

Mini Research Project

Research carried out in 2006/07

TITLE OF PROJECT:

Writing from experience: facilitating the process of giving academic value to experience through APEL

INSTITUTION:

London Metropolitan University

PROJECT LEADERS:

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CONTEXT:

The Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) offers a vehicle for integrating the experiences of mature students into their studies and for providing a means by which their knowledge and skills can be given 'academic value' in the curriculum. However, both nationally and within our own institution, the take-up of APEL has been low. The academic requirement to 'write-up' experience in a portfolio format is one potential barrier.

PROJECT OBJECTIVES:

The aim of this project was to explore the differing expectations, feelings and uncertainties around the APEL writing process held by a sample of APEL staff and students, and to provide online APEL 'writing guidance' for students informed by these different perspectives.

METHODOLOGY:

Interviews with a sample of APEL staff and students.

DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT:

All of the students had sought out APEL for entirely pragmatic reasons. Most were part-time and/or mature students juggling the demands of life, work and study. These students needed to reduce the time spent at the university where possible. They had different experiences of the writing process but found that, in addition to receiving the credit towards their studies, they had acquired new perspectives on their own experience and that writing about their experience had been a hugely developmental process.

Many people with non-traditional academic backgrounds do not see themselves as university students – itself a major barrier to access. APEL can specifically enable these individuals to see how what they have done in life can be translated into something of academic value. However, all of the students we interviewed shared an uncertainty about how the APEL process fitted into the university's systems. The lack of visibility and clear signposting is an issue for any process operating at the level of individual experience within a system of mass higher education. Nevertheless, their comments showed that if we are to encourage students to undertake APEL assessment, there is a broader context they need to be aware of. We decided, therefore, **to integrate a stage in our online materials** that would provide the context for APEL – inviting experienced students and staff to talk

about what APEL is, what the benefits can be, how it works and who is involved. This APEL website is available at: <http://apel.londonmet.ac.uk>

Our research also showed that the role of the tutor is essential to the writing process. APEL is often presented as an unproblematic process of matching experience to existing module/course learning outcomes. Yet, as one student noted, learning outcomes are often written to be 'very large and all encompassing'. Negotiating a shared frame of reference for the writing was key to a successful outcome. Staff and students have shared with us their particular ways of approaching APEL which we used for the **second stage** of the website design called 'preparing your portfolio' which is available at: http://apel.londonmet.ac.uk/stage2_prepareportfolio.html

We are very grateful to all of the staff and students who gave of their time and experience and made this project possible.

ASSESSMENT OF IMPACT OF PROJECT:

Online surveys (one for students and one for staff) on APEL website <http://apel.londonmet.ac.uk/> to monitor effectiveness of website in helping prospective students.

AVAILABILITY OF PROJECT OUTCOMES

APEL website at <http://apel.londonmet.ac.uk/>