THE UNIVERSITY OF LIVERPOOL

CASE STUDY – EQUIPE PROJECT

QUALITY ASSURING THE ACCREDITATION OF PRIOR EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING (APL*)

Introduction

This case study focuses upon the way in which the University of Liverpool has built quality assurance mechanisms into formal APL processes. It also raises questions about the limits of quality *assurance* tools in meeting student needs and the need to consider ways of building a culture of quality *improvement* in the drive to harness student potential.

Rationale for the Case Study

APL can be seen as a cornerstone in building individualised pathways in Higher Education. It uses personal learning experiences as the basis for progression, it promotes ownership of learning (and therefore the ability to direct one's own study route) and it can significantly increase confidence. By encouraging the development of these lifelong learning skills it also helps to prepare individuals for further learning. As such, APL can be viewed as a gateway to Higher Education for those seeking experience of Higher Education for the first time.

APL is also however an access mechanism for those returning to HE study, often following some time away from the academic environment. Commonly APL in this context is used by mature professionals seeking higher degrees. APL in this context recognises that:

- experienced professionals are likely to bring relevant learning from a variety of formal and informal sources to their academic study
- both professional individuals and their sponsors are likely to be highly motivated to reduce the input (both cost and commitment) to gain credit or full awards
- vocational/professional areas are likely to promote skills and knowledge which are both valid and valuable in an academic setting.

APL as an entry mechanism therefore is likely to involve a diverse range of learning experiences and learners whose needs require careful consideration in the course of policy development.

Rationale for the Project

The scope of the project is the University's formulation of an institutional policy for APL.

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* See end Glossary in Appendix 1 for definition of APL and related terms.

Key factors that influenced the decision to establish such a policy included:

- A lack of consistency across departments in carrying out processes which could be regarded as falling within the scope of APL. These included admission on the basis of non-traditional qualifications (APCL or credit transfer), entry with advanced standing, APEL and the recognition of prior learning (RPL) for the purpose of admission to a programme.

- The need, in vocational areas, to demonstrate to external bodies and the Professions that the University has a system in place to recognise, in a fair and consistent manner, appropriate learning derived from a work based setting.

- Recent institutional developments in relation to Quality Assurance including the establishment of a Quality Assurance Framework for Non-Credit-Bearing Courses and the development of a Quality Monitoring Scheme for external organisations.

Alongside these factors was the growing importance of APL as a tool in the drive to widen participation by facilitating both entry and the flexibility of progression routes. In a few parts of the University there was also a recognition of the potential of APL, particularly APEL, to enhance the student experience. Whittaker and Cleary[1] describe APEL as a "transformative agent" which "can provide the basis for the emergence of a learner identity". APL was seen as an important tool in helping to motivate and support non-traditional learners (studying, for example, upon modular accredited Continuing Education courses) to build meaningful credit pathways towards awards - although this view was not generally widespread.

The National and Local Contexts

Whilst the positive aspects of APL were apparent centrally in the institution, the drivers to establish an institutional framework for APL sat uncomfortably alongside an unwillingness on the part of some academic staff to engage with the APEL component of any proposed APL framework. At the University of Liverpool, academic staff, when consulted, generally voiced relative comfort with the prospect of standardisation of systems for APCL (or entry with advanced standing). Furthermore, in other than a few, mainly professional, areas, they expressed at best indifference - and in some cases hostility - to the introduction of formal APEL systems. As HEFCE[2] itself acknowledges:

"Academics may also be more reluctant to promote APEL as it is both time consuming and "different" (Therefore difficult pro-actively to support in a busy timetable".

And Whittaker and Cleary[1]:

"processes of APEL are often criticised for being too cumbersome, time-consuming and bureaucratic".

Understandably, time and work pressures contribute to this attitude but recent public debate has also made its mark. For example recent reporting of the UK's Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA) intention to draw up guidelines for APEL in the Times Higher Education Supplement (THES)[3] is not helpful.

"QAA Warning over Degree Shortcuts"

and quoting one senior academic:

"The idea that you can be excused quite a chunk of your course on the basis that you've gained life experience is odd in the extreme…..And charging money for it is a worrying step in the direction of those degree mills that send you a certificate if you send them a few thousand pounds and your CV".

Objectives

On the basis of the national and local contexts, the objective, or challenge, was to build QA mechanisms into an overall APL framework which could deal with the diversity of APL practice and students whilst at the same time ensuring that any APL credit awarded would hold equivalence of worth. It also meant building mechanisms which:

- devolved a significant proportion of responsibility from the centre to departments - thus mirroring institutional strategy in relation to other QA systems. As Johnson[4] notes, APEL (and by implication APL)

  " .. should not be seen as something extra "tacked on" to the curriculum. It is both an essential and a necessary element, embedded in the culture and ethos of the institution"

- would not alienate users by burdensome or restrictive recording procedures. As noted by the National Open College Network[5]:

  "The drive to provide proof of quality of provision may override the subtlety of learner's aspirations and achievements"

Model

A separate quality model was not explicitly articulated (although this may change as processes and usage develop over time). The quality model was built into the overall institutional framework. Its key elements were:

- *Mandatory staff development for academic staff engaged in the APL process*
  Although at an introductory level, it will be compulsory for staff acting in the role of APL Adviser or Assessor to undertake a taught staff development session introducing the concept of APL and associated institutional procedures.
- *Explicit central support through the Centre for Lifelong Learning (CLL)*

Departments will be able to call upon experience and expertise through the CLL for example in implementing procedures or in cases of difficulty or ambiguity – thus providing a clearly articulated support structure.

- *Embedding of processes in institutional committee structures and related policies*
  For example in the Code of Practice for Admissions. This is key to ensuring that policy implementation takes a holistic approach and that APL is integrated across all aspects of the academic system
- *Clearly defined responsibilities within APL processes*
  The Adviser, Assessor and Student responsibilities are clearly defined and communicated
- *Clearly defined recording procedures for guidance and assessment*
  To assist with audit trails and monitoring
- *Monitoring, evaluation and review of policy and procedures*
  Also including student progress

Organisation

The project was driven by the Centre for Lifelong Learning (CLL) in the University. This reflects the importance of APL to CLL's key target audience – adults and non-traditional learners.

Work undertaken in the project was overseen by an APL Working Group and the appropriate institutional committee related to learning and teaching ie. the Academic Standards Sub-Committee (ASSC)

The project fell naturally into well-defined phases as follows:

Phase 1 (7 months)   ***Research and Analysis***
Internal survey of APL practice and arising concerns & analysis of findings
Identification of good practice (internal and external) and issues to be addressed

Phase 2 (5 months)   ***Formulation of Policy***
Followed by internal consultation with ASSC and Faculties
Refinement of Policy in the light of consultation

Phase 3 (4 months)   ***Formulation of support documents – Student and Staff Guides***

Phase 5 (1 month)   ***Institutional ratification of documentation***

Phase 6 (9 months)   ***Piloting of policy and associated procedures (On-going)***
Including organisation of an open introductory seminar, structured staff development sessions and formulation of evaluation strategy

Phase 7   ***Formal adoption and implementation (Autumn 2004)***

Formal 1st year evaluation and review
On-going staff development

INPUT TO PROJECT

Input from	Role
Centre for Lifelong Learning	Implement consultation exercise Analyse findings Research practice elsewhere Write documentation Record Working Group decisions
Student & Examinations Division (Registry)	Chair of Working Group Advise on existing practice relating to student/validation/certification processes
Teaching Quality Support Division	Advise on quality issues and ensure coherence of approach
Academic Staff	Articulate needs of students and the professions
Academic Standards Sub-Committee	Ratify decisions, procedures

The project was not costed.

Results and Implementation

The project has resulted in the production of:

> A written institutional Policy (See Appendix 2)
> A Staff Guide (Available on request)
> A Student Guide (Available on request)

Issues and Learning Points Arising from the Project

The Equal Handbook[6] describes the need for both the "individual professional" and the "collective" approach to ensure quality. The University's development of a regulatory framework and associated procedures have been established through just such a "collective" approach.

This approach has been successful in ensuring:

- sensitivity to the local, institutional context
- clarity of purpose and in defining the scope of policy eg the inclusion of the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in response to recruitment needs for the Flexible Degree Programme.
- involvement of key decision makers who can influence institutional systems to ensure the integration of APL procedures.
- capability to review and refine procedures at all levels

In doing so, the resulting framework can be seen, to a degree, as a "tool to inspire confidence" [6]

The question which follows however is the extent to which student, as opposed to institutional, needs have been met given the distinctive nature of the APL process. The intensity of APL student support, often on a one-to-one basis, is not generally a feature of the traditional teaching role. As Wailey and Simpson[7] point out:

"the preparatory, monitoring, supportive and evaluative function" of APL "aligns APEL much closer to the guidance, mentoring and monitoring roles in a learner support context".

Alongside the need to assure the quality of the formal assessment, verification and ratification procedures, we need to consider the quality of input at the level of the individual professional in his or her role as guide or mentor. This is a role which academic staff may resist or for which they may be ill prepared yet which undoubtedly influences the quality of the APL service. The University may therefore need to consider supplementing the basic "tool-kit" input which makes up the proposed introductory APL sessions with staff support which enhances the effectiveness of the process at the "sharp end".

Possible approaches to this providing such support are at 2 levels:

Raising awareness of the benefits of APL

Creating a culture where AP(E)L becomes the norm by selling APL as an agent for change and describing its potential to:

- recruit students with potential for academic success. Many students recruited through non-traditional routes out perform those entering directly from school.
- stimulate curriculum development – APL processes may suggest new assessment methods or new taught modules
- promote the development of partnerships with external organisations through dynamic interaction with current work based practice

Dissemination of tools and techniques

For example:

- checklists, sample forms, case studies
- workshops highlighting good practice
- experienced APL practitioners mentoring inexperienced practitioners

Conclusion

To date (November 2003) the process of establishing the University's APL policy has taken 18 months. Its formal adoption and initial evaluation will add an additional 18

months to this time scale. Part of the reason for this considerable length of time is the widespread exposure that the development work has been given. This has provided the opportunity for contributions from individual members of staff – as both academics and representatives of professional areas - and from groupings such as Departments and Faculties.

The benefit of such an approach has been significant in that it has allowed staff to be part of the process and to appreciate that the Policy arises from a considered and reflective process. It has also prepared them to make changes in current in practice where required.

The "collective" approach to quality systems has also added to the time factor. Input from a range of senior staff and use of the committee structure has had a significant impact.

The forthcoming evaluation of the APL system that has been put in place will point the way to future refinements. In the meantime, the driving agents in the APL process, CLL and experienced APL practitioners, must define ways in which support tools and direct interventions can create a culture of quality improvement to complement the system of quality assurance.

References

1. Whittaker, R, and Cleary, P. (2003) *Broadening the Concept of APEL in Scotland* Biennial CRLL Conference. Glasgow Caledonian University

2. Higher Education Funding Council for England (2003) *The Costs of Alternative Modes of Delivery*

3. The Times Higher Education Supplement, (August 29[th,] 2003) P.1

4. Johnson, B (2002) *Models of APEL and Quality Assurance*

5. National Open College Network (2003) *The Rewards of Recognition: the Value of NPCN Accreditation, Quality Assurance and Development of Non-Accredited Learning*

6. EQUAL: Educational Quality in University Adult Learning, Socrates Adult Education Project (2001) *Designing and Managing a Quality Project in University Adult and Continuing Education*

7. Wailey, T. and Simpson, R. (1998) *Staff Development: APEL as a Guidance and Support Model* in Southern England Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer, APEL *Beyond Graduateness*

GLOSSARY

APL   Accreditation of Prior Learning
The generic term used for the award of credit on the basis of demonstrated learning that has occurred at some time in the past.

APCL   Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning
The accreditation of prior learning gained from formal courses (interpreted broadly to include any designed learning experience) which has previously been assessed and/or accredited at HE level. This is also known as credit transfer.

APEL   Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning
The process of assessing and then credit-rating learning which has its source in some experience which occurred prior to the point of entering the course, where the experience was not previously assessed and credit rated at HE level.

RPL   Recognition of Prior Learning
The process of recognising prior learning for a specific purpose, for example admission, without awarding formal credit.

Entry with Advanced Standing   Where institutional procedures allow a student to enter a course later than the normal start point (eg. directly into Year 2) or otherwise shorten the normal period of study.