



**Research into APEL/AEL throughout
Herefordshire and Worcestershire
2009/2010**

Brigitte Stockton

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Research Aims

The aim of this research is to clarify current practice in the colleges and universities of Herefordshire and Worcestershire which enable students to gain accreditation for skills gained prior to the course. Should a student have sufficient experience and higher level knowledge of a subject area, which has been identified within the modules of the course, it is feasible that they may apply for accreditation without attendance. This has been recognised by Government white papers, the Dearling Report and HEFCE to encourage higher level application of study to a wider section of the population. The research aims to identify how this is currently being put into practice, whilst also identifying key areas which could inhibit the implantation within an education centre.

Through identification and research into this area it is expected that effective systems which are encouraging the process, or generally enabling the process to be implemented, can be identified.

Research Methodology

Initial collation of primary information is to be through email surveys which will be assessed and evaluated against government guidelines. During this time the desktop research will enable a greater knowledge of HEFCE, QAA and other agency requirements to be established and for secondary research to be looked at in more depth.

After the initial research period it is envisioned that key areas of good practice and common problems can be ascertained. These are to then be discussed with colleges which have no current practice of accreditation to establish if the sharing of good practice would be beneficial to them.

The final evaluation should take note of all primary research and the relevant findings of researchers or universities out of the area of Herefordshire or Worcestershire.

Credit Values

The main objective of students who request accreditation for prior experiential or examined learning is to reduce the repetition of learning skill they already have and possibly reduce the required time of attendance at the higher education institute. Thus, offering students a potential monetary saving and reduction in their overall length of study allowing them to enter the employment with a higher level qualification earlier than the majority of students who would attend the equivalent course.

To achieve this students' could apply to have accreditation of their skills or knowledge gained previously and be awarded the credit value without completion of the module.

Within Higher Education courses in England it is the usual practice for Higher Education Institutes to devise a credit value to modules or blocks of learning within each academic phase of the course. The credit values are aimed to indicate the amount of learning expected to be achieved by the student and the skills which have been accomplished in order to show competency within a unit or module. These should be relevant to the level of learning and show a progression of understanding which has been approved by the university throughout the accreditation process of the higher education course. The credit values are indications of

both the notional hours of learning students are required to undertake and the required level of competency they are to achieve. (QAA: 2006)

Clarification of terminology

Students' knowledge and skills may have been achieved through a variety of methods and initially used in a different context to the requirements of the higher educational course. Though it is possible that they are transferrable and could be accredited successfully, with a method of assessment and quality control measures in place.

These accreditation methods are often referred to in acronyms and although there are some variances between educational centres on the appropriate terminology, the main acronyms currently in use are:

- APL accreditation of prior learning
- APCL accreditation of prior certificated learning
- APEL accreditation of prior experiential learning
- APE/CL accreditation of prior certificated and/or experiential learning
- APL&A accreditation of prior learning and achievement

Research has determined that the most common areas which students may have gained skills in the workplace to a higher level prior to graduate courses are usually in the transferable generic or key skill areas. The higher level skills may have been achieved through prior employment or through attendance of non accredited courses. Though it has now been recognised that the application of the skill within the subject context, rather than the knowledge and isolated use of a skill which should be measured. (CIDG: 2008)

'The term 'key skills' can be used as a synonym for 'generic skills', or for a subset of these, as it is in the Dearing Review of Higher Education. However, the term 'key skills' is commonly used to refer to the nationally-agreed sets of skills in the key skill units specified in detail and at four levels by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) in the six areas of communication, application of number, information technology, working with others, improving own learning and performance, and problem solving.. There are generic skills which are widely quoted but which do not appear explicitly in the key skills units (such as creativity or entrepreneurial skills).' (Gillespie)

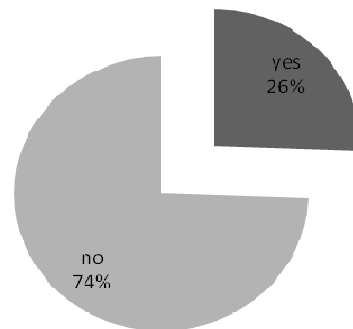
Primary Research Results

Across Herefordshire and Worcestershire, thirteen LLN partnership educational centres were contacted for the collation of primary data. Information from nine centres was returned.

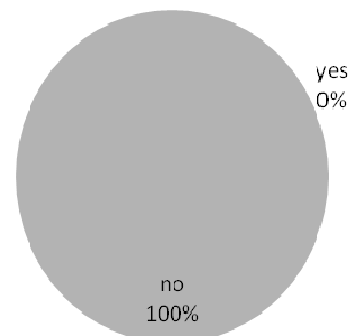
Higher Education Questionnaire on APL/AEL

December 2009

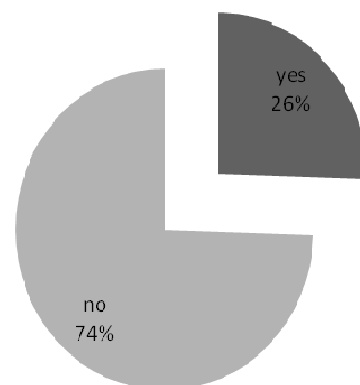
1. Is there a cross college/university policy concerning accreditation of prior learning or accreditation of experiential prior learning?



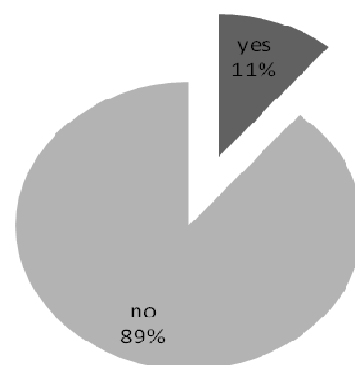
2. Does your education establishment have a dedicated department or person who routinely deals with enquiries concerning APL/APEL?



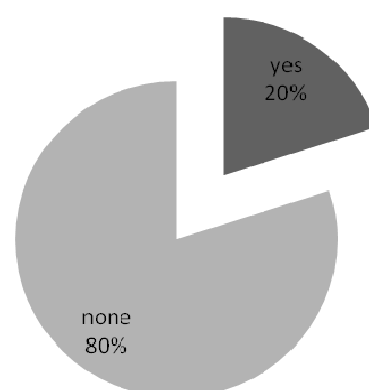
3. Are there individual subject policies concerning accreditation of prior learning or accreditation of experiential prior learning?



4. Have you found that many potential students enquire about APEL/APL in regards to a method of reducing their module attendance?



5. If your course information advises on details of APEL to encourage enquiries from potential and actual participants, could you give indicative the number of students that enquire, and module or subject areas?



6. If APEL/ APL is available within your educational establishment (to reduce the module attendance required from students), could you give percentage and actual numbers of students which have taken this option during the academic years 2007/08 and 2008/9. Including module information this option is taken in.

7.

7 centre = 0%
1 centre = 1%
1 Centre = 23% 07/08 17% 08/09 (literacy numeracy science IT modules)

8. If your educational establishment does not offer APL/APEL, which could reduce the module attendance required from students, or if there is low take up of the option, could you please tick possible relevant reasons in the chart below:

Reduced finance gained from students preventing implementation	<input type="checkbox"/>
----------------------------------------------------------------	--------------------------

	0%
Insufficient enquiries from students	77%
Insufficient knowledge of accreditation process from tutors	44%
Difficulty in transferring skills due to composition of modules, in relation to the student showing subject knowledge within the module tasks	34%
Limited staff resources available to accredit students work knowledgably , therefore students advised to take modules for convenience	23%
Limited staff resources to research suitable methodology to implement APEL/APL	20%
Senior Management decision to not use APEL/APL within the education establishment	0%
Tutor reluctance to encourage APEL/APL within a subject area	0%
Research on implementation of APEL/APL currently being undertaken with a view to implement a policy next academic year.	12%
Other (please give details) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>‘Due to the accreditation of the degree courses by other universities it is their policies on APEL which are used as guidelines to enquiries and it to them that we would refer enquiries’.</i> • <i>‘Although we do not have a cross college policy it is to the Higher education Institute that we work with whose policies we would refer enquiries to’.</i> • <i>‘Evidence of attainment is required for this to be considered an option but it is difficult to monitor when it is out of context to the subject so it is often easier for the student to complete the work again, but within the right subject. Some flexibility on attendance may be arranged on an individual student basis.’</i> 	

Analysis of Primary Research

From this initial research it can be ascertained that although in principle the higher education centres are in favour of adopting APEL or AEL policies, it is often difficult to implement across all subject areas as a cross college policy.

Three Key problems which have been identified are:

- Limited staff resources available to research implementation and initialise a whole centre policy
- Dedicated, or newly appointed staff are not in place to develop the policy into an accepted method of accreditation across subject areas
- Lack of enquiries from prospective students

Throughout the research it has become apparent that across many Higher Education Institutes in England there is a tendency for individual subject areas, rather than whole centres, to implement this type of accreditation. There is no indication that it is more predominant in any one subject area and appears to be reliant more on the innovation and understanding of APEL by the staff within a department. With individual tutors independently developing an effective quality control methodology to measure experience or a skill, in relation to the course or module they teach.

To enable a whole college/institute policy to be implemented it would appear necessary to have a member of staff, experienced in action research projects, who would be able to work with all the academic schools. This would allow similar skill sets to be recognised and a process of assessment to be developed. Once the processes were established, with subject benchmark statements to adhere to, it would then be possible to promote or market the concept to tutors and prospective students. Thus encouraging the accreditation process and increasing awareness to potential students. This could be further encouraged by a marketing campaign for colleges or universities who were experiencing low application numbers. Joint international research has found it would further social inclusion and from a learners point of view enable them to utilise the skills previously developed and give a value to their previous experiences. (Warwick)

The successful implementation of an APEL policy would also be in line with current Government policies in their aim to widen participation and access to higher education qualifications.

With the responsibility of implementation and accreditation currently the responsibility of tutors in the large majority of centres, it is also understandable that time restrictions don't allow APEL to be developed. It was found that in most centres it is not tutor reluctance to implement APEL, but the lack of procedures in place which deters consideration of the option. Offering the option of APEL to students, without a preset validation procedure and policy, makes it a time consuming and unpredictable procedure. With a high risk of students failing modules if insufficient evidence has been produced or if the support of a tutor was withdrawn, possibly through employment change.

Therefore tutors responsible for validation or marking of students work prefer to recommend students to complete all modules as they are secure in their knowledge of how a student would successfully complete the assessments.

The research indicates strongly that prior accreditation would become more accessible to a larger range of students, if there was a predetermined route for students to follow. With the

number of UK students at Higher Education centres expected to fall over the next 10 years (BBC: 2008) it is becoming more apparent that courses should become more appealing to non traditional students. Through accreditation of their previous skills it may be possible to encourage mature students back into education, or graduates to complete secondary degrees or higher level qualification to further their careers. The implementation of a policy which could possibly lower attendance or monetary commitments through validation of existing skills could be seen as a step towards extending opportunities and promoting applications.

Whether they should wish to take the option of APEL or learn if it was suitable for them. It is envisioned that once these processes were in place an admissions administrator would be able to take responsibility of initial enquiries with only the final award and validation becoming the responsibility of the tutors.

For example at Warwick University there are clear guidelines available online and students are advised to discuss options at their interviews when starting a course. The admissions department do request individual enquiries to be confirmed by the module leaders; however both admissions and tutors are fully aware of procedures. Employed tutors receive in house training and mentoring by lecturers from different departments which enables them to determine the additional work required by students to successfully pass a module without full attendance. (Warwick University)

Researching across the Higher Educational Institutes of England a different approach to APEL can be found at some institutes, whereby all APEL is accredited through work based learning accredited courses. The implementation of this validation process is seen to further the promotion of work based learning and enable education centres to work more closely with student to develop personal learning plans appropriate to their needs. (<http://www.excellencegateway.org.uk>)

Due to the unique module delivery devised through the work/university/student three way contract of learning, courses could be designed to recognise skills learned which previously had no prior accreditation. At Middlesex University each individual is appointed an academic adviser who is able to create a combined learning qualification through the use of work based projects and virtual learning. To gain additional skills, module attendance at the university may also be incorporated where feasible. (Middlesex University, 2009).

Although the introduction of work based learning qualifications may be an effective way to value and utilise students' prior skills, the initial set up costs involved for delivery may outweigh the benefits. This is particularly in areas such as Herefordshire and Worcestershire where student numbers are comparatively low to the larger city based universities and colleges and tutors may find themselves gaining additional responsibilities through the role of academic adviser, for which they had little relevant experience.

There is also the additional cost of developing a virtual learning programme of study for modules which may be accessed and beneficial to only a small minority of students. Although virtual learning has been accepted as a valuable learning tool, it is still recommended for use alongside lectures due to the recognition of problems identified with the use of it as a teaching methodology (Stiles, 2000). It could be argued that the use of accreditation which would allow students to miss informal learning opportunities which arise during formal learning sessions, does limit the benefits of obtaining the qualification or an important aspect of the students

learning experience. With this in mind it would be advisable for students and tutors to discuss this in detail prior to application of APEL.

Two colleges within Herefordshire and Worcestershire stated in the primary research that they would refer students to their course validating university policies. However when this was investigated further there was no clear pathway to establish how a potential student would be able to accredit their skills, or reduce their attendance. In both cases the admissions team were unable to advise a potential student and when discussed with a tutor it was not the preferred route as 'validation may be a problem'. If a college does have other universities as the validating universities it would again be beneficial to establish in the whole college policy an effective route of enquiry with individual subject pathways. Once these benchmark processes were established as part of the validation of a course in-house training could widen participation and knowledge to tutors.

Sharing Good Practice - Research and Implementation of Policies

As part of this research it has been possible to identify areas of good practice currently being developed or recently implemented and from these the following recommendations have emerged: (Hereford College of Art, Middlesbrough, Warwick).

Key elements recommended for inclusion within whole centre policies

- Outlined reasons of implementation for alternate entry routes
- Clarification of terminology to be used in the document
- To whom all queries should be referred and application process for students
- Clarification of responsibility for validation and method of cross referral/quality control
- Administration flow chart to ensure visual clarification of procedures with appropriate documentation details
- Relevant monetary or time reductions for students where appropriate
- Appeals procedures
- Cross centre marketing method of the policy to be established

Key elements for individual academic schools

- Clarification of areas which are suitable for APEL/APL within each module
- Methodology of accreditation process confirmed in relation to each identified module area
- Clarification of person responsible for validation within each course and module
- Clarification of application details and procedures with variances if applicable

- Planned training schedule and mentoring system for existing and new staff to further awareness of the policy and procedures of validation.

Evaluation

The research has established that accreditation of skills obtained outside of an educational centre is an area which is not currently being addressed widely across Herefordshire and Worcestershire. With the exception of Hereford College of Arts which has implemented a whole school policy (February 2010), no other centre has established an independent policy which is not related to the validating universities of the degree courses or developed through their own research.

It has been established that whole school policies may not been put in place due to many factors yet one is the differences tutors can identify within their own subject area. Within Hereford College of Art the policy is for the whole school across the subjects offered yet it could be argued that it is still for the one category of Art and similarities across the modules may occur. Thus making it more feasible to instigate a whole school policy.

Three Key problems which prevent whole school policies have been identified as:

- Limited staff resources available to research implementation and initialise a whole centre policy
- Dedicated, or newly appointed staff are not in place to develop the policy into an accepted method of accreditation across subject areas
- Lack of enquiries from prospective students

It has been found that some individual academic schools may incorporating a system of benchmarking and accrediting skills but this is dependent on the course leader or an individual tutor who has been supported in developing appropriate resources and taken responsibility of the process. As in subject areas such as Health Care there is a noticeable widening of enquiries which is being promoted through external agencies or governing bodies of a profession.

It has not been possible to establish the exact number of courses across Herefordshire and Worcestershire which currently have this system in place due to the lack of information available through admissions and the survey but also the inconsistency of information.

Currently all centres state there has been limited interest in APEL within the two counties. Three reasons I identified which are related to this are;

- Inconsistency in availability of accreditation knowledge from centres
- information available to potential candidates in regards to methodology of accreditation
- Low levels of marketing on the availability of accreditation possibilities

It was expressed by the majority of centres that whole centre policies could be developed with the additional support of a researcher who could establish cross school familiarities and develop appropriate methodologies of accreditation on key modules. The creation of a research post should relieve tutors from the additional responsibilities that have been identified which prevent APEL to be available on a wider scale or to be successfully implemented. It would also be desirable for the effective benchmark criteria to be established to ensure tutors could identify clear outcomes for students within the validation process of their qualification. Once these were in place this should ensure a more consistent approach which would be less independent from staff changes or other external factors. However proposed reductions in HEFCE funding would have an impact on additional research opportunities.

Guidelines to the development of a whole school policy has been established through the research and discussed informally with many centres and 77% agreed by that the development of a whole centre policy would be seen as an initial step in the process of implementation.

From this research the next recommended step would be for a centre to access funding and create a part time action research post at to develop a whole school policy and implement individual subject processes for accreditation. This project would take a minimum of two academic years to establish due to the changes and extended validation methodologies of a module, plus the marketing campaign which would be required. If the problems identified in this research were addressed and the project well supported by senior management and all teaching staff, it would then be possible to measure the impact on student applications and whether social inclusion was increased.

It is proposed that one of the outcomes would also recognise which subject areas showed an increase in applications and whether implementation was in perspective to the cost which would be beneficial to other centres across Herefordshire and Worcestershire.

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