

Professional practice projects: APEL or development?

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Abstract

The rise of work-based learning in higher education has increased the use of real-life projects, i.e. things that would be done anyway, to contribute to accredited university programmes. Where projects are used that have been completed pre-registration they are commonly brought into the programme through the process known as accrediting prior experiential learning (APEL). Material submitted for APEL normally attracts an amount of credit, the rest of the programme being completed through new components.

Outside of higher education it is more common for full qualifications, in particular National Vocational Qualifications and some professional practice designations, to be awarded fully on the basis of pre-registration work. Taking projects submitted for a professional practice assessment as an example, it appears possible to transfer the essentials of this approach to university awards. Rather than treating the pre-existing work as APEL it can be considered as the basis for the entire award, with where necessary additional learning growing out of the projects.

Workplace learning and academic credit

Over the last two decades there has been a significant evolution in the recognition of workplace learning, including learning from naturally-occurring activities and projects, towards the award of formal qualifications. In the United Kingdom the development of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) during the late 1980s made available a raft of qualifications that were based principally on workplace competence, while in parallel increasing moves were being made in the university sector to give credit for work-based learning (Adams *et al* 1991, Duckenfield & Stirner 1992). Subsequently the recognition of workplace learning within higher education has moved from being exploratory and innovative to a point where it can now be regarded as part of the mainstream, even if it is not well-understood across or within all universities (Evans 2001). Internationally, parallel developments have taken place in a number of other countries notably in Australia (e.g. Fahy *et al* 1999) and in France, where the process of *validation des acquis de l'expérience* (VAE) provides a legally-backed process for obtaining all or part of a degree based on experiential learning (e.g. Haeringer 2006). As part of the impetus towards compatible qualification structures in Europe there is currently a major if sometimes debated thrust towards recognising at least previously-completed work-based learning towards further and higher education qualifications.

Returning to the UK it is now established practice to allow pre-existing learning from the workplace (and from other sources outside of formal education) to be assessed and accredited towards

university awards. This process, generally known as APEL (the accreditation of prior experiential learning), typically involves learners presenting a portfolio of work or collection of evidence supported by a narrative or verbal argument (see Heeks 2003). This work is assessed to identify, broadly speaking, whether it is sufficiently relevant to be accepted as credit against the target higher education award; whether it is at the appropriate level for the award; and the amount of credit that should be given. Any work that meets the standards required for at least the lowest higher education level can in principle be given credit in this way, but it is regarded as 'general' credit (or perhaps more accurately potential credit) until it has been matched against the requirements of a named award, when it becomes 'specific' credit (see for instance Inter-Consortium Credit Agreement 1998).

In university programmes that are based on a structured syllabus or series of prescribed modules the specific credit principle means that credit can only be given where the workplace learning matches sufficiently well with the course requirements; up to a point it can be thought of as a means of gaining exemptions from course modules. On the other hand the rise of flexible modular programmes and structures in the 1980s and beyond has provided greater scope for the use of APEL, particularly where the programme is designed for learners in work (e.g. McDonagh 1999). In programmes of this type it has become more common to allow pre-existing learning to form a significant part of the programme provided that it is relevant to the overall topic of the qualification and it doesn't duplicate material in the modules that the learner intends to take.

A more recent development in many universities in the UK, Australia and elsewhere has been the growth of awards at all levels based on what is known as negotiated work-based learning (see for instance Foster 1996, Garnett 2000). The principle behind this approach is that individual learners are able to negotiate fully customised awards based on or around their work activity, the focus being provided by the learner's and where relevant the employer's context and aims rather than by university notions of subject and discipline. The main requirement for approval of an award is that the proposed outcomes of learning are at the relevant level, the amount of learning is sufficient for the proposed award, and the overall package adds up to a coherent whole in accordance with a rationale negotiated by the learner. In most universities the award is defined through a learning contract or agreement (see Stephenson & Laycock 1993) and structured as a series of modules which may be learner-designed and based on workplace or other independent activity, existing university courses, or a mixture of both. Requirements for taught or predefined modules are often limited to an introductory module based around managing personal learning processes, and particularly at postgraduate level a research methods or research-and-development course. Beyond this the bulk of many learners' programmes consist of pre-existing and planned workplace learning rather than university courses. In terms of APEL, the 'general' versus 'specific' credit distinction still exists in negotiated programmes but only in the sense that specific credit is defined by its fitting into the rationale of the learner's learning contract.

Naturally-occurring projects

A 'naturally-occurring project' can be defined as an activity with a reasonably clear beginning and end that would have taken place regardless of whether or not the person concerned was enrolled on a qualification programme. Using this kind of project as evidence towards qualifications can be attractive to work-based learners both because it focuses learning on matters directly relevant to the workplace, and because it makes economic use of their time. Anecdotal evidence collected for

instance as part of the development of the Ufi/Learndirect *Learning through Work* initiative (see Stephenson & Saxton 2005) also suggests that some employers are more amenable to supporting learning and development activity built around work that would be happening anyway, as opposed to hosting an additional project or piece of research.

Nevertheless there are limitations associated with using naturally-occurring projects for a university award. There is a presupposition that the learner in question is undertaking work that is capable of contributing to a university programme. There is also an assumption that the work project or projects are able to provide a vehicle for the development that the learner wants to achieve. This is often unproblematic for people who have a high level of discretion in their work and who are looking for professional extension, but it may hold less well for those who are looking to develop into a new area or look beyond a relatively constrained work role. And there is the issue of bringing an additional agenda, that of development and accreditation, directly into a piece of work that belongs essentially in the learner's work context. The learner who uses a work project as part of a university programme will often be working with three agendas: his or her own, that of the employer (or client), and that of the university.

An alternative approach to using naturally-occurring projects is to focus on work that has already been completed, or at least which is under way at the time of registration. This doesn't alter the first two issues mentioned above - the workplace still needs to offer relevant opportunities and the work context needs to be able to provide a vehicle for development - but it does remove much of the conflict concerned with having multiple agendas, and allows potentially a greater range of work to be brought in as part of the programme. This suggests a conception that builds on and moves beyond the principles of APEL, for whereas in the APEL process there is generally an assumption that once credit has been awarded the relevant learning has been concluded, in practice there can be scope for reflecting on and drawing new learning out of activities that have already taken place. Some approaches to NVQ and professional practice assessment do this up to a point, and within universities there is a partial analogy in the award of doctorates through publication and more recently through public works.

Workplace projects in professional practice assessment

One field that uses naturally-occurring projects for formal assessment is conserving cultural heritage, where the designation Accredited Conservator-Restorer (ACR) is achieved through a practice-based assessment administered by the UK professional body, the Institute of Conservation (Icon). Achievement of ACR is regarded as requiring a postgraduate level of application, and a small number of accredited practitioners who lack postgraduate university qualifications have expressed an interest in achieving master's or similar awards by building on their accreditation. This prompted a small-scale investigation to explore how this might be done, as described in the next section.

The assessment process for ACR status involves practitioners submitting a detailed application that includes a career history, description of the candidate's current role, a professional development review, and summaries of six or more projects or work activities that demonstrate that the candidate meets the profession's standards. One of the activities must be a description of how the candidate manages his or her work and interfaces with professional colleagues and other stakeholders, but the other five typically involve the conservation of an object or collection, preparation of an advisory or

analytical report, or an investigation designed to inform practice. Because of the way the professional standards are written (see National Council for Conservation-Restoration 2003) there is a tendency for candidates to structure their submissions according to a format of investigation and analysis, decision-making and planning, treatment or preventive action, and advice or action related to aftercare.

The submission is given an initial examination by a peer-review committee and then passed to two assessors from within the profession - a specialist in the candidate's area of work (e.g. textiles, stone, paper, paintings and so on) and a second assessor who acts as a generalist - who conduct a full-day assessment at the candidate's workplace or project locations. The assessors make decisions against each area of the standards and report back, the committee acting as a moderation board and deciding whether the candidate is accredited, referred (requiring limited re-assessment) or effectively failed requiring reapplication at a later date. The projects are considered though not strictly speaking assessed as separate entities; accreditation depends on whether overall the candidate demonstrates a 'proficient' level of work (Dreyfus & Dreyfus 1984) in each area of the professional standards. A description of the process is given by Lester (2001).

Since the accreditation process was introduced in its current form in 2000, 143 applications have been made, 115 full assessments carried out and 101 practitioners achieved ACR status (the success rate is slightly higher than indicated because of a small number of reapplications and reassessments). There is guidance that candidates should have four or five years relevant experience after finishing a conservation degree or equivalent practice-based training, but most of those who have applied to date have five to ten years' experience and some of the projects put forward have been of an exceptional standard.

The investigation

The investigation was carried out by the author, who as an education and accreditation consultant guided the conservation profession in the development of its qualification and was also involved in setting up the Ufi *Learning through Work* system.

At the end of 2005 the accreditation submissions of five qualified conservators were selected for re-examination against postgraduate criteria. Four of the candidates had been commended for the quality of their submissions and had agreed for their applications to be available in the public domain, subject to personal and organisational identities being removed. All of these candidates had degrees and postgraduate qualifications and were employed in institutions such as museums, galleries and archives. The fifth was approached on the recommendation of Icon's accreditation manager in order to provide an example from a non-graduate in a private practice context (just over half of the UK's 3500 or so conservators work in private practices and while graduate or postgraduate entry is now the norm, many older practitioners entered through studio-based training). Details of the candidates are given in table I.

From the submissions each project was reviewed to establish three things:

1. Does it appear to meet the criteria for postgraduate work, i.e. level M or 7 as defined in the relevant Quality Assurance Agency documents and the Ufi Ltd *Learning through Work* level indicators?
2. What size does the project appear to be in terms of higher education credits? Projects were broadly divided into bands based on small (10), medium-sized (30) and substantial (60-credit) projects, using the UK convention where a full master's degree is 180 credits.
3. Does it appear capable of meeting the requirements for a master's dissertation? This was interpreted as meeting the level criteria in full, being of around 60 credits in size, and including a sufficient research or development aspect that would warrant dissemination. In the context of conservation this could involve among other things research into provenance and history, technical investigations and analysis, development and testing of new treatments, or environmental analysis and implications for object or collection care.

Finally, consideration was given to how the projects might be built upon to enhance their contribution to a university programme.

Review was limited to the one-page project summaries provided in the submission. As the projects had already passed the professional assessment the veracity of candidates' statements and the quality of their technical content was taken as given. However, the level of detail available means that the review results should only be taken as illustrative, representing the kind of judgements that might be made in respect of the projects.

Findings

Table 1: candidates and projects

Candidate	A	B	C	D	E
Qualifications at time of application	History of Art degree Postgraduate diploma in conservation	Conservation degree Postgraduate diploma in conservation	History of Art degree Postgraduate diploma and MA in conservation	Humanities degree MA in conservation	Non-graduate 2-year furniture restoration course plus 3-year internship
Work context	Employed in art gallery	Employed by university	Employed by heritage body	Employed in specialist archive	Own practice
Post-training experience	11 years	11 years	10 years	8 years	8 years post-internship
Project no	Potential postgraduate credit (D = potential dissertation)				
1	n/a	n/a	n/a	60+ D	n/a
2	10-30	10-30*	30*	10-30*	30-60
3	60+ D	30	30	30-60	30
4	60 D	30+	60 D	10*	10-30*
5	30	30	30	10-30	10-30
6	30+	10-30	10-30*	10-30	60 D
7		10			
8		10*			

* These projects may not meet postgraduate criteria in their 'raw' form but should be capable of doing so with further development.

The initial findings as presented in table I indicate that all five candidates' submissions would be likely to attract a significant amount of postgraduate credit. The volume and quality of work submitted for (professional) accreditation generally appears of a similar order to that required for a work-based master's degree, something which is perhaps unsurprising given the level of the accreditation award, the experience and level of qualifications of the candidates, and the profession's emphasis on research and dissemination. Some projects appeared to need further work for them to meet postgraduate criteria, but in all cases this could be dealt with in the writing up of the project rather than requiring additional activity in the workplace. At the opposite end of the scale, one project (A3) drew on work undertaken over an eight-year period that had already resulted in three published papers and appeared to have potential for development as the basis of a doctorate.

The traditional treatment of work of this type within a university award would be for it to be submitted as part of an APEL claim. The professional accreditation process is based explicitly on providing evidence of current ability when ready to do so, whereas in UK higher education there is commonly an assumption of a process of development, interpreted in most contexts to mean that an award cannot be based entirely on retrospective work. In practice this is often translated into rules about the maximum amount of credit allowed for prior learning, typically half or two-thirds of the qualification; for master's degrees it is also common to require a dissertation or equivalent component to be completed as a minimum, sometimes along with a research methods or other preparatory course. In terms of credit the APEL claim will normally form a component (or set of components), with the remainder of the qualification to be completed in the form of new components (e.g. modules and projects).

An examination of the projects in table 1 suggests that this may not be the best approach to use for practitioners who, like the accreditation candidates, already have a substantial collection of work-based projects that are documented or can be written up. Virtually all the candidates have enough work for a master's degree without the need for new components, although some of the current projects (components) are likely to need further work to meet the required criteria. Instead of making a distinction between prior learning and new work at component level, it may be more appropriate to regard each project as a component that incorporates some prior learning and (in most cases) some additional work. Two examples are used to illustrate how this might work.

Example 1: using an existing project to top up to a master's degree

This example supposes that candidate A wants to 'top up' her postgraduate diploma to a master's degree. Assuming that the diploma is fully relevant to the focus of the degree, she would need to complete a dissertation-type component and demonstrate familiarity with relevant research or development methodology. There are two potential projects in her 'portfolio' that might qualify: for illustrative purposes both have been used, project A3 because it would be the easiest to use and project A4 because it is a more typical example of a work-based project (see table II).

In project A3 the quality, breadth and depth of the project is such that the amount of additional work needed is fairly small. The 'raw' project can be seen to have involved considered research and led to significant learning that has resulted in the candidate gaining recognition as an expert in the field concerned. The additional work is principally about making certain aspects of the project and resultant learning more explicit, and it may or may not result in new learning. In A4 the work-based

project needs to be put into context and the methodological approach and conclusions need to be drawn out; again the candidate may have already done this or it may involve additional reflection and perhaps background reading or investigation.

Table II: a dissertation component (two options)

Project details (existing work)	Comments	Additional work
<p><i>Project A3: painting materials and techniques</i></p> <p>This synoptic piece of work summarises research and insights into painting materials and techniques used in the nineteenth century. It draws on several activities carried out over an eight-year period, including a two-year research fellowship that examines the materials and techniques used by a particular artist, as well as investigations and findings from the conservation and restoration of a number of paintings. The candidate published two conference / professional journal papers and a catalogue essay drawing on the work.</p>	<p>This is a substantial in-depth project that has resulted in the candidate developing significant expertise in the relevant field. It is clearly of postgraduate level and with further work might form the basis for a doctorate.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draw together the process and findings into a coherent narrative. • Make explicit methodological understanding and approaches relevant to the project. • Reflect on and evaluate the learning derived from it and how it has affected the candidate's practice and if relevant that of others.
<p><i>Project A4: assessment of a collection</i></p> <p>This project involved the systematic assessment of the paintings within a gallery, with a report produced for each. The reports were then used by the candidate to agree a conservation strategy for the collection, produce a shorter technical note for each painting, and identify any additional research that needed to be carried out. The work has led to a more strategic approach to conservation within the gallery and provided a basis for agreeing priorities.</p>	<p>This is a substantial work-based project that appears to be clearly of postgraduate level and demonstrates the application of relevant professional expertise. It could be developed to form a dissertation-type component.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe (investigating if necessary) the contextual issues relating to the collection. • Make explicit methodological understanding and approaches relevant to the project. • Draw out themes and conclusions from the technical notes and explain the strategy. • Reflect on and evaluate the learning derived from it and how it has affected the candidate's practice and if relevant that of others.

Example 2: a full master's degree

This example supposes that candidate E, who is a non-graduate, wants to gain a full master's award based on the work submitted for accreditation. As indicated in table I she has several eligible projects most of which are clearly at postgraduate level. The potential treatment of these projects is shown in table III.

In this case the additional work needed varies between the projects. In some instances a supporting narrative or straightforward write-up may be all that is needed, accompanied possibly by a discussion of learning and effect on practice. In others further discussion is likely to be needed, which may simply be a case of the candidate producing a more in-depth discussion for instance to explain principles, issues and decision-making criteria, or it may require additional reading and investigation to set the project in a more general context. Project E6 requires more work than did A3 to develop it into a coherent dissertation, although that may be more a case of making assumptions, processes and methodologies explicit rather than involving knowledge acquisition. Overall there appears to be sufficient work to put forward for the master's degree without requiring additional work-based projects or investigation.

Table III: a master's degree based on existing projects

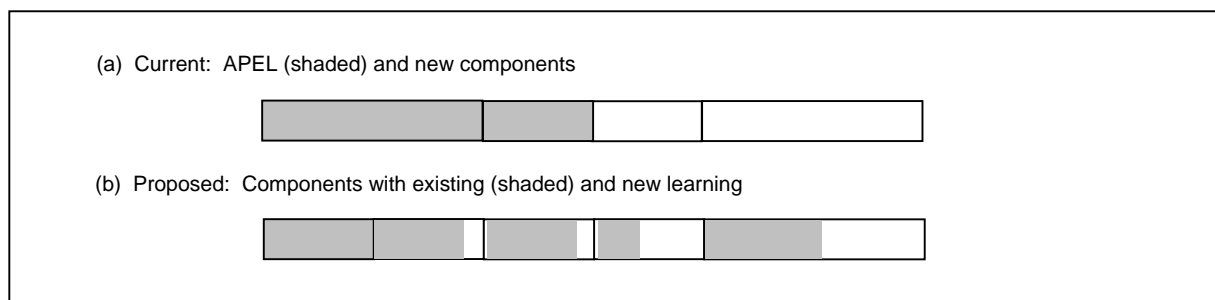
Project details (existing work)	Comments	Additional work
<p><i>Project E2: reconstruction of a frieze</i></p> <p>This six-month project concerned the conservation and reinstatement of a damaged, fragile 19th-century gilded frieze. Work included researching the original appearance of the frieze, researching suitable materials, carrying out a feasibility study and proposing options, and carrying out the conservation, reconstruction and reinstallation work in conjunction with a paintings conservator and an assistant hired by the candidate. The project resulted in a joint conference paper.</p>	<p>This is a good example of a practical project to which a researched and considered approach has been taken. It is likely to be of postgraduate level and form a substantial piece of work in the range 30-60 credits.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a narrative to go alongside the conference paper indicating the candidate's role and adding any details not made explicit in the paper. • Reflect on and evaluate the learning derived from the project and how it has affected the candidate's practice.
<p><i>Project E3: conservation of a mirror</i></p> <p>This project involved the conservation of a large ornamented mirror, the frame of which was in poor condition and had been overpainted. The ornamentation was thought to include components from more than one century and the object presented a significant degree of complexity in terms of conservation options and treatments. The initial stage consisted of a condition assessment and treatment recommendations, and the second an updated assessment through to completion of the treatment.</p>	<p>This project appears to be of postgraduate level although further information would be needed about how the issues involved were approached. It is difficult to judge the potential size of the project from the submission but it is likely to be a medium-sized project of at least 30 credits.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write the project up as a coherent narrative, including details of the context, options, judgements and decision-making involved. • Reflect on and evaluate the learning derived from it and how it has affected the candidate's practice.
<p><i>Project E4: collection of paintings</i></p> <p>This 6-month project involved refining work that had been done to a collection of 40 paintings that had suffered fire damage. The purpose of the work was to tone the frames in a reversible manner to provide an authentic aged appearance. An original, untreated painting by the same artist was sourced to act as a benchmark, and treatment carried out to produce a match.</p>	<p>From the information provided the project is probably not in itself of postgraduate level, although it is likely that it could form the basis for a postgraduate submission. The project may be in the range of 10-30 credits depending on the surrounding research and discussion.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write the project up as a coherent narrative, including details of the context, options, judgements and decision-making involved. • Include a discussion of relevant issues at a more general level. • Reflect on and evaluate the learning derived from it and how it has affected the candidate's practice.
<p><i>Project E5: 18th-century chair</i></p> <p>This project concerned the conservation of a valuable 18th-century French chair, on permanent display and still used occasionally, that had sustained considerable surface deterioration. The background research for the project included a study trip to Paris to investigate methods and materials before the final work to the chair was completed.</p>	<p>The project appears to be of postgraduate level or would lend itself to writing up at this level. Depending on the way it is approached it might be presented as a small to medium-sized project, c. 10-30 credits, or extended to form a larger piece of work.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write the project up as a coherent narrative, including details of the study trip and comparative approaches to conservation. • Reflect on and evaluate the learning derived from it and how it has affected the candidate's practice.
<p><i>Project E6: 17th-century collection</i></p> <p>This activity, which took place over a five-year period, concerned the conservation of a collection of carved and gilded panels, frames and items of furniture from a historic house. A condition assessment for the whole collection was carried out along with prioritised treatment proposals. Treatments were then carried out over time followed by reinstallation to meet the deadline for the house to be opened.</p>	<p>This project is likely to be of postgraduate level and, depending on the range of issues and complexity of investigation and treatment involved, may form a substantial project of around 60 credits.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write the project up as a coherent narrative, including details of the methodologies, judgements and decision-making involved. • Include an evaluation of the treatments. • Reflect on and evaluate the learning derived from it and how it has affected the candidate's practice and if relevant that of others.

Issues and applicability

The two examples illustrate approaches where the candidates are in theory able to achieve a master's degree, one from scratch and the other by topping up from a postgraduate diploma, by using components based on existing projects. In both cases any additional learning takes place within the components, through their writing up and if applicable extension, rather than through adding further components. The approach is illustrated graphically in figure 1.

This integrated approach to existing projects raises two questions: how much new learning is taking place, and how much does it matter? The first question will inevitably vary between individuals. In writing up one or other of her projects Candidate A may not actually learn very much that's new other than through reflecting on and possibly reconceptualising previous work. Candidate E may need to extend her contextual and methodological understanding around one or two of the projects in order to write them up, though the main benefit may be more in the synthesis of ideas behind the projects. It is also easy to envisage a similar approach applying to a less experienced candidate who may need to develop his or her theoretical and methodological understanding further.

Figure 1: *alternative approaches to pre-existing work*



Whether it matters if the bulk (or even all) of the learning takes place pre-registration depends largely on the approach taken to assessment. If the APEL process gives rise to less confidence than normal assessment of post-registration learning, then there is a clear case from a quality assurance viewpoint for limiting the proportion of a qualification that can be achieved through this route. But if pre-existing work is written up and reflected on in a way that is essentially no different from that used for post-registration work, there is less of a problem. To return to Candidate E, if she submitted her collection of projects in a form that clearly satisfied the criteria for a master's degree, including any requirement for independent, methodologically sound research or development, there would seem to be few grounds for requiring her to undertake additional components.

A further issue relates to the breadth of application of the proposed integrated approach. The five candidates whose work has been examined were working substantially at postgraduate level and had been assessed at the equivalent of this level: they could therefore be expected to have work available that would meet, with little modification, postgraduate criteria. Where the gap between the available work and the qualification sought is wider, the work needed to bridge it will need to be more extensive. Nevertheless it may still be not only feasible but capable of being done in a way that leads to significant further learning without requiring further work-based components to be undertaken. The following examples illustrate this; they are based on actual learners although the qualification aims are hypothetical.

- The manager of a small self-contained unit has recently completed a level 4 NVQ in management. He is interested in gaining a postgraduate diploma or master's degree, but wants to build it around practical issues rather than taking an MBA-type course. He uses his unit as a case-study and draws on some of the NVQ evidence as the 'nucleus' of his writing-up, but he takes a more in-depth and strategic approach culminating in a major review that identifies the unit's viability outside its parent organisation.
- A gardener working in the grounds of a historic house lost interest in a level 3 NVQ that she was taking, disliking the evidence-collecting approach she was asked to adopt and feeling it would do little towards her aim of becoming a gardens manager. The quality of evidence she was producing was particularly high, and she was encouraged to use this work and other projects she was involved in towards an intermediate-level higher education award. Her learning contract would focus on enhancing her knowledge around landscape design and management projects she had been involved in and building on her experience to develop plans for the management of her existing workplace.
- A first-year undergraduate business student had taken a year out before starting his course, working for nine months in a shop. He was able to complete a 20-credit module through reflecting on his work experiences and reviewing employment and management practices in his workplace. A similar approach is used by some universities to capture learning from part-time or vacation work during the course.

The conclusion from reviewing the conservation projects and from these more hypothetical examples appears to be that there is significant scope for using naturally-occurring workplace projects and evidence in a more dynamic way than is the case with APEL.

Using learning contracts to support retrospective projects

As mentioned earlier the use of learning contracts or agreements in work-based higher education is now well-established, making it possible for learners to design all or part of their programmes around their work activities and negotiate both their intended learning outcomes and, within reason, the criteria to which their work will be assessed (see for instance Stephenson & Yorke 1998 or the *Ufi Learning through Work* web site, www.learndirect-ltw.co.uk). This approach is eminently suitable for supporting the use of retrospective, naturally-occurring projects to contribute to higher education qualifications while having the advantage of integrating with existing university practice in negotiated work-based learning. An example of how this might work is given below; this draws on a situation where the candidate's programme is based completely on retrospective projects, but it could be used where there is a mix of retrospective and new work.

- The learner agrees a target qualification and the broad aims of the programme - including what it will help him or her achieve - and the expected learning outcomes.
- The learner puts forward a summary of the work on which the programme is to be based. This is run through initial screening to establish whether it is capable of forming the basis of the programme: is it likely to support the target level, is the volume of work broadly sufficient, does it

provide a basis to meet any qualification-specific requirements (e.g. for a research-based dissertation or similar), and is it likely to support the programme aims and provide a vehicle for producing the intended learning?

- The initial screening is followed by a dialogue between learner and tutor that results in a learning contract outlining the key components of the programme and their associated learning outcomes and assessment criteria, based around the projects, and an outline of what needs to be submitted for each component. The negotiation at this stage could also result in adjustments to the target qualification, the programme aims or the intended learning outcomes, or the addition of further components based on retrospective work or new learning.
- The agreement for each component takes the form of a description of how the work or project would be presented and any further activity that might need to take place. It would also include the more detailed assessment criteria to be applied to the project, referenced back to the relevant qualification level.

There is nothing essentially different in this approach to that currently taken in the kind of learning contracts used by universities as part of *Learning through Work*. The main departure is that rather than each component agreement being based on a blank template, it starts with some pre-existing content (the learner's project or work) and agrees how that will be treated and if necessary added to in order for the component to be achieved. This process is in some respects analogous to the *bilan de competences* used in the French VAE process (see Roy 2005), but rather than acting as a broad consideration of previous experience it operates within an already-identified programme and should be tight enough in scope to be encompassed within the learning contract.

Conclusions

Comparison of work put forward for professional accreditation with the generic requirements for postgraduate work in higher education indicates that there are cases where it would be appropriate to award a full qualification on the basis of a coherent body of pre-existing workplace activity, normally with some additional reflection and writing-up and possibly with a small amount of additional exploration of context, principles or relevant sources. Even where the work available is not sufficiently substantial or of the right level there may be an opportunity to build on it as the basis for further learning without the need for additional workplace investigation. This calls into question the universal appropriateness of the current system of APEL, and suggests that instead of giving credit for previous work as a component or series of components of a qualification that leave additional components to be completed, it can be brought in as a series of fully- or partially-complete components which are then reflected and built upon as necessary to achieve the full qualification.

The use of learning contracts in work-based higher education provides a vehicle that can support this kind of programme with very little change to current procedures. The advantage is that it potentially makes better use of work experience as a vehicle for learning, it enables existing work to be used in situations where conflicts of time or interest may arise from introducing dual-agenda projects to the workplace, and perhaps more significantly it allows experienced practitioners to gain awards based around existing portfolios of work. The fact that existing work is used does not mean that there is no new learning; drawing together, conceptualising and reflecting on workplace activity is often the

aspect of work-based learning that provides the most significant development. Existing approaches to APEL would remain in use where appropriate and learners would have the option when negotiating their learning contracts to use all, some or none of any eligible work they may have towards their programme.

Note on paper

An earlier version of this paper was presented at *Work-Based Projects: the Worker as Researcher*, a conference of the Work Based Learning Network of the Universities Association for Lifelong Learning, April 2006, University of Northampton.

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