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**Recognising and Accrediting Prior and Experiential Learning  
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Armsby P. and Helyer R. (2016) Recognising and Accrediting Prior and Experiential Learning in: Helyer R. (ed.) Facilitating Work Based Learning. pp. 94-113 , 2016, Palgrave Macmillan, reproduced with permission of Palgrave Macmillan.

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# Chapter 5 Recognising and accrediting prior experiential learning

Pauline Armsby and Ruth Helyer

This chapter aims to:

- clarify the importance of RPL/APL in WBL programmes through an overview of current pedagogic practices and theories of learning
- illustrate a range of ways that credit can be used in WBL programmes
- discuss the role of the tutor in supporting and assessing these accreditation processes
- show the international nature of RPL and APL
- present an example of how technology has been utilised to manage these processes
- outline the place of accredited company training activity in WBL programmes
- explore some common issues for tutors working in this area and provide some approaches for dealing with them

This chapter focuses on recognising and, if appropriate, accrediting prior learning which students have already undertaken before they embark upon a formalised programme of study with a university or other higher education institution (HEI). Often work-based learners will have amassed considerable learning from their experiences of work and life; if they can adequately evidence this learning and if it has some relevance to their current learning pathway there are established processes in place within education to award credit for this learning. These processes are commonly referred to as the recognition of prior learning (RPL) and the accreditation of prior learning (APL). Recognition of existing learning as a foundation to further work based study is important, but using RPL and APL can be extremely beneficial for work-based learners as it can reduce the time they need to spend on campus and also reduce the fees they might have to pay, due to undertaking less modules overall. The majority of the chapter will examine RPL and APL within work based learning (WBL) programmes for individual students, but one of the final sections explores the accreditation and use of in-company programmes (also see chapter 4). Case studies are offered throughout to provide practical examples and real-life context to the ideas being discussed. Student performance is rigorously judged against academic standards – RPL effectively links assessment from learning elsewhere with assessment from programme learning and the key features of sound practice still apply. We hope that the chapter will

convince you of the importance of RPL/APL in WBL programmes and provide you with some guidance on how to incorporate and manage RPL/APL processes.

### **The RPL/APL process and why it is important in WBL**

Many WBL programmes begin with some kind of recognition and accreditation of prior experiential learning. There is a range of reasons for this, including its alignment with the lifelong learning agenda (OECD, 1996), acknowledgement that learning arises from contexts and practices (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and an ontological turn in Higher Education that foregrounds who the student becomes (Dall’Alba and Barnacle, 2007). Perhaps most important is the philosophy of WBL that puts the learner and his or her learning requirements central to the programme. These learning requirements may be guided by organisational priorities, but it is the learner as a productive worker who must take the work based developments forward, and is therefore seen as the central agent of action. The RPL process offers the opportunity to accredit the learner’s relevant prior experience, and can act as a kind of Training Needs Analysis (TNA) of areas that may still need development in order to complete the WBL programme. In addition, the process of making the claim requires the ability to reflect on experiences to define what has been learned, and is often facilitated in HE via a self-audit module. RPL offers:

1. the opportunity to *accumulate and recognise* a foundation of relevant credit towards the WBL programme
2. a mechanism for *auditing and evaluating current knowledge*, skills and abilities required to complete the programme
3. a learning process to develop *reflective practice* skills that will be invaluable in supporting learning through the rest of the programme

Experiential learning has a long philosophical history, but in more recent times its importance in Higher Education has been asserted (Kolb, 1984) and connected with reflection as a process to develop practitioners (Schon, 1987). These ideas have, in turn, been built on constructivist theory that argues that individuals develop knowledge through building meaning from their experiences. These conceptual frameworks underpin WBL pedagogies, and modern teaching and learning principles such as student -centred learning have also evolved from these approaches. The following box explores pedagogic approaches used in RPL and helps clarify the difference between:

- specific credit – credit achieved through meeting specific learning outcomes e.g. on a specific module, and

- general credit – credit achieved through showing alignment to general level outcomes.

### **Box 5.1: Pedagogic Metaphors for Recognising Prior Learning**

Learning from experience is not a causal relationship because learning does not automatically emerge; rather experience provides a context in which learning may happen. The recognition of prior learning (RPL) helps students to claim for this experiential learning, if it meets certain specified levels, and is always aligned to the discernible learning, never merely the experience.

Furthermore, RPL claims do not attempt to capture all learning, but rather that which is relevant to current learning plans. Good RPL facilitation seeks to capture key insights that give a flavour of deeper learning and which in turn help to suggest at what level the learning can be claimed. The focus here is on facilitation, this is a pedagogic activity; there are several pedagogic metaphors (Wall, 2013), which might help to think about this:

#### Meticulous Accountant

This is the most common pedagogy in the UK and US and involves learners accounting for their knowledge against known and specified outcomes from an existing academic framework. It may involve minor re-organisation of what is already known, but its facilitation focuses on ensuring that the learner is able to express their learning in terms of academic standards. Handled badly this can feel like an administrative process, but done well it enables less confident learners to structure and organise their learning. Similarly, it can be very useful for learners who understand the framework being used and are capable of making an independent and self-directed claim, or for those who wish to explicitly make a claim against the learning outcomes of an existing module. This is called 'specific credit'.

#### Creative Sculptor

To help the learner become more aware of their learning, or more specifically, their tacit knowledge, more open-ended, exploratory facilitation is used. This helps learners to take responsibility for the structure of their learning and is valued by those who want to reflect more deeply or make sense of what they know in a more formal or academic sense. This is less common in traditional higher education (HE), but can be the mainstream practice on negotiated work-based learning programmes in HE. The credit gained from this practice is usually 'generic credit', as the learner has identified his or her own learning in relation to generic level outcomes.

#### Creative Accountant

This metaphor includes both of the above sets of practices. Here, the first facilitation task is focused on enabling the learner to explore and select existing knowledge frameworks or standards they want to use to help them account for their learning. The second task is then to systematically account for the learning, much like the Meticulous Accountant metaphor. This is particularly useful for those who want to account for their learning against formal, recognized standards or bodies of knowledge.

To use RPL to its full potential it must be viewed as a pedagogic task: it can enable individuals to become aware of their existing learning whilst also producing opportunities to re-organise that learning in generative ways, creating new linkages and dynamic connections.

**Dr Tony Wall, University of Chester**

## **Accumulation of credit and recognition of learning**

In relation to Higher Education's 'recognition' of learning, Butterworth (1992) asserted that the accreditation of prior experiential learning should be seen as more than just an opportunity for credit accumulation. As Trowler (1996) commented, the 'developmental' model which focuses on extending the learners understanding of their experiences is more appropriate for the context of HE. This is particularly pertinent for negotiated work based learning that situates the learner as central to the agreed learning programme.

By utilising an HE accreditation process, learners' existing knowledge, skills and abilities are recognised and legitimated (Armsby et al, 2006). This has served to improve access to HE for those from non-traditional backgrounds. In addition, recent research has pointed to the importance of this for the development of self-realisation (Sandberg and Kubiak, 2013), and self-understanding can provide a solid basis for planning a successful WBL programme in which the learners' abilities are central. The importance of the candidate, tutor and assessor in the recognition process is clear (Hamer, 2012), but Sandberg and Kubiak (2013) assert that a range of other actors, for example, co-students, colleagues, managers, family and friends have an important influence. The claimant's experiences, together with others' past and current perceptions of it provide an opportunity for the learner to explore the social context of their learning, much as Lave and Wenger (1993) describe in their seminal work on situated learning. Understanding others' views of one's learning is important in WBL studies because the learner must influence and impact on their work based context.

### **Teaching tips**

Your HEI should make it clear:

- Whether prior learning will be graded
- Whether there will be charges for either the process and/or the ensuing credits
- What the periods of time around claims are (for example does the claim have to be before the programme commences? And so on)
- How old the learning can be (within 5 years for example)
- How much credit can be claimed, and at which level/s
- Who the key contacts are who will facilitate the process
- How feedback on RPL will be provided – if successful do students still get feedback? (If rejected they must be provided with full reasons and details of re-study, re-submission and appeals)
- How any credit achieved will be represented on the eventual transcript

## **Evaluating knowledge claims**

Theories of knowledge creation such as Gibbons et al (1994) 'modes of knowledge' have prompted debate about what is being taught and assessed in WBL studies (Costley and Armsby, 2007). It is argued that work based knowledge and practice are trans-disciplinary in nature (Costley, 201x), but as Trowler (1996) noted, most academics are sceptical about accrediting knowledge gained from experience, preferring the propositional knowledge of their disciplines. More recent research suggests that this may be changing, at least in some subject areas (de Graaff, 2014), although the prevalence of RPL/APL in HE generally remains low. We will return to this issue later in the common misconceptions section. Negotiated WBL programmes set out to recognise the kinds of knowledge that arise from work practices; other uses of APL, for example to provide accreditation for an existing subject based module, may not.

De Graaff concludes that 'RPL is a bridge between the workplace and the academy' (2014:13). Given what has been described as a 'practice turn in contemporary theory' (Schatzki et al, 2001) it seems appropriate that HE has ways of recognising and accrediting knowledge arising from practices of the professional groups they seek to educate. Debates about the place of different types of knowledge, theory and practice, are not new to HE, and the use of APEL in WBL is central to these. The ontological turn, mentioned above (D'all Alba and Barnacle, 2007) which foregrounds education for personal and professional development is also important in relation to WBL APL claims as it offers the opportunity to explore the learning that arises from being a professional. Both 'turns' fit comfortably with APEL in WBL and illustrate its cutting-edge position in contemporary HE, as well as some of the reasons for its controversy.

The APEL process gives students the opportunity to self-assess their learning and negotiate how this learning will be gauged by HE. This innovative practice, where students gain knowledge and understanding of the HE credit system, level descriptors and learning aims and outcomes means that student's assessment literacy is developed, along with enhanced professional judgment around how standards are derived – including regulations, policies and processes (QAA, 2014:15).

## **Assessment and evidence**

Assessing specific credit claims is straightforward. Evidence should prove that the student has met the learning outcomes for the specific module or programme at the appropriate level. Deciding on the level of general credit to be awarded is also usually straightforward;

universities use their own already established level descriptors, which outline the features of each level of study. APL tutors need to use to assess if evidence will prove the learning has taken place. Assessment criteria are usually based on the generic level descriptors (also see Chapter 4).

<b>Box 5.2 generic level descriptors</b>	
Generic level descriptor	Assessment criteria
Management of human, material and financial resources	Manages human, material, financial resources affectively in potentially complex circumstances

Determining the *volume* of credit to be claimed is more difficult (Workman, 2008, Pokorny 2012). Within UK HE one credit represents ten hours of learning, although precise measurements of this are not possible, and this rule differs around the world. Some HEIS give word count advice for experiential learning claims, using more standard modules for comparison. This does bring some precision, but may place too much emphasis on outputs rather than prior achievements (Prince, 2004). For example, if credit claims are to be around ‘areas of learning’, these areas might be compared to the size of a written assessment for a module, for example, carrying 20 credits. This kind of comparison is only an approximation and should not be used to slavishly require the student to produce the same amount of words. With APL claims quality always comes before quantity; that is, a piece of high quality evidence can say a lot more about a student’s prior learning than, sometimes, many thousands of words. Structured CVs can often be used to help define ‘areas of learning’, but good evidence of learning might include:

- Your student’s own professional writing:
  - Reports, evaluations
  - Plans, drafts
  - Handbooks
  - Presentations (including video)
  - Websites, Blogs, Wikis, Twitter feed
  - Budgets/ forecasts
  - Briefing papers/other papers/articles
- Workplace performance appraisals and testimonials
- Correspondence proving involvement

- Products and artefacts
- Minutes/actions from meetings
- Project outlines
- Procedures developed
- Initiatives created

**Teaching Tips: Appropriate assessment tools:**

1. Portfolio of evidence
2. Structured interview
3. Completion of piece of work, accompanied by a reflective account of the learning achieved
4. Artefacts
5. A performance based assessment
6. A completion of the assessment used to demonstrate learning in a module/programme where compatibility is being claimed

Based on some suggestions from the QAA (2014:17)

This kind of evidence is required for experiential learning claims but some claims rely entirely on prior certificated learning. This involves comparing the learning outcomes of the completed module with those of the module to be claimed. Sometimes, if the tutor involved feels there is not an adequate match they may require a 'mixed' portfolio that includes certificated and experiential evidence. The following outlines a case in which experiential learning was claimed, and illustrates the role of the tutor in facilitating this learning.

**Case Study 5.1: Assessing Prior Learning**

As part of her BA in Work-based Studies (Innovative Leadership) Lucy, an Executive Officer, was asked to compile a portfolio of evidence to support her APL claim, this is a very popular assessment method within RPL practice. She approached the task positively and confidently as she was accustomed to writing many complicated, formal reports within her job role. She was surprised, and slightly upset, when her first attempt was handed back to her with a lot of constructive criticism. She had produced what she thought a university would require – formal language and factual information. The problem was it was so formal it was impossible to find the individual within it.

Lucy had undergone an admission interview at her university and her passion and intensity had really impressed the interviewers; the work she handed in was so precise and objective this passion and intensity had been omitted, along with content that would demonstrate her



learning of new skills and knowledge, and the application of this to the workplace. Instead she listed her formal duties at work. Lucy had been awarded with the title 'Employee of the Year', something her tutors felt needed exploring as it should have the potential to bring a good deal of credit, however Lucy had only mentioned this fact in passing.

When pressed on the 'Employee of the Year' accolade Lucy was initially very shy but eventually opened up to give her tutors plenty of information and evidence about why she had been given the award. She had started a voluntary group within her organisation to help disadvantaged people within her community and through this had plenty of evidence to demonstrate her learning in several areas, including:

- Leadership
- Strategic planning
- Time management
- Problem solving
- Analytical reflection
- Financial management
- Effective communications
- Working with others
- Co-ordinating skills
- Writing skills

On top of these skills there was also ample evidence of Lucy's ability to empathise, encourage and care for others and her vast enthusiasm. The tutors had to initially tease the information out of Lucy and make the most of their questioning and listening skills themselves. They also suggested that she discussed her voluntary work with a trusted friend or colleague and recorded the conversation – this captured why she had started to do the activity, the connections it had with her skills and activities at the beginning, how she came to have these skills initially, and how it was enhancing and developing her skills and knowledge in an ongoing way.

Writing a claim for credit for previous learning is not a one stage writing exercise, to get the most from the task allow plenty of time for compilation of the claim and giving feedback on drafts, along with time to re-draft the submission before the final assessment hand in date. Lucy managed to successfully claim 200 credits for her prior learning by structuring 'areas of learning' around what she had learned in creating and developing the voluntary group.

**Dr Madeline Fisher, Cranfield University (formerly Teesside University).**

### Teaching Tips

Make sure evidence clearly demonstrates:

- Relevance (significance, match to, and implications for, contents of programme)
- Sufficiency (amount and strength of evidence, balance of quality and quantity)
- Authenticity (valid clearly their own)
- Currency (current, intrinsic value, equivalence)

Within HE RPL focuses on recognising, 'learning at the equivalent level (to HE learning) achieved outside the defined programme of study' (QAA, 2014:3). Tutors need to offer feed

forward in order to focus on prior and current, but also further learning. These students have not had the benefit of feedback during the learning process, which more traditional students enjoy, but they do need feedback now. In giving this feedback you must evaluate and develop your own practice, drawing on scholarship, research and professional activity. Furthermore, you must build reflection into your own practice (as your RPL candidates are expected to reflect effectively, and will rely on you to help them).

### **Reflective Practice**

The ability to reflect on practice has long been seen as essential to develop practitioners, and Schon's work (1987) consolidated understanding of the importance of analytical reflection for educating modern day professionals. The content of the narratives that typically accompany evidence of practitioners experiential learning, often presented in an 'RPL portfolio', will vary, but will require the claimant to have reflected on the meaning, extent and importance of their practices. It is the RPL tutors responsibility to clarify what should be included in a claim, and importantly, to help the candidate develop this capability. A developed ability to reflect *on* practice is important as it enables the person to learn more effectively from their past experiences, and prepares them to reflect *in* practice, and *for future* practice (Schon, 1983 and also chapter 2). Reflective practice is therefore a cornerstone of WBL, and is required throughout the WBL studies curriculum, for example in:

- considering the perspective of all the key stakeholders in the candidate's learning agreement (Chapter 7)
- selecting an appropriate methodological approach for a work based project
- analysing the implications and possibilities arising from a work based project

Reflective practice begins with the individual but the individual's reflections relate to the social context and endeavors of their everyday work, and is also exemplified in WBL programmes of study. The social element of reflection is important in facilitating productive work (Boud, Cressey and Docherty, 2004). The following case study illustrates some of the issues involved for a student and a tutor facilitating reflection on practice.

#### **Case Study 5.2 Preferred Learning styles and their effect on articulation of prior knowledge**

Meta-cognition, the learning to learn process, is established in Work-based learning as being at the heart of RPL: the tutor acts as facilitator enabling the learner to recognise and articulate their prior experiential learning. To begin this process at Teesside University, we use various learning styles questionnaires that help the learner to recognise their preferred learning styles; an exercise in self- awareness, and the beginning of reflective practice.

They become the *knowing subject* who can identify how they learn best, yet RPL claims that require articulation of prior learning, measured against rigid learning outcomes still, in some cases, proves to be too difficult for them. In an attempt to resolve this issue and inform pedagogical practice, the author hypothesized that learning typologies may affect the ability to present prior experiential learning in an academic written form, such as the reflective portfolio assessment preferred by many universities. In order to test this and give former students who had undertaken the process a voice, leading to a learner-centred approach to RPL, a comprehensive questionnaire that considered learning types, linked to the skills of meta-competence, reflective practice and articulation of tacit knowledge, was circulated.

Whilst the use of learning typologies has been criticised when used to inform pedagogical practice (Coffield et. al., 2004) patterns emerged from the research that confirmed the hypothesis. There was clear evidence that those learners who demonstrated strong activist and weak reflector learning characteristics, (Honey and Mumford, 2006) found the greatest difficulty in articulating prior learning experiences, albeit for different reasons. Activists who enjoy the immediacy of new learning experiences found reflecting on 'old' learning and especially that which is tacit, challenging to the point of demotivation:

*My learning style was primarily activist with pragmatist close behind... I found the (RPL) process did not sit well with me as I tend to want to move on rather than look back.*

The overwhelming conclusion was that the majority of activists found critically examining former situated learning within the workplace was easier and practical demonstration would be beneficial in providing evidence of learning, making the learning achieved from the RPL process to be self-directed from an andragogical perspective and more liable to improving and developing professional practice; a tenet of WBL. To substantiate this, weak reflectors found the greatest difficulty with articulation of tacit knowledge, as the research confirmed the *situatedness* of the learning gained through experience in specific contexts is known, but cannot be easily communicated through a written text"

*I found it difficult to articulate what I learnt as I had learnt it over time honing my skills... learning within the structure of academic theories is difficult.*

Conclusions revealed that insistence upon written portfolios inhibits RPL claims for some students, meaning they are unable to maximize upon prior learning. Choice of assessment mode, negotiated between student and tutor, considering the preferred learning characteristics of the individual should be taken into account. This will make the learning experience for each student undertaking RPL relevant to the individual and contextually valid. Furthermore, consideration should be given to delaying the process until the essential skills of reflection, meta-competence and understanding of complex theory is established.

**Norma Sutcliffe, Teesside University.**

### **UK and International terminology and practice**

Trowler (1996) traces the origins of APEL back to the USA where there has been an established practice of awarding credit to assessed learning. He suggests that the UK's pre-1992 universities with their focus on modularisation, accreditation of WBL and 'credit frameworks' have led in its implementation. A survey of HE credit practice in the UK appears to support this (Atlay et al, 2012). However, the practice of APEL is still not widespread in the UK, and is minimal in Europe. While there are some positive frameworks

in Europe for enabling APEL such as the *Validation des Acquis de l'Experience* in France, and there has been some sharing of practices in Europe, Schmit and Gibbs (2009) conclude that APEL and WBL are only very slowly advancing in Europe.

International terminology and practice varies, but UNESCO's (2012) published '*Guidelines for the Recognition, Validation and Accreditation of the Outcomes of non-Formal and Informal Learning*' illustrate a widespread drive to use RPL to deliver on the access and lifelong learning agenda and give 'value to the hidden and unrecognised competences that individuals have obtained through various means and in different phases of their lives (p.3). The Bologna process and European Higher Education Area ([http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/higher-education/bologna-process\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/higher-education/bologna-process_en.htm)) is addressing the issue of different national frameworks, which obviously influence the opportunity for APEL. Taken together these initiatives suggest that APEL may continue to advance. The following case study illustrates how one APEL development in Lithuania progressed following initial consultations with APEL experts in one French, and two UK modern universities. This network of HEI's was chosen due to their experience in assessing adults' learning in diverse environments outside of academia. As a result of the development adults, with evidence of prior learning, can now be enrolled to the Lithuanian university and be awarded credit towards a professional programme.

### **Case Study 5.3: Adults' experience in the procedure of assessment and recognition of non-formal learning in higher education in Lithuania**

Assessment and recognition of non-formal and informal learning (ARNIL) in Lithuania has been on the policy agenda since 1998 (Law on Non-formal Adult Education, 1998), however, legal acts regulating the process in higher education (HE) were adopted only in 2009 and 2010 (Law on HE and Research, 2009; Recommendations on the Assessment, 2010). Nevertheless, some HEIs have gained experience in this field through an EU project for about a decade, which resulted in the introduction of assessment procedures for ARNIL before the legislation was passed. Recently, a network of HEIs has been established to assess and recognise non-formal and informal learning.

The present study analysed ARNIL in HEIs to examine adults' perception of their experience of participating in the procedure of assessment of their prior learning with a particular focus on their experience of portfolio development.

Prior learning of 27 adults, in four colleges across Lithuania, was assessed. The HEIs and learners were novices in the field as they did not have any previous experience either in assessing this type of learning or in preparing for this type of assessment.

Content analysis of the adults' responses to the feedback question "What was the biggest challenge in the process of portfolio development?" revealed 3 categories of challenge, including the challenge to analyse and document one's learning, to understand the procedure of assessment/portfolio development, and to manage one's time.

Research results indicate that the adults perceived analysing and documenting their learning as the major challenge. As they did not have any previous experience of doing this, it was concluded that the challenge was caused by lack of ability to distinguish between experience and learning. This is in accord with Evans' (1992) view that the most demanding intellectual task that adults face is to make a shift from a description of their experience to an identification of learning. It also reinforces Pokorny's (2013) recommendation that during the process of preparing claims for assessment of prior learning emphasis should be shifted from artefacts and products of practice presented in portfolios to the creation of mutual understanding between assessors and adults, which could open better opportunities for disclosing learning.

These findings lead to the assumption that a strong institutional emphasis on the complexity of ARNIL in general and on the process of portfolio development in particular is required. This strengthens Burkšaitienė & Šliogerienė's (2010) findings that institutional support provided in the format of portfolio development courses and long-term consultations lead to adults' success.

The overall conclusions of the study are that ARNIL can be strengthened by raising adults' understanding of how learning is understood and interpreted in HE, and by increasing institutional awareness of the difficulties that adults face while preparing for assessment. This could lead to a better understanding of what institutional support is required.

## **Using Technology to Facilitate Claims**

RPL is often cited in academia as time consuming and resource heavy. This is based upon the notion of academic staff dealing with each individual's claim. In response to this several HEIs have developed online tools to facilitate electronic claims. Technology can enable economies of scale to be made in the RPL/APL process. The massification of HE has required academics to find efficient, cost-effective ways to work with learners. The below case study from the University of Derby showcases an innovative online tool for facilitating initial APEL claims.

### **Case Study 5.4: E-APEL**

In the early 2000's the University of Derby experienced a rapid growth in demand for higher level negotiated work-based learning from employed learners, with almost 90% of these individuals expressing a wish to achieve appropriate recognition for their existing levels of knowledge and expertise. In particular they did not have the time or the inclination to cover old ground.

As the Negotiated Work-Based Learning Scheme at Derby used the accreditation of prior learning (APL) these learners avoided repetition of such learning, and instead remained engaged and enthused as they were guided through a claim for academic credit. Staff noticed that at times a disproportionate amount of work and effort had to be undertaken by the student, with cases occurring where it seemed easier for them to undertake modules and requisite assessments. By the same token, some individual students needed considerable time and support with the APL process, often before they had actually committed to study, or

paid any fees (Minton & Malone, 2010), and even post-enrolment these frequent tutorials had no revenue attached to them.

Staff felt that some initial structured support and guidance, encouraging reflection on learning to date, and looking at matches for students' experiential learning with level indicators and learning outcomes, could be achieved electronically, based upon the team's existing virtual learning environment (VLE) experience. Such a facility, it was felt, could offer great potential for building student confidence, helping with Higher Education (HE) terminology and preparing them for future more in depth discussions about their work-based learning. The students would first identify their own level of competency by matching their prior learning to the university's levels (all in the electronic tool) and explaining how they felt they were meeting the various criteria, along with citing potential sources of evidence to support their claim.

The tool was designed to be as accessible as possible, with a logical flow. However, students could also go back to put in additional information as thoughts occurred to them when they became more immersed in the reflective process. The students register on the system, enabling them to log in and out as desired and build up their proposal in their own timeframe. A workflow structure was adopted, guiding the student through the process; this works particularly well as it clearly illustrates progression as each section is completed, with sections left to complete being highlighted.

The tutors designed an Advisor tool, capable of producing an output, hence facilitating reviews and comments made up of focussed and specific guidance on how to further develop the claim, as well as the nature of the required evidence which would support a full claim. Pre-set evaluation criteria were designed to ensure consistent feedback across the tutor team.

As well as really helping these students to master the APL process the E-APEL tool has enhanced awareness of APL to learners and staff across the whole university, but also to new students, where it has served as a useful marketing device in attracting non-traditional and part-time students to study.

**Ann Minton, University of Derby**

## **Accreditation**

Within APL claims candidates are encouraged to claim credit for any relevant past training that they may have undertaken in the work place, which can be proved to be at HE level (although it did not carry credit at the time). This accreditation of workplace training is popular. However, the philosophy of RPL has also encouraged many HEIs to look creatively at how they can acknowledge training and development that is happening in the workplace at HE level *prior* to any students presenting it as a retrospective claim. Often in-house training can be mapped across an HEI's own level descriptors and awarded credit, this means that employees undertake the in-house course knowing that they will gain HE credits for it. This activity also facilitates relationship building between the HEI and the organization. The following case study exemplifies this activity.

### **Case Study 5.5: Partnership development and higher education accreditation**

Higher education has a large role to play in workforce development (Lester and Costley, 2010, Hordern, 2014). The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2010) support this need to respond to the changing demands of both learners and employers.

In 2007 I initiated a partnership with the Defence College of Policing and Guarding (DCPG) at MOD Southwick Park, Portsmouth, several hundred miles from the University. This military College has historical significance linked to WW2. It is a combined military police school being the training facility for the Royal Navy Police, the Royal Military Police and the Royal Air Force Police. This University link came through an article I had written promoting programmes which military personal could study both at the university and online. Trust developed between both partner organisations and the discussions evolved into the eventual accreditation of a number of military police courses taught at DCPG.

Through the partnership, military police personnel completed short specialist courses accredited by the University. The courses varied in level and content and allowed personnel to be formally acknowledged, useful for their continuing military career, but also as recognised qualifications for when they leave the services in the future. Over several years over 1200 learners have completed university-accredited courses at FHEQ levels 4 and 5.

I engaged with the partners in their own workplace, several hundred miles away, rather than them needing to travel to the campus and offered flexible timescales – for example fast academic approval and year round delivery. Gaining access to and developing the trust of both the decision makers and the practitioners within police organisations can be challenging, an aspect that Westmarland (2011) identified when attempting to conduct research within the police service. I have found it to be imperative that the context and subject specific language of the discipline is understood, their expertise valued and their trust and needs for their learners are developed over a period of time.

**Dr Ian Pepper, Teesside University**

In conclusion, the following box revisits some of the most common misconceptions about RPL/APL, together with some further detail to explain the reality of each situation.

<b>Box 5.3: Some misconceptions about RPL/APL</b>	
<i>It gives credits away and makes getting a degree too easy – it's dumbing down</i>	Using RPL is a different, but not easier, way of gaining HE qualifications. The processes designed to facilitate it are rigorously quality assured and in line with all other HE regulations and standards.
<i>It makes getting a degree too cheap</i>	It is true that some HEIs do not charge for credits gained through RPL – but most do, although this will be at a reduced rate when compared to the equivalent module. However, RPL candidates have not attended the module/s, with all of the attached resources and costs.
<i>The process is very labour intensive</i>	Because each student is treated as an individual case there is a perception that endless hours of staff time will be involved. However, as with all things, the more often

	<p>something happens the better we become at dealing with it and those institutions who regularly award large amounts of credit via RPL have developed efficient systems to make it cost effective, whilst still giving the candidates the personalised service they deserve (see the case studies in this chapter).</p>
<p><i>The process is very complicated and convoluted – it is always easier to do a module</i></p>	<p>The ethos of RPL is simple – it is aiming to avoid forcing students to re-learn anything that they have learned already – with this in mind the system is simplified because all we are trying to achieve is proving the candidate’s learning – in a way that meaningfully demonstrates its level and relevance.</p> <p>Usually those who state that the process is complicated have never actually attempted to understand the process, or have some deep-seated lack of information about the credit system itself.</p> <p>The criticism ‘it is easier to do the module’ is usually a give-away that the student is being asked to do far too much to prove their previous learning. It is true, once a student is expected to write a long narrative they almost may as well be writing the essay or report a similar module might require (see elsewhere in chapter for more details on how to evidence a claim).</p>
<p><i>By giving people an alternative you are losing students, or taking them away from other courses</i></p>	<p>Almost without exception the kind of student who benefits significantly from RPL would not have come to university without a work-based studies style route. They are probably working full-time and these kind of programmes tend to have an ‘out of hours’ offering.</p> <p>They are often mature learners whose sector has become a graduate profession since they joined (although there are many, many other reasons) but their age and stage of their career makes them ‘in a hurry’ as well as very experienced, so what they have learned from this experience is the ideal tool to give them some advanced standing – which also helps them to – in their eyes – catch up a bit more quickly. This is the route they want – they are not somehow ‘stolen’ from a more traditional</p>



	one.
<i>It messes up awards – in terms of class of degree and so on</i>	It is true – RPL credits do not carry a mark or class – this would be very difficult to do – although probably not impossible – for this reason HEIs define what they MUST do in terms of taught modules which consequently limits how many credits a student may bring in. This is clearly written in individual institution’s quality regulations and not the ‘black art’ that some colleagues think.
<i>It isn’t academic or scholarly, for example, it doesn’t include theory</i>	The learning that RPL candidates evidence is marked against the institutions level descriptions and learning outcomes – so it will be as academic as these are.
<i>It didn’t happen in my day – I didn’t study like this</i>	It is called innovation! Our students are subject to a rapidly changing world and work environment – nothing stays the same and we all have to learn to cope with changes. There are now many ways to study and many conflicting theories about how knowledge is created. RPL is a different – but equally good way to gain HE recognition. It is about individual appropriateness.
<i>It is impossible to prove</i>	This simply is not true. See elsewhere in this chapter for ideas around evidence. All RPL claims have to be proved and backed up by evidence – it is as easy to map this against descriptors and outcomes as it is an essay or report or presentation. Education needs to be creative, not stagnant.
<i>It fragments my class – I cannot treat everyone exactly the same</i>	Well that’s a shame! The news is your class are not all the same – even if they want to study the same topic, are roughly the same age or come from the same background – all students are individuals and deserve to be treat as such, it is the only way to ensure they maximise upon their learning experience.
<i>Students can’t learn anything if they are not in the classroom with me</i>	Unfortunately for our egos this has been proved to clearly not be the case. Work-based students frequently embark upon projects. They are far more expert in the topic than any of the university staff, because they have been working on that area, in a real life scenario for a number of

	years, solving problems, analysing performance and innovating.
<i>You just have to prove you have a job, or work experience and you get a degree</i>	This is one of the widest held falsehoods. RPL credits are awarded for LEARNING from experience – nothing is awarded for merely having an experience. Once academics realise and accept this they are much more interested in the potential of the process.
<i>Students are wasting time looking backwards when they should be learning here and now</i>	Psychologically, as stated above, these students do tend to want to quickly get on, perceiving themselves to be behind already. However, once they have been shown the process of proving their learning is at HE level they feel empowered that they have already been operating at this level and are therefore NOT behind. They learn about, and feel the power, of reflective practice and become reflective practitioners – capable of looking back, but also capable of reflecting on the present and reflecting forward to future activity. Some enlightened institutions allow work-based learners to keep making RPL claims throughout their programme of study.
<i>Nowhere accepts or acknowledges it</i>	The Bologna process means that HE credits are part of a recognised global currency, CATS. <a href="http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/higher-education/bologna-process_en.htm">http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/higher-education/bologna-process_en.htm</a>
<i>There are no experts to help you with this</i>	Membership bodies such as SEEC and NUCCAT offer expert advice and support around HE credit.  <a href="http://www.seec.org.uk/">http://www.seec.org.uk/</a>  <a href="http://www.nuc.ac.uk/">http://www.nuc.ac.uk/</a>  Also, there is a UK Credit Forum that shares information about credit and recently published a review of practice (Atlay et al, 2012).
<i>It is only about low level learning</i>	This can't be true: it is used at undergraduate and post graduate level. In fact, the PhD by published works is a kind of APL and professional doctorates and professional doctorates by public works also use it (Armsby 2012). So it's available right up to level 8.

*The difference between specific and general credit is very confusing*

It's no more confusing than any other terms in teaching and learning. Specific credit is easily understood as connecting with already validated modules or programmes i.e. the credit is specific to them. General credit is not confusing, it's just not well used and hence known about. This is probably because many academics think that they should deliver the knowledge they think is important rather than facilitate, the development of students' own existing knowledge.

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