UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

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ACCREDITATION OF PRIOR (EXPERIENTIAL) LEARNING:
GUIDANCE FOR ADMISSIONS TUTORS TO
POSTGRADUATE AND CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Earlier this session the Senate approved, in principle, the implementation of procedures for accrediting a person's prior learning or experience for either admissions purposes or admission with credit. The full documents relating to this can be accessed at web address:
http://www.marketing.bham.ac.uk/admissions/apl-introduction.htm
1.2. Adopting the principles and procedures for accrediting prior learning will be a useful tool in widening access to the University for people with non-standard qualifications or experience. The purpose of the procedure is to assess the abilities and potential of the student against stated entry criteria, and to grant entry or, where appropriate, entry with credit (thus allowing exemptions from particular parts of a programme).
1.3. The terms used in this document are:

Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) and Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL). Where both are being discussed simultaneously they will be referred to as AP(E)L.

APL is the assessment of traditional study or course-based learning and qualifications of an applicant: the focus is on assessing their level of knowledge. The process may show that the person has a level of knowledge and relevant skills appropriate for admission to the programme. In some cases it may be apparent that the applicant has a level of knowledge which extends beyond entry level, in which case it may be appropriate to allow credit exemption from a single module, a range of modules or a whole level of a programme. The process of APL will only be required where the applicant is offering qualifications other than the traditional entry routes, or wishes to transfer from another institution or programme internally. In this case an applicant may hold professional qualifications, or have completed components of a higher education programme here or elsewhere.
APEL is the recognition of learning other than that from a taught course. APEL requires a judgement to be made about the level of knowledge and skills acquired through life, work experience (paid or unpaid) and study and their appropriateness for entry to a programme. It is likely that most applicants will wish to use APEL for entry purposes, although it is possible to allow APEL for credit and exemption from part of courses where appropriate. Although less easy to use than traditional entry qualifications, experiential learning can be assessed using existing national guidelines on skills and levels of learning and internal tests or, in some schools, a specifically written module
1.4. There is already much experience of non-standard entry and allowing entry with credit (previously known as Advanced Standing) around the University. A credit transfer scheme has been operational as part of a national scheme in Education for some time. Admissions Tutors and Programme Co-ordinators have been carrying out these processes informally for many years and will have built up knowledge and experience of what is appropriate for entry to their programmes and what is not. They will also know that non-standard applicants often present a mixture of qualification and experience which cannot neatly be separated into APL and APEL. Although it is not intended that the procedures should be used for every admissions case (for example, when there is experience of admitting applicants with particular non-standard qualifications or backgrounds), many applicants are now seeking a more formal assessment of their qualifications and experience and require a credit value to be placed against them to allow transfer of credit both into and out of the institution. Many will ask specifically for AP(E)L and it is important that we have a procedure in place. It is hoped that these notes will help describe what should be done.
1.5. Support will be provided by Admissions in the Academic Office and advice can be sought from James Barker, Admissions Administrator, in the first instance.
It is hoped that some training and information sessions will be provided on this issue for admissions tutors in due course.

2. IDENTIFYING APPLICANTS FOR AP(E)L

2.1. Dealing with enquiries before application
The availability of an AP(E)L procedure will be advertised in the postgraduate prospectus, and staff of the Admissions Liaison and International Office and Admissions Section of SS&A will mention the procedure, when appropriate, to enquirers.
Enquiries will be directed to the Admissions Administrator who will describe the type of evidence that will need to be provided, give out the web address of available programme and entry requirement descriptions and give general advice. The intention will be to give the enquirer sufficient information to decide whether to proceed with an application. In some instances the enquirer may be put in touch with

an Admissions Tutor, or other person designated as AP(E)L contact, for further discussion before a formal application is made.
Enquiries received directly in a School should be directed to the Admissions Administrator, although an Admissions Tutor or AP(E)L co-ordinator may also like to begin the dialogue with the prospective applicant at this stage.
2.2. When applications are received
A flow chart (pdf. format) of the process is attached.
Applicants likely to be appropriate for the AP(E)L procedure will fall into two categories:

- those with non-standard or very few qualifications seeking admission;
- those seeking entry to years other than the first, either with standard qualifications or non-standard qualifications. Regulations allow for entry into each year of a programme, although in practice it is unusual to allow entry to the final year of a three or four year programme. It is possible to grant credit for (and therefore grant exemption from) up to two-thirds of a programme.

The Admissions Office will make an initial assessment of the form as usual and will highlight any relevant information for the attention of the Admissions Tutor. Where an applicant states that they would like to be considered for AP(E)L on their application, Admissions will send the applicant person information on the type of evidence they will need to provide and a form to complete (the Guidance for Students on AP(E)L leaflet). Admissions will make a note on the application form accordingly. A copy of the form will be passed to the Admissions Administrator.
The Admissions Tutor receives the form and is free to contact the applicant if they wish. If the applicant appears to be a likely candidate for AP(E)L but has not specifically requested it, the Admissions Administrator will discuss with the Admissions Tutor whether to ask the applicant if they would like to go through the process of AP(E)L.

3. DEALING WITH AN AP(E)L APPLICATION

3.1 The completed AP(E)L form will be sent to the Admissions Administrator in the first instance. It will then be discussed with the Admissions Tutor, and it may be possible to make a decision at this point. It should be clear from the completed AP(E)L form whether the applicant is wishing us to assess their qualifications only (APL), their experience only (APEL) or a mixture of the two and whether they are seeking admission only, or admission with credit.
3.2 Where confirmation of awards are required from the awarding institution, or it is clear that more information is required from the applicant, the Admissions Administrator will seek this as appropriate.
If considered necessary, it is also appropriate to ask the applicant to submit to assessment in any, or a mixture of, the following:

- a review of transcripts, syllabi, references
- a portfolio of evidence
- attendance at an interview
- a simulation /practical exercise
- a diagnostic test(s)
- a piece of work or special assignment
- an artefact

3.3 Some applicants will require a lot of support in providing appropriate evidence, particularly where compilation of a portfolio of evidence is required. Where this is the case, a charge will be made to the applicant [charge to be determined] and they will be asked to provide their evidence within a given timescale. Help and guidance will be provided to the applicant on the compilation of a portfolio by the Admissions Administrator. He will use available sources of information, including entry requirement descriptions, programme and module descriptions. Where a programme is not modularised, e.g. research, the Admissions Administrator and Admissions Tutor will need to discuss what might be appropriate.

4 ASSESSING THE EVIDENCE

4.1 For an APL claim, confirmation of awards, transcripts and syllabi will be passed to the Admissions

Tutor for a decision on their appropriateness for entry or entry with credit.
4.2 For an APEL claim, the completed portfolio will be passed to the Admissions Tutor for a final assessment and decision against entry criteria (required knowledge and skills) for admission purposes and against module descriptors for credit (if appropriate). However, in a case where an Admissions Tutor has assisted the applicant in producing the portfolio, an alternative designated person must be used in making a judgement.
4.3 The evidence to be provided by an applicant within a portfolio will include:

Transcripts

Syllabi

References

A curriculum vitae

Descriptions of experience which illustrate their knowledge and which can be compared against entry criteria or module descriptions

In assessing evidence, an Admissions Tutor should look for:

Relevance - A judgement should be made as to whether this evidence is valid in this context.

Authenticity - The evidence should be clearly related to the student's own efforts and validated by appropriate independent means.

Sufficiency - A judgement on whether there is sufficient evidence to demonstrate fully the achievement of the outcome claimed.

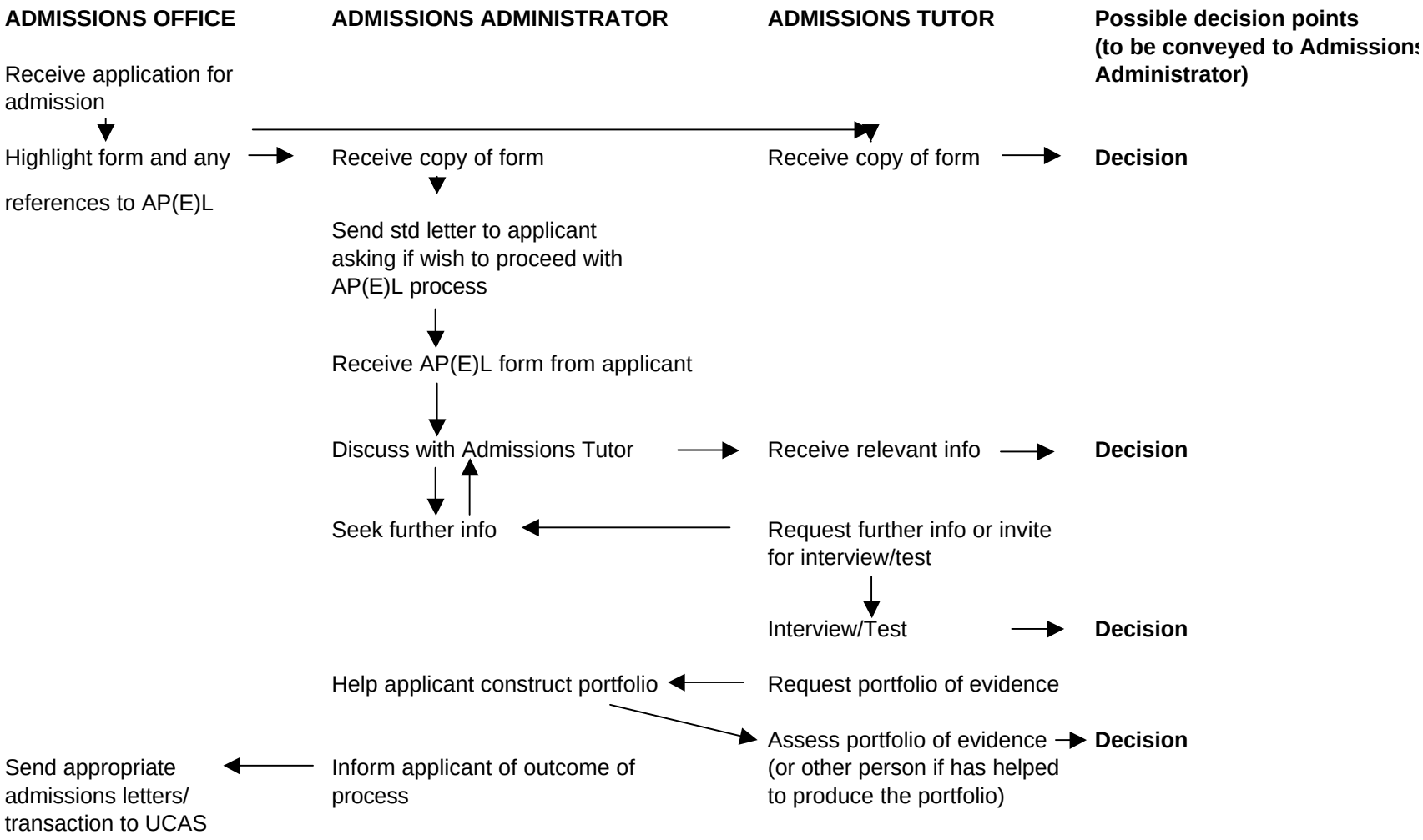
Level – A judgement should be made as to the level of achievement and whether it is of a level to allow progression to the programme being applied for.

Currency - Some subjects quickly become out of date. An Admissions Tutor should have a clear idea of what is current and what is not in their subject area. It is suggested that the currency of learning will not normally be greater than five years.

4.4 Decisions must be forwarded to the Admissions Administrator. Where credit is to be granted, the particular modules (or whole level of a programme) must be identified. A decision/calculation will then be made of the level of fee exemption to be allowed.

5 INFORMING THE APPLICANT

The applicant will receive a letter from Admissions stating the outcome of their claim for AP(E)L. Where it is felt that the applicant cannot be accepted for entry, for instance, if there is insufficient evidence in a portfolio, they should be allowed the chance to provide further evidence (if time permits, bearing in mind start dates of programmes). Where it is clear that the reason for rejection is lack of relevant skills and knowledge, information should be provided on how they might acquire such appropriate skills and knowledge, e.g. an alternative course of study, further work experience.
Offers of admission may be unconditional or conditional on producing further information or taking a particular qualification/test.
Where admission with credit is to be allowed, a clear statement of the parts of the programme for which credit is being granted will be made, including the modules/programme level to be exempted.
Admission processes will then proceed as usual.

D P Chambers
August 2000

ACCREDITATION OF PRIOR (EXPERIENTIAL) LEARNING: PROCESS