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Recognition of Prior Learning as Threshold: Supporting Transitions to Formal Learning

To support the increasing prominence of the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in Scottish Higher Education, QAA Scotland produced guidelines (Whittaker and Brown, 2012). Among other issues, the guidelines highlighted the importance of flexibility to the process.

This paper will examine flexibility in RPL and its limits through the lens of the University of the West of Scotland's Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) process. APEL is the means through which UWS recognises and awards credit for informal learning (often called non-formal learning in North America). Given that APEL applicants bring a wide range of experience, it follows that the approach taken to assessing the learning generated by that experience should be flexible. To that end, the APEL procedure at UWS asks applicants to map their learning against SCQF level descriptors and programme-level Learning Outcomes (as opposed to the narrower, more restrictive module Learning Outcomes). Flexibility makes the APEL process more accessible, essential if it is to play a role in widening participation in Higher Education.

However, it should be remembered that in this context the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning is not an end in itself but a way for learners to gain access to university. After successfully completing the APEL process, the learner joins an existing student cohort already some way through a programme of study. This cohort will be familiar with the requirements of the university environment (for example, how to talk in seminars, take lecture notes, reference, and use the library). Therefore, while it is important that APEL be flexible enough to accommodate the range of the learner's past experiences, it must also be structured enough to guide the learner into the formal learning environment of the university. The APEL process can, then, be understood as a threshold through which learners make the transition from informal to formal learning.

This paper builds on the idea of APEL as a threshold to consider the experiences of learners who have been through the process and asks whether it equipped them for learning in a formal university environment. In other words, did it achieve the correct balance between flexibility, in terms of recognising the different types of learning which had occurred, and structured guidance on the types of learning which would form the student's future university journey?

Abstract:

The Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) process can be conceived as a threshold through which learners make the transition from informal to formal learning. This paper examines learners' experiences following RPL and discusses the balance between flexibility (recognition of a wide range of learning) and structure (preparation for the university environment).