



# **A Framework for defining the competencies required for the successful guidance and support of persons seeking to Identify and gain Recognition their Prior Non-formal and Informal Learning**

## **1. Introduction**

This paper is designed to provide a Framework for Education and Training providers who wish to design, develop, provide and evaluate accredited programmes of learning for professionals engaged providing guidance and support for people wishing to claim the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning [APEL].

## **2. Definitions**

"APEL generally refers to incidental prior learning which is un-assessed. Such learning may be gained through unstructured experiences, arising from leisure pursuits, family experiences and work. It also includes un-assessed formal training courses. Certificates may or may not be available as evidence that the learning has taken place<sup>1</sup>."

"Accreditation of Prior and Experiential Learning (APEL) began as an educational response to ideas of informal and self-directed learning, focusing specifically on experiential learning. It arose from a desire on the part of educators to acknowledge the learning that people undertake – intentionally or otherwise – within their daily lives, and without the intervention of educational institutions or practitioners<sup>2</sup>."

"Accreditation of prior learning (APL): a process for accessing and, as appropriate, recognising prior experiential learning or prior certificated learning for academic purposes. This recognition may give the learning a credit-value in a credit-based structure and allow it to be counted towards the completion of a programme of study and the award(s) or qualifications associated with it.

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<sup>1</sup> Wilcox J & Brown R (2003), APEL- A Practitioner's Guide, UK Centre for Materials Education and Bradford College, Page 3, Available from <http://www.materials.ac.uk/resources/library/apelpractitioners.pdf> (last visited March 5, 2006)

<sup>2</sup> Colley H, Hodkinson P, & Malcolm J (2003) Informality and formality in learning: a report for the Learning and Skills Research Centre, page 60. [A classification of theoretical approaches and practical roles can be found at page 62] Available from <https://www.lsd.org.uk/cims/order.aspx?code=031492&src=XOWEB>



The term 'accreditation of prior learning' is used in these Guidelines to encapsulate the range of activity and approaches used formally to acknowledge and establish publicly that some reasonably substantial and significant element of learning has taken place. Such learning may have been recognised previously by an education provider; described as 'prior certificated learning' or it may have been achieved by reflecting upon experiences outside the formal education and training systems; described as 'prior experiential learning'.

Accreditation of prior certificated learning (APCL): a process, through which previously assessed and certificated learning is considered and, as appropriate, recognised for academic purposes.

Accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL): a process through which learning achieved outside education or training systems is assessed and, as appropriate, recognised for academic purposes.

Recognition (of learning): any process that acknowledges and establishes publicly that some reasonably substantial and significant element of learning has taken place and can be assessed to have done so<sup>3</sup>."

### **3. Principles of implementation**

The principal source of UK guidance for Universities has identified a number of key principles.

1. Decisions regarding the accreditation of prior learning are a matter of academic judgement. The decision-making process and outcomes should be transparent and demonstrably rigorous and fair.
2. Where limits are imposed on the proportion of learning that can be recognised through the accreditation process, these limits should be explicitly stated. The implications for progression, the award of any interim qualification and the classification or grading of a final qualification should be clear and transparent.
3. Prior experiential and/or certificated learning that has been accredited by an HE provider should be clearly identified on students' transcripts.
4. Higher education providers should provide clear and accessible information for applicants, academic staff,

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<sup>3</sup> Quality Assurance Agency UK (2004), Guidelines on the accreditation of prior learning, Appendix 1, <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/apl/guidance.asp#append1>



- examiners and stakeholders about its policies, procedures and practices for the accreditation of prior learning.
5. The terminology, scope and boundaries used by an HE provider in its policies, procedures and practices for the accreditation of prior learning should be explicitly defined in information and guidance materials.
  6. Information and guidance materials outlining the process(es) for the assessment of claims for the accreditation of prior experiential and/or previously certificated learning should be clear, accurate and easily accessible.
  7. Higher education providers should consider the range and form(s) of assessment appropriate to consider claims for the recognition of learning.
  8. The criteria to be used in judging a claim for the accreditation of prior learning should be made explicit to applicants, academic staff, stakeholders, assessors, and examiners.
  9. Applicants should be fully informed of the nature and range of evidence considered appropriate to support a claim for the accreditation of prior learning<sup>4</sup>.
  10. The assessment of learning derived from experience should be open to internal and external scrutiny and monitoring within institutional quality assurance procedures.
  11. The locus of authority and responsibilities for making and verifying decisions about the accreditation of prior learning should be clearly specified.
  12. All staff associated with the accreditation of prior learning should have their roles clearly and explicitly defined. Full details of all roles and responsibilities should be available to all associated staff and applicants.
  13. Appropriate arrangements should be developed for the training and support of all staff associated with the support,

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<sup>4</sup> In detail, "45 Decisions about the equivalence of learning should be informed by reference to explicit criteria such as those contained within programme specifications and statements of learning outcomes (for example, the combination of skills and learning outcomes, level, subject knowledge and understanding). Statements of professional competency (for example, where required by professional, statutory or regulatory bodies) may also be relevant and should be applied as appropriate. Higher education providers will also need to consider whether decisions about equivalence require evidence of an exact and complete match to the learning and achievement that would otherwise need to be demonstrated when studying the validated programme and undertaking its assessment requirements. 46 In common with good practice in assessment generally, processes and procedures for the assessment of learning derived from experience and/or prior certificated learning should demonstrate objectivity, be clear and consistently applied."



- guidance and assessment of claims for the accreditation of prior learning.
14. Clear guidance should be given to applicants about when a claim for the accreditation of prior learning may be submitted, the timescale for considering the claim and the outcome.
  15. Appropriate arrangements should be in place to support applicants submitting claims for the accreditation of prior learning and to provide feedback on decisions.
  16. Arrangements for the regular monitoring and review of policies and procedures for the accreditation of prior learning should be clearly established. These arrangements should be set within established institutional frameworks for quality assurance, management and enhancement.

The above principles provide a general framework that has potential relevance outside the Higher Education sector as indicated in Footnote 4 above explaining Principle 9. However, the formulation of these principles recognise the decentralised and devolved nature of University autonomy. One specific aspect, which is not mentioned, is the assumption that the choice of criteria for the accreditation of evidence is located in specific Awards that have met the general national criteria that identify general Level criteria<sup>5</sup>. In some National Qualifications Frameworks, there are also general statements of competencies required, as is the case in Scotland<sup>6</sup>.

In the Learning and Skills Sector, there is a marked range and diversity of provision.<sup>7</sup> Changes in the assessment of National

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<sup>5</sup> For example, the criteria which all Bachelor's degrees are required to meet are: "An Honours graduate will have developed an understanding of a complex body of knowledge, some of it at the current boundaries of an academic discipline. Through this, the graduate will have developed analytical techniques and problem-solving skills that can be applied in many types of employment. The graduate will be able to evaluate evidence, arguments and assumptions, to reach sound judgements, and to communicate effectively.

An Honours graduate should have the qualities needed for employment in situations requiring the exercise of personal responsibility, and decision-making in complex and unpredictable circumstances."

<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/EWNI/default.asp> (last visited March 5, 2006)

<sup>6</sup> See SCQF (2005), Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Informal Learning (RPL), July, <http://www.scqf.org.uk/downloads/SCQF%20RPL%20guidelines%20final%20030805-2a.pdf> (last visited March 5, 2006)

<sup>7</sup> Concerned with the provision of Vocational Education and Training – most of the funding goes to Further Education Colleges which have recently been the subject of a national review see "Realising the Potential" available from



Vocational Qualifications have made it clear that assessors and verifiers must be appropriately qualified, have appropriate occupational expertise and are familiar with the processes of recording evidence.<sup>8</sup> One of the sources of evidence is the Accreditation of prior learning (APL) which involves the use of evidence from past achievement. In assessing learners for an NVQ, evidence relating to past performance can be used as well as that relating to current performance. In recent years, the concept of APL has developed as a way of ensuring that the past experiences and learning of mature people is recognised and validated. Nevertheless, NVQs are awarded on the basis of assessment of performance against current national standards.

Approaches to Guidance and Support should take account of the issues of policy and practice identified above.

#### **4. Some proposed competencies**

These statements are derived from a range of responses and have not been significantly altered.

A competent APEL guidance and support professional will have the necessary knowledge and be able to provide evidence of the ability to:

1. Recognise and emphasise the perspective of the clients of guidance
2. Recognise own perspectives and identify key sources and discourses that influence those perspectives
3. Be aware of the systems that frame their guidance practice and be able to express and explain pros and cons of these systems to the clients of guidance.
4. Demonstrate familiarity with the relevant performance indicators and performance criteria and of the types of evidence that signify competent and effective performance.
5. Judge the validity of evidence of competence that is demonstrated by a variety of candidates working in a range of different settings and contexts.
6. Demonstrate a consistency of approach when evaluating different types of evidence gathered from a variety of different settings and contexts.
7. Conduct exploratory questioning in a manner that sets candidates at ease.

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<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/furthereducation/fereview/downloads/REALISING06.pdf> (last visited on March 5, 2006)

<sup>8</sup> QCA (2001), NVQ Code of Practice, Para 27 available from <http://www.qca.org.uk/3041.html> (last visited on March 5, 2006)



8. Conduct exploratory questioning in a structured and systematic manner that facilitates the eliciting of all appropriate and relevant supplementary information.
9. Judge, and evaluate consistently, the validity of evidence submitted in a variety of formats and from a variety of sources e.g. products of candidates' work, witness testimony, text, electronic, audio-visual, interviews.
10. Be able to provide constructive feedback to candidates deemed not to have demonstrated full competence against all criteria assessed so that such candidates have a clear understanding of the additional evidence that they will need to produce.
11. Demonstrate a thorough overview of the local, national and European context.
12. Work as an effective member of a team and in particular to co-evaluate the APEL process and products with the candidates
13. Recognise the nature and importance of professional ethics and their implementation.
14. Recognise relevant psychosocial models and theories and apply relevant aspects to improving the effectiveness of the APEL process.
15. Demonstrate effective listening skills and the ability to help clients to engage in reflective analysis of their experience and expertise.
16. Demonstrate an experiential understanding of the range of work related learning, as well as informal learning.
17. Interpret and explain learning outcomes and content from the formal system of education and training, adapt and reconstruct these into the individual competencies of the candidate.
18. Locate the context/intended outcome of individual claims in the overall context of lifelong learning
19. Appreciate the different purposes that APEL claims can be used for (e.g. specific, non-specific etc and entry/advanced standing/exemption foci) and structure own guidance and support for candidates in the light of this.
20. Appreciate the relationships and tensions between the three educational domains (i.e. psychomotor, cognitive and affective), and that demonstrate awareness that competencies may reflect experience within all or any of the domains.
21. Have a sound, pragmatic experience base of teaching, learning and assessing.
22. Understand the tensions between the HE/FE providers and the professional bodies (i.e. fit for purpose/practice/award balance)
23. Understand the impact of differing dominance paradigms in education, both intra and internationally
24. Understand the notion of 'academic levels' and understand the complexities of these in relation to the educational domain, and the context of the experience.



25. Translate academic theories of knowledge and learning into effective practice of guidance and support.
26. Able to create and sustain a network of colleagues in departments and faculties (of a university) who have detailed knowledge of particular diplomas and curricula.
27. Demonstrate a thorough understanding of the rules and procedures of the system in which the candidate is being 'validated'.
28. Have good counselling skills and the ability to help people discover experience, learning, skills and competencies they may not realise they have.