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Cylchlythyr

Circular

## Funding the accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL)

**Date:** 13 December 2010  
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**To:** Heads of higher education institutions in Wales  
Principals of directly-funded further education colleges in  
Wales  
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This circular clarifies the circumstances in which HEFCW will fund the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL). It also provides good practice guidelines for institutions to consider in implementing and promoting APEL.

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## Introduction

1. This circular clarifies the circumstances in which HEFCW will fund the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL). It also provides good practice guidelines for institutions to consider in implementing and promoting APEL.

## Background

2. In 2004 the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) published its *Guidelines on the Accreditation of Prior Learning*<sup>1</sup> (APL). APL is the process for assessing and recognising (including via allocation of credit) prior learning, which may be either experiential learning or certificated learning. APL is now more commonly referred to as the recognition of prior learning (RPL). Work on the recognition of prior learning is also being undertaken at European level and institutions will want to take account of this as it develops.
3. In Wales all programmes are funded on the basis of credit. Therefore RPL involves the allocation of credit to the learning which is being recognised. RPL includes both prior certificated and experiential learning.
4. 'For our Future: the 21st century Higher Education Strategy and Action Plan for Wales' was published by the Welsh Assembly Government in November 2009<sup>2</sup>. Incorporated in the document was an expectation that 'there will be greater use of accreditation of prior learning'.
5. The accreditation of prior certificated learning (APCL) is the process through which learning which has previously been assessed and certificated is recognised for academic purposes<sup>3</sup>.
6. The accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) is the process through which learning achieved through prior experience, eg from work, community or volunteering, which has not been previously assessed and/or awarded credit, is recognised<sup>4</sup>. Credit is not awarded for the experience itself, but for the learning evidenced from that experience<sup>5</sup>.
7. APEL facilitates workforce development and enables the higher education community to play a 'more central, innovative and transformative role for business development in the regional and national economy,' as identified in *For our Future*. It contributes to the Assembly Government priorities

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/apl/default.asp>

<sup>2</sup> <http://wales.gov.uk/docs/dcells/publications/091125hedocen.pdfv>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/apl/default.asp>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/apl/default.asp>

<sup>5</sup> *Mapping APEL: Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning in English Higher Education* by The Learning from Experience Trust (LET), March 2000

identified for Wales: to deliver social justice and to support a buoyant economy.

8. In 2009 the Welsh Higher Education Credit Consortium (WHECC) commissioned work to identify the current status of APEL in HEIs in Wales. The work was funded by the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW), which is within the Welsh Assembly Government, and was carried out by Professor Bob Johnson.
9. This study revealed that, although there was no common consensus, benefits had a range of benefits:
  - To students: widening access, enabling more flexible study patterns, avoiding repetition, shorter time to qualify;
  - To employers: more qualified workforce, tool for recruitment and retention, increased potential contribution to the wellbeing of the business, improved employee morale, incorporation of experiential learning into the workplace;
  - To the institution: enabling them to meet the widening access agenda, giving opportunities to non-standard entrants, demonstrating responsiveness to needs of learners and employers.
10. Due to the changing nature of higher education in Wales, and given the priority of this work in the Welsh Assembly Government's agenda, APEL will become increasingly important over the coming years.

### **Current position**

11. Some of the findings from the WHECC study are identified below:
  - All except one institution had made provision for the use of APEL for admission to programmes;
  - There is no standardisation between, and sometimes even within, institutions of the way in which prior experiential learning is recognised by institutions, including:
    - i. whether it may be used at post-graduate level
    - ii. whether it may be used for dissertations
    - iii. the maximum number of credits which may be awarded at any level via APEL
    - iv. the impact of award of credit via APEL upon classification;
  - APEL plays a small part in the operations of institutions in terms of student numbers and income generated. No institution had set a target, or identified a forecast, for the numbers of APEL students recruited. However, over half the respondents considered APEL to be an important priority of their institution;
  - There appears to be no means to ascertain the true numbers of students gaining APEL as only one institution was able to provide data, which

appeared to include aggregated data for all RPL students. The lack of data means that it is not possible to monitor separately the performance and progression of these students. Most (but not all) institutions reported that APEL credits were identifiable in student transcripts/ diploma supplements. Given the reported lack of data, however, it is likely that the full extent of APEL credits is under-represented;

- Perceived barriers to the growth of APEL were reported to include the lack of awareness of learners, employers and HEI staff. The process was considered to be complex and expensive in terms of staff time. There were also concerns that APEL was less rigorous than other forms of learning, leading to concerns regarding quality and that the resources required for APEL for both learners and the institution were prohibitive compared to the costs of other forms of provision;
- All institutions had APEL policies, which were based on the CQFW<sup>6</sup> and on QAA<sup>7</sup> APL guidelines. Some had also made use of the SEEC Guidelines<sup>8</sup>. However, in most cases these policies were contained within broader institutional documentation, and were therefore not obvious to students. In addition, there was little evidence regarding the active marketing of APEL by institutions. All except two institutions had APEL regulations;
- Institutions were not confident about the knowledge of non-specialist staff with regards to APEL, eg personal tutors, receptionists.

### **What is fundable?**

12. HEFCW recognises that there are resource implications for the accreditation of APEL, more so than APCL. Resources impacted include staff time and learning resources. Therefore HEFCW funds institutions for the process through which this learning is assessed and awarded credit.
13. HEFCW funds the accreditation of prior experiential learning against specific 'APEL module(s)' within a programme of study. Such modules are normally taken within a programme of study, subject to the institution's policies on the credit contribution limits of APEL to programmes. As identified above, these policies differ greatly between, and sometimes within, institutions. The learning outcomes of such modules focus on the students' experiential learning and are typically examined by portfolio. These modules need to be subject to similar rigorous quality and standards procedures as applied to taught provision.
14. HEFCW also funds APEL against other modules within a programme of study, again subject to institutional policies and procedures. In this case the

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<sup>6</sup><http://wales.gov.uk/topics/educationandskills/learningproviders/creditqualificationsframework/handbook/?lang=en>

<sup>7</sup><http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/apl/default.asp>

<sup>8</sup> Originally the South East England Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer – now has a wider membership <http://www.seec.org.uk/>

learning outcomes are identical to those being assessed for other students taught on these modules, and the student is normally assessed via the same assessment criteria and learning outcomes as other students of these modules. The specific assessment tools deployed may differ, however.

15. HEFCW does not fund
  - the recognition of prior experiential or certificated learning for entry or admissions purposes;
  - the recognition of prior certificated learning, although HE providers may accredit certificated learning to exempt students from particular modules;
  - experiential learning which has previously been accredited elsewhere;
  - credits from which students are exempted.
16. Institutions therefore need to be able to distinguish between the types of RPL in order to count credits awarded to individuals in recognition of their prior experiential learning as fundable by HEFCW.

### **Evaluating APEL**

17. Institutions will normally require students to undertake the APEL process in advance of completion of the level at which credit is to be awarded. This is in order to be able to offer them the opportunity to undertake an alternative module should they not be awarded the credit for their experiential learning.
18. APEL may be evaluated via the production of a portfolio of evidence, which is sometimes examined by oral interview. In some professions, eg health, professionals have to maintain a professional portfolio, which could be used for this purpose.
19. APEL may also be examined by requiring a student to undertake the assessment(s) associated with the module for which accreditation is being sought.
20. APEL may also be assessed via the completion of assignments designed specifically to test the achievement of the required learning outcomes, via demonstration, or another diagnostic process against the module learning outcomes.
21. Institutional policies need to identify whether or not the module(s) accredited carry a grade which can contribute to the student's overall grade for the programme of study.

### **Identifying modules taken through APEL in data returns**

22. Modules cannot currently be identified as having been taken through APEL on the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) student record.

23. We will be liaising with HESA to introduce a way of identifying such modules in future. This will not be possible until 2013/14.
24. For the purposes of HEFCW's HESES survey, providing the module fits the HESES rules to be recorded on the return as fundable, and the module fits the fundability criteria, credits associated with such modules can be returned as fundable on the survey.

### **Guidelines on good practice**

25. Some good practices relating to APEL are identified below:

#### *Infrastructure*

- Ensure management information systems are able to identify students awarded APEL, both via specific APEL modules and via APEL of other modules;
- Ensure management information systems are able to track progress and performance of students awarded APEL.

#### *Marketing*

- Identify how APEL supports the institution's mission, eg widening access, workplace learning, flexible learning;
- Ensure that clear information on eligibility for APEL is readily available and disseminated to potential and existing students;
- Establish a market plan for the provision of APEL;
- Identify employers who would most benefit from APEL and work with them;
- Work with employers to scope potential larger scale accreditation of experiential learning in the workplace.

#### *Quality and Standards*

- Integrate APEL within the policy and quality procedures of the institution;
- Identify any compulsory modules for which APEL cannot be used;
- Identify how APEL will be evidenced;
- Clarify how the authenticity, sufficiency, currency and acceptability of the experiential learning will be evaluated;
- Ensure that the assessment methodology is designed to capture the desired learning outcomes;
- Ensure that the procedure is appropriate, academically rigorous, and not excessively burdensome for students or staff;
- Set APEL credit contribution limits to programmes;
- Clearly identify whether APEL will carry marks/grades;
- Clearly identify how APEL impacts on the award classification;
- Evaluate how APEL will be reported in the forthcoming Higher Education Achievement Report;
- Ensure that APEL is considered in all validation and revalidation processes;

- Ensure that APEL does not impact on the integrity of the award;
- Ensure that APEL modules are subject to the same quality and standards procedures as all other provision;
- Provide samples of assessments for other modules for which APEL is granted to the external examiner(s) for external verification;
- Monitor progress of APEL students to ensure that they are not disadvantaged by the process.

#### *Implementation*

- Take account of the institution's equalities, accessibility and Welsh language policies;
- Ensure that staff are provided with development opportunities regarding APEL which are appropriate to their role (eg admissions staff, programme leaders, receptionists);
- Ensure students are provided with alternative options for obtaining credit if they are unsuccessful in their application for APEL;
- If evidence, such as a professional portfolio, is already available, identify if this is suitable for evaluation as part of the APEL process;
- Ensure that APEL processes in the FE and HE sector in Wales are compatible and reliable so that credit transfer between the sectors can be securely achieved;
- Work with the other countries of the UK to enable credit transfer between the countries can be securely achieved.

#### *Collaboration*

- Share good practice with the HE sector in Wales and beyond;
- Move to a consensus in the HE sector on the benefits of APEL for learners, employers and institutions;
- Move to a consensus in the HE sector on the contribution of APEL credits to awards.

### **Equality Impact Assessment**

26. We have a legal responsibility to assess the impact of our policies on equality groups, and to set out how we will monitor or address any possible negative impact. We have therefore undertaken an internal equality impact assessment screening process to consider the impact on individuals with protected characteristics and groups under-represented in higher education. The outcomes of this process are available upon request.

### **Further information / responses to**

27. For further information, contact Dr Cliona O'Neill (tel 029 2068 2283; email [cliona.oneill@hefcw.ac.uk](mailto:cliona.oneill@hefcw.ac.uk)).