

Accreditation of prior learning (APL)

We learn in many ways: at work, through related courses or work placements, by distance or self-directed learning and through our leisure activities. Someone thinking of applying for a higher qualification may look at the content of possible courses and think 'I know a lot of this already through my work' or 'that was part of my NVQ'.

It makes good sense and can save time and money if this existing knowledge is recognised. Universities and Further Education Colleges in Britain, working in conjunction with the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) have a system to identify, assess and recognise (or formally acknowledge) prior learning and achievement and allow it to count towards some higher education qualifications.

www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/apl/default.asp

Gaining accreditation may be relevant at the point of entry to an Access to Higher Education course; it could count as credit for some of the requirements of a vocational, academic, occupational or competence-based award. It may even be possible for some applicants to go straight into the second year of a course, such as a Foundation Degree or HND/HNC.

A range of terms are used, but the following are the most frequent:

Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL)

Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning (APCL)

Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL)

Accreditation of Prior Learning and Achievement (APL&A)

Guidelines for gaining accreditation

It is important to realise that the acknowledgement of experience alone is not sufficient to gain accreditation. Whenever and wherever the experience occurred, evidence must be presented to demonstrate that learning has taken place.

QAA has worked with the higher education community to draw up guidelines designed to accredit learning and achievement. These include the achievement of learning, or the outcomes of that learning that:

- has been previously assessed and certificated
- occurred at work, in a community-base or related setting but is not a formal part of that experience
- took place at some stage prior to the chosen HE course
- is currently taking place side by side with the chosen HE course but is not a formal part of that course
- comes from experience and personal reflection but has not been a part of formal learning

Note that it is the achievement of learning, or the outcomes of that learning that is accredited and not the taking part in the experience that led to it.

How to go about gaining accreditation?

The process varies from one institution to another so discussion with the Admissions Tutor for the course is essential. Sometimes APL is built into a work-related degree course. To be accurate and fair the accreditation of evidence from a course or workplace must be both detailed and specific.

To make the process smoother start by:

- identifying the potential programme, award or module
- matching previous learning to the requirements of that course or module
- providing evidence, which could be in writing, as a recording, or via an interview, of that learning

Likewise the university or college should:

- provide sufficient background information for applicants to track where their knowledge matches the content of the course
- have appropriate staff to support the process of identifying and submitting evidence of learning
- provide assessors who can accurately assess and quantify the learning within the context of the university's course or programme
- be satisfied that the evidence submitted is sufficient, authentic, current and valid in relation to the learning outcomes of the course and the level of credit being sought.

Accreditation of overseas qualifications

If you have studied overseas and have qualifications from a university abroad, you can ask for a statement of comparability from the National Academic Recognition Information Centre (NARIC). They will need to see a photocopy of your qualifications. If these are a close match to a British university qualification but do not cover the full scope of the course, you may be able to apply for accreditation and simply study for the modules which did not match. For more information go to:

www.naric.org.uk

A final note! Look out for courses offered by universities that are specifically designed to support the APL student and facilitate the APL process.

For further information about Vocational Learning, Higher Education, choosing a course or university, or Student Finance, go to the Learning Opportunities website:

www.learning-opportunities.org.uk