



ACCREDITATION OF PRIOR LEARNING – A POSITION STATEMENT

1. Context

The College of Occupational Therapists' *Strategic Vision and Action Plan for Lifelong Learning* (COT 2004) states that the profession should be:

Valuing the achievement of learning of the individual, which is concerned with the recognition of formal and informal learning through the validation and accreditation of prior experience and learning (APEL/APL) and enabling this to count towards further study and career progression (Carter 1999).

The College has been proactive and innovative in encouraging and facilitating the development of Accreditation for Prior Learning (APL). The *Position Statement on Foundation Degrees* (COT 2004) states that:

- Those students who have successfully completed a generic foundation degree in health and social care should be offered the opportunity to be exempted from up to a third of a Bachelor's Degree with Honours;
- The College supports eligibility for progression from a Foundation Degree to level 6 of an Honours Degree when the learning outcomes of the former have been tailored to match the programme specific requirements of the latter, and is supported by a bridging period at the end of level 5. In Scotland, those students who have successfully completed the Higher National Certificate in Occupational Therapy Support are eligible for entry to year 2 of a Bachelor's Degree with Honours.

In the wider context of the Allied Health Professions (AHPs), the development of accrediting prior learning has also been encouraged. The *Joint Statement on Foundation Degrees*, a collective statement by seven AHP bodies, promotes "innovative ways of ensuring that experiential learning is a significant factor for admission" to foundation degree programmes. It also reiterates the College's statement on foundation degrees in that foundation degree graduates will normally have the opportunity to use APL as a means of claiming advanced standing for admission to a qualifying programme.

2. Definitions

There are sector variations in the use of the accreditation terminology. Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) for example can either refer to the general process of assessment used to find out whether credit can be awarded for a range of past activities, or can be used specifically as the recognition of relevant certified learning for which credit has already been awarded.

For the purposes of clarity, the College will use the definition of APL from the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in its *Guidelines on the Accreditation of Prior Learning*:

- **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;

- **Accreditation of prior certificated learning (APCL):** a process, through which previously assessed and certificated learning is considered and, as appropriate, recognised for academic purposes;
- **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;
- **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 2005).

An additional term used is *Accreditation of Work Based Learning (AWBL)*. This refers specifically to the accreditation of relevant learning that has been gained from work (University of Northumbria 2002).

3. Principles

3.1 The College recognises that candidates for admission onto an occupational therapy degree programme will have a range of knowledge, expertise and skills. All applicants should therefore have the opportunity to enter higher education at the level appropriate to their previous learning and experience.

3.2 It is common practice for HEIs to distinguish between the use of general and specific credit in their APL policies:

General Credit is normally defined as the total amount of credit possessed which certifies that a student has qualified to gain entry onto a degree programme. General credit is additionally used in some instances to gain exemption from one or more modules where the prior learning is judged to be of an equivalent value (University of Hull 2005).

Specific Credit is awarded in the form of exemption where evidence of prior learning can be matched to the specific learning outcomes of one or more modules.

3.3 APL procedures must be sufficiently robust to withstand the requirements and scrutiny of external bodies such as the QAA, Health Professions Council (HPC), and the College. In order to ensure this, HEIs need to provide:

- guidance on evidence required for APL application
- a clear statement on the basis upon which this evidence will be judged
- support and guidance in the preparation of evidence for submission
- explicit assessment processes and procedures disseminated to the candidate in advance of their application
- an adequate record of each APL application

3.4 Successful APL students must not be disadvantaged by virtue of their exemption in other module assessments. The learning and development of APL entrants should be comparable to that of any other student both in terms of academic content and the student experience.

3.5 HEIs are encouraged to think creatively about ways of accrediting prior experiential learning in whichever context it has been acquired. APEL applications can be considered if the applicant has:

- relevant experience that has been gained in a work, voluntary, home or leisure environment. One way in which previous practical experience can be accredited would be if the applicant can demonstrate that in working with clients s/he has already met the learning outcomes of the first year placement modules.
- practice experience that has been gained as a component of a previous formal programme of learning eg a relevant Foundation Degree such as Health and Social Care. In considering these applications, particular attention should be paid to whether the learning outcomes of prior placement modules satisfy both the COT practice standards and the Health Professions Council's Standards of Proficiency. In using APEL in these instances, Specific Credit should be awarded unless placements are not credit-rated and/or have explicitly stated what experience can be exempted.

Successful APEL applications can contribute to up to one third of the 1000 hours practice placement experience required by the World Federation of Occupational Therapists.

3.6 Each APL application should be considered on an individual basis and academic judgement must be applied. However, in order to maintain a level of consistency across institutions, it may be helpful to use the following as a means of assessing an applicant's suitability:

i. Evidence of experiential learning

When assessing an applicant's suitability, particular attention should be focused on:

- the demonstration of some understanding of how some basic concepts and principles of occupational therapy can be applied to working with clients in current health and social care provision
- whether the level of the learning presented matches that for which the claim is made
- the currency of the learning and the applicant's ability to demonstrate that the acquired learning is up to date and has current applicability
- ensuring that the evidence is verified by at least one referee (eg line manager)
- verifying the evidence of the applicant's work.

You may wish the applicant to undertake an alternative form of assessment, particularly if s/he is submitting a claim for very few credits. These may include:

- focused interview
- oral examination
- exemption from attendance on a module (but still required to undertake the assessment as verification of the claim).

ii. Evidence of certified learning

In assessing whether an applicant is suitably qualified to gain certified credit, HEIs should consider:

- whether the curricular content of the previous programme of study is broadly equivalent to those learning outcomes for which credit is claimed
- the HEI's own regulations on the currency of prior certified learning
- relevant transcripts and (if appropriate) certificates
- letters confirming grades and courses completed
- copies of course materials – handbooks, timetables or other course documents
- marking schemes and feedback sheets for assessments

- 3.7 It is important to ensure that there are appropriate arrangements in place to support applicants submitting claims for APL. Information on learning requirements, supporting evidence, and assessment procedures should be made available to each applicant.
- 3.8 Applicants should also be encouraged on their APL application form to disclose any disability they may have in order that the receiving HEI can make reasonable adjustments upon acceptance of an offer onto the programme. Disclosure is the prerogative of the individual applicant although if they choose to not disclose a disability and the HEI has fulfilled their anticipatory duty in offering disclosure, then it is less likely that reasonable adjustments can be made at a later stage (COT 2004).

4. References

Carter C (1999) *We live and learn. Learning from Experience Trust*. Available at: <http://www.learningexperience.org.uk/publications.php>

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Quality Assurance Agency (2004) *Guidelines on the Accreditation of Prior Learning*. Available at: <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/public/apel/guidance.htm>

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World Federation of Occupational Therapists (2002) *Minimum Standards for the Education of Occupational Therapists*. Australia: WFOT