



**Northern Ireland Post Qualifying  
Education and Training Partnership**

**Guiding Principles and Arrangements  
for Accreditation of Prior Learning  
within the NI PQ Framework**

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Produced by:

Northern Ireland Post Qualifying Education and Training Partnership  
Unit 2a  
2 River's Edge  
13-15 Ravenhill Road  
Belfast BT6 8DN

Tele: 028 90 461495

Fax: 028 90 731516

Web: [www.nipqetp.com](http://www.nipqetp.com)

Email: [info@nipqetp.com](mailto:info@nipqetp.com)

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# Guiding Principles and Arrangements for Accreditation of Prior Learning within the NI PQ Framework

## Introduction

Acquisition of knowledge and skills is achieved within a very broad context of learning. A professional and, or, academic framework that sets out to recognise and value learning in its widest dimension, must give consideration to the diversity of learning opportunities and the even greater diversity of outcomes that currently exist or may develop in the future.

The Academic world has a culture of recognising learning across the spectrum and has in place a range of structures that enables accreditation of such learning. Many professions also have in place structures within their education and training provision that allow for consideration of previous learning or learning gained elsewhere.

Such recognition or consideration is usually managed through an Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) structure.

In the current climate of complexity of roles across a wide range of professional settings, it is important that all learning and development frameworks provide a diversity of provision and access. Life long learning is a recognised and valued concept within social work, and therefore drives the APL process.

The review of the PQ Framework in Northern Ireland in 2003 highlighted the need for greater recognition of prior learning in all of its forms.

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) has published Guidelines on the Accreditation of Prior Learning for higher education institutions. This guidance sets out a model for use by academic institutions to award academic recognition for prior learning, thus leading to an academic award.

It is equally important that the Professional Framework for Social Workers in Northern Ireland (Northern Ireland Post Qualifying Education and Training Framework) affords similar opportunities as part of the process for gaining professional awards.

The NIPQETP sets out the principles that underpin the arrangements for professional recognition and accreditation of prior learning leading to professional awards within the NI PQ Framework.

In some instances the academic and professional processes apply to the same learning. It is therefore important that the models or systems applied are consistent and compatible.

## Context For APL Provision

The PQ Framework for Northern Ireland provides the qualified social work workforce with a range of professional awards that recognises professional development.

Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) in a professional context can be used as a key tool for achieving progression in the NI PQ Framework

APL provision therefore applies in both the academic and professional context.

NIPQETP have in place standards and arrangements for APL which are quality assured in line with all aspects of the NI PQ Framework.

Programmes seeking accreditation must make provision for APL. Programmes that are part of an academic structure apply the APL arrangements of the academic institution.

The NIPQETP Assessment Board must also meet these standards. This paper therefore is mainly used as guidance for APL submissions to the Assessment Board.

This means that whether a Candidate chooses an Accredited Programme route or an Individual Assessment route, there is access to professional APL arrangements.

The APL route is normally for those candidates who have already achieved their learning and development elsewhere and are now seeking recognition of that learning and development within the NI PQ Framework.

The majority of Candidates do not seek to use an APL route for either an Accredited Programme or an Individual Assessment. These Candidates undertake the Programme or a piece of work for Individual Assessment within the context of developing their learning.

## Definitions

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, in its guidance on accreditation of prior learning (Sept 2004), explains that the term “accreditation” refers to the process of identification, assessment and formal acknowledgement of prior learning and achievement.

This learning may or may not have been previously recognised.

The following terms are used by NIPQETP to describe the process of accreditation of a range of circumstances where learning and development has taken place:

- **Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL)**

**This is the generic term that will apply to either of the following:**

- **Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning (APCL)**
- **Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL)**

APL submissions must clearly indicate their basis, i.e. either APCL or APEL.

Academic Programmes accredited within the NI PQ Framework may consider:

- APEL for Admission to the Programme
- APCL or APEL for Advanced Standing within the Programme
- APCL or APEL for Exemptions from Modules within the Programme

## Status of APL in the NI PQ Framework

Accreditation of prior learning (APL), gives credit for and formal acknowledgement within the NI PQ Framework, of achievement already gained elsewhere.

Candidates may demonstrate that they have already met the requisite outcomes for identified PQ Requirements for any of the PQ Awards and therefore be awarded those Requirements via the PQ – APL process.

An APL submission to the NI PQ Assessment Board for either APCL or APEL is therefore for the purposes of **Alternative Assessment of learning already achieved elsewhere** for achievement of PQ Requirements within a specified award.

In effect, this means that the successful APL submission gains PQ Requirements and therefore has the same status as achievement by any other means within the NI PQ Framework.

The main distinction between an APL submission for Individual Assessment to the NI PQ Assessment Board and a “normal” submission is that the APL submission reflects learning and development that has already taken place elsewhere and now in a separate process is to be assessed against PQ Requirements.

APEL can only be used for 2 thirds of any PQ Award.

The APCL assessment process will take account of and, where appropriate, recognise circumstances where the previous learning has already been assessed and certificated (see p11, point 15).

In some instances APCL can be used for achievement of a full award, for example, where a substantive piece of work such as a doctorate has been undertaken and can be mapped to all of the requisite requirements of the Award.

## Underpinning Principles

The following principles underpin the PQ – APL Standards and the arrangements for a professional APL process:

- 1 All achievement within the NI PQ Framework, including via an APL route, is based on an assessment of professional knowledge, skills and values.
- 2 It is the application of learning, or the demonstration of the outcomes of that learning, that is assessed in order for that learning to be accredited for PQ Requirements.
- 3 The application of learning can be recognised irrespective of the context in which that learning has been achieved.
- 4 Submissions for APC/EL are open to the same rigour as claims via other routes within the NI PQ Framework.
- 5 Submissions for APC/EL are comparable to submissions via other routes within the NI PQ Framework in terms of the original effort afforded to the achievement of the learning now being presented. The submission must therefore be given recognition for the original effort and this should not have to be replicated or duplicated.
- 6 The entire APL process must be transparent to all stakeholders and be demonstrably rigorous and fair.

## Context of Learning

There can be a range of circumstances and situations where learning and development has been achieved. It is in this range that a flexible and inclusive approach can be applied. The following are examples of where accreditation of prior learning may be considered.

1. Learning that has been previously assessed and certificated by an academic and, or, other professional body, i.e. APCL

Where the assessment has taken place more than 5 years ago, the submission must address how the learning has been up-dated and remains current in its application.

Examples may include post graduate awards, masters and doctorates or higher level professional awards.

2. Learning that has occurred through experience and critical reflection, but was not part of a formal learning programme, i.e. APEL.

Where the experience has taken place more than 5 years ago, the submission must demonstrate validity, sufficiency, currency, authenticity and coherence and be of an appropriate level to the claim being made.

Examples of experiential learning and development are wide and varied and may include having been involved in the improvement or development of new provision, systems, structures or policies. Other examples may include having published material or articles, research or evaluation.

**In all of the above circumstances it is not just the experience of the activities alone, but more importantly, the achievement of learning or the outcome of that learning, that is being assessed.**

# **Standards/Arrangements for Accreditation of Prior Learning**

## **Structure, Governance and Quality Assurance**

1. A number of designated APL Assessors, as part of the Assessment Board and approved by the PQ Management Board, consider all APL submissions.
2. The locus of authority lies with the Assessment Board for making all decisions on submissions for APL.
3. Procedures for APL claims are in place and are demonstrably rigorous and fair and transparent to all stakeholders.
4. Quality Assurance and governance arrangements and processes apply to the Assessment Board and its arrangements and assessments.
5. An APL Advisory Group advises on issues arising from these arrangements.

## **Guidance and Support**

6. Employers provide an APL Adviser(s) to provide advice and guidance to applicants on submissions for APL.
7. Appropriate training and support is available to all staff involved in the APL process.
8. Guidance on APL standards, procedures and practices is available to candidates preparing for submission.
9. Assessment criteria is explicit to all.
10. Procedures for submissions, including timescales etc, is available to candidates.

## **Submission Process**

11. **To make an APL claim, candidates must be currently enrolled with NIPQETP for the NI PQ Framework.**
12. An APL claim can be made for any Requirement in any of the Awards within the NI PQ Framework.
13. The application of learning must be evidenced as valid to the appropriate level of the claim being made.
14. APL claims must relate to a specific Requirement/s and must satisfy all aspects of the Requirement; a claim can not be made for part of a Requirement.
15. APCL submissions must include the relevant certification and, where appropriate, other forms of evidence (e.g. course handbook and/or submitted course work) and be accompanied by an explanation of how the evidence meets the PQ Requirement.

Where assessment for the certificated learning has taken place more than 5 years ago, the submission must address the currency of the application of learning.

16. APEL claims must include evidence of learning and development that is authentic, valid and of a sufficient level to meet the specified PQ Requirement/s and be accompanied by an appropriate explanation of how this evidence meets the PQ Requirement.

In addition, where the learning achieved has taken place more than 5 years ago, the submission must address the currency of the application of that learning.

17. A range of presentation formats is available and the most appropriate selected dependent on the type of the APL submission.

Examples include:

- Portfolio of evidence;
- A focused interview or viva;
- A completed piece of work and a reflective account of learning achieved

## **Assessment Process**

18. Decisions regarding the accreditation of prior learning are a matter of professional judgement made by the PQ Assessment Board.
19. Assessment by the Assessment Board must be consistent and be able to be flexible in recognising themes being presented and linked to Requirements.
20. A range of assessment methods is available and the most appropriate selected, dependent on the type of the APL submission.

21. The Assessment Board designates a number of Assessors who have or will have specific training and expertise in APL assessment. All APL submissions are allocated amongst these Assessors as part of the normal assessment arrangements.

## **Outcomes**

22. NIPQETP has in place arrangements to respond to demand for APL.
23. The PQ Database is able to meet the demands of assessing and awarding APL achievement.
24. APL achievement is be clearly identified on the Candidate's transcript providing as much detail as is given in instances of achievement by other routes.

## **Key Documents**

1. The Post Qualifying Framework for Northern Ireland – NISCC
2. The Standards For Accreditation of Post Qualifying Education and Training in Northern Ireland - NISCC
3. University of Ulster Policy on Accreditation of Prior Learning (2006)
4. QAA Guidelines on the Accreditation of Prior Learning (Sept 2004)

## Glossary of Terms

Accreditation: the process of identification, assessment and formal acknowledgement of prior learning and achievement.

Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL): a process for assessing and, as appropriate, recognising, prior experiential learning or prior certificated learning for recognition within the professional NI PQ Framework. This recognition may enable attainment of Requirements within a specified Professional Award and contribute towards the completion of the Award.

The term ‘accreditation of prior learning’ is used here to encapsulate the range of activity and approaches used formally to acknowledge and establish publicly that some reasonably substantial and significant element of learning has taken place. Such learning may have been recognised previously by an education provider; described as ‘prior certificated learning’, or it may have been achieved by reflecting upon experiences outside the formal education and training systems; described as ‘prior experiential learning’.

Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning (APCL): a process through which previously assessed and certificated learning is considered and, as appropriate, recognised for professional purposes.

Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL): a process, through which learning achieved outside education or training systems, is assessed and, as appropriate, recognised for professional purposes.

Advanced Standing: is a broad term associated with admission where applicants are deemed to have met the requisite outcomes to enable them to commence the Award at an advanced stage.

APL Adviser: person with subject expertise to provide advice and guidance to applicants.

Authenticity: the evidence should clearly relate to the applicant’s own effort and achievements.

Credit: is an educational currency which provides a measure of learning achieved at a given level.

Currency: the evidence should relate to current learning. Current is defined as within 5 years.

Exemptions: is the awarding of academic credit against specific outcomes on a modular basis.

Level: the standard of achievement reached on completion of the specified outcomes for which accreditation is being claimed.

Sufficiency: there should be sufficient written evidence to demonstrate fully the achievement of the learning being claimed.

Validity: there should be a clear and transparent link between the learning being evidenced and the PQ Requirements against which recognition is being sought.