

APEL Assessment in the East of England

*A report on the assessment of experiential learning
and proposed alternatives to portfolio assessment*

Brenda Crichton - October 2008

Mission Statement

MOVE's overarching purpose is to bring about a step change in progression opportunities for vocational learners across the East of England region and to improve opportunities into and through Higher Education at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

Contents

	Page
1. Introduction	5
2. Overview of key findings	5
3. Consideration and approval of APEL claim	7
4. Structure of the APEL portfolio	7
5. Perceived strengths and weaknesses of portfolio assessment	8
6. Other forms of assessment for the accreditation of experiential learning	9
7. The QAA guidelines and information for stakeholders, academic staff, applicants, assessors and examiners	10
8. Alternative proposals to the assessment of prior experiential learning	11
9. The support and assessment of experiential learning	11
10. The use of portfolio assessment in other types of work based learning	12
11. Conclusion	12
12. Contact information	13

Appendix 1 *APEL Assessment Questionnaire*

Appendix 2 *Glossary of definitions, terms and acronyms*

MOVE **IMPACT** MOVE **IMPACT** MOVE **IMPACT** MOVE **IMPACT** MOVE **IMPACT**
IMPACT MOVE **IMPACT** MOVE **IMPACT** MOVE **IMPACT** MOVE **IMPACT** MOVE
MOVE **IMPACT** MOVE **IMPACT** MOVE **IMPACT** MOVE **IMPACT** MOVE **IMPACT** MOVE **IMPACT**

1. Introduction

- 1.1** The MOVE Audit of Credit Processes and Practices in Higher Education Institutions in the East of England: First Report in May 2007 shows that there is very little variation in the processes of managing and approving the accreditation of prior experiential learning across the region, especially in the use of portfolio assessment as a means of measuring the learning achieved. Despite this, there seems to be a general perception that portfolio assessment is onerous and this view prevents a more widespread use of the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) as progression into or through higher education. This could disadvantage work based learners if they have to repeat learning already achieved through work and practice because opportunities for experiential learning to be recognised within an award are not taken into account via APEL processes.
- 1.2** As a result of the findings in the earlier report, MOVE is interested in considering the strengths and weaknesses of portfolio assessment as a way of measuring learning from experience and in exploring attitudes and considering suggestions for alternative means of assessing experiential learning. If alternatives are feasible and/or portfolio assessment can be simplified we hope to consider what processes need to be in place to ensure best practice and encourage the use of recognising learning achieved through experience.

2. Overview of key findings

2.1 Methodology

This report is based on a broad framework of questions (Appendix 1) which have been aligned to the *Guidelines on the Accreditation of Prior Learning* published by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in September 2004 (QAA 064 09/04), Principles 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10.

The questions were addressed by email to each of the higher education institutions in the East of England. Any queries about the replies were clarified by telephone and/or visits to the institutions and correspondents concerned.

The aim of the project was to:

- seek clarification of the processes and procedures within each institution
- evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of using portfolio assessment as a means of measuring learning achieved through experience
- seek suggestions for alternative methods of measuring this learning
- agree processes which will ensure that any alternative assessment can be quality assured and accepted by institutions across the region.

2.2 Higher Education Institutions

The institutions listed below were invited to take part in the audit:

Anglia Ruskin University
 Cranfield University
 Norwich University College of the Arts
 The Open University
 University Campus Suffolk
 University of Bedfordshire
 University of Cambridge
 University of East Anglia
 University of Essex
 University of Hertfordshire
 Writtle College

Of the eleven institutions approached six replied and completed the questions as appropriate to their institution. One of these institutions does not undertake APEL assessment at all and one institution has APEL modules through which it assesses learning achieved through experience. However, the MOVE Audit Interim Report indicated a much wider use of APEL processes and activity and therefore we can assume that the majority of those institutions who did not respond to this survey will still have APEL processes in place. In view of this we have incorporated some replies included from these institutions within the First Report where they are applicable and can inform this report.

2.3 Headline findings

- four of the six responding institutions accept experiential learning as a means of admission with credit into higher education
- all four of these institutions use portfolio assessment as a means of measuring learning achieved from experience
- all institutions using APEL have internal handbooks and guidelines on APEL and the process of approval
- several institutions use other methods of assessment for experiential learning. These are detailed in Section 6.0
- institutions using portfolio assessment broadly agree about the expected contents of a portfolio and on the relative strengths and weaknesses. This is further explored in Section 4.0
- all institutions use portfolio assessment in the area of work based learning as a means of assessment, especially within foundation degrees
- all institutions using APEL portfolio assessment match the learning achieved through experience against the learning outcomes of the modules which form the basis of the application.

3. Consideration and approval of APEL claims

- 3.1** The number of claims for APEL differs greatly between institutions and the number of applications considered and approved in 2006/7 by the responding institutions was greater than those in 2005/6. The numbers of approved claims in institutions varied between 0 and 20 in 2005/6 and from 3 to 70 in 2006/7. One institution considered and approved 77 applications for experiential learning during the period September 2006 to March 2008.
- 3.2** It appears from the figures quoted that all applications submitted for consideration for APEL were approved. The reasons behind such a high success rate were not followed up in this research and it is probable that these figures do not include those learners who apply but do not actually submit a completed portfolio. However, it may be useful for a further study to consider the types and levels of support available in institutions for APEL assessment and the link this has to satisfactory completion and final approval of portfolios.

4. Structure of the APEL portfolio

- 4.1** The results of the survey show that the content of an APEL portfolio is relatively standard, although it can vary between vocational subjects. Typically, portfolios will be expected to include evidence such as:
- employers' references
 - professional body qualifications
 - testimonials
 - continuing professional development (CPD) training
 - details of the modules against which the claim is to be made. All the institutions expect all learning outcomes to be achieved for the whole module
 - a reflective commentary mapping the learning achieved to the learning outcomes of the modules.
- 4.2** As the expected contents of the portfolio are consistent across all the institutions and overall most portfolios include very much the same material to evidence and confirm learning achieved, this suggests that recognition of experiential learning through portfolio assessment could be transferable across institutions without quality assurance being compromised.

5. Perceived strengths and weaknesses of portfolio assessment

- 5.1** Portfolio assessment has been used in the United Kingdom higher education system as a vehicle for measuring the achievement of credit in the workplace and through experience for over twenty years, especially in vocational areas such as nursing. It therefore has a proven track record.
- 5.2** The strengths of APEL assessment by portfolio are seen to be that 'it gives a broad opportunity for the demonstration of experiential learning and can be set against ILOs (learning outcomes) of prescribed programmes in a flexible and individualistic way'. It is seen as 'facilitating the students' realisation of their own learning' and enables 'the use of authentication from previous managers and tasks to be set by the tutor where actual evidence is not readily available'.
- 5.3** There are, however, perceived weaknesses and the process is considered by some to be 'regimented and tedious'. Other comments include:
- the process is time consuming in terms of personal guidance and assessment for applicants, staff and approval boards
 - mapping against learning outcomes can be difficult if there is a large amount of credit involved
 - the process can be confusing
 - few students actually complete the portfolio.

It is therefore often considered to be 'as easy to take the module as to construct a portfolio'. However, although this may be the case in terms of meeting assessment requirements, taking the module does not offer the same flexibility in time, place and pace of 'delivery' as the APEL portfolio process affords.

- 5.4** It would appear from the answers given therefore, that although the principle of using learning achieved through experience is widely accepted, in reality most institutions do not encourage or maximise the use of the APEL process. However, with the emphasis now placed on raising skills, employer engagement and progression into higher education for those already in work, the recognition of learning achieved in the work place is crucial to facilitate personal and career development.

6. Other forms of assessment for the accreditation of experiential learning

- 6.1** Three institutions use other types of assessment of prior experiential learning and these include:
- professional portfolio
 - CPD evidence
 - reflective essays
 - questionnaires
 - work project
 - in exceptional circumstances any other valid method of demonstrating learning
 - 'shell' courses providing an academic structure enabling students to negotiate learning within a course. This is achieved through the use of an e-portfolio as a repository and workspace to capture prior learning.
- 6.2** These assessment processes may be used as an adjunct to portfolio assessment rather than an alternative and in some cases the use of alternative assessment methods depends on the subject specialism, although no further information has been given.
- 6.3** The strengths of these alternatives are that they:
- are shorter, designed to be easy to use and low on staff time, resulting in a reduced workload, are more cost effective and encourages a wider range of students to pursue claims
 - provide a focused and simplified approach
 - shell courses enable students to gain credits drawing upon learning at work; enable a clearer understanding of their personal development and facilitate future career planning
 - are more cost effective.
- 6.4** The weaknesses are perceived to be that:
- students do not return the agreed assessment and are then rejected for non-completion
 - there is uncertainty about whether what is being assessed is new learning rather than prior experiential learning
 - the 'shell' modules are linked to course timetables and therefore lack necessary flexibility.
- 6.5** The only way to discover whether these suggested alternatives are viable is to test them. A further project could be designed with the cooperation of partners and practitioners to set up a variety of alternatives which could then be piloted with the agreement of learners. The objectives could be set to ensure that what is being assessed is prior learning not new learning (although the process of reviewing and reflecting on learning achieved will always involve new learning from this experience itself).

7. The QAA guidelines and information for stakeholders, academic staff, applicants, assessors and examiners

- 7.1** All institutions confirm that they meet the criteria laid down in the QAA guidelines but the processes adopted differ, although all APEL applications are expected to meet the regulatory requirements of each institution. In some institutions the approvals process is devolved to the Schools/Faculties but several institutions have developed centralised approval systems although support for the applicant is normally within the subject specialist area. As a consequence of the HEI and partnership changes in the East of England, several institutions are reviewing their regulations relating to the Accreditation of Prior Certificated (APCL) and the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) and therefore were unable to give substantial answers. The main points made were:
- in one university where the largest user of APEL is the Health Faculty, a handbook and portfolio completion guidance template is issued but elsewhere in the university no handbook is in operation. There is however, information on the website which is being looked at currently and there are university regulations for staff to observe.
 - one institution has both a procedural document and information leaflets.
 - one institution has institutional guidelines, uses individual tutorials and a Credit Approvals Board which oversees the process at institutional level and reports to the Examination Board. Portfolios are made available to External Examiners where APEL is included in the programme of study and contributes to a degree.
 - one institution bases the criteria firmly on the module learning outcomes which must all be evidenced if the module is to be 'APELed'.
 - in one institution, decisions have been devolved to the Schools and can be varied. No further information is available about the processes followed as they are being revised.
 - one institution until recently was in partnership with another institution and used their regulatory framework. Their new criteria have only recently been approved by their Academic Board.
- 7.2** The approvals process and information, guidance and support available to learners may differ within each institution but all institutions treat APEL applications within the context of standard assessment processes implemented across each institution. This supports the view that the accreditation of prior experiential learning is quality assured and consistent with other assessment processes.

8. Alternative proposals to the assessment of prior experiential learning

- 8.1** Alternatives to portfolio assessment are being considered although portfolio assessment is still the most accepted means of assessing learning from experience. A project using e-portfolios on a virtual learning environment (VLE) (Blackboard is used) and electronic capture of information and learning through the use of blogs, videos, photos and oral communication are being planned and considered as an alternative. However, learning outcomes will continue to be the key criteria and an equivalent verification process to that for conventional portfolio assessment will need to be agreed to ensure a quality assured process is maintained.
- 8.2** An interesting alternative suggested by one institution is to validate a suite of modules at levels 4, 5 and 6, with learning outcomes designed to redress the balance between specific knowledge and gradueness and with the word count reflecting the volume of credit claimed. By reflecting on the outcomes related to their own subject specialism, the learner could explore the concept of graduate-ness and evidence the level and volume of their learning from experience. The assessment would be negotiated between the student and academic support and would be tailored to the subject specialism of the experiential learning the student has. The assessment could include all the methods of learning as used in new learning and would not exclude a portfolio if this was deemed the most appropriate form of assessment. Standard quality assured assessment procedures would be implemented to ensure equivalence with other modules.

9. The support and assessment of experiential learning

- 9.1** Most of the respondents interpreted the question 'Does your institution support ongoing APEL throughout a programme of study. If so, how is supporting and assessing this learning managed?' in terms of how much APEL is allowed within a programme of study and what support learners receive from staff. All institutions place limits on the amount of credit for APEL which can be transferred into a programme of study. The amount allowed varies between 25% and 66% and this confirms conclusions from the earlier report. University regulations may also stipulate how much credit from each level (i.e. levels 4, 5 and 6) may be claimed especially at level 6, the final year of an honours degree award.

- 9.2** All institutions state that support is available to learners at all stages of the APEL process and this seems to be mainly through subject specialist module leaders and/or APEL advisers and co-ordinators. Some specific modules designed to incorporate on-going work based learning receive support from employers and university staff, although this is not actually learning from prior experience. Again, portfolio assessment in addition to other means of assessment is used.

10. The use of portfolio assessment in other types of work based learning

- 10.1** Portfolio assessment of work based learning is also used within programmes of study such as foundation degrees, various occupational awards including nursing and teaching and other awards designed to include discrete or embedded work based learning modules. However, these work based modules may also be assessed by other means such as essay or a final report and like portfolio assessment are often supported by specialist tutors in the institutions, work based assessors, mentors, and/or employers.

11. Conclusion

- 11.1** Although portfolio assessment has been used to accredit learning achieved through experience for many years and the understanding of experiential learning and its comparability and equivalence to learning in the classroom has been generally accepted in HEIs across the region, most institutions do not maximise its use to its full potential.
- 11.2** This survey has shown that the APEL process is generally considered to be time consuming and onerous but that there is a genuine desire for some progress to be made in designing and testing alternative means of assessing experiential learning. This may be driven by a recognition both nationally and locally of the need to engage with employers and those in work in order to improve skills and qualifications to meet the needs of a twenty-first century post-industrial society.
- 11.3** The Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) will be fully implemented by 2010. The QCF will bring consistency to the recognition of credit levels and volumes and should facilitate the recognition of credit achieved through learning in the work place. In order to ensure that this goal is achieved it may be helpful for some project work to take place to ensure that APEL processes meet all the criteria of standard modules or units of study.

- 11.4** In addition, there are various developments or suggestions which could benefit from further support. These include learners taking the standard assessment for modules or institutions designing specific APEL modules to encapsulate the learning achieved through experience (see Sections 6.0 and 8.0). These assessment methods could be part of an approach that provided various levels of support in preparing for the assessment, from no support, through resource based or online support to one to one tutorials. Charges for the process could reflect the level of support received by the learner.
- 11.5** If support was made available for a project with input from several interested institutions and APEL practitioners, a regional dimension could be developed for the recognition of learning in the work place. This could lead to a more consistent, simple and accessible approach to the accreditation of prior experiential learning.

12. Contact Information

If you require further information or would like to discuss aspects of this report or any other issue related to credit and credit processes please contact:

Brenda Crichton

Administrative Researcher - Credit, Progression and Equivalence

brenda.crichton@move.ac.uk

Telephone: 01480 467073

or

Mick Betts

Director - Credit, Progression and Equivalence

mick.betts@move.ac.uk

Mobile: 07766726201

Appendix 1

APEL Assessment Questionnaire

Please answer all questions if possible and add additional information on separate pages if you wish to

Institution:	
Name:	
Title:	

- How many claims for prior experiential learning did your institution consider (not necessarily approve) for the academic years 2005/6 and 2006/7?

2005-2006	<input type="text"/>
2006-2007	<input type="text"/>
- How many claims for prior experiential learning did your institution approve for the academic years 2005/6 and 2006/7?

2005-2006	<input type="text"/>
2006-2007	<input type="text"/>
- Do you use portfolio assessment as a means of measuring experiential learning?

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>
-----	--------------------------	----	--------------------------
- Do you use any other forms of assessment for the accreditation of experiential learning?

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>
-----	--------------------------	----	--------------------------
- If so, what other forms of assessment do you use?
- Do you use these alternative forms of assessment as an alternative to or as an adjunct to, portfolio assessment? If it is as an adjunct to portfolio assessment can you explain how it is used?
- What would you expect to see in a portfolio claim for APEL (e.g. evidence, commentary etc)?
- What do you consider to be the strengths of portfolio assessment?
- What do you consider to be the weaknesses of portfolio assessment?

10. If you use alternatives to portfolio assessment what are their strengths and weaknesses?

- (a) Type of Assessment:
Strengths:
Weaknesses:
- (b) Type of Assessment:
Strengths:
Weaknesses:
- (c) Type of Assessment:
Strengths:
Weaknesses:

11. The QAA Guidelines recommend that the criteria to be used in judging a claim for APEL should be made explicit to applicants, academic staff, stakeholders, assessors and examiners. How do you ensure that this is so?

12. Do you have any proposals for alternative and innovative methods for the assessment of APEL which could form the basis of a funded project or development?

- (a) If so, can you please detail these:

- (b) How would you ensure that the process of assessing by the proposed method is quality assured?

13. Does your institution support ongoing APEL throughout a programme of study? Yes No

14. If so, how is supporting and assessing this learning managed?

15. Do you use portfolio assessment for any other type of work-based learning? Yes No

16. If so, can you describe how this is managed and then assessed. For example, is there a specific module for work based assessment?

Appendix 2

Glossary of definitions, terms and acronyms

APL/APCL	<i>The Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning. The identification and recognition of existing certificated learning as relevant to be used as part of a new qualification or award</i>
Accreditation	<i>The process of awarding formal recognition, expressed as a volume and level of credit, to a given body of learning</i>
Accumulate	<i>Build up credit to achieve a qualification (eg honours degree = 360 credits)</i>
AEL	<i>The accreditation of experiential learning (as distinct from "Prior") ongoing throughout the programme of study</i>
APEL	<i>The Accreditation of Prior Experiential learning. The identification, assessment and formal acknowledgement of learning achieved through work or life experience</i>
AP(E)L	<i>The Accreditation of Prior Certificated and Experiential Learning. A term used when including both Certificated and Experiential Learning</i>
Assessment Regulations	<i>Rules governing assessment including pass marks and other grades of assessment, number of credits needed to complete an award or to progress to the next stage of an award.</i>
CATS	<i>The Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme is the generic term used to describe the transfer of credit between higher education institutions</i>
Certificated Learning	<i>Learning which has been formally assessed by examination, essay, project or other means and for which a certificate and/or transcript has been given</i>
CPD	<i>Continuing Professional Development</i>
Credit	<i>A numerical value given to a unit of learning on the basis that 1 credit equals 10 notional hours of learning.</i>
Credit Value	<i>Indicates the volume of learning or 'how much' learning is expected. For example, 20 credits describes 200 hours of learning.</i>

Credit Level	<i>Indicates the relative level of difficulty of learning or 'how hard' it is. For example, learning at level 5 (equivalent to the second year of a full time degree) is 'harder' than learning at level 4 (equivalent to the first year of a full time degree).</i>
Credit Transfer	<i>A way of using credit gained in one HEI to transfer to another HEI or from one programme of study to another. This means that learners do not have to study the same learning twice</i>
HEIs	<i>Higher Education Institutions - this includes universities and colleges of higher education</i>
Learning Outcomes	<i>Express learning achievement in terms of what the student will know, understand or be able to do, on successful completion of a module, unit or qualification. A unit/module/qualification will normally have several learning outcomes</i>
Level descriptors	<i>Learning becomes more difficult at each level of study (for example, each subsequent year of study on a full time degree course) of an award. Level descriptors are used to facilitate course/ programme design by demonstrating the differences in achievement at each level</i>
Notional hours of learning	<i>The number of hours a student will need to spend, on average, in a range of activities, including all teaching, self study and assessment, to achieve the learning outcomes</i>
Qualification descriptors	<i>Exemplify the learning outcomes of the main qualification at each level and demonstrate the nature of change between qualifications at different levels</i>
Transcript	<i>The formal, detailed record of a student's achievements issued by an HEI which typically, will show modules titles, credit value and level, marks and grades achieved</i>
Uncertificated Learning	<i>Describes learning which has been undertaken and for which no certificate or transcript has been awarded and that usually has not been formally assessed</i>
Unit/module	<i>A discrete block of learning with a coherent set of formally identified learning outcomes, which have been given a value (volume) and level of credit to show how much learning is required to be undertaken and how difficult it is. For example, 20 credits at level 4 equates to 200 hours of notional learning in the first year of a full-time degree</i>

MOVE

SUITE 1, LANCASTER HOUSE,
MEADOW LANE, ST IVES,
CAMBRIDGE, PE27 4LG

TEL +44 (0)1480 467073,

EMAIL info@move.ac.uk,

WEB www.move.ac.uk

MOVE **IMPACT** MOVE **IMPACT** MOVE **IMPACT** MOVE **IMPACT** MOVE **IMPACT**
IMPACT MOVE **IMPACT** MOVE **IMPACT** MOVE **IMPACT** MOVE **IMPACT** MOVE
MOVE **IMPACT** MOVE **IMPACT** MOVE **IMPACT** MOVE **IMPACT** MOVE **IMPACT**

MOVE **IMPACT** MOVE **IMPACT** MOVE **IMPACT** MOVE **IMPACT** MOVE **IMPACT**
IMPACT MOVE **IMPACT** MOVE **IMPACT** MOVE **IMPACT** MOVE **IMPACT** MOVE
MOVE **IMPACT** MOVE **IMPACT** MOVE **IMPACT** MOVE **IMPACT** MOVE **IMPACT**