SSCLLN BEST PRACTICE GUIDES: GUIDE EIGHT

Helping Learners Progress
In Practice: Accreditation of Prior Learning

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Creating opportunities for vocational learners
Lifelong Learning Networks were established across England to develop and promote opportunities for people with vocational qualifications and/or experience to progress more easily into and through higher education. The networks are made up of partnerships of educational organisations such as universities and further education colleges who are working together to streamline access to higher education, and open up routes to graduate and postgraduate levels.

The Skills for Sustainable Communities Lifelong Learning Network (SSCLLN), hosted by the University of Leicester, was established in 2006. The Network covers a sub-region of the East Midlands across Leicestershire, Northamptonshire, Lincolnshire and Rutland. The Network is funded until December 2010 by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE).

This best practice guide is part of a series of guides produced by the SSCLLN. These guides aim to share best practice used by partner colleges and universities to enable progression for vocational learners. Other guides in the series include:

- Targeting Vocational Learners
- Bishop Grosseteste Touring Company
- In Practice: Blueprint for Curriculum Development
- Developing vocational curriculum
- Constructionsite: Developing a shared resource
- Delivering/developing the University Certificate in Professional Development
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**Introduction**

This best practice guide has been written to provide information on Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL), its uses and advantages as well as any barriers experienced. The guide will feature the University of Northampton model and examine how this has been developed and used by the School of Health.

This guide provides an in depth look at APL, including:

- What is APL? (Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning (APCL) and Accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL))
- What are the advantages of APL (APCL/APEL)?
- What are the challenges to APL (APCL/APEL)?
- Case Study – The School of Health, University of Northampton
- The development of The University of Northampton APL scheme
- The stages of making an APL claim
- Student experience of APL
- The preparation of APL advisors and assessors
What is APL?

The Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) is a process that enables people from different backgrounds and with different experiences to receive formal recognition for skills and knowledge that they have acquired during their lives. The term is often divided into two categories:

- **Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning (APCL):** This gives recognition to learning which has been formally assessed, and for which a certificate has been awarded.
- **Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL):** This gives recognition for knowledge and skills that have been gained from experience, rather than from a certificated programme of study or training.

Whatever type of prior learning and experience an individual has, it is the skills and knowledge gained from that learning, and the extent to which the knowledge and skills can be applied that is important, not the learning experience itself. The process of giving recognition is based on a comparison of these existing skills and knowledge against the requirements of the new learning programme.

The prior learning and experience can be taken into account so that the student can:

- Gain entry to further or higher education courses
- Have exemption from certain parts of a new course of study
- Qualify for an award in an appropriate subject in further or higher education

The majority of higher education institutions in the UK have procedures in place for APL, which will follow the guidance produced by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in September 2004. However, take up and usage of APL varies considerably across institutions and although the principal is accepted, it is not widely understood and often not encouraged. With the current emphasis on raising skills, progression into higher education for those in work, the recognition of learning achieved in the work place is crucial to facilitate personal and career development.

How does APCL work?

APCL involves the recognition and use of certificated learning towards a new programme of study. The process is more straightforward when the certificated learning is from another higher education institution, which operates a credit-based framework, as is the case for the majority of UK based higher education institutions. Credit is the term used to summarise and describe an amount of learning. A credit value identifies the volume (how much) and the level (how difficult) of the learning undertaken. For example, a three year full time honours degree is made up of 360 credits with students studying 120 credits in each year.

The method used by all institutions to recognise prior certificated learning is to compare what has already been learned with what would be studied on the new course. This will show whether the learning on each course is identical or sufficiently similar to enable the learner to claim that they have already achieved the outcomes. Although the method is standard, each institution will make individual decisions about how much credit can be approved into any course of study. In some cases, not all of the credit from existing learning may count towards a new award, as not all of it may be relevant and specific to the new award.

The main criteria for entry to a new course with credit for previously achieved learning are always that the learning achieved must be:

- Assessed
- Passed
- Relevant to the new course of study
- Current (i.e. sufficiently recent to still be relevant)
- Evidenced with an original certificate, transcript and details of the course content from a recognised educational institution or organisation
- Approved by the institution admitting the learner

How does APEL work?

APEL generally refers to incidental prior learning which has not been assessed. Such learning may have been gained in a number of different ways:

- Experiential learning acquired in paid work
- Experiential learning acquired in unpaid or voluntary work
- Experiential learning acquired from leisure activities
- Un-certificated learning from self-directed study

APEL is generally more difficult to assess and involves consideration of what has been learned and again comparing this with what would be studied on the new course. Without certificates, a process of interviews and portfolio preparation is usually required to look at and assess both the content of the learning and the level. In some cases, students can be enrolled on to an APEL credit bearing module, as is the case with the University of Northampton model.
The advantages of APL (APCL/APEL)

- There are many advantages to APL, which is a powerful way of recognising, and accrediting existing learning, these include:
  - APL avoids repetition of learning already undertaken and employers can save money on staff training.
  - For students the avoidance of repetition helps with motivation on a course.
  - APL provides a mechanism to enable adult learners to access higher level learning when they do not possess formal qualifications.
  - The transfer of credit from one institution to another can enable a student to access a course at a later stage and complete the course in less time than it would normally take.
  - APL provides the framework for collecting and presenting the evidence required by learners.
  - An organisation is more likely to attract a wider pool of individuals if they have some assurance that their previous knowledge and experience will be valued and used to help them obtain further qualifications.
  - APL improves student students’ learning skills and builds confidence as they become involved in the assessment of their learning experiences.
  - APL can provide the pathway to further learning at all levels.
  - Students of all ages who wish to study overseas can use APL to gain access to the course of study.
  - Past students with previous qualifications but who want to change careers or broaden their expertise can provide evidence of prior learning in specific areas.
  - APL can provide evidence that prior learning has occurred for students who wish to return to courses of study that have been interrupted by work or family commitments.

APL (APCL/APEL) challenges and solutions

**Challenge:** Research has shown that portfolio preparation and assessment, which is often an integral part of APEL, is seen as onerous for both the student and the institution, and this prevents its more widespread use.[1]

**Solution:**
- Careful initial guidance for applicants with specialist advisors
- Use of portfolio alternatives such as reflective essays
- Student enrolment on credit based APEL module (see University of Northampton model)

**Challenge:** Trained advisors/assessors are required to carry out APL and their training can be time consuming and costly.

**Solution:**
- Staff who are new to the process of APL can gain experience by joining existing APL assessment panels that meet to look at student claims.

- Initial one to one support means that students’ individual circumstances are addressed and they subsequently need less ongoing support.

**Challenge:** It is sometimes difficult to match the level of the prior learning to academic levels.

**Solution:**
- Provide students with clear information on academic levels and discuss as part of the initial guidance.

**Challenge:** Prior learning is often a match to part of a unit, but does not cover all the learning outcomes.

**Solution:**
- The level of detail that must be adopted in matching a candidate's level of prior learning and experience against the competences demanded by the institution will vary and needs written clarification for the benefit of both applicants and staff.
- Portfolios that do not adequately match the learning outcomes of a unit can be annotated with suggestions and then re-submitted.

**Challenge:** Programmes need to be flexible to enable students to access separate sections.

**Solution:**
- The majority of programmes are already divided into credit based modules, but students do need to have access to detailed structural and content information so that they can familiarise themselves with the modules/units and their learning outcomes before embarking on portfolio preparation.

**Challenge:** Student group cohesion can be reduced if some students are not required to complete sections of the programme.

**Solution:**
- Many programmes are now utilising techniques borrowed from distance learning programmes to expand student interaction through electronic forums.
- Student enrolment on to an APEL module (see University of Northampton model), requires student attendance at several workshops where students have an opportunity to interact.

**Challenge:** APL may lead to a more complex system of student tracking.

**Solution:**
- Once the APEL process is completed the student, tracking process will be the same as for all other students.

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**APL in practice: School of Health, University of Northampton**

**Background**

The University of Northampton has operated an APL scheme for a number of years, which covers both APCL and APEL. At the core of the APEL scheme is the enrolment of applicants on to a 10 credit module called ‘Learning through Experience’. This module has been customised by individual schools to meet the needs of applicants from different areas of the university.

In 2007, the LLN provided funding for the modification of the APEL module to meet the requirements of students on Health related programmes. This programme is entitled ‘Learning Through Experience (Health)’. There was a high demand for an APEL module in Health due to the numbers of adult learners and the requirements of Professional Registration, which meant that it was important to have the specialist contextualisation of the unit.

The APEL module provides the student with the opportunity to identify significant learning from previous study and experience and match the skills, knowledge and understanding from that learning to specific programme specifications. Students then prepare and present a portfolio of evidence, which demonstrates learning of higher education standards against module specifications, which can go forward for APEL.

Over 185 students have successfully undertaken the APEL module since its approval in 2007/8 with the majority continuing on to join existing courses. If students are Registered Practitioners then the fee for undertaking the module will be covered by ‘Learning Beyond Registration’ (correct at July 2010). Otherwise students are charged £150.00. There is no charge for credit transfers.

A further development has been the development of a 20 credit module ‘Learning Through Work (Health)’ which is open to students who are currently employed within a Health and Social Care setting. This is providing a progression route for both existing and new staff in work that do not have formal qualifications for the work that they are carrying out and it is extending partnerships with the Strategic Area Healthcare Authority and other independent health based organisations.

**APL claim stages**

There are five distinct stages to making an APL (APCL, APEL) claim:

**Stage 1 - Dealing with initial enquiries:** Enquiries from adult applicants without formal entry requirements are referred to the departmental APEL co-ordinator. Admissions have a key role in recognising when to refer on applicants and it is important to have an APEL co-ordinator in each school who can give expert advice to applicants.

**Stage 2 - Giving detailed advice:** The APEL co-ordinator can help the applicant to look at which course of study would be the most suitable and discuss the type and level of work experience that they possess. An initial on-line diagnostic tool, which has been developed by the University of Northampton, can replace some of this work but the meeting(s) with an experienced member of staff is crucial to the applicant making the right choices. A maximum of three meetings with the APEL co-ordinator is quite possible.

The APEL co-ordinator will:

- Outline the module content, teaching and learning strategy, assessment etc.
- Discuss the Personal, Academic and Learning Profile (PALP) system
- Identify what learning achievements the student is seeking credit for, and within which named programme
- Discuss with the student how experiential learning might most appropriately be evidenced and where applicable the types of evidence needed.
- In consultation with colleagues determine the appropriate method(s) to be utilised to assess the applicant’s experiential learning.
- Offer guidance on completing and submitting the formal application for APEL/APCL.

**Stage 3 - Making a formal application:** Applicants are required to complete an APEL registration form before they can begin the module. On enrolment students are given a start date and set up with one to one support. They are also provided with a number of guidance documents to support them in completing the module, such as the ‘Student Guide for Compilation of the APL/APEL portfolio of Evidence’.

**Stage 4 - Assessing the claim:** The module is graded on the following set of criteria:

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

**Stage 5 - Processing outcomes:**

The APEL Coordinator will:

- Present the assessment outcomes to the APEL Panel for approval.
- Maintain a record of the whole of the APEL process for each student.
- Ensure copies of all completed application forms and submitted support evidence are filed.
- Process completed APEL Student Evaluation Forms for The University of Northampton Annual Review procedures.

The Admissions Officer will:

- Send an offer letter to the applicant detailing the outcome of the APEL claim, any conditions of entry and any specific requirements of programme registration (e.g. modules that can or cannot be taken.
- Ensure that the decision is recorded appropriately.
- Ensure copies of all completed application forms and submitted support evidence are filed on the student’s record.

All recommendations for APEL made by the APEL Panel are subject to the confirmation of the relevant Board of Examiners.
The University of Northampton’s 10 credit APL/APEL module: Learning through Experience (Health)

The 10 credit APEL module ‘Learning Through Experience’ (Health) is suitable for a wide group of students from health related backgrounds who are aiming to enrol on a higher education programme in the School of Health at the University of Northampton but who may lack normal entry qualifications, or who are looking to gain credit for existing qualifications.

Students are supported in the completion of a claim for APEL by three strategies:

- Individual tutorials with APEL Co-ordinator
- Groups workshops
- Written guidance: APEL Co-ordinator

The Module Guide provides information on:

- Learning outcomes
- Indicative content
- Teaching and learning strategies
- Assessment strategies
- Assessment criteria
- Indicative reading list

The Student Guide for the compilation of the portfolio of evidence sets out the steps that students will need to go through and the questions that they will need to ask themselves as they prepare a claim.

**Step 1: Preparing the APEL claim**

An APEL claim can be used to gain credit from modules within an existing award or to gain credit in order to demonstrate the requirements for admission. First students need to understand why they are applying for credit. They are then challenged to analyse their experiences to see what they can focus on to demonstrate learning at the appropriate level. They are given a series of questions and asked to reflect on what they have done.

If they are seeking credit from modules within an existing award, they will need to closely examine the learning outcomes and the indicative content of the modules and try to see which modules match their experience and achievements.
If they are seeking credit in order to demonstrate the requirements for admission they will need to be clear about the learning statements that will be needed and the experiences they can use which will provide evidence for the statements.

**Step 2: Planning the claim and selecting the supporting evidence**

All students are required to develop a portfolio of evidence to support their claim. In addition they may be required to:

- Complete assignments which show their knowledge and skills in action
- Participate in an interview.

Students are provided with a detailed list of the types of acceptable evidence that they can use to back up their claim and given guidance on how the evidence will be assessed.

It is often difficult for students to understand the different levels of learning as they are defined for academic study. Students are provided with information on the level descriptors from level 1 to level 7 and guided to compare their experiences with the learning outcomes of modules.

**Step 3: Producing the APEL claim**

Students are expected to build their portfolio of evidence in conjunction with the APEL co-ordinator. This means that they can be advised and supported through the process prior to submission. In many cases, students amass more information than is required and require guidance on selecting the best items that illustrate the skills to be addressed. Students have final control over what is in the portfolio.

Students are guided on how to structure the portfolio of evidence and how it will be assessed. A specialist APEL assessment panel has been set up and each claim will go to this panel. The APEL module is unique but it follows the marking of the school and is always moderated. The Quality Assurance for the module is seen as very important and all the work is sent to the external examiner of the programme to be accessed.

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**The University of Northampton’s 20 credit APEL module at level 4: Learning through Work (Health)**

- This module provides a work-based approach to learning that enables students (who are all employed in a health and social care setting) to gain confidence in the key skills required at HE level 4 and the National Occupational Skills required to perform safely and competently. It builds upon the ‘Learning Through Experience’ APEL module and adds specific elements that the portfolio must contain, such as observations by Registered Practitioners and a 700 word summary of the challenges of promoting choice, well-being and protection of all individuals. Students are required to map all their evidence of work place learning and achievement to the four key occupational standards at vocational level 3:
  - Promoting effective communication
  - Promoting, monitoring and maintaining health, safety and security
  - Reflecting on and developing own practice
  - Promoting choice, well-being and protection of all individuals

Each student is allocated an occupationally competent mentor to guide and support them in the workplace whilst they are undertaking the module. All students are required to complete in-house induction sessions that cover all statutory/mandatory training requirements, and attend six workshops at the University of Northampton, which focus on the development of lifelong learning skills, the integration of theory and practice and the development of self-critical awareness. The portfolio will need to contain documentary evidence from the student’s manager that the probationary period has been successfully completed.
Student experience of APEL

The main opinions of students who had undertaken APEL were as follows:

- The process of constructing a portfolio helped students to consolidate and confirm their previous learning.
- It also helped to enhance students’ ownership of their learning.
- The formal recognition of previous experience boosted the self-confidence of students.
- Students were able to identify their individual learning needs prior to commencing the course.
- Undertaking the APEL module was less time consuming and less expensive than alternatives.
- It was relatively easy to recall experiences at work and describe them, but much more difficult to identify what had been learnt and write about them in a meaningful manner.

Below is a selection of comments from students who recently completed the 20 credit APEL module:

‘The course has made me aware of how I work and how much skill and knowledge I already have and use without being conscious of it. It has also highlighted my weaknesses and made me reflect on my practice’.

‘It has helped me to reflect our everyday work with our patients. Reading has opened my mind to know more about mental health illness and why our patients behave in certain ways’. I think it has made me look at how I work and will help me with new and existing staff to advise and assist them.

‘The course has made me more aware and I have become more knowledgeable at presenting myself on paper’.

‘I set myself time to read everyday and things started to open up and I was able to reflect more on my everyday work’.

‘The course has been very beneficial to me. I have learned how to describe, analyse and evaluate’.

Students were able to identify some difficulties with certain aspects of the work:

‘It was not difficult to put a portfolio together, but I found it hard to reflect on my experiences. This gave me an insight into how important it is to reflect’.

‘It was difficult to put together the essay’.

‘Evaluating and analysing situations was difficult for me, but I managed to get there’.

‘Knowing how to explain the right ways of putting my thoughts and feelings into an assignment’.

Students provided the following advice and comments to potential APEL students:

‘Be non-judgemental and be aware that listening and communication skills are very important’.

‘Always ask if you are unsure or have a question. Listen and research as it will advance your knowledge. The course will benefit you with your work on the ward’.

‘Doing this course will make you a better nurse and give you the confidence you need on the ward’.
How to prepare APEL advisors and assessors

There are a number of ways in which staff can be prepared for the role of APEL advisor/assessor:

- Information and guidance materials outlining the process for the assessment of claims for APEL should be clear, accurate and easily accessible.
- It is recommended that advisors/assessors have experience of admissions, as this will give them the background skills in filtering and assessing applications as well as knowledge of a range of qualifications.
- New advisors/assessors can be invited to join the APEL assessment panel so that they can see how portfolios are assessed and can gain experience by becoming involved in panel assessments.
- It is important that a shared understanding of APEL processes and criteria is developed.