The Accreditation of Prior Learning in Scotland:
Six things for Italian colleagues to consider

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September 2006
A NEW CONTEXT
The concept of the Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) has been part of the educational vocabulary of Scotland since the mid-1980s. During the subsequent two decades interest in this form of accreditation has progressed very slowly. However, in the recent few years there have been some important changes in the political and social environment of Scotland which are accelerating an interest in the recognition and accrediting of prior learning.

1. CATALYSTS FOR CHANGE
(Catalizzatori di cambiamento)
The first of these is Geopolitical Change. The population of Scotland began to decline in absolute numbers in the 1970s, due to out-migration and low fertility rates. A natural decrease began in the 1990s when deaths consistently exceeded births. In 2003, the demographic prediction was that, by 2009, an ageing Scottish population would fall to below 5 million people: this was seen as below the lower limit for economic and social efficiency. In the past few years, there has been an expansion of the European Union with a new group of European citizens who have qualifications gained under very different political regimes and in different cultural situations. Many of these new citizens are geographically and occupationally mobile. In the past two years, over 36,000 workers from the new EU states have settled in Scotland, many from Poland and Lithuania. In the light of the relatively low productivity of the Scottish economy, these workers are needed and therefore made very welcome (a situation which puts the Scottish Parliament at odds with the UK Parliament!). In order to remain prosperous, the Scottish economy needs to utilize any available talent and skills. Most of these new workers are entrepreneurial and adventurous in spirit and it is important for Scotland that the learning they undertook at home is recognised. As well as this, Scotland has a “qualification oriented” workforce with a large credit framework into which people can be placed and progress routes charted. It is important that workers with foreign qualifications can be “slotted in” through having their qualifications recognised and accredited.

The second catalyst is Social Justice. Scotland is a small country and there is a growing belief in the need for greater self-determination, with the Nationalist Party expected to form the next government in Scotland. As Scotland tries to separate itself psychologically from the United Kingdom, characteristics considered to be particularly Scottish are being emphasised. One of these is a strong belief in Social Justice and democratic access to the benefits of society. Scotland has had a long-standing social openness to education. Indeed, this characteristic served to differentiate Scottish education from most of what happened in the rest of the United Kingdom and Europe. There has been, traditionally, a pride in those who advanced from humble beginnings through dint of hard work and using talents to the full. But, qualifications are a social construct which includes and excludes. In a democratic society, how can we exclude those with equivalent qualifications or skills learned elsewhere? In a democracy which has good citizenship as its aim, we need to diversify learning opportunities and recognise the learning and experience of others.

The third catalyst is Economics. We have to realise that learning can take place outside the institution (often at far less cost!). It is absurd to oblige someone to enter an academy for 3 or 4 years to be taught what they already know. This is wasted time which could be used to make an economic contribution to society. To take full advantage of this, we have to know what competences the workforce possesses so that APL can operate to the maximum level of efficiency. Underpinning this is a disguised commitment to the Human...
Capital model of economic progress. It is people as Human Capital who matter. One would therefore expect that APL would be extremely attractive to Scotland. There are real economic arguments for the state to encourage APL. It gets people into education for little cost and allows people to get through education at reduced cost. Anything that reduces the cost of creating Human Capital should be attractive.

2. INPUT MODELS TO OUTCOME MODELS (Da modello input a modello risultati)
If we wish to respond positively to these catalysts for change we need to consider new learners, new learning and new ways of thinking about the curriculum. Traditionally, Higher Education has been based on an Input Model. The knowledge rests with the lecturer who fills up the heads of the student by transferring this knowledge. In this model, the power rests with the academy and the lecturer. APL implies a shift to an Outcomes Model. We have to know what we expect students to do as a result of their education. We can then map the skills and knowledge of the workforce over the outcomes expected of our students. Again, it follows from this that curriculum structures, examinations, entry and exit points have to be made much more flexible. Degree structures in most of Europe are still too inflexible to allow appropriate use of APL. A commitment to APL implies that courses need to be broken down into smaller units so that there can be a fair matching of knowledge and skills.

A good test of the educational model which you experienced is to ask yourself what you learned at University. Did you learn facts? Did you learn how to do things? Did you learn how to be someone else?

With regard to thinking about the curriculum, Scottish education has adopted the outcomes model. Within vocational training the Scottish Vocational Education Council (SCOTVEC) adopted outcomes-based learning in the 1980s. Vocational education is organised in 40-hour modules or units all with clear learning outcomes, and assessment methods related to these outcomes. In the 1990s the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) which organises school qualifications also adopted outcomes based learning. The educational system in Scotland has used this to design an all-encompassing framework from age 14 years onwards. It is called the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF). Vocational, technical and academic education are all in the framework, all underpinned by the concept of notional student effort. Much hope has been placed on the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF). This framework has the potential to underpin a coherent and accessible lifelong learning system in Scotland, but the effective use of the framework will be crucial in realising this potential. The SCQF is an integrated unified framework incorporating the qualifications of the main awarding bodies in Scotland. These are the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) and degree-awarding Scottish higher education institutions. The framework therefore includes all major qualifications from schools, colleges, workplaces and universities. “Any kind of learning can be assessed and placed within the framework, so it has the potential to provide a single reference point for learners and employer.” (Lifelong Learning Report, par. 118). Note that the report indicates that any kind of learning, and, ipso facto, Prior Learning, can be assessed and placed within the framework. “The credit point will be exactly the same (10 notional hours of learning time) whether someone is at the early stages of school, in a further education college, in a professional statutory body or learning anywhere in Scotland. A common unit of credit will run through absolutely everything. One of our important goals is to bring about that simplicity.” (QAA Official Report, Jan 2002)
The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (see www.scqf.org.uk)

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<tr>
<th>SCQF Level</th>
<th>SQA national units, courses and group awards</th>
<th>Higher Education</th>
<th>SVQ</th>
<th>SCQF Level</th>
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<td>HNC, Cert HE</td>
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Columns 1 and 5 indicate the levels of qualification: Scottish qualifications are divided into 12 distinct levels. Column 2 contains the types of qualifications available in school or in non-advanced further education. Column 3 has to do with the higher education qualifications available in higher education institutions and in further education. Column 4 indicates the 5 levels of Scottish Vocational Qualifications. It can be seen that an APL claim can, theoretically, be given a credit amount together with a credit level. To provide a shared understanding of each level and to help differentiate between levels and facilitate the positioning of learning and qualifications on to the system of levels, general descriptors of the learning at each level are being developed. This will be completed in terms of relative demand, complexity and depth of learning, learner autonomy, and links to associated academic, professional or vocational practice. Naturally, given the complexity of learning, these statements can be neither precise nor comprehensive, but general and meaningful. As, almost by definition, APEL will be calculated on the basis if the SVQ column, what are these Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs)? SVQs are structured into a system of five levels. These range from Level 1, covering jobs which involve a range of tasks, most of which fall into a pattern and do not change, up to Level 5 which covers senior management functions. They are related to competence at work rather than the successful achievement of a particular course and so should be particularly amenable to APL. The SCQF has been given massive funding to hasten its development and push it into the lifelong learning agenda. It is imperative that this framework becomes part of Scottish consciousness and provides proper facilities for APEL. There has to robust internal assurance processes that are used to guarantee the worthiness of credit plus an external body to assure this. In this way, all credit, irrespective of its provenance, is worthy. A key element in the SCQF is what is called “Parity of Esteem”. People’s perceptions of the various routes open to them are formed by a range of influences, key among which is the fact that vocational routes tend to be less highly valued than academic routes. Indeed, the vocational route can be used as a threat and equated with failure. This apparent lack of parity of esteem for different columns in the Credit Framework is a crucial
issue, which must be overcome, especially for the promotion of APEL. Opportunity Scotland (p. 62) states that “Highers in History and Hospitality, for example, will be equally challenging.” That is, there needs to be Parity of Esteem.

3. “KNOWING THAT” AND “KNOWING HOW” (“Sapere come” e “Sapere cosa”)

However, can there ever be “parity of esteem”? There is too much knowledge: to read every scientific article produced in one year will take 22 centuries. So, we need to consider what knowledge is for. It is difficult to actually determine what is being assessed or accredited in any APEL transaction. This difficulty hinges on the distinction between Mode 1 knowledge and Mode 2 knowledge. These terms are not particularly helpful. The French terms “Savoir théorétique” and “Savoir faire” provide a better encapsulation of the distinction. Mode 1 knowledge is academic, based on scholarship, produced through the processes of research, and codified in academic curricula: in the 1960s, philosophers called this knowledge “knowing that”. Mode 2 knowledge is produced through action, outside the academy and may transcend traditional disciplinary boundaries: philosophers called this knowledge “knowing how”. Mode 2 knowledge is judged for its credibility through its relevance and is become increasingly important. The difficulty arises because APEL is based on Mode 2 knowledge and it is being assessed into a Mode 1 system. This will remain a problem until some equality of standing can be demonstrated within these two modes.

4. TOOLS AND PROCEDURES (Strumenti e procedimenti)

The Scottish Experience

Where is APL taking place?
There is still no mainstreaming of APEL within Scotland. There is no overall national commitment to recognise and accredit non-formal and informal learning in Scotland. There have been institutional developments, supported through some nationally funded development projects. It is an oversimplification (but with a strong element of truth) to state that it is only in the new universities that there is any institutional interest. This is because these institutions placed a greater emphasis on widening access to Higher Education, especially for adult returners, and because they had a strong tradition of vocationally oriented provision. Within these institutions there was an early tendency towards vocationally specific APL in the areas of social work, nursing, and health studies. These are student groups who have substantial levels of practical work based experiential learning, and who are demanding a system which will recognise this learning, and give them credit for it. This is now becoming broader with more departments becoming interested in using APL as a recruitment and progression tool. Some Universities, such as the University of Paisley, provide an APL service for the provision of guidance and advice, and for assistance in preparing a portfolio.

For what purpose is APL being provided?
APL is recognised as an important first step because it leads to people valuing themselves through recognition of their experience. There are, however, two different philosophical positions with regard to APL:

1. Learning and training organisations, business, industry and commerce are interested in recognising professional work-based skills within a framework of
qualifications. This is based on the argument that, if modern societies and economies are to develop and grow, education and training systems must be flexible enough to enable people to engage and re-engage with learning at various points in their career (Gallacher and Feutrie, 2003). This is a new form of capitalism (Gee et al, 1996) and will have APL used within a clearly defined agenda and for credit.

2. The Widening Access and Lifelong Learning community is more interested in using APL to open up life’s chances. There is, in this position, a concern related to social justice and social inclusion. There is a sense of danger that those whose participation in formal learning has been limited, and who have limited educational qualifications, will be increasingly excluded from society and citizenship.

These two viewpoints become apparent when we examine how people are using APL in Scotland.

For entry to a course
Students can offer the knowledge and skills offered through work as a means of entry to university. However, Because of the way in which higher education is funded in Scotland, it is vital that there is student retention. Institutions are wary of using APL as an entry mechanism because it is unclear what probability of retention is implied. The award of entry credit through APL is not proof that a student can cope. The present funding model in Scotland means that first year at university is being used as a test-bed for future performance. Because of funding, students have to survive the first year, therefore much APL is bolstered by interviews, and an entry test.

To accelerate progress
APL is often used in professional areas such as Community Education, Social Work, Sport in the Community, Human Resource Management to allow accelerated progress with entry to the second or third year of a course. Giving APEL to recognised cohorts, however, can be very effective and is used extensively in the area of nursing. Nurses studying part-time are often given AEL credit to accelerate their progress through a degree. Here, the types of knowledge acquired through experience are seen as significant and can be recognised through APL.

To make up a credit deficit and allow graduation
In this case, APL tends to be used for small bits of credit so as to avoid overlap. A good example is where APL is used in Nursing Studies and Health Studies to top-up any credit deficit (normally 5-15 points) and so allow graduation. This is because of a mismatch of module sizes between institutions. For example, in Nursing Studies, Glasgow Caledonian has modules worth 20 credits while Paisley has modules worth 15 credits. Students moving between the two institutions can end up with a 5-15 point deficit. APEL is used to bridge the gap.

Portfolios
APEL is normally for small amounts but, under the current regulations of those institutions committed to APEL, 300 credits out of 360 can be awarded by APEL. This will be in precise vocational areas such as Nursing Studies or Health Studies. The case is normally made through a piece of work completed (for small amounts of credit, e.g. an extended essay about reflective practice. For more substantial amounts of credit there will be a portfolio). Often, in nursing, this will include old qualifications that were not credit-rated at the time, e.g. Theatre Sister. If the present Theatre Sister qualification is worth 60-80 credits, then a portfolio will have to be prepared. This leads to the problems of resources
discussed earlier. As well as this however, there is the difficulty of the shelf life of qualifications and the implied difficulties for APEL.

**How flexible and user-friendly are APEL procedures?**
There is the danger of APEL procedures being inflexible, bureaucratic and very user-unfriendly. Organisations such as the University of Paisley have simplified processes and generated much good practice in this area.

**The University of Paisley Method**
(see www.paisley.ac.uk/education/APL.asp)
The University of Paisley is strategically committed to APL and APEL. Its paperwork is extremely clear, declaring to potential applicants that:

APEL is learning which has its sources in experience. It is important to stress that credit is not given for experience. Experience is only valuable, in this context, as a source for learning. It is what has been learned that is important, not what the individual has actually done. If learning cannot be extracted from experience, there is nothing to assess and a claim cannot be made.

Identification of learning comes through systematic reflection on experience and has three stages:

(a) Experiences are looked at and those where learning has occurred are selected;
(b) Clear statements are written about what was actually learned. These are called **Statements of Learning**;
(c) Evidence in support of the claim to learning is collected and collated.

The APL/APEL proposal (see Appendix One) will therefore consist of a portfolio comprising the following:

**Name**
**Subject Area**
**Certificated Learning**

**Statements of Learning:**
- The situations where learning was achieved;
- The level of supervision the applicant had;
- The complexity of the situation in which the learning was achieved;
These Statements should relate to the SCQF grid discussed earlier.

**A Written Account of the Learning:** this should
- Refer to the Statements of Learning and the evidence;
- Describe how the learning developed over time;
- Demonstrate the ability to reflect on learning;
- Clearly demonstrate a knowledge and understanding of relevant academic theory;
- Provide a guide through the portfolio of evidence.

**A collection of appropriate and valid evidence to support the claim**
Direct Evidence, e.g. Procedures designed by the applicant
Project or Research Reports
Lack of Confidence
I have indicated earlier that, because of the way in which higher education is funded in Scotland, it is vital that there is a high degree of student retention. Many Institutions are therefore wary of using APEL as an entry mechanism because it is unclear what probability of retention is implied. Because of funding, students have to survive to graduation, so any APEL is bolstered by interviews, and an entry test. This is demonstrated at the University of Paisley, where applicants must also make a presentation and undergo an oral examination for any claim exceeding 30 credit points.

5. Costs and Payments
(Costi e Spese)
Time Intensity
The major problem holding back the spread of APL within Scotland has been the lack of significant resources. APL is very resource intensive in the short run. For APL to work, it cannot be considered a marginal activity of lifelong learning and institutions. Only when it moves from the margins to the mainstream has it any chance of working. It has been suggested that APEL can be made more economic through the judicious use of IT. However, it is clear from the experience within Scotland that people are needed at the front end, interacting with those wishing to use APL as part of their life plan. There has to be specialist advice by staff trained in guidance and mentoring who will assist candidates to think about their knowledge. There is also a procedural stage in creating the portfolio. The portfolio has to be assessed by at least one academic. A decision has to be made about the applicant. This is very labour-intensive if it is for single one-off decisions. It can be more efficient if it is groups or cohorts that can be charged. There is, however, no coherence across the HE sector about charging for APEL services. APEL charging varies from:

- A free service
- A charge per credit
- A charge per module
- A proportion of the module fee

The University of Paisley makes no charge: these APL applicants get credit which is specific to University of Paisley courses, and so the University gets money back through funding.

6. The Role and Purpose of Universities
(Il ruolo e la funzione dell’università)
If we accept that APL is a proper response to the geopolitical problems and concerns with social justice identified earlier in this paper, we perhaps have to rethink the purpose of a University. A university has traditionally been seen as a guardian of knowledge, holding within itself the accumulated knowledge of humanity. As well as guarding knowledge, universities are a major source of new knowledge, that is, they manufacture knowledge. However, in post-modern times, universities have come to be seen as having another
significant purpose. At the present time we are in a global period of social, political and economic uncertainty. A result of this is a moral and cultural relativism in which culture seems to be debased. Universities are now therefore being given the role of preserving culture and moral values. They are a steady point in the surrounding moral and cultural confusion. However, APL implies a new function: ensuring the quality of what is learned elsewhere.

References

National Documents


Articles, etc.


Websites
www.paisley.ac.uk/education/APL.asp

www.scqf.org.uk
APPENDIX ONE

APL/APEL PROPOSAL

You are now ready to start planning your portfolio. You will be assigned a supervisor from the appropriate academic department(s). Before meeting with your supervisor prepare a brief outline of the areas for which you may wish to claim credit and an indication of the type of evidence you intend to produce.

Name
Subject Area
Certificated Learning

Statements of Learning
### Written Account

### Supplementary Evidence

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Approved by:

- Admissions Officer
- Programme Leader
- Module Co-ordinator