



Accreditation of Prior Learning

Guidance for Students

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Assessing Prior Learning: Guidance for Students

Introduction

The University recognises that, as one of its enrolled or potential students, you may already possess considerable amounts of learning which could be legitimately counted for academic credit.

This learning may be **certificated learning** (obtained via previous study) or **experiential learning** (previous learning which has not received recognition in the form of a recognised certificate. Experiential learning should have resulted in the acquisition of knowledge and skills equivalent to learning arising from study).

The University wishes to encourage and facilitate the admission of suitably qualified students to programmes of study, including its professional development programmes, through the use of the Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL). It recognises that the application of APL procedures will vary across the University due to the differing needs of the Schools, Centres, programmes and individual students. However, the University's APL policy allows flexibility for these groups to use APL procedures to their best effect while at the same time providing an overall framework within which regulatory and quality assurance issues are addressed across the University.

Successful APL claims will lead to the awarding of academic credit which can be counted for entry to a programme and/or exemption from parts of a programme leading to a University award. In the latter case this may allow you to achieve your award within a shorter period of study.

An example of the application of APL procedures

An experienced business manager who has no formal qualifications wishes to obtain a recognised Higher Education (HE) qualification and is accepted onto a programme leading to a Business Studies degree. After due reflection, the manager who, after several years of practical experience, has acquired considerable knowledge of a substantial number of the topics normally covered in a Business Studies degree, may decide to apply for APL credit to gain exemption from part of the degree.

The applicant might cite prior learning including the use of computers in keeping staff records, the production of guidance manuals on employment law or health and safety, or management talents revealed in the daily exercise of organisational abilities or inter-personal skills.

As evidence in support of a claim for APL credit, the applicant might offer to produce references from a line manager, or might express a willingness to undergo appropriate tests of the level of his/her learning and skill by interview, simulation exercise or other more traditional modes of assessment such as the production of a portfolio. In addition, there will be a requirement to

demonstrate **reflection on the learning** which has taken place as the result of the experience gained during the applicant's employments.

Glossary of terms

Throughout this document the following terms will be used as defined below.

Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL)

An inclusive term which covers the formal recognition, assessment and award of **credit** at an appropriate academic **level** (or levels) of study. The prior learning may be of two types; **certificated learning** or **experiential learning**.

Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning (APCL)

The formal recognition, assessment and award of credit for prior certificated learning. This may also be referred to as **credit transfer**.

Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL)

The formal recognition, assessment and award of credit for prior experiential learning, that is learning which has not been certificated but which has been achieved in specific contexts such as employment, voluntary work or life experience. This learning should have resulted in the acquisition of knowledge and skills equivalent to learning arising from study at an appropriate academic level (or levels).

Advanced entry

Where the amount of credit an applicant is awarded via APL allows the applicant to gain exemption from one or more **modules**, but not a whole level or stage of study, within a programme.

Advanced standing

Where the amount of credit an applicant is awarded via APL allows the applicant to gain exemption from at least one whole level or stage of study within a programme

Assessment criteria

Assessment criteria describe what the learner has to do to show that the **learning outcome** has been achieved. They are based on the intended learning outcomes for the work being assessed and specify the standards that must be met and the evidence that will be gathered to demonstrate the achievement of the learning outcomes.

Credit

A quantitative measure of the amount of learning required to achieve

specified learning outcomes of a module or level within a programme of study. In the University's credit framework, one credit equates to ten hours of required learning. The learning time includes class contact, directed learning, private study, preparation of assessments, revision and examinations.

General credit

Credit which may qualify a student for entry to HE but which may or may not be matched to the student's choice of programme of study.

The total amount of credit, at a specified level, a student may claim for appropriate prior learning. It is the award of credit which does not necessarily count towards specific module(s) but which may qualify the applicant for entry to the start of a specific programme of study.

Learning outcomes

Learning outcomes are specific for a programme or module. They describe what a student should know, understand, or be able to do by the end of that programme or module.

Level

Credit is expressed in terms of the academic level of study which relates to the relative demand, complexity, depth of learning and learner autonomy required in order to achieve the learning outcomes of a module or level within a programme. The levels within the University are shown in Table 1 in Appendix 1.

Module

A component of a programme of study to which are allocated learning outcomes and ways of achieving those learning outcomes through learning opportunities and the completion of assessment items. Modules are defined in terms of their credit value at a particular level of study.

The standard module is the basic course unit in the Undergraduate Modular curriculum and is worth 20 credits. Credit values may vary eg there are some half modules worth 10 credits which devote half the normal amount of time to the module material and some modules carrying 30 or more credits which devote the proportionate amount of learning time to the module material.

In the Postgraduate Modular curriculum credit values are more variable. In the University Professional Development Framework some modules may be taken by students as "stand-alone" modules rather than as a component of a programme of study.

Specific credit

Credit which may qualify a student for entry onto a specific course where the

volume, content and level of prior learning can be matched to the learning outcomes within a module or level/stage of a chosen programme.

Credit, at a specified level, for prior learning which can be used to gain exemptions from specific modules within an award of the University.

The APL process

1. Responsibilities of participants in the APL process

(a) YOU AS THE APPLICANT are responsible for the preparation and submission of your application for the award of APL credit.

Your specific responsibilities are to:

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

(b) THE APL ADVISER (who may also be your admissions tutor and/or programme leader) is responsible for providing you with the guidance and documentation necessary to allow you to progress your claim for APL, if it is deemed appropriate to do so.

The specific responsibilities of your APL Adviser are to:

- (i) describe and explain APL and the processes involved, including an assessment of your future learning. It may be that your APL Adviser will advise against the submission of your 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 you should gather, its collation and preparation in an appropriate format.

If your claim relates to APCL the format of the evidence is likely to be certificates of qualifications or awards resulting from the prior learning.

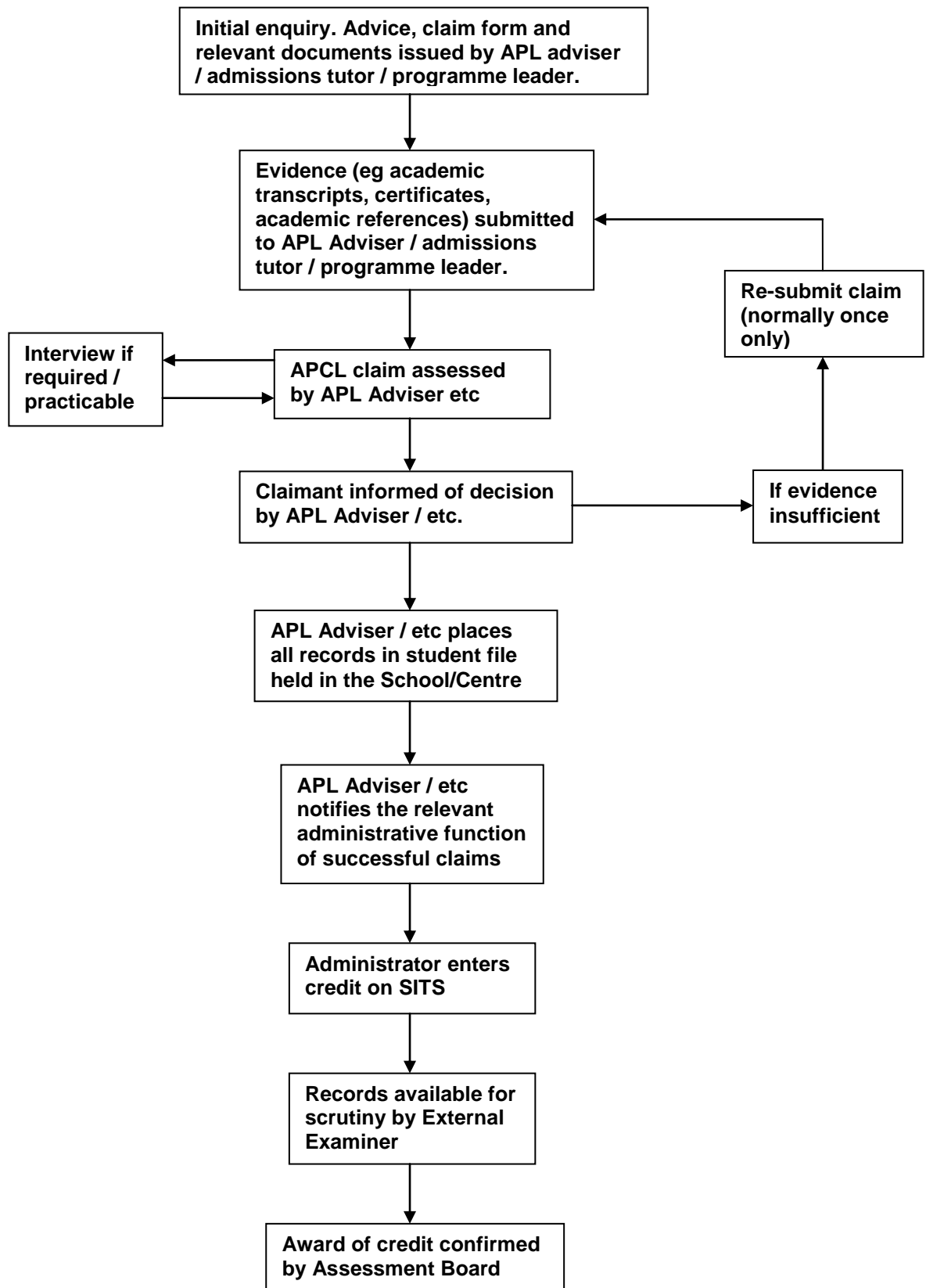
If your claim relates to APEL, there may be a number of different types of evidence available/required, which may include the preparation of a portfolio of evidence.

- (iv) if a portfolio is required, review your plan and draft portfolio to ensure the inclusion of evidence to demonstrate that you have satisfactorily reflected on the prior learning which is the basis of your claim.
- (v) accept your completed claim and progress it through the APL procedures.
- (vi) inform you of the decision following the assessment of your claim. Where a claim for exemption is successful your Adviser is responsible for informing the relevant administrative function in the University and the relevant Assessment Board(s) as appropriate.

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 you should be able to present documentary evidence in the form of certificates, course information, transcripts etc. Normally this documentary evidence will form the basis of the claim for APCL and will be taken through the stages shown in Figure 1. 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 or Programme Leader for the programme (either or both of whom may also be the APL Adviser).

Figure 1 Overview of the APCL process for claiming credit exemption



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 you to make a specific claim for credit for prior learning, often drawing on your 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. It is important that you are able to establish that you, if only by inference, have the requisite theoretical and methodological foundation for your claim for APL credit.

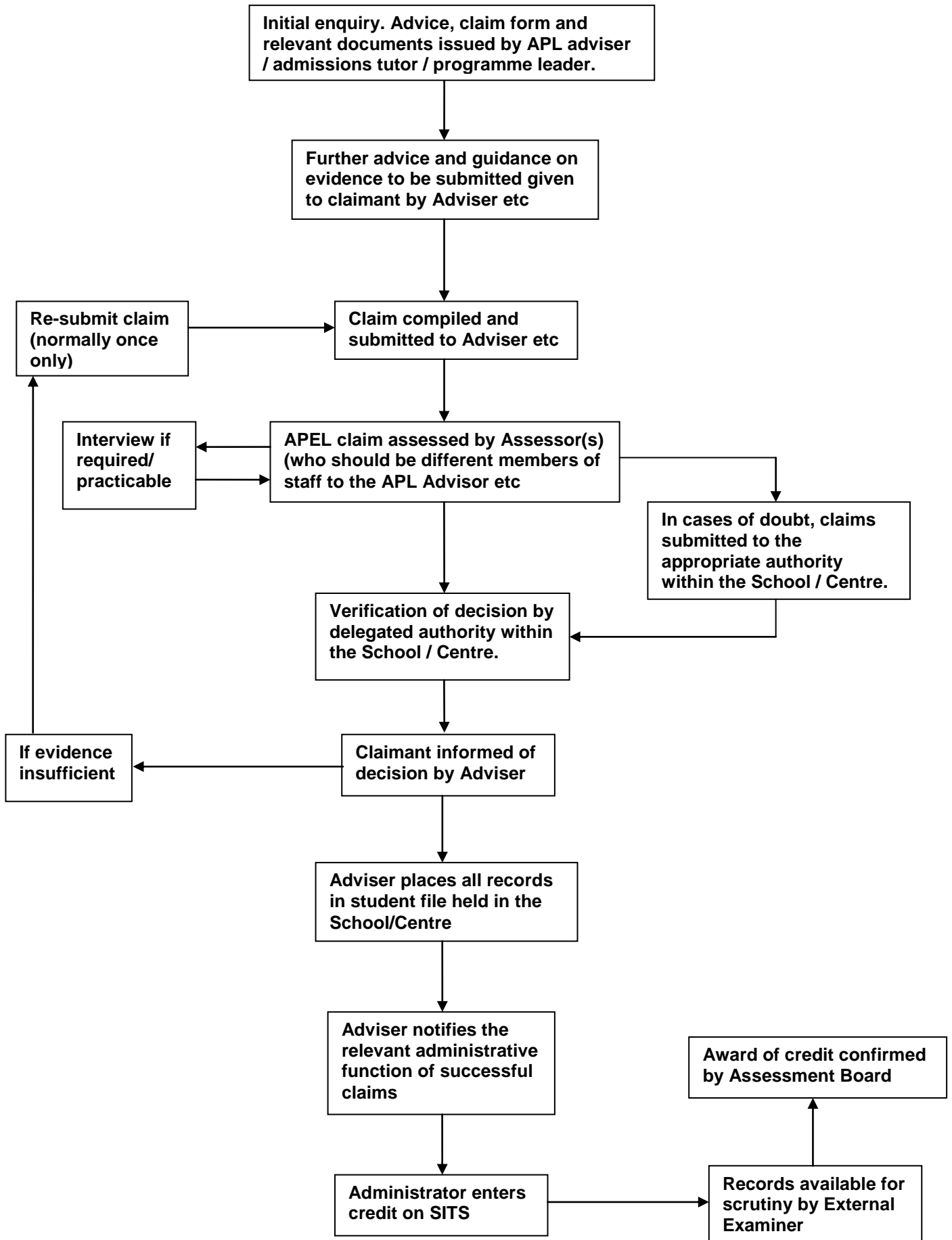
See figure 2 for a summary of the stages in the APEL process.

(a) The Criteria

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

- learning must be clearly differentiated from experience. (It is your knowledge, capacity for reflection, understanding and skills which are assessed for credit, not what you have done or experienced).
- learning must be at a level appropriate to a programme offered by the University (ie Levels 3 to 8. See Table 1 in Appendix 1).
- knowledge, understanding and skills must be current. While experience may have occurred at any time, you 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. Your learning should not be tied to one particular perspective but should 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.

Figure 2 Overview of the APEL process for claiming credit exemption



(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

You 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 you reflecting on your experiences in order to gain precise knowledge of what you have learned from them. This is a vital step

and is also the most difficult and lengthy. It involves careful examination and reflection.

You need 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, you may wish to make use of a **learning audit** such as the following:

(i) Do you?

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

(ii) Can you work independently to?

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

(iii) Can you?

- 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 you 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 you?

- 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 you?

- 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) Do you possess mathematical/numeracy skills to?

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

(viii) Have you special skills not listed above, such as?

- wordprocessing
- computer programming
- drawing
- designing
- surveying

(ix) Can you evaluate your own performance?

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

(x) Can the you 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 your portfolio, you will be expected to make specific claims relating to your learning. It is important that you express your claims in a way which indicates as precisely as possible the nature and the level of your learning. This can be achieved through (a) the terminology used, and (b) giving specific examples of what you 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:

- (i) I know how to find relevant sources of information*
- (ii) I can discriminate between reliable and unreliable sources of information*
- (iii) I can extract relevant information from various types of sources, such as books, reports, the media, graphs, accounts*
- (iv) I can decide on the best way to present information for a variety of purposes*
- (v) 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 you can link your learning to the levels of academic awards for which you are seeking credit. Under the University's APL policy, and with the guidance of your APL Adviser, you will identify the level of your experiential learning.

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, for a student 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 your learning becomes clearer if the statements are linked to:

- (a) a particular experience or task which you have 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 you can do, but as it stands, it is not clear whether this involves you 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, you should be in a position to formulate your own 'Learning Claims' in relation to each category of learning in your 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 you to gain academic credits. It describes the learning which you have derived from your experiences. 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 Principles, Procedures and Regulations.

Each portfolio will be an individualised statement of your 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 your 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 your 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 your major learning experiences
- (c) evidence of that learning.

A problem in portfolio presentation is the weight of evidence that could be submitted. You should select samples of your materials which best demonstrate the specific knowledge and skills which you 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 you should consult with your APL Adviser(s) at critical points in the process. The role of the Adviser (s) is that of facilitator in order to:

- (a) explain the APL process;
- (b) guide you through the various stages;
- (c) work with you on the production of your portfolio;
- (d) act as a 'broker' with subject specialist assessors in order to clarify aspects of the process.

Step 5: Assessment of the experiential learning

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

- (a) The likely academic credit arising out of any formal qualifications (ie. certificated learning).
- (b) 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).
- (c) 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).

- (d) 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 your prior learning.

Assessment of the portfolio (where submitted)

Once you have completed and submitted your portfolio to the APL Adviser it will be forwarded to the Assessor(s) for the award from which you are seeking Specific Credit. The evidence will be interpreted by the Assessor(s) who will form an overall picture of your 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 you are seeking.

The following assessment criteria are used:

- (a) Authenticity: you 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: your learning must be at the level claimed.
- (f) Currency: your learning must be up-to-date.
- (g) Sufficiency: your learning must be sufficient in weight to match the learning experience on the taught programme from which you are seeking exemptions.

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

Resubmission of an unsuccessful claim

If your claim for credit is unsuccessful you may be permitted one resubmission at the discretion of the Assessor(s).

Appeals in relation to unsuccessful claims

You may request a review of the decisions of the APL assessment under the University's Appeal Regulations if it is believed the following grounds may apply:

- there was some material irregularity in the conduct of handling the claim for APL.
- your performance in any assessment associated with your claim for APL was affected by circumstances which may be covered by the University's Mitigating Circumstances Procedures.

Note:

Decisions based on academic judgement cannot form the basis of an appeal.

Submission of an appeal is only possible once the decision on a claim for APL has been ratified by an Assessment Board.