

Valuing Your Experience

How to make your experience count within higher education



Are you thinking about going on to Higher Education? Not sure if you have the right qualifications or skills gained through experience?

This leaflet will help you to plan your options.

When making choices about applying to university it is important to recognise that universities and colleges value the knowledge and skills you have gained through experience as well as formal qualifications.

Even without the required qualifications, you may be able to gain entry onto a course using the knowledge and skills you have gained through experience.

Using your knowledge and experience to achieve your ambitions at university or college.

Studying at university or college can open up your career choices, improve your chances for promotion and help you to achieve your personal goals and ambitions. With over 50,000 courses at around 500 universities and colleges to choose from there's bound to be a course for you.

“What experience do I have?”

Real world experience is an essential part of learning. It can be acquired through your everyday life: doing your job, bringing up a family, running a home, taking part in sports and hobbies or through volunteering.

Aspects of your life may have led you to develop an interest in a specific subject area, for example, coaching your local football team may have led to an interest in sports coaching; caring for a child with a disability may mean that you have a great deal of experience in child development. Universities and Colleges value the skills and knowledge you have gained through experience and these could enhance your application to higher education. If you still need additional experience, training or qualifications before embarking on your chosen course, then the university/college will advise you.

As well as subject knowledge, universities and colleges look for independent learners with organisational and communication skills. They want to know that you are dedicated to and enthusiastic about your chosen course. If you are returning to learning after a long gap they can help with study skills workshops and even summer schools to get you ready to learn.

What next?

Once you have an idea of the courses you might want to undertake, the next step is to contact the university/college to find out more (Contact details can be found at the end of this leaflet). Think about:

- what you would like to study
- where you would like to study
- how you would like to study e.g. full-time, part-time, via distance or work-based learning
- ways in which you could use your experience to contribute to your study (entry or exemption from modules)

How can you use your experience within university?

1. To gain entry onto a course – If you don't have the necessary academic qualifications, your experience and skills may still enable you to gain entry onto the course of your choice. If you can prove that you have a strong understanding of the relevant area and that you have the ability to work at the necessary level, then you may be considered for admission.

* Please check with the relevant university admissions department for the course you want to apply for. Some programmes ask for GCSE qualifications including English and Maths as an entry requirement. You will almost certainly need GCSEs in English, Maths and Science if you want to embark on a career in primary or secondary school teaching.

2. To gain exemption from parts of your course – If you can demonstrate that you have already covered the subject content of one or more modules during your personal/professional experience, then you may be able to gain exemption from the relevant module(s). This may prevent you from repeating your learning.

You might be asked to demonstrate your learning through an interview, presentation or a portfolio of evidence. Please see next page for details.

Within education, this process (using your experience or previous qualifications to gain academic credit) is called **APL – the Accreditation of Prior Learning**.

So how can I use Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL)?

How can I evidence my experience?

When making an APL claim you will need to gather evidence to support your claim for credit. There are a number of different ways in which universities/colleges may ask a candidate to gather evidence. It is important to note that the type of claim will be determined by the nature of your learning and the requirements of your university/college and course of study. Evidence of your skills, expertise, knowledge and understanding is typically measured against the learning outcomes and performance criteria sought by the university/college.

Evidencing previous qualifications

If you are seeking credit for prior certificated learning (APCL) then universities/colleges will normally want to see evidence of your previous qualifications in the form of a certificate, transcript, formal letter, or pass list, such a document should normally include the following details:

- name of the institution
- awarding body
- course title studied
- student name
- dates of study and
- (where appropriate) modules passed, credit points achieved and final award.

Case Study:

Susan was a Teaching Assistant at her daughter's school. She wanted to become a Higher Level Teaching Assistant but was told that she must complete the Foundation Degree in Early Years before she could be considered.

Susan, who had left school at 16 without any official qualifications, assumed that she would never be accepted onto the Early Years course. However, when speaking to a colleague, she discovered that applicants are considered on an individual basis and practical experience is often considered as valuable as academic qualifications. Although Susan didn't have any A Levels, she did have five years' experience of working with children within a school environment. Furthermore, she supported a partially sighted boy on a daily basis and was accustomed to writing brief reports on his progress.

Following the advice of her colleague, she decided to apply, evidencing all she had learnt whilst at work. She was delighted to be invited to attend an interview with the course tutor. During the interview, the tutor showed a real interest in her current role and previous experience, asking all about her challenges and achievements. A few weeks later, Susan was amazed to be offered a place and never looked back.

* Please refer back to Point 1

Case Study:

James was a Senior Marketing Consultant within his firm but was hoping to relocate and start his own consultancy within the next couple of years. Although he had a vast amount of marketing experience, he realised that he would need to learn more about business development if his own company was to be successful. He decided to study for a Masters Degree in Business Administration (MBA) at his local university.

However, when James looked at the curriculum, he noticed that he was already familiar with the content of a couple of the units, having undertaken specific work based projects and/or training within these areas.

Upon discussion with his tutor, it was decided that rather than repeat the learning, James would claim exemption from these modules and demonstrate the necessary learning through a personal portfolio instead. This enabled James to complete his MBA quicker and start his own business sooner than expected.

Evidencing work and life experiences

If you are seeking credit based on prior experience (APEL) then you will normally be asked to show that you have met the learning outcomes of the module or level for which you are seeking credit by matching your prior experience with the skills, knowledge and understanding required by the institution.

Demonstrating your prior experience normally includes providing universities/colleges with the following forms of evidence:

- **A portfolio** of evidence is the most popular form of evidencing prior experience for universities/colleges. A portfolio is a collection of evidence, normally compiled in a folder which demonstrates a person's skills and experience. Most universities/colleges will ask you to show how your training, work and life experiences match the skills, expertise, knowledge and understanding required for claiming credit from a course of study. A portfolio can include a variety of ways in which to evidence your experience, this may vary from university to university (*here are some examples*):
 - > A job description
 - > A curriculum vitae
 - > Reference from employer/ letters of verification from colleagues
 - > Supervisor or employers' reports
 - > A logbook maintained as part of a company training scheme or professional body
 - > Reflective journal of a particular life experience
 - > Minutes of meetings
 - > Copies of presentations you have made
 - > Project reports
 - > Appraisal reports
 - > Videos or audio tapes – you may have a video or audio record of an activity in which your job role is clearly identified
 - > IT materials – these may include disks and printouts of documents you have designed or utilised using a variety of software packages
 - > Photographs documenting your work and verified by manager/colleagues
 - > Artefacts to demonstrate your work and life experiences these may include paintings, sculptures, posters
- **An interview** – you might be asked to undertake an interview, as part of the process of making an APL claim.

- **Undertake an existing assessment or element of programme** – you may be asked to undertake an existing assessment or an element of a programme for which you are seeking credit, this may include a formal examination, piece of performance, project or written assignment (which may be identical to the module coursework).

Please note: Your experiences and qualifications will have a certain 'shelf life' depending on the particular course you are applying for. There may have been changes in the knowledge base or regulations associated with the subject area which means that your knowledge and skills require updating.

Benefits of Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL)

Although, claiming credit from prior experiences can sometimes be a time consuming process there are definite advantages and benefits to having your learning from experience assessed for credit.

- It allows you to build upon your experiences so that you do not have to repeat aspects of a course with which you are already familiar.
- It can shorten the time required to complete a course.
- Gaining exemption from modules or part of a course may save you money.
- It recognises the value and relevance of your experiences.
- It can help you gain a qualification.
- It can build your self-confidence.
- It can support your career aspirations.



So, what next?

STEP 1 Research

Research your local Universities/Colleges to find out what's available. Speak to careers advisors, employers, family and friends. Decide what you would like to study and where.

STEP 2 Get in touch

Get in touch with the relevant University/College to find out the specifics of your chosen programme e.g. content, entry requirements, fees, etc.

STEP 3 Relate

Relate your prior experience/ qualifications to your chosen programme. Think about how you could demonstrate what you have already learnt and how this could relate to your programme choice.

STEP 4 Contact

Contact the programme tutor or admissions department at your chosen university/ college (*see contact details on back page*). Discuss your previous experience/qualifications, the APL process and how to apply. (*Please see the list of useful questions to ask an APL advisor*).

STEP 5 Apply!

Please note: Each university/college may have slightly different processes and requirements regarding APL. You will be advised about these during your discussions. Further advice/details should also be available on university/ college websites. Please see the back of this leaflet for APL contacts.

Useful Questions to ask University/ College APL contacts/advisors

The following questions may be of use to ask when contacting a university or college to enquire about APL. It may be useful to have a copy of your updated Curriculum Vitae to hand to prepare you for discussion.

- Is it possible to claim credit for my experiences? Is there a maximum of APL credit I can claim?
- How would I evidence my experiences? For example, does the University/College have a template I can use to help me evidence my prior experiences?
- When can I apply for APL, is there a University/College cut-off date for APL applications?
- Will I have an APL tutor to support me in developing my APL application?
- Are my experiences valid? Can the University/College give me guidance on whether there is a 'shelf life' to the skills I possess, how current does my experiences or past qualifications have to be?
- How long will the APL application take to process?
- What if my APL claim is unsuccessful?
- Is there a fee for the APL process?

Glossary of Terms

Accreditation of prior learning (APL): a process for accessing and, as appropriate, recognising prior experiential learning or prior certificated learning for academic purposes. This recognition may give the learning a credit-value in a credit-based structure and allow it to be counted towards the completion of a programme of study and the award(s) or qualifications associated with it. (QAA 2004)

Accreditation of prior certificated learning (APCL): a process, through which previously assessed and certificated learning is considered and, as appropriate, recognised for academic purposes. (QAA 2004)

Accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL): a process through which learning achieved outside education or training systems is assessed and, as appropriate, recognised for academic purposes. (QAA 2004)

Credit: This is a type of educational currency that can be used for a course of study. It will represent both a quantity and a level of learning. The quantity of learning is related to the total of credit points required for each type of qualification – a Foundation degree is normally worth a total of 240 credit points. Each programme will be made up of levels.

Foundation degrees: Foundation degrees are nationally recognised qualifications established in 2001 which integrate academic study with work place learning. Designed in partnership with employers they equip people with the relevant knowledge, understanding and skills to improve performance and productivity. Foundation degrees tend to be delivered in Further Education Colleges and accredited by universities.

Further Education College: a Further Education College is an institution for people over compulsory school age (currently 16 in England). The type of learning can be full or part time, academic or vocational. There are around 450 FE colleges in England and Wales, a Further Education College may include a sixth-form college, vocational training college and deliver higher education courses.

Learning Outcomes: Statements indicating what a learner should have acquired at the end of a given learning period. (HEA, 2007)

Modules: are units of learning that "fit" together to make a complete course. Each individual module has a certain amount of credit attached.

Recognition (of learning): any process that acknowledges and establishes publicly that some reasonably substantial and significant element of learning has taken place and can be assessed to have done so. (QAA 2004)

Undergraduate: a student working towards a degree, higher education certificate, diploma, foundation degree, honours degree or equivalent.

University: a place of higher learning where people continue their education after sixth form or further education study. Universities offer a range of certificate, diploma and degree qualifications to successful students and help prepare people for professions and careers. A university can be a group of buildings where students live and learn, or it can be an institution which teaches by distance learning i.e. via internet and/ or post.

For APL enquiries, please contact the undergraduate admissions department of the following universities and colleges:

University/College APL Contacts:

University of Bath

Tel: 01225 383019
Email: admissions@bath.ac.uk
Website: www.bath.ac.uk

Bath Spa University

Tel: 01225 875875
Email: admissions@bathspa.ac.uk
Website: www.bathspa.ac.uk

University of Bristol

Tel: 0117 9289000
Email: ug-admissions@bristol.ac.uk
Website: www.bristol.ac.uk

University of Gloucestershire

Tel: 0844 8011100
Email: admissions@glos.ac.uk
Website: www.glos.ac.uk

Open University South West

Tel: 0117 9299641
Email: south-west@open.ac.uk
Website: www.open.ac.uk

Royal Agricultural College, Cirencester

Tel: 01285 652 531
Email: admissions@rac.ac.uk
Website: www.royagcol.ac.uk

University of the West of England

Tel: 0117 3283333
Email: admissions@uwe.ac.uk
Website: www.uwe.ac.uk



Western Vocational Lifelong Learning Network

The Western Vocational Lifelong Learning Network aims to widen participation and facilitate the progression of vocational learners into higher education.

Lifelong Learning Network
University of Bath
Carpenter House, Broad Quay
Bath BA1 1UD
www.wvlln.ac.uk