

Accreditation of Prior Learning

Guidance for Academic Staff

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Accreditation of Prior Learning: Guidance for Academic Staff

The APL process

1. Responsibilities of participants in the APL process

(a) THE APPLICANT is responsible for the preparation and submission of their application for the award of APL credit.

The specific responsibilities of the applicant are to:

- (i) contact the APL Adviser for the programme to discuss their application and to obtain the required documentation.
- (ii) reflect on their experiences and, with the guidance of the APL Adviser, identify the skills and knowledge already achieved and their future learning needs.
- (iii) compare the prior learning with the learning outcomes of the module/level/programme for which they are applying for APL credit.
- (iv) gather together appropriate evidence in support of their claim for APL credit.
- (v) submit the evidence to the APL Adviser in an agreed format within an agreed deadline.

(b) THE APL ADVISER is responsible for providing the applicant with the guidance and documentation necessary to allow the applicant to progress their claim for APL, if it is deemed appropriate to do so.

In the case of an application for APCL, the Adviser may be the admission tutor or the programme leader and this person may also assess the claim when submitted.

In the case of an application for APEL, the Adviser should be a different member of academic staff to the Assessor of the claim.

The specific responsibilities of the APL Adviser are to:

- (i) describe and explain APL and the processes involved, including an assessment of the future learning needs of the applicant. It may be that an APL Adviser will advise against the submission of a claim.

- (ii) explain the requirements of the programme of study with respect to the specific learning outcomes for modules/levels and the credits associated with each.
- (iii) advise on the type of evidence which should be gathered, its collation, and preparation in an appropriate format. If the claim relates to APCL the format of the evidence is likely to be certificates of qualifications or awards resulting from the prior learning. If the claim relates to APEL, there may be a number of different types of evidence available/required, which may include the preparation of a portfolio of evidence.
- (iv) if a portfolio is required, review a plan and draft of the applicant's portfolio ensuring the inclusion of evidence to demonstrate that the applicant has satisfactorily reflected on the prior learning which is the basis of the claim.
- (v) accept a completed claim and progress it through the APL procedures.
- (vi) inform the applicant of the decision following the assessment of the claim. Where a claim for exemption is successful the Adviser is responsible for informing relevant administrative function in the University and the relevant Assessment Board(s) as appropriate.
- (vii) produce and/or maintain appropriate records of the APL process including
 - notes of meetings and other contacts with/about the applicant;
 - the report of the assessment process;
 - documented feedback from the student on the APL process;
 - monitoring reports on APL activity to the School/Centre Board of Studies;
 - monitoring records of the performance of successful APL applicants on their University programme.

All records relating to the APL claim should be added to the applicant's file.

An effective Adviser should have knowledge of:

- the principles and procedures of APL
- methods of and opportunities for assessment available to claimants
- possible sources of evidence (eg. portfolios, natural performance, interviewing, testimonials, assignments, projects, simulations)
- the characteristics of portfolios to aid the assessment process
- ways of structuring evidence to create an effective portfolio

An effective Adviser should have the ability to:

- identify the range of experiences with potential for assessment
- establish the sufficiency, current validity and authenticity of evidence
- formulate assessment plans
- support claimants in ways that will encourage self-esteem and assist in the identification of potential experiences.
- use effective questioning techniques

(c) THE ASSESSOR is responsible for assessing the APL claim. In the case of an application for APCL, the Assessor may be the Adviser, the admission tutor or the programme leader.

In the case of a claim for APEL, the Assessor should be a different member of academic staff to the Adviser.

The specific responsibilities of the APL Assessor are to:

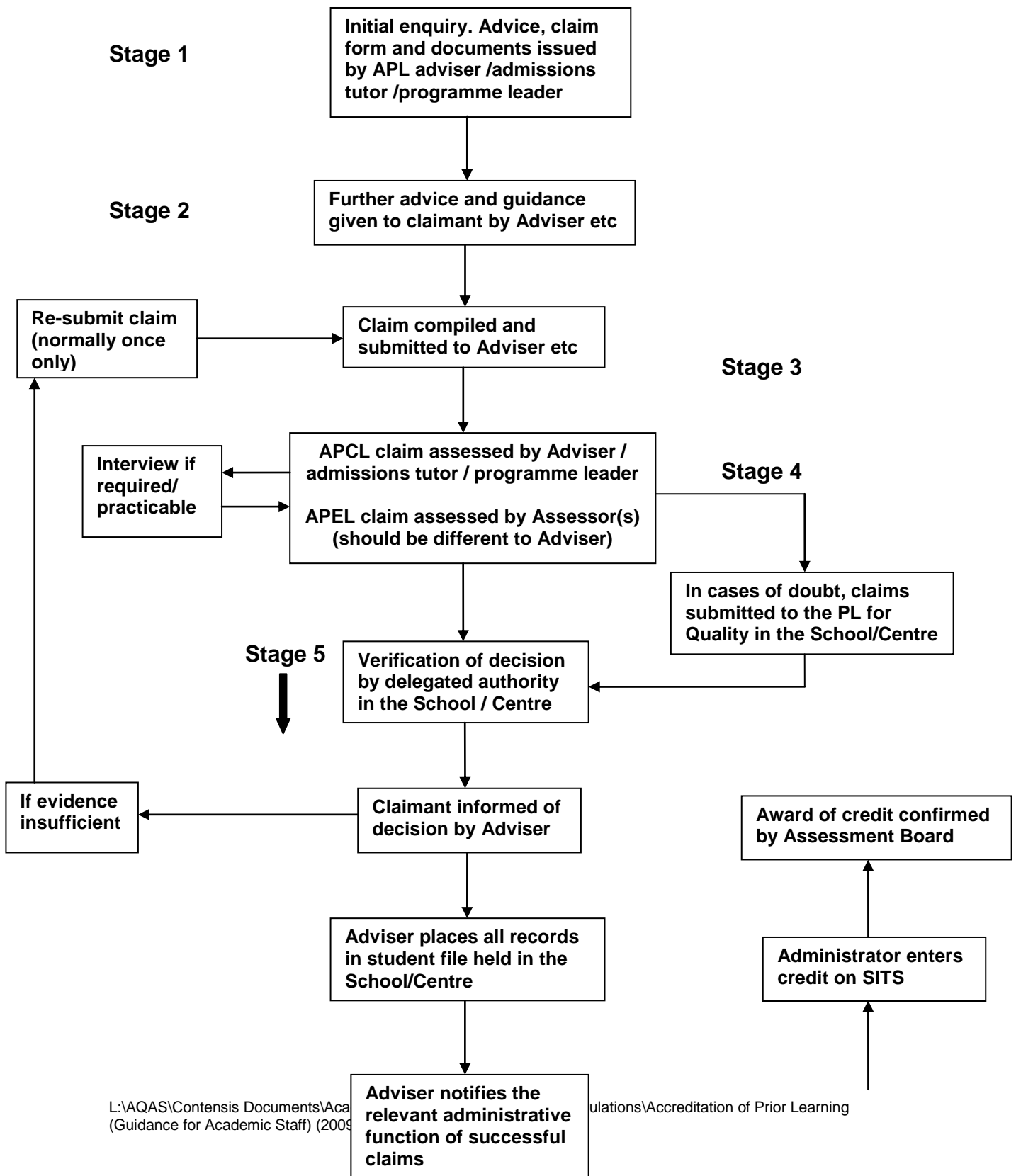
- (i) consider the learning outcomes for the module/level, identify appropriate assessment criteria to be met by the applicant's claim for APL and communicate these to the applicant and the APL Adviser
- (ii) assess the evidence presented by the applicant against the defined assessment criteria
- (iii) report the outcome of the assessment process within an agreed time-scale to the applicant's APL Adviser
- (iv) maintain appropriate records of the APL process including:
 - notes of meetings and other contacts with/about the applicant
 - the report of the assessment process

and copy to the applicant's APL adviser.

There are five stages of staff input to the APL process as illustrated in Figure 1.

- 1 Responding to an initial enquiry
- 2 Providing further advice and guidance
- 3 Accepting a formal application
- 4 Assessing the evidence for making a claim
- 5 Communicating the outcomes of a claim

Figure 1 Overview of the APL process for claiming credit exemption





Records available for
scrutiny by External
Examiner

2. Process for the accreditation of prior certificated learning (APCL)

APCL is normally the easier of the two types of prior learning to take through the APL procedure since it is based on learning which has been formally assessed by a recognised body or authority and for which there should be documented evidence in the form of certificates, course information, transcripts etc. Normally this documented evidence will form the basis of the claim for APCL and will be taken through the five stages listed above. Where the evidence is fully documented by the means given above, and can be verified, the assessment of the evidence may be carried out by the admissions tutor and /or the programme leader for the programme (who may also be the APL Adviser).

3. Process for the accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL)

Experiential learning is the more difficult type of prior learning to assess. It places the onus on the applicant to make a specific claim for credit for prior learning, often drawing on the applicant's own unique set of circumstances which need to be precisely identified and expressed and for which appropriate forms of supporting evidence need to be produced. The learning is then assessed in terms of its equivalence to that expected on a module or programme leading to an award of the University. The member(s) of staff assessing the claim, the APL Assessor(s), may require additional written tests, demonstration activities or an interview to achieve a satisfactory assessment. One of the most difficult problems is to establish that the applicant, if only by inference, has the requisite theoretical and methodological foundation for his or her claim.

(a) The Criteria

In order to gain credit under APEL procedures the applicant's learning will need to meet the following criteria:

- learning must be clearly differentiated from experience. (It is the knowledge, capacity for reflection, understanding and skills of an individual that is assessed for credit, not what an individual has done or experienced).
- learning must be at a level appropriate to a programme offered by the University (ie Levels 3 to 8)

- knowledge, understanding and skills must be current. While experience may have occurred at any time, the individual must be able to demonstrate that the acquired learning is up to date and has current applicability.

- learning must demonstrate general transferability outside the specific situation in which it was acquired. An individual's learning should not be tied to one particular perspective but show an ability to relate to a broader outlook.

- learning must be capable of being demonstrated to and assessed by an expert in an appropriate subject area.

(b) The Process

The main steps in the APEL process are:

- Step 1: establishing the learning experience
- Step 2: identifying the learning which has taken place
- Step 3: expressing the learning and preparing precise learning claims
- Step 4: compiling a portfolio which contains the learning claims and supporting evidence to substantiate these claims.
- Step 5: assessing the experiential learning.

Step 1: Establishing the learning experience

The claimant should begin by producing an enhanced *Curriculum Vitae* identifying all significant past experiences under the following categories:

- **Work:** jobs, positions held (full-time and part-time); responsibilities held; technical functions; appraisals, promotion, in-service courses; professional or union activities; on-the-job training; conferences.
- **Education:** academic, professional or vocational courses; employer training courses; distance learning or correspondence courses; evening classes; apprenticeships; industrial training; workshops; self-taught activities (eg. IT, word-processing).
- **Home and family:** raising children, budgeting, domestic organisation, handling social, medical and personal issues.
- **Voluntary work:** membership of community groups, charity organisations, religious activities, interest and pressure groups; fund-raising; public service work, welfare work.
- **Political activities:** organising meetings, involvement in group work, fund-raising, representative duties.

- **Travel:** holidays, business/representative trips.
- **Leisure interests:** hobbies; pastimes; club membership; recreational group activities; social activities; society membership.
- **Reading and research:** reading interest; specialist subjects; local enquiries.

Step 2: Identifying learning gained from experience

This step involves reflecting on experiences in order to gain precise knowledge of what one has learned from them. This is a vital step and is also the most difficult and lengthy. It involves careful examination and reflection. The claimant needs to identify:

- the knowledge gained/applied
- the skills acquired/used
- other relevant aspects (eg. feelings, attitudes, key elements of experience)

When identifying knowledge and skills, the claimant should be directed towards using a **learning audit** such as the following:

(i) **Does the applicant ?**

- know about his/her job
- know about his/her organisation
- have any specialist/technical knowledge
- have any special interests
- possess the skills listed in 2-10 below.

(ii) **Can he/she work independently to?**

- organise time
- organise tasks
- see a task through to completion
- work to deadlines
- set and achieve objectives

(iii) **Can the applicant?**

- deal effectively with others on a one-to-one basis
- recognise the needs of others and take account of them in his/her relationships with them
- influence/persuade/motivate others
- work effectively in a group
- contribute to group planning and group decisions
- lead a group

(iv) Can the applicant communicate?

- orally
- in writing
- graphically
- in more than one language
- one to one/in a group situation
- in different contexts (work, social, academic)

(v) Can the applicant?

- recognise a problem
- analyse a problem into its constituent parts
- formulate and evaluate possible solutions
- plan to deal with it
- actually deal with it
- evaluate the outcome
- plan to avoid similar problems

(vi) Can the applicant?

- find relevant information
- extract relevant information from a variety of sources (eg. books, reports, media, graphs, statistics, accounts, and by observation)
- discriminate between reliable/unreliable sources; reorganise information for a particular purpose

(vii) Does the applicant possess mathematical/numeracy skills to?

- calculate in different ways
- use fractions, decimals, percentages, ratios formulae
- solve mathematical problems in different contexts; keep accounts

(viii) Has the applicant special skills not listed above, such as?

- typing/wordprocessing/DTP
- computer programming
- drawing
- designing
- surveying

(ix) Can the applicant evaluate their own performance?

- in carrying out a particular task

- in a variety of roles as a (eg. parent, employee, club member, etc.)
- by identifying their own strengths and weaknesses
- by planning effectively for their own future development.

(x) Can the applicant evaluate the performance of others by?

- assessing the skills and abilities of others
- setting up and apply measures of performance (tests, production targets etc.)
- interviewing for selection.

Step 3: Expressing learning

In their portfolios, applicants will be expected to make specific claims relating to their learning. It is important that they express their claims in a way which indicates as precisely as possible the nature and the level of their learning. This can be achieved through (a) the terminology used, and (b) giving specific examples of what they can do/have done.

For example, in formulating a precise learning statement, the following would be far too general:

"I am able to collect and use relevant information"

The following would be far more acceptable:

"I have the ability to process and present relevant information and in particular:

- (a) *I know how to find relevant sources of information*
- (b) *I can discriminate between reliable and unreliable sources of information*
- (c) *I can extract relevant information from various types of sources, such as books, reports, the media, graphs, accounts*
- (d) *I can decide on the best way to present information for a variety of purposes*
- (e) *I can present information effectively in the form of oral and written reports, graphs and statistical tables"*

Learning takes place at different levels depending on the nature of the experience and the degree of conceptualisation that comes from reflection. Identifying the level of the learning is important so that the claimants can link their learning to the levels of academic awards for which they are seeking credit. Under the University's APL policy, claimants will be identifying the level of their experiential learning as 3 to 8 of the FHEQ and/or the QCF.

The following is a guide to levels of learning and to the sort of language and task which may reflect learning at these different levels. The levels do overlap, so it may, in some cases, be impossible to use language which clearly indicates learning at a particular level:

(i) Knowledge of facts (Level 3 upwards)

This addresses the question "What do I know?" at the most basic level and relates to knowledge of such things as: specific facts (dates, events); definitions; classifications; criteria; methods of organising data; principles; theories etc. For example, applying for APEL for a business studies programme:

Does the claimant know:

- the countries in the European Community
- the principles of management
- the definition of a contract
- how to solve problems?

Is the claimant able to:

- list, name, specify, enumerate etc. the countries in the European Community
- recount, repeat etc. the principles of management
- define a contract
- state the technique of problem-solving?

(ii) The collection and use of information (Level 3 upwards)

Is the claimant able to:

- find relevant sources of information
- discriminate between reliable and unreliable sources
- extract relevant information
- reorganise information
- decide the best way to present information
- present information well
- explain the above skills to others?

(iii) Interpretation of factual knowledge (Level 4 upwards)

This addresses a rather higher level of learning because the claimant can interpret the facts both for his/her own benefit and that of others. For example:

Does the claimant understand:

- the European Community
- the principles of management
- the definition of a contract
- how to solve problems?

Is the claimant able to:

- describe the countries of the European Community
- restate/explain the principles of management
- explain the definition of a contract
- explain the techniques of problem-solving?

(iv) Application of knowledge (Level 5 upwards)

This concerns the application of what is known to concrete situations and therefore indicates a higher level of conceptualisation. For example:

Does the claimant understand the European Community/the principles of management/the definition of a contract/how to solve problems to such an extent that he/she can:

- draw a map of the countries in the European Community
- locate the European Community countries on the map of the world
- apply the principles of management to his/her department
- draw up a contract
- give examples of a contract
- solve different types of problem?

(v) Analysis of knowledge (Level 6 upwards)

At a higher level, the claimants may be able to break up the knowledge they have into constituent elements in a variety of ways and for a variety of purposes. For example:

Can the claimant:

- compare/contrast the countries of the European Community
- distinguish/appraise/debate the principles of management
- analyse/examine/criticise the definition of a contract
- compare different techniques of solving particular types of problem?

(vi) Synthesis of knowledge (Level 6 upwards)

A still higher level of knowledge may be reflected in the ability to bring together different elements of what is known and to present them in a new way or to create a different framework for them or to produce a new idea. For example:

Can the claimant:

- formulate/propose policies for the future organisation of the European Community
- teach/redesign the principles of management
- develop innovative ideas about management
- redefine a contract
- suggest modifications to a contract
- develop new ways of solving problems

(vii) Evaluation of knowledge (Levels 6 – 8)

Here the claimant is in a position to evaluate established knowledge by applying criteria of various kinds to it. For example:

Is the claimant able to:

- assess the European Community in the light of political, social and economic theories
- evaluate/appraise the principles of management
- assess the validity of a contract
- judge the effectiveness of a contract in protecting against business risks
- decide the effectiveness of different approaches to problem-solving both in theory and in practice?

Expressing specific examples of learning

The level of learning becomes clearer if the statements are linked to:

- (a) a particular experience or task which the learner has carried out (eg. speaking to a written report compiled for a departmental head)
- (b) a series of experiences (such as a job as a publicity officer, union official or safety officer). The level will become even more clear if the experience were supported by, say, a recording/video of the presentation and a copy of the report, or an example of a successful promotion package.

For example, the following statement may accurately describe what the learner can do, but as it stands, it is not clear whether this involves simply interpreting the information or something more:

"I can present information effectively in the form of oral and written reports, graphs and statistical tables"

Re-expressed as follows, the learning is much more likely to involve the ability to analyse and synthesise:

"I can present information effectively in the form of oral and written reports, graphs and statistical tables ... in that, as senior assistant in the Marketing Department for two years, I regularly made oral presentations and prepared such material for publication inside and outside the company."

Expressing learning as a 'Learning Claim'

Finally, after preparing thorough and detailed learning statements, claimants should be in a position to formulate their own 'Learning Claims' in relation to each category of learning in their individual learning audit. Each category of

learning may be formulated in terms of a competence statement as in the following example (which addresses item vi in the **learning audit** described in step 2):

"I can collect and use information and in particular:

- (a) *I know how to find relevant sources of information in that I have devised a departmental library catalogued for easy reference.*
- (b) *I can discriminate between reliable and unreliable sources of information.*
- (c) *I can extract relevant information from various types of sources, including books, journals, statistics, computerised information and consulting with experts and others.*
- (d) *I can recognise information for easy reference and can decide on the best way to present information in different ways and for different purposes: eg. I have devised a specification for a computerised system for recording medical examinations.*
- (e) *I can use a computer in the presentation of written reports and statistical tables (eg. in compiling tables and reports on the incidence of industrial diseases in the workforce).*
- (f) *I can instruct other staff in the above skills.*

Step 4: Preparing a portfolio

A portfolio of experiential learning is a collection of materials compiled by a claimant to gain academic credits. It describes the learning which that individual has derived from experience. The portfolio includes claims to that learning, with supporting evidence, in a way in which the claims can be assessed according to the University's APL general principles and guidelines.

Each portfolio will be an individualised statement of experiential learning so there is no model form of portfolio. Nevertheless, any portfolio will contain evidence in two categories, direct and indirect.

- (a) direct evidence: project reports, databases, case study notes, correspondence, conference papers, workplans, etc.
- (b) indirect evidence: statements from employers, customers or clients; documentation on courses undertaken; appraisals, references; letters of validation (from people who are in a position to judge the value and quality of the learning) etc.

Examples of evidence

Evidence will vary according to the disciplinary area(s) involved and may be provided in a variety of ways, etc.

- (a) Testimonials and references from appropriately experienced referees covering specific areas of enquiry for which evidence may be required.
- (b) Lists of past achievements and the learning sequence which was essential before they could be successfully completed.
- (c) Monographs, articles or other tangible evidence of learning and skill.
- (d) Lists of artifacts or other tangible evidence of learning and skill.
- (e) Presentations or Simulation exercises to illustrate mastery and/or understanding.
- (f) Offers to undertake written tests or practical problem-solving.
- (g) Offers to be interviewed by specialists in the relevant disciplines.
- (h) Participation in peer group dialogue, discussion and exploration of relevant fields and issues.

The finalised portfolio should contain the following:

- (a) a statement clarifying the academic award to which it will contribute
- (b) a description of the major learning experiences
- (c) evidence of that learning.

A problem in portfolio presentation is the weight of evidence that could be submitted. Claimants should select samples of their materials which best demonstrate the specific knowledge and skills which they are claiming. Summaries should be submitted of major documents. Assessors will wish to know what objectives are clearly identified, processes followed and outcomes achieved rather than wade through masses of content.

The role of the APL Adviser in portfolio preparation

It is important that each claimant should consult with their APL Adviser at critical points in the process. The role of the Adviser is that of facilitator in order to:

- (a) work with the applicant on the production of a portfolio
- (b) explain the APL process
- (c) guide the applicant through the various stages

- (d) act as 'broker' with subject specialist assessors in order to clarify aspects of the process.

Step 5: Assessment of the Experiential Learning (Stage 4 of the APL process)

Upon submission of an application for APL, the assessor(s) can make a number of preliminary and provisional judgements:

1. The likely academic credit arising out of any formal qualifications (ie. certificated learning).
2. Whether any additional credit is likely to arise from any uncertificated learning (eg. a applicant may have significant additional learning from in-company programmes which has not hitherto been assessed but could qualify for academic credit).
3. What additional information would be needed before any relevant uncertificated (experiential) learning could be assessed (eg. an applicant may have referred to work-based learning without having given enough detail or evidence for an assessor to be able to make a judgement).
4. How much of the total General Credit arising from 1 and 2 above is likely to be relevant to the qualification being sought ie. how much Specific Credit is likely to arise and from which areas of the applicant's prior learning.

Assessment of the portfolio (where submitted)

Once the applicant has completed the portfolio, it is submitted to the APL Adviser for forwarding to the Assessor(s) for the award from which the claimant is seeking Specific Credit. The evidence will be interpreted by the Assessor(s) who will form an overall picture of the claimant's achievements. Checks and crosschecks will be made to evaluate each item of evidence to ensure that the learning is appropriate to the learning objectives of the academic award which the claimant is seeking.

The following assessment criteria are used:

- (a) **Authenticity:** the applicant should actually possess the learning claimed.
- (b) **Relevance:** the focus of the learning must be sharp and relevant to the course or programme proposed.
- (c) **Breadth:** the learning must be integrated effectively with the wider context of the subject.

- (d) Depth: the learning must demonstrate a grasp of theoretical as well as practical knowledge or skills.
- (e) Quality: the learning must be at the appropriate level claimed.
- (f) Currency: the learning must be up-to-date.
- (g) Sufficiency: the learning must be sufficient in weight to match the learning experience on the taught programme from which the candidate is seeking exemptions.

Normally an assessment interview will be held to test the claims to learning. Assessors might ask the applicant to undertake an assessment exercise to substantiate aspects of his/her learning claims. These exercises could be written assignments, demonstration activities or examinations, possibly taken from the module(s) for which the applicant is claiming credit. Assessors are encouraged to provide positive feedback. If further evidence is required, then opportunity should be given to the applicant to produce the evidence. The Assessor(s) will assign credit points to the applicant's learning and this credit rating will be subject to the approval of the appropriate Assessment Board.