
A European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning

United Kingdom - By John Konrad
(Konrad Associates International)

ECOTEC
Research & Consulting Limited

Priestley House
12-26 Albert Street
Birmingham B4 7UD
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0)121 616 3600
Fax: +44 (0)121 616 3699
Web: www.ecotec.com

CONTENTS

Comment [CA1]: Table of Contents automatically generated from Headings

1.0 VALIDATION OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING IN UNITED KINGDOM.....	1
By John Konrad (Konrad Associates International)	1
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Review of existing initiatives	1
1.3 Conclusions	9

1.0 VALIDATION OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING IN UNITED KINGDOM

By John Konrad (Konrad Associates International)

1.1 Introduction

Structure: The identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning in the United Kingdom is based on the national formal education systems of England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales¹. These systems are usually decentralised (devolved to a national level), delegated (operated within an institution by operational units within a framework of general regulation and guidelines). The three UK system's are generally based on the moderated assessment of students' learning by teachers moderated by internal or external assessors.

1.2 Review of existing initiatives

1.2.1 Accreditation

The Accreditation of Prior Learning [APL] developed in the early 1990s, as a route for those with low formal qualifications to gain *access* to Higher Education and Vocational Education and Training [VET] alongside the traditional routes based on the assessment of formal learning through National examinations. The policy goal was to improve *access* to programmes of post-compulsory education leading to formal qualifications

The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) Implementation Plan (October 2002) details the future developments of the SCQF. One target is to develop and agree a set of guidelines on recognition of prior learning and experiential learning (APEL) which would then allow credit rating and levelling on the framework².

In terms of lifelong learning strategy, the motivation of potential learners who are currently not participating in formal education may be significantly enhanced by the valuing of their non-formal learning. This could be achieved if these learners were to be encouraged to record their personal learning history. There is some limited evidence that appropriately structured non-accredited Adult and Continuing Education will measure the motivation of participants by supporting the development of a portfolio which records what courses they had pursued and observations on those courses. "In addition, the APEL interview method (which assesses skills such as group work, personal development and the way skills, knowledge and understanding has been developed) was a means of measuring the effect of adult learning in some contexts"³. This area is currently under development through a series of local pilot schemes run by the Learning and Skills Councils.

¹ Specific information on Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales will be available in 2005.

² Leney T (Ed) and May T (2004), *Achieving the Lisbon Goal: The Contribution of Vocational Education and Training Systems – Country Report for UK*, Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, page 22.
http://www.refernet.org.uk/documents/Country_Report_UK.pdf (last visited March 20, 2005)

³ Powell R et al. (2003), *Research into Adult and Continuing Education: Final Report*, pages 74 - 75.

1.2.2 *Work-based Learning*

Work-based learning is an important area of non-formal learning. “Work-based learning, then, operates at both formal and non-formal levels within the workplace, and when non-formal, often relies on networks and interactions with people both within and outside the organisation to facilitate new learning. The learning itself is often goal and work orientated. It is also often problem-centred and involves experimentation and trying things out. It may require both personal reflection on the outcomes and dialogue and feedback from others including colleagues and managers. It may include the taking of formally accredited programmes of study at an institution of higher education, and may use APEL as an accreditation and learning vehicle.⁴”

Higher Education Courses or other programmes of learning may lead to the award of a *Degree* that may be a Bachelor, Master or Doctor Qualification. Credits are based on the norm that an average full-time student gains 120 UK Credits per year. Thus, two UK Credits are broadly equivalent to one ECTS Credit.

Further Education, Courses or other programmes of learning above the level of compulsory secondary education and below the level of Higher Education normally lead to an accredited qualification. Representatives of employers are involved at National and Sector levels in the national systems through the *curriculum* bodies [UK Sector Skills Councils]⁵; and the *funding* systems [National – England the Learning and Skills Council operating Regionally and locally]. In the latter case, the funding objectives for 2005-06 are likely to encourage local Learning and Skills Councils to support the funding of flexible approaches to Vocational Education and Training based on *Recognising and Recording Progress and Achievement in non-accredited learning* (RARPA).

1.2.3 *Recognising non-accredited learning*

This development is important as it represents a different, open approach to publicly supported lifelong learning. If, as this strategy suggests, it is possible to move away from the emphasis on funding qualifications rather than learners, then the opportunities for validation of non-formal and informal learning is likely to be significantly increased.

“There will be a learner-focussed system of recognising both anticipated and unanticipated learning outcomes arising from non-accredited programmes. Quality systems in relation to RARPA will be robust, fit for purpose and meet each learner’s needs. Providers will use the

⁴ Cullen J et al. (2002), “*Review of Current Pedagogic Research and Practice in the Fields of Post-Compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning**”, FINAL REPORT Revised Submitted to the Economic and Social Research Council by The Tavistock Institute, February

⁵ For example, SEMTA [(*Science, Engineering, Manufacturing Technologies Alliance*) is the Sector Skills Council for Science, Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies] has launched a 2004 pilot Adult Apprenticeship project that makes significant use of APL. This is due for implementation in 2005. [http://www.semta.org.uk/NTOPubImages.nsf/vGraphics/apps/\\$file/apps.ppt](http://www.semta.org.uk/NTOPubImages.nsf/vGraphics/apps/$file/apps.ppt) (last visited March 20, 2005)

Approach as a tool for quality improvement and to increase recognition of learner achievement.⁶

The RARPA approach consists of the application of the 'Staged Process' to non-accredited provision, plus the arrangements put in place by a provider to ensure that the Staged Process is applied consistently and effectively and can be evaluated in the provider's self-assessment.

The Staged Process

1. **Aims** appropriate to an individual learner or group of learners.
2. **Initial assessment** to establish the learner's starting point.
3. **Identification of appropriately challenging learning objectives:** initial, renegotiated and revised.
4. **Recognition and recording of progress and achievement during programme (formative assessment):** tutor feedback to learners, learner reflection, progress reviews.
5. **End of programme learner self-assessment; tutor summative assessment; review of overall progress and achievement.** This will be in relation to appropriately challenging learning objectives identified at the beginning/ during the programme. It may include recognition of learning outcomes not specified during the programme.

'Appropriate' and 'Fit-for-Purpose'

The application of RARPA should be proportionate and appropriate to the type and context of learning and should not intrude on learning. Recording of learners' progress and achievement is the responsibility of the provider. Many innovative and non-intrusive examples of practice have been developed and will be available to share with providers of lifelong learning.

Non-bureaucratic

One of the key themes of RARPA is to be non-bureaucratic. It was a concern in some of the pilot projects that the provider generated paper forms for learners to complete. This is an inappropriate approach, which can lead to negative reactions and experiences. Alternative methods need to be developed. Examples of effective practice can be found in the Support pages.

Self-assessment

All post-16 education and training providers are expected to produce annual self-assessment reports and continuous improvement development plans. Self-assessment should be a systematic evidence based process involving the whole learning organisation where the

⁶ Learning and Skills Council (2005), *Welcome to RARPA*,

http://www.lsc.gov.uk/National/Partners/PolicyandDevelopment/AdultandCommunity/welcome_rarpa.htm (last visited March 20, 2005)

provider makes judgements about their performance against agreed goals and uses the Common Inspection Framework as a guide to the questions to be addressed⁷.

The above strategy indicates that Policy is seeking to ensure that the valuing of learning will have a stronger impact on the reality of learning opportunities. It will be important to monitor how this will involve employers and the voluntary sector. The forthcoming White Paper will make specific proposals⁸.

1.2.4 Terminology of Validation

Terminology is not fully consistent across the national systems. Although not an exhaustive list, HE providers typically describe their approach to the accreditation of prior learning under one or more of the following headings:

- Accreditation⁹ of prior learning (APL);
- Accreditation of prior certificated learning (APCL);
- Accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL);
- Accreditation of prior certificated and/or experiential learning (AP[E/C]L);
- Accreditation of prior learning and achievement (APL&A).

These approaches typically include policies and practices designed to accredit learning and achievement that has occurred and has been previously assessed and certificated in a work/community-based or related setting, but is not a formal part of that experience at some time, prior to the formal HE programme on which an applicant is about to embark. This may also include non-formal experience acquired during an HE programme.

This use of Accreditation in Further Education is likely to broaden out of this traditional involvement in National Vocational Qualifications [NVQs]. Good practice uses APL as part of mainstream provision.¹⁰

The accreditation of an individual's experience and critical reflection, outside a formal

⁷ Learning and Skills Council (2005), *RARPA: Frequently Asked Questions*, NOTE: the Common Inspection Framework will ensure that this approach is part of

http://www.lsc.gov.uk/National/Partners/PolicyandDevelopment/AdultandCommunity/rarpa_faq.htm#glossary (last visited March 20, 2005)

⁸ In the longer term, the Framework for Achievement proposed by the Qualification and Curriculum Authority [QCA] will provide an important development of this strategy. For more details see

<http://www.creditworks.uk.com/learnerRefdAchievement.htm>

⁹ Accreditation is used as the English language equivalent of Validation. "The process of assessing and recognising a wide range of knowledge, know-how, skills and competences, which people develop throughout their lives within different environments, for example through education, work and leisure activities. informal / non-formal learning." Tissot P (2004), *Terminology of vocational training policy*, CEDEFOP, page 161.

¹⁰ See for example: The NVQ Level 3 Management programme at http://www.runshaw.ac.uk/pages.asp?page_id=369 (last visited March 20, 2005)

learning programme is also a significant possibility¹¹.

The theme common to all these accreditation activities is *the achievement of learning, or the outcomes of that learning, and not just the experience of the activities alone.*

1.2.5 Principles of Validation developed for Higher Education [HE]

Principles of Accreditation for HE have general relevance across all post-compulsory education and training.

- Decisions regarding the accreditation of prior learning are a matter of academic judgement. The decision-making process and outcomes should be transparent and demonstrably rigorous and fair.
- Where limits exist on the proportion of learning that can be recognised through the accreditation process, these limits should be explicit¹². The implications for progression, the award of any interim qualification and the classification or grading of a final qualification should be clear and transparent.
- Prior experiential and/or certificated learning that has been accredited by a provider should be clearly identified on students' transcripts.
- Providers should provide clear and accessible information for applicants, academic staff, examiners and stakeholders about its policies, procedures and practices for the accreditation of prior learning.
- The terminology, scope and boundaries used by a provider in its policies, procedures and practices for the accreditation of prior learning should be explicitly defined in information and guidance materials.

¹¹ "Assessment methods used in experiential learning are based on the notion of informal self-assessment and focused planning for improved performance. Barkatoolah (1998) articulates the learner-centred existential approach to self-growth when she discusses the French system of recognising prior learning (RPL). The approach is exceptional for its seemingly individualised approach to the recognition of learning. Coming from a similar perspective to Knowles (1984) who suggests learners have the capacity for self-growth, this methodology stresses the importance of the learning climate as something that may either enhance or hinder individual developments. The RPL approach to the assessment of prior learning begins with the learning experiences and subsequent learning of the individual, prior to formal accreditation. This is similar to Kolb and Fry's process model of experiential learning as the basis of placing the responsibility for learning on the student (Kolb and Fry, 1975). It presents a futuristic outlook on the entire APEL process, providing the learner with the opportunity to reflect, conceptualise and develop a plan for further experiences and, subsequently, learning and self-development. Learner autonomy has also been at the centre of much debate over recent years (Fryer, 1997; Dearing, 1997), emphasising the impact of the process model of APEL, as opposed to outcome-based models of credit-exchange (Trowler, 1996). This has become the recognised idiom of distinction between experiential learning processes and traditional/idealist educational approaches (for example Kolb, 1984; Lindeman, 1926:27-65). Parallel with this, is the need to attribute formal recognition to learner skills and abilities irrespective of where they may have been acquired, in order to enhance student prospects (Dearing, 1997; Fryer, 1997; Le Goff, 1994; Kennedy, 1997; Blunkett, 1998)." Baille S and O'Hagen C, (1997), APEL and Lifelong Learning, University of Ulster, Page 18.

¹² Typically, these limits specify a normal maximum of 50% of the available credits for a particular qualification or, in the case of Bachelor's Degrees, for a particular Level.

- Information and guidance materials outlining the process for the assessment of claims for the accreditation of prior experiential and/or previously certificated learning should be clear, accurate and easily understood.
- Providers should consider the range and forms of assessment appropriate to claims for the recognition of learning.
- The criteria used in judging a claim for the accreditation of prior learning should be explicit to applicants, academic staff, stakeholders, assessors and examiners.
- The assessment of learning derived from experience should generally be subject to the same internal and external quality assurance procedures as assessment of learning through more traditional routes. Assessment methods must be appropriate to the evidence provided, and the criteria used must be clear to applicants and staff.
- The locus of authority and responsibilities for making and verifying decisions about the accreditation of prior learning should be clearly specified.
- All associated with the accreditation of prior learning should have their roles clearly and explicitly defined. Full details of all roles and responsibilities should be available to all associated staff and applicants.
- Appropriate arrangements should be developed for the training and support of all staff associated with the support, guidance and assessment of claims for the accreditation of prior learning.
- Clear guidance should be given to applicants about when a claim for the accreditation of prior learning may be submitted, the timescale for considering the claim and the outcome.
- Appropriate arrangements should be in place to support applicants submitting claims for the accreditation of prior learning and to provide feedback on decisions.
- Arrangements for the regular monitoring and review of policies and procedures for the accreditation of prior learning should be clearly established. These arrangements should be set within established institutional frameworks for quality assurance, management and enhancement.

Process: Identification and Validation use a framework of Levels and Criteria to enable specific learning to be recognised in a reliable and valid way.

1. All four national systems are developing Credit and Qualifications Frameworks. Each of the Frameworks describes Learning Outcomes associated with Education and Vocational Training at Levels from Level 1 (Access 1) to Level 12 (Doctorate). The Guides from Bradford College¹³ (a College of Further and Higher Education where Higher Education Courses are accredited by the University of Bradford) indicates a typical approach and uses the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework [SCQF].
2. The processes involved are those of applying for entry to programmes of learning based on a non-standard experience of learning; and/or seeking exemption from parts of a programme of learning, normally Units or Modules, without undertaking any formal learning; and in some circumstances, by demonstrating the necessary knowledge and competence in ways equivalent to those used normally used.
3. Steps followed (see Bradford College document Section 5):
 - Candidate profiling
 - Gathering the evidence

¹³ Available from <http://www.materials.ac.uk/resources/library/apelintro.asp>

- Assessing the evidence
- Accreditation
- Review of progress

1.2.6 *Assessing individuals' claims for Credit*

Assessments of claims for Validation take place within the formal system of education. *In Higher Education* claim's, are assessed by the same people (lecturers, teachers, trainers, etc) who are involved in the process of formal learning, using the same regulations and procedures. See the examples in the documents from Bradford College and the University of East Anglia for typical approaches. The way in which this operates is a matter for each University, within the Guidelines of the UK Quality Assurance Agency. See *Guidelines on the accreditation of prior learning*, (September 2004)¹⁴

- Higher education institutions (HEIs) are able to recognise the significant knowledge, skills and understanding which can be developed as a result of learning opportunities found at work, both paid and unpaid, and through individual activities and interests.
- The accreditation of learning and achievement is one of the central functions of HE. In exercising this function, HE providers are able to assess and formally recognise non-formal and informal learning through accreditation¹⁵.
- Formal certification of this learning operates within robust and participatory quality assurance frameworks. These frameworks promote public understanding and confidence in both the quality of HE and the standard of its outcomes. A diverse range of approaches and practices for the accreditation of prior learning has evolved across the HE sector. Public confidence in the accreditation of prior learning, comparable to that for learning achieved during more traditional teaching and learning activities, is important if the practice is to be sustained and developed.

In Further Education, the three-stage model of Quality Assurance (Assessment, Internal Verification and External Verification) seeks to ensure the consistency of assessment. This is discussed further in Section 6 below. Evidence of previous learning is merely one aspect of evidence for competence against national standards.

The criteria used for successful credit claims are as follows. Claims should be:

- **Acceptable** to match the evidence presented and the learning being demonstrated.
- **Authentic** providing evidence of the individual's own efforts and achievements, with supporting statements where necessary;
- **Sufficient** to cover fully the achievement of the learning requirements of the Module/Unit;
- **Valid** to meet these requirements;
- **Reliable** to justify the granting of credit;

¹⁴ Available from <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/public/apel/guidance.htm>

¹⁵ For an example of this, see the structure of the BA/BSc in Early Childhood Studies with its APEL Module provision at each of the three Levels.

<http://www.roehampton.ac.uk/programmedetails/ug/earlychildhoodstudies/index.asp>

- **Record Current learning** - where professional, statutory or regulatory bodies have specific requirements and/or time limits for the currency of evidence, certification, or demonstration of learning, these should be clear and transparent.

Specifically the assessment process should operate according to the following principles¹⁶:

- All qualifications are rigorous, accurate. Assessment of candidate performance must be consistently conducted in accordance with published criteria and the standards specified for each accredited qualification.
- Assessment procedures and systems must be capable of establishing whether or not there is evidence to determine that candidate performance meets defined standards; assure the validity, authenticity and sufficiency of that evidence.
- Assessments guarantee the consistency and integrity of the standards of each accredited qualification.
- The chosen format and method of assessment must be appropriate to the qualification. The method of assessment used for each qualification are the responsibility of the body responsible for the award of qualification.
- Assessments must be based on published specifications of the required skills, knowledge and understanding and, where appropriate, competence, and must provide opportunities for candidates to demonstrate their ability to meet the full range of specified assessment requirements.
- Where qualifications offer candidates alternative routes or methods of assessment, awarding bodies must ensure that the level demanded is comparable to the normal routes or methods.
- Assessments must be manageable and cost-effective in order to operate with minimum disruption and bureaucracy. The minimum equipment and material requirements for any assessment must be specified in advance.
- Assessment materials must be presented in clear and unambiguous language. They must be free from any overt or covert discrimination against an individual, either in wording or in content¹⁷.
- Where relevant, an awarding body must ensure that adequate mechanisms are in place to guarantee the consistency of assessment decisions across the languages of English, Welsh and Irish.

¹⁶ Based on the principles described in the NVQ Code of Practice (QCA 2001), Section B: Assessment and awarding, pages 25-26

¹⁷ There is an important argument to be developed (and researched) about such concepts as impartiality, equity and comparability which are usually explained as technical concepts, rather than with regard to their social significance. See Warmington P et al. (2003), "Fair Assessment and the Discourse of Equal Opportunities: describing inter-relationships in the context of vocational qualifications," *Paper presented to the seventh annual conference of the Learning and Skills Research Network*, 9-11 December

- An awarding body must specify the knowledge, understanding, skills, and – where appropriate – competence required for assessors to be acceptable in the area being assessed, following principles established by the standards-setting body where appropriate. The awarding body must provide information, guidance and, where appropriate, training to enable assessors to meet their responsibilities in relation to standards and assessment.
- Assessment must be carried out in a manner that is demonstrably independent of anyone who might have a stake in the outcome. This may involve one or more of:
 - assessment carried out by a visiting independent assessor;
 - tasks designed by the centre according to awarding body guidance and where the materials are evaluated by individuals not involved in their development alongside associated assessment criteria or mark schemes;
 - tasks set or defined by the awarding body, taken under specified conditions (which must include details of supervision and duration) and assessed externally to check that the tasks meet the assessment requirements set out in the specification; assessment taking another equally rigorous form acceptable to the regulatory authorities.
- There are no barriers to assessment, which prevent candidates from effectively demonstrating their attainment. Arrangements for candidates with particular assessment requirements such as learning disabilities (special arrangements) must also ensure that such candidates are not given, or do not appear to be given, an unfair advantage. Special arrangements are generally not appropriate where the candidate's particular difficulty directly affects performance in the actual attributes that are the focus of assessment.

1.3 Conclusions

Quality Assurance operates on a UK basis for Higher Education through the UK Quality Assurance Agency¹⁸ and on a National basis for Further Education through the separate funding councils. In England, the Learning and Skills Council is responsible for funding post-compulsory education and training¹⁹, which is delivered through contracts between local Learning and Skills Council and public providers, normally colleges, and private providers which may be employers, training companies, or voluntary organisations. All these English organisations are subject to Inspection²⁰. In the area of Skills for Life, the National Quality Initiative has one of its priorities the development of APL Guidelines during 2004-05²¹.

¹⁸ See <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/ukwork/default.asp>

¹⁹ See <http://www.lsc.gov.uk/National/default.htm>

²⁰ See the Adult Learning Inspectorate <http://www.ali.gov.uk/htm/index.htm>

²¹ Learning and Skills Council (2004), *Skills for Life Quality Initiative 2004-05*.
http://www.lsbu.ac.uk/llupluspdcdocs/SFLQI_12pp_Brochure_FINAL.pdf

In all cases, there are general criteria and guidelines linked to external checking of the internal Quality Assurance system of a University, College or Private Training Centre. In APL/APEL, this means that there is a systematic monitoring of the results, possibly subject to external scrutiny. International systems of Quality Assurance Certification are widely used. In the National Vocational Qualification [NVQ] system [England and Wales] a number of criteria exist to ensure the quality of assessment. These procedures are described in the NVQ Code of Practice (2001)²². There have been significant efforts to improve access to lower level of competencies at NVQ Level 2 and in Basic Skills.

However, the Evaluation of the first year of the Employer Training Pilot makes little mention of the importance of Accreditation. The report for the Tyne and Wear area provides the sole mention in its proposal for 2003-04. "The provision of training needs analysis and the accreditation of prior learning will be improved to ensure efficient provision of required training. The aim is for every participant to undergo a training-needs analysis"²³.

More recently, NVQ-based Modern Apprenticeships are being extended to the over-24 age group through such pioneering schemes as TESCO providing accreditation to its internal training programme. It will be interesting to see how this scheme makes use of APL²⁴.

²² Published by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA/02/875). This document is for awarding bodies and other organisations involved in the provision of NVQs. This document specifies the processes and procedures required to ensure high quality, consistent and rigorous standards in the assessment and awarding of NVQs.

²³ Hillage J and Mitchel H (2003), Employer Training Pilots: First Year Evaluation, Institute for Employment Studies, page 106 <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/ETP1.pdf> (last visited March 20, 2005)

²⁴ "Educational first for Tesco Tesco is the first British retailer to have its in-house apprenticeship training scheme accredited by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA). The retailer can now award National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) to those employees on its retail apprenticeship scheme. ... In a separate move, Tesco will be developing an apprenticeship scheme for post-24 year olds in conjunction with City & Guilds in a trial to get underway in this year. Until now, Government apprenticeships have only been available to those aged 16 to 24.

Apprenticeships at Tesco work by giving apprentices experience of working across different areas of the store - everywhere from customer service to security, to the warehouse. Candidates keep a workbook to document their progress and can attend lectures at a local college to top up their skills. Section and personnel managers check on progress, coach and assess candidates, which is then externally verified by City & Guilds." <http://www.trainingreference.co.uk/news/gn050131a.htm> (last visited March 20, 2005)

A typical issue is the need to use APL in the process of teacher and trainer training, both for accreditation and for experiential learning. A study of one of the pioneer NVQ Level 4 programmes in Adult Learning at Oxford Brookes University found that:

"Tailoring a course to keep everyone interested has been a challenge", admits Jenny [Hankey – the course tutor]. The students have varied experience – some have the teaching experience but not the linguistic knowledge, others have the linguistic skills but not the teaching experience, and others are here to learn both. ... A modular system which could be tailored to an individual's needs, would work best", says Jenny, "but systems, such as APL (Accreditation of Prior Learning), which identifies exemptions based on a student's past experiences and learning, have resource implications as they require one-to-one assessments and ongoing reviews."²⁵

This National Report has covered the most significant current developments relevant to the Common European Principles for Validation. Currently, the main areas of development of good practice affecting the use of APL are in the UK Higher Education Sector. There are significant innovations in process affecting Scotland and Wales. These are likely to have considerable impact in 2006.

²⁵ Department for Education and Skills (2003), *Update*, Summer, page 10.
<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/readwriteplus/bank/Update8.pdf> (last visited March 20, 2005)