



TRANSFINE Project

UK Country Study

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Introduction/Background

This report reviews progress to date and provides a summary set of discussions on the key areas identified within phase II of the Transfine project. The report presents an overview of the current “state of the art” in respect of transfer between formal, informal and non-formal learning across the four constituent parts of the UK. To a large extent this section serves as an introduction to the four individual UK country reports which follow. These individual country reports offer between them a series of snapshots informed by a short period of field work which addressed the terms of reference for this phase of the project. This report does not seek to provide a fully comprehensive account of the “state of play” across the UK in these areas, as this was not possible given the resources and time available. However, the report does present an important set of discussions and insights into the key questions identified within the terms of reference for phase II of Transfine.

One of the first considerations in setting up the UK study was to understand the purpose of the project and in particular its terms of reference in the context of the developments in the constituent parts of the UK. Although not a perfect fit, the Assessment or Accreditation of Prior and Experiential Learning (APEL) is, broadly, the term used in the UK to cover the areas of activity included in the Transfine brief. As is evident from the individual reports, the UK has a widespread set of systems for APEL dating back in some cases to the early 1980’s at least. This report will therefore use the term APEL as shorthand to denote transfer between formal, informal and non-formal learning and similar activities.

It is also important to note that APEL incorporates for the purpose of this report, both assessment and accreditation. In some instances it is used to imply a process that precedes the award of credit, but might result nevertheless with credit being awarded. In such examples assessment would be the prime purpose. However, where the stated purpose is to award credit, normally leading to a qualification then the term accreditation would usually apply. This distinction is reflected in a number of examples which are referred to in the individual UK reports. Although not an absolute distinction it does tend to be used in practice to denote whether the learning in question is either formal or informal. The latter tends to lead to assessment and the former to accreditation.

Collectively then the four reports by drawing on both the policy and practice of APEL across the nine fields of activity illustrate something of the spread and depth of APEL arrangements in the UK. In addition to this, and often as an integral part of it, the reports also provide a commentary on the system for Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CAT) where these are linked to APEL arrangements. Here again, individual reports reflect how widespread and developed CAT is in the different sectors and fields of activity where APEL is found.

Although there is a considerable amount in common in relation to CATS within the UK and indeed with ECTS, it is also important to note that there are areas of difference as well. As the country reports illustrate, it is also the case that within the nine areas of activity that Transfine is concerned with there are considerable variations in the degree to which for instance credit features. It is evident from the information gathered by the UK research team that, both in relation to APEL and CATS, the picture that emerges is both complex and uneven, giving raise to important questions about the relationship between for instance formal and informal learning. If we further add to this the role and contribution that CATS can and in fact does already make in some instances, you begin to appreciate what it means to describe the picture as being complex and uneven.

Methodological Issues

The UK research team comprised a UK co-ordinator and four country reporters. The country reporters undertook field work and produced a report based on findings from their respective fieldwork activities. Reports were therefore provided for Wales, Northern Ireland, England and Scotland. Between them the four members of the research team had in-depth understanding and wide experience of:

- APEL
- CATS
- HE/FE
- Vocational training
- Professional bodies
- National Agencies
- EU Programmes

It is also important to recognise that partly as a consequence of this wide ranging set of experience, the research team had an extensive network of contacts, highly relevant to the questions explored in the fieldwork. Given the limited timeframe, such contacts and experience proved as effective as they were valuable. This summary introduction gives as accurate an impression of developments in relation to APEL practices from across the UK as possible within the parameters of this limited study. So not withstanding the differences of volume of activity and focus, which taken together the four reports provide between them important information and clues for the further development of APEL services, in both the UK and wider Europe.

The approach pursued by each reporter varied in both relation to the combination of research methods adopted and also the range of information sources they were able to draw upon. The latter being referred where possible to the nine fields of activity included in the terms of reference. Research methods used included:

- (i) Documentary analysis of policy documents from government departments, national agencies, professional institutions, training bodies, regulatory systems
- (ii) Expert seminars: Groups of experts from different sectors usually experienced APEL practitioners. This approach provided an opportunity to gather information in an interactive way.
- (iii) Expert Questionnaire: This was designed and produced by the UK Co-ordinator and incorporated all the key areas of inquiry from the terms of reference. The research team were asked to use these headings and questions to structure both their information gathering activities and also their country reports. The questionnaire was used in a number of ways including being targeted electronically to key individuals.
- (iv) Meetings/discussions/interviews with a sample of key stakeholders: Breakdowns of activities are given in the individual reports, but a wide variety of important players have been involved.

In order to establish a proper basis from which to make comparisons, not only between the four UK country reporters but also for further comparisons to be undertaken across the five European Country Studies, it was essential for all the research team to operate with a similar set of headings. In the case of the UK research team this approach provided an important operating framework from which to proceed. This operating framework developed from the headings included in the terms of reference informed both the sources to be approached and also the organisation of the country report. Inevitably, given the constraints in time in particular, the extent to which each country report was able to cover all aspects of the terms of reference varied. However, between the four reports, it is possible to gain an overall picture of the existing arrangements for APEL across the various parts of the UK.

The following two tables provide a breakdown of the key pieces of information provided in the four UK reports which summarise the existing arrangements for APEL. The variety of practice and provision captured in the tables illustrates something of the spread of APEL and the extent of development of the services that exist.

Qualifications Systems and Employers

One of the underlying issues hinted at in the reports is the fact that APEL systems and provision are to be found in both educational and training contexts. The former linked to academic qualifications and where applicable credit accumulation and transfer and the latter usually part of the National Vocational Qualifications N(S)VQ framework. The approaches to and the philosophies that inform APEL in these two contexts are marked by significant differences. As the reports from the four parts of the UK between them contain a disproportionate amount of information about academic related APEL services, a brief outline of APEL in the context of N(S)VQ will be provided. The process of establishing and accrediting a National Vocation Qualification involves a number of stages. An industry lead body is established by the Employment department. Occupational areas within the coverage or scope of the lead body are mapped and roles analysed in order to produce a framework of what are described as occupational standards. These standards are presented as units of competence, broken down into elements, which are further divided into statements of competence with associated performance criteria, range statements and guidelines for assessment. Awarding bodies adopt the standards, incorporating them into existing or new qualifications. The national council for Vocational Qualifications “kite marks” or accredits the qualifications, at one of the five levels within the N(S)VQ framework. Awarding based on valid assessments and monitor and verify assessment to national standards. One important feature of the N(S)VQ framework in terms of assessment is that it automatically incorporates the acknowledgement and accreditation of prior learning, which is addressed before an individual training programme is designed for learners. Despite the academic and vocational system do nevertheless share a common belief in a fundamental principle informing APEL provision, which is that learning achievements capable of assessment regardless of time, place or context can be accredited within both systems. It is however important to note that the N(S)VQ framework for APEL and the academic context of APEL are in many respects insulated from each other despite sharing some common features. This division derives mainly from the fact that the N(S)VQ system is a national system and therefore operates according to national regulations. Contrast this with APEL provision in the academic context where it is a matter for each university to decide whether they will offer APEL services and on what basis these will be provided. Another important difference between the two systems is that in the case of N(S)VQ the system, as described, is based on a model of assessment underpinned by a hierarchy of competence, which are criterion referenced to the occupational standards for any given vocational field. APEL provision in the academic context is as the reports indicate extremely variable, but usually involves an approach to assessment which includes learning outcomes and notional time. So there are important and distinctive differences between the two systems and they tend to operate as

separate systems so far as APEL provision is concerned with each system providing different opportunities for APEL.

Given the important role that N(S)VQ play in relation to training for employment and consequently the opportunities that enable work based learning to be assessed and accredited within the N(S)VQ framework, it is vital to situate APEL in this broader context. Evidence from Anders Nilsson, who co-ordinated the CEDEFOP survey of non-formal and informal learning indicates in the case of the UK, the significant involvement that employers and trade unions have in APEL in relation to work based learning and vocational qualifications. Employers have a key role for example not only in providing the physical base for training, which can lead to the accreditation of work based learning through the N(S)VQ system as described but also, through contributing to the setting of the occupational competences which, as we have seen form the basis of N(S)VQ, and enable individuals to have their work based and broader experiential learning accredited.

The role of trade unions and the Trade Union Congress (TUC) in supporting opportunities for APEL amongst its members illustrates yet another strand of training provision which enables learners to gain accreditation based on in this case on their trade union activities. Through partnerships with the National Open College Network the TUC is offering for example, routes to Open College accreditation based in part on the assessment of prior learning.

It is vitally important to recognise the extent of APEL related provision that exists in the vocational domain and furthermore to understand the degree of separation that exists between the academic and vocational systems in relation to APEL.

To summarise the main findings of each of the four UK constituent reports the following tables are provided to give a breakdown of the key characteristics of existing APEL arrangements in each part of the UK.

Greater detail and discussion of some of the points can be found in the main reports from the four countries.

Summary of response – Existing APEL Arrangements
Table 1

	England	Northern Ireland	Scotland	Wales
Where	HE (unevenly distributed between for example: FE, Professional Education, i.e. nursing, midwifery, Business and Management, engineering, teacher training	HE, FE, Vocational training, Nursing, Social Work	HE (patchy) – both under- and postgraduate, work based training.	HE/FE/OCN (Welsh Assembly is taking steps in support of APEL)
Purpose	Credit, access to HE, access to HE and credit, professional body, recognition/requirement, recognition of work based learning.	Access to HE, Access to HE with credit, work based learning recognition.	Self-valuing, recognition of professional work based skills within qualifications framework, course entry, accelerate progress, credit deficit	Recognition in FE and HE including practice based provision (Nursing, social work), credit bearing, alternative entry, whole qualification at under- and postgraduate.
What is being assessed or accredited?	Work based learning, learning outcomes, specific credit	Voluntary and youth work leading towards accreditation, community based learning (child care, computing)	Knowing how learning is being assessed as if it were that type of learning	Learning outcome unit modules, WBL, records of achievement, progress files, professionally certificated learning, and individual learning experience.
Methods	Various, portfolios, reflective reports/essays, challenge, tests, CVs, simulators	Credit records, presentations	Reflective essays, portfolios, prior qualifications	Various, credit Common Accord, Progress files in FE/HE
Who	Trained APEL assessors (academic staff) workplace assessors.	Academic staff, trainers	Academic Staff, Accredited professional trainers and educators	Teachers, trainers, internal verifier

Summary of Response – Existing APEL Arrangements
Table 2

	England	Northern Ireland	Scotland	Wales
Systems and Structures for APEL	SEEC code of practice, QA process, wide use of formal systems as part of the assessment and examination system	Institutional based HE systems within NICATS, NVQ framework	Institutional based systems in some HEIs, Health professions, Accreditation systems plus some other professional bodies	National qualification framework (9 levels) HE level descriptors, credit based NVQ framework
Number of APEL systems operating in your area (multiple)	HEIs use one system in respect of their programmes, professional bodies also have systems sometimes directly linked to HEIs	NICATS, NVQ, HEI systems	HEI Systems, SQA	Both inter and intra systems are operating in HE, professional associations operate their own system (nursing, social work)
Flexibility and user friendliness	Systems rated as moderately to highly user-friendly by providers		Inflexible, bureaucratic, very user unfriendly	Moderate to high
Main strengths of APEL system	Systems were seen as: rigorous, transparent assessment processes, allowed many different forms of learning, part of normal processes of assessment and quality assurance.		No system as such and little strength in current arrangements	APEL seen as part of widening access to LLL national policy, distinction between APEL and APL, proposed credit common accord, seen as important.
Main weaknesses of APEL System	Too bureaucratic, resource hungry, time consuming, lacks credibility for some.		Lack of resources, seen as a marginal activity and not mainstream.	Perception of fragmentation between different sectors offering APEL, absence of a unified credit framework, no specific policy framework for APEL, staff resistance as APEL is seen to be a threat to entry requirements, labour intensive.

Country Report Wales

The nature and extent of the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning within Wales

This document is a summary of responses collected from policy documents, education and training providers, and APEL experts from across Wales. These were requested and collated by the University of Glamorgan.

Further Education (FE) Colleges, Higher Education (HE) Institutions, private training providers, voluntary organisations, Open College Networks (OCNs), trade unions, and professional associations were asked to complete this questionnaire.

Responses were received from further and higher education providers, private sector training companies, open college networks, and individual experts interested in APEL issues and procedures. These responses have been considered alongside a summary of current Welsh Assembly Government policy.

However, the response rate has been low, in part caused by unrealistic project deadlines. This national profile warns against any ambitious generalisations which do not account for the current lack of feedback from large corporate training bodies, trade unions, and voluntary sector networks.

Questions on existing APEL arrangements

Where is APEL taking place in your area? (E.g. particular institution, course, professional area)

We have gathered data, in the main, from the HE, FE and OCN sectors. As these institutions and organisations push toward the participation and access targets put in place by the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG), they are increasingly examining alternatives to traditional entry requirements, one of which is the use of APEL.

For what purpose are APEL services being provided? (E.g. entry progression, award credit and/or qualifications)

Good and developed practice in the use of APEL in FE and HE tends to pertain to Care Sciences, Nursing, Social Work, Business Studies, Management Studies, and various access and lifelong learning courses. In general, this involves the use of prior experience - as well as non-accredited learning - which count towards specific learning outcomes or advanced standing on a particular module or unit of study.

By way of illustration, the new qualifying degree for Social Workers allows, in the regulations provided by the Welsh Assembly Government, for APEL to be used as a method of meeting assessment criteria.

In FE, APEL as alternative entry criteria and in place of taught elements is used by one group of colleges towards “Access to HE” provision. However most Welsh FE uses APEL to count towards NVQ units or other awards by negotiation.

Provision of APEL which leads to some or all of a qualification is noted for some postgraduate awards within HE, including research qualifications based on the recognition of portfolios of evidence relating to research publications and output. At the most advanced level this includes the PhD by Publication and the PhD/MPhil by Portfolio, both of which give recognition of prior work and prior learning.

On most other courses in FE and HE there appears to be a limit to the total number of credits counting toward an award that could be claimed via APEL. In most cases this appears to be approximately half of the total number of possible credits.

What is being assessed or accredited? (E.g. learning outcomes, work based learning, individual/social experience)

Learning outcomes, units and modules of achievement, work-based learning, simulations, records of achievement, progress files, transcripts, previous certificated learning (see section 3.9) and individual experience are all accredited under various systems of APEL in Wales.

What methods or tools are being used as part of the APEL system? (E.g. portfolios, formal test/assessments)

Varied and numerous, but it is planned that a **Credit Common Accord** will operate amongst providers within Wales in order to recognise and quality assure methods and tools used. The Accord will not apply to Higher Education, but it will use terminology and specifications that are fully compatible with those established in higher education credit guidelines. The Credit Common Accord is in the final stages of being formulated following a national consultation period ending in December 2002.

It is worth noting the piloting of various schemes based around ‘Progress Files’ in HE, FE and secondary schools. These are portfolios covering key skills and employability competences alongside personal development, and - although not currently assessed in their own right - it is possible that these materials could be used as evidence of learning for APEL.

Who is undertaking the assessment or accreditation of prior learning? (E.g. trainers, teachers, approved assessors)

As there is no current universal APEL framework in Wales, there are no specifically approved national assessors. Work is generally carried out by the appropriate teacher or trainer, and in some instances this will be supported by an internal verifier. In many cases the assessors and verifiers have appropriate qualifications, such as the D32-36 awards within the NVQ framework for the UK.

The frequent emphasis on ‘genuine’ learning in the questionnaire responses suggests that quality assurance issues are uppermost in the mind of institutional assessors. This is echoed by the Welsh Assembly Government consultation document on the Credit Common Accord, which stresses the need for agreed principles and procedures for all APEL partners.

Please describe the APEL systems and structures which have been put in place in your organisation or sector.

At policy level a nine-level qualifications framework operates in Wales. Entry level leads to levels 1-3 within the National Qualifications Framework for Wales, after which levels 4-6 address certificate, intermediate and honours levels in higher education. Levels 7 and 8 indicate masters and doctoral level qualifications.

It should be noted however that at a practical level HE institutions use their own level descriptors for levels 4-6 within the national framework; namely level one (HE Certificate), two (HE Diploma), three (HE Degree) and M (Masters).

APEL can be awarded at various stages and levels in relation to the general formula of a notional 10 learning and assessment hours equalling one credit. Within the proposed Credit Common Accord APEL can be set against pre-defined units based on outcomes and assessment criteria, but not against sub-components of a unit. The candidate is awarded either all the credit available for achieving a pass in the unit, or none of the credit for not achieving the unit.

It should also be noted that lifelong learning targets within Wales, as stipulated in the Welsh Assembly Government’s The Learning Country, include levels of achievement for target populations which are cast first and foremost in terms of NVQs or their equivalents – thereby promoting work based learning.

Is there one or more APEL systems operating in your area? Please give brief details.

As answered above, each institution or, in some cases, section of an institution, tends to have its own policy, though the Credit Common Accord will tend to standardise the equivalence of particular areas and levels of experience to academic credit.

There are also APEL systems operating within professional associations, such as Nursing as well the Care Council for Wales (linked with the Social Services Inspectorate), and its APEL guidelines for Social Work Training.

How flexible and user-friendly would you rate your APEL service as being?

The consensus from the responses was moderate-to-high. In the main, APEL has evolved in institutions to meet specific identified provider and learner needs the overall ‘system’ in Wales must be said to be highly-flexible and user friendly.

Please describe the main strengths and weaknesses.

Strengths:

In Wales, there is a core mission for widening access to lifelong learning. APEL reflects this general concern through having a flexible definition based on the widespread use of learning outcomes philosophy and principles. Furthermore, providers adhere to the consistent distinction between general APEL, and the more specific Assessment of Prior Learning (APL) - which carries certification, and which can be directly mapped on to credit equivalents within the National Qualifications Framework.

At the same time organisations and institutions address standards through rigorous quality assurance principles associated with the proposed Credit Common Accord. Welsh Assembly Government and NIACE Dysgu Cymru have stressed the importance of informal learning, to include the power of non-assessed courses in attracting people from disadvantaged backgrounds back into education and training. WAG has also promoted the use of such instruments as Progress Files in order to help learners and providers articulate APEL levels and prepare APEL applications.

Finally, although FE and HE have separate systems and funding streams, there is continuity between FE and HE based on the use of similar terminology and processes. This continuity extends to other UK regions as well as Europe. At an institutional level, APEL is welcomed in that it allows more non-traditional students to participate in education, allows them to study part-time on a full time course (combining a reduced workload with a compressed period of study) and allows them to avoid repeating learning.

Weaknesses: Not all institutions and organisations use the terminology within the National Qualifications Framework; learners may therefore perceive fragmented systems and a lack of continuity between sectors. National policy for a unified credit framework against which APEL can be awarded has been slow to materialise. Furthermore, there is as yet no dedicated policy framework for APEL itself; instead APEL is recognised through mapping on to other policy such as that for qualifications frameworks. There has also been some staff resistance to what could be seen

as an erosion of traditional entry requirements, and a wide concern regarding the intensive demand on staff time required to advice and then robustly assess an APEL bid. Within this context APEL is seen by some institutions as a costly process and one which requires complex retrospective resourcing from further and higher education funding bodies based on credits earned.

Briefly explain how your APEL service came about.

There have been various projects and initiatives throughout Wales, sponsored by FE and HE funding councils as well as various fora and professional associations. In the main APEL has grown in institutions to meet learner or provider needs. In FE, both the OCR (qualifications awarding body) and NOCN (adult learning network) have encouraged colleges to accredit prior experience.

Would you describe your APEL service as a top-down or bottom-up? Please tick the appropriate box.

Though there was some confusion as to the precise meaning of this question, the consensus seemed to be that APEL was a bottom-up undertaking.

Who are the main stakeholders involved?

ACCAC, ELWa, the Awarding Bodies, Open College Networks, Heads of Sector Skills Councils, Estyn, Welsh Higher Education Credit Consortium, Fforwm, Higher Education Wales, Wales Council for Voluntary Action, the Welsh Local Government Association, Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, CBI (Wales), Wales TUC, National Training Federation and the Federation of Small Businesses.

What are the main elements or building blocks of your APEL system? (E.g. credits, learning outcomes, levels)

APEL building blocks are set against the use of a credit and qualifications framework for Wales. The main elements include assigning credit values to units and qualifications (based on a notional 10 hours learning and assessment time equalling one credit) via mapping experience on to outcomes. The notional learning time can include:

- Formal learning (including training sessions, coaching, seminars and tutorials)
- Practical work in laboratories or other locations
- Relevant IT activities
- Information retrieval in libraries
- Expected private study and revision
- Work based activities which lead to assessment
- All forms of assessment
- Programme planning

- *Educational counselling and mentoring*

By far the most common method of assessing APEL was the personal portfolio, where evidence of non-accredited learning can be directly compared to the requirements for the credit or qualification attempted. The individual nature of APEL claims (no two are the same) means that each individual portfolio may demonstrate competencies and knowledge in a different way.

Is there a national framework or qualifications structure that your APEL service links to? Please give details.

A nine-level qualifications framework for Wales will be compatible with those being developed in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland, as well as ECTS.

As noted in section (3.6) entry level leads to levels 1-3 within the National Qualifications Framework for Wales, after which levels 4-6 address certificate, intermediate and honours levels in higher education, with levels 7 and 8 indicating masters and doctoral level qualifications.

(NB As of July 2002 within the National Open College Network (NOCN) and Open College Network (OCN) credit framework operating across the UK, 30 notional learning hours = one credit. However, the NOCN has developed systems, which will conform to the **Credit Common Accord** in Wales. In order to ensure that the **Credit Common Accord** is inclusive of OCN and NOCN accredited learning, the relationship of 1 NOCN and OCN credit to 3 credits within the aforementioned national credit frameworks is proposed.)

Currently, the varying UK qualification structures are used as far as possible in assessing the level and credit rating of an APEL claim. In FE, the NVQ framework is widely prevalent - due to its vocational emphasis experiential learning is often directly comparable. There is no comparable HE framework, so claims are carefully assessed against the validated learning outcomes of modules or awards, which are themselves assessed by the QAA.

Are there any informal arrangements for recognising and valuing learning? Please give brief outline.

‘Access’ courses (those aimed at non-traditional learners as a “stepping stone” to further learning) tend to place great value on the experience and learning previously gained informally; this is true for FE and HE institutions.

Learning is recognised informally in a wide range of non-accredited community based courses provided by HE institutions, and in adult learning and training generally.

Towards a European wide system for APEL.

(This section invites you to comment on the potential for developing a European wide set of arrangements to enable the transfer of informal and non-formal education.)

What do you think about the development of a Europe-wide framework for recognising and accrediting informal and non-formal learning? Please tick the appropriate box against one of the following ratings.

The average response was 4, on a scale of 1 (not needed) to 5 (essential).

Please explain briefly the reasons for your rating:

Providers were keen to see increased collaboration amongst European educators, and looked forward to a greater ability to transfer and award credit for prior learning. It was felt that this would provide an excellent model for a future international system of learning credit.

However, one expert HE provider felt there would be considerable practical problems, with reference to the Bologna Declaration aspirations. Another suggested that a Europe-wide framework would be "...desirable but not necessary..." due to the marked differences in approaches to and uses of APEL in even one institution.

FE providers noted that demographic changes, coupled with rapid increases in the complexity of work processes and occupations looks set to drive the post-16 system into finding more flexible, accessible and efficient means of meeting training and skills needs for adults returning to learn.

In order to gauge your overall opinion on the pros and cons of a Europe wide system, please look at the issues and questions listed below and give a summary response to all or some.

- **Would the key stakeholders be able to recognise learning that was acquired outside the country?**

The expert opinion was that if there was recognised European Qualifications Framework then stakeholders would be happy to accredit international learning. One provider suggested that this would require a more general convergence of post-compulsory educational systems.

Interestingly, a provider of vocational training felt that large employers would be more inclined to bypass national frameworks entirely and produce their own transactional training and 'qualification' systems.

- **Would they expect/need the learning acquired outside the formal system in their own country to be recognised in another country?**

If there were a European Qualifications Framework, the issue would be more to do with which part of the formal system credit was being claimed towards. It would be impossible to have a framework

that covered all possible learning so it was envisaged that APEL would work here in the same way as it does now.

- **Are there any legal obstacles that you can see to a Europe wide system**

No specific examples were cited, but one expert did suggest that “pan-European legislation should provide for the rights of citizens to equality and activity in this area”

- **Are there any cultural, political, economic... obstacles**

Generally, the feeling was that cultural and political issues based on Europhobia would dissipate over time. However, expert commentators commented on a range of issues. At an administrative level, there will be wide variation in the type of evidence and certification – and its authentication – available for inclusion in portfolios. At an economic level, funding for education in member states varies widely, so therefore there is not an equality of opportunity to participate in post-compulsory education across Europe. The provision of centralised education funding for all of Europe was viewed as idealistic, overlooking serious political and cultural obstacles. And at higher education levels, there are likely to be serious and marked differences in the acceptance of APEL by ancient, traditional and new universities.

One FE/Adult learning provider stressed the importance of “identifying a common tariff for credit... and recognising the concept of notional learning time”.

- **What problems would be posed by using something like ECTS as the basis of a Europe wide system**

Experts felt that ECTS would need to be reinforced by a large scale awareness raising exercise, as “few within education are fully aware of it and the majority... outside education are unaware of it”. Another suggested that the relative value placed on each award (sought credit against) would need to be clarified.

- **What sort of time frame could be envisaged for linking the existing arrangements (or creating new ones) with a Europe wide system**

One expert suggested that in common with other Europe-wide policies (economic convergence, defence and foreign policies, agriculture) that ‘sometime never’ would be a usable timeframe for the production of a workable system! The suggestion was that a move towards closer harmony in “levels, awards, credits” and support for smaller initiatives, such as the building of networks being built between two or more member states would be a useful first step. A demand-led solution, similar to the growth in APEL only in particular areas of a single institution, was the final recommendation from this expert.

A provider added that a system that took too long to roll-out would lose momentum and impact.

- **What negotiations might be necessary and with whom for a Europe wide system.**

An expert provider opined that the credit and qualifications framework of each member state should be tabled a Europe-wide forum for consultation and feedback.

Support from national governments and ‘clusters’ of forward-thinking providers would be essential.

- **What do you think would be the basic minimum requirements? For example common framework of levels, a common definition of a credit or more simply a common set of “tools” (E.g. Euro CV, European portfolio or Euro certificates).**

A provider of vocational qualification sought a common EU portfolio for use in NVQ accreditation.

In HE and FE, the main emphasis was on a common framework of levels and notional credit values.

Responses collated and analysed by David Kernohan, Danny Saunders and David Turner; the University of Glamorgan

Country Report England

The nature and extent of the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning within England

A Political and Historical Context

The concept of the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) has been part of the educational armoury of England since the mid-1980s when it was led by the Council for National Academic Awards, CNAA.. The work was then taken up by the regional Credit and Accumulation and Transfer, CAT consortia, particularly Southern (was South East) England Consortium for CATS, SEEC (37 institutions) and Northern Universities Consortium, NUCCAT, (47 institutions).. The latter traditionally consisted of representatives from the academic registries of universities. The former has pioneered the development of APEL led in the main by lecturers and other academics in a practical and practice -based manner.

The early work developed out of the deliberations of the Learning from Experience Trust which laid the foundations by stating that ALL learning, wherever, however it was acquired should be recognised. In the late 1980s, SEEC set up a number of networks to identify, develop and share good practice in a number of areas, including AP(E)L. The number of institutions in the network has grown and continues to flourish today. Its first publication was a collection of papers by its members, Getting to the core of APEL J Storán (editor) 1993, Then SEEC undertook a government-funded project which laid the ground rules for the implementation of credit and APEL Credit guidelines, models and protocols SEEC 1996. This was followed by a joint consortium Inter-Consortia Credit Associations, InCCA project A common framework for learning DfEE 1998. Meanwhile the SEEC APEL network had produced APEL: A code of practice SEEC 1996, a guide for institutions to use for the quality assured use of APEL. The network subsequently published APEL: Beyond gradueness SEEC 1998. More recently two SEEC publications have developed APEL further Models of APEL and Quality Assurance Johnson 2002 and How to do APEL. Wailey 2002.. However it is true to say that the work was assisted by and progressed alongside the developments in credit and credit frameworks.

All along the work was predicated upon the definition of credit relating it to the volume and level of learning. The latter was described in SEEC publication of Credit level descriptors.

Alongside these activities the National Council for Vocational Qualifications, NCVQ developed and refined a raft of work-based competency qualifications.

The subject was given particular impetus by the Dearing report: National enquiry in Higher Education 1997 and the subsequent Quality Assurance Agency, QAA, A framework of qualifications for Higher Education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. QAA 2001. HE qualifications were put into four groups; Certificate, C, Intermediate, I, Honours, H, and Masters, M., each group being defined by Qualification descriptors. The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, QCA's publication of A National Qualifications Framework QCA 2001. did likewise for further education awards and qualifications. Unlike elsewhere, e.g. Scotland, neither body included a credit framework. However the former did invite the regional consortia to proffer advice which resulted in the publication of Credit and HE qualifications: Credit guidelines for HE qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, EWNI 2001. including the following.

Table 1 Comparisons of levels

	Qualification Levels		EWNI credit levels	FE/HE levels
HEQF	Doctoral D Level		Level 8	
	Master's M Level		Level 7	Level M
	Honours H Level		Level 6	Level HE3
	Intermediate I Level		Level 5	Level HE2
	Certificate C Level		Level 4	Level HE1
NQF	Level 3 Advanced		Level 3	Level FE3
	Level 2 Intermediate		Level 2	Level FE2
	Level 1 Foundation		Level 1	Level FE1
	Entry		Entry	Entry

And

Table 2 Credit guidelines for post graduate qualifications

Qualification	HEQF Qualification Level	Min overall credits	The range of levels No of credits at highest level	Max credits at lowest level
POSTGRADUATE				
Professional Doctorate	D	540 credits	Levels (6), 7, 8 min 360 credits at Level 8	max 30 credits at Level 6
Master's Degree	M	180 credits	Levels (6), 7 min 150 credits at Level 7	max 30 credits at Level 6
PG Diploma	M	120 credits	Levels (6), 7 min 90 credits at Level 7	max 30 credits at Level 6
PG Certificate	M	60 credits	Levels (6), 7 min 40 credits at Level 7	max 20 credits at Level 6

GRADUATE				
Graduate Diploma	H	120 credits	Levels (3, 4, 5), 6 min 90 credits at Level 6	max 30 credits at Level 3
Graduate Certificate	H	60 credits	Levels (3, 4, 5), 6 min 40 credits at Level 6	max 20 credits at Level 3

Table 3 Credit guidelines for undergraduate qualifications

Qualification	HEQF Qualification Level	Min overall credits	The range of levels No of credits at highest level	Max credits at lowest level
Integrated Master's Degree	M	480 credits	Levels (3), 4, 5, 6, 7 min 120 credits at Level 7	max 30 credits at Level 3

Honours Degree	H	360 credits	Levels (3), 4, 5, 6 min 90 credits at Level 6	max 30 credits at Level 3
Ordinary Degree	I	300 credits	Levels (3), 4, 5, 6 min 60 credits at Level 6	max 30 credits at Level 3
Foundation Degree	I	240 credits	Levels (3), 4, 5 min 90 credits at Level 5	max 30 credits at Level 3
Diploma HE	I	240 credits	Levels (3), 4, 5 min 90 credits at Level 5	max 30 credits at Level 3
HND	I	240 credits	Levels (3), 4, 5 min 90 credits at Level 5	max 30 credits at Level 3
HNC	C	150 credits	Levels (3), 4, 5 min 30 credits at Level 5	max 30 credits at Level 3
Certificate HE	C	120 credits	Levels (3), 4 min 90 credits at Level 4	max 30 credits at Level 3

The recognition and use of APEL was further enhanced with the various government policies on widening participation and the introduction of Foundation degrees in 2001, which for the first time really brought APEL into the front line of government thinking. QAA has been charged with a review of the emerging quality of Foundation degrees (2003) and has included a number of references to the use and implementation of APEL especially for admission, with and without advanced standing and the work-based elements of the programmes.

Given the number and scale of the developments the SEEC APEL network has revised its guidelines on APEL, APEL A code of practice SEEC 2003. And is in the process of producing a further publication Guidelines for Work-Related Learning due to be issued in 2003.

In summary therefore there are legislative aspects in place for qualifications, with qualifications grouped according to level, each described by QUALIFICATION descriptors and advisory guidelines on the use of credit in HE qualifications described by level, CREDIT level descriptors and by volume of learning. Taken together there is a credit and qualifications framework which is

operated in much the same way by all institutions(over 74% (Johnson and Walsh Credit practice: a comparative approach 1994-1999), who have adopted a credit-based approach. Johnson and Walsh also found that these institutions have embedded APEL into the main stream of the curriculum and use it as an admissions tool, to give exemptions from modules and stages of a qualification. It forms an essential element in the policies of institutions looking to widen participation .and to form partnerships with employers and other organisations. The latter has been helped by the recent publication of Credit Level Descriptors for further and higher education SEEC 2003.

The majority of institutions see APEL as STUDENT-centred, enabling them to gain recognition for learning which has taken place in environments outside traditional learning establishments, colleges and universities, including the workplace, charity and voluntary organisations, social and life experiences. By recognising prior learning, students avoid the need to duplicate learning and in many cases can complete their qualifications in less time.

The survey

A questionnaire (appendix 1) was produced and circulated to a selection of Higher Education Institutions, members of the SEEC APEL network, regulatory and awarding bodies, professional bodies and other organisations. My thanks to the twenty-two respondents, who completed the questionnaire. The list of organisations appears in appendix 2.

- 14 Higher education institutions
- 1 regulatory Body
- 2 awarding bodies
- 3 organisations
- 2 consultants

4 of the respondents were from the FE sector.

Where is APEL taking place?

APEL is practised widely in Higher Education, but occurs unevenly between universities and within universities. The greatest occurrence is in the areas of nursing, midwifery and health, prompted by the professional body and the major changes to the qualifications structure, Nursing P2000. However there is also substantial work in other areas notably business and management, engineering, education and teacher training.. This confirms the results of a much larger survey reported in Models of APEL and Quality Assurance Johnson 2002. The recent introduction of

Foundation degrees has stimulated the use of APEL in those same and other areas, e.g. media studies and IT

For what purposes are APEL services being provided?

The majority of respondents linked APEL to the award of credit, to give

- access to HE programmes of study,
- entry with advanced standing, sometimes individual modules, others for whole stages
- professional body recognition/requirement
- recognition to work-based learning

What is being assessed or accredited?

The majority of HE respondents cited wbl, a few cited professional practices and fewer still mentioned life/social experience. The great majority stressed the need to use Learning Outcomes in the process and especially the clear definition of LEVEL It is apparent that most users were looking to award SPECIFIC, rather than general credit.

What methods or tools are being used?

Most institutions used a variety of tools.

Portfolios were mentioned most frequently - by almost all respondents- closely followed by **reflective reports/essays** a relative few mentioned challenge test type interviews and CVs and simulations

Who is undertaking the assessment?

In the main, the respondents stated that the assessment/accreditation was undertaken or they would like it to be, by trained APEL assessors, usually academic staff who might be subject specialists, but not necessarily. In the area of health and particularly nursing, great use is made of nursing staff mentoring, advising and assessing. Occasionally use is made of workplace assessors.

The regulatory body stated that it was the responsibility of the awarding bodies to decide who was to undertake the work.

Please describe the APEL systems and structures in place.

This question was open to several interpretations, with some respondents describing the framework, e.g. the SEEC Code of practice, others the QA/ committee structure and yet others the processes through which a claim for accreditation goes. However all appeared to be using formal systems

mainly embedded into the assessment and examining processes of the institution and subject to the same or similar quality processes as other assessments.

Are there one or more APEL systems operating in your area?

All the institutions used just one system for accreditation against their own programmes. However, some reported that they worked with professional bodies who had systems that differed from their own, The regulatory body reported that a variety of systems were acceptable; it was down to the awarding body to decide upon which one(s) and to be able to justify it to the regulatory body.

How flexible and user friendly is your APEL system?

Two questions in one!

Not one respondent said their system was inflexible nor user Un-friendly. The respondents were split 2 to 1 in favour of highly vis-à-vis moderately flexible/user friendly.

The implication is that institutions spend a great deal of effort to make their APEL systems attractive and flexible.

What are the main strengths of the APEL system?

Many respondents stressed the needs and position of the student in the process.. Systems were

- Flexible
- Open to all
- Recognised ALL learning
- Supportive of students

In addition the strengths were that the systems were

- Rigorous
- Transparent assessment processes
- Robust in that many different forms of learning could be considered in the same system
- Embedded into the normal. processes of assessment and quality assurance as other forms of learning.

Weaknesses of APEL systems

The main complaints were that APEL systems are

- Too bureaucratic
- Resource hungry
- Perceived to be difficult by students
- Time consuming -students can achieve the same credits more readily by undertaking the modules

- Credibility: some staff and students do not recognise the learning under APEL as 'real' learning

Briefly describe how your APEL service came about

The pressures to introduce APEL are many and varied and included

- Accessing new markets
- Demand from students
- Encouragement by Professional Bodies
- Government initiatives, e.g. widening participation and Foundation degrees
- Extensions to the use of APL, certificated learning

Is your APEL service top down or bottom up?

The answers were split about 50:50 on this, but more from different interpretations of the question. The vast majority described systems which were within an institutional framework, but delivered by the departments/faculties. The institutional framework tended to be based upon guidelines issued by SEEC.

Who are the main stakeholders?

All institutions mentioned candidates/**students**, and where there were others listed, students usually came at the top. Next most popular were **APEL practitioners**, then the **institution**, followed by **Employers, Quality agencies and government**

What are the main elements of your APEL system?

- At FE competency and occupational skills
- Credits
- Learning outcomes, sometimes negotiated by the students
- Level descriptors and quality assurance

Is there a national framework or qualifications structure that your APEL service links to?

There is a national qualifications framework or more precisely two; one HE from QAA and the other FE from QCA, both use subject benchmarking and qualification descriptors, which are used to determine whether or not exemption based on APEL can be awarded for stage(s) of a programme of study.

However the bulk of APEL systems is based upon or derived from SEEC credit level descriptors EWNI credit guidelines for HE qualifications

SEEC APEL publications, e.g. How to do APEL

In addition some respondents mentioned professional bodies and for FE NVQs based upon MCI.

Are there any informal arrangements for recognising and valuing learning?

The resounding response here was a deafening **NO** for the award of credits. However informal methods are used in interviews when counselling and advising students on relevant educational pathways

Europe-wide APEL framework?

What do you think about the development of a Europe-wide framework for recognising and accrediting informal and non-formal learning? Please tick the appropriate box against one of the following ratings.

	Not Needed	→	→	→	→	Essential
	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	
Responses	1	27%	0	27%	44%	

Forty four percent saw it as essential and over 70% saw an urgent need for a Europe-wide framework..

The reasons advanced seen for the introduction of a Europe-wide scheme for included

- reciprocal recognition of learning, thereby encouraging the mobility of labour
- to give confidence to the main stakeholders, students and employers

In order to gauge your overall opinion on the pro's and con's of a Europe wide system, please look at the issues and questions listed below and give a summary response to all or some.

- Would the key stakeholders be able to recognise learning that was acquired outside the country?

Most respondents wanted this facility and saw it as a definite benefit

- Would they expect/need the learning acquired outside the formal system in their own country to be recognised in another country?

Most respondents wanted to see this but thought that it would be very difficult to achieve

- Are there any legal obstacles that you can see to a Europe wide system

Very few respondents were in a position to provide a response to this question, but felt that there probably were. On a more positive note one respondent remarked that legislation could be both a hindering and a promotional factor and maybe we should work towards effecting change towards the latter.

- Are there any cultural, political, economic... obstacles?

Respondents did not underestimate such obstacles, the main ones cited were cultural, especially in the education sectors and language.

- What problems would be posed by using something like ECTS as the basis of a Europe wide system?

ECTS as it stands at the moment is about credit transfer, often on the basis of bi-lateral agreements between institutions and not about credit accumulation. The system in use in England, albeit informal is both Credit accumulation and Transfer, CAT. Significant additions would have to be made to develop ECTS into a Europe-wide framework, e.g. a common definition of credit, defining levels and level descriptors for both qualifications but more importantly credit. The difference in the ratings England 120 credit for 1 year full-time study and ECTS 60 credits is relatively easy to articulate but much more difficult to get agreement on which number, if either to use.

- What sort of time frame could be envisaged for linking the existing arrangements (or creating new ones) with a Europe wide system?

Most respondents saw this as a long timeframe with quotes of 5 to 10 years being quite common.

- What negotiations might be necessary and with whom for a Europe wide system?

Negotiations would have to take place at all levels. There must be a will on the part of governments, the quality agencies such as QAA and support from institutional leaders, vice chancellors in England. Then the excellent work already undertaken by the credit accumulation and transfer consortia, particularly SEEC, as these include the practitioners and have developed frameworks which have been tested over a period of years,

- What do you think would be the basic minimum requirements? For example common framework of levels, a common definition of a credit or more simply a common set of “tools” (E.g. Euro CV, European portfolio or Euro certificates).

The basic minimum requirement is a European-wide credit and qualifications framework based upon ways of measuring the volume and level of learning with

- A common definition of credit based on notional learning hours
- A common framework of levels, i.e. number of levels.
- An agreement to adhere to a set of Credit level descriptors and qualification descriptors

With a framework in place ALL learning could be recognised and accredited irrespective of its nature; formal, informal and non formal, to this would be added an APEL code of practice which would move towards a quality assured and consistent set of protocols for the accreditation of APEL

Conclusions

England is probably the country where there is the most experience of operating a quality assured process for the accreditation of informal and non-formal learning, where it is called APEL. Although there is no national scheme laid down by the government or the quality agencies, there is a wealth of good practical experience of good practice based upon the advice and guidance of credit consortia members. There is a national qualifications framework established by QAA which is in operation and is followed by the Higher Education institutions in England. Likewise there is a national qualifications framework for further education set up by QCA and implemented by the Awarding bodies. On the credit side, although there is no legislative CREDIT framework, for those institutions in HE using credit, there is a well established and well used credit framework with an acceptance of a common measure of credit (1 credit being awarded for 10 hours of notional student learning) which is also being rapidly accepted in the FE sector too. There is also a basis for determining the level of learning based upon via level descriptors (SEEC has recently extended its definitions of levels to include further education). Thus in practice there is already in operation a credit and qualifications framework (see tables 2 and 3 above) which is subscribed too by members of the consortia, SEEC, 37 institutions, of NUCCAT ,47 members and other institutions who are non-members.

APEL relates to the credit and qualifications framework and is treated in the same way as learning acquired in other ways and in other environments. QAA has not produced a code or guidelines for APEL, but in the process of producing **guidelines** for Learning outside Formal Teaching, LOFT. However those institutions applying APEL use or are strongly guided by the SEEC publication APEL A Code of Practice, revised and updated in January 2003. Thus institutions feel comfortable and confident in receiving on APEL decisions reached by others applying the principles contained therein. They have in short robust internal quality assured APEL processes.

The HEI respondents are adamant that any developments on the European front should NOT ignore the above, but rather build upon the extensive experience within England. This could be done in any number of ways including

- Using the EWNI Guidelines for the use of credit for HE qualifications

- Using the SEEC documentation on APEL as a basis for discussion and debate amongst member countries
- Involving SEEC consortia members in discussions, drawing on the wealth of practical experience
- Commissioning a number of case studies to illustrate how such a system works drawing on the long experiences of APEL users in England.

Appendix 2 List of responding organisations

Transfine project

organisation
Christ Church Canterbury University College, CCCUC
CCCUC Health Faculty
City University
Diocese of Oxford C.of E.
Institute of Directors
Institute of Management
Johnson Associates
Konrad Associates
London Institute, LCP
Middlesex University
NOCN
OCR
Open University
Oxford Brookes U/Ox Diocese
QCA
Thames Valley University
UCL
University. of Brighton, Nursing
University of Brighton
University of Derby
University of Surrey
University of Westminster

Country Report Scotland

The nature and extent of the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning within Scotland

A Political and Historical Context

The concept of the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) has been part of the educational vocabulary of Scotland since the mid-1980s. It is disappointing to note how slowly this form of accreditation has progressed during the subsequent two decades.

In the mid-1990s, some United Kingdom Higher Education Institutions began to produce serious work on APEL. In Scotland, the lead was taken by Glasgow Caledonian University who produced extremely interesting and useful documents, the best example of which is Accrediting Prior Experiential Learning: a manual for good practice in higher education (Reeve and Smith, 1996). This particular document, as well as proselytising the benefits of APEL, set out procedures and protocols which institutions could adopt in order to make APEL part of their credit portfolio. However, the last major educational paper produced before Scotland gained its own Parliament, Opportunity Scotland: a paper on lifelong learning (1998), hardly mentions APEL in its 73 pages on how Scotland's educational aspirations can be met through lifelong learning. Another significant paper, Skills for Scotland: a Skills Strategy for Competitive Scotland (1999) fails to mention APEL at all. APEL, during the 1990s disappeared from the political landscape. It has re-appeared with the Scottish Parliament's publication of the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee Report on Lifelong Learning (2002). Although relegated to Paragraphs 392 and 393, the statement and recommendation about APEL is very powerful.

392. One way of attracting people to learning is to offer credit based on learning they may have already done, formally or informally, at work or in the community. In education, this is called "Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning". The need for better, more transparent, accreditation of prior experiential learning was highlighted by, among others, the Universities Association for Continuing Education and the Scottish Management and Enterprise Council.

393. Recommendation: We recommend that the Executive should put a single agency in the lead on the development of better Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning.

It is surprising that, until recently, there seems to have been such a lack of political will with regard to APEL. Scotland has had a long-standing social openness to education. Indeed, this characteristic served to differentiate Scottish education from most of what happened in the rest of the United Kingdom and Europe. There has been, traditionally, a pride in those who advanced from humble beginnings through dint of hard work and using talents to the full. Underpinning this is a disguised commitment to the Human Capital model of economic progress. It is people as Human Capital who

matter. One would therefore expect that APEL would be extremely attractive to the state. There are real economic arguments for the state to encourage APEL. It gets people into education for little cost and allows people to get through education at reduced cost. Anything that reduces the cost of creating Human Capital should be attractive. However, a reason for the lack of emphasis on APEL has been the growth of opportunity to gain access to higher education through other means. Most Scottish universities offer an access programme or Summer Study programme for those wishing to enter by a non-traditional route. Within further education, the Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP) is very highly developed. If there are these FE-based community access programmes and in-house access programmes organised by universities, there is possibly no perceived need for APEL. Because of this, there has been no educational pressure to develop swift and efficient APEL systems. Because there are no swift and efficient systems, people tend to use access courses for entry. A vicious circle develops. Given the commitment to APEL in the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee Report on Lifelong Learning, APEL may begin to re-enter the arena of educational discourse.

Facts about APEL in Scotland

Where is APEL taking place?

There seems to be no mainstreaming of APEL within Scotland. It is not in the popular consciousness. There is no overall national framework for recognising and accrediting non-formal and informal learning in Scotland. There have been institutional developments, supported through some nationally funded development projects. It is an oversimplification (but with a strong element of truth) to state that it is only in the new universities that there is any institutional interest. This is because these institutions placed a greater emphasis on widening access to HE, especially for adult returners, and because they had a strong tradition of vocationally oriented provision. Within these institutions, however, there are only small pockets of commitment and these tend to be vocationally specific, e.g. in the areas of social work, nursing, and health studies. These are student groups who have substantial levels of practical work based experiential learning, and who are demanding a system which will recognise this learning, and give them credit for it. Very few Scottish higher education institutions provide an APEL service either for the provision of guidance and advice, or for assistance in preparing a portfolio. At present, only SQA and universities award credit (and a fortiori APEL credit). It can therefore be deduced that there is an inherent problem for anyone wishing to use APEL. By and large, it is only available in certain institutions, and only within certain vocational areas. Also, APEL in Scotland is more likely to be used in postgraduate programmes rather than for access to undergraduate programmes (Cleary et al, 2002).

There are work-based training programmes aiming to boost people through the identification of existing skills. These, however, are a means of getting people involved in education and there are often financial inducements to keep them progressing through the system. Work-training projects with an APEL component began in Scotland around 1987 but have since been in decline.

For what purpose is APEL being provided?

APEL is recognised as an important first step because it leads to people valuing themselves through recognition of their experience. There are, however, two different philosophical positions with regard to APEL:

Learning and training organisations, business, industry and commerce are interested in recognising professional work-based skills within a framework of qualifications. This is based on the argument that, if modern societies and economies are to develop and grow, education and training systems must be flexible enough to enable people to engage and re-engage with learning at various points in their career (Gallacher and Feutrie, 2003). This is a new form of capitalism (Gee et al, 1996) and will have APEL used within a clearly defined agenda and for credit. The Widening Access and Lifelong Learning community is more interested in using APEL to open up life's chances. There is, in this position, a concern related to social justice and social inclusion. There is a sense of danger that those whose participation in formal learning has been limited, and who have limited educational qualifications, will be increasingly excluded from society and citizenship. These two viewpoints become apparent when we examine how people are using APEL.

For entry to a course

In the past, APEL was used in professional areas such as Community Education, Social Work, Sport in the Community (if there was relevant experience) to allow accelerated progress with entry to the second or third year of a course. But, it has been found, for example in the area of Social Work that people admitted to courses on the basis of experience could not cope with the academic demands. Institutions have almost lost confidence in APEL as a predictor and tend to use it for entry to first year rather than a meaningful contribution to the degree. Even this has become weaker. Because of the Scottish funding regimes, students have to survive the first year. This means that any APEL tends to be bolstered by interviews, and an entry test.

To accelerate progress

This is very seldom used for individuals, because of the unpredictability of progress by those given accelerated entry into a programme. There is an interesting parallel with the use of vocational qualifications for entry to HE. Initially, possession of an HND gave entry to the third year of a degree course. Because of poor performance by these students, it then gave entry to second year. As the performance did not improve, the HND is now used as an entry qualification. Because of doubts

about APEL, work-based learning is often used as a replacement for APEL. Students are given some planned WBL instead of APEL. This WBL credit will be course-specific, e.g. Real Estate Management, and not used by any other course. APEL therefore becomes a prospective WBL claim that can be based on past experience. This is because APEL is often concerned with forms of knowledge that are not understood by academics.

Giving APEL to recognised cohorts, however, can be very effective and is used extensively in the area of nursing. Nurses studying part-time are often given APEL credit to accelerate their progress through a degree. Here, the types of knowledge acquired through experience are seen as significant and can be recognised through APEL.

To make up a credit deficit and allow graduation

In this case, APEL tends to be used for small bits of credit so as to avoid overlap. A good example is where APEL is used in Nursing Studies and Health Studies to top-up any credit deficit (normally 5-15 points) and so allow graduation. This is because of a mismatch of module sizes between institutions. For example, in Nursing Studies, Glasgow Caledonian has modules worth 20 credits while Paisley has modules worth 15 credits. Students moving between the two institutions can end up with a 5-15 point deficit. APEL is used to bridge the gap

What is being assessed or accredited?

It is difficult to actually determine what is being assessed or accredited in any APEL transaction. This difficulty hinges on the distinction between Mode 1 knowledge and Mode 2 knowledge. These terms are not particularly helpful. The French terms “Savoir théorique” and “Savoir faire” provide a better encapsulation of the distinction. Mode 1 knowledge is academic, based on scholarship, produced through the processes of research, and codified in academic curricula: in the 1960s, philosophers called this knowledge “knowing that”. Mode 2 knowledge is produced through action, outside the academy and may transcend traditional disciplinary boundaries: philosophers called this knowledge “knowing how”. Mode 2 knowledge is judged for its credibility through its relevance and is become increasingly important. The difficulty arises because APEL is based on Mode 2 knowledge and it is being assessed into a Mode 1 system. This will remain a problem until some equality of standing can be demonstrated within these two modes.

What methods or tools are being used?

APEL is normally for small amounts but, under the current regulations of those institutions committed to APEL, 300 credits out of 360 can be awarded by APEL. This will be in precise vocational areas such as Nursing Studies or Health Studies. The case is normally made through a piece of work completed (for small amounts of credit, e.g. an extended essay about reflective practice. For more substantial amounts of credit there will be a portfolio). Often, in nursing, this

will include old qualifications that were not credit-rated at the time, e.g. Theatre Sister. If the present Theatre Sister qualification is worth 60-80 credits, then a portfolio will have to be prepared. This leads to the problems of resources discussed earlier. As well as this however, there is the difficulty of the shelf life of qualifications and the implied difficulties for APEL.

How flexible and user-friendly are APEL procedures?

It is clear that APEL procedures, unless designed to deal with specific cohorts are inflexible, bureaucratic and very user-unfriendly. The National Project Report for Scotland, produced by the Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning, Social Inclusion through APEL: A Learners' Perspective (2001) notes a general feeling that APEL processes were time-consuming and complex in terms of the documentation required. Processes have to be simplified and guidelines for good practice are needed.

The Strengths and Weaknesses of the present system in Scotland

It is difficult to discern much strength in the present system. Indeed, to call it a system is to massively overstate the reality of what is happening. There is widespread ignorance about APEL throughout the Scottish educational system. There is no coherence within institutions about procedures, protocols or charges. Neither is there coherence among institutions with regard to funding or philosophical commitment to APEL.

On the other hand, much weakness can be identified, as well as several barriers to the widespread acceptance of APEL as a legitimate educational tool.

Lack of resources

The major problem holding back the spread of APEL within Scotland has been the lack of significant resources. APEL is very resource intensive in the short run. For APEL to work, it cannot be considered a marginal activity of lifelong learning and institutions. Only when it moves from the margins to the mainstream has it any chance of working. It has been suggested that APEL can be made more economic through the judicious use of IT. However, it is clear from the experience within Scotland that people are needed at the front end, interacting with those wishing to use APEL as part of their life plan. There has to be Guidance, a Procedural Stage in creating the portfolio, the Assessment of the portfolio, the Decision about the applicant. This is very labour-intensive if it for single one-off decisions. It can be more efficient if it is groups or cohorts that can be charged. There is, however, no coherence across the HE sector about charging for APEL services. APEL charging varies from:

A free service

A charge per credit

A charge per module

A proportion of the module fee

Subsequent credit inflation

This incoherence can lead to credit inflation, casting further doubt on APEL as a legitimate tool. Should the credits awarded be in module-sized amounts? This is an extremely attractive proposition to an educational institution for two reasons. Firstly, the effort of resource in assessing credits is not related to the credits awarded, i.e. to assess 5 credits is not one third of the effort of assessing for 15 credits. Secondly, those students are awarded credit through APEL that must make sense with reference to students progressing by more traditional methods. This leads to credit inflation through APEL: “We might as well give 15 credits rather than 10.” To avoid this, some institutions have developed special units within conventional undergraduate programmes. Called something like “make your Experience Count” they actually create space within an undergraduate programme for APEL to be slotted.

Funding problems

Because of the way in which higher education is funded in Scotland, it is vital that there is retention. Institutions are wary of using APEL as an entry mechanism because it is unclear what probability of retention is implied. The award of credit through APEL is not proof that a student can cope. The present funding model in Scotland means that first year at university is being used as a test-bed for future performance. Because of funding, students have to survive the first year, so any APEL is bolstered by interviews, and an entry test. In Scotland, the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council has capped student numbers. While this enables some sort of control on student numbers, it causes a quasi norm referencing which causes distinct problems for those wishing to gain entry or progression through APEL. For example, if someone with 72% can be admitted while someone with 71% cannot, why should someone with APEL get in? Unless special arrangements are made with the Funding Council regarding APEL, this capping of student numbers will remain a difficult problem. There seems to be no APEL strategy within the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council. When we set this against the cultural position within Scotland that, as education is worthwhile and a good thing, the State should be paying for it, there are clear problems ahead. Educational institutions within Scotland are in difficult financial times. Increases in funding are not able to match increases in salary and other costs. Most universities, for example, are offering voluntary redundancy schemes. In this climate, APEL is a financial threat. This is because if

someone gains entry through APEL into year two of a four-year degree course, the host institution will write off at least £3500.

Bureaucracy and the inflexibility of degree structures

It should be obvious that any APEL system has to be transparent and easy to understand. There is no possibility whatsoever of widening the appeal of APEL if consumers cannot understand what is required and providers feel bogged down in processes. There are very few educational institutions that provide an APEL service. Where they exist, procedures are unclear and bureaucratic. Allied to this is a perceived need for the development of more user-friendly degrees. Degree structures are too inflexible to allow appropriate use of APEL, so courses need to be broken down into units so that APEL can be matched. There is a feeling that APEL works best with generic degrees and it will be in higher demand when degree programmes become less rigid.

Ideological problems

Within Scotland, there are ideological problems surrounding APEL, but these have not clearly been voiced.

(a) The implied commitment to the Dominant Ideology

A commitment to APEL implies a commitment to the status quo. This is because any educational system is an encapsulation of a society's value system. Education is an intrinsic good because it enables people to think for themselves, to make decisions, to learn the merits of co-operation, facing up to challenges, and to become socially involved. That is, to become a good citizen. But signing up for credit implies an acceptance of the dominant order. Does APEL make people sign up to a dominant ideology that is not necessarily to their advantage? Sometimes an academic superstructure works against people's best interests. You can be in favour of APEL because it opens up the system, but you need to be confident that the system is worth opening up. This is an interesting argument but, of course, applies to credit generally and not just to credit awarded through APEL. A more refined version of this argument is being voiced within Scotland. It states that there is an inherent danger in APEL processes. What we expect people to do is recast their knowledge into forms (see the earlier Mode 1/Mode 2 distinction) that are deemed to be appropriate for accreditation. What this means, in effect, is that there is a move away from the experiential learning to something that is more readily understood by academics.

(b) Anti-educationalism

There is still an anti-education culture created by people's experience of initial education. There is a feeling within workers' associations and community educators that those brought into academic education by APEL will feel and be intimidated by the academic elitism of the university.

(c) Attitudes to vocational credit

In Scotland there is a wide resistance to APEL. Within Scotland, we are very proud of the process of education. However, as APEL is outside the traditional process it is resisted. If the process of education refines you, then you are second rate if you advance through APEL (because you have missed out the refining). We are proud of our educational standards and APEL is seen as inferior. In the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework, the SVQ column is seen as intrinsically inferior, having been described as “All right for other people’s children.” There is therefore a cultural opposition based on views of vocationalism and, hence, a “vocational” credit is unlike an “academic” or “real” credit. One cause of this cultural doubt is the massive proliferation of SQA modules and units within NC, HNC and HND catalogues. As so few are actually used, there are doubts about the robustness of the rest.

Informal and Non-formal education

The importance of informal and community based learning for many people, particularly those living in deprived circumstances cannot be exaggerated. Research has shown how participation in informal learning can be an important pathway into more formal learning. Community education often deals with individuals who are not ready or confident enough to embark on certificated learning. It has a vital role to play in terms of encouraging participation in lifelong learning. Voluntary and charitable organisations also make a substantial contribution to learning and first-steps type provision. However, given that “credit” in Scotland mean academic credit to be awarded by higher education institutions or the Scottish Qualifications Authority, it is clear that much of this activity could not be recognised by APEL systems.

Trade Unions have been recognised as key players in employee development and in progressing lifelong learning. Trade Unions are well placed to negotiate on training and development issues on their members’ behalf. However, what is the possible use of APEL when people in low-paid employment feel a lack of lifelong learning opportunities? APEL has little meaning for most TU members because the concept of accreditation is irrelevant or meaningless. How can those with no formal education ask for APEL? Where will they get the concept? In the supermarket chain Safeway, there is a project funded by the Scottish Union Learning Fund to encourage members of USDAW to take up learning opportunities in 14 stores. There is now a Union Learning Representative organising road shows in the supermarket canteen in negotiated breaks. However, credit does not figure largely in schemes like these.

As far as the Scottish economy is concerned, the aim is to get people started and so educational provision has to be local, low cost, and with no examinations. When we move from engagement to

the award of credit, we get into a hierarchy, and, hence, the ideological problems identified earlier. Credits have to be a “passport” and so engage people in education. APEL could give a flying start. But, for many people, what experience will they use? If they are still a shop assistant, what can they show to prove anything? This implies that APEL is for those who are already some way up a hierarchy. This has been stereotyped as “white, middle-class, male, aged 25-35”, and as we have seen, mostly used in postgraduate programmes.

Is there a National Framework or qualifications structure that APEL can link to?

The educational system in Scotland is very advanced by designing an all-encompassing framework from age 14 years onwards. It is called the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF). Vocational, technical and academic education are all in the framework, all underpinned by the concept of notional student effort. Much hope has been placed on the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF). This framework has the potential to underpin a coherent and accessible lifelong learning system in Scotland, but the effective use of the framework will be crucial in realising this potential. It is crucial to the progress of APEL that the framework is embedded in the public consciousness and, crucially, in Scottish higher education institutions.

A key element in the SCQF is what is called “Parity of Esteem”. People’s perceptions of the various routes open to them are formed by a range of influences, key among which is the fact that vocational routes tend to be less highly valued than academic routes. Indeed, the vocational route can be used as a threat and equated with failure. This apparent lack of parity of esteem for different columns in the Credit Framework is a crucial issue, which must be overcome, especially for the promotion of APEL. Opportunity Scotland (p. 62) states that “Highers in History and Hospitality, for example, will be equally challenging.”

The SCQF is an integrated unified framework incorporating the qualifications of the main awarding bodies in Scotland. These are the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) and degree-awarding Scottish higher education institutions. The framework therefore includes all major qualifications from schools, colleges, workplaces and universities. “Any kind of learning can be assessed and placed within the framework, so it has the potential to provide a single reference point for learners and employer.” (Lifelong Learning Report, par. 118). Note that the report indicates that any kind of learning, and, ipso facto, Experiential Learning, can be assessed and placed within the framework. “The credit point will be exactly the same (10 notional hours of learning time) whether someone is at the early stages of school, in a further education college, in a professional statutory body or

learning anywhere in Scotland. A common unit of credit will run through absolutely everything. One of our important goals is to bring about that simplicity.” (QAA Official Report, Jan 2002)

The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework

SCQF Level	SQA national units, courses and group awards	Higher Education	SVQ	SCQF Level
12		Doctorate		12
11		Masters Degree	SVQ 5	11
10		Honours degree		10
9		Ordinary Degree		9
8		HND, Dip HE	SVQ 4	8
7	Advanced Higher	HNC, Cert HE	SVQ 3	7
6	Higher		SVQ 3	6
5	Intermediate 2 Credit Standard Grade		SVQ 2	5
4	Intermediate 1 General Standard Grade		SVQ 1	4
3	Access 3, Foundation Standard Grade			3
2	Access 2			2
1	Access 1			1

Columns 1 and 5 indicate the levels of qualification: Scottish qualifications are divided into 12 distinct levels. Column 2 contains the types of qualifications available in school or in non-advanced further education. Column 3 has to do with the higher education qualifications available in higher education institutions and in further education. Column 4 indicates the 5 levels of Scottish Vocational Qualifications. It can be seen that an APEL claim can, theoretically, be given a credit amount together with a credit level. To provide a shared understanding of each level and to help differentiate between levels and facilitate the positioning of learning and qualifications on to the system of levels, general descriptors of the learning at each level are being developed. This will be completed in terms of relative demand, complexity and depth of learning, learner autonomy, and links to associated academic, professional or vocational practice. Naturally, given the complexity of learning, these statements can be neither precise nor comprehensive, but general and meaningful. As, almost by definition, APEL will be calculated on the basis of the SVQ column, what are these Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs)? SVQs are structured into a system of five levels. These

range from Level 1, covering jobs which involve a range of tasks, most of which fall into a pattern and do not change, up to Level 5 which covers senior management functions. They are related to competence at work rather than the successful achievement of a particular course and so should be particularly amenable to APEL. For every SVQ there are national standards: for every unit in every SVQ there are national standards. Therefore National Occupational Standards underpin SVQs. The aim is for every unit to be allocated credit points at a level in the Framework. The SCQF has been given massive funding to hasten its development and push it into the lifelong learning agenda. It is imperative that this framework becomes part of Scottish consciousness and provides proper facilities for APEL. Within SCQF will there be a difference between credit awarded by APEL and other sources? No! If we are confident in the processes there will be no difference. The parallel is between a p/t degree and a f/t degree. But, in the short term, it will probably be recognised as “credit awarded by APEL”. This will lead to the problem of how widely recognised it will be across the United Kingdom (much less Europe!) It therefore needs a QAA to look at the processes and awards. The way in which universities and colleges do this are assured by QAA or equivalent. In this way credit becomes assured credit. There has to be robust internal assurance processes that are used to guarantee the worthiness of credit plus an external body to assure this. In this way, all credit, irrespective of its provenance, is worthy.

A European Framework?

The notion of a Europe-wide system for APEL is extremely attractive. It will enable institutions and employers to recognise and have confidence in the learning and qualifications that were acquired through APEL in other countries by incoming workers. An integrated APEL system can therefore aid the movement of workers throughout Europe. Naturally, there has to be a mutual acceptance, so that APEL credits or recognition obtained through SCQF will be recognised in other countries. However, given the different way in which education and training systems have developed in Europe, it is difficult to visualise a common set of protocols. It would seem that a domestic framework is crucial. SCQF is for Scotland: if other countries do not have the same sort of framework, then how can APEL and qualifications be portable? A common European framework for APEL seems therefore to be premised on the idea of other countries designing similar frameworks that can be mapped. This will be difficult: the proposed Harmonisation of European Qualifications does not augur well. If there are difficulties within countries, it is clear that Europe-wide systems will be impossible. However, if there are other domestic frameworks in the countries of Europe, the prospects of SCQF dovetailing are high. The further development of SCQF that will clarify the levels, relationships and relative weights of Scottish qualifications means that, theoretically, any integration with European awards frameworks in the future should be relatively

straightforward. SCQF can be related to ECTS on time-based equivalents. Through ECTS, credit gained through APEL is as secure as any other type of credit and can be transferred to other countries. This, however, implies that each country has appropriate quality assurance arrangements in place with regard to the conferring of APEL credits.

Scotland has a criterion-referenced system of educational achievement. There may be difficulties if other countries use a norm-referenced system.

Conclusion

APEL in Scotland is still very poorly developed. At present, it appears that there are major difficulties to be overcome if there is to be a more widespread use and acceptance of APEL. Until APEL is more fully integrated into public discourse about learning, it will remain at the margins. To be brought into the mainstream, however, will require major changes in the way in which education is funded, of an order that has been described as “beyond contemplation”. Until appropriate funding is offered, we are just tinkering to make the educational system look fairer and more accessible.

Country Report Northern Ireland

The nature and extent of the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning within Northern Ireland

The role of credit in the future development of education in Northern Ireland is central both to the provision of enhanced opportunity for non-traditional learners and the delivery of a flexible service to learners who require different modes of access. The ideology of credit is a framework for embedding the concept of lifelong learning within institutions and for addressing the issues of curriculum, assessment, learning and the learner needs. It is important to note that credit may be conceptualized in instrumental terms as a mechanistic system for exchange; from this perspective knowledge is considered as taxonomy of itemized cognitive segments that are tradable across educational markets. Such a view ignores the situated and contextual nature of knowledge and the cultural diversity that has resulted in varied modes of understanding across communities. A strategy that is evidence-based will facilitate diversity, recognition and credibility across learning communities provided that the value-imbued nature of the credit procedures is approached in a critical manner. In the context of modularity, credit accumulation and transfer schemes and flexible approaches to learning and assessment, describing structured blocks of learning have recently been developed across the Northern Ireland Education system. The impact of these developments is not yet clear as the systems need to be matched against the needs and resources of communities; the basic infrastructure has, however, been put in place. The learning benefits have percolated beyond the specific purposes of their initiation (Moon, 1995; Otter, 1992), and have opened up new realms of opportunities for learners. The impact of learning outcomes for example in further and higher education and vocational curricula (including the workplace) has demonstrated a shift not only in method but more importantly in thinking, placing the learner at the heart of the learning experiences (O'Hagan, 2000; Kolb, 1983; Dewey, 1938).

The need for the widening of participation in relation to excluded sections of Northern Ireland society has been recognised by the Westminster Northern Ireland Affairs Committee (1997: 35-43) which pointed to the hiatus between increasing university participation and “the significant minority of young people [who] emerge from 12 years of compulsory schooling unable to read a simple text”. This has led to concern that sections of the population maybe confined with areas where educational disadvantage is compounded by unemployment, poor health and exclusions from the mainstream economy. Central to the debate about a credit framework, therefore is inter-agency co-operation and a commitment to the concepts of access, equality and comprehension (NICATS, 2003; Robertson, 1994). Accessibility and flexibility, valued and accepted as key components of a lifelong learning policy, need to be incorporated into the policies and practices of educational and

training organisations (NICATS, 2003) in a manner that facilitates coherence and comprehension (DENI, 1999). In this sense, the key issues centre on access policies (McAleavy et al, 2002; Field and Spence, 1999; UCAS, 1999), curriculum design (UDACE, 1992), accreditation structures and procedures (NICATS, 2003) and teaching methods (Knapper and Cropley, 1997; Dearing, 1997).

This study of Northern Ireland¹ has therefore explored two specific areas of the accreditation of prior learning including both the recognition of formal and informal learning. The first was an exploratory study of policy initiatives and government targets in relation to ‘Access to formal Education’. The second phase of the study involved an investigation of academic courses and associated curriculum techniques employed, informed by previous investigative studies. The aim of this investigation was to assess the current accessibility and flexibility of courses (procedures for recognizing informal learning within a formal setting) offered across a range of educational and vocational sectors. A comparison of structures within the education system and national policy movements has provided a framework for this empirical investigation. Experts in the field of further and higher education, representative of community, voluntary and employment sectors have offered information in support of this report. The standardized questionnaire was employed to gauge an insight into the processes and objective progress of policy arrangements together with an audit of policy documents. Respondents have included the University of Ulster, the Queens University at Belfast and the Association of Northern Ireland Colleges and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority.

Various coherent themes have emerged, with conceptual issues and philosophical contentions appearing. The policy and regulatory findings reinforce the practical (on the ground) findings, offering diverse structural information. Generally, the study has elicited two focal points of interest:

- Conceptual diversity
- Structural Deficits

The report will continue by examining each of these points of interest using the report outline below:

Government Perspectives; Formal educational institutions; Employers and social partners; Voluntary and Youth associations; a European system.

¹ See Appendix 1 for overview of Northern Ireland Education System

Government perspectives (Ministries concerned with education, employment, youth)

The most urgent task for the government came with the review of Higher Education in 1997 and the impact of the NVQ model in the UK. Various initiatives evolved, funded by government, for example the Northern Ireland Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (NICATS, 1996-1999) Project which aimed to ‘reflect the concern with widening access to and participation in... learning’, facilitating the idea that ‘properly constructed schemes...’ for the recognition and transfer of prior achievements, must be offered (NICATS, 1997). The key aim of government, in relation to formal and informal credit recognition, is to develop a single credit framework across Further Education (FE), Higher Education (HE) and other providers of post-16 education and training in Northern Ireland. It is reported that such a framework will ‘support the operation of a regional...UK national [and European] CAT system’ (NICATS, 2003). The intention is that a single framework will offer students the opportunity to progress and transfer within a series of specified pathways, at different levels, whilst translating credit coherently and systematically. Such a scheme would be designed to dismantle barriers and put in place the necessary structural components, in line with similar operations in England, Scotland and Wales (NICATS, op cit). To ensure comparability across the U.K. and member states the NICATS project has developed a coherent set of specifications with clearly designed descriptors, which have been informed by the various CAT projects which have proceeded including that of the South East England Consortia and the New Zealand framework for CATS. The NICATS initiative, whilst informing the sector, is also closely aligned to the National Qualifications Framework and recommendations from reviews in Further Education in Northern Ireland. Consultations with post-18 providers have commenced and are ongoing. Higher Education institutions, in particular, though supportive of the developing framework for the acceptance and recognition of credit equivalences, require information and clarification in relation to the value and application of such a framework. Currently, accreditation opportunities have been at the lower levels (up to level 3). Specifications, using a NICATS model, will require further investigations to be carried out across sectors. The drive towards a unified system is no doubt augmented by the fact that a project like Transfine is now being undertaken. An integrated model of credit, however, will have to address the diversity of knowledge types that have been developed and create space for communities to bring forward their own models of social learning and become involved in the decision-making process. This, in part, is the current difficulty, which underlies the work that has already taken place in Northern Ireland. Many practitioners have reported, across sectors, that the systems, that afford recognition to prior formal and informal learning experiences remain developmental and largely driven by financial exigency and the need

of providers to recruit more students (entry) in order to satisfy funding requirements. The vocational sectors (community, voluntary and the workplace), as a result of their experience with the NVQ model; offer a degree of flexibility that allows students to present evidence from a negotiated set of instances/work experiences. Very often this process of accreditation, though based on a plural model of credit recognition, operates through developing the student by means of the presentation of an achievement-based approach to prior learning (Bailie et al, 2000). Maximising participation and achievement in education and training through the development [not least, implementation] of a unified system for the recording of credit will only succeed if educational and employment sectors understand and value the process of experiential learning. In higher education, in the graduate market, there is a need [still] for higher education institutions to progress toward a part-time educational provision. With this, obviously, comes the need for recognised and valued procedures, which facilitate adult learners in progressing through an awards structure at a pace suitable to them, with defined pathways and opportunities for progression. Traditionally [albeit informally in most cases] further and higher education has offered access opportunities to adults, particularly at graduate levels by recognising prior and informal learning. The process has seldom involved a structured system other than the use of traditional interviews for decision making purposes. Some informal systems have, however, endured through the various social and human sciences departments, possibly owing to the practices developed by professional and adult education domains and the relationships with communities which may have evolved.

Formal educational institutions (universities, vocational schools, private training organisations)

The University of Ulster supported the development of the NICATS project, funded by the Department of Education in Northern Ireland (now DEL). The University has also developed an educational model for the accreditation of prior learning within the School of Education as a result of a DENI funded four year HEFCE project on APL. Such initiatives, together with many other exploratory CATS projects e.g. in the School of Nursing and in Social Work, have in some way aided the developments of University Curriculum in terms of projects currently running in the area of Workplace Learning and Practice-based Studies. Many in Higher Education still present the view, however, of APL [isolated and course-based] as an instrument that is mainly used for access to and credit exemption within education. By their own admission, NICATS representatives have reported that awarding and regulatory bodies are not yet ‘ready to accept’ a credit culture, therefore, the principles of a future CATS framework which will be all-inclusive, though opportunistic, is reliant on the additional influence of a future policy strategy which involves a range of credit forms.

We would suggest this strategy must offer a framework which enables credit to be mapped to different curriculum models. To establish what is being proposed in order to widen participation through student choice, flexibility of award structure and opportunities for accreditation (NICATS, 2003; DEL, 1998) it is necessary to define a credit culture. This may be considered in relation to the core principles and objective manifestations its application explores.

Language change, in this context, may initially appear unimportant. The importance of the change in language is, in building a culture, moreover representative of a process that is much more than a re-naming semantic exercise. Whether we agree with the changes [apparent or not], modularised course structures are now something that are seen as conforming to student calls for flexibility and the recognition of educational achievement (Field and Spence, 1997). The demand and need for change (Dearing, 1997), has not yet fully been appreciated within the university system. It could be said that we continue in Higher Education to offer a ‘phantom modular’ (Watson and Taylor, 1998) structure. The current trends, post-Dearing, are making use of the following elements of curriculum in terms of design features: units of study (learning outcomes); potentially portable credit; multi-level award structures (stopping off points); individualised as well as group-customised programmes of study; and the acceptance of study for personal as well as professional development (Watson and Taylor, 1998; NICATS, 1998, 2000). Though no conclusion in relation to the framework approach or number of different frameworks has been offered by Robertson [who has led our thinking nationally], the Northern Ireland Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (NICATS) project, now managed by the Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) has adopted a position of working from the compositional ‘bottom up’ approach in the design of a credit framework for Northern Ireland. Robertson (in considering all of the evidence) offered many guiding principles. First in explaining the term ‘credit’ he offers three paradigms: compositional, impositional and competence-based. The choice of model clearly conveys more than a straightforward strategy requirement; it outlines all of the associated attributes: the curriculum model, the assessment model, the framework needed for change and so on.

Credit, Modules and Learning Outcomes

The debate about defining levels of achievement in terms of outcomes continues (Otter, 1992). The Robertson review revealed a very uneven commitment to the importance of level by module or year in universities. It is regarded as and accepted that the level of undergraduate attainment supports progression to final degree, whilst coinciding naturally with the structure of the full-time degree, with a general acceptance of what Masters level is. Some see the articulation of such rigorous attributes, for the purpose of credit, as artificial devices for managing progression (Robertson, 1996: 131). Many are of the opinion, nonetheless, that properly defined levels of attainment will simplify

and clarify (as well as assure quality and accountability for all involved) the meaning of education, including higher education. The argument is based on the notion that knowledge and skills must be written in terms of output (NCVQ, 1997) or outcomes statements (Otter, op cit).

Here lies the problem for a unified system of credit. The HE curriculum model, inherited from CNAAB, is traditionally a compositional paradigm (where a programme is partitioned and measures of learning or workload are central to the credit tariff given; a top-down approach). The NICATS framework specification has been configured essentially from the impositional curriculum model (bottom-up), where the smallest possible denominator (unit of assessment) is awarded credit. To add to the difficulties such a continuum of approaches brings, the vocational model [which to some extent has led to the ideological acceptance of learning outcomes in education and training] has derived from a competence-based model of credit (where each outcome is batched into a group which carries credit).

The difficulty surrounding higher education, in particular, may be explained by a brief re-examination of the findings of the UDACE Learning Outcomes in Higher Education Project (UDACE, 1992). The question that remains unanswered to a certain extent is '*What can graduates do?*' Despite the effort of the project, the answer remains fuzzy. This is not to say, as Robertson put it, 'we do not know what our graduates can do', moreover we have difficulty in defining it. Many projects have investigated the HE curriculum model and the idea of graduate competence. Such projects have reported that to search for the ultimate precision may in a sense unravel, in an unproductive manner, the higher education sector that has been created. The desire for an outcomes evidential language nonetheless continues (Dearing, 1997). NCVQ (now QCA) in the 80s focused attention on the idea of qualifications that are based on outcomes and evidence of learning, rather than on input associated products and processes. This approach to course and standard specification is now more familiar to further education. Learning outcomes are, however, recommended language for module design (QAA, 1999) in higher education. In the Republic of Ireland this picture is very similar. According to findings to date the Higher Education sector (though somewhat different to HE in the UK, see appendix 2) remains un-modularized. This is something, which is, however, changing rapidly with the new vocational awards structure and the development of standards and credit-point systems. It remains contested in higher education, however, both in the UK (Robertson, op cit) and in ROI (see interview schedule with HE representative). Many, including proponents of credit systems (Robertson, 1996) would suggest the damaging consequences of the idea of an outcome-based culture e.g. 'intruding pseudo-objective and mechanistic measures' would possibly damage the higher education process and therefore 'should be resisted'. All too often the idea itself is resisted when it is misinformed. Reconsidering the

mechanisms and technical requirements remain the challenge. Rather than performance indicators, many universities have introduced outcome-based statements that have helped refine the curriculum in terms of learning inputs, the process, strategies and methodologies of assessment and the overall relational meaning of the curriculum in terms of credit and content. It has been suggested that the process of learning should be at the hub of the lifelong learning wheel (Bailie and OHagan, 2000), and that learning outcomes are but a mere element albeit an essential ingredient.

The notion now, in Northern Ireland, of a credit culture which will unify the qualifications offered is something to be viewed as valuable and achievable. To undertake this challenge, however, will call for a more open approach to specification. To move the curriculum model of further and higher education closer together would be a more valuable tool in order to enhance opportunities for curriculum transferability, transparency and currency. Much work remains for the NI CCEA.

Employers and social partners

The first NICATS implementational phase met the challenge of establishing a unit (physical environment), develop and maintain links with the sectors (formal providers across FE, HE, employers and other authorities e.g. QCA, CCEA, UfI) and in developing a database and template electronic credit transcript to underpin the accreditation process [something that may be introduced]. This work has clearly been successful; however, a new central body (CCEA) are now tasked with the chore of consolidation and the complex need for further discussion in relation to currency values across the educational fields. The national qualifications framework (NQF) and the higher education qualifications framework (HQF), with the work of NICATS has influenced the developments of qualifications and has been successful in advising stakeholders of the operation of the agreed framework in most sectors. This work has also been coordinated within the FE sectors across England, Scotland and Wales [of recent times the Republic of Ireland who are developing their own National Framework]. The support of awarding bodies, particularly in relation to FE curriculum, through QCA and CCEA will obviously aid future developments across the national boundaries. The framework is currently developing further links with the new National Qualifications Authority in Northern Ireland (NQAI). They are working closely with other UK credit bodies to monitor developing European Credit Transfer systems in the context of the Bologna Agreement and are actively working to articulate with emergent models. They have already begun work with the South Africa Qualifications Authority in this respect.

A 'holding operation' (NICATS, 2003) however is now in place where the DEL await the outcomes of the current review (commissioned by the Secretary of State at Westminster) to be undertaken by the Department for Education and Skills, the QCA and the Learning and Skills Council.

NICATS, in particular, in representing the future opportunities of the FE sector, has reached a crucial point in terms of strategic possibilities. Negotiations will be needed in order to move the system forward with NI CCEA and DEL in terms of a European System.

Voluntary and Youth associations

Significant work has taken place across the voluntary and youth sectors in Northern Ireland, in particular projects like 'Making Belfast Work' and the 'Springvale Initiative' (now being merged with the Belfast Institute of Further and Higher Education). Various vocational accreditation projects have been undertaken across the province where socially excluded groups have been given the opportunity to undertake training and certified learning opportunities. Areas like community and development and crafts has been offered in support of making sustainable links across neighbouring communities, particularly across women's groups in Northern Ireland but also in areas where men would partake, e.g. agriculture and fishing. Accreditation has on occasion been offered, particularly in vocational areas such as child-care and computing (e.g. ECDL). Appendix 3 offers an overview of some of the recent findings from the Local Initiatives to Combat Social Inclusion (LOCIN) database (<http://locin.jrc.it/>).

Individuals see any advantage of a European system

Central to the struggle, for equality of opportunity and the integration of socially excluded groups, is the development of a system whereby access routes into education for adults is now a basic assumption. Over the last decade, a number of countries, inside and outside European, have introduced various systems for the recognition of formal and informal learning, identifying and validating prior certified and experiential learning. We would suggest that priority has been given to learning achieved across formal education and training settings, therefore widening opportunities for the recognition of formal (certified) learning. This does not always involve adult learners, particularly in Northern Ireland, where many providers of adult education have difficulty in recruiting adult learners [with the exception of postgraduate students and an array of part-time professional courses]. The recognition of prior experiential (informal) learning or learning acquired outside formal training and education settings has been developed primarily within the workplace, through vocational courses. Work must continue nationally and across awarding institutions and bodies in order to develop a suitable framework [recognizing all curriculum models] for the

accumulation and transfer of credit. A European system, with such a vast array of models of credit, will facilitate national networks.

In the University of Ulster, Campus One (<http://campusone.ulst.ac.uk>) [the University's Virtual Campus] aims to widen global learning opportunities. As eLearning gains ground rapidly, as a tool for increased learning opportunities, regional Universities will increasingly be required to recognize learning achieved from various settings. A European system would sustain such important developments world-wide.

Appendix I

Transfine Project – UK Study Headline Comments

- The Assessment or Accreditation of Prior and Experiential Learning (APEL) is the shorthand term used to denote the recognition of informal and non-formal learning in the UK
- No UK wide system of APEL, but sub-systems which sometimes link up, through credit accumulation and transfer
- Long established APEL services can be found throughout the UK offered by some universities, colleges, professional bodies, employers, voluntary organisations
- APEL in HE has existed as an organised activity since the early 1980's, at which time it was seen largely as a response to demographic changes, leading to an undersupply of 18 yr-old HE entrants
- Shared practice, protocols and operating standards are evident across varied APEL arrangements. Informed for example by codes of practice, reports, guidance, research publications and a preoccupation with national quality assurance systems
- Access to APEL services limited to some education providers, professional bodies and similar organisations
- Enormous variation in APEL activity from very informal to highly formal. A complex continuum of APEL provision spanning these two points exists across the UK
- Practice based professional bodies (e.g. social work, nursing) are more engaged in APEL than other professions
- Commonly used “tools” as part of the APEL process include, portfolios, reflective essays, progress reports, simulations, interviews
- Strong support for European developments which might facilitate increased opportunities for APEL leading to greater demand for UK APEL services. Links with ECTS could be useful.
- Recognition that reciprocal agreements at regional, national and European level between institutions may in turn lead to better support being available for existing or indeed future APEL services
- Methods in use as part of APEL services include: learner portfolios, reflective reports, essays, challenge tests, credit records, prior qualification, progress files in FE/HE
- Main strengths of existing APEL systems, seen as rigorous, transparent assessment processes, APEL part of mainstream and therefore subject to broader regulatory institutional requirements. APEL seen as part of widening access to lifelong learning opportunities
- Main weaknesses of APEL systems: over bureaucratic, resource hungry, lacks credibility for some, marginal activity, absence of unified credit framework, staff resistance as APEL is seen to be a threat to entry requirements
- National (Scottish) Vocational Qualifications (N(S)VQ) system provides access to accreditation for learners with claims to have already achieved a level of competence consistent with the requirements of a specific unit.

- Weak links between APEL services within the vocational qualification framework and academic framework.
- Employers with social partners have been active partners in specifying the occupational standards, which form the basis of the N(S)VQ framework which enables APEL claims.

The newly created Foundation Degrees include employers as part of the development and validation process. This qualification (depending on the providing institution) will offer opportunities for APEL.

Appendix II



Introduction/Background

TRANSFINE is a major European partnership project built around an inner circle of five European networks covering the field of Socrates, Leonardo and Youth: EUCEN (lead partner), EAEA (adult education), FIEEA (youth and voluntary sector), AEFP (vocational training), and SEFI (engineering education). This inner circle is responsible for carrying out the work to achieve the objectives of the project but works with an outer circle of experts and stakeholders for information, advice and feedback on the results as they emerge. Phase II of the project involves the preparation of country studies. The UK has been selected as one of the five country studies which will feed into the main report which in turn will shape the specification of a future European Commission call for project bids in the field of transfer between formal, informal and non-formal education. The report will cover the “state of play” in the field of recognition and accreditation of informal and non-formal learning in the UK at the present time and the feasibility of a Europe wide “architecture” for recognition. As the UK has been a leading developer of APEL systems and credit accumulation and transfer services, it is anticipated that its country study will make a major contribution to the final report.

The attached Experts Questionnaire will form an important source of information for the report, and therefore your response and other information provided will be a vital part of the data collected. In order for a comparative analysis to be undertaken between the five country studies, a common set of actors have been identified as well as a shared set of questions or themes, which form the basis of the Experts Questionnaire.

Completing the Questionnaire

Please provide full information in relation to all sections of the questionnaire and if need be, please feel free to consult with other colleagues if you are not able to complete any section. Equally, if any question is unclear and you would like clarification, please contact me. Full contact details are given at the end of the questionnaire. Further details of the TRANSFINE project can be found at the project website which is www.transfine.net.

Please note that in this questionnaire we have used the shorthand “APEL”. However, the European Commission is interested in the idea of a comprehensive architecture that would include records of achievement, portfolios, CVs as tools for informal recognition as well as very formal or informal accreditation arrangements. If you have informal arrangements as well as or instead of formal APEL systems, please report these in question 4.6.

A full acknowledgement will be given in the report to all expert respondents, although no responses made or information provided will be attributed to individual respondents.

Thank you very much for your response,

John Storan, UK Study Co-ordinator

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TRANSFINE Experts Questionnaire

1. Name:-----

Organisation / Institution:-----

Address: -----

Tel: -----

E-mail:-----

2. Type of organisation or field of activity

Please tick the appropriate box(es).

Higher Education Adult Education

Further Education Youth/Voluntary Sector

Vocational Employer

Work-based training Trade Union

Other, please specify:-----

3. Questions on existing APEL arrangements

3.1 Where is APEL taking place in your area? (E.g. particular institution, course, professional area?)

3.2 For what purpose are APEL services being provided? (E.g. entry progression, award credit and/or qualifications)

3.3 What is being assessed or accredited? (E.g. learning outcomes, work based learning, individual/social experience)

3.4 What methods or tools are being used as part of the APEL system? (E.g. portfolios, formal test/assessments)

3.5 Who is undertaking the assessment or accreditation of prior learning? (E.g. trainers, teachers, approved assessors)

3.6 Please describe the APEL systems and structures which have been put in place in your organisation or sector.

3.7 Is there one or more APEL systems operating in your area? Please give brief details.

3.8 How flexible and user-friendly would you rate your APEL service as being?

Not at all Moderately Highly

3.9 Please describe the main strengths and weaknesses.

Strengths: -----

Weaknesses: -----

4. Background

4.1 Briefly explain how your APEL service came about.

4.2 Would you describe your APEL service as a top-down or bottom-up? Please tick the appropriate box.

Top down Bottom-up

4.3 Who are the main stakeholders involved?

4.4 What are the main elements or building blocks of your APEL system? (E.g. credits, learning outcomes, levels)

4.5 Is there a national framework or qualifications structure that your APEL service links to? Please give details.

4.6 Are there any informal arrangements for recognising and valuing learning? Please give brief outline.

5. Towards a European wide system for APEL. (This section invites you to comment on the potential for developing a European wide set of arrangements to enable the transfer of informal and non-formal education.)

5.1 What do you think about the development of a Europe-wide framework for recognising and accrediting informal and non-formal learning? Please tick the appropriate box against one of the following ratings.

Not Needed → → → → Essential
1 2 3 4 5

Please explain briefly the reasons for your rating:

5.2 In order to gauge your overall opinion on the pro's and con's of a Europe wide system, please look at the issues and questions listed below and give a summary response to all or some.

- Would the key stakeholders be able to recognise learning that was acquired outside the country
- Would they expect/need the learning acquired outside the formal system in their own country to be recognised in another country
- Are there any legal obstacles that you can see to a Europe wide system
- Are there any cultural, political, economic... obstacles
- What problems would be posed by using something like ECTS as the basis of a Europe wide system
- What sort of time frame could be envisaged for linking the existing arrangements (or creating new ones) with a Europe wide system
- What negotiations might be necessary and with whom for a Europe wide system
- What do you think would be the basic minimum requirements? For example common framework of levels, a common definition of a credit or more simply a common set of "tools" (E.g. Euro CV, European portfolio or Euro certificates).

