

REFINE Project:
Interim report from UK Partner
Prepared by Professor Bob Johnson, December 2004

A. The timeliness of the REFINE Project

The European scene is advancing rapidly on a number of fronts developed by different interest groups. The Bologna Declaration/Process, in which the education ministers have an avowed aim of forming a European Higher Education Area by 2010, began in 1999. The ministers meet formally every 2 years, Prague (2001), Berlin (2003) and Bergen (2005) and move the agenda forward more rapidly than many of the educational institutions can sustain. Following initial agreements to 2 cycles of qualifications, a third has been developed to include 'doctorates'. Further developments have included the recognition of lifelong learning and the aim to develop the existing ECTS into a truly viable and workable system which can be implemented across Europe.

In November 2002, the European Commission issued the Copenhagen Declaration, which amongst other things looked the development of a credit transfer system for vocational education and training, ECVET.

Furthermore, in January 2004, the European Commission published 'Common European Principles for Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning' – notes for a meeting of its expert group. At the same time, a number of European projects have been funded to underpin and support the initiatives. In the area of recognising informal and non-formal learning, generally referred to in the UK as APEL, parallel projects are in hand to investigate the possibility of developing credit processes for vocational and academic learning. The Transfine project, 2002-2003, explored the relationship between formal and informal learning. The REFINE Project follows on naturally in that the aims are *'to test the tools for a European methodological framework for the recognition of formal and informal learning; to foster trans-national and trans-sectoral collaboration and to build understanding of and confidence in the practices and procedures involved'*.

The REFINE project is most timely given the situation in Europe and also in the UK, where over the past 20 years Higher Education Institutions HEIs, have been practising, developing, implementing and refining the processes for APEL. In addition, they have developed the infra-structures to support the recognition of learning 'wherever and however it takes place'.

Southern England Consortium for CATS, SEEC, has been to the forefront with a number of publications by and for its members. For example, the SEEC *Code of Practice for APEL*, first written in 1995 has been brought up to date with a revised version published in 2003.

A survey of the application of APEL in institutions of SEEC members led to *'Models of APEL and Quality Assurance'*, Johnson 2002 in which advice is proffered on how institutions might consider the provision of APEL in HEIs in 'seven stages' when initiating, developing and refining APEL processes.

The report of a survey of the practice of credit in all HEIs in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, EWNI, commissioned by EWNI Credit Forum, (EWNI 2004) contains a wealth of detail on the practice of APL, APEL and work-based learning, WBL, and provides evidence of the long and valuable practical experience on which current practice in the UK is based.

Furthermore, in October 2004, the Quality Assurance Agency, QAA, published its own guidelines for APEL for HEI's. Whilst currently, the Qualifications and Curriculum Agency, QCA, dealing mainly, but not exclusively with the provision in Further Education Colleges, FECs, has its own credit and qualifications, including APEL paper out for consultation.

Conclusion

It is evident therefore that the REFINE project is most timely and apposite to the developments in the UK and Europe.

The aims of the REFINE project are *'to test the tools for a European methodological framework for the recognition of formal and informal learning; to foster transnational and trans-sectoral collaboration and to build understanding of and confidence in the practices and procedures involved.*

The objectives are to test

- *a range of tools, e. g. ECTS, the Euro CV, Europass, codes of practice, for the recognition of formal and informal learning.*
- *tools in a range of different institutional and organizational contexts:- including FE and HE institutions, awarding bodies, regulatory agencies, youth, adult and community organizations and trade unions.*

A parallel programme is taking place in a number of countries, around 12, each testing a different tool.

The focus of the UK programme is to develop and test a code of practice for APEL and to relate this to the existing European Credit Transfer System (ECTS).

B. The REFINE Project in the UK

The 'TOOL'

The UK Partner, Continuum, under the direction of Professor John Storan, at the University of East London, appointed Professor Bob Johnson as Project Officer. Following the appointment, a detailed plan was drawn up and approved by the European Project Manager. It was decided at the outset that the REFINE project should build upon the existing work in the area; the Common European Principles and the SEEC Code of Practice.

The Common European Principles suggests a single set of principles for

Formal education and training

Learning taking place in relation to the labour market and

Learning taking place in relation to voluntary activities, e. g. youth organisations.

It consists of six principles

1. purpose of the validation of APEL (in UK called either assessment or accreditation)
2. Individual rights: ownership of the results and rights of appeal
3. Institutional obligations: especially clarity of understanding
4. Confidence and trust: transparency of procedures , standards and assessment criteria, based upon clear information
5. Impartiality: separation of roles of trainer and assessor; code of conduct for assessors and systematic initial and continuing training
6. Credibility and legitimacy: validation criteria involving all stakeholders especially social partners; validation bodies need to be impartial at ALL levels of the operation.

The process should be followed up with systematic monitoring and the evaluation of initiatives.

As stated earlier, following a long period of extensive practice in the England, a code of practice for APEL published in 1995, was later revised in 2003 (SEEC 1995 and 2003). The code gives advice to Higher Educational Institutions, HEIs, on the strategic and operational aspects for the implementation of APEL

It was proposed that the SEEC Code of Practice could be developed further and extended for use by both HEIs **and** other communities such as FECs, Awarding Bodies, Adult and Continuing Education and trade unions whilst at the same time incorporating the Common European Principles. Although primarily designed for use by institutions and organisations who have the authority to award qualifications, e.g. UK universities and awarding and professional bodies, the SEEC code was adapted so that regulatory bodies could use it as a yardstick for the quality assurance of the work of awarding bodies. In addition those organisations and individuals who are applying for APEL, can use the tool to to ensure that they are receiving appropriate advice and being assessed in a rigorous, open and fair manner.

The resulting tool, called '**General principles for the recognition of formal and informal learning, APEL – for organisations**', is shown in appendix 1.

The method of consultation

Although different consultation processes were considered, it was decided that an emailed questionnaire sent to named, selected individuals/organisations would be the most cost effective. The potential respondents, shown in Appendix 2, were each sent a covering letter explaining the purpose of the project, the 'General principles' tool and a short questionnaire (see appendix 3). In addition the Project Officer was invited to organise a workshop/discussion group at the SEEC Annual Conference in September 2004.

Initial results

Since the UK tool is designed primarily for the use by organisations in the development of quality-assured processes for the implementation and delivery of APEL, the European Project Manager recognised at the outset that the report template originally envisaged for all the partner countries would not be appropriate for recording the testing of the 'tool' in the UK.

The 'tool'

General principles for the recognition of formal and informal learning, APEL – for organisations.

A. What were the good points of the tool?

The underlying feeling is that the *General Principles* provide an excellent quality assured framework within which the recognition of informal and non-formal learning can flourish to the benefit of all the stakeholders.

The *General Principles* are sufficiently flexible to cover all levels of learning both in higher and further education and also to encompass vocational and academic learning.

Adherence to the *General Principles* by organisations benefits

- candidates for APEL (Informal and non-formal learning) who would then
 - have confidence in the process
 - place greater 'value' upon the credit awarded and
 - feel that their learning in non-formal environments is as worthy as that achieved in the classroom
 - see it (APEL) as a means to assist their future development
- Employers/trade unions/adult education organisations who welcome the rigour provided and the credibility of any decision on the award of credit.
- Educational institutions feel confident that adherence to the *General Principles* would give them
 - a credibility with other educational institutions/ employers and other organisations, thereby facilitating the
 - transfer of credit
 - mobility of candidates.

- Regulatory bodies reported that the tool is an excellent basis for audit purposes

B. What were the difficulties?

The major difficulty is finding a single set of *General Principles* which can be used by higher and further educational institutions, private /governmental training organisations, awarding bodies, professional bodies including trade unions and quality assurance/inspectorate agencies.

C. What would you take out?

The opinion seemed to be that there were no elements which should be excluded

D. What would you add in?

There is a feeling that there is insufficient emphasis on the candidate with a need to stress the responsibility of the organisations to prepare students/candidates for the process of APEL and to be accountable to them.

E. Comments from 'testers'

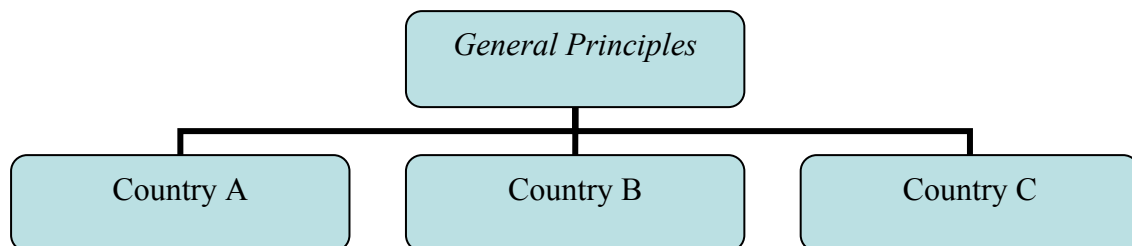
'Testers' are very insistent that the *General Principles* should provide a 'loose' and 'flexible', yet rigorous framework for the recognition of formal and informal learning.

The language should be simple and the meaning should be transparent and easy to understand.

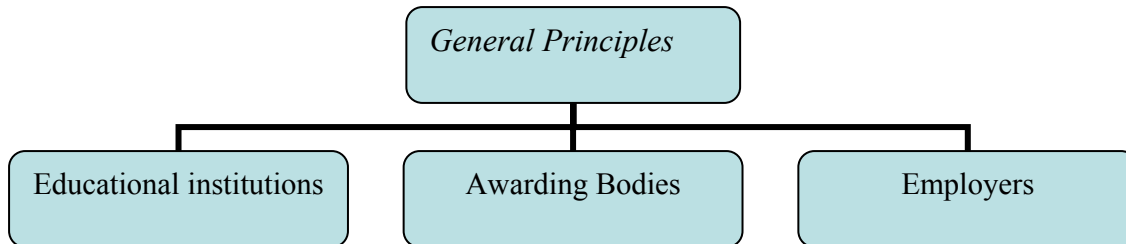
The *General Principles* should be flexible enough to allow for differences in culture and environment when applied across national boundaries. Given the autonomy and hence diversity in the UK higher education sector, this is felt to be particularly important.

Various suggestions were put forward on how the flexibility might be achieved, including:-

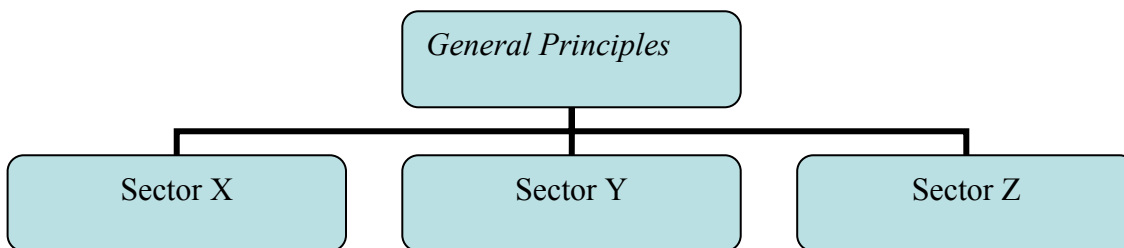
A) National differences



b) The guidelines should be flexible enough to cover all forms of learning be it vocational or academic, and be capable of being used by different organisations/bodies. For example:-



c) The guidelines should be flexible enough to be capable of being applied across all sectors, e.g.



F. Comments from candidates
Not applicable

Some References

European Commission (2004) *Common Principles for Validation of Non-formal and Informal learning*, EC, Brussels

Johnson Bob (2002) *Models of APEL and Quality Assurance*, SEEC, London

QAA (2004) *Guidelines for APEL*, QAA

SEEC (2003), *SEEC Code of Practice for APEL*, SEEC, London

Professor Bob Johnson
October 2004

Appendix 1

REFINE: General principles for the recognition of Formal and Informal Learning (APEL) – for organisations

1. Common definitions are needed to both safeguard and ensure the highest quality arrangements for AP(E)L services.

AP(E)L is defined as the assessment/accreditation of certificated and non-certificated learning (including the assessment of experiential learning). It is recognised that there are other definitions in use.

2. A clear statement of the organisation's commitment to AP(E)L should be provided and included in all relevant literature.

This statement could be included in organisational documentation at a strategic level including mission statements, strategic plans and programme information relating to access and admissions to membership and/or educational/training/developmental programmes. It also should be prominent in information aimed at learners including career development, and the programme handbook.

3. Organisations should seek to embed AP(E)L processes across their learning strategy and policy.

Experience to date suggests that AP(E)L arrangements can be introduced into existing provision through, for example, the process of review and validation.

4 AP(E)L procedures and practices should be properly documented and made available to all.

Responsibility for all of the stages of the AP(E)L process from initial enquiry to the award of credit should be clearly defined. It is important to make explicit the roles and responsibilities of all staff. Information on the responsibilities of the learners needs to be clear and readily available.

5. AP(E)L services should be fully integrated within an organisation's quality assurance processes.

AP(E)L involves academic judgement and can lead to the award of credit. It should be subject to the organisation's quality assurance systems.

6. AP(E)L policies, procedures, documentation and outcomes should be monitored.

Monitoring the impact and performance of all stages of the AP(E)L process should contribute to the improvement of learning strategy, policy and operation.

7. Adequate preparation is required for all persons involved in the AP(E)L process.

The widest participation of staff in AP(E)L will be necessary. This will require the training and development of staff to improve services to learners.

8. Organizations should promote the recognition of APEL as a part of the developmental process for the learner

Organisations should subscribe to the ideal that the recognition of APEL is not an end in itself, but an integral part of lifelong learning and the continuing development of the learner.

9. Formal recognition of AP(E)L should be available..

It is important that the learner receives a clear record of the learning which has been recognised. The format of the recognition could be located on a scale from simple 'valuing' to formal certification. Although APEL should be made available and easily accessible to all potential learners, the decision to determine the nature of the recognition will rest with the learner. However, formal certification will normally require some form of assessment.

We acknowledge that the general principles above are derived from 'A Code of Practice for AP(E)L', SEEC (2003). Visit the Southern England Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer (SEEC) website at www.seec-office.org.uk for details of SEEC, membership and resources available.

Appendix 2

Organisations invited to complete the questionnaire

AOC
BCC, British Chamber of Commerce
CBI, Confederation of British Industry,
CCEA
Credit East
Connexions
Edexcel
ELWa
Fire Service College
Macmillan Nursing
NHSU
NIACE
NOCN
NUCCAT
QAA
QCA
Unison Open College
and
Universities
 Queen's University, Belfast
 Thames Valley university
 University of Lincoln
 University of Liverpool

Glossary

AOC

The Association of Colleges was created in 1996 as the single voice to promote the interests of further education colleges in England and Wales. The Association provides a broad range of services to its subscribers. It represents their interests locally, regionally, nationally internationally. Its management, split into various directorates, provides a pool of expertise on which the sector draws.

BCC

The British Chamber of Commerce a network of local Chambers has a Skills Network which is one of the largest training providers in the UK and is committed to delivering solutions totally aligned to the objectives of the business community.

CBI

The Confederation of British Industry has some 10 000 companies and organizations as members and provides a number of advisory (including learning and education) and consultancy services

CCEA

The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) was established on 1 April 1994 and is a non-departmental public body reporting to the [Department of Education](#) in Northern Ireland. CCEA places learners and those who have a concern for their educational and personal development at the forefront of its thinking. CCEA's mission is: "To enable the full potential of all learners to be achieved and recognised". CCEA monitors standards – ensuring that the qualifications and examinations offered by awarding bodies in Northern Ireland are of an appropriate quality and standard. It is also Northern Ireland's leading awarding body offering a diverse range of qualifications.



Credit East

Credit East was (2000-2003) a consortium of universities and colleges in the east of England whose aim was to establish a regional credit framework to recognise learning wherever it took place.

Connexions

Connexions offers a range of guidance and support for 13 to 19 year olds to help make the transition to adult life a smooth one. Connexions will improve the employability of young people and help them to overcome barriers to success in the modern working world, which is why close collaboration with employers is central to the service's development.

Edexcel

Edexcel was formed in 1996 by the merger of two well-respected bodies, BTEC (the Business & Technology Education Council) and ULEAC (the University of London Examinations and Assessment Council). Both were leaders in their respective fields of academic and vocational qualifications. Now Edexcel provides a very wide range of qualifications to cater for all needs and learning styles and believes strongly in the parity of esteem of vocational and general qualifications.

ELWa

Education and Learning in Wales, ELWa, is a government department which inter alia funds and supports the Credit and Qualifications Framework in Wales, which encompasses all forms of learning both formal and informal.

Fire Service College

The Fire Service College provides unique facilities for both practical and theoretical fire fighting, fire safety and accident emergency training. Established on this site in 1968, the College has built its reputation as the premier fire related training establishment in the world, both in terms of the calibre and experience of its teaching staff and the scenarios it can offer.

LSDA

Learning and Skills Development Agency, LSDA's mission is to improve the quality of post-16 education and training in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. We do this through research to inform policy and practice, through helping to shape and communicate education policy and through improvement and support programmes for organisations that deliver post-16 education and training.

Macmillan Cancer Care

Our education programme helps Macmillan health and social care professionals become leaders in their field through ongoing development and training. Macmillan works with you to identify your individual needs and provides ongoing support.

NHSU

The National Health Service University, NHSU is a new kind of learning organisation, providing learning and development opportunities for everyone working in health and social care. It wants all staff to have the skills and knowledge they need to deliver the best possible patient care.

NIACE

NIACE (The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education - England and Wales) is a non-governmental organisation working for more and different adult learners. NIACE's aim is to support an increase in the total numbers of adults engaged in formal and informal learning in England and Wales; and at the same time to take positive action to improve opportunities and widen access to learning opportunities for those communities under-represented in current provision."

NOCN

NOCN is a major recognised national qualifications awarding body, subject to regulation by QCA (in England), ACCAC (in Wales) and CCEA (in Northern Ireland). Some NOCN qualifications and services are also available in Scotland. NOCN is more than just an awarding

body. Through its national qualifications, and through the complementary range of national local services, NOCN seeks to widen access to lifelong learning and develop innovative solutions to the age-old problems of exclusion and under-achievement.

NUCCAT

The Northern Universities Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer is a federation of some 45 higher education institutions in the UK - from the north east to the midlands in England whose membership seeks to:

- Share and promote best practice in the development of modularity, credit frameworks and academic frameworks
- Promote staff development in these areas
 - Debate issues of common interest
- Undertake specific projects on credit for external sponsors

QAA

The Quality Assurance Agency's mission is to safeguard the public interest in sound standards of higher education qualifications encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of higher education. It was established in 1997 and is an independent body funded by subscriptions from universities and colleges of higher education, and through contracts with the main higher education funding bodies. Agency works in partnership with the providers and funders of higher education, the staff and students in higher education, employers and other stakeholders, to:

- safeguard the student and wider public interest in the maintenance of standards of academic awards and the quality of higher education
- communicate information on academic standards and quality to inform student choice and employer understanding, and to underpin public policy making
- enhance the assurance and management of standards and quality in higher education and promote a wider understanding of the value of well-assured standards and quality
- promote a wider understanding of the nature of standards and quality in higher education, including maintenance of common reference points, drawing on UK, other European, and international practice.

QCA

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) is a non-departmental public body, sponsored by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES).

QCA maintains and develops the national curriculum and associated assessments, tests and examinations; and accredits and monitors qualifications in (sic Further Education) colleges and at work QCA develops the qualifications framework for England, Wales and Northern Ireland, which sets out the different levels at which qualifications can be recognised, helping learners make well-informed choices on the qualifications they need. QCA recognises and regulates awarding bodies and their qualifications to maintain the reliability of the national qualifications framework. QCA feels that opportunities to learn continue throughout life and high-quality vocational learning and qualifications are the key to developing the country's workforce.

SEEC

The Southern England Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer, is a consortium of 37 higher education institutions in the south of England, created in 1985 and committed to the principle that all learning which can be judged to be at higher education levels can be credited and programmed to achieve nationally recognised awards. SEEC has four networks that meet each term:

Assessment of Prior (Experiential) Learning;
Key Skills;
Health and Social Care Professions;
Work Related Learning

UK Youth

UK Youth exists to develop and promote innovative non-formal education programmes for and with young people - working with them to develop their potential. The latest detailed inspection/monitoring report has adjudged UK Youth's DfES-funded Connexions work to be



“value for money”, saying that the national youth work charity “engages well with disadvantaged and vulnerable groups”.

Unison Open College

As the flexible learning arm of UNISON, Britain's biggest trade union, our role is to promote and encourage the personal and career development of our members. UNISON Open College has been established to do what it can to make these beliefs a reality for our members. UNISON Open College is a fully accredited distance learning college, which means all our course materials, tuition and student advice services are independently assessed by the Open and Distance Learning Quality Council to ensure they meet the highest standards of educational provision. We are also members of NIACE the National Organisation for Adult Learning and EADL, the European Association for Distance Learning, We believe that:

- learning should be a lifelong activity for everyone
- people should be able to develop their full potential at home and at work and in their communities
- barriers to accessing education and training should be removed wherever possible

end

Covering letter and questionnaire

Dear

Re: European Project: Refine

As you may know, Continuum has recently managed a national mapping of APEL policy and practice in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. This research forms part of a European project – Transfine- which has explored the relation between formal and informal learning. Continuum has now been invited to undertake further work on APEL, as part of a Europe-wide project called Refine. The aims of the Refine project are *‘to test the tools for a European methodological framework for the recognition of formal and informal learning; to foster transnational and trans-sectoral collaboration and to build understanding of and confidence in the practices and procedures involved. The objectives are To test a range of tools, e. g. ECTS, the Euro CV, Europass, codes of practice, for the recognition of formal and informal learning.*

To test tools in a range of different institutional and organizational contexts:- including FE and HE institutions, awarding bodies, regulatory agencies, youth, adult and community organizations and trade unions.

There will be parallel programmes taking place in a round 12 countries. The focus of the UK programme will be to develop and test a code of practice for APEL and to relate this to the existing European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). Professor Bob Johnson, who carried out the earlier work on the Transfine project, has agreed to act as project officer for the Refine project.

I am writing to invite you to become an Associate Partner in the project – a commitment which will not require a substantial amount of your time – by sharing your views on the ‘General principles for the recognition of formal and informal learning’ (APEL), which as you may recognise, are based upon the SEEC publication (2003) ‘A code of practice for APEL’

Would you be kind enough to complete the attached and return it to Professor Bob Johnson, bobjohnson@northwoodha6.fsnet.co.uk ?

A summary of the responses will be shared with all partners.

May I take this opportunity to thank you in advance for your co-operation.

Yours sincerely

John Storan
Director
Continuum

European Project: *Refine*. Questionnaire

Developing a set of general principles for the recognition of formal and informal learning (APEL)

1. Does your organisation have a policy for APEL? Yes No

If so, would you be kind enough to send me a copy or, if applicable, your website?

2. If your organisation were to adopt the *Refine General Principles*

i) who would be the 'target group(s) eg. Students, employees, member organisations, institutions?

ii) how could you use the General principles with the target group(s)?

3. Please describe your views on the practicality and applicability of the General principles to your target group(s).

4. Whilst at this stage we are not looking for editorial refinements, we are interested in your views on those

principles which you feel are:

i) relatively unimportant

ii) omitted

5. Please add any other observations

6. Name:
Position:
Organisation:
Telephone number:
Email address:

Would you like to be kept informed of the progress of the Refine project? Yes No

Please return your responses via email to bobjohnson@norhwoodha6.fsnet.co.uk or post to: *Professor Bob Johnson, 45 Woodhouse Eaves, Northwood, Middx, HA6 3NF*

Thank you for your co-operation.

Yours sincerely



Professor Bob Johnson