Oysters and APEL - Destined to be a delicacy? Evaluative Study of APEL Policy in Practice 2013

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Abstract: *The paper uses social policy theory (SPT) in the context of a UK university (UKU) and RLtd to explore the nature of the APEL relationship. Surveys sent to students and other stakeholders along with the literary evidence provide data for this study. The paper argues that through the enactment and analysis of APEL, traditional approaches are highlighted, which show that APEL can lead to "taken for granted practices" in HE, and become embodied as urban myth, and that many aspects of APEL don't appear changed over time; However the paper also argues that the enactment of APEL policy in different contexts can extend the concept, engagement and understanding of the benefits, illuminating successful outcomes between the different parties involved, and gaining increased credibility for HE collaborative partnerships in the current environment in which Higher Education Institution's (HEI's) are now situated.*
KeyWords: Higher Education; Accreditation; Policy Enactment.

1. Introduction

In 2001, APEL was considered "mainstream" in an important report by Merrifield et al (2000), which mapped APEL in English HE; however not much later a report by Garnett, et al (2004) found APEL became a marginal activity relevant to some professionally oriented courses, and universities differed considerably in their approach to and adoption of APEL. There is also evidence from a later regional study that some universities do not have an APEL route at all, e.g. in Stockton's (2008) study, it was found that only 26% of respondents had APEL /Accreditation of Experiential Learning (AEL) policy in Herefordshire and Worcestershire. Hence the reason for this study; although APEL as a policy exists in HEI's, it is now some time after Merrifield et al's (2000) report. The environmental backdrop has changed considerably in HE, and therefore the question posed is "How has APEL developed (if at all) to accommodate this changed environment in which it is operating?"

Becher and Trowler (2001 p2) report that these changes include, "globalization; "massification"; altered HE-state-industry relations; marketised relationships; managerialism within universities and, finally, substantive disciplinary growth". This shows a somewhat turbulent environment for Higher Education, coupled with what Bloland (1995) refers to as a "blurring of boundaries between HE and other education sectors" and indeed a key feature for some universities is the development of collaborative partnerships, hence the choice of the RLtd, the case study being evaluated in this study.

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It represents many elements of this new operating environment; the widening participation agenda, the marketised relationships, managerialism and HE-state-industry relations.
The other main reason for this study is that Trowler (1996 p8) found "there has been almost no attempt to substantiate or refute the claims through...study of the student experience of APEL or to identify how students respond to different ways of implementing the process."
This study attempts to contribute towards this objective, and portray this perspective. It is highlighted that the context of this study is very different to a traditional student context in HEI's; indeed Armsby et al (2006) suggest that 'work-based learning approaches' could offer solutions to the problems generated for APEL practitioners because they recognise general learning.

The key research objectives from the study are as follows:

1. To establish which aspects of APEL policy enactment have remained stable over time
2. To ascertain whether there are any new developments with APEL
3. To determine whether there may be wider potential for APEL policy in HEI's.

The next section reviews the main literature relevant to this area.

2. Literature Review

In many ways APEL can be compared to an oyster; it has been around for some time, but is not always popular with everyone; however for those who really appreciate oysters, they can be a taste to savour. Oysters have many and varied varieties, and this could be compared to the different varieties of prior accredited learning - APEL, Accredited Experiential Learning (AEL), Accredited Prior Learning, (APL), Accredited Prior Certificated Learning (APCL), variations on a theme some might say, and attractive to different people. Hence the reasoning behind the analogy: Is APEL destined to be only a delicacy for some, like the oyster, or does it have the potential to be a mainstream policy, and more widely adopted and used by students?

Garnett et al (2004) neatly summarise the APEL benefits from various papers and one key advantage of APEL is that it is seen as a flexible response recognising the learning achievements and future aspirations of claimants. This is further supported by Betts & Crichton (2009), who found that APEL can offer a lot more flexibility in time, place and pace of 'delivery' than the traditional module delivery. This is particularly pertinent now with modes of technology and transport infrastructure enabling people to travel and communicate much more easily. However in practice this is rarely discussed between the students and tutor in the case of APEL. However APEL facilitates the fact that it is open to all people with work experience and thus enables contribution to widening participation, and is supportive of the Government agenda. APEL has always offered these same flexibilities, but APEL does have its downsides, and Cox and Green (2001) noted it "is widely regarded as time consuming and difficult".

Even with environmental changes and the fact that APEL could offer opportunities for people returning to study and thereby address national social inclusion and widening participation agendas (Cox and Green 2001) there does not appear to be a co-ordinated HEI strategic initiative to use APEL and release its potential. The fear is that although the value in APEL seems to have been recognised for some time, e.g. (UCAS 1996) generally the numbers of students part-taking in the process seem small and the argument

was that the situation would likely continue to be this way unless changes were made both in policy and in HEI's. This prophecy does seem to have remained true. The complex environment as described as the marketised HE system characterised by de-regulation of the system, reduction in the monopolistic position of universities and a threat of new rivals, including private industry and information technology on a global scale, and the increased power of customers, students, employers and the government acting as a core buyer by Dill and Sporn, (1995) shows that it would seem that not only have the dynamics become more acute in these areas, but so has the agenda for APEL in 2013.

Stockton's findings (2008) revealed the how APEL was viewed in HEI's; 44% said there was insufficient knowledge of the accreditation process from tutors, and in addition 23% of students were advised to take the full module for convenience rather than APEL. Both these latter aspects of APEL seem firmly rooted in the culture of HEI's as taken for granted practice. Garnett et al (2004) conclude that APEL, though long established in the UK, is an under-used tool, yet it has great potential as a framework for providing retrospective credit, exemptions and 'advanced standing' into higher education programmes, and, crucially, as a developmental tool. APEL offers huge benefits to HEI's by opening up opportunities to use their assessment capability to better effect and to play a full part in workforce development at local, regional and national levels.

3. Research Methodology

The theoretical stance adopted in this paper is social practice theory (SPT), drawing on Bourdieu (2000) and Giddens (1986). SPT offers value by attempting to provide new insights on habitual practices: (Sibeon, 2007), so in this case, APEL policy and practice, and is often defined as a framework to describe how individuals in different societies both shape and are shaped by their environment and it attempts to articulate how identity and individual agency rely on and produce cultural forms.

The purpose of this study is to report on a qualitative pilot study of APEL policy to ascertain whether perceptions and practices have changed over time. In order to achieve this, the recent experiences of mature students, business practitioners, are explored to ascertain how students themselves feel about the APEL process. Leaders and policy-makers of APEL were also interviewed to gain an additional perspective in an attempt to gain an end-to-end view of the whole process, and then to discuss its applicability in a wider context in 2013. The pilot was based around the 2013 cohort of 20 mature students on the RLtd foundation degree, partly to represent the nature of the collaborative venture now supported by wider participation and new Government direction. Electronic questionnaires were dispatched to 20 APEL students who are serving Middle Managers typically in the age range 25 – 45, and responsible for the efficient running of a restaurant. This method was the most expedient to despatch and return to this widespread audience working in restaurants all over the UK, and the quickest way for ease of completion. The response rate was 80%. The questions for the survey were informed by reference to previous studies in this area so that direct comparisons can made (e.g. Stockton (2008), Betts & Crichton (2009)), and also to the wider literature. Questions arising from the interviews were also inserted into the questionnaire.

The strengths of using a case study lie in the depth that is possible when using a limited number of people thereby allowing focus on individual experiences, (Polit & Hungler 1989). This depth facilitates analysis of personal reflections, thoughts, intentions from the individual in their environment, which was

necessary when assessing the situation concerning APEL. Semi-structured interviews with 4 university officers, 2 policy makers, 8 Business School Heads of Department and Academics, and 4 leaders at FFC, along with the documentary evidence such as emails, and APEL policies provide additional data for this study to capture the discourse surrounding the policy enactment in practice.

4. Main Findings

The first research objective was to establish from the study which APEL policy practices seem to have stayed the same. There is evidence that themes around APEL are constant, e.g. APEL is seen as a good and valid thing to do, the benefits are sound, and the students found APEL a positive experience recognising their learning, and providing exemptions where they are merited. This can only improve the student experience.

Cox and Green (2001) also showed that APEL provision that provides support for individuals who are unfamiliar with HE is more costly, since more guidance and support is needed, and this is shown to be true in the case study. RLtd does provide dedicated support to the cohort and as one manager said "This is an investment for RLtd. We know that as our managers become more knowledgeable, and apply wider skills their restaurants and people and customers will benefit". The cost aspect is acknowledged, but it is managed. It also means though, that students require support for APEL to be successful, and RLtd have set up a rigorous and transparent assessment process, fully aligned to university quality assessment and quality assurance standards, and accredited. RLtd regard APEL as an important tool in the development of the intellectual capital of their organisation and have nurtured it as such.

The second research objective was to determine whether there were any differences or new facets to APEL. There were new perspectives emerging from this case study in the way RLtd enact APEL, such as, engagement in APEL because it is embedded in the degree programme, resourcing APEL to ensure its success, clear communication and frameworks, and support of the widening participation agenda for different types of student. APEL is fully tracked, audited, with a robust framework clearly linked to academic quality standards.

Stockton's (2008) study shows 77% respondents reported insufficient enquiries from students, and this concurs with Betts & Crichton findings (2009) which also found that few students actually completed the APEL claim, not surprising considering students can be dissuaded from claiming by academics. 100% of the RLtd cohort made an APEL claim in 2013.This is a significant and important difference from traditional numbers. Indeed this was so different the trends were examined over the previous five years for RLtd, since the degree started, and the RLtd cohorts show the same consistently high trend in APEL claims, and so the 2013 cohort is not an exception. It is suggested this is a significant new finding, partly due to the new environment the universities find themselves operating in, and also to the way in which APEL is enacted in this context. As one RLtd participant said, "we take our Education seriously. People know APEL isn't a walk in the park. They have to work hard for it. We have our standards, and those of the university, and anything less will not do".

The final research objective was to capture from the management discourse around APEL if there was any learning and points for improvement. This study shows that there are learning points that HEI's can adopt such as adopting a strategic more student-centred approach to APEL. This takes into account the

students' changing environment especially in 2013 where they may acquire a taste for APEL and perhaps saving on some of the debt burden for education provision.

This case study has shown that it is possible to release the potential of APEL, and in a way that satisfies the needs of various stakeholders, APEL needs to fight for its place amongst the many other strategic priorities on the HE agenda. Stockton (2008) found that although in principle the higher education centres are in favour of adopting APEL policies, it is often difficult to implement across all subject areas as a cross-college policy. This too was a finding in this study: "the policy is made in one area, and it's implemented in another. Implementation and communication is down to the Heads and the Deans of Faculty" (UKU respondent). This tends to lead to quite a chasm, a disjoint between policymaking and those who enact the policies, and are responsible for their effectiveness. In Industry there can rarely afford to be such a disconnect as income, customer and staff satisfaction are dependent on effective implementation and enactment of the policy in the organisation, and this exemplified in the RLtd case study, where there is clear ownership of the policy and its enactment, right through to its review and improvement.

5. Conclusions

The research showed absolute clarity of understanding of APEL, reasons for undertaking the accreditation, and its value to the respondents. Therefore in general terms the study does not reveal much change in perception regarding what APEL is or what it stands for. It does show excellent student understanding and satisfaction with the concept, nature and personal experience of APEL. Trowler (1996 p8) found "there has been almost no attempt to substantiate or refute the claims through...study of the student experience of APEL or to identify how students respond to different ways of implementing the process." This study has attempted to provide evidence of this student perspective.

The case study shows an example of one collaborative partnership that has enacted APEL policy to successfully achieve 100% claims in APEL. It also demonstrates evidence of good HE-industry relations, the widening participation agenda, student satisfaction and employability, as these students are released from the programme theoretically qualified at a higher level, but also ready practically to deliver better results. It also goes some way to contribute evidence of the student experience of APEL, fulfilling in some small way, Trowler's (1996 p8) observation "there has been almost no attempt to substantiate or refute the claims through...study of the student experience of APEL".

Many themes have surfaced in this research supporting what was known years ago; these themes are captured and well documented and enacted in practice today. This case study has shown enactment of the policy and its potential in action. However, much of the literature examines APEL within HE; this research in the RLtd case and context highlights some interesting new aspects in the 2013 environment, where APEL has been used well as part of their collaborative agreement.

The research indicates strongly that APEL would become more accessible to a larger range of students, if there was a predetermined route for students to follow (Stockton 2008). With the number of UK students at HEI's expected to fall over the next 10 years (BBC: 2008) it is becoming more apparent that courses may become more appealing to non-traditional students. APEL may encourage mature students back into education, or graduates to complete secondary degrees or higher level qualification to further their careers. The sound enactment of an APEL policy which could possibly reduce the financial burden

through validation of existing skills could be seen as a step towards extending opportunities and promoting applications. Hence the findings from this collaborative venture and the examination of APEL shows potential for the future.

More recent development with collaborative partners such as with UKU and RLtd shows that APEL could have important consequences for the developing nature of higher education, subject to learning outcomes being clear, and support offered to the students and accrediting tutors. As long as this is correctly administered and quality assured, as can be seen this has a number of benefits for HE and collaboration, benefits for the commercial organisation, and certainly developmental benefits for the individual. The HE environment is changing, and the developmental approach is perceived by some to be time consuming but worth it for the student.

One of the original questions posed at the start of this paper was "How has APEL developed to accommodate this changed environment in which it is operating?" Through this case study, and in this context it can be seen APEL has grown up. It has been taken seriously and enacted comprehensively from policy through enactment to review and improvement. This takes account of the context and environment in which it is operating as the policy is alive and well, and will no doubt continue to evolve, or not, to suit its circumstances. Employer engagement was identified by Leitch (2006) as an essential ingredient in ensuring that the workforce of the future has the appropriate knowledge, skills and understanding to contribute to an increasingly complex working environment. APEL could play an important part.

Earlier on in the paper, APEL was compared to an oyster; oysters can be an acquired taste, and may not be for everyone, but for those who appreciate them, they can be source of great value and treasure...and can be fulfilling for those who take the time to enjoy the experience.

6. References

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