

Practice Evaluation

The Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) is established in higher education, but there are no studies on its use in occupational therapy. Brunel University wanted to investigate whether APEL could enable occupational therapy students meeting certain criteria to be exempt from the first-year practice placement, and so devised an APEL proposal. Practice placement educators and students were invited to give their opinion on the proposal through a questionnaire; additionally, the students attended a nominal group discussion.

Three themes emerged from the six practice placement educators who agreed to participate: logistics, student experience and learning opportunities. The three students who participated valued APEL for confirming and recognising learning from previous experience. The low response impedes establishing any definite views on the topic, but could suggest that APEL is not a controversial option to practice placement educators and students. Further study is required on the adoption of APEL in occupational therapy education.

Using Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) to Replace a Practice Placement: a Controversial Option?

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Introduction

The Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) is defined as 'A process through which learning achieved outside education or training systems is assessed and, as appropriate, recognised for academic purposes' (Quality Assurance Agency 2004). In contrast, the Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) is the recognition of prior academic certificated learning (Quality Assurance Agency 2004). The APEL definition clarifies that it is not the experience that is accredited, but the learning that has been acquired from the experience. In this context, occupational therapy students with support worker or similar experience may have achieved learning from their previous experience that may be similar to the learning objectives for the 4-week practice placement for first-year students at Brunel University. An appropriate

APEL scheme could accredit the learning, exempting them from completing this practice placement. This is in line with the Government's strategy for flexible and accessible education for people who wish to become allied health professionals (Department of Health 2000), and for widening participation and fair access to higher education for everyone who can benefit from it (Higher Education Funding Council for England 2006).

There have been calls for higher education to be less 'supplier driven' and to consider more flexible ways of offering degree programmes (Halpin 2006). APEL is one way of increasing flexibility and is widely used in higher education, either to gain entry onto an educational programme or to be exempt from specific modules. However, there is no literature describing the process of applying APEL to allow exemption from practice placements in occupational therapy education. The College of Occupational Therapists (2004, 2005) has encouraged the profession to support the use of APEL within the United Kingdom.

In a study of 444 first-year students on the BSc (Hons) Occupational Therapy at Brunel University, Craik and Zaccaria (2003) noted that two-thirds of the students were over 21 years of age at the start of the programme and that over 70% of them had previously worked in a health or social care setting. The profile of the students in cohort 2005/6 at Brunel University is similar and 20% (n = 36) of the students are studying on a part-time basis,

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many while working in an occupational therapy setting. Therefore, the majority of the students may have relevant experience that could be the basis for an APEL application.

The Division of Occupational Therapy at Brunel University wanted to investigate the introduction of APEL in order to allow students who met certain criteria to be exempt from the first-year 4-week practice placement. However, as debate in the literature had suggested that APEL was a controversial topic, it was decided to seek opinions on APEL from students and practice placement educators to help to inform the decision.

Literature review

APEL is not a new idea, but it is gathering pace because widening participation and access to higher education are currently high on the political agenda (Pouget and Osbourne 2004). It has risen partly in response to the development of lifelong learning, the economic climate within the sector and the increased diversity in the student population (Simpson et al 2000). The theoretical underpinnings suggest that learning is not restricted to the academic setting and can occur through experience (Starr-Glass 2002, Garnett et al 2004). However, there is not universal support for APEL, with traditional universities questioning the validity of the process (Trowler 1996). There is a contradiction in that experiential learning cannot be accepted as it is but has to be matched to learning outcomes and other academic conventions, and some academics perceive knowledge as valid only if presented in an academic format (Peters 2005, Armsby et al 2006).

Successful APEL students must have self-awareness and take ownership of the learning that has occurred (Howard 1993). The locus of control lies with the individual student and an advantage of APEL is that it encourages self-reflection and self-motivation. Thus, it has been advocated as a learner-centred process (Simpson et al 2000). There are logistical benefits to APEL in that it improves the efficiency of educational programmes (Thomas 1989), since learning that has already occurred does not need to be retaught. Within occupational therapy, it may be a partial solution to the national and long-standing shortage of practice placements (Craik and Turner 2005).

Howard (1993), however, urged caution, postulating that APEL might be a 'cut-price' approach to higher education. She argued that there was a risk that standards might be lowered and that previous learning could be valued at the expense of prospective learning. There are also issues surrounding the validity of APEL (Starr-Glass 2002) because the process must measure accurately the knowledge that it is replacing. In practice, APEL has been criticised for expecting candidates to write in academic language that they may not yet have acquired, potentially stifling their ability to present the information to demonstrate that learning has been acquired through their experience (Starr-Glass 2002). However, the most popular assessment method is through a portfolio assembled by the student (Starr-Glass 2002).

Proposed introduction of APEL at Brunel University

As part of the reapproval of the BSc (Hons) Occupational Therapy programme by Brunel University and the Health Professions Council and its accreditation by the College of Occupational Therapists in 2005, a strategy for introducing APEL was proposed. It would enable students to be exempt from the first-year 4-week practice placement if they could demonstrate that, in working with clients, they had already met the learning outcomes of the placement. Students would complete a 2,000-word portfolio and their managers would provide a reference. The portfolio and reference would be marked against the learning objectives of the practice placement, thus enhancing its concurrent validity. The portfolio would include a case study and the student would be required to reflect on what was learnt from the experience and what he or she would do differently the next time. The staff produced an APEL proposal and this was used as a basis for informed discussion. Prior to implementing the process, it was decided to conduct an exploratory study, with the aim of gathering opinions about APEL from practice placement educators and students.

Method

The study was approved by the Brunel University Ethics Committee. An information sheet and request to participate were posted to 100 practice placement educators, who were randomly selected from the database of Brunel University practice placement educators. Those educators who agreed to participate in the study were sent a copy of the APEL proposal and were invited to complete a questionnaire about it. The educators were assured of anonymity and implied consent was assumed by returning the questionnaire.

Approximately 185 first-year full-time and part-time students were informed of the study through a short presentation before a lecture and were asked to express their interest. An information sheet accompanied the presentation. The students who agreed to take part in the study were invited to complete an anonymous questionnaire prior to going on their first-year placement and to attend a discussion group employing the nominal group technique on their return from the placement. Written consent was obtained from the students prior to participating in the nominal group.

The questionnaire for the practice placement educators posed two additional questions to the questionnaire for the students, asking the educators to identify the main advantages and disadvantages of the APEL concept. These issues were explored in the nominal group session with the students. Both questionnaires sought participants' views on the clarity of the Brunel University APEL proposal, using a rating scale, and an open-ended question asked for any other comments that the participants felt were relevant. The questionnaires were developed by the authors and peer reviewed as part of the University Ethics procedure.

The questionnaires from both practice placement educators and students were analysed using descriptive

Table 1. The opinions of practice placement educators on the proposed introduction of APEL

	Theme 1: Logistics	Theme 2: Student experience	Theme 3: Learning opportunities
Advantages	Helps with shortage of placements	Acknowledges value of previous experiential learning Enhances ownership	Increases flexibility to meet the learning requirements
Disadvantages	Originality of work needs to be assured Equity of grades from managers may be difficult	Reduces exposure to clinical practice May have an impact on transition from occupational therapy assistant to student Potential split in cohort	Limits the range of placements that the student will experience

statistics for the clarity of the documentation and thematic analysis for the open-ended questions. The discussion group employed the nominal group technique, which was considered appropriate because it allows for individual opinions to be gathered and then encourages debate before embarking on a consensus decision-making process (Steward 2001).

The six stages of the nominal group technique outlined by Steward (2001) were followed. The first was group formation and the second was the nominal phase where the research statement was presented: 'Identify the aspects you valued most in the APEL proposal in comparison to your first-year practice placement.' Independently, each participant generated a list of responses and, in the item-generation phase, all responses were collated for everyone to see.

In the fourth stage, the first two authors facilitated a group discussion and clarified the participants' responses; a total of 10 values were agreed. In the voting phase, each participant individually ranked these 10 values from 6 for the most important value to 1 as the least important value. These ranks were recorded individually and then totalled to provide the group ranked scores, with the highest value being the most important. Each participant contributed equally in this process, but individual responses are not identifiable from the ranked scores (see Table 2). A final discussion clarified the group-agreed ranked values and picked out any themes.

Results

In total, six practice placement educators agreed to participate and all returned the questionnaire. Four students agreed to participate, but one was unable to attend the discussion group and did not return the questionnaire.

Practice placement educators' opinions on APEL: All the practice placement educators responded positively to the clarity of the written proposal. Three themes emerged from the open-ended questions within the questionnaire: logistics, student experience and learning experience, all with advantages and disadvantages (see Table 1).

Students' opinions on APEL: All the students responded positively to the clarity of the APEL proposal. The results from the nominal group can be found in Table 2. Ten values were generated and scored regarding the concept of APEL: the top seven were positive and the bottom three were negative.

Table 2. The opinions of students on the proposed introduction of APEL

Value	Individual rank scores	Total group rank scores
a. Completing a portfolio could confirm previous learning experience and justify exemption from practice.....	6,6,6.....	18.....
b. Recognition of previous experience.....	6,5,6.....	17.....
c. Could help identify individual learning needs prior to commencing the course.....	5,6,5.....	16.....
d. Observation on placement versus doing as a technical instructor.....	4,6,4.....	14.....
e. APEL saving time.....	3,4,5.....	12.....
f. Limited learning in 4 weeks if limited contact with clients on placement.....	5,5,2.....	12.....
g. Opportunity to work in a different clinical area (compared to prior experience).....	3,2,6.....	11.....
h. Completing APEL could be more hassle than it is worth.....	4,3,4.....	11.....
i. Placement can be reassuring that one is going in the 'right' direction.....	4,2,3.....	9.....
j. Doing a placement gives a sense of inclusion in the learning process.....	4,1,2.....	7.....

Discussion

The concept of introducing APEL to replace a period of practice placement education was thought to be controversial and prompted this study. In total, 285 people were invited to participate but only nine people took part. Questionnaires have an acknowledged low response rate, but the very low response rate of both the practice placement educators and students must be considered when interpreting the findings. It may be an interesting point in itself, that is, the APEL concept is hotly debated within education but may not be of such importance to students and practice placement educators.

All participants supported APEL for acknowledging the value of prior experience (Table 1, Theme 2, and Table 2, Value b). The practice placement educators also recognised the value of APEL for enhancing students' ownership of their learning (Table 1, Theme 2) and the student participants valued APEL to help to identify individual learning needs (Table 2, Value c). However, the student participants also felt that a successful placement reinforced that they were

heading in the 'right' direction (Table 2, Value i). Exemption from practice placement could therefore limit this, although the student participants also valued that APEL could offer the same reinforcement.

The participants mirrored the comments from Thomas (1989), supporting APEL because it increased the efficiency of the educational programme for the practice placement educators who would not need to reteach the learning. If a student qualifies for exemption from the first-year practice placement, he or she will not have the learning retaught. Other aspects highlighted by the student participants acknowledged that it was frustrating to spend 4 weeks on placement and not feel that they had acquired new learning when contact with clients was limited, as well as the experience of increased observation on placement compared with their experience of doing when employed as an occupational therapy assistant or technical instructor (Table 2, Values d and f).

Howard (1993) argued that previous learning could be valued at the expense of prospective learning and there were comments from participants that supported this (Table 2, Values g, i and j). One participant noted that, even though she had worked as an occupational therapy assistant and considered herself experienced, she valued the practice placement because it enabled her to make the mental shift from occupational therapy assistant to student. In the Brunel University proposal, APEL would not be a compulsory process but it would enable students to have a choice, which is currently not available to them.

Using a portfolio within the assessment is congruent with the recommendations in the literature (Starr-Glass 2002). Although the participants noted that completing the portfolio might be 'more hassle than it is worth' (Table 2, Value h) in the context of a 4-week placement, they gave it the highest rank score of 18 (Table 2, Value a). However, there are wider professional implications, given that all occupational therapists are required to engage in continuing professional development activities and record them in a portfolio (Health Professions Council 2006). It could be argued that encouraging students to start working on a portfolio as part of the APEL process is helping them to prepare for their future professional obligations.

Study limitations

This study had a small sample, so it is difficult to generalise the findings and answer how controversial this topic is. Therefore, further debate and research are required to establish the broader opinions about implementing APEL within occupational therapy programmes.

Conclusion

The practice placement educators and students in this small exploration valued the concept of APEL. This would enable students to be exempt from the placement if they could demonstrate achievement of the learning outcomes from previous experiences. The controversial nature of

this topic remains unclear and further discussion is welcomed to enhance the debate.

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