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## **Excavating Experience to Reveal Learning: Practical Approaches to Facilitating Experiential Learning Claims for Accreditation**

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### **Introduction**

Learning from experience can be a rich seam from which to gain insights into skills and capabilities gained from life and work. Experiential learning also can inform everyday practice in the workplace if reflected upon, interrogated and explored. In addition, it can contribute toward higher education awards if recognized, evidenced and accredited. This article discusses facilitation of Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) as part of a work-based learning program of studies in the United Kingdom. Academic staff who work with learners who apply for academic credit toward work-based learning degrees need special skills to enable them to maximize the claimants' learning experiences and credit claims. These practitioners may need a framework of learning activities and structures to assist in the process. This article outlines how Middlesex University's (MU) work-based learning framework uses APEL as a starting point for degrees and postgraduate programs, and offers some structured approaches to facilitating accreditation claims.

APEL is defined as:

The accreditation of prior experiential learning, that is, the award of credit for learning based on prior experience — from work, community or volunteer experience — which has not previously been assessed and/or awarded credit. By converting informal learning into certificated learning, APEL provides cost-effective routes to qualifications. It has potential significance for people who, through life and work experience, have learned knowledge, skills and analytical abilities that are comparable to those in a higher education award. APEL offers the possibility for what learners know to be recognised, assessed with the same rigour as any other learning would be at HE [higher education] level, and awarded credit. (Merrifield, McIntyre & Osaigbovo, 2000, p. 1)

APEL is incorporated into a module as part of a Work Based Learning (WBL) Framework program that is located within the Institute for Work Based Learning (IWBL) at MU in London, U.K. The Institute has pioneered the development of WBL at the higher education level for 20 years. The Institute offers university awards and includes APEL across all undergraduate and postgraduate levels, up to and including the professional doctorate level. Accreditation of either personal and professional experiential learning or employer-based training programs is a starting point for a wide variety of WBL Framework awards, as it recognizes and accredits the experiential knowledge and skills that claimants bring with them and influences the foundation from which they can construct their program.

### **Accreditation in Work Based Learning Programs**

Garnett (2009) defined WBL as "a learning process which focuses University level critical thinking upon work (paid or unpaid) in order to facilitate the recognition of acquisition and application of individual and collective knowledge, skills and abilities to achieve specific outcomes of significance to the learning, their work and the University" (p. 4). Learning is concentrated around the learner's real work issues and concerns, which are interrogated by university-level critical thinking processes to reveal options and alternatives. Consequently,

learning is relevant to work practices and cuts across subject disciplines, often resulting in significant learning in areas such as managing projects, managing people or resources, teamwork, teaching or mentoring and other such “generic” transferrable workplace skills.

Traditionally, in other higher education institutions (HEI), APEL is measured against specific validated university modules that state the amount and complexity of learning expected to equate to a specific amount and level of credit. Within the U.K., HE programs are currently designed around a Credit Accumulation Transfer System (CATS), with the current practice that 1 credit equals 10 hours of academic activity, whether that is composed of direct student/teacher contact or self-directed study. Each academic year of an honors degree is equivalent to 120 credits and a total degree is 360 credits. The CATS points provide the educational currency between HEI's, allowing program transfer between institutions (Johnson& Walsh, 2000).

### **The Assessment Dilemma**

Although the Institute has a long and varied experience in awarding HE-level credits to experiential learning for both individual learners and employer-based training programs, there had previously been no formal guidance as to how the amount of credit awarded to experiential learning. APEL in WBL was guided by Level Descriptors, which made the level of learning explicit, but did not define the volume of credit to be assigned. Assessment practice tended to depend on the experience of the assessor and his or her inclination to award credit depending on the presentation of the APEL claim as aligned to Level Descriptors. As WBL subject content is transdisciplinary rather than subject specific, it does not easily match to subject-based modules. The amount of credit given to work-based learning experience is difficult to align to learning hours or years of experience or theories and practical knowledge, and therefore a mechanism to equate volume of credit to accreditation claims needed to be devised.

Additionally, traditional assessment strategies often require the regurgitation of facts and information by the learner through formal HE assessment processes as in exams or coursework. Conversely, APEL ranges across a wide diversification of knowledge content, skills, processes and outcomes as learned by the student through a variety of mediums, sometimes referred to, and including, the “university of life.” As a result, equitable assessment between study programs or academic levels or complexity is extremely difficult to apply consistently to APEL claims in WBL. In order to make the assessment process as transparent as possible, a research project (Workman, 2007) was undertaken to identify the assessment and facilitation factors that academics used when working with learners compiling a claim so that tacit practice could be made explicit and shared with a wider audience. That research informed the current accreditation practice as described in the rest of this article.

### **Curriculum Framework for WBL**

The WBL Framework is based upon Kolb’s experiential learning cycle. Kolb (1984) defined learning as: “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (p. 41). The cycle has been used within the WBL Framework curriculum to facilitate identification and extension of knowledge from work, and there are four WBL Framework stages, each of which focuses on a different aspect of the cycle. In the APEL process, claimants undertake “reflective observation” on their “concrete experiences” as the first stage in the experiential learning cycle. The process of “reflective observation” facilitates making tacit knowledge explicit. The curriculum design means that the APEL process not only reflects back to the learning that is brought with the claimant, but also extends forward to the learning that will be undertaken in the future to enhance work practice, building on that which has gone before through the process of “abstract conceptualization.”

Following the conclusion of Workman’s (2007) research, the WBL Framework was revalidated and the process of assessment of level and volume of credit was revised to make a more transparent and consistent approach to the awarding of credit in WBL programs. As a result, claims are now aligned with both credit level and volume criteria in the form of negotiated generic project modules, thus strengthening assessment rigor and

enhancing quality assurance. The project module learning outcomes are written in a generic way that can be interpreted for any subject discipline and reflect the WBL Level Descriptors and therefore level of difficulty, and are created in a variety of sizes from small to large modules (see tables 1 and 2). The accreditation process is enveloped within a “Review of Learning” module. This engages the learner in a reflective journey to identify key learning activities from at least the last two to five years, or longer where relevant, enabling the claimant to claim for significant learning acquired through this period.

### **Reflection as a Learning Tool**

A strong component that runs through WBL pedagogy is that of reflective learning. Eraut (1994) described the process of APEL as systematic reflection leading to the identification of significant learning that leads to a synthesis of evidence to support claims for accreditation. The process of using reflection as a deliberate consideration of experience leading to the decision of what a learning experience means is one way of making tacit learning explicit (Institute for Work Based Learning, 2009). Reflection on the process of exploring experience is also a means of enhancing understanding (Boud, Keogh & Walker, 1985). Through the reflective process, existing knowledge can be revealed and thereby made explicit. However, reflection is a very messy process that Schön (1987) referred to as the “swampy low land of practice” representative of the reality of the real world of work.

Many learners find it difficult to engage with reflection, some find it hard to “think for themselves” due to past experiences and others find it personally exposing. The challenge for the academic is to facilitate the reflective process in a way that enables a stimulating exploration of experience for the claimant. The reflective process can also uncover ethical issues such as trust, personal and professional vulnerability, and confidentiality, all of which need to be recognized and accommodated (Moore & Workman, 2011). A skilled facilitator undertakes a balancing act between a confidante, educator and counselor in order to enable the claimant to have the confidence to explore buried personal territory. Excavating experiential learning to make knowledge explicit can significantly change an individual’s mindset and build their self-confidence. It can be revealed as a byproduct of making an APEL claim. Ideally, a reflective model can be used to unlock a claimant’s knowledge and capabilities in a way that conventional education is unlikely to achieve, resulting in both personal and professional development (Evans, 1994).

### **Developing a portfolio for assessment**

An overview of the module process is as follows:

- Enrollment in the Review of Learning Module: this ensures that the claimant gets facilitator support, is registered, can be assessed, and incurs a fee for assessment and facilitation
- Annotate and update résumé and job description: these documents highlight learning from each successive job and shows how each one equipped the claimant with new knowledge, and the potential academic levels to be presented within the claim
- Identify and develop Areas of Learning (AOL) for accreditation: these are the learning activities that will be assessed for credits
- Decide on the size, level and number of AOL's: these are structured around generic project modules determining level and volume of credit to be applied for, and depend on the size of award being sought
- Gather evidence to support claims that must be:
  - authentic (originating from the learner)
  - relevant (relating directly to the learning and its impact)
  - current (demonstrates progression and impact of learning)
  - sufficient (enough to prove the learning)
  - valid (illustrates clearly the claimant’s knowledge)
  - reliable (learning can be repeated in other situations)
  - ethically aware(should be demonstrated by protection of the rights of others and any associated organizations). Information that identifies others or reveals sensitivities should not be used, and

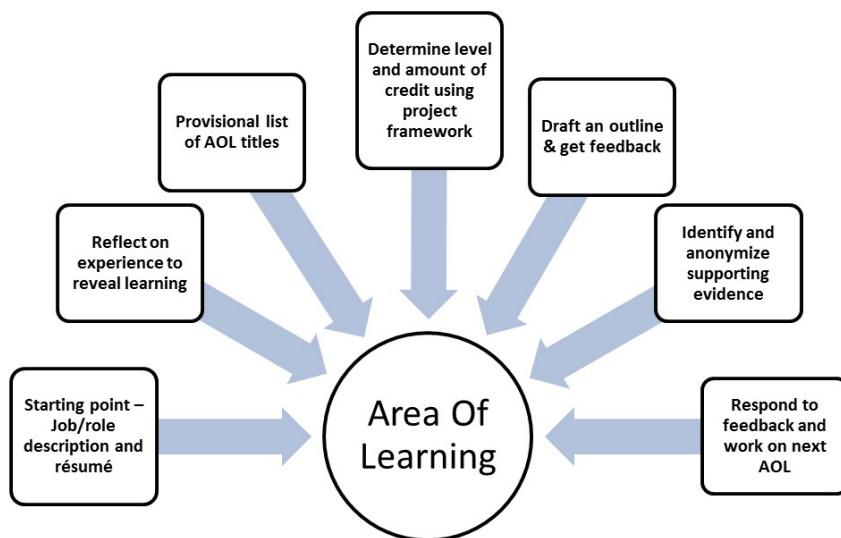
consent should be sought and obtained before use (Moore & Workman, 2011).

- Write a reflective essay on their “learning journey” that identifies the context of the learning activities presented for accreditation.

## Turning Experience Into Academic Credits

Claimants begin the module by writing an annotated résumé and job description. If they have changed their jobs in the last two years, they are encouraged to reflect on their previous job descriptions. This activity enables them to consider what they have learned over the previous two to five years and makes a good starting point from which to build areas of learning (AOL). AOLs are the component parts of the overall APEL claim that will be assessed. Another exercise determines the level of influence, responsibilities and impact on others that the claimant brings, as this helps to determine the academic level for which the claimant can claim. These processes start to expose themes of learning that can be given “titles,” and therefore focus, which is then further explored to determine the skills, knowledge and evidence available to support them. The claimant is then encouraged to align their learning experience with the generic project module outcomes at the required size and level (see Tables 2 and 3 for examples). Questions around the level and depth of knowledge and kinds of evidence available to support the claim are used by the facilitator, either as an online discussion or in a workshop environment.

The annotated résumé is a useful exercise. Concurrent with compiling the portfolio, the claimant writes an essay about their learning journey that identifies key learning opportunities during their career or life experience thus far, signposting where the significant learning events have occurred, and can be cross-referenced to the portfolio claim. The essay is submitted separately and awarded a grade, whereas the AOLs are only awarded credit amounts that respond to the size and level of project modules chosen by the claimant.

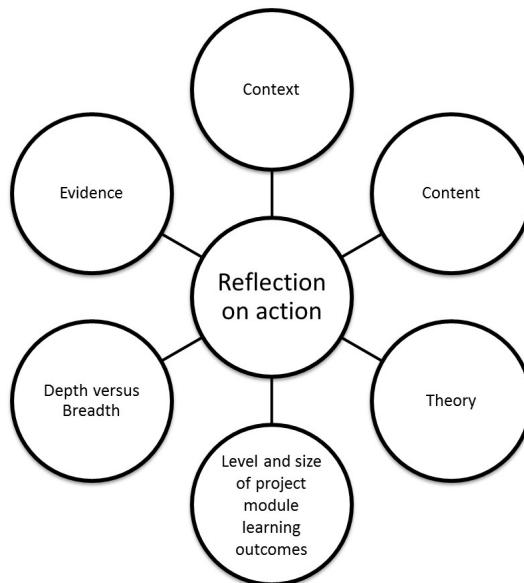


**Figure 1:** Stages of creating a claim

Creating the first AOL is often extremely challenging for both the claimant and facilitator. The AOLs usually consist of non-overlapping categories of skills, abilities and knowledge, but using the generic project learning outcomes provides a structure on which to focus different aspects of the learning process. The learning outcomes derive from level descriptors which are structured around four areas: knowledge, cognitive skills, practical skills and personal and enabling skills. Basing the modules on level descriptors allows incorporation of general credit<sup>1</sup> at specific academic levels, and evidences the validity of a claim for experiential learning. The modules show that experiential learning can be the counterpart of academic learning through identifying common characteristics between the two (Walsh, 2006). Firstly, the knowledge should be identified: is this propositional or practical knowledge, performative or theoretical? Cognitive skills include analysis, evaluation,

synthesis, critical reflection, and problem solving or action planning. Practical skills relate to communication and networking within the claimant's community of practice, and design of work-based activities. Personal and enabling skills relate to responsibility and leadership skills and self-directed professional development skills. The learning outcomes of each project module reflect these elements to a greater or lesser extent and are therefore represented within each claim (see Tables 1 and 2).

Additionally, as claimants construct their AOLs, they will find it helpful to consider these other factors in their reflection (Figure 2):



**Figure 2:** Factors to consider when constructing an APEL claim  
(adapted from Moore & Workman, 2011)

- Context – this should be made explicit, including the type of working practices and impact of that learning on practice.
- Content – the focus is upon the experience and the work activity. Explicit consideration of the processes such as decision making, problem solving.
- Theory – the inclusion of an evidence base to provide a rationale for decision making and problem solving. Theory that is generated from the work place or new theory that is incorporated into practice to inform learning should be explicit.
- Evidence – Learning needs to be proved and should be selected with discrimination to maximise the use of available evidence. It can take the form of testimonials; emails, conversations; reports/audits/policy documents; case studies/articulation of experiences/situations etc.
- Breadth versus depth – while the context is described, the reflexive commentary should present the cognitive evidence of analysis and evaluation.
- Level and size of project module learning outcomes – these provide a “scaffold” for the claimant to assist them in creating a robust claim (see Lipscomb et al., 2004 for a full discussion on scaffolds).

Lipscomb et al. (2004) described building a scaffold to assist the extension of learning beyond a learner's current capability. Scaffolding has become increasingly advocated for in modern education, particularly primary education; the term scaffolding was developed as a metaphor to describe facilitation of learning by either a teacher or peer whereby the learner requires assistance to acquire knowledge and skills that are initially beyond their capability. The challenge of reflective learning has already been described, but the use of a structured approach can assist the claimant to use the reflective and learning tools to become increasingly self-directed in constructing an APEL claim. Lipscomb et al. (2004) noted that inherent in the concept of

scaffolding is the “zone of proximal development” (ZPD) as described by Vygotsky (as cited in Lipscomb et al., 2004). Scaffolding and the concepts of ZPD are not commonly acknowledged in U.K. higher education, but are described by Lipscomb et al. (2004) as “the area between what a learner can do by himself and that which can be attained with the help of a ‘more knowledgeable other’ adult or peer” (p. 4). Lipscomb et al. (2004) cited the use of conceptual scaffolds in HE as assisting students in organizing their ideas and connecting them to related evidence – ideal for creating individual experiential learning claims. This is particularly pertinent where the facilitator’s time and skills are at a premium and much of the claimant’s learning is done by reflection and in isolation; that is, outside of a classroom environment. Therefore, having trigger questions and learning outcomes to address can help construct the claim.

A challenge for the APEL facilitator is assisting claimants to articulate their tacit knowledge in a way that equates to higher education criteria, and to facilitate its excavation in a form that can be accredited. The original research project (Workman, 2007) had identified qualitative guidelines for assessing volume, but not measurable criteria. The creation of a range of negotiated WBL project modules provided the missing criteria and are used to structure APEL claims. As such, the projects are available at every level from level 4 (undergraduate year 1), through to level 7(postgraduate masters), with a variety of sizes of “small projects” at 10, 15, 20 credits or “large projects” at 30, 40 and 60 credits. Small projects have four learning outcomes, and large projects have six learning outcomes, but both encapsulate the level descriptors for their appropriate academic level.

Table 1: Example of level 4 small project outcomes (Institute for Work Based Learning, 2011):

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Identify and apply knowledge and explain its relevance to your work/practice;</li> <li>2. Describe and explain the design and development processes used to inform your project/inquiry/work-based activity and reflect upon the outcomes;</li> <li>3. Appropriately communicate your ideas, relevant information and outcomes of the project/inquiry process;</li> <li>4. Demonstrate taking responsibility for this project/inquiry and explain how it contributed to your professional development. (p. 121)</li> </ol> |
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In using the scaffolding process, the claimant can be directed to think of specific, continuous professional development activities for small claims such as in-house training days, or a secondment where learning was acquired for professional development such as shadowing chairing a meeting, and consolidated through some kind of work-based activity, or application to practice. When offered in these terms, claimants are easily able to identify a specific learning opportunity with its outcome and impact on their practice, supported with evidence.

Table 2: Example of graduate level 6 “large” project outcomes (Institute for Work Based Learning, 2011):

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|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Identify and critique advanced theoretical perspectives, ethical principles and other knowledge applicable to your work/practice context and demonstrate how they apply to the work/practice of yourself and others;</li> <li>2. Critically reflect on how the engagement and involvement of other practitioners has contributed to the enhancement of your work/practice;</li> <li>3. Give a rationale for your choice of methods of inquiry that have informed creative approaches to action planning/problem solving, contextualising your choices;</li> <li>4. Critically evaluate the process of designing and developing your project/inquiry/work-based activity and how its outcomes have contributed to enhancing your work/practice and that of others;</li> <li>5. Demonstrate coherent and organised communication, interpersonal and networking skills when sharing ideas and information with work/practice and academic audiences;</li> <li>6. Demonstrate the ability to lead and take responsibility for future professional development using the learning from the project/inquiry process. (p. 177)</li> </ol> |
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These larger modules offer the opportunity to make substantial claims for learning that have occurred over a

period of time, or during a specific project. For example, one claimant reorganized a whole school's timetable through the use of a software package, introduced it and adjusted it over several terms in response to feedback to meet the demands of the school (such as teacher changes, room availability and special needs support), and was able to make a substantial claim of 60 credits at graduate level. Visualizing her learning in relation to a project over a period of time made it much easier for her to address each learning outcome and demonstrate the breadth and depth of her learning with appropriate supporting evidence.

The differentiation of credit amount is determined by using an equivalence model of word count to number of credits (see Table 3 for examples). This allows flexibility in meeting size equivalency so that if an essay was submitted it would equate with the standard word count, but if other evidence was included, such as a report or a certificate, the evidence could contribute to the total word count. While some facilitators had concerns that the claimant would present reams of writing in order to express a specific amount of learning, including these other modes helped to contain it and demonstrated the claimant's level of learning by meeting the learning outcomes through a variety of evidence.

Table 3: Examples of credit claims as expressed in word count equivalency (adapted from the Institute for Work Based Learning, 2011):

Number of credits	Size of assessment Levels 4 & 5 (undergraduate)	Levels 6 & 7 (graduate and post graduate)
10	1,500 words or equivalent e.g., a project or inquiry report of 1,000 words with 2-3 items of annotated evidence of development activity relating to practice	2,000 words or equivalent: e.g., a reflective commentary on experiential learning or learning from short courses (1,000 words) with 3-4 pieces of annotated evidence relating to work/practice
15	Equivalent to 2,500 words, e.g., a project or inquiry report of 1000 words with a 5 minute audio/visual presentation and a 500 word reflective account	Equivalent to 3,000 words, e.g., a 1,500 word reflective account and portfolio evidence equivalent to 1,500+ words
20	Equivalent to 3,500 words, e.g., 3,000 word report plus 5 minute presentation	Equivalent to 4,000 words, e.g., a 2,000 word reflective account with annotated portfolio evidence equivalent to 1,500 words
30	Equivalent to 5,000 words, e.g., a project report of 2,000 words with oral presentation of 5 minutes with a reflective account (1,000 words) of learning from the project	Equivalent to 6,000, e.g., a project report of 4,500 words with 4-6 items of annotated evidence of 1,500 words relating to your work/practice
40	Equivalent to 7,000 words, e.g., a 2,000 word reflective account and a portfolio evidencing engagement with a professional network equivalent to 4,500 words	Equivalent to 8,000 words, e.g., production of practical work and 4,000 words critical commentary and/or report
60	Equivalent to 10,000 words, e.g., an inquiry report of 3,500 words with a 15 minute audio/visual presentation and a 2,000 word reflective account	Equivalent to 12,000 words, e.g., a 3,000 word reflective account and portfolio evidence equivalent to 8,000 words, 5 minute presentation

## Factors Enabling APEL

Further findings from Workman's (2007) research also identified that certain characteristics of the facilitators help successful APEL claims to be made. These include:

- *Academic recognition of value of knowledge from communities of practice* – If academics accept that knowledge is generated from experience as well as from the academy, they are then more likely to recognize and accredit the practical knowledge being presented as significant learning.
- *Ability to measure learning outside the notional 10 hours equals one credit* – Calculating or estimating

alternative time allowances that recognize learning over an extended period of time without being too rigid accepts learning gained over several months or years.

- *Skilled facilitators to aid excavation of knowledge* – Skills of facilitation rather than didactic teaching enables in-depth reflection and the claimant to appreciate and unearth their own knowledge.
- *Appreciation of transferability of knowledge across spheres of life outside academic disciplines* – Recognizing that learning occurs in work and through recreation can enable the claimant to see themes in their skills and abilities in overlapping spheres of their life. For example, a sports coach may also work well with young people, or an office administrator may be excellent at managing a charity.
- *Skills of reflection to identify learning* – Enabling reflection in others requires the facilitator to understand what reflection is and how to dig down into several layers, to look for cause and effect, to recognize transformative moments and ask searching questions.
- *Recognition that learning events do not necessarily lead to new learning* – All teachers are aware of course participants who attend a study day and come out none the wiser, so enabling claimants to recognize where real learning has occurred may mean that it is less about training days and more about life changing events.
- *Communication & evidence of the multi-layered complexities of work knowledge* – Facilitating claimants to recognize what and how they have learned from work and to distinguish between relevant evidence is a skill. Asking claimants what they are proud of achieving, where they have made a difference and how they know that can trigger reflection on aspects of practice that may have previously been discounted. For example, examining experience gained from working in a team can enable a learner to identify a number of strands of learning from the team task itself, to how the team worked together, their personal and professional skills brought to the task and so forth.
- *Balance between personal learning & application to practice* – Learning that is very personal may not be at a high enough level to get significant credit. For example, a postgraduate student was reflecting on her learning as a nutritionist, but part of her claim included learning gained from going through a divorce process. While it was significant learning personally, it had a limited contribution to her professional claim.

### **Characteristics of a Good Accreditation Claim**

Although the process for compiling APEL has now changed to a more structured approach, characteristics of a good claim were also drawn from Workman's (2007) research. These were compiled from experienced facilitators' tacit knowledge of assessing APEL, and include:

- The context in which learning occurs is explicit and factors impinging on the situation are not too descriptive but captured and summarized
- A clear explanation of task/role is situated within the context & work activity
- A clear rationale for problem solving and the choices and decisions made
- Self-awareness is demonstrated with an understanding of the implications of a claimant's own and others' behavior/actions
- Appropriate reference to academic theories is incorporated and evidence-based knowledge to support decisions/actions is explicit
- A demonstration of progressive learning over time and the resultant outcomes are made explicit or summarized
- Evidence of structured reflection and analysis of the experience
- A well written account – concise, organized and tightly worded, clearly related to the learning outcomes
- Careful selection of annotated evidence, demonstrating its relevance, is referred to and clearly cross-referenced to the narrative
- Each piece of evidence is used in several ways and across several AOLs to demonstrate different aspects of learning
- Distillation of knowledge from professional experience demonstrates understanding of practice issues and application of theory to practice

Both facilitators and claimants have found that a structured APEL approach facilitates effective articulation of

experiential learning through, for example the provision of trigger questions or by specifically signposting the cognitive skill required to present learning. For example, description of knowledge alone would not gain a high level of credit, but analysis and critical reflection raises the academic level. Presentation of evidence without annotation does not contribute as effectively to the claim as that which is clearly positioned within the work context and includes a reflective commentary.

## Conclusion

This article has outlined some specific activities that contribute to the development of sound APEL claims for the award of credit within a work-based program module. A structured approach to creating claims using project module frameworks has been outlined and offered as an approach to demonstrating rigor and transparency of assessment. Tacit knowledge gained from experienced facilitators when facilitating and assessing accreditation claims has been integrated to demonstrate assessment expectations.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> General Credit is awarded for learning demonstrated by the claimant and does not have to demonstrate an exact match with taught programs, unlike Specific Credit, which is required to match specific learning outcomes from validated programs to demonstrate that the claimant has equivalent learning from a source other than a taught university program.

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