

**'Identifying barriers to the adoption of Certificated and Experiential Accreditation/Recognition of Prior Learning: A global perspective'**

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In this brief review I will be addressing my comments mostly in respect of Recognition or Accreditation of Past Learning since credit transfer is a particular variety of that practice and it is also the subject of most of the research. The aim is set out a broad brush picture as far as I am able, to provide a context for the rest of the presentations and discussion which will no doubt be more nuanced.

What we call R/APL goes under various other names around the world. In the US it is known as Prior Learning Assessment (PLA), in France Validation des Acquis de l'Experience (VAE). It is also referred to by some policy makers such as the EU as Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning (VNIL) by the EU, Recognition Validation and Accreditation (RVA) by UNESCO, in Canada Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR), Validering in Sweden. RPL is the most common term in Australia, South Africa and New Zealand although others are used. The QAA guidance prefers RPL over APL (used in the 2004 guidance) on the grounds that it "reflects the terminology in many European countries" (p5). In practice both APL and RPL are widely used. R/APL is used either for admissions purposes, part completion of an award or full completion- the latter being rare in the UK. As well as differing terminology there are also a variety of motivations for practice. These include a recognition of knowledge beyond the academy, expediting the learning process, reducing the perceived gap between formal and experiential learning, a concern for social justice, a means of attracting and rewarding adult learners and developing programmes better suited to the requirements of a globalised economy.

It is the latter in particular which underpins recent interest by international policy makers (UNESCO 2012; OECD 2010; European Council 2012). By contrast there has been little political interest in England and Wales, perhaps reflecting the tradition of autonomy for institutions. We have instead the QAA (2013) guidance, which offers very little practice guidance at all.

The origins of UK practice go back to the 1980s when 'credit transfer' was one of the reasons for introducing the CATS system in 1986 when it was argued a universal system of credit would facilitate transfer between programmes. While it is true that the introduction of CATS (now ECTS) does indeed greatly facilitate transfer in theory we have seen relatively little of it in practice. Credit transfer- the bringing in of credit already obtained by a student into a new programme of learning is part of a group of practices more commonly referred to as 'Recognition of Prior Learning' or the 'Accreditation of Prior Learning' (R/APL). During the 1980s and 1990s the Learning from Experience Trust (LETs) led by Norman Evans (2000), with funding from the Manpower Services Commission spread practice into many British universities, including my own. Evans had spent time in the American Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) and brought its practices to the UK. Since that time there has been no active promotion, Norman is sadly no longer with us and LETs exists in name only at Birkbeck. In the absence of data it is difficult to say exactly what the position is but I think most people see at best only marginal gains in practice in recent years.

There are two types of R/APL assessment. Credit transfer is also known as Recognition or Accreditation of Past Certificated Learning (R/APCL). The second type is R/APL is concerned with the transfer of unaccredited learning and is usually referred to as the Recognition/Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (R/APEL). R/APEL attempts to capture learning of two types: Non-formal learning and Informal learning. Non-formal learning refers to planned, structured learning often taken in the form of unaccredited courses, Continuing Professional Development or online learning from MOOCs. Informal learning refers to the incidental, unplanned everyday learning which occurs, especially in professional contexts (Bjornavold 2000). Unlike R/APCL which if compatible with the programme should be awarded automatically, R/APEL requires assessment to translate unaccredited learning into formal academic credit. Butterworth (1992) distinguishes two

approaches to assessment. The first model she calls 'credit exchange' where a portfolio of evidence is submitted by the student in exchange for the awarding of credit. In the second 'developmental' model, credit is awarded for the experience in addition to the learning the student can demonstrate from the experience. Although the distinction is something of an over-simplification as there is often some form of dialogic assessment accompanying the submission of a portfolio it does highlight differences in approach. I have used both approaches in different universities and there are pros and cons on both sides.

Again, in the absence of data it is impossible to say how much of each is occurring but it is my perception that the most common practice here and elsewhere is credit exchange. This is the approach in the two case studies I highlight later. The limitation of the approach is that there is essentially no new learning occurring. Although there may be accompanying reflective logs and the student is usually required to reflect in an interview, this does not usually require the student to engage with relevant, authoritative literature to contextualise any learning. This can be a problem especially where students make very large claims for past learning at the beginning of their studies and are then required to transition to more a conventional academic approach on subsequent modules. Portfolios without an explicit academic content are also difficult to assess in terms of volume and level of learning. There is a tendency for students to produce evidence by the carrier bag full (I have seen this). Because of the varied and often voluminous volume of evidence, assessment is usually by a panel or team making the process time consuming and inefficient. Assessment by portfolio almost inevitably results in grading on a Pass/ Fail basis with limited opportunities for feedback on the kind usually provided on academic programmes. Finally the process can lack transparency and accountability since it is very difficult for external examiners to make sense of what is presented in the time available.

The developmental approach by contrast usually only requires the student to provide minimal evidence of the basis for the claim and the emphasis is instead upon the analysis of reflective learning from experience, as informed by relevant literature. Usually the reflective review is less than the length of a normal assignment to reflect the value of learning tied up in the lived experience. As the review obeys normal academic conventions it can be assessed in with any other module by a first and perhaps second marker without the need

for a panel. It is transparent, can be graded and enables students to progress onto conventional academic modules more readily. Butterworth clearly favoured this approach although was not as explicit about its advantages as I have been here. In most circumstances I also think it superior although I would add some caveats. The Credit exchange model is probably OK for admissions purposes and better suited to technical disciplines such as Engineering where discursive writing may be less important. It can also be argued that the development approach does not work so well for relatively small claims since students may find themselves putting in more work than completing a conventional module.

Although Butterworth's distinction is important it has rarely figured in surveys of practice which tend to concentrate upon identifying the volume rather than type of practice. The first large scale survey of practice in England was conducted in the late 1990s by Merrifield, MacIntyre and Osaigbovo (2000). They found the widespread presence of procedures but little use of them. The same pattern is evident in the Whittaker et al (2011) of Scottish practice. More recently Atlay, Bridges and Finn (2011) and Atlay and Turnbull (2017) have conducted two surveys for the UK Credit Forum. Both reveal low levels of usage of procedures and few attempts to record the volume of credit awarded. Various barriers are identified including low awareness and understanding by academic tutors, administrators and students, a lack of staff time, institutional commitment, complexity and concerns in respect of quality assurance. Howieson and Raffe's (2013) study of credit transfer in Scotland identified similar cultural issues such as a distrust of credit gained elsewhere, fears over a lack of income and unfamiliarity with other qualifications. A (2013) NIACE study of practices in a variety of non-HE institutions and drew similar conclusions in respect of limited application of practice. While it is difficult to gauge, given the lack of systematic monitoring there is a sense that the spread of practice in England has stalled in recent years (Watson 2013). Other surveys such as that by Souto-Otero (2013) provides interesting case studies where practice flourishes but there is little sense of extensive engagement.

International surveys, like those in the UK consistently conclude there is scope for far greater use of accreditation procedures (Annen 2013; Corradi, Evans and Valk 2006; Harris, Wihak and Breier 2011; OECD (undated); Weber 2013; Werquin 2010). The same picture of small scale, fragmented picture emerges from the regular European surveys of R/APL

practice by CEDEFOP which have been conducted in 2004, 2005, 2008, 2010, 2014 and 2016 respectively. Studies of practice in single nations such as Canada (Belanger and Mount 1998), Australia (Service Skills Australia 2010) and Denmark (Andersen and Laugesen 2012) have also found little evidence of widespread practice.

### **Institutional barriers to adoption**

Many researchers have attempted to identify institutional barriers to the adoption of practice. A 2009 study of 166 HEI websites in England, Wales and Northern Ireland found that only 11% had information about R/APL which was 'easy to find, useful and well presented' (Hawley 2010, p. 15). This suggests at least part of the problem is that few students are aware that R/APEL exists or is an option for them. A second difficulty is connected to university cultures. Hoffman et al. (2009) Pitman and Vidovich (2013) both identify institutional mission as an important factor. Practice appears to be heavily concentrated in lower status, vocationally led teaching institutions of recent origin rather than those focussed on more traditional subject disciplines and research where opposition is often at the level of philosophy and principle. It also appears resistance is greater in 'pure' subjects in both the humanities and sciences than in more applied subject areas (for a summary see Travers 2011, pp.259-261).

Another barrier to adoption is the way academic curriculums are planned. Anderson, Fejes and Ahn (2004) make an interesting distinction between a 'Procrustean' approach, where the non-formal learning of the student is only accepted so long as it is consistent with a pre-defined curriculum and 'Trojan horse' where the curriculum is adapted to meet the acquired learning of the individual. In practice almost all curriculums are inflexibly designed and so unable to incorporate external learning (Whittaker et al. 2011). Woodrow Wilson once remarked that it is easier to change the location of a cemetery than it is a curriculum and even where there is the will there is the barrier of 'cumbersome, inflexible and lengthy administrative procedures' (Hurlimann, March and Robins 2013, p639). Cooper and Harris (2013) in their South African study identify the dominance of subject discipline as the organising principle in curriculum design as another key source of inflexibility.

Real world, practitioner knowledge by its nature is trans-disciplinary (Costley and Pizzolato 2018) and not easily accommodated within a disciplinary framework. Didactic instruction in subject discipline as expressed in pre-defined learning outcomes are another barrier to a flexible, student approach to learning (Sin 2014).

### **Factors facilitating practice**

International comparisons are difficult because few countries record how much credit is awarded for past learning but there does seem to be a fairly consistent pattern of low level, fragmented practice. What is less evident from the research is the reasons why practice appears to be more widespread in some countries and in some institutions or faculties. Although it is impossible to be certain in these matters if I were asked to identify the countries where practice is most widespread I would pick the USA and France for reasons I will elaborate. Having said that practice in both is still the exception rather than the rule (Brigham and Klein-Collins 2010; Charraud 2010). I will take each in turn and illustrate with examples of institutions I am familiar with.

#### **The USA**

The American HE system is similar to the UK in terms of the tradition of institutional autonomy although the pattern of provision is considerably more diverse. Like the UK there is no national legislative framework in respect of R/APL. It differs in that it is not part of the European Higher Education Area so there is no national unified credit system so while this presents no problem in respect of accrediting experiential learning, the task of transferring credit is more complex. Despite this as long ago as 1980 a survey by the American Council for Education (1981) identified 2000 institutions using Prior Learning Assessment as a means of either/or experiential learning for the purposes of admission of for credit as part of a formal programme. Of these 1100 indicated they accepted portfolios of evidence as well as more traditional exams. Later research by Hoffman et al. (2009) indicated a further spreading of practice and shed light on factors associated with such practices. The study also confirmed the finding in other countries (see above) that practice is strongly associated with institutional mission, commitment and support.

Travers (2012) is an excellent short history of practice in the US. Differences between the US and countries like the UK where take up is much lower can be attributed to three factors:

- A much earlier start, from the 1930s compared with the 1980s in the UK
- Post war Federal legislation to encourage practice, specifically aimed to enable returning GIs to access higher education programmes. There has never been legislation in the UK.
- A major boost driven by concern for social justice, in particular the Civil rights movement in the 1960s and 1970s.
- A national charitable foundation– the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) founded in the 1970s to promote practice.
- Development of specialist universities aimed at adult learners.

### **Case Study: Thomas Edison State University, New Jersey**

Thomas Edison is a public university in New Jersey, founded in 1972 with about 17000 students all of whom are adult learners in work. All students upon admission are encouraged to apply for Prior Learning Assessment which can be either credit transfer or experiential. Experiential learning is mostly assessed in subject disciplines via a portfolio. A wide variety of subjects is available for assessment in this way although there are some omitted subjects, such as Maths, English composition and Physical Education. No additional reading is required although applicants are encouraged to submit a bibliography. Most of the process is completed online although there are specialist mentors. Alternatively credit can be obtained thorough an exam without prior instruction.

Credit transfer is a complex business in the US because the bewildering number of accrediting bodies and very high degree of autonomy granted to institutions and faculties. The State university of New Jersey has two campuses and the two Business Faculties do not recognise credit from the other!

After making claims students then complete what are from a work based learning perspective, very conventional modules, mostly delivered online in areas for which there is a

market- such as Business Studies, Nursing, Public Services etc. Delivery is mostly online and assessment is mostly by exam.

## **France**

The US and France both share an historical, revolutionary past rooted in conceptions of equality and social justice creating a powerful cultural predisposition towards educational inclusion. Like the US French practice dates from the 1930. The main differences are that there is a strong national legislative framework and no equivalent body to CAEL promoting practice. Legislation passed in 2002 gives adults with three years or more experience the right to request a publicly accredited university grant them a formal qualification. The legislation requires employers to give paid time in order to assist with the process. Earlier legislation dictates how claims for past learning are assessed (by a panel or jury) and the composition of the jury. French HE is far less diverse than the US in terms of mission and I am unaware of any universities specialising in adult learning. Practice is widespread but small scale (Pouget and Osborne 2004).

## **Case Study: University of West Brittany (Brest)**

R/APL is practised in almost all of the 76 public universities. The University of West Brittany in Brest is a medium sized (20,000 students) 'general purpose' university with a wide variety of programmes in mostly traditional subject disciplines and an active research base. Its student body (like all French universities) is overwhelmingly comprised of younger people who have obtained their Baccalaureat. is by no means an elite institution but nor can it be described as teaching led: it is regarded as being among the top twenty in France. Potential candidates approach the University to see if they have sufficient experience in order to make a claim. Claims for past learning can only be made against validated programmes so there is no adaptation to the students' own learning. The university employs specialist staff to support and advise students as to whether they have the potential for a successful claim and if so, how to prepare a portfolio and accompanying narrative. Once it is accepted the student has the basis for a claim, they sign a contract. Once the portfolio and review is completed it is sent to the jury, which is comprised of a senior member of the

University, two specialist academics and a practitioner. They read the submission and then a meeting is convened where the student presents their case (10 minutes) and is questioned (30-40 minutes). The assessment is not about knowledge of theory or literature but about the capacity of the individual to practice in the area for which the qualification is designed. Although applicants are expected to be reflective they are not required to demonstrate some of the underpinning theoretical knowledge you would expect on a conventional programme.

In this way the university awards about 120 degrees a year. The most popular subject is in Human Resource Management.

As an outside observer of the US and France there are a couple of observations I would make.

First although there is certainly much more practice than in the UK I am not sure I would regard either as role models. As already discussed I think there are a number of drawbacks to the use of portfolios.

Second there are a great many rigidities in both approaches. Both require experience to conform to subjects and the traditional full award suitable for full time students.

The other issue I noticed in France is that a legislative approach appears to rob tutors and institutions of agency. It becomes something you do because it is required- just another bureaucratic process. Those involved are proud of what they do and can explain it- but they could not theorise it. The French system also appears inefficient.

### **Summary of main points**

Practice in England remains sparse. There are islands of practice in an ocean of non-practice. Both Pokorny (2011) and Singh (2015) state that R/APL is heavily concentrated in Nursing and Work Based Learning departments. It is in the latter where there is also the greatest flexibility in terms of curriculum design and delivery. Most universities have regulations which permit the transfer of credit but there is often little use of the facility.

Practice appears to have spread, especially in the 1980s and 1990s but is largely confined to some universities and some subject areas. French and US experience suggests that greater use of procedures is enhanced by legislative backing and a dedicated agency to promote it. It is possible the renewed interest in vocational education may see the necessary changes but this appears unlikely. Within the lifelong learning sector, if I can call it that we are not very visible and I am not aware of any advocates in Parliament. Whatever measure are taken there is likely to be resistance because of following barriers:

- Institutional mission- the more research oriented universities are the least likely adopters
- Principled opposition by academic tutors
- Inflexibility in curriculum design
- Lack of administrative support and training
- The prevalence of subject discipline as the organising principle for curriculum design- 'pure' subjects are less open than applied, vocational subject areas.
- Lack of detailed guidance on practice

On the positive side in the UK we do have some very sophisticated practice and there are the pre-conditions for much greater use of R/APL. Most universities have regulations which permit it, there is widespread adoption of the EQF credit framework and the QAA Subject Benchmarks, which create commonality in curricula, and ensure there is greater potential for the transferring credit between subject-discipline oriented programmes.

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