



Accredited Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) Guidance for participants

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This material covers the fundamentals of APEL as it is used within the University of Hertfordshire. It is intended to be as practical as possible and has deliberately been created using a 'Frequently Asked Questions' style.

APEL is defined and described, and the ways in which it can be linked to University programmes is outlined.

There are slides covering experiential learning and reflection and the ways in which academic levels and descriptors can guide written work and assessment. Also outlined are the nature and volume of evidence and the ways in which theory can be woven into your work to make it evidence and theory based.

Some guidance on a writing style appropriate to APEL is also offered.

What is APEL?

APEL stands for **A**ccredited **P**rior **E**xperiential **L**earning

In other words, what have you learned from your experience which might be relevant to the course of study you are about to undertake?

Your learning is likely to be work related but there may be other things you have done outside work which could be relevant. Your experiential learning is just as valuable as that gained from a formal course of study, and as it is personal and often linked to repeated experience, you are unlikely to forget it!

How can I use APEL in my course?

This will depend on the course structure. In some cases, APEL can be used for large claims which may exempt participants from large parts of a course, perhaps as much as three quarters.

In other cases, APEL may be claimed against perhaps a single module. Your APEL tutor should have discussed this with you so that you know what you are expected to do to make a claim of the appropriate size.

Your APEL tutor will also explain the idea of academic levels of study to ensure that you are demonstrating that your learning is at the required level – see slide 10.

What does an APEL claim consist of?

It involves putting together a portfolio of material which usually consists of written work, in which you will explore and explain your learning at a particular academic level (see slide 10) plus evidence of your learning and achievement. Your APEL tutor will give you guidance and a structure to work with, including paperwork in a set format, so that you can create your claim.

Before you start to grapple with the task, you might like to think about your experience, perhaps using your job description, to remind you of the full scope of what you are doing now, and your CV, if you have one, to remind you of how you got to where you are now.

What experience is a claim based on?

Think about your work. What sort of things have you had a lot of experience of?

For example:

Policy development

Document design

Project management

Team leadership

Designing administrative systems

Managing change

Managing risk

Technological innovation

Quality assurance

All of these, and a wide variety of other work activities, general and specialist, may form the starting point for an APEL claim, and a big claim may explore more than one of the above, possibly in combination, such as developing a risk management policy.

Your APEL tutor will help you to choose which area(s) of your learning and development to focus on.

How can I link my experience to my learning?

You need to indulge in a bit of reflective practice:

'Reflection is an important human activity in which people recapture their experience, think about it, mull it over and evaluate it.' (Boud et al 1985:19)

Think of the previous slide and apply the reflective cycle below to something you have been involved in, such as policy development. Remember that this cycle can be applied to longer term events lasting weeks, months or even longer as well as short, sharp, 'critical incidents'.

The Reflective Cycle (Gibbs 1998)

Start at the top and go
clockwise



What do I actually write about? 1

Take the example of policy development

What is the area of practice concerned? This sets the work context.

Why was a new or revised policy needed? Was there a change in practice, technology, or legislation perhaps? Explain.

How did you start?

Who did you involve and why? Did you choose, and if so, how, or were some people forced on you for 'political' reasons?

How did you ensure that your developing policy was up to date? Explain how you found the literature to give your policy its evidence base and any problems with interpretation of the evidence.

continued...

What do I actually write about? 2

continued from slide 8...

Did you set a time frame for development? What were the factors guiding this?

Did you have meetings of the team concerned? If you did, how did you manage them? If you didn't, why not? Did they go well?

How did you manage the policy drafts? Did you use technology in a simple or sophisticated way here?

What problems did you encounter and how did you deal with them? Problems with people, problems with finding resources, problems with 'events'?

What was the eventual outcome? Did you end up with what you expected/intended?

How and when will you be evaluating the effectiveness of the new policy?

Crucially, what did you learn from all this? This is vital for a successful APEL claim!

How much depth of discussion is needed?

Remember the mention of academic 'levels' in slides 4 and 5?

The next few slides will explain the idea of academic levels and level 'descriptors' and how they relate to University awards. They explain how assessors are able to tell, by using the descriptors, if you are writing at a level which is appropriate to your intended claim.

You will use a specially prepared form on which the level descriptors appropriate to the level of your claim are printed, and you will be required to explore and explain your learning in relation to them, cross referencing to evidence, and indicating in your written work when you think your are addressing one or more of the descriptors. You can therefore use the descriptors as a mental 'prompt' to help you to shape your writing.

One thing we can say for sure – at any level within the University, just describing what you have done will not be enough!

What does 'academic level of study' mean and what are 'credits'?

Academic levels are standard across all higher education institutions in England, Wales and Northern Ireland

Level 4 is equivalent to the first year of study on a normal university degree course.

Level 5 is equivalent to the second year of study.

Level 6 is equivalent to the third year of study. Completion will lead to the award of a BA/BSc

Level 7 is Masters level.

Level 8 is Doctoral level.

Level 4 consists of 120 credits

Level 5 consists of 120 credits

Level 6 consists of 120 credits

So, a BA/BSc (Hons) has 360 credits

A Masters degree (MA/MSc etc) normally has 180 credits.

Many Doctorates (PhD, DProf etc) are not divided into credits. It depends on the University and the Doctorate concerned.

How will I know that I am writing at the correct academic level?

We use level descriptors created by an organisation called SEEC:

Level descriptors define the level of complexity, relative demand and autonomy expected of a learner on completion of a module or programme of learning. They provide a description of levels of learning through a hierarchy of knowledge and skills. (SEEC 2016)

They are organised into five headings:

Setting (the context in which learning takes place)

Knowledge and understanding

Cognitive skills

Performance and practice

Personal and enabling skills

Each of the above is then subdivided.

Examples of academic level descriptors 1

Examples of level descriptors at level 5 (equivalent to the second year of an undergraduate programme):

Setting

Operational context: Operates in situations of varying complexity and predictability requiring the application of a wide range of techniques and information sources.

Cognitive skills

Synthesis and Creativity: Collects and synthesises information to inform a choice of solutions to problems in unfamiliar contexts.

Examples of academic level descriptors 2

Examples of level descriptors at level 7 (Masters level):

Setting

Operational context: Operates in complex and unpredictable and/or specialised contexts, requiring selection and application from a wide range of advanced techniques and information sources.

Cognitive skills

Synthesis and creativity: Flexibly and creatively applies knowledge in unfamiliar contexts, synthesises ideas or information in innovative ways, and generates transformative solutions.

Using level descriptors to guide how you express your learning 1

If you are claiming credits at a particular level, you can use the descriptor to help you to hit the right level when you are exploring and explaining your learning.

So, if the descriptor (from level 6 - Synthesis and Creativity) says:

Collects and synthesises information to inform a choice of solutions to problems in unfamiliar contexts

... it is asking you: where did you get the information from to help you to deal with the problem, and how did you combine elements from the pieces of information concerned to give you some options concerning what to do? For APEL purposes, what have you learned from this and how has your approach changed with experience?

Using level descriptors to guide how you express your learning 2

If the descriptor (from level 5 - Interpersonal and communication skills) says:

Adapts interpersonal and communication skills to a range of situations, audiences and degrees of complexity.

...it is about thinking how you change your approach to suit the circumstances.

For example, how do you deal with language difficulties, cultural sensitivity or a delicate situation?

For APEL purposes, how have your experiences and learning helped to shape your approach and develop your skills?

What writing style should I use?

If you have completed some study in the past, you may be used to writing in a formal 'academic' style, which is impersonal and objective.

With APEL, the whole point is that this is your personal learning, so you should write in the first person (I learned..., I became aware that...) to make explicit your learning and insight gained through your reflection on experience. This will be subjective as well as objective, but it does not affect the academic level as long as you keep the level descriptors in mind. It also does not stop you from bringing in some supporting theory to support your discussion – see the next slide!

How do I include theory in my discussion?

You may have been involved in change management, or team building, or project management, or any number of other activities which may be forming the basis of your APEL claim.

What does the theory say about change management, and how does it compare with your experience and learning?

There are project management models out there – did you use one? If you did, how did you select and apply it? If not, how did your approach ‘fit’ with a model or two?

It is in this way that you can weave theory into your discussion and use it to give a broader context to your thoughts along with some critical discussion to help you make sense of your experience, both positive and negative, and draw out the learning.

What referencing system should I use?

When you are using the words of another author, from a book, journal, website or wherever the source, you must acknowledge this fact. To do this in your APEL claim, use the Harvard referencing system, as demonstrated in practice in the final slide of this presentation.

The Business School Centre for Academic Skills Enhancement (CASE) has produced an excellent guide to Harvard Referencing available through Studynet - access the *Help and Support* pages (at the top) and CASE is in the most viewed pages list. The *Academic Support* link will take you to a *Harvard referencing* option.

If you are not used to referencing, you may find it time consuming at first but when you have mastered it, which you can expect to do quickly, you will have a skill which will be invaluable in the rest of your studies.

What evidence do I need for my claim?

Evidence may be direct or indirect

Direct evidence will come directly from you. Items may include:

- assignments from previous non-academic-credit-bearing courses
- work related reports, policies, training materials and guidelines
- project reports, presentations and similar 'products' that indicate achievement
- professional or personal development portfolios compiled for professional bodies or for other awards which may be relevant to your claim

Indirect evidence may include:

- testimonial and witness statements verifying achievement, perhaps from an employer or client
- certificates of achievement / attendance from previous non-academic-credit-bearing courses

Using your evidence effectively

Evidence does not speak for itself. It needs a context which you will have provided in your written material, and it should be cross referenced when you put your claim together so that the assessor can go quickly from your written text to the linked evidence.

You may use one piece of evidence more than once in a claim. For example, you may have produced a final report on a project you have led. An excerpt from this may be used as evidence for a claim concerning your completion of a complex project. It may also be evidence for the fact that you can write such a report to meet the needs of a specific audience, and it may serve to show that you understand how to structure a report of that type.

Remember that you must respect the principles of anonymity and confidentiality in your claim. It should not be possible to identify people, places or organisations from your evidence, unless consent has been obtained or implied where, for example, you are using a testimonial as evidence from a named person on headed paper from the organisation concerned. Your APEL tutor can advise you on the practicalities of this.

Using your evidence selectively

Some people imagine that they need a wheelbarrow load of evidence to support their written work. This is not so. Selectivity in the use of evidence is a good indicator that you are operating at a high academic level.

So you have created a 30 page teaching pack for your area of practice? Good, but select two or three representative pages to make your point.

You wrote a fifty page report on that project? Great, show us the summary and some typical and relevant pages cross-referenced to your discussion, not the whole thing.

APEL credits are not awarded according to the weight of your portfolio!

The relationship between academic credit volume and time taken to complete the learning activity

One credit = 10 hours of participant learning activity

How long did it take you to complete the activity which is the basis for your claim? This is not just the time taken to write up the claim, with all the background reflection and searching for evidence involved, but also all the time taken while you were engaged on the related work. If, for example, you were involved in writing a policy on a new aspect of practice, how many hours did you spend on it?

This time may include meetings with other people involved, the reading and researching around the subject area, drafting and redrafting the policy, organising the initial implementation of the new policy and perhaps a first evaluation of effectiveness. All of this time contributes to your learning, and if you spent several months or even years on the work, on and off, you may have a considerable number of hours to consider.

References

Boud D, Keogh R and Walker D (eds) (1985) Reflection: turning experience into learning. London: Kogan Page.

Gibbs G (1998) Learning by Doing: A Guide to Teaching and Learning. London: FEU.

SEEC (2016) SEEC Credit Level Descriptors. Online. Available at:

<http://www.seec.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/SEEC-descriptors-2016.pdf>

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