

**0151**

## **Accrediting prior experiential learning (APEL): perceptions of higher education in further education lecturers**

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### **Background**

Individuals learn throughout life, not always in a formally assessed way at school, college or university but through, for example, employment, life and voluntary work. Accrediting this experiential learning is generally referred to as APEL in England but is also termed recognition of prior learning (RPL) (Pitman, 2009). Although APEL is currently high on the educational agenda of the European Union, it remains a marginal activity for UK higher education institutions (Garnett et al, 2004). Where it does occur, APEL is mainly used to gain entry onto a programme or to gain credit towards the completion of a programme of study (Learning from Experience, 2003).

### **Research Questions**

Offering individuals the opportunity to APEL is perceived to benefit a number of different stakeholders, including students, employers, higher and further education institutions. For example, valuing and rewarding experiential learning may encourage those most alienated to return to learning (Gallacher and Feutrie, 2003). APEL offers employers the opportunity to have employees' prior work and training formally recognised whilst simultaneously contributing to further qualifications. Indeed, it is recognised that segments of the workforce are most likely to benefit from APEL within work-based learning programmes customised to meet the needs of employers (Garnett et al, 2004). Despite these possible advantages, there remains confusion about implementation (Challis, 2005; Pitman, 2009) as well as wider concerns about the changing role of higher education within a knowledge-based society (Gallacher and Feutrie, 2003). Furthermore, few researchers have examined this area since Challis (2005: 25) reported that, 'there is little practice on which to base any generalised patterns of activity'. This paper will report findings from a questionnaire study that sought to investigate patterns of activity across a higher education in further education partnership.

### **Methods**

The research took place in the south west region of England with the University of Plymouth Colleges (UPC) Faculty. This partnership operates between the University of Plymouth and 19 local further education institutions delivering foundation degrees. Many of these students are in employment studying part time and over 21 years old. Indeed, foundation degrees aim to attract 'non-traditional learners' and this group naturally lends itself to APEL for entry purposes or advanced standing (module exemptions) within a programme. Many students choosing a foundation degree will not necessarily have pursued the 'normal' pre-university routes to study. Therefore careful assessment of the level and nature of their prior learning is required (Rowley, 2005).

As part of a larger JISC funded Pineapple Project ([www.pineappleproject.org.uk](http://www.pineappleproject.org.uk)), an online questionnaire was administered to all higher education programme managers in the partnership (n=161). Programme managers were chosen for this study following discussions in colleges revealing that members of staff in this position were most likely to deal with any enquires or applications. The questionnaire was designed to collect quantitative and qualitative data about two main areas. The first was general awareness of APEL in their institution, including understanding of policy and responsibility for APEL. The second focused upon the support they received for APEL and the level of support they required.

### **Frame**

A 50% (n=81) response rate was achieved for this study which revealed a number of interesting findings. Analysis was undertaken adopting a critical realist approach (Bhaskar, 1998) using elements of adaptive theory as described by Layder (1998). The results are discussed with specific reference to the mechanisms in place to APEL and how the emergent properties of structure and culture influence agency. For example, if agents such as programme managers are to effectively support students, structures need to bring clarity and transparency to the process. This takes into consideration the macro-level structures such as government agendas, as well as institutional policies and regulations.

## Research findings

Most respondents indicated a good general awareness of APEL. Yet, many were unsure about who was responsible for APEL in their institution or whether their institution had an APEL policy. Therefore the findings suggest that one immediate barrier to APEL for staff may be confusion surrounding current information, advice and guidance. However, when programme managers were asked how many enquiries and applications they had encountered, a surprising number claimed to have had enquiries from students about APEL and half had been involved in applications. These results were unexpected and suggest a rise in interest among foundation degree students about accrediting their prior experiential learning. This may be explained partly by macro-level structural changes in education, but also by current regional labour market trends. The paper concludes with discussion about how best to enable programme managers to support APEL. This, it is argued, is important if mature learners continues to increase and the foundation degree attracts those learners who already hold higher education qualifications (Jackson and Jamieson, 2009).

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