Does the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) impact on the HE learning experience?

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Abstract

This paper is a literature review of the Accreditation of Experiential Learning (APEL) which examines the process and proposes a view of its implementation within higher education (HE). The study considers the impact of APEL on the HE learning experience as part of a changing landscape where choice, flexibility and placing ‘students at the heart of the system’ are key to the sustainability and future of HE. Policies and systems implemented nationally and internationally to accredit learning gained outside the recognised domain of academia reveal APEL as a positive tool to harness the skill base of individuals in order to support a country’s economic growth and competitiveness. However, despite the collective acknowledgement of its importance, barriers still remain, halting the transition of policy into practice.

Key words Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL), Accreditation of prior learning (APL), Recognition of non-formal and informal learning (RNFIL), Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), PLA Prior Learning Assessment (PLA)

Introduction

This literature review focuses on the value of APEL as part of the HE learning experience and considers attitudes, systems and the success of its implementation within Further Education (FE) colleges with a track record of delivering vocationally-focused HE programmes. The investigation explores the advantages and disadvantages of offering this opportunity to students who may wish to use their work experience to gain access and obtain accreditation towards an HE qualification.

To fully understand the development of APEL, an initial review of its status and implementation, nationally and internationally, will offer a basis from which to evaluate the concepts and mechanisms used to encourage individuals to re-engage with education to recognise the skills and knowledge gained throughout their life.

Context

A country’s economic growth and competitiveness is linked to education policy and lifelong learning initiatives, with government targets set to meet ever challenging goals (Blunkett, 2000; CEC, 2000; DfES, 2002, 2003, 2004a, 2004b; Foster, 2005; OECD, 2004). Government policies view FE and HE institutions as the ‘engine room of a successful economy’ offering a ‘demand-led system’ (DfES, 2006, p. 5) which delivers ‘economically valuable skills’ (Leitch, 2006, p. 12) to increase the skills base of the nation. Government studies and analysis of the impact of policies demonstrate that providing the
opportunity for skills development is only part of the jigsaw (DfEE, 1998; Kennedy Report, 1998; DfES, 2003; Coffield, 2007; Crowther, 2004; Field, 2003 & 2006). Recognising the skills that individuals have acquired throughout their working life is essential if a country is to continue to be competitive and demonstrate productivity and economic growth within the global market (OECD, 2007b). This type of lifelong learning is often informal or non-formal, providing a challenge to government and policy makers when measuring its value in terms of the contribution it makes to support economic stability and growth (Leitch, 2006).

The concepts of informal and non-formal learning and their value in terms of the skills, knowledge and academic understanding individuals possess have provided much debate amongst policy makers and those who work within the education sector (CEC, 2000; DfES, 2006; Harris, Breier and Wihak, 2011; OECD, 2007a; Smith, 2010; Smith and Clayton, 2007; Werquin, 2007). In an attempt to rationalise the ‘fuzzy borders’ surrounding this type of learning, a variety of descriptions and explanations are offered to support the importance of acknowledging the value of learning which takes place outside of formal learning environments (Werquin, 2007). Nations and political leaders acknowledge the importance of identifying, capturing and accrediting this learning to support the global economic growth and competitiveness of countries, as well as the organisations in which individuals work (OECD, 2007a; Billett, 2010; Fenwick, 2010; Jarvis, 2010; Werquin, 2010; Browne, 2010). The lifelong learning agenda is fundamental in supporting these objectives, charging the education sector with implementing systems and processes which can quantify informal learning (OECD, 2004; Watson, 2009). Institutions are tasked with providing mechanisms which offer opportunities through which an individual’s experience can be mapped to academic credits of learning as part of the process of achieving a recognised qualification. In a climate where increasing demands are placed on sustainable economic prosperity, the recognition and acknowledgement of skills acquired as part of a person’s lifelong learning journey has become paramount.

Lifelong learning is perceived from a ‘triadic’ viewpoint by Aspin and Chapman (2001) suggesting it contains three important elements: economic progress and development, personal development and fulfilment, and social inclusiveness and democratic understanding. Providing a framework for lifelong learning which recognises personal development and social inclusion whilst valuing both formal and informal learning is essential.

The accreditation of experiential and informal learning creates high expectations and challenges for education, with government policies instructing educational institutions to provide a ‘more diverse and responsive sector’ (BIS, 2011b). Werquin (2010) cites examples where countries have taken advantage of informal learning by providing an opportunity for ‘people to complete formal education more quickly, efficiently and cheaply by not having to enrol in courses for which they have already mastered the content’ (Werquin, 2010, p. 7). This consumer approach to learning could offer a different concept to what we believe lifelong learning, and in particular HE, to be. Creating an environment in which individuals are provided with the
opportunity to ‘fast track’ the traditional three year degree programme raises questions about the value and relevance of the HE learning experience.

National and International Systems

‘Lifelong learning for all’ as a concept and an ambition was introduced in 1996 by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2004) as part of a strategy to engage individuals in improving and developing themselves. It provided a framework which included all aspects of learning, placing the individual at the centre of the concept. Education and the recognition of non-formal and informal learning (RNFIL) is an important part of the OECD work, with a particular focus on adult learning linked closely to the skills required to ensure sustained economic growth and development. In 2006 the OECD initiated a research project to analyse the RNFIL activity within 22 countries. The data from the project summarised the status and implementation of RNFIL across each of twenty two countries (Harris, Breier, Wihak, 2011, p. 164). This data revealed the differing stages of progress each country had made towards recognising and accrediting informal and non-formal learning. The results highlighted variations in practice and the degree to which each country embraced and developed their models, with a total of nine countries able to demonstrate that all or most individuals had access to systems which recognise informal and non-formal learning.

In order to understand the extent to which APEL is adopted internationally, it is worthwhile reviewing some of the more established systems in operation within and outside the OECD.

Australia has created a credit based process in which the Australian Qualification Framework Advisory Board defines the recognition of prior learning as:

‘... an assessment process that assesses the individual’s non-formal and informal learning to determine the extent to which that individual has achieved the required learning outcomes, competency, or standards for entry to, and/or partial or total completion of, a qualification.’ (Smith and Clayton, 2009, p. 9)

The recognition of prior learning was introduced in Australia as part of a national training reform in the 1990s with competency-based vocational education and training programmes linked to the Australian Qualification Framework (AQF). The National Centre for Vocational Educational Research (NCVER) acknowledged the recognition of prior learning as a powerful tool to encourage individuals into learning, citing a variety of reasons including saving time, fast-tracking to a recognised qualification and the benefits and impact on self-esteem of the system (Hargreaves, 2006). Research carried out on the process has demonstrated that, whilst established systems exist, there are still barriers to overcome in relation to its implementation at organisational and individual levels (Harris, Breier and Wihak, 2011). Studies have cited inconsistencies of assessment, leading to ‘evidence overload and lack of rigour in assessment’ (Hargreaves, 2006, p. 7).
In response to the lifelong learning agenda and in an attempt to ensure education and training systems are flexible enough to allow individuals to engage and re-engage with learning, France developed a national system which gives universities the authority to validate professional skills (validation des acquis professionnels – (VAP)) and also the validation of experience obtained from non-salaried or voluntary activities (validation des acquis de l'expérience (VAE)). The VAP system, established in 1985, offers the opportunity to gain credit for work experience. VAP allows an individual who has three years’ work experience in a specific field to apply for credit to be awarded towards a diploma in the same subject area. VAE, introduced in 2002, extended the right to individuals who have three years’ experience obtained via non-salaried and voluntary work, non-formal and informal, to also apply for credits towards a university diploma. Despite an established national system, data has shown take up by French universities is not ‘common practice’, with universities afforded a ‘great deal of autonomy’ in relation to how the system is implemented and the amount and level of credit awarded for experiential evidence (Gallagher and Feutrie, 2003, p. 75).

In Canada the recognition of prior learning, termed prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR), was implemented as a result of government initiatives and in response to a need to increase the labour force. Each of Canada’s ten provinces and three territories addresses PLAR differently, with common themes and initiatives used across the country to promote and encourage the recognition of prior learning. Most of the systems have been implemented within education, professional regulation and employment, with individual organisations controlling the criteria and judgements made in relation to the assessment and value of the prior learning. Resistance to the system by universities have been expressed through their concerns over the quality of the learning, purpose of university education and the control over what counts towards an academic credit in the PLAR process. The majority of universities have opted not to use PLAR (Harris, Breier and Wihak, 2011, p. 50).

APEL was introduced to UK colleges and universities in the late 1980s. Systems and processes relating to the application and implementation are varied, with institutions and organisations controlling the rules by which they approve and credit experiential learning. In 2004, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) published guidelines on APEL to support and ensure activity related to the accreditation of non-formal learning was conducted in light of best practice. As a result, an APEL or Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) policy is now a fundamental part of an HE institution’s quality assurance system. The guidance provided by QAA is promoted as a prompt and therefore is not prescriptive, with reliance placed on institutions to seek to assure ‘themselves that their practices promote the maintenance and enhancement of quality and standards’ (QAA, 2004, p. 4). Whilst this allows for institutional autonomy, it raises questions about the future consistency and sustainability of academic standards, particularly in light of current government policies which require institutions to provide more diverse, flexible and responsive routes into HE (BIS, 2011c). As a result, the implementation of
APEL is varied, with pockets of practice identified which embrace it as a valid route into HE and other areas where systems and processes discourage or erect barriers to its use (Harris, Breier and Wihak, 2011; Armsby, Costley and Garnett, 2006; Gallacher and Feurie, 2003).

Werquin (2010) clearly articulates that action as well as words is required if experiential learning is to be recognised as a credible route to formalising the skills and knowledge individuals have acquired. In reviewing the different models adopted by each country, it is clear more action is required with practice and the application of APEL lagging behind the systems and processes set up to encourage individuals to return to learning. A challenge in interpreting the evidence produced as part of an individual’s working and life experiences is identified within most countries. This is reflected in the attitude of HE institutions in France and the UK, where systems exist but practice is not universally applied, or as in the case of Canada, where PLAR is resisted by the majority of universities due to concerns relating to its effect on the quality of learning and perceptions of a university education. Furthermore, these examples reveal that the degree of autonomy afforded HE institutions in the value they placed on learning obtained outside the domain of academia can affect the amount of credit awarded and the level at which informal and non-formal experience is assessed (Harris, Breier and Wihak, 2011; Gallagher and Feutrie, 2003).

Despite resistance and the perception by HE institutions that APEL students may not have the appropriate academic level to succeed on their course, studies carried in the UK (Watts and Campbell-Baigrie, 2012) and in the USA (Klein-Collins, 2010) reveal positive outcomes for individuals using APEL as a tool to access HE. The USA project tracked students in 48 institutions and found the pass rates of APEL students outperformed non-APEL students. Comparing institutions by the size of the student population, those with between 1,000 and 4,999 students produced the most successful pass rates, demonstrating 79% of APEL students graduated with a HE qualification compared to 44% of non-APEL students (Klein-Collins, 2010, p. 39).

In summary, whilst in theory systems and processes exist to accredit experiential learning, findings in relation to its use present an image of APEL both nationally and internationally as varied and inconsistent in its application. Although studies clearly signify the success of APEL as a process (Klein-Collins, 2010; Watts and Campbell-Baigrie, 2012), barriers and prejudices in relation to its implementation are evident.

Higher Education Landscape

The need to increase higher-level skills and their link to the economic growth and prosperity of the UK was apparent with the launch of foundation degree qualifications in 2000 (Blunkett, 2000). Foundation degrees were identified as vocational degrees which would ‘marry academic content with vocational experience’ (Thomson, 2000) to provide learners and employers with the high level of technical skills demanded by the global economic market. These programmes were regarded as an essential component of ‘choice’ and
‘diversity’ for learners, offering an alternative route through which individuals could acquire higher level skills supported by a recognised HE qualification (DfES, 2004a, 2004b; HEFCE, 2000). Engaging with employers was a critical part of the development of foundation degrees if future employees were to be flexible and responsive in order to meet the skills demanded by the global economy (DIUS, 2008; DfES, 2006; Leitch, 2006). The BIS report ‘Higher Ambitions’ (2009) outlined the challenges for HE institutions in sustaining a knowledge economy, reinforcing the importance of providing a diverse provision through the development of vocationally-based foundation degrees and increased work-based study. APEL and the processes of recognising the learning individuals have acquired as part of their working life offered an opportunity for the HE sector to respond to the demands of the government policies in order to provide ‘life chances for individuals’ who would not necessarily have accessed HE (BIS, 2009, p. 3).

Initially, many HE institutions struggled with the concept of HE for the workforce (DIUS, 2008). Whilst they recognised the need to vary their provision, the HE community also identified many challenges (DIUS, 2008). Workforce or employer engagement had not previously been part of HE, with funding, support and quality assurance systems established to support a full-time undergraduate market of 18-21 year olds studying on traditional three year academic degrees. Diversifying the market identified a potential risk for HE institutions. Concerns were expressed over a need to ‘safeguard’ the ‘HE-ness’ (DIUS, 2008) of institutions, declaring HE was much more than skills training. DIUS (2008) stressed the necessity of reassessing HE in order to achieve the objectives of government policy.

The Browne Review (2010) identified a ‘closer fit’ was required between what was taught in HE and the skills required to support the economy. It also focused on the contribution HE had to make through widening access and addressing the needs of existing workers to improve and develop their skills to a high level. In the USA, a report by Bass (2012) proposed that colleges and universities should no longer assume the formal curriculum and learning are ‘composed of bounded, self-contained courses delivered in one place’ (Bass, 2012, p. 24). His paper acknowledges the recognition of informal and experiential learning which takes place outside of the curriculum playing an important part in influencing the way in which individuals learn. In considering this premise, Bass asks whether we can ‘continue to operate on the assumption that the formal curriculum is the centre of the undergraduate experience’ (Bass, 2012, p. 24). The Institute for Public Policy Research [IPPR] outlines the threat posed to universities if they remain complacent and continue to deliver what is regarded as the traditional university model, offering a range of degrees and research programmes. This report urges HE institutions to transform the way in which they recognise and provide a ‘broader, deeper and more exciting education’ (Barber, Donnelly and Rizvi, 2013, p. 5), echoing many of the proposals and initiatives identified within the Browne Review (2010).

APEL and the philosophy behind the system go some way to providing an answer to the question posed by Bass and the ambitions of both the Browne
Review and the IPPR report. As a process, APEL requires individuals to demonstrate skills that reflect the knowledge and experience gained outside of the formal curriculum delivered by educational institutions. Recognition of prior learning draws on the experience obtained by an individual, normally as part of their work, and transfers this experience into credits of learning as part of a qualification.

Increasingly, demands are being made of HE institutions to review the programmes they offer to ensure they are more responsive, flexible and employment-driven to meet the needs of employers and the wider global economy (BIS, 2011a; BIS, 2011b; DES, 2006; OECD, 2011; Barber, Donnelly and Rizvi, 2013; QAA, 2013). Research studies justify the importance of informal and experiential learning in this process, citing examples of APEL implemented nationally and internationally. However, as suggested within this report, whilst systems exist, it is clear that there are numerous approaches to the way in which practice is conducted from a national and international perspective (Harris, Breier and Wihak, 2011; McCaig, Bowers-Brown and Drew, 2007; Barrington Research Group, 2005; Garnett, Portwood and Costley, 2004). International research undertaken by the National Institute for Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) illustrates that the uptake of APEL across many countries is generally low (Harris, Breier and Wihak, 2011). Wong’s article within this research focuses on accrediting and assessing prior learning in HE and provides an insightful account of the possible factors affecting the reluctance to use APEL within HE institutions. Conclusions are drawn between the research-intensive universities and those institutions whose focus has a balance of academic and vocational programmes, identifying the latter as more able to recognise and assess the skills of students who wish to apply for APEL.

Despite government initiatives and demands by organisations such as the OECD to acknowledge APEL as a route to achieving a higher education, there still appears to be a tension between what is perceived by HE institutions, who often regard themselves as the ‘traditional custodians of high-status knowledge’ (Dismore et al, 2011, p. 327), and what policy is demanding. Wong’s observations reflect elements of the DIUS report (2008) which suggested creating an HE environment in which institutions select to ‘diversify or specialise’ by providing either a more ‘mixed economy’ approach to HE, including the delivery of vocational degrees or alternatively elect to follow an approach which has a ‘strong focus on academic teaching and academic research’ (DIUS, 2008, p. 12).

Higher Education delivered in Further Education Colleges

In 2010 the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) stated that 275 FE colleges were involved in delivering foundation degree programmes in 2006-2007, accounting for 75% of their delivery (HEFCE, 2010, p. 13). This number has continued to increase with approximately 171,000 students in 2011 identified as studying on HE courses in FE colleges. This highlights the important contribution colleges make to the growth in students studying HE (Richardson, 2011). Colleges actively pursue ways in
which they can meet the socioeconomic goals outlined by government policies through the development and promotion of industry-focused HE courses (Blunkett, 2000; DfES, 2002, 2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2006; Foster, 2005; OECD, 2004). HE in FE features prominently within government reforms, with the expectation that more colleges will become involved in delivering HE, offering ‘more variety in modes of learning and wholly new providers delivering innovative forms of higher education’ (BIS, 2011, p. 3).

In working to establish partnerships with FE colleges, universities have addressed some of the challenges and objectives set by Leitch (2006). However, the 2011 White Paper, ‘Students at the Heart of the System’ continued to highlight the employer-focused approach which HE institutions must embrace to broaden access and offer courses that meet the needs and expectations of students (BIS, 2011a; BIS, 2011b). This White Paper also emphasised the importance of responding to student needs, putting ‘students at the heart of the system’ by removing regulatory barriers to create a level playing field for all HE providers, including FE colleges, to improve ‘choice by supporting a more diverse sector’ (BIS, 2011b, p. 5).

The strength of the FE sector in engaging non-traditional and mature learners into education is well established (Crowther, 2004; DfEE, 1998; DfES, 2002; DfES, 2006; FEFC, 2000; Foster, 2005; Leitch, 2006). In 2008, John Widdowson, principal of New College Durham, encouraged universities and colleges to seize the opportunity to ‘find innovative and creative ways to work together’, recognising ‘the strength that each sector brings and the advantages for all concerned’ of putting the ‘interests of students, employers and communities ahead of institutional self-interest’ (Widdowson, 2008). It is essential that universities harness the potential offered by continuing to work with FE colleges to establish sustainable links with employers to create a route into HE different from that of the more traditional three-year degree route.

Recognising APEL within Higher Education

'I want to make sure that skills provision in this country is of such quality that any lingering snobbery is removed from the equation.'(Vince Cable, 2012)

The above statement clearly demonstrates the government’s appetite to put the quality of the skills training delivered as part of FE and HE high on the government agenda. Skills are seen as the key to success, resulting in increased productivity and growth to sustain the country as a leading world economy (DfES, 2006; Cable, 2012). However, skills on their own do not necessarily result in individuals who have the attributes to remain competitive in the world of work (Brown et al, 2003; King, 2009). Often regarded as a set of competencies that an individual is required to demonstrate, skills are frequently viewed as the acquisition of knowledge. But are skills, knowledge and understanding the same thing? The subject benchmark statements for foundation degrees (QAA, 2010) clearly articulate the expected academic standards that a student must obtain in order to achieve an HE qualification.
Knowledge and understanding, application of skills and transferable skills such as employability are considered as separate learning outcomes when designing foundation degrees (QAA, 2012). Brown et al (2003) and King (2009) offer some perceptive views related to the development of skills and employability within HE. Brown expresses the failure of policy statements to recognise the ‘duality of employability’ (Brown et al 2003, p. 110), whilst King suggests ‘the acquisition of employability skills is not necessarily a guarantee of employment’ (King, 2009, p. 39). Therefore, with regard to APEL, is the process in danger of fixating on accrediting the competency and skill base of an individual whilst neglecting to measure the higher level thinking skills that supplement this knowledge to demonstrate the academic level and standards required of a HE qualification?

The significance of ‘intellectual growth and the development of other academic abilities beyond learning and reciting facts’ is often underestimated (Newman, 2010). Beard and Wilson (2006) use a statement by Johnston and Badley to introduce the basis for facilitating good practice in experiential learning:

‘Good reflective practice takes practitioners beyond mere competence towards a willingness and desire to subject their own taken for granted[sic] and their own activities to serious scrutiny. Competence is not enough.’ (Beard and Wilson, 2006, p. 45)

The statement provides valuable guidance in approaching the collection of evidence required for an APEL application. If students are able to ‘fast-track through a qualification, thereby saving time’ (Bowman et al, 2003) will they be afforded the time to develop other academic abilities beyond reciting facts (Newman, 2010)? Meaningful experiential learning requires individuals to be able to reflect on their activities and articulate, through a process of critical thinking and reflection, what they have gained from their experience (Boud, Cohen and Walker, 1993). Evidencing competence is only part of the picture. In reviewing HE and the learning experience, it is vital that students applying for APEL understand they must be able to demonstrate the high level thinking skills required of the academic level determined by the Framework for Higher Education qualifications (QAA, 2008).

Armsby, Costley and Garnett (2006) identified challenges and barriers to legitimising APEL within HE, with several universities at odds with the concept of translating and accrediting learning that happens outside the traditional realms of academia. Their report outlined the differing perspectives of lecturers from across the HE sector when confronted with the assessment of APEL. Examples within the study identified the difficulty some academics experienced in translating practical, work-related evidence which is often the basis of an APEL claim into an academic context. The subjectivity of a claim linked to personal experience and informal learning challenged the thinking of academics, particularly in relation to assessment and what is required to be successful in a university. Peters (2005) describes this as ‘the voice of life and work experience interface with the requirements of academia’, citing the concept of HE and university as a place where individuals come to learn and
not where they bring their prior knowledge for ‘recognition or sharing’ (Peters, 2005, p. 275). The notion of what we believe HE to be provides further discourse in terms of what is viewed as an HE learning experience and whether individuals need to attend an HE institution to obtain it.

Armsby, Costley and Garnett’s (2006) study offers insightful observations into the perception of APEL as part of the HE learning experience. The tensions involved in interpreting evidence which does not conform to the objectives and learning outcomes prescribed by academia can often affect the way assessors view and value an APEL claim. Dismore et al (2010) conducted research which investigated the perceptions and tensions of APEL for FE colleges delivering HE, describing APEL as ‘problematic in higher education’. Dismore et al (2010) concur with Armsby, Costley and Garnett’s (2006) observations, where in an attempt to rationalise the resistance to APEL, HE institutions:

‘…may be seeking to maintain their monopoly of higher learning and their roles as traditional custodian of high-status knowledge.’
(Dismore et al, 2010, p. 329)

Dismore et al (ibid.) ask whether APEL is viewed as a process only for use with students who would not normally pursue the ‘traditional university route’ to HE, choosing instead to access HE via FE colleges delivering more vocationally-focused degrees. This viewpoint of APEL, coupled with observations of Peters (2005) and Armsby, Costley and Garnett (2006) reveal some of the possible reasons why there are issues and tensions with APEL as a functioning system within universities. However, adopting an approach which distinguishes between different types of learning could promote a two-tier system for HE at odds with national and international drivers that place students at the heart of a system (BIS, 2011b) which increasingly considers students as ‘active co-creator(s) of knowledge’ (Barber, Donnelly and Rizvi, 2013, p. 43). Given the political commitment to provide a more accessible and flexible HE system which encourages new learners into HE, it would be unwise for universities to disregard APEL as a potential avenue through which they could encourage new learners (Barber, Donnelly and Rizvi, 2013; BIS, 2009; BIS, 2011b; Cable, 2012).

Conclusion

If the notion of what we believe HE to be is changing and if, as Bass (2012) suggests, we cannot continue to assume that the formal curriculum is the centre of the undergraduate experience, we need to make sure diverse and flexible systems like APEL are given the appropriate support, resources and consideration if they are to be recognised as a viable option to the more tradition three year degree route. To echo Werquin (2010), action as well as words is required if HE institutions are to offer the opportunity to accredit and share the experience of learning that is acquired outside the formal educational environment.


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