

COUNTRY REPORT UNITED KINGDOM

ANNEX TO WP 1.2

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A) DEFINITION OF VALIDATION

Institutional context

In the UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are overwhelmingly public bodies while having a great deal of institutional autonomy. They are public in the sense that the great bulk of their funding is from the government via student fees but they are not subject to Parliamentary laws. Each university therefore has its own regulations although their practices are governed by the Privy Council (which is responsible for awarding University status) and the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). The QAA provides a series of guidelines including practices in respect of informal learning and is also responsible for regular institutional audits to ensure the maintenance of academic standards and quality. The most recent QAA guidelines are attached in Appendix 1. There is therefore little direct political interference although politicians exert influence through decisions on funding. In theory all institutions are equal although in practice the older established, more research intensive universities are better funded and usually attract the best qualified students.

'Validation' is the word used to describe the approval of a programme of learning by a University. Such programmes are re-validated every five years at Chester but practices vary. The Work Based and Integrative Studies (WBIS) programme was validated in 1998 and has been re-validated every five years since. Any modules which are part of the validated programme are described as 'validated modules'. In WBIS this includes modules such as 'Self Review and Negotiation of Learning' which almost all WBIS students complete. The validated WBIS programme includes provision for additional modules to be created which are relevant to it without the need for re-validation. These are called 'accredited' modules and are developed in response to learner demand.

While academic standards are maintained across the sector each HEI is largely free to develop its own portfolio of programmes and admissions policy so there are considerable variations. While there are guidelines (QAA Subject Benchmark statements) as to what might be expected in a subject discipline oriented curriculum there is considerable autonomy for HEIs to develop their own policies in respect of what is known outside the UK as informal learning. Pokorny (2011) and Whittaker (2011) provide overviews of practices in England and Scotland respectively but there are few differences in Wales and Northern Ireland. For adults aged over 21 there is considerable variation in admissions practices but informal learning is not seen as criteria for admission to programmes as it is in some countries but is instead more widely used as part of formal academic programmes of study, especially in vocational subjects. For adults (ie those aged over 21) many universities do not have formal entry requirements. Instead judgements are made about the capacity of potential students to engage with study at HE level in the interests of what is known as 'widening participation'- that is making a university education something accessible to as many people as possible.

While older universities tend to concentrate upon traditional subject disciplines and vocational subjects like medicine, law and engineering, it is in the newer, more adaptive HEIs that the recognition of informal learning is more prevalent.

Why have UK universities developed processes and procedures for 'informal' learning?

The reason why we have developed such procedures and policies is a complex one and I will attempt to answer it. In part the answer lies in the UK's linguistic and cultural proximity to the home of many great ideas- the USA. One of the functions of the UK is to act as a conduit for their ideas to spread to the rest of Europe. One of my favourite examples is the shopping mall. The original concept was devised by an Englishman at the end of the nineteenth century, developed and refined by an Austrian twenty years later but developed in the modern sense (with anchor store etc) by Americans. They re-entered the UK in the 1960s and eventually the rest of Europe and the world thereafter.

If you want to be a little philosophical about it Dewey was a pragmatist: US and UK culture is noted for its pragmatism and aversion to excessive theorising. Both are also bastions of economic liberalism. In US and UK society it is almost universally believed that we are bound to both initiate economic change and respond to it. There are undoubtedly changes in the global economic order which creates new imperatives. But there are also impulses towards egalitarianism. Many educational practitioners see the recognition of experiential, non-formal learning as opening up opportunities for social groups traditionally excluded from higher education.

US culture in particular has an informality to it lacking in some European contexts. Much of the theorising on experiential learning is American and they were the first to use it in a formal educational setting- although mostly as a mechanism for entry on to programmes. Many of their practices were picked up by a Welsh man called Norman Evans in the 1970s and it was he who introduced the idea and practices to Chester in the 1980s. This was also a time when there was a revival of interest in praxis (Friere 1972, Arendt 1998) and the whole idea of social practices (Bourdieu 1977).

US and UK cultures see universities as essential bastions of freedom and democracy (the right to free expression for academics is guaranteed by law in the UK) so are highly autonomous. So another part of the answer as to why practices have developed is because they have been allowed to do so. Few Britons would regard themselves as disciples of JS Mill (1791-1848) but a central part of his political philosophy can be summarised in the phrase: 'that which does no harm should be allowed'. More traditionally minded academics may not like some of the practices described here but in the absence of harm believe it should be permitted. There is another and deeper explanation to do with economic change. This is a purely personal view but to my mind the standard Humboldtian university is essentially a product of an industrial age. They are producer driven and engaged in mass processing (of graduates) using standardised methods and highly bureaucratic administrative systems. They may have to adapt to a post industrial, individualised world of smaller producers aiming to be quicker on their feet than the competition and requiring for their survival ongoing and expensive investment in lifelong learning. Didactic instruction in subject discipline does produce a basic product- the graduate- but it does not meet the real world learning needs of individuals who are actively engaged in the labour market nor their organisations. It is the organisations and individuals who both want recognition for their own specialist knowledge but above all wish to define their own learning needs. A developmental approach to experiential learning enables universities to do what no other agency can- enable people to add value to their experience by promoting genuine, relevant learning and in the process confer recognised awards.

Turning informal learning into academic credit- accreditation

We do not use the terms 'informal' and 'non-formal' learning and I am not certain I understand the difference between the two. We use the terms 'experiential learning' derived from the use of the term by theorists such as Dewey, Rogers and Kolb. Experiential learning as conceived by these writers is not defined by context but by the idea of people learning directly from lived experience. Contextual learning we usually refer to as being 'situated' after the work of Lave and Wenger but the term has no meaning in terms of the awarding of academic credit. Academic credit is awarded for past experiential learning (the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning- APEL) and past certificated learning- learning which has a recognized credit value (APCL). We also award credit for current experiential learning, usually for workplace projects. At Chester we regard the studying of subject specific modules (such as 'Managing People' or Project and Programme Management') as the basis for future experiential learning. The process of turning past learning, whether certificated (ie formal) learning or experiential (ie informal) into new academic credit is usually referred to as the Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL). APL using formal learning- ie certificated, credit bearing learning is usually referred to as the Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning (APCL). Where past learning is informal (ie experiential) it is referred to the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL).

APL and APEL are features in some vocational programmes. In conventional subject discipline oriented curriculums it is most easily integrated with the natural sciences, engineering, technology and design (Trowler 1996). However the greatest use is in a type of programme which does not exist in most European countries. In the last twenty years a number of UK universities have developed fully negotiable Work Based Learning (WBL) programmes (Lester and Costley 2010). Such programmes enable students to negotiate a curriculum and award title relevant to their learning requirements in the workplace. WBL dispenses with the key organising principle of most education programmes- subject discipline- in favour of learning tailored to the needs of the learner. This results in the abandonment of another staple of educational practice- didactic instruction- in favour of the facilitation of learning. Accompanying this change is a third radical departure- a recognition that knowledge is socially constructed, distributed and has value even when it is not universal. Finally learning itself is not seen as abstracted from context. Its value is seen from the perspective of the learner and is therefore assessed by its utility- its ability to inform changed practices. Knowing is not regarded as an end in itself but its value lies in the extent to which it informs actions so learning is seen as intimately connected with doing.

Unlike conventional programmes which may find difficulty incorporating experiential learning into a more formal framework, it is an essential element in WBL. WBL synthesises a number of theoretical and practical developments in learning and these terms are associated with leading theorists such as Lewin 1951, Dewey (1916), Kolb (1984) and Schon (1992). Experiential learning can be described as the process of learning directly from our lived experiences.

In the rest of this paper I will not attempt to describe practices in all universities but will instead concentrate upon practices at the University of Chester on its WBIS programme. Since 1998 the University has used a WBL framework called 'Work Based and Integrative Studies' (WBIS). WBIS is a highly flexible programme which can incorporate past experiential learning, facilitate current experiential learning and enable study for future experiential learning. Past experiential learning is admitted as APEL claims; present experiential learning is in the form of Negotiated Experiential Learning Modules (NELMs) while learning for future experience is facilitated by the study of relevant modules in subject disciplines, such as project management, financial management and so on. This is explained in more detail below.

B) FRAME CONDITIONS AND REGULATIONS

At the University of Chester a named award (ie Bachelor and Masters degree, Professional Certificate, Professional Diploma, Post Graduate Certificate and Post Graduate Diploma) can be comprised of up to two thirds APL although the final level of a Bachelor degree must be comprised of wholly new learning. The relevant extract from the University of Chester regulations is in Appendix 2. This is not unusual for a UK University although others may be set at a lower level, such as 30% or 50%. The rest of a named award can be obtained either through studying 'taught' modules (in traditional subject disciplines), current experiential learning in NELMs or a combination of both. With the exception of a Research Methods equivalent module (on conducting practice based research projects) an entire WBIS award can be obtained through experiential learning.

Building up a programme of learning ('WBIS pathway') is usually a combination of APL and new learning. Incorporating APL into a new programme of study at Chester is not an arbitrary process. All APL, whether APCL or APEL must be compatible with the award title, level and aims of the programme so that it would not be possible for example, to incorporate credits relating to physics into a business studies programme. Nor would it be possible to incorporate accountancy practice into a negotiated nursing award although generic competences (such as management and leadership) are transferable.

APCL must be current (ie obtained within five years of the commencement of study), awarded from an accredited institution and be awarded at the same level as the new award. Where an old certificated programme is incorporated into a new award (for example a Post Graduate Certificate into a Masters) the older award is extinguished. If credit from a previous programme is more than five years old, currency can be given by the student updating the learning in the programme. This might be demonstrated by a subsequent award or completing a specially commissioned written exercise. Alternatively a student might be able to make an APEL claim using the certificate to demonstrate underpinning knowledge accompanied by a reflective review demonstrating how they have applied their learning in practice. Credit obtained from another Chester programme is simply treated as 'Chester credit' rather than APCL.

As all APL, whether APCL or APEL is regarded simply as credit it is ungraded. Certificated learning (APCL) is easy to assess and so attracts no student fee. APEL is assessed by means of evidence of experiential learning plus a reflective review up to half the normal word length for the level of learning and volume of credit, bound together in a single folder. The evidence may be a certificate of learning, either over five years old, no credit bearing or perhaps at a different level. We have recently accepted Certificates from the Saylor Foundation (a with freely available high quality content) which uses automated assessment as the basis for APEL claims.

C) EXISTING PROJECTS AND INITIATIVES

WBIS is a highly developed adult learning framework which enables individuals, cohorts and organisations to create programmes and award titles precisely tailored to their requirements in the workplace. It disregards the usual organising principle in education- subject discipline- in favour of an approach which focuses upon the attainment of knowledge and requirement for learning of practitioners in the workplace. WBIS students usually begin their programme by undertaking a diagnostic module. In this module students formally assess their own learning achievements as the basis for APL claims before identifying what they need to learn as the basis for their own curriculum. They also undertake an exercise in reflective learning to sensitise them to the programme's underpinning philosophy of improving practice by means of formal study of experience. The module is also diagnostic in the sense that the student is assessed to ensure they are on the appropriate level of study. There are no formal academic entry requirements for WBIS so judgements are made at the application stage as to the appropriate level of study. In some cases a potential student might be asked to produce some written work to help with this, perhaps in cases where senior practitioners without a Bachelor degree wish to study at Postgraduate level. Usually conservative judgements are made since it is easier to suggest a student goes up a level than comes down.

An important objective in WBIS is to progressively develop the cognitive ability of each student. The main mechanisms for this are individual tuition and extensive use of formative assessment, using Vygotsky's (1978) concept of 'scaffolding'. Unlike conventional programmes where learning is seen as occurring at the point of instruction, in WBIS learning is seen as principally occurring at the point where the student constructs their own meaning (in assessment) and engages in dialogue with their tutor. Scaffolding is an important idea because it concentrates on the 'zone of proximal development'- the main priorities for the development of the individual rather than attempting to address all issues.

In a typical scenario, a student will have an informal discussion with the tutor about what they plan to learn in a module and then produce an outline. In the case of NELMs, students have to agree a form with their tutor which specifies learning outcomes, relevant literature and so on – a Negotiated Experiential Learning Agreement (NELA). Learning outcomes are a formal statement of what a student can be expected to learn upon the completion of a module or programme. Learning outcomes are written so as to reflect the level of learning and formally stated in a programme document when a programme is

validated or a new module accredited. On a conventional taught programme a student may not be aware of the learning outcomes but on WBIS where students negotiate their own learning, they are involved in negotiating their own learning outcomes using a pre-written template as a guide. The significance of learning outcomes is that they must be capable of being demonstrated. Therefore while the student negotiates their own learning outcomes they also negotiate how they will demonstrate their achievement in the assessment process. Along with all other HE programmes in the UK even an individually negotiated programme can be mapped against the National Qualifications Framework and EQR.

There is then dialogue between the student and tutor culminating in the submission of a draft which the student submits for formative assessment. Even in summative assessments, the emphasis in feedback is on learning for the future rather than describing what the student has done in order to justify a grade. Although this process is quite resource intensive at the beginning of a student's programme, tutor input declines over the course of the programme as students are able to assume greater responsibility for their own learning.

D) ENGAGED UNIVERSITIES

The practices described at Chester are not unique although I am not aware of any comprehensive research to survey practices in the UK Universities. From her survey of the literature Pokorny 2011, p. 118) concludes "that it is in the field of WBL higher education degrees that APEL is thriving and pushing boundaries". Universities most likely to be making extensive use of APL will therefore be those with the most extensive WBL provision, such as the Universities of Middlesex, Derby, Teesside, Northumbria, Kingston, Greenwich and so on- mostly newer, more vocationally and teaching oriented institutions. Nottingham's (2012) survey is the most recent on the spread of WBL practice, suggesting that the use of APEL and experiential learning is also spreading. WBL also appears to be reaching out beyond its traditional base in teaching oriented institutions to include more research intensive universities such as Aston and Kent.

E) RESUME

There are essentially two approaches to the assessment of APEL in the UK one termed 'credit exchange', the other 'developmental' (Butterworth 1992). In the majority of institutions the former model prevails, especially in technical and scientific subject areas. In this approach students produce evidence in the form of a portfolio and tutors attempt to assess its value in terms of level and volume of credit.

At Chester and other HEIs which use the same approach assessment is used not to make judgements about the degree of competency attained but the learning of the student. In the developmental model of APEL assessment students are required to produce evidence of practical experience and a judgement is made upon the potential volume of credit and level of that learning. However experience alone is not considered worthy of awarding academic credit. Real currency is gained from the learning students are able to demonstrate learning from their experience usually in the form of a reflective review. The emphasis upon reflective learning is another key theoretical building block in the practice of awarding credit for lived experience. It is important to note that we do not assess competences since we generally believe these are best assessed by those competent to do so- senior practitioners in the workplace. We instead assess the learning of individuals, as evidenced by their ability to reflect upon experience. A qualification is a formal statement of learning achievement such as a degree certificate. We map all qualifications against the National Qualification Framework (NQF) which is itself mapped against a European framework. Not all qualifications are mapped against the NQF. They are therefore non-credit bearing and cannot be used for APCL claims.

The reflective review in an APEL claim is designed to demonstrate that the student has been able to learn from their experience. 'Learning' in this sense means they are able to use relevant, authoritative literature to make sense of their experience and so explain what they might do differently in future and why. Like W. Edwards Deming (1994) who famously said 'experience alone teaches nothing' and Lewin's (1951) we believe exposure to theory and dialogue are essential in making sense of our experiences. Writing a reflective review not only forces a student to consider what they have learned in a formal setting but as it does so it reinforces the discipline of the academic learning process. Literature has to be collected and assessed for its relevance; it has to be read and analysed, ideas have to be synthesised and translated into a coherent written review.

At Chester each review is structured as follows. First the student describes the basis for the claim, cross referenced with the evidence. Second the student analyses the experience by reference to relevant literature to deepen the reflective process. A final section discusses how the student conceives of their practice in the light of this and highlights what if anything they will do differently in future. Academic conventions are obeyed throughout. The review is up to half the normal word tariff. In a typical 10 ECTS credit postgraduate module students are required to produce 5000 words. For an equivalent APEL claim, the reflective review would be up to 2500 words and the level of fee also halved.

SUMMARY

As in other countries the incorporation of informal learning into formal programmes of learning in higher education is not widespread although no data exists on its extent. It would seem there are particular difficulties integrating it within many conventional subject discipline curriculums. The term 'informal learning' has little currency- the word 'experiential' being more commonly used. Experiential learning is captured from past learning and often in current learning. It is rarely used as the basis for admission. Practices vary between universities reflecting their high degree of institutional autonomy.

The most developed practices and extensive integration of experiential learning occurs in Work based learning programmes of which there are a growing number. Such programmes are flexibly designed and delivered around the needs of adults in work rather than having a curriculum designed to impart didactic learning in a subject discipline. Trans-disciplinarity enables an easier integration between real world/ informal and accredited/formal learning.

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