

# **Bridging Rhetoric and Reality:**

## **Accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) in the UK**

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## Contents

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<b>Foreword</b>	3
<b>Introduction</b>	4
<b>Part 1: APEL in the UK</b>	6
1. Historical overview	6
2. APEL and Higher Education qualifications	7
3. APEL practice and NVQs	12
4. Conclusion	13
<b>Part 2: The International Dimension</b>	14
1. Europe	14
2. Australia	16
3. North America	16
4. Conclusion	18
– Policy issues	19
a. Labour market	19
b. Access/equity and power knowledge	19
c. The changing role of universities	20
d. National infrastructure for APEL systems	20
<b>Part 3: Learning, Recognition and Development: a productivity model</b>	21
1. Introduction	21
2. Promotional aspects of APEL	21
3. Perception of APEL	22
4. Stereotyping barriers	22
5. Political barriers	23
6. Infrastructure barriers	23
Learning, Recognition and Development (LRD) Productivity Model	24
<b>Part 4: Conclusions and Recommendations</b>	26
<b>References</b>	28
<b>Appendix 1:</b> Typical APEL portfolio structure	31
<b>Appendix 2:</b> APEL within the Chartered Teacher Programme at the University of Strathclyde	32
<b>Appendix 3:</b> Case study of a Work Based Learning approach to APEL: Nina	33
<b>Appendix 4:</b> Case study: Middlesex University and Bovis	34

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## **Foreword**

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The Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL), though long established in the UK, is an under-used tool. Yet, as this report shows, its potential is enormous, not only as a framework for providing retrospective credit, exemptions and ‘advanced standing’ into higher education programmes, but also, crucially, as a developmental tool. France and Canada lead the way in using APEL as a forward-looking mechanism for continuing professional development and wider workforce development.

Developing APEL is a priority for UVAC. We are delighted that the Learning and Skills Council has supported the production of this report by Professor Jonathan Garnett, Professor Derek Portwood and Dr Carol Costley of Middlesex University’s National Centre for Work Based Learning Partnerships. The report charts the history of APEL, identifies the barriers hindering its development in the UK (including the very term ‘APEL’, with its backward-looking connotations) and describes the lead taken in other countries from which we can learn.

The rapid growth of vocational HE programmes – particularly Foundation Degrees – aimed at employees and students who may have substantial workplace experience, is generating a ‘call for action’ on APEL and associated issues of credit. This report’s recommendations, including a proposed model for Learning, Recognition and Development (LRD) with the LSC as the lead agency, make an important contribution to the policy debate. They are also informing a series of APEL national forums facilitated by UVAC in London, Cardiff and Belfast during 2004 to develop a plan of action on APEL.

APEL offers huge benefits to HEIs by opening up opportunities to use their assessment capability to better effect and to play a full part in workforce development at local, regional and national levels. Let us work together to forge the partnerships and put the systems in place that will enable the benefits of APEL to learners, institutions, employers and the nation to be realised.

**Professor Simon Roodhouse**  
**Chief Executive**  
**University Vocational Awards Council**

## Introduction

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This report was commissioned from Middlesex University by the University Vocational Awards Council with the support of the Learning and Skills Council. It is concerned with 'what next?' in the story of APEL in the UK. Over the past 25 years, APEL<sup>1</sup> has become a classic example of a gap between rhetoric and reality.

Originally imported from the USA, where it was driven by a national agency and championed especially within the community college sector, APEL resonated primarily with UK academics concerned with the access and programme concerns of adult students. Its protagonists were situated mainly in continuing education departments. However, its slogan of 'recognising and using learning wherever and whenever it occurs' was greeted more cautiously, even sceptically, by subject-based academics. They needed a clear match between the experiential learning and what they taught.

The widespread modularisation and credit-rating of academic programmes in the 1990s were hailed by APEL activists as offering a framework not only for measuring the volume and level of experiential learning but also its incorporation through exemptions and advanced standing into academic programmes. Ideological and practical considerations, however, quickly arose.

Universities differed considerably in their approach to and adoption of APEL. Even when protocols and procedures were painstakingly developed and agreed by higher education consortia, they provided little impetus for the actual implementation of APEL. The question of the cost of these activities predominated. The commonly favoured method of students assembling and then academics assessing a portfolio was seen as labour intensive and not particularly productive unless the result could be incorporated into a negotiated programme. Very few universities trod that path, and APEL for most became a marginal activity relevant to some professionally oriented courses.

The introduction of work-based learning in the 1990s used APEL to great advantage in the construction of work-based programmes. These were claimed to contribute to the intellectual capital of both the university and collaborating organisations. Work-based learning, however, was not widely embraced by universities generally.

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<sup>1</sup> APEL is the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning. It is a process by which appropriate experiential and uncertificated learning is given recognition and an academic value. Often the academic value is expressed in terms of academic credit points (a measure of volume) at a particular level (a measure of difficulty) but it can occur outside an academic credit framework for exemption from specific course units. Experiential learning encompasses knowledge, skills and behaviours acquired in a planned or unplanned way through life, especially work. APEL is often closely associated with and sometimes subsumed within APL which is Accreditation of Prior Learning and can apply to both certificated and uncertificated learning.

Earlier the adoption and use of APEL by NVQ providers to meet some of the assessment requirements of their qualifications, although widely practised was rejected by higher education as irrelevant to their provisions.

In consequence, APEL in the UK has produced a voluminous literature but a paucity of practical results. Stereotypically it is now an in-house university activity marginalised and offered as little more than a token to such worthy causes as widening participation.

Inevitably this stereotype is denied by a few institutions which have incorporated APEL into mainstream activities. This report explores why and how they do this and with what results for pedagogy, curriculum and their relations to their communities. Also recognising that the UK learned in the first place about APEL from elsewhere, this report describes and examines what is happening in other countries. We consider the policies, procedures and provisions that others have used which favour the fuller use of APEL.

Of particular concern to this report is what we can learn from these sources about extending the productivity of APEL in the UK. What barriers hinder that extension and how might they be overcome? Do we in fact need to go another step beyond the stereotype of APEL and what would be a model to that end? At root we shall ask what is the essential productivity of APEL and how can we come to a fuller realisation of it? In short, can the story of APEL continue to unfold?

## Part 1: APEL in the UK

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### 1. Historical overview

Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) in the UK is evidenced in the 1980s as a tool for admission to higher education programmes and as a valid form of demonstration of competency against National Occupational Standards for the award of a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ). These developments took place in parallel but rarely intersected with each other.

The use of APEL in the higher education sector developed from the pioneering work of the Learning from Experience Trust (e.g. Evans 1988) and the academic credit for mature entry provided by the Council for National Academic Awards (the academic awarding body for the Polytechnics) in 1986. The CNAA stance was crucial as it legitimised APEL in higher education with a regulation which stated "Appropriate learning at higher education level, wherever it occurs, provided it can be assessed, can be given credit towards an academic award" (CNAA, 1986). The development drew heavily from the work of the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) in the USA and was driven by the perceived need to extend access to higher education to mature students at a time when it was feared that demographic trends would severely restrict the pool of 18-year-olds seeking entry to higher education. Thus the initial primary purpose of APEL was to increase the supply of students to higher education.

By the end of the 1980s it is estimated that at least 20 polytechnics were active in APEL. The spread of APEL was fuelled in the early 1990s by the favourable policy and funding context needed to promote a dramatic expansion of higher education numbers. The Robertson report 'Choosing to Change' (1994) was influential in highlighting the significance of flexible, credit-based programme structures in order to meet the needs of an expansionist higher education agenda. APEL was very much a part of this facilitating structure and was taken up by more institutions. SEEC (Southern England Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer) was able to draw upon established good practice in a wide range of SEEC institutions in the 1993 publication 'Getting to the Core of APEL' (Storan Ed). In 1995 SEEC published a Code of Practice for APEL which was endorsed by 38 institutions and in 1997 a UCAS briefing report on APEL claimed that "the assessment and accreditation of prior learning is used within a wide range of programmes within Higher Education at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels" (UCAS, 1997). In the late 1990s the policy agenda, as articulated by Dearing (1997) and Fryer (1997), remained one of increased student numbers and a further emphasis on widening access and learner-centredness.

A national survey by the Learning from Experience Trust (Merrifield, McIntyre and Osaigbovo 2000) provides the most comprehensive picture of APEL provision at the turn of the millennium. The survey included 133 higher education institutions, of these 107 replied and 83 (78 per cent of respondents) indicated they had APEL policies and

procedures. The responses indicated a higher percentage take-up in new universities and colleges but in absolute numbers old universities were the largest single group. APEL was most often available in large institutions with a large percentage of part-time students. Old universities were particularly likely to have APEL at the departmental level only, with health and education departments predominating. Thus there is continued evidence of the expansion of the infrastructure for APEL in the higher education sector. Identifying the numbers of students actually benefiting from APEL is much more difficult to evidence. Merrifield et al (2000) reports that two thirds of HE institutions with APEL policies and procedures had less than 100 APEL students. This picture is confirmed by the detailed study of APEL and quality assurance in SEEC member institutions carried out in 2002 which notes "the number of part-time students averaged 120 per institution, with numbers ranging from 10 to 700. Whilst the number of APEL full-time students averaged 46" (Johnson 2002:15). Johnson also noted that while APEL was not expected to decline, "over half of the respondents did not expect APEL to grow in the coming year". The surprisingly low numbers may in part be explained by identification and tracking difficulties but it still represents a low rate of actual provision after 15 years of development in a generally favourable policy context. At the time of writing (February 2004) the UK Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) has circulated draft guidelines for APEL in higher education for comment by higher education institutions. It seems that 18 years on from legitimisation by the CNAA there is still a perceived need to explain, control and offer reassurance in respect of APEL.

## 2. APEL and Higher Education qualifications

The major recent surveys by Merrifield et al (2000) and Johnson (2002) evidence a high degree of conformity of practice across institutions that offer APEL. There are major structural variations between institutional or departmental models but significant areas of agreement about principles and commonality of practice, probably stemming from the initial CNAA regulations and fostered by such agencies as SEEC.

APEL is generally seen as an admissions process allowing for entry to higher education programmes, often with advanced standing. It thus combines a potential marketing use with advice and guidance and formal assessment. This is a complex and unusual combination.

Seen as part of the higher education admissions process, APEL has to be positioned within the marketing strategy and admissions process of the institution (Johnson 2002). Information about APEL has to be clear and effectively communicated to potential users. There are examples of good practice e.g. "one actively recruiting institution provides two central educational guidance officers who do a great deal of outreach in the community" (Merrifield et al, 2000:41). There are doubts as to whether this is the norm, even in

institutions with an established APEL history, as Merrifield et al (2000:20) reports that 26 per cent of institutions do not include APEL in their prospectus and 76 per cent “expect students to ask admissions officers or academic staff – assuming that students know enough about the existence of and potential of APEL to ask.” Merrifield et al contrast active promotion of APEL with the institution which responded “with difficulty” when asked how students find out about APEL. To be an effective admissions tool APEL has to be understood by all staff who represent the institution to potential applicants and by staff operating the admissions process. Again there are concerns that APEL is perceived and treated as a marginal or highly specialist activity and not advanced as part of the mainstream institutional offer. Merrifield et al (2000:42) was informed by one APEL co-ordinator that “advice and guidance is a problem as I am the only person and it needs to be delegated out into departments. We need more people in the institution turned on to APEL.” Johnson (2002) points to the need for enquirers to receive informed advice about the possibilities of APEL before committing to the APEL process.

Both Merrifield et al and Johnson identify a model of APEL which starts with a significant guidance function to produce a portfolio, an assessment process of varying complexity and a ratification process by a formal committee on behalf of the institution.

Almost all institutions offer guidance to students on the preparation of a claim for accreditation of prior experiential learning (Merrifield et al 2000:21). In fifty per cent of cases this is by designated APEL advisers, however “only a quarter of the institutions provide formal training to admissions or guidance staff on APEL” (Merrifield et al 2000:21). Merrifield et al identifies that guidance is provided on an individual basis in almost all institutions and this is supplemented by group sessions by half of the institutions. Written guidelines are provided to students making APEL claims by two thirds of HEIs but one in five have no written guidelines. Just over half of institutions offer support within the context of an APEL module, with two thirds of these offering credit for the module in addition to the actual APEL claim.

Both Johnson (2002) and Wailey (2002) provide detailed guidelines for good practice in developing the APEL claim. The role of the APEL adviser is to provide information and guidance in respect of institutional APEL procedures, the format, content and evidence requirements of a claim and other requirements of an APEL module e.g. any additional reflective writing required to meet the learning outcomes of the APEL module. The APEL adviser may not always be a subject expert in relation to all aspects of the claim but will know where to seek specialist advice if required.

Wailey (2002:16) outlines how the adviser works with the claimant from initial discussions to facilitate a review of qualifications and experience in order to determine the potential for the APEL claimant to match experiential learning with generic (e.g. SEEC level

descriptors) or specific programme outcomes. The matching process results in a claim which usually takes the form of a portfolio (Wailey 2002:21). The outline for a typical APEL portfolio is given at Appendix 1.

A key role for the APEL adviser is to facilitate reflection upon experience in order to identify and articulate learning achievement which is either of general relevance to the proposed programme or specifically relevant to a component of the programme i.e. the basis for a claim for exemption from a specific programme component. The APEL adviser also has a key role in advising on the nature, role and sufficiency of evidence, which may take a variety of forms e.g. artefacts, videos, tapes, websites, written case studies as well as original written documents. The APEL adviser is a highly skilled role and requires the provision of support and staff development to the adviser.

Merrifield et al (2000:22) reports that departmental academic staff provide the overwhelming majority of APEL assessors but “only 28 per cent of institutions require training as a prerequisite for APEL assessors.” Merrifield notes that of 23 institutions responding to the question of how many staff are APEL assessors only four institutions reported that they had more than 10. This appears to be further evidence of the local and marginal nature of APEL in most institutions. The usual process is for one or more assessor, which may or may not be the adviser, to assess the portfolio, possibly including an interview of the claimant, and make a recommendation to a departmental or central APEL Board (Johnson 2002:55). Evans (quoted in Wailey 2002:35) argues that “fundamentally, APEL as an assessment system faces challenges and debates and exposes other assessment systems.... The dynamics, dimensions and nature of assessment, the maintenance of standards, the process and content, the decision and judgement making process are common to all assessment systems. What is different and exciting is the use of experiential learning to support the assessment decision and in recognising the context of assessment.” The emphasis upon learning in context can be highly advantageous where the learning is part of professional practice (Appendix 2 gives a case study of the use of APEL by Strathclyde University as part of the Chartered Teacher programme).

Wailey (2002:35) identifies widely accepted assessment criteria as:

- Validity – relating to the match between the evidence presented and the learning outcomes claimed
- Sufficiency – relating to sufficient breadth of evidence, including reflection, to demonstrate the achievement of all the outcomes claimed
- Currency – demonstrating that what is being assessed is current learning
- Quality – relating to the evidence demonstrating the required level of learning achievement.

Assessment often involves making a judgement as to how far the claimant has been able to match and evidence the learning outcomes of specific modules. This matching approach does not necessarily do full justice to the full range of experiential learning of the individual claimant.

By recognising work-based learning as a field of study in its own right Middlesex University cleared the way for individuals to claim for the full extent of the learning they had achieved rather than just that which happened to match a predetermined and prescribed programme (i.e. general rather than specific credit – see Appendix 3 for the Case of Nina). Knowledge gained in, through and for work is usually transdisciplinary and multi-dimensional knowledge that is not easily teased out into subject disciplines. Awarding general credit greatly empowers the individual learner (Garnett 1998) and at the same time challenges the University monopoly on high status learning. This approach to accreditation has also opened up the possibility of constructing customised accreditation frameworks for organisations (see Middlesex University and Bovis, case study at Appendix 4).

The Bovis case study is highly significant as it shows how APEL can be customised to individual employer as well as individual or University needs (Garnett 2001). Accreditation which uses level descriptors for higher education level work-based learning can be used to formally recognise in-company training as accredited learning units with learning outcomes and evidence requirements. This approach has led to the development of a major work-based learning partnership between the National Centre for Work Based Learning Partnerships (NCWBLP) at Middlesex University and Marks and Spencer.

Merrifield et al (2000:22) notes that 41 per cent of institutions use internal verifiers and 38 per cent external examiners. External examiners were usually attached to APEL Boards and saw samples of claims. Their comparatively limited use in APEL assessment might simply be a reflection of credit via APEL being mainly awarded just at level 1 by some institutions and hence outside the usual remit of the external examiner or it may indicate a tendency to regard APEL assessment as different and hence not automatically subject to the norm of external examiner scrutiny. Other examples of variation from common norms of assessment practice include no right of resubmission of APEL claim and 58 per cent of institutions do not provide for the possibility of appeal against an APEL assessment decision (Merrifield et al 2000:24). Both Johnson and Wailey advocate the importance of APEL coming within the mainstream quality monitoring processes of the institution but there is no data available to indicate how far this is being applied. This situation is being addressed via the proposed QAA guidance on APEL (QAA 2004).

Merrifield et al reports significant variation in practice between Higher Education institutions in respect of whether a fee is charged for APEL assessment and if so how much. APEL assessment has significant resource implications and institutions need to be assured that the support and assessment process is adequately resourced. Support is often resourced by the device of providing it within the structure of a module. Some institutions also charge an additional portfolio assessment fee. APEL is often seen as a labour intensive form of assessment. Extensive operating experience at Middlesex University over a 10-year period suggests that a reasonable average time allocation for an experienced APEL assessor is four hours per portfolio. This is very heavy if compared to the time taken to assess a single module but if one considers the possibility of a claim gaining accreditation of equivalent academic credit value to two or three University modules, i.e. in a range of 45 to 60 credits, the time taken is by no means excessive. The Middlesex University experience suggests that assessment of very strong APEL claims resulting in awards of over 60 credits are very cost effective in terms of time taken to assess in comparison with standard module assessments to the same credit point value.

Another area of significant variation highlighted by Johnson and Merrifield et al is the proportion of credit derived from APEL which Higher Education institutions will allow to be counted towards their awards. Institutions which practice APEL tend to have an upper limit of half or two thirds of the credit required for an award as the maximum proportion which can be achieved by APEL e.g. maximum 240 of the 360 credits required for an Hons Degree. Such a limit will typically be specified in Universities' assessment regulations but the rationale for it is rarely articulated. It appears to be based upon a general feel of what proportion has to be studied under the direct auspices of the degree awarding body and a slightly more tangible need to have a certain number of graded academic credit points upon which to base an Hons Degree classification. The current position appears to lack transparency and is potentially confusing for the aspiring APEL applicant who may find that she can cash in more of her experiential learning at one University than at another for a similar programme. It is significant that the UK Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) draft guidelines for APEL circulated for consultation in late February 2004 do not assume a maximum limit to the proportion of a higher education qualification which can be achieved by APEL.

The Merrifield et al survey states that "overall the respondents were very positive about APEL". Agreement was particularly strong with positive statements about APEL as a learning experience itself and no respondents disagreed with the statement that APEL gives credit while maintaining educational standards. Three issues concern a substantial minority: little student demand (38 per cent), the reliability and validity of APEL (33 per cent) and problems with grading and marking APEL claims (31 per cent).

### 3. APEL practice and NVQs

NVQs are awarded against occupational standards which are subdivided into units, elements and statements of competence. Each element has specified performance criteria, range statements and guidelines for assessment. Awards are made by Awarding bodies which are responsible to the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority. Significantly, assessment of NVQs has recognised from the outset the need to acknowledge learning achievement wherever and whenever it has occurred provided it is relevant to the NVQ in question and can be reliably evidenced. The NVQ APEL system is offered on a national basis via the awarding bodies. There are standard training units for NVQ assessors which require the assessor to be competent to assess occupational standards using a range of evidence and including evidence from APEL. There is also a specific unit for the AP(E)L Adviser. The national system requires APEL advisers and assessors to be working towards and within a specified timescale to pass these assessor and adviser units. There is no such comparable training and assessment of competency for APEL in relation to higher education qualifications and some higher education institutions have addressed this deficiency by using the NVQ units.

The 2003 Transfine Project UK Country Study (Storan, 2003) draws attention to the significant role of employers in “not only providing the physical base for training ... contributing to the setting of occupational competencies which .... enable individuals to have their work-based and broader experiential learning accredited.” In relation to NVQs and Open College accreditation the Trades Unions are also active in supporting APEL opportunities for their members. This stands in stark contrast to APEL for entry to higher education qualifications which can be characterised as a simple two-way transaction between the individual applicant and the University as the provider of the course against which APEL is claimed.

By design APEL in NVQs appears to engage and potentially benefit a wider range of stakeholders than APEL for entry to higher education courses. NVQ assessment offers the same status to competence demonstrated via APEL as it does competence based upon current performance evidence, provided that continued currency, reliability, validity and sufficiency can be demonstrated. Thus it is possible to gain an entire NVQ on the basis of APEL. The extent of APEL within individual units or NVQ awards cannot be identified. The overall range and take-up of NVQs is diverse. Swailes (2002:8) reporting on QCA statistics highlights that “by the end of 2001, of the 3.5 million NVQ certificates awarded, 95.1 per cent had been at levels 1-3 and well over half of these were at level 2.” NVQ level 4 award in 1999-2000 represented just 4.3 per cent of the total market for awards at that level (e.g. degrees, HNDs) while NVQ 5 awards represented only 1 per cent of the total market share for all awards at postgraduate level (Swailes 2002:9). Thus while the NVQ may have secured a valuable role for APEL at National Qualifications Framework (NQF) levels 1 to 3, it has done little to contribute to the impact of APEL at levels traditionally associated with higher education i.e. NQF levels 4 to 8.

## 4. Conclusion

APEL in the UK is long established and widespread. There is substantial agreement about principles and commonality of practice, even between APEL for NVQ and APEL for higher education course entry. Yet APEL is still regarded with uncertainty and suspicion by much of the higher education academic community and is not well known or understood outside of education and training. APEL is itself a heavily value-laden term. The use of the word 'prior' qualifies the nature of the learning as that which has gone before admission to a particular programme. In the context of the University course 'prior learning' is thus differentiated from the 'high status' learning derived from the provider of the course. The different nature, and by association status, of this 'prior' learning is further highlighted by categorising it as 'experiential'. The assumptions that are made around these terms have fundamentally shaped and circumscribed the use of APEL by higher education institutions in the UK.

This report demonstrates that at its best APEL in the UK can be:

- a flexible response to recognise the learning achievement and future aspirations of the individual claimant
- open to all and thus able to contribute to widening participation
- supportive of students, often leading to enhanced confidence
- rigorous as part of a transparent assessment process
- robust as many different forms of learning can be considered in the same system
- embedded into the normal processes of assessment and quality assurance
- an important tool in the development of the intellectual capital of organisations (especially employers and Universities).

APEL often falls short of this potential because:

- information about the possibility of APEL is not always widely available or clearly written
- the APEL process can be overly bureaucratic and resource intensive
- APEL is perceived as difficult and overly time consuming by students
- APEL lacks credibility with some staff and students
- APEL can be circumscribed by close matching against prescribed learning outcomes and competency statements which do not fully cover the range of learning achievement held by the individual or valued by their employer.

## Part 2: The International Dimension

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### 1. Europe

Two approaches to APEL can be broadly defined within the European Community, one relates to higher education and the other to vocational training. The European Commission's Bologna Declaration (1998), followed by the Bologna process, included the implementation in higher education of a European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). ECTS concerns the transfer of credit, (unlike the UK Credit Accumulation and Transfer system (CATs) which also incorporates the possibility of accumulation of credit). A series of papers and proposals have since been produced by the Commission that urges formal education and training systems to promote the recognition of informal and non-formal learning through the ECTS.

The European Universities Continuing Education Network and Transfine have a particular view on APEL in universities. Pat Davies writing for EUCEN states "the development of assessment and accreditation of non-formal and informal learning by universities has been uneven within and between countries." Key issues are then listed and Davies goes on to say "... although the tools developed for European mobility, for example ECTS, European CV and so on, could demonstrate a successful precedent... they have not been tried or specifically tested for assessment and accreditation ..." (Davies 2003a).

The Copenhagen declaration (2002) related to vocational training and included a key concern for the "validation of non-formal and informal learning with the aim of ensuring greater compatibility between approaches in different countries and at different levels."

Currently the Europe-wide implementation of APEL is still irregular and complex. The bulk of methodologies for APEL at national level during the last 5-10 years are within formal education and training systems making the award of full or partial credit. Whilst this is considered to constitute a flexible approach to education and training, the main emphasis is towards established formal qualifications and only those elements of the non-formal learning defined as relevant to the formal qualification are recognised. In contrast methodologies within the labour market seek identification of competencies relevant to careers and may be better positioned to identify those abilities that are not developed within formal education and training and thus transcend formal qualifications. Both approaches are sought through the introduction of qualifications standards developed in co-operation between education authorities and representatives of employers and employees. The number of approaches linked to the labour market or enterprises seems to be growing (Bjornavold and Brown 2002:129-30).

The International Labour Office (ILO) is a prominent agency involved in the progression of the European-wide development of APEL. In their document "Revision of the Human Resources Development Recommendation" (2003) they recommend the promotion

of a “national, regional and international qualifications frameworks which include provisions for prior learning” (ILO 2003:ch1p.9) because “Countries and industries need an institutional framework in order to develop coherent competency standards and systems of assessment and recognition and certification” (ILO 2003:ch4p25).

As momentum gathers to develop coherent APEL systems across Europe some writers are looking ahead at the implications for individuals and economies. Bjornavold writes that the system may have a direct effect upon the setting of wages as well as on the distribution of jobs and positions in the labour market and suggests that its basis should be as broad as possible (Bjornavold 2000:191-3).

France has, arguably, the most advanced system for identifying, assessing and recognising skills that are focused on the labour market and on enterprise. This is an outcome of national legislation, methods of financing lifelong learning and private sector initiatives. In January 2002 France passed a law of social modernisation (no.2002-73), *Validation des Aquis de l'Expérience* (VAE), which set up a new APEL system. This followed a series of Ministry initiatives and laws since the 1960s in relation to APEL. The VAE system allows those with a minimum of three years' employment history (paid, unpaid or voluntary) to make an application for exemptions towards or for a complete award. There are Diplomas or professional titles awarded by the state (or on behalf of the state by HEIs) (of which there are c.1,700) and titles awarded by consular or private training organisations (of which there are over 900).

The award by the state is the *bilan de compétence* which is awarded by an accreditation panel following an interview. To prepare their application and development of a portfolio and to meet the panel, candidates can benefit from a new official 24 hours accreditation leave from their work (Collot et al 2003).

To gain the *bilan de compétence*, which focuses on non-formal learning, requires a complexity of approach at a national level that has subsequently led to a diversity of implementation. However, compared to more sophisticated methods of testing and assessment in formal education and training, the focus on non-formal learning has not led to major methodological innovations. “A positive interpretation would be that diversity secures a richness of approach necessary to deal with the highly contextual and partly tacit character of non-formal learning. A negative interpretation would be that diversity leads to heterogeneity and lack of consistency. Both interpretations are possible” (Bjornavold 2000:187).

In Ireland APEL is seen as access to universities. Moore (2003) states that in a white paper (July 2000), the Irish department of education published best practice characteristics to enable APEL in universities. The National Qualifications Authority under the Qualifications

(Education and Training) Act 1999 provides for the establishment of two independent bodies with their own functions, the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC), both of which have policies on APEL. The relationship of the seven universities in Ireland to the NQAI is not defined but issues of demand from the education 'market' are likely to drive the development of APEL where it has been established that there are at least elements of APEL practices in all of them (Moore 2003). The Irish government has provided funding to universities to develop initiatives to support students from socio-economic disadvantaged backgrounds, industry has been asked to consider paid learning leave and some partnership initiatives with regard to work-based learning have been successfully established.

## 2. Australia

In Australia the National Training framework is designed to make training and regulatory arrangements simple and more flexible and allow easier movement and credit transfer between courses, programmes and institutions (ILO 2003: ch4 p26).

The Australian Qualifications Framework advisory board commissioned research in 2002 on the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in Australia. It was found that RPL had not yet delivered the policy goal of creating pathways to qualifications in the numbers originally envisaged (Wheelahan et al 2003).

## 3. North America

The kind of focus used for APEL affects which government departments are involved and the manner of involvement. In the USA it is the Department of Labour which funds initiatives of up to \$2 million annually through major agencies, primarily The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL). Increasing numbers of colleges are conducting Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) mainly to facilitate access of adults back into education. CAEL offers workshops to academics in the colleges to show them how to conduct and assess PLA (see CAEL website). CAEL also offers quality assurance for PLA by setting criteria against which PLA can be claimed and including this as part of their service. These criteria only offer the opportunity to claim credit for learning if the learning matches against the syllabus in the particular course for which the claimant is applying. CAEL have been evolving the PLA systems for 20 years and although fairly confined in its conceptions of the use of experiential learning, it is an established and expanding system.

PLA in Canada is supported at Provincial level. The most well-developed model appears to be in British Columbia where the ministry of Advanced Education, Training and Technology funds initiatives through its Centre for Curriculum, Transfer and Technology (see Matthews 1997, Barker 1998, C2T2 website). PLA here is described as the development

and maintenance of a process within institutions to advise students regarding their learning options and to formerly assess their evidence of learning when there is no documentation or confirmation of the outcome of that learning from a recognised education authority. A successful assessment may result in the award of credit, admission or advanced standing and may, in some cases reduce programme completion time.

Each year grants have been given for specific projects and the Centre for Curriculum, Transfer and Technology has been funded to support a variety of resources and initiatives such as an on-line database and on-line learning facilities and resources. This centre has addressed the issue of the active involvement of a wide range of stakeholders. It uses Web-based learning, partners in education and in industry to customise learning and deliver education and training packages on-line. PLA is an integral part of the customised learning packages. PLA in British Columbia developed over a period of about 10 years to a significant province-wide initiative and has become highly successful. Grass roots advocacy and collaboration in the education sector was gained as well as provincial leadership and co-ordination, dedicated resources, expertise and finance. An incremental and flexible approach to implementation was put in place; the PLA enhancement programme. The programme "supports projects that assist BC public post-secondary institutions in expanding the flexible assessment and learning options available to all learners, regardless of the context or region in which they work" (C2T2 website 2001).

A central and forward-looking element to the Centre's work is its work with the Industry Training and Apprenticeship Commission (ITAC). PLA is a key priority for ITAC and in a Forum between ITAC and C2T2 (2001) issues for the consistent and smooth running of PLA in the province of British Columbia, were addressed. The issues from the point of view of the labour unions were: contributing to raising awareness about the need for PLA in the trades, addressing jurisdictional issues that may be limiting flexibility within the system, demonstrating a commitment to change, better informing members of education, training and flexible assessment options.

The issues concerning PLA for the employers were to contribute to increasing awareness about the need for PLA in the trades, to demonstrate a commitment to change and to better inform employees of flexible assessment options.

The issues for education and training providers were improving their ability to market PLA services to individual learners and employers, a share in the cost of piloting PLA in particular occupational trade areas, contributing to the identification of occupational standards or learning outcomes, to develop standardised assessment tools, assist labour and employers to understand modular training, flexible delivery and various assessment options and to ensure competency of assessors.

Issues for government were to make PLA processes open, transparent and rigorous, ensure that provincial skills agenda includes PLA in the trades, ensure that the national skills agenda being developed by the labour market and education ministries includes PLA in trade occupations, fund specific projects in trade industries and to fund new innovative approaches.

The funding ends for the C2T2 centre in March 2004 and transition strategies are being set up with systems partners for continuation of the work.

#### 4. Conclusion

Policy issues that have been drawn from the experience of the countries described above tend to be initiated from national and European government documents that advocate APEL as a tool to improve and expand skills in the labour market. At the same time issues of widening participation and equal opportunities are drawn upon to further make the case for why APEL is a good and productive way of engaging with a wider constituency of learners.

Some agencies and institutions within these national contexts may be appointed or agree with the policy statements on APEL and from their own perspectives, have put into practice an interpretation of APEL. Other agencies and institutions may have done little or nothing to further APEL because there has been no compulsion to do so. This has left varying gaps between policy and practice in many countries.

The polarisation of vocational and academic learning that exists to some extent in each of the countries reviewed means that APEL appears differently when it is constructed within higher education, than when it is constructed within a vocational training setting. Two distinct models of APEL have emerged and are here described briefly. In higher education APEL is often constrained by the way universities' hierarchies are constructed through disciplines. Schools and even faculties within universities often do not recognise transdisciplinary knowledge and only recognise learning that can be directly reflected in specific modules. A more vocational model may be criticised for its utilitarianism and lack of criticality. Credit is gained for being able to complete a task or function that may be quite complex but is nevertheless based on performance often without the necessity to be reflective.

Ideally these two generalised and polarised models conflate and APEL can become a useful, critical and reflective mechanism that can be used by individuals and organisations as part of a customised and flexible programme of study. Such a model is able to include a more forward-looking perspective for the learners where previous experience is used to act as a starting point for new projects and work-related activity. The nearest national model for this is found in France although there are pockets of good practice such as the Centre for Curriculum, Transfer and Technology in British Columbia.

## Policy issues

As well as the academic/vocational divide, a further complication appears to be the structures that are necessary nationally, in Europe or between countries to instigate APEL systems, that can form an integrative part of or the whole of a qualification, as generative learning that is relevant to the learner and the learner's context. Successful APEL at national level requires a national and political drive as in the French model. It requires agencies who can bring together the wide range of stakeholders necessary. The following issues appear as key issues of policy that need to be addressed before an ideal APEL system can be nationally instituted:

### a. Labour market

Changes in work practices, the needs of the labour market, the pressures of employability create an opportunity for APEL to play an important role for developing workers. In France the *Institut de Management des Competences et de la Validation des Acquis* (MCVA) was based on the "realisation that the development of skills management in undertakings and the introduction of a mechanism for the accreditation of prior or non-formal learning (APL) represent major changes in occupational relations, the modes of knowledge transition and the management of vocational pathways" (CEDEFOP 2003). The experience in France is revealing the possibility for enormous change in the way working practices are linked to education especially vocational training.

### b. Access/equity and power knowledge

New relationships between the global economy and education have meant that education increasingly follows the requirements of work. It is therefore increasingly acknowledged that "learning of equal value to university learning can take place and that new knowledge produced outside the academy is a major rupture to ... the traditional role and function of universities" (Davies 2003). Most writers advocate that "the assessment methodology of APEL should be fair, linked to standards, and be non-discriminatory. Potential hidden discrimination should be actively guarded against" (ILO 2003 ch4 p25). The use of APEL in educational institutions can be seen as a way in which education has linked into work-based requirements. However, whilst "one of the drivers for the introduction of RPL in Australia, as in many countries internationally, was its perceived capacity to act as a mechanism for social inclusion" (Wheelahan et al 2003), there has been "little discussion of the micro-circulations of power within the recognition of prior learning (RPL) nor the possibility that RPL itself might be co-implicated in power relations or that power could be exercised differently and that RPL practice/experience improved as a result" (Harris 2000). Issues of access and equity need to be fully discussed and integrated into systems architecture, not just a 'bolt on' or subsidiary element.

**c. The changing role of universities**

Davies (2003b) defines several factors relating to APEL that are likely to be contentious issues in universities. In France some of these factors are already proving problematic. APEL causes the separation of the function of teaching and assessment that prioritises the assessment role for universities. The changing role of academics away from teacher and marker and more towards assessor and learning facilitator causes academics to have to redefine their role and universities to change their systems for example by developing different approaches to assessment and quality arrangements. If the large part of the learning for any given award is gained through APEL, or as in some cases in France a whole degree is awarded through APEL, then how can the award be construed as an award from the particular university? Universities' historical ownership of knowledge may seem to be at risk if APEL is used in this way. To fully embrace APEL means to acknowledge that learning takes place outside the university and knowledge is produced outside of the university. Universities will have to forge new partnership models and undertake major challenges to their role in education which may affect their credibility and legitimacy.

**d. National infrastructure for APEL systems**

In France a radical change of laws over a period of time brought about the possibility for a nation-wide change in the use of APEL. The system is funded and has quality mechanisms built into the system. In the province of British Columbia in Canada a system has emerged that is a model of excellence in the way it incorporates all the stakeholders into a well-funded and quality assured system. Such structures take time, high-level direction and a great deal of consideration to put in place.

## Part 3: Learning, Recognition and Development: a productivity model

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### 1. Introduction

Evidence from the literature surveys and case studies presented in parts one and two of this report indicate that APEL has the potential to contribute substantially to national socio-economic interests. The United Kingdom, however, is clearly not in the forefront of these developments and uses of APEL.

Part one of this report demonstrates that although APEL protocols, procedures and practices in the UK have been thoroughly worked out, they are narrowly focused. In practice education institutions in the UK mainly regard APEL as a marginal activity, primarily useful for admission to their courses, possibly providing for advanced standing by matching some elements of the prescribed curriculum. The emphasis is on 'you have done this already'. This focus is reinforced rather than challenged by the use of APEL within NVQs as matching against course outcomes is simply replaced by matching against the performance criteria of prescribed national occupational standards.

There are only isolated and occasional instances in the UK of APEL being regarded as promotional of socio-economic interests. That is, that individuals' existing knowledge and skills can be made explicit and used creatively for a range of innovative and developmental purposes at individual and corporate levels. The emphasis here is on 'you are opening up new possibilities'.

Plainly there is a world of difference between these two approaches as far as productivity is concerned.

### 2. Promotional aspects of APEL

The international survey in part two of this report shows that other countries, notably France and the Province of British Columbia in Canada, have made fuller use of the promotional potential of APEL. They provide considerable evidence that it can serve a variety of socio-economic outcomes which serve individual, local and national interests. Paramount among these are the accumulation, application and distribution of intellectual capital.

The question for this section of the report, therefore, is what is involved in achieving a productivity model of APEL where the emphasis is on the promotion of intellectual capital.

The cardinal difference between the UK's position and that of these other countries is the extent of involvement of a range of interested parties. In the UK, APEL is little more than a private transaction between educational institutions and individuals with the institutions clearly the dominant partner. Whereas in Canada, for instance, government departments, research councils, employers and trades unions are also heavily involved not only in policy

making but also in delivery of APEL e.g. through employer associations. In consequence, leadership, funding, oversight and accountability of APEL initiatives are undertaken in the community at large rather than solely within the walls of educational institutions. This radically affects how APEL is perceived, organised and practised.

### 3. Perception of APEL

In perceptual terms, the basic question confronting advocates and practitioners of APEL is what is its productivity? At its narrowest, this is access to academic courses. At its broadest this is a significant contribution to the intellectual capital not simply of individuals and educational institutions but also a range of other interested parties, spanning individual companies and trades unions, employers, trade and professional associations and public and state authorities. These wider interests are served because hitherto unrecognised (possibly tacit) knowledge and skills are unlocked, enhanced, made useable and disseminated via various APEL practices within all these contexts. APEL becomes especially potent when it is connected integrally to other progressive and inter-related work-based learning activities provided by educational and work-related institutions and agencies.

When APEL is acted out on this larger stage, its funding becomes a shared responsibility between all beneficiaries. This means that Research and Development investment and innovative projects as well as day-to-day operations are possible. Equally significant, the quality assurance of APEL is not left to educational institutions alone but is placed firmly in the hands of specialised national agencies in quality assurance and audit which are responsible to all interested parties.

### 4. Stereotyping barriers

All this sounds most alluring and one wonders why it has not already happened in the UK. The barriers are many.

For a start, the very nomenclature of APEL has acquired a stereotypical status in the UK. APEL is seen primarily as an instrument of recognition rather than a process of development. Reference to “prior” is interpreted mainly as past achievement without consequence for future achievement. Employers, unsurprisingly, are more concerned with unrealised potential than with what is already evident and, therefore, can see little point in APEL. Also the reference to “experiential” is seen as implying unstructured learning which thereby might be considered of lesser quality or significance than the structured learning of “the course”.

However, even in the current narrowly focused practice of APEL in the UK there is no consensus on how much credit can be awarded from APEL towards particular qualifications and the interface between FE and HE has hardly been explored. Indeed, these two sectors

of tertiary education have been allocated the differing spheres of APEL in respect of NVQ and Higher Education courses. FE occupies the former and HE the latter. APEL consequently has served to divide the two sectors rather than providing a bridge.

All this stereotyping of APEL suggests that there is a need in the UK to move on to a concept which spans Learning, Recognition and Development and which has a productivity focus.

## 5. Political barriers

Within the larger socio-economic picture, we consider the following issues must be addressed if that kind of Learning, Recognition and Development (LRD) concept is to be realised.

The key factor is political will and support as international experience shows that without Government sponsorship and endorsement APEL will not realise its full socio-economic potential. Educational institutions alone have few levers of power to make APEL an instrument for socio-economic change.

So far as education is concerned, there is a cultural barrier in the UK which focuses attention almost exclusively upon the individual learner. Educational institutions accordingly have no developed view of or role in learning developments for teams of workers or whole organisations. The articulation and release of tacit knowledge, for instance, is seen purely in terms of the knowledge and capability of the individual. Compare this with the Japanese approach where the permutation of tacit and explicit learning are seen as the main source of knowledge creation in companies (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995, Nonaka and Nishiguchi, 2001). This individualisation of learning means that there is little congruence and interaction between academic structures of educational institutions and human resource and training structures of organisations. Once more, APEL has failed to be a bridging instrument – in this case between universities and companies.

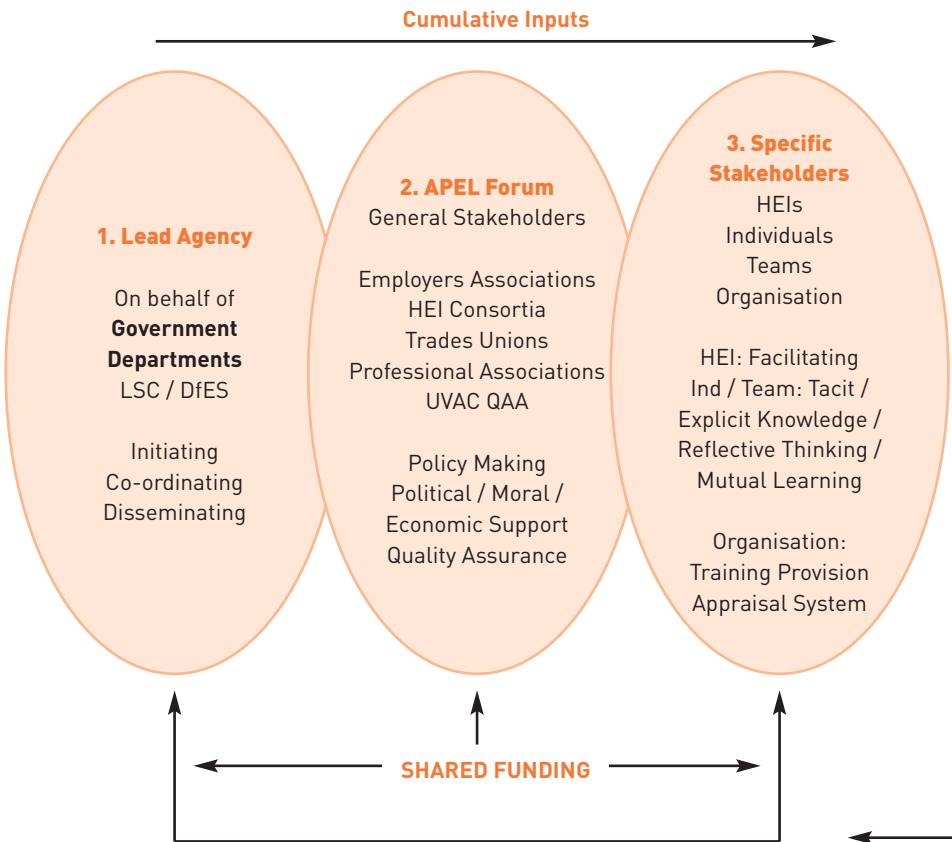
## 6. Infrastructure barriers

It is apparent that a credible national agency to act in initiating, co-ordinating and disseminating roles is vital. While there is no such body in the UK at present, the Learning and Skills Council might be seen as an obvious candidate.

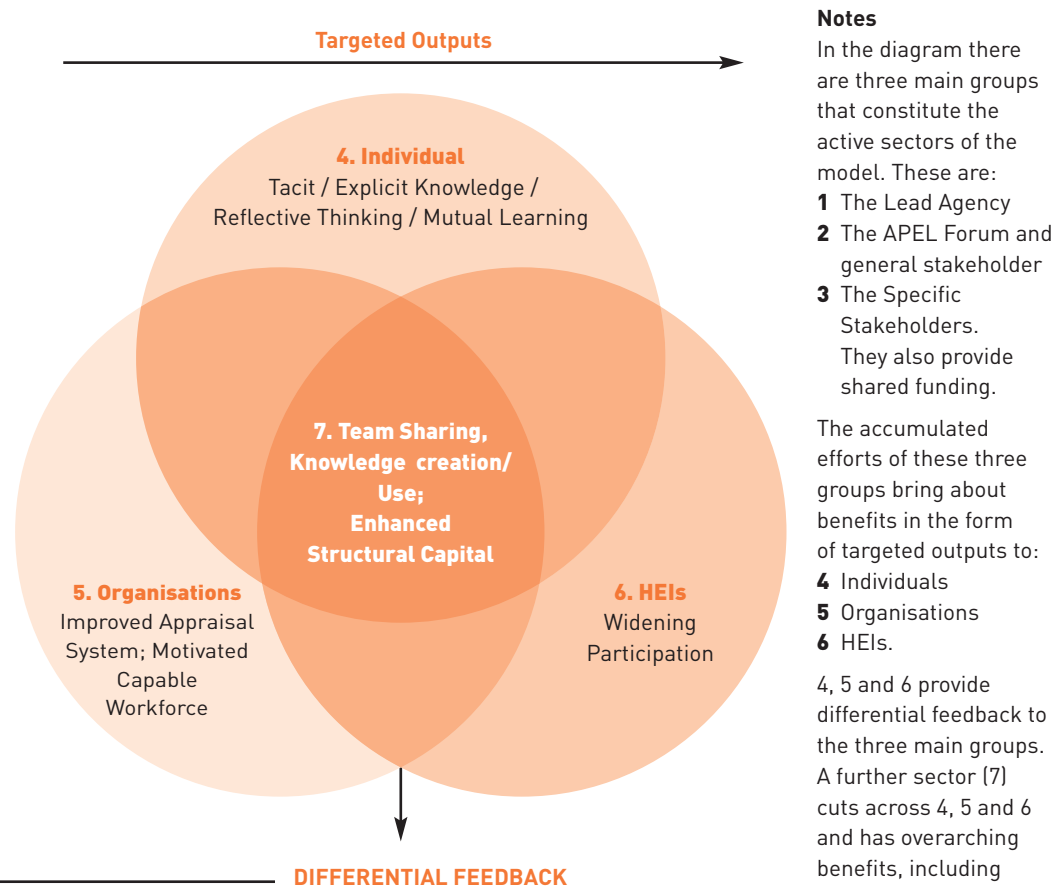
A forum of representative stakeholders is crucial for policy formation, political, moral and economic support and quality assurance. Although again absent in the UK at present, foremost participants in such a forum might be the CBI, TUC, UVAC, QAA and QCA. The LRD concept provides common ground and interests for these and allied stakeholders (e.g. professional associations) to combine forces.

Those directly involved in the actual delivery and use of APEL (HEIs, individuals, teams, organisations) need appropriate and harmonised systems, procedures and instruments. However, examples of good practice in areas such as institutional accreditation systems and their relation to company appraisal systems and training programmes, modules for eliciting and assessing prior learning and programmes designed to incorporate and extend that learning on a customised basis for individuals and teams within their organisations already exist (see Appendix 4 Middlesex University and Bovis case study). They need to be made known and spread. Vehicles for this purpose would include publications and a variety of staff development activities. The Lead Agency in co-operation with agencies such as SEEC could provide these services.

### Learning, Recognition and Development (LRD) Productivity Model



In summary, any productivity model of APEL or our preferred concept of Learning, Recognition and Development (LRD) needs to be based on the principles of inclusivity, coherence, collaboration and communality. Productivity of intellectual capital through APEL (or LRD) requires active involvement and specialised contributions from all interested parties. Also, to achieve continuous improvement, feedback mechanisms from beneficiaries to contributors are essential. With these in mind we offer the following “productivity model” based upon Learning, Recognition and Development.



### Notes

In the diagram there are three main groups that constitute the active sectors of the model. These are:

- 1** The Lead Agency
- 2** The APEL Forum and general stakeholder
- 3** The Specific Stakeholders. They also provide shared funding.

The accumulated efforts of these three groups bring about benefits in the form of targeted outputs to:

- 4** Individuals
- 5** Organisations
- 6** HEIs.

4, 5 and 6 provide differential feedback to the three main groups. A further sector (7) cuts across 4, 5 and 6 and has overarching benefits, including benefit to the State.

## Part 4: Conclusions and Recommendations

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### Conclusions

- APEL in the UK is long established and widespread (available within all NVQs and offered by most Higher Education Institutions)
- Within UK Higher Education use of APEL is predominantly for advanced standing purposes against prescribed courses. It is thus of significance only to the individual applicant and the higher education institution. There are notable exceptions e.g. the use of APEL within work-based learning programmes customised to meet the needs of employers or professional bodies. The use of APEL within NVQs has also highlighted the possibility of involving employers and Unions
- Despite these developments APEL in the UK is only a marginal activity for Higher education institutions and is predominately used only for access with advanced standing. Despite its substantial track record it is still regarded with scepticism on resource and academic grounds.

Outside the UK a radically different picture is emerging:

- APEL is high on the educational agenda of the EU and France provides a model of a national system geared to the needs of workers and their employers rather than higher education
- The advantages of involving a wider group of stakeholders is also evident in the Province-wide approach to APEL developed in Canada by British Columbia.

## Recommendations

In the short to medium term:

- 1 Staff development should further spread good APEL practice at institutional, regional (e.g. via SEEC) and national (e.g. by the Higher Education Academy) level
- 2 The amount of credit that can be awarded from APEL towards particular qualifications should be made transparent
- 3 APEL in higher education should be resourced and quality assured by including it within the HEI curriculum, e.g. an APEL module or course unit
- 4 The use of APEL within higher education and NVQ programmes should be actively and positively promoted.

In the medium to long term:

- 5 An appropriate body, such as the Learning and Skills Council, should be assigned as the national lead agency for APEL, supported by a national forum of stakeholders. The lead agency would initiate, co-ordinate and promote APEL development. The national forum, which would include stakeholders such as CBI, TUC, UVAC, QAA and QCA, would drive APEL policy formation and provide political, moral and economic support and quality assurance
- 6 APEL should be re-termed to reflect its full potential and banish the narrow, stereotypical perceptions it has acquired in the UK
- 7 A new 'Productivity Model' of Learning, Recognition and Development (LRD) should be used to move APEL beyond advanced standing to recognition of learning for developmental purposes at work. The LRD productivity model should be put out for consultation to the potential stakeholders, and piloted on a regional basis under the auspices of the LSC and UVAC
- 8 Any new APEL model should be developed as a useful, critical and reflective mechanism that can be used by individuals and organisations as part of a customised and flexible programme of study. Such a model would be able to include a more forward-looking perspective for the learners where previous experience is used to act as a starting point for new projects and work-related activity. Crucially, the model would enable APEL to be used as an essential tool to support workforce development. To deliver these objectives the model would:
  - fully integrate issues of access and equity into the APEL system
  - re-draw the role of academics away from teacher and marker towards assessor and learner/designer
  - require HEIs to forge new partnerships
  - incorporate all stakeholders within a well-funded and quality assured system.
  - require high-level direction, careful consideration and significant time to achieve.

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[www.seec-office.org.uk](http://www.seec-office.org.uk)

## Appendix 1

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### Typical APEL portfolio structure

An APEL portfolio will typically include:

- Claimant's personal details
- CV (some institutions require this to be presented as a record of significant learning experiences)
- Current job description (if the claim is for learning from work, this may require the claimant to develop a job description where no formal one exists e.g. some forms of voluntary work)
- The claim for learning, articulate in terms of learning outcomes and identifying any programme units for which exemption is being sought. This may also include the volume and level of credit being claimed
- Evidence of the learning achievement claimed.

## Appendix 2

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### **APEL within the Chartered Teacher Programme at the University of Strathclyde**

In 2001 the new grade of Chartered Teacher was introduced in Scotland through agreement between teachers, local authorities and the Scottish Executive. Chartered Teacher programmes validated by Higher Education Institutions and accredited by the General Teaching Council Scotland began to be delivered in August 2003.

To achieve Chartered Teacher status, a teacher can follow either the Programme Route or the Accreditation Route. Both routes require a teacher to complete Module One (Self Evaluation) successfully before continuing. The Programme Route involves the completion of a 12-module Master's Degree followed by the award of Chartered Teacher status by The General Teaching Council Scotland. A teacher following the Programme Route may claim accreditation for prior learning for up to the equivalent of six modules. A teacher following the Accreditation Route will complete Module One and then make a claim to the General Teaching Council Scotland. The claim will consist of a portfolio and commentary showing how the teacher has achieved and maintained the Standard for Chartered Teacher.

Teachers will make claims based on both prior formal learning and prior experiential learning. Both types of claim must contain evidence that learning has taken place which allows the teacher to claim Chartered Teacher competencies. Claims must be equivalent to level 11 of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (Masters or SVQ 5); show evidence of professional action, knowledge and understanding; and show time and effort spent.

The University of Strathclyde is offering support to teachers wishing to make APL claims. Teachers who are considering registering on the Chartered Teacher Programme can attend a three-hour workshop on how to maintain a CPD Portfolio which introduces them to the concept of keeping evidence of experiential learning for future claims. Once teachers have completed Module One, they are invited to attend a one-day workshop on making an APL claim. This second workshop gives teachers practice in reflecting on past experience and relating these to recent practice and to the Chartered Teacher competencies. Workshop presenters use case studies, discussion and focused exercises to guide participants through the process.

*Case study by Isobel Calder, Professional Development Unit, University of Strathclyde.*

## Appendix 3

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### Case study of a Work-based Learning approach to APEL: Nina

Nina is a health visitor working as part of a team in an inner-city Primary Health Care Trust which has a population which under all indices is acknowledged to be deprived. The Primary Care Trust decided to commission educational awards via work-based learning for a cohort of staff. The project was a joint venture between the University and the Trust. A cohort of 22 staff were selected from nurses, health visitors and managers across the Trust.

The first stage of the award programme was to develop a portfolio of learning which could be presented for academic recognition and the award of academic credit. This caused much consternation in the group who had no experience of learning in this manner, on the contrary their experience led them to believe that knowledge and the consequent right to practice was something that was externally conferred by experts. Confidence and assertion that knowledge could be derived from reflection and analysis of their own practice was extremely challenging.

With support from group and individual advice, Nina developed an area of learning focusing on refugee health. Reflecting upon her experience, Nina described and analysed how many refugee families not only found it hard to survive economically in a new environment but to understand and adapt to the differing expectations of child care and upbringing that they encountered in the UK. Her area of learning explained how healthcare, illness prevention, food, behaviour and punishment all presented problems of understanding and internalisation which not infrequently led to confrontations with authority leading to more misunderstandings. Nina elaborated upon how she had adapted her practice by drawing upon her own experience of loss of status, loss of family and friends and bewilderment as a refugee to understand family needs and to open up communication between herself as a health care professional and her clients.

Nina developed this area of learning, relating her knowledge and skills to the Higher Education level 3 (Degree level) criteria used in work-based learning at Middlesex. The work was assessed and sampled by an external examiner leading to the award of credit at level 3. The group of fellow workers, including her line manager, was astounded as they knew nothing of her background nor the skills that she had developed in tackling what was for them all a very real issue. Nina became a resource for helping colleagues to enhance their skills and for exploring ways of improving the service. She reported that the public recognition through academic credit and the connection that drawing up the claim had fostered with her manager and peers had served to enhance both her confidence and motivation. Nina went on to gain a first class honours degree.

*Case study by Katherine Rounce, School of Health and Social Science, Middlesex University.*

## Appendix 4

### Case study: Middlesex University and Bovis

This case study examines the role of APEL in the development of a work-based learning partnership between Middlesex University and Bovis from 1994 to 1999. The partnership programme was made possible by the accreditation policy and procedures of the University.

Bovis originally approached the University seeking accreditation for their Management Development Programme. Several Universities were approached and, while feedback about the programme was positive, it appeared that changes would have to be made to bring it into close alignment with existing University management courses if accreditation was to be achieved. Bovis were reluctant to change a programme which clearly met their business needs. Unlike many other Universities the Middlesex approach to accreditation was not restricted to close matching of existing programmes as University regulations also allowed assessment against generic higher education level descriptors for the award of general academic credit. Following this approach, Middlesex was able to accredit the Management Development Programme as carrying 20 academic credit points at postgraduate level.

In further discussions about the possibility of building upon the accredited Management Development Programme to develop a work-based learning postgraduate scheme for Bovis managers, the Bovis Core Competencies were identified as a key source of organisational learning which Bovis wished to be incorporated into the programme. The Bovis Core Competencies were a set of behavioural indicators which were common to all staff within the organisation, they were part of the performance management process and underpinned all learning and development activity at Bovis. The knowledge and skills required to exhibit competent performance in the Bovis Competency areas were identified and developed into an accreditation proposal by the University Accreditation Manager and the Bovis Training Manager. An example of how the Bovis competency “Teamwork” was developed for accreditation is given below.

**Table 1: Elements of the Bovis “Teamwork” Core Competency**

TEAMWORK
<b>1</b> Demonstrating understanding of team roles and commitment to team decisions.
<b>2</b> Manage group processes by taking account of individual and group behaviours.
<b>3</b> Contribute fully as a team member, resolving conflicts, building appropriate alliances and networks and helping others to do so.
<b>4</b> Keep the team fully informed about developments and encourage awareness of the competitive environment.
<b>5</b> Treat colleagues as customers.

Each of the five elements of teamwork were analysed to identify the knowledge and skills required in order to perform it. This resulted in an expanded version of each element. An example of the expanded element 3 of “teamworking” is given below.

**Table 2: Expansion of Bovis Teamwork Core Competency element 3**

TEAMWORK
<b>3</b> Contribute fully as a team member, resolving conflicts, building appropriate alliances and networks and helping others to do so.
<b>3.1</b> Understanding of the causes of conflict.
<b>3.2</b> Ability to resolve conflicts.
<b>3.3</b> Understanding of what constitutes an appropriate alliance, network.
<b>3.4</b> Understanding of what constitutes building appropriate alliances and networks.
<b>3.5</b> Ability to help others to build appropriate alliances and networks.

This accreditation of the Bovis competency framework was a significant development for Bovis and for the University. The significance for Bovis was that it had a substantial stock of University accredited learning which could be used alongside the accredited Management Development Programme as part of a customised postgraduate work-based learning scheme. The high level of customisation was achieved by the use of accreditation to enable the scheme to draw upon the structural capital not only of the University but also of Bovis. A work-based learning project report by Comerford (1998) demonstrated that participants in the scheme had a much greater understanding of the core competencies than other employees. Participants in the postgraduate scheme were required to demonstrate their understanding of the competencies and how they related to their work roles.

The development and accreditation of a competency framework was a significant development for the University as for the first time it explicitly linked corporate capability with academic accreditation (see Garnett 1998 for a discussion of APEL and competency frameworks). By determining credit values for specified areas of learning based upon the Bovis competencies, the assessment process of individual learning from experience was given greater structure and uniformity as the assessor no longer had to come to individual judgements about the volume of credit awarded. The assessment focused on satisfactory coverage of all the elements for the competency claimed and a judgement of the level of learning achievement demonstrated, measured against the University generic work-based learning level descriptors. The accreditation formed the platform for individually negotiated development programmes which culminated in major work-based projects of direct relevance and potential value to Bovis.

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