.

<sup>3</sup> Challis, M. (2005). *Challenging Issues: the accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL)*, Forward 5, Spring: 23-25.

certified learning is recognised across countries has been a particular focus in recent years in response to the need of governments for an employable workforce with lifelong learning at its heart<sup>4</sup>. APEL assessors must be careful not to award credit twice for the same learning so it is important to assess certified learning before looking at experiential<sup>5</sup>.

There are understood to be three broad uses of APEL: on entry; advanced standing with credit; and for professional development. However, very different practices can exist within institutions for each of these uses. For example, on entry some institutions employ detailed application forms to help match experience to entry criteria and provide dedicated staff to implement and promote the APEL process. In other institutions, less informal interviews are used to ascertain to what extent experienced learners are prepared for higher level study. APEL for advanced standing with credit also varies across institutions. Moreover, it can differ according to whether credit is awarded for learning outcomes for a specific module (specific credit) or more generally, learning outcomes that fit with the objectives of the programme as a whole (general credit). The extent to which the APEL process differs across institutions supports the claim that, 'there is little practice on which to base any generalised patterns of activity'<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Scholten, A. and Teuwsen, R. (2001) *Accreditation of Prior Learning: a background report*. <http://www.web.uni-oldenburg.de/download/service/Background.pdf> accessed 24.0609.

<sup>5</sup> Dearden, G. (1991) *The Assessment of Prior Learning An introduction for employers, employees and academic assessors*, London; Learning from Experience Trust.

<sup>6</sup> Challis, M. (2005). *Challenging Issues: the accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL)*, Forward 5, Spring, page 25.

Although the PINEAPPLE project uses the term APEL, the term Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is now gaining currency and a range of terms are used to discuss the accreditation of prior learning. The most common variations are the addition or substitution of the words, recognition, experiential and certificated. This leads to the following range of acronyms in use:

APL	Accreditation of Prior Learning
APEL	Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning
AP(E)L	Accreditation of Prior (Experiential) Learning
APCL	Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning
APECL	Accreditation of Prior Experiential and Certificated Learning
APE(C)L,	Accreditation of Prior Experiential and (Certificated) Learning
APL&A	Accreditation of Prior Learning and Achievement
ARPEL	Accreditation and Recognition of Prior Experience and Learning
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning.

It is likely that the lack of consensus on terminology is a contributory factor to the confusion, lack of understanding, inconsistency (even within institutions) and marginalisation that surrounds APEL; factors which, in turn, lead the process to be time consuming with costs that are unclear (see below).

APEL first became a legitimate means of receiving credit in 1986 through the Credit Accumulation Transfer Scheme<sup>7</sup> which gave authority for institutions to give credit at undergraduate and post graduate levels. However in the 23 years since its introduction it has failed to become widespread. A search of their respective websites suggests that

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<sup>7</sup> Council for National Academic Awards (1986) *Credit accumulation and transfer scheme*. London, CNAA.

APEL lacks prominence with key national agencies such as HEFCE (Higher Education Funding Council for England) and the HEA (Higher Education Academy). It fails to get a mention in the latest HEFCE strategy<sup>8</sup> but is referred to in 2007 Circular letter to Vice Chancellors and Principals concerning supporting employer engagement where it is included in a list of priority areas for funding<sup>9</sup>.

### 3. UNIVERSITY OF PLYMOUTH

The University of Plymouth has its own regulations on APEL that specifies the maximum permitted credit and provides information about making and assessing claims. These also state that all APEL decisions must be recorded and identified for consideration by the Subject Assessment Panels and Award Assessment Boards. The policy is continually monitored and reviewed by the University's Academic Regulations Sub-committee.

Across the University, APEL is managed by individual faculties and information on APEL is therefore also fragmented. Of these faculties, Health and Social Work is the most advanced in terms of publicising APEL and processing claims, this reflects the national trend (see Section 6). For example, there are a number of APEL pages on the Faculty website providing details about the benefits and eligibility for APEL. APEL in Health and Social Work is supported by one academic and one administrative member of staff who

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<sup>8</sup> Higher Education Funding Council for England (2008) *Strategic Plan 2006-11; Updated June 2009*. [http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2009/09\\_21](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2009/09_21) accessed 29.06.09.

<sup>9</sup> Higher Education Funding Council for England (2007) *Allocation of additional student numbers in 2008-09 for employer engagement - Circular letter number 03/2007*. [http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/circlets/2007/cl03\\_07/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/circlets/2007/cl03_07/) accessed 11.05.09.

contact students as soon as they enrol on a programme and support their claim through to the final decision. Most importantly perhaps, data is collected on each claim and stored on a database. Whether successful or not, these are recorded, building up what may be termed, 'case histories'. These can then be referred back to as and when similar claims arrive, saving administrative time in the longer term. Overall, at degree level 25 students have made APEL claims in 2008/09 and this is expected to increase as new initiatives (e.g. voucher schemes and mentorship modules) are introduced<sup>10</sup>. Other faculties such as those for Education and Science are also processing quite a few certified learning claims and fewer experiential claims, although this data is not readily available.

#### **4. UNIVERSITY OF PLYMOUTH COLLEGES**

The UPC network is a partnership between the University of Plymouth and 17 local further education institutions that delivers two year Foundation degrees throughout the South West region. Students who have successfully completed their course may progress to the final year of a full honours degree at the University of Plymouth. The work of UPC is supported by the Higher Education Learning Partnerships Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (HELP CETL) which is funded by HEFCE for 5 years in order to build on UPC's track record of innovation and excellence.

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<sup>10</sup> Watts, A. and Cambell-Baigrie, J. (2009) *The Faculty of Health and Social Work is proud to present: AP(E)L innovations, presentation made at the Work Based Learning: Towards the University's 2012 Vision Conference.* University of Plymouth.

Some UPC partner institutions have APEL regulations in place which are based on the University of Plymouth policy and these vary in detail. For example, City College Plymouth has a brief policy which outlines the definitions of APEL before listing a number of key points about the process. In contrast, Cornwall College is more extensive and includes naming the roles responsible for APEL, an application form and guidance for students.

To date, little is known about the extent to which APEL is used by the UPC partner institutions. Some of the larger colleges have informally reported only one or two APEL cases over the last year. City of Bristol College, for example stated that, 'the use of APEL within Foundation degrees is minimal despite the initial wave of enthusiasm surrounding the possibilities for its use'<sup>11</sup>. Anecdotal evidence suggests that there are a range of issues that have influenced the rate of APEL applicants, namely that:

1. There is a general lack of awareness about APEL, particularly among students and employers.
2. Members of staff face a number of problems implementing APEL, which include:
  - time, e.g. because applications for APEL have to be made 6 months before enrolling on a module and because the application itself can take a considerable amount of staff time;

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<sup>11</sup> Williams, C. (2009) *Implementation of APEL: the reality and the potential*, HELP CETL Development Activity Strand Project Plan, HELP CETL.

- responsibility for implementing APEL is not always clear;
- if there are no college guidelines on APEL, then it may be difficult to get consensus on the correct and approved protocol;
- there is often confusion about the cost of APEL;
- certified APCL is often more straight forward compared to Experiential APEL, which can dissuade staff from tackling an application based purely upon experience;
- APEL can demand a lot of administration which can also accrue costs.

Some members of staff are also of the view that only a very small proportion of students can qualify for APEL. One member of staff from North Devon College was contacted by email about his experience dealing with a recent APEL claim. A student was approached about APEL after, 'he gave numerous examples which convinced me that he was not only qualified to APEL the 'sports provision for special populations' module, but he could probably teach it'. This suggests that, as stated above, the timing of identifying potential APEL applicants is crucial. As this member of staff went on to say, 'if I had pointed the opportunity out at his initial interview for a place on the programme, this would have made things easier. However if APEL is uniformly introduced as an interview topic, interviews are going to go on for a long time and get quite complicated'.

Yet, there do appear to be a number of reasons why the process of APEL, if modified, would be utilised more effectively by UPC partners. Foundation degrees (and their constituent programmes – Certificate in Personal and Professional Development, Certificate in Higher Education) aim to attract 'non-traditional learners' and naturally lend

themselves to APEL for entry purposes or advanced standing (module exemptions) within a programme. Many students choosing the Foundation degree will not necessarily have pursued the 'normal' pre-university routes to study and therefore careful assessment of the level and nature of their prior learning may be required<sup>12</sup>.

There is also demand from employers seeking to offer staff opportunities for further qualifications as they work. In order to match suitable education routes to individuals, staff may need to map their education to date. Offering this service would encourage employers to engage more with the delivery and design of HE courses.

There are many employees who have studied for a wide range of vocational qualifications (National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) III/IV/V). For example, there are those who may have undertaken supervisory and management positions for a good part of their careers, without having recognition through higher education qualifications. For example, it is envisaged that APEL will be of interest to students embarking on a new Airside Operations Foundation degree delivered in collaboration with the airline company, Flybe. There are also segments of the workforce who have recently entered the sectors via modern apprenticeships or vocational qualifications (NVQ IV) who have not considered higher education opportunities on a part-time basis.

Clearly then, there is a need to obtain regular, consistent and reliable data on APEL across the partnership. As a precursor to the PINEAPPLE project, the HELP CETL commissioned a small-scale research project in order to investigate more fully the extent

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<sup>12</sup> Rowley, J. (2005) Foundation degrees: a risky business? *Quality Assurance in Education*, 13(1), 6-16.

to which APEL is and might be used across the partnership. The main aim of this project is to explore the ways in which APEL operates specifically within HE in FE context. The objectives to achieve this aim are three-fold:

- identify the possible barriers and mechanisms to implement APEL procedures;
- discover how these barriers and mechanisms are viewed by the different stakeholders;
- investigate the extent to which this might differ according to course and institution within the partnership.

Three colleges are participating in this project, each focusing upon different Foundation degrees and corresponding subject areas. These are summarised below:

1. APEL as an integral part of designing a Foundation degree in sustainable construction (Weymouth College);
2. introducing APEL to an existing Foundation degree in culinary arts (City College Plymouth);
3. the potential of implementing APEL within Foundation degrees in complementary health therapies and administration and business technology (City of Bristol College).

Weymouth College also differed to the others in that it investigated APEL with employers in the design stage of a Foundation degree. The other colleges were exploring existing courses and the potential of utilising APEL within these. Despite the differences in approach, an overarching aim was to encourage collaboration between the colleges and facilitate the sharing of ideas and findings. It is hoped that the findings from these

projects will also inform the PINEAPPLE project.

## 5. LEARNERS

Some work takes a narrow view of APEL and sees it as:

*“primarily concerned with demonstration of achievement of learning outcomes of the programme, which may include assessment against National Occupational Standards, NVQs or professional body and/or regulatory requirements”*<sup>13</sup>

However, it is widely regarded as a more rounded process of reflection on a learner’s strengths, skills and knowledge. The process by which this happens is often compared to Kolb’s<sup>14</sup> four stage learning cycle that describes how individuals learn through making sense of their experiences<sup>15, 16, 17, 18</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> Brennan, L. (2005) *Integrating Work-Based Learning into Higher Education: A Guide to Good Practice*. Bolton; University Vocational Awards Council, page 25.

<sup>14</sup> Kolb, D.A. (1984) *Experiential Learning*. New Jersey, Prentice-Hall.

<sup>15</sup> National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (2008) *Accreditation and Recognition of Prior Experience and Learning, JISC Funded Project*. Leicester; NIACE.

<sup>16</sup> University Vocational Awards Council (2004) *APEL National Forum Recognising workplace learning and achievement as a tool to enhance the delivery of Foundation Degrees Summary of Proceedings*. London; UVAC, 22 July.

<sup>17</sup> Konrad, J (2005) *A European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning: United Kingdom*, Birmingham; ECOTEC Research and Consulting.

<sup>18</sup> Grundtvig Project (2002) *Making Your Experience Count: A learner’s guide*. European Commission: Socrates – Grundtvig Project Social Inclusion through APEL: The Learners’ Perspective.

The relevant literature shows general agreement on the numerous benefits for learners, not least of which is removing the need to repeat learning which has already been acquired. The Grundtvig Project<sup>18</sup> summarises advantages as:

- access to further learning at all levels;
- confidence-building;
- gaining credit within academic programmes;
- personal/self-development;
- improve learning skills;
- professional development;
- valuing life experiences.

To this list may also be added that it encourages learners to manage their own learning, develop research and evidence skills and improve communication skills<sup>19</sup>.

The University of Derby's JISC funded eAPEL project reports that 85 to 90 percent of learners applying for their Learning Through Work programmes want recognition and accreditation of prior experiential learning<sup>20</sup>. Anecdotal evidence obtained whilst researching this paper suggests that some learners decide that repeating the learning is preferable to undertaking the reflection process necessary to claim and evidence APEL. This is regrettable but not surprising as it is evident that learners often struggle to

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<sup>19</sup> Merrifield, J., McIntyre, D. and Osaigbovo, R. (2000) *Mapping APEL: Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning in English Higher Education*. London; Learning from Experience Trust.

<sup>20</sup> University of Derby (2006) *e-Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (e-APEL)*. JISC eLearning Capital Programme project proposal. <http://www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents/aboutus/foi/bid48derbyuniversity.pdf> accessed 14.02.09.

understand and carry out reflection in other contexts e.g. as part of personal development planning (PDP). Any measures that can make this element of APEL easier to comprehend and achieve will be vital to widening take up of APEL.

The NIACE/JISC report<sup>15</sup> highlights good practice taking place in the voluntary sector which has concentrated on guidance and reflection, and to a lesser extent, relating skills to a set of outcomes, i.e. they have tended to give attention to the prior learning rather than the accreditation. This sector has used ICT Tools to help clients structure their experience e.g. templates and questionnaires. However, due to differences between voluntary and education, perceptions of ownership and boundaries were found to be more in tune with lifelong learning precepts. There are a number of reasons why this might be the case, for example:

- the voluntary sector deals with much lower numbers than HE;
- there is an absence of pressure to accredit for the purpose of leading on to specific activity;
- the benefits of APEL listed above have, arguably, a greater overlap with the work of the voluntary sector than with that of the HE.

The National Union of Students does not directly address APEL and it is not included in their 2008/2010 Strategic Plan but it may be covered by their forthcoming Widening Participation report.

## 5.1 Learner Record

There is scope within IMS LIP to incorporate APEL achievement into the QCL (qualifications, certificates and licenses) element where it should be represented as an *activity*<sup>21</sup>. The PINEAPPLE project will also be approaching the University of Plymouth to explore the possibility of incorporating APEL outputs into the forthcoming HEAR (Higher Education Achievement Record).

## 6. HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Implementing effective APEL can benefit a learning provider in a variety of ways. A report commissioned by the Department for Education and Skills<sup>19</sup> notes the following variety of advantages for higher education institutions:

- recruiting new students;
- attracting different kinds of students, mature/experienced;
- keeping students involved, loyal to the institution;
- links with employers;
- financial benefits from CPD and corporate courses;
- developing relationship with new markets;
- opportunity to review teaching and learning practices.

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<sup>21</sup> Grant, S. Rees Jones, P and Ward, R. (2003) *Mapping Personal Development Records to IMS LIP to support Lifelong Learning Consultation Document (UK LP 1.1B)*  
[http://www.recordingachievement.org/downloads/MAP\\_PDR\\_LIP.pdf](http://www.recordingachievement.org/downloads/MAP_PDR_LIP.pdf) accessed 12.04.09.

These are all outcomes that will contribute to being competitive and fulfilling widening participation obligations. In practice institutions vary in their processes for granting APEL, the cost of doing so and the maximum amount of exemption that can be claimed. They also set rules concerning time limits for claiming APEL and the maximum levels of exemption for which it may be used.

During the period of May/June 2009 the PINEAPPLE project searched the websites of 166 HEI's within the UK using a list taken from Wikipedia<sup>22</sup>. Primarily this was done using the search tool built into the institution website but occasionally a Google site search was used when there were no other methods. The search terms used were 'APEL' or 'APL'. The first few relevant search results were then viewed in order to discover as much information as possible.

As this is essentially a desktop report and due to the size of the task the information is intended to provide a general flavour of information available. The quality of the content was rated into four categories based on a number of factors such as:

- Ease of information discovery;
- Accessibility / Presentation of content;
- Quality / amount of information;
- Explanation of processes.

Figure 1 below provides a visual representation of these ratings.

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<sup>22</sup> Wikipedia (2009) *List of UK universities by size*. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_UK\\_universities\\_by\\_size](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_UK_universities_by_size) accessed 14.04.09.

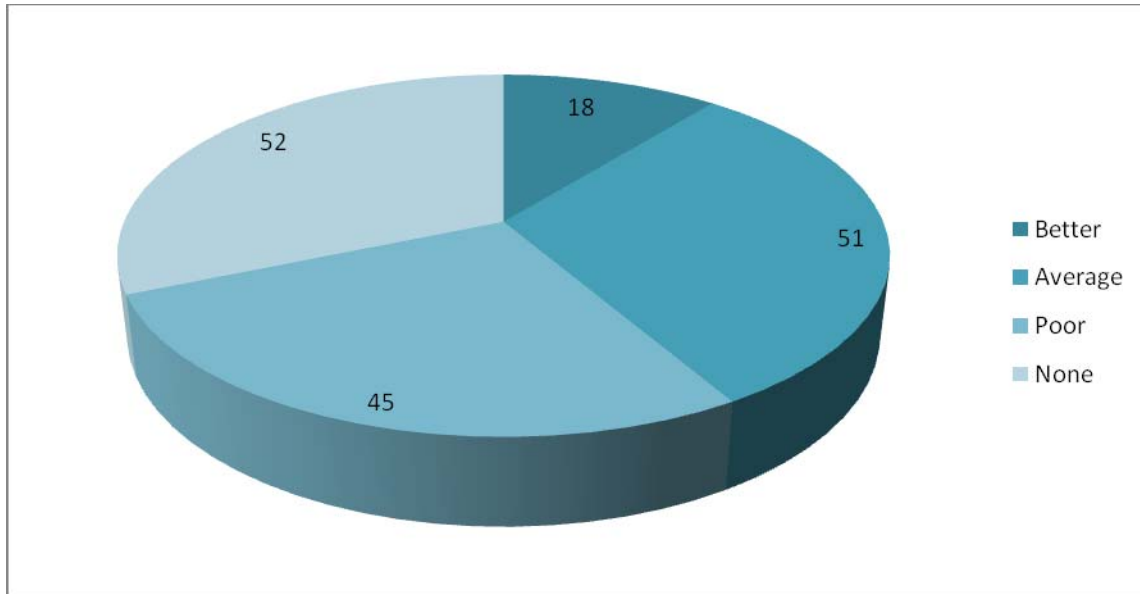


Figure 1. Quality ratings of student focused APEL information available from HEI websites.

- Better (11%)** information was easy to find, well presented, useful and clear.
- Average (30%)** information harder to find information or less well presented; or text heavy documents only.
- Poor (27%)** little information which was not easy to find e.g. mentioned in course programme handbook only.
- None (32%)** searches did not work, no information or websites were down.

This was an informal investigation to gain a 'snapshot' of externally facing, student accessible, APEL information and to identify areas of good practice to draw on later in the project. However it appeared that availability of information could generally be improved upon in terms of delivery or ease of discovery. Overall the majority of HEIs provided little or no information on APEL. A handful of these institutions provide courses which do not easily lend themselves to APEL, have very high entry qualifications, or simply do not offer it which should be taken into account.

The discipline which is most commonly associated with APEL is Health and a large number of HEIs support this perception. A number of HEIs only appeared to provide APEL in the area of Health along with a number for which it appeared their primary area for APEL.

In terms of the PINEAPPLE project there were many other useful resources and documents discovered relating to APEL such as institutional policies and processes, but these were not intended to be used as outward facing student information.

Following the initial overview the focus turned towards the HEIs whose APEL resources were rated as better. It is important at this point to remember that this does not mean others did not provide a similar standard of information, merely that the full package of presentation, ease of discovery and quality may not have been as strong.

## **6.1 Advertising, Marketing and Recruitment**

Awareness of APEL will obviously affect student uptake and therefore is important to provide access to students who may struggle to get onto a course.

Overall most HEI websites search functionality was easy to locate (*over 95% on the front page*) and provided reasonably accurate results (*more so for those using a Google search*). For over 50% of the sites searched, there was very little or no information available about APEL.

Out of all HEIs it was very difficult to find strong all round examples although some of the

better sites provided some or all of the following information:

- *simple overview of APEL;*
- *FAQs;*
- *relevant documentation (application forms etc);*
- *contact email and phone number, sometimes named / role;*
- *clearly marked out processes;*
- *explanation / guide to costs;*
- *examples / case studies / step by step guide;*
- *glossary of terms.*

In addition to the availability of this core APEL information, clear and straightforward navigation to it is really important, possibly from course information pages or other relevant routes. Finally the presentation of the pages could be vastly improved in a majority of examples through increased use of images (*varying and relevant contexts*) to break up text heavy content along with enhanced page layout. This is often implemented more in examples where there is a dedicated APEL site designed for the purpose.

## **6.2 Responding to enquiries**

For the majority of the HEIs the first point of contact for potential APEL students is either:

- A dedicated APL co-ordinator / administrator / advisor at the institution (*it appears in Health and there are sometimes co-ordinators within Trusts too*);
- A faculty or school contact;
- The tutor for that course;
- An admissions administrator.

The primary forms of contact appear to be via phone and email.

### **6.3 Applications and clarity of processes**

Nearly all APEL applications appear to begin with completing an application form in .doc format. This is then either printed or completed and emailed. Some applications involve printing a form displayed in HTML but this is not common. There was little evidence of any integrated online APEL application systems but this is not to say they do not exist. For APEL a portfolio of evidence is normally submitted.

Clarity of process varied greatly and many sites do not really go into much detail. Some better examples included rough timings or visual process diagrams but this is not common. More commonly, examples of this were found in some of the staff focused APEL process documentation located during the searching.

### **6.4 Advising on portfolio and preparation**

Paper based portfolio submission appears to be normal and makes sense in a lot of cases. The advice on preparation of this portfolio does vary in both quality and delivery method.

Some institutions offer an APEL short course or module and upon enrolling applicants receive full module documentation including a handbook, other relevant literature and forms. Other methods involve direct contact with an APEL co-coordinator / adviser or a contact from the faculty or school. This can involve telephone / email contact or a face to face meeting to advise on preparation and to assist with reflection on previous

experience. A small number of HEIs offer more information online and use step by step methods to outline what is required, presenting documentation where necessary.

Portfolio examples and case studies were few and far between which was disappointing. The portfolio can contain a range of different evidence types, although generally paper based appears to be the preferred method. A good APEL support page offered documents such as level indicator charts to assist applicants with recognising achievements.

## 6.5 Costs of APEL

The issue of cost in relation to APEL is rarely mentioned in the literature. This is not surprising given that institutions themselves do not always make the costs clear and of those that do, how much this varies. Despite this fact, Trowler<sup>23</sup> mentioned that institutions already in a weak market position may be concerned about the loss of funding if they offer students advanced standing through APEL and that this concern may be aggravated by the desire to avoid any damage to its perceived 'quality' of programmes.

There seems to be little consistency when setting charges for APEL. Again focusing on the HEIs rated as "better", there was as much variation in the information available as the costs themselves. The charging methods can be broken down as follows:

- Fixed price per credit (*by module*);

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<sup>23</sup> Trowler, P. (1996). Angels in Marble? Accrediting prior experiential learning in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 21(1), 17-30.

- Administration fee;
- Fixed price per credit / module + administration fee;
- Fixed or maximum price.

The general costs ranged from free to £250 per module. Overall there was a real lack of consistency and clarity among many providers. On one website the pricing was only available by logging into the staff intranet. It would also be fair to say that it costs less for APCL than APEL, although this has not been explored in depth.

## 7. EMPLOYERS

Employers may be motivated to use APEL as means of attracting and retaining staff and of developing and recognising the skills of their workforce. The need to develop a “culture of learning” was stressed in the Leitch review<sup>24</sup> and encouraging and recognising employer provided learning is a vital aspect of this. The QCA’s QCF Employer Recognition Programme and the Learning and Skills Council’s RARPA scheme described below enable employers to get their high quality in-house training nationally accredited but there will always be less formal training and employers for whom this is not an option which will make the need for APEL a necessity.

Employers do not always record and monitor their education links, so the extent to which higher level training does take place can be hard to quantify. Neither do employers

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<sup>24</sup> Leitch, S. (2006) *Leitch Review of Skills: Prosperity for all in the global economy - world class skills (Final Report)*. Norwich: HMSO.

always regard their learning in terms of levels, as colleges and universities do<sup>25</sup>. Despite this, there has been a significant drive by the government to encourage employers to work more with higher education institutions by aligning the learning outcomes for work and higher education more closely. One way in which this shift is most evident is the recent merge of the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills with the business department to create the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS).

Generally, there appears to be a difference in the way that employers view accrediting the work experience of future employees and the experiences of existing employees. The Council for Industry and Higher Education (CIHE) surveyed 600 employers about collaborating with higher education. They reported that employers were less likely to use HE to further develop existing employees simply because, 'a combination of in-house provision and private training was meeting their current needs appropriately'<sup>26</sup>. However, more employers were seeking to ensure that elements of work experience were built into degree courses so that graduates obtained the relevant skills before entering the workforce.

On the whole, colleges have a longer history of employer engagement than universities, which they have utilised for delivery of Foundation degrees and professional awards<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> King, M. (2007) *Workforce development: employer engagement with HE*. Council for Industry and Higher Education.

<sup>26</sup> Connor, H. and Hirsh, W. (2008) *Influence through collaboration: employer demand for higher learning and engagement with higher education*; page 30. Council for Industry and Higher Education.

<sup>27</sup> King, M., Widdowson, J. and Brown, R. (2008) *Higher education and colleges: a comparison between England and the USA*, Council for Industry and Higher Education.

Indeed, the original intention was for Foundation degrees to be designed in partnerships involving universities, colleges and leading employers in order to meet a niche employment need (Wilson, et al, 2005). In practice, employers can be involved in a number of ways, including the design of the Foundation degree, as a member of an employer liaison group and by offering work based learning or guest lectures<sup>28</sup>. Some research conducted with employers has reported that it is often the employee who brings the Foundation degree to the employers' attention after an employee enrolls on a programme<sup>29</sup>. However, examples of good practice are regularly highlighted and include engaging employers to consider the needs of the local employment market, ensuring appropriate training and briefing of mentors and setting up 3-way learning agreements to promote shared understanding of roles<sup>12</sup>. This is important if, as the QAA state, 'without consistent employer involvement, the professional currency of Foundation degree programmes will not be secure'<sup>30</sup>.

There has been little research into APEL in relation to Foundation degrees, beyond suggesting that since most students choosing Foundation degrees will not have pursued the 'normal' pre-university routes to study, 'it will be necessary to carefully assess the nature and level of their prior learning'<sup>12</sup>. Furthermore, there has been hardly any mention of researching this area since Challis reported that, 'it appears that APEL is not

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<sup>28</sup> Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). (2005). *Learning from reviews of foundation degrees in England carried out in 2004-05: sharing good practice*. Gloucester: QAA.

<sup>29</sup> Foundation Degree Forward (FDF). (2007). *The impact of foundation degrees on the workplace and students: a summary of research projects commissioned by FDF*. Litchfield: FDF.

<sup>30</sup> Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). (2005). *Learning from reviews of foundation degrees in England carried out in 2004-05: sharing good practice*, page 18. Gloucester: QAA.

widely used, despite the fact that the Foundation degree format makes it a feasible and appropriate option'<sup>31</sup>. It was this situation that led to recent research carried out by Weymouth College and supported by the HELP CETL. The small-scale study sought to gain the general views of the construction industry towards APEL and higher education in relation to a new Foundation degree in sustainable construction. The advent of the Code for Sustainable Homes<sup>32</sup> and the need for all construction firms to comply with new sustainability criteria, creates a clear challenge for staff to develop higher level skills. All 19 construction firms who responded to the questionnaire welcomed the concept of APEL and most staff would be considered appropriate for some degree of accreditation. In general, staff at more senior levels (Site Manager) had a greater potential for APEL. Generally more staff in small and medium firms could be considered for APEL with larger firms having fewer opportunities due to greater staff specialisation and less generalist roles. Most firms felt that job descriptions and references could be used to evidence prior learning with reflective accounts being considered less welcome. It was clear that for smaller and medium sized firms that face to face explanation was crucial to engage staff in the concept and potential of APEL and to help engage staff in developing higher level skills<sup>33</sup>. This suggests the need for clearer guidance, not only for staff and students within higher education, but with employers.

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<sup>31</sup> Challis, M. (2005). *Challenging Issues: the accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL)*, Forward 5, Spring, page 24.

<sup>32</sup> Department for Communities and Local Government (2008). *Code for sustainable homes: technical guide*. London: Department for Communities and Local Government.

<sup>33</sup> Kay, R. (2009) *APEL and Sustainable Construction*. Final report to the Higher Education Learning Partnerships CETL. Plymouth: The University of Plymouth.

## 8. PROFESSIONAL BODIES

Professional bodies are non-profit organisations aiming to oversee a particular profession, to ensure the legitimate practice of the occupation as well as to protect the employees. The way they operate varies a great deal, as does their size, whether they are chartered, government-regulated or voluntary bodies and to what occupational sectors they belong. To understand how professional bodies operate in relation to APEL, it is important to appreciate the various socio-economic and educational factors that influence their work.

In the UK, fully qualified status in professional occupations is normally awarded by a professional association or registration body. However, as Lester explains, most professionals provide a variety of routes to qualified status which can be broadly divided into four groups<sup>34</sup>:

- Sequential - full time academic learning followed by supervised practice;
- Parallel – part time academic learning alongside practice;
- Integrated – integrating theory and practice;
- Experiential – emphasises learning through practice.

Some professions, such as those related to teaching and health, award qualified status via academic qualifications. Other university courses have to be formally accredited by the professional body to achieve this status. However, increasingly the period of initial experience in an industry is valued as an important aspect of the qualifying process.

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<sup>34</sup> Lester, S. (2009). Routes to qualified status: practices and trends among UK professional bodies. *Studies in*

Alongside this development there has been an emphasis upon rigorously assessed practice periods. Appropriate assessment for work based learning, for example, is widely debated<sup>35</sup>. Positioned as learner centred and experience-led<sup>36</sup>, this form of experiential learning serves to help provide graduates with the same skills and abilities of employees already in the workplace. Yet the extent to which related pedagogic theory and appropriate assessment can support the learning is not clear<sup>35</sup>. Indeed, there remain claims of a shortage of guidance and support for assessing more experiential modes of qualifying status, particularly graduates who are looking to bridge the gap between degree and professional accreditation<sup>34</sup>.

Many professional bodies are members of the Professional Associations Research Network (PARN)<sup>37</sup>, an international group of professional bodies. Of approximately 300 professional bodies in the UK, around 120 are members of PARN. The network offers professional bodies knowledge based services and events based on topics such as standards. Standards are key to establishing consistency between programmes of learning. This is important when considering that many professional bodies deliver their own qualifications as well as endorsing other programmes of learning. For example, The Chartered Institute of Building (CIOB), representing professionals in the construction industry, has an accreditation process for those seeking CIOB recognition of their

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*Higher Education*, 34(2), 223-236.

<sup>35</sup> Brodie, P. and Irving, K. (2007). Assessment in work-based learning: investigating a pedagogical approach to enhance student learning. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 32(1), 11-19.

<sup>36</sup> Costley, C. (2007). Work-based learning: assessment and evaluation in higher education. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 32(1), 1-9.

<sup>37</sup> Professional Associations Research Network <http://www.parnglobal.com> .

qualifications. To support this process, an education framework has been developed establishing the core standards required of construction education. One method of assessment is 'assessment through reports and interviews of knowledge and skills gained through unstructured workplace experience'<sup>38</sup>.

Professional bodies can also help to inform employers of the skills and knowledge their professions require. Although much of this information can only be accessed by members, publications are often openly available, such as an ILM report entitled, 'Delivering in a Downturn – what does it take?'. This reported that communication, financial and building effective relationships with clients were priority skills for chief executives. Organisations such as this also advertise details of events and services where industry leaders can get up to date with current trends and activities.

Some professional bodies are more active than others in supporting learners directly. For example, The Institute of Leadership and Management (ILM) employs a useful tool named a 'qualification finder' that helps learners to identify the programme that best suits their development needs. One of the questions seeks to ascertain the extent to which a learner might wish to undertake academic study or demonstrate their abilities in the work place. More information is also provided on progression from the chosen course and where in the country this is offered. Some professional bodies employ their own schemes to support learners. For example, the HAVE scheme introduced by the Institution of Hospitality (IOH) supports learners on work placement or work experience

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<sup>38</sup> Chartered Institute of Building (CIOB) (2007) *The CIOB education framework*.  
<http://www.ciob.org.uk/education/framework>, accessed 29 May 2009.

who work part time in the hospitality industries. The learners assess their own employability skills, learn how to reflect on this and evidence their development to a prospective employer.

## 9. IMPLEMENTATION AND MODELS OF APEL

There is comparatively little guidance on how institutions should implement APEL despite this being crucial to take up. The QAA has produced guidelines<sup>39</sup> which are designed not to be prescriptive but to get HEIs to develop their own systems. The guidelines offer principles and good practice in the areas of:

- policies and procedures;
- information for applicants and staff;
- roles and responsibilities of staff and applicants;
- staff development;
- support for applicants;
- monitoring and review of procedures and policies.

Practical steps that can be taken by an institutional outlined by the Grundtvig project<sup>40</sup> include:

- devising clear policies on APEL;

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<sup>39</sup> Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2004) *Guidelines on the accreditation of prior learning*. Gloucester; QAA.

<sup>40</sup> Grundtvig Project (2002) *Creating Opportunities for APEL: Recommendations for Change*. European Commission: Socrates – Grundtvig Project Social Inclusion through APEL: The Learners' Perspective.

- organising training and support for staff involved in implementing APEL;
- establishing more effective mechanisms for disseminating information to learners about APEL opportunities;
- ensuring that APEL policies are prioritised in funding for widening participation and access;
- encouraging the use of APEL by all departments within the institution;
- the establishment of working groups/committees to discuss issues and communicate with departments;
- ensuring strong support and guidance networks for learners;
- including APEL when drawing up quality assurance policies;
- ensuring that flexibility is built into APEL/RPL processes;
- ensuring positive and active support for senior managers.

In their guidelines for validation and quality assurance of Foundation degrees<sup>41</sup>, the FDF (Foundation Degree Forward) state that APEL procedures and roles should be clear. In FE the evidence suggests that APEL is seen as time consuming and expensive, linked to competencies, and that the use of technology could increase awareness, understanding and access<sup>15</sup>. As there is often a 'bleed over' between FE culture and HE in FE culture, it is likely that this view is also taken by teachers of Foundation degrees.

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<sup>41</sup> Foundation Degree Forward (FDF) (2009) *Guidelines For Validation And Quality Assurance*. [http://www.fdf.ac.uk/home/information\\_for\\_universities\\_and\\_colleges/fdf\\_services/guidelines\\_for\\_validation\\_and\\_quality\\_assurance/](http://www.fdf.ac.uk/home/information_for_universities_and_colleges/fdf_services/guidelines_for_validation_and_quality_assurance/) accessed 14.06.09.

In Johnson's<sup>42</sup> investigation into APEL and quality assurance, it was determined that institutions might be in one of three phases of implementation: preparing, fine tuning or auditing and monitoring. A seven stage model was proposed:

- Stage 1 advertising and marketing, recruitment;
- Stage 2 considering enquiries;
- Stage 3 dealing with applications from enquirers;
- Stage 4 briefing, counselling, advising;
- Stage 5 advising on portfolio preparation;
- Stage 6 portfolio assessment;
- Stage 7 decision taking and ratification.

However it was suggested that not all institutions would find all stages relevant.

The JISC funded eAPEL project has focussed on supporting claimants through the process to enable self-assessment, gathering of evidence and making a claim although some aspects of the Credit Estimator<sup>43</sup> tool seem to be broken at present. The project has defined a high level picture of the process<sup>44</sup>:

- Stage 1 create learner profile;
- Stage 2 define prior learning;
- Stage 3 create proposal;
- Stage 4 create estimate;

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<sup>42</sup> Johnson, B. (2002) *Models of APEL and quality assurance*. London; SEEC.

<sup>43</sup> University of Derby (2009) *Welcome to the Credit Estimator*. <http://ciadweb.derby.ac.uk/estimator> [login required] date accessed 15.05.09.

<sup>44</sup> Meijer, R. (2007) *Supporting the e-APEL process*. <http://betablogs.derby.ac.uk/wp-content/blogs/45/uploads/Supporting%20the%20eAPEL%20process%2020070713.doc> accessed 13.01.09.

- Stage 5 refine proposal;
- Stage 6 build claim;
- Stage 7 evidence claim;
- Stage 8 assessment;
- Stage 9 accreditation.

The 2008 report for the JISC written by NIACE<sup>45</sup> formulated a seven stage model:

- Stage 1 initial guidance;
- Stage 2 reflection and the recognising and identifying of skills;
- Stage 3 relating these skills to an agreed set of outcomes or criteria;
- Stage 4 gathering evidence of these skills;
- Stage 5 documentation of evidence;
- Stage 6 assessment of the evidence;
- Stage 7 accreditation.

In the same year the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) published guidelines for claiming credit within the newly implemented Qualifications and Credit Framework<sup>45</sup> (QCF). Although the guidance is specifically related to the QCF it is evident that there are areas of overlap with institutional APEL claims:

- Stage 1 general awareness about claiming credit - information, advice and guidance;
- Stage 2 pre-assessment – gathering evidence and giving information;

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<sup>45</sup> Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (2008) *Claiming Credit: Guidance on the recognition of prior learning within the Qualifications and Credit Framework*. London; Qualifications and Curriculum Authority.

- Stage 3 assessment/documentation of evidence;
- Stage 4 awarding credit;
- Stage 5 feedback;
- Stage 6 appeal.

In each of the four models there are areas of similarity and agreement. The PINEAPPLE project will map these areas, identify any gaps and increase granularity. Furthermore it should complement the Derby e-APEL work by guiding tutors and other stakeholders through the APEL process.

## **10. INFLUENCES ON APEL**

In at least one European country, the right to APEL has been legislated for. French students have an entitlement which is supported by dedicated assessment centres<sup>46</sup>. There is no indication that this is likely to become policy in the UK, nevertheless the promotion of APEL is in accord with numerous UK government policies aimed at promoting employability, work-based learning, widening participation and the skills agenda. Although it is not a driving force for APEL, the increasing interest in PDP and ePortfolios could facilitate the process as PDP-like activity is often part of the application process.

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<sup>46</sup> Pagnani, B. (2003) *France: Towards a Structure for the Recognition and Accreditation of Experiential Learning in Europe - Accreditation of experiential learning in France: What contribution could it make?* Report for the TRANSFINE Project.

On the other hand, there are several initiatives which may erode the demand for APEL if they become established. The first is the Learning and Skills Council's (LSC) RARPA (Recognising and Recording Progress and Achievement) process which was rolled out nationally in 2005. It is aimed primarily, but not exclusively, at providers of non-accredited learning who are in receipt of LSC funding. In contrast to the retrospective nature of APEL, RARPA is a prospective approach to validating informal learning which takes the following staged approach to learning<sup>47</sup>:

- **aims** appropriate to an individual learner or group of learners;
- **initial assessment** to establish the learner's starting point;
- **identification of appropriately challenging learning objectives**: initial, renegotiated and revised;
- recognition and recording of progress and achievement during programme (**formative assessment**): tutor feedback to learners, learner reflection, progress reviews;
- end of programme learner self-assessment; tutor **summative assessment**; review of overall progress and achievement. it may include recognition of learning outcomes not specified during the programme.

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<sup>47</sup> LSDA and NIACE (2004) *Recognising and Recording Progress and Achievement in Non-accredited Learning: Summary of the Evaluation Report on the Pilot Projects April 2003 to March 2004*. London; Learning and Skills Council. <http://readingroom.lsc.gov.uk/Lsc/National/SummaryRARPAEvaluationReport.doc> accessed 24.05.09

The introduction of the QCF, recently approved for implementation<sup>48</sup>, is also likely to reduce the amount of non-accredited learning. Its main features are:

- unit-based qualifications;
- a 'unit databank' containing all units developed by all organisations submitted by a web-based interface;
- achievements recognised through the award of credits (from units) and qualifications;
- easily identifiable levels and size of achievements;
- a process for accumulating and transferring credit between qualifications and awarding bodies.

Awarding organisations specify the units that are needed to achieve a particular qualification using rules of combination. Depending on the quantity and difficulty of credits obtained, learners will be able to gain an Award, Certificate or Diploma at level 0 to 8. Crucially an employer providing in-house training can apply to become a QCF awarding body or choose to work with an HEI or FEC with that designation and an Employer Recognition Programme is being introduced to facilitate this.

All credit that a learner gains on the QCF from units they've completed will be 'banked' on a system called the 'Learner Achievement Record' (LAR) using a unique learner number. When the learner has enough to gain a qualification he or she should be

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<sup>48</sup> Simon, S. (2008) *New flexible qualifications and credit framework will widen access to learning.* <http://nds.coi.gov.uk/Content/Detail.aspx?NewsAreaId=2&ReleaseID=384238&SubjectId=16&AdvancedSearch=true> date accessed 16.06.09.

notified by the system.

## 11. CONCLUSION

The PINEAPPLE project is in agreement with UVAC in that there is a fair amount of literature about APEL but nothing to indicate that it is widely practiced<sup>49</sup>. Investigation of outward facing institutional APEL material has shown that the need to have an APEL policy has largely been heeded but this has not lead to widespread student take-up. Without further investigation it is difficult to say precisely why this is the case but it is likely to be for a combination of reasons e.g. lack of awareness by learners; lack of awareness by academic and support staff; APEL procedures being too onerous for either group to contemplate.

The next step for the PINEAPPLE project is take the theory, practice and policies identified in the course of this study to create a synthesis encompassing those elements which are both necessary and sufficient for an effective APEL process. This would satisfy the NIACE / JISC requirement of the

*"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."*<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Garnett, J. Portwood, D. And Costley, C. (2004 ) *Bridging Rhetoric and Reality: Accreditation of prior experiential learning* (APEL) in the UK . University Vocational Awards Council.

<sup>50</sup> National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (2008) *Accreditation and Recognition of Prior Experience and Learning, JISC Funded Project*, page 6. Leicester; NIACE.

and the UVAC requirement that:

*“to be an effective admissions tool APEL has to be understood by all staff who represent the institution to potential applicants and by staff operating the admissions process”<sup>51</sup>.*

This should complement the work of other projects in this area such as the University of Derby eApel project which has focussed on facilitating the process from the learner’s perspective. Initially the PINEAPPLE work will be done to support and extend the practice of APEL within the UPC network of institutions but implementation will be scalable and transferable in order to be able to extend the model to the wider HE in FE and HE community.

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<sup>51</sup> Garnett, J. Portwood, D. and Costley, C. (2004 ) *Bridging Rhetoric and Reality: Accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) in the UK* . University Vocational Awards Council, page 8.