

## Using Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) to Support Refugee Access Into Higher Education and Employment

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*I saved my body, now I need to save my mind.- Arya, refugee from Afghanistan*

### Introduction

When people flee persecution in their own country to seek a safe haven elsewhere they are primarily concerned with the bare facts of survival but what do refugees bring with them and how can host countries help them unlock their potential and become active citizens? This paper<sup>1</sup> looks at how APEL can be used to help refugee professionals, experienced workers and graduates assess their own capabilities in relation to opportunities in higher education and the UK labour market. The specialist APEL<sup>2</sup> programme delivered by the Refugee Assessment and Guidance Unit at London Metropolitan University is highlighted as an example of good practice in the field of refugee education and an example of how to tackle through education the multiple barriers faced by refugees.

### Refugee Skills

Although statistical data on refugees is scarce it has now been established that a large percentage of refugees who come to this country bring with them a range of positive attributes including professional and academic qualifications, employment experience and technical, clerical and trade skills. A recent report based on a survey of 2,000 newly arrived refugees found that 67% had been in employment in their country, 37% came from professional or managerial backgrounds and 30% held qualifications (Kirk, 2004). Another survey using data from 400 respondents found that 56% had formal qualifications with 23% at degree level or higher (Bloch, 2004). While more research needs to be undertaken in this area we can assume that there are a large number of refugees who possess levels of skills, knowledge and experience that should enable them to enter appropriate higher study or employment in the UK.

However, most refugees suffer unemployment or under-employment disproportionately. Two reports put the figure of refugees in employment at 27% (Carey-Wood, 1995) and 29% (Bloch, 2002) compared to 60% for other ethnic minority communities. When they are employed it is usually in temporary or part-time jobs at unsocial hours and on significantly lower wages than other groups (Bloch, 2004). The government has stated that employment is a key factor in the integration of refugees into the host community (Home Office, 2004) and the enrolment of refugees onto university courses also contributes to widening participation strategies in HE.

## **Barriers to progression**

The barriers facing refugees have been well-documented with a high degree of agreement in a range of surveys and reports. The following areas are particularly relevant in this context.

*Language* - Bloch highlights the fact that low language skills keep people in low paid jobs either in their own community or where language proficiency is not required (Bloch, 2004). In both instances the individual is isolated from native speakers and unlikely to develop fluency. Wagner identifies lack of language skills as a barrier to finding work commensurate with refugees' previous learning and experience that also prevents individuals from accessing vital information (Wagner, 2004).

*Non-recognition of qualifications* – Qualifications gained overseas can be assessed by the National Academic Recognition Information Centre (NARIC). They provide a certificate which shows what the qualification is equivalent to in UK terms. Although not an official document, this assessment is widely used as a guide by universities and employers. In most cases, degrees from refugee-producing countries are regarded as being below the level of a UK degree and therefore those wishing to progress academically and professionally have to go through a re-qualification process. In addition, many refugees flee their country without documents and have no proof of the educational or vocational qualifications they have gained.

*Lack of UK work experience* – Refugees are caught in a catch 22 situation when trying to meet the criteria for employment. Most UK employers regard experience in this country as a pre-requisite for employing someone. Without this, refugees need to find other ways of gaining experience in the workplace environment. Long periods spent outside training or employment can also lead to de-skilling and loss of knowledge gained from years of employment in their countries of origin.

*Psychological* – All refugees suffer from some degree of psychological trauma as a result of their forced migration. Loss of income, status, friends and family combined with loss of nationality and cultural context can lead to varying degrees of mental

health problems. Many will also have witnessed terrible scenes in countries that are experiencing war, oppression or famine or have direct experience of torture, abuse or imprisonment.

*Cultural* - In education there are issues of access, methodology and assessment that usually differ considerably from systems and practices in their own country. In employment the overwhelming focus on the individual and the ability to sell oneself are new concepts that many refugees find difficult to absorb. Also important is the area of equal opportunities, both in terms of the individual's rights under the law and their responsibilities in a workplace environment.

*Social* - Mishandled dispersal policies, lack of political leadership and widespread misrepresentation of asylum issues by the media often create a hostile and racist atmosphere into which refugees are placed. Verbal abuse is commonplace occasionally leading to physical attacks and even murder. Outside the major metropolitan areas refugees can feel isolated from the wider community with few support networks available to help them integrate.

The combination of some or all of these experiences can lead to physical and mental health problems or, at least, a severe drop in self-confidence and self-esteem.

## **AP(E)L for refugees**

The AP(E)L programme developed and delivered by the Refugee Assessment and Guidance Unit [RAGU] at London Metropolitan University is an attempt at providing an integrated approach to tackling the major barriers identified above. This programme draws on methods developed in mainstream AP(E)L but tailors them to the particular needs of refugee professionals including reflection on past experiences and identification of learning outcomes. The following elements link together to provide an integrated programme of support:

- Portfolio Building (*see appendix*)
- Communication skills
- Personal development
- Information on higher education: Access and funding
- Preparation for entry into the labour market
- Information and Communication Technology
- Advice and guidance
- Portfolio writing tutorials

## **Portfolio Building**

The core of the course is the creation of a portfolio of experience that provides evidence of skills, knowledge and personal qualities. Most refugees flee their countries of origin in haste and with few belongings, including university certificates

and other evidence of academic and professional ability. Writing the portfolio provides students with the opportunity to re-visit their own pasts and re-construct their experience in a focused and meaningful way. The completed document stands as a record of their own learning that can be used in a variety of situations including writing applications, attending interviews and seeking recognition for entry onto university courses. Students are encouraged to look not only at positive experiences from education and employment but also to examine the negative and often painful experiences they have had to face. Many choose to include a 'Life Experiences' section in their portfolio where they can identify the skills they gained from a range of situations including imprisonment and war. It is important to stress though that this is the students choice and not a necessary section in the portfolio.

The concept of writing a portfolio will be totally new to most students particularly when it comes to describing what they have learnt and reactions to the process vary from student to student. Some wholeheartedly embrace the concept and immediately see its value and relevance to their situation. Others find it difficult to accept the validity and value of this model of teaching and learning and this can be compounded by feelings of bitterness at the situation they find themselves in. Over the course, feelings and attitudes can, and usually do, change and students who have completed the programme successfully often comment how it has helped them subsequently.

During the course students undertake research projects in areas such as employment in the UK, equal opportunities or the British HE system. Some of these tasks are done individually, but others involve working as part of a team. When a task has been completed, students reflect on the experience, evaluate the task and their performance, and disseminate the information they have researched back to the class. Group exercises and the open discussion of cultural attitudes, beliefs and value systems encourage trust and co-operation between students. This mutual support and sharing of experience is a crucial element in establishing a constructive learning environment.

*“The course helped me to make decisions about my future and know about opportunities available to me here. By estimating my skills and abilities through the course, I have a clear idea of where I am now, where I am going and how I will get there”. - Valentina, APEL student*

## **Providing support for refugee learners**

RAGU aim to provide a safe and empowering environment in which refugees can learn, reflect and plan for the future. This means developing close relationships with students that continue after courses have finished and can last a number of years. In order to provide the necessary support, students are assigned an advisor who will see them for education and career advice and guidance for as long as they need it.

These one-to-one sessions are an integral part of the programme and provide students with the opportunity to focus on their own action plans and future needs. In addition, students on the AP(E)L programme receive individual tutorials to help them through the portfolio writing process. Taken together these elements enable students not only to achieve the 'hard' outcomes of assignments, places on a degree course or relevant employment but also 'soft' outcomes such as increased self-confidence and cultural awareness. Without the tailored training, support and guidance that AP(E)L provides individuals can waste years pursuing unrealistic goals or making misinformed decisions.

## Notes

1. A longer version of this paper appears in 'Towards a global understanding of lifelong learning' FACE Annual Conference proceedings 2005
2. **AP(E)L** includes both APL and APEL assessment. **APL** is for learning that has been done in a formal situation such as a school, college, university or training organisation. **APEL** is for learning gained informally through experience. This experience could be from professional practice, work experience or voluntary work. Equally, experiential learning can occur through hobbies, interests or sports. For refugee students this would also include learning from life experiences such as political or trade union activity, military service, war, prison or life in exile.

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### Portfolio Building for the purposes of AP(E)L

#### *Experiential Learning*

Although the AP(E)L course contains some traditional teaching the programme emphasises experiential learning. This involves learning by actually doing things and reflecting on the experience of doing them. Thus, during the course students are given tasks in areas such as jobsearch, equal opportunities or the British HE system. Some of these tasks will be done individually, but others will involve teamworking. When a task has been completed, students will reflect on the experiences involved in doing the task, evaluate the task and their performance, and report this evaluation to the rest of the class as feedback.

The course enables students to produce evidence of two kinds of learning:

- *Prior Learning* -- this is learning that has been done in a formal situation such as a school, college, university or training organisation.
- *Prior Experiential Learning* -- this is learning gained informally through experience. This experience could be from professional practice, work experience or voluntary work. Equally, experiential learning can occur through hobbies, interests or sports. Similarly, such learning can take place as a result of life experiences such as parenthood, political or trade union activity, military service, or being a refugee.

One important aspect of AP(E)L is that it recognises all of the following:

- *Skills* -- these could be subject-specific skills such as IT (computing) skills, design skills, engineering skills or management skills. Alternatively, they could be transferable skills teamworking, problem-solving or communication skills, for instance.
- *Knowledge* -- for example, knowledge of such subjects as Biology, History or Economics.
- *Understanding* -- such as the ability to analyse, interpret or evaluate information.
- *Achievements* -- these could be projects, exhibitions, prizes or publications which are the work of the student or a group, team or organisation in which the student has participated.

AP(E)L will consider learning irrespective of whatever country the learning took place in, or whatever language was the medium of learning. Thus, AP(E)L is an educational process which enables students to make the best use of what they have learned in both formal and informal settings. AP(E)L recognises the principle of lifelong learning; it can be used to gain entry into British HE institutions, or to gain exemption from or credit for parts of courses in HE. For example, a refugee with a degree in engineering from their home country could use AP(E)L to gain exemption from having to do a year or more of an engineering degree at a British institution. AP(E)L can be useful to a student's jobsearch, or in preparing for employment in the UK.

## The Process

As you work on the course you should find that remembering your past experiences and reflecting on them will help you to recognise your personal strengths and deepen your knowledge of yourself. Further, when combined with sessions on Labour Market Preparation, the British HE system, and Equal Opportunities, the APEL process will help you to 'find your way' through the maze of education, training and employment options available in the UK, and re-orientate yourself within British society. APEL should enable you to identify career paths which you could follow and put together an effective action plan that will enable you to do so.

The APEL process aims to help students develop themselves personally and professionally via *reflection*. This process of reflection on your life experiences and achievements is central to the APEL programme; reflection involves looking back at these experiences and achievements stage by stage, "revisiting" them in your mind. This will take time: it is important that you think carefully about your present situation and both the positive and the negative events of your life and evaluate them. By reflecting in this way you should better understand what you have learned formally and informally, and how different experiences have contributed to your learning.

Reflection should help you to:

- understand what you have learned in a wide range of situations, both positive and negative
- recognise your strengths and weaknesses
- clarify your plans for the future
- decide what steps you need to take to make these plans a reality  
build your self-confidence

This handbook will discuss reflection at greater length further on, focusing on how to evaluate learning from past experience and how to describe that learning in order to gain access to HE or gain credit for, or exemption from, parts of HE courses.

## The Assignments

In order to complete the course successfully, you must complete four assignments, which are assessed internally (by RAGU staff) and externally (by an examiner from another university). The 'products' practice and develop the kind of personal skills and advanced English language communication skills that you will need in order to succeed in HE or in employment in the UK. These products are:

- a portfolio -- this is a dossier that you compile which gives details of your *prior* and *experiential* learning, and your reflections on your life experience. The portfolio also contains a CV and copies of certificates and other evidence to back up your claims to learning. The portfolio has to be word processed and written in good formal English -- you will be given English language and IT support to enable you to complete the course. The taught part of the APEL course lasts for twelve weeks; after that you have a further three months in which to complete your portfolio. Although you should have an outline

of your APEL portfolio by the end of the twelve teaching weeks, most of the actual writing of the portfolio should take place in the three months which follow, this is to ensure that *reflection* on your past experience has taken place. During this time you will continue to have access to the university's IT facilities, the RAGU and UNL libraries, and you will have one-to-one tutorials with your APEL trainers who will help you to plan, prepare and edit your portfolio.

- an **individual presentation** -- you give a formal presentation about yourself to an audience of people you know (classmates, course tutors, etc.) and people you don't know (the external examiner and other guests). The presentation has to show evidence of effective communication skills in formal spoken English, presentation skills and reflection. The individual presentation takes place at the end of the course.
- a **group presentation** -- this presentation is given by a group of three to five students of which you are a member, based on a short research project which is related to an aspect of the APEL course such as the British HE system or equal opportunities. The make up of the audience is similar to that of the audience of the individual presentation. The presentation has to show evidence of effective presentation skills, research and team work. The group presentation takes place at the end of the course.
- A report of your group presentation

### *Portfolio Building*

The AP(E)L portfolio contains two main parts:

- A written account of the student's learning, which is completed after a period of careful reflection.
- Whatever evidence that the student wants to include in the portfolio to back up his or her claims of skills, experience, knowledge or competence.

The layout of the portfolio is as follows:

#### *The Contents Page*

This is set out in a clear and logical manner, and is divided into sections and sub-sections. The contents page functions as an index to the portfolio's contents. Thus, thinking about the structure of the contents page is one of the first exercises that the student will complete as preparation for writing up the portfolio.

#### *The CV*

In the UK and in many other countries the Curriculum Vitae (CV) is an essential document for people seeking work. It is a summary, usually not more than one or two pages long, of your personal details, qualifications and experience. Writing CVs is covered in the Labour Market Preparation sessions.

#### *The Written Account*

The written account has three main parts:

- An introduction which gives an outline of your aims and objectives in putting the portfolio together.

- A main body which sets out your knowledge, skills and experience in detail.
- A conclusion which summarises the contents of the written account, and which may give some indication of your medium and long-term plans.

This forms the main body of the portfolio. It is an extended piece of writing on your life experience in the following fields:

- *Experience gained in employment.* This includes professional practice and any other paid employment that you feel will be useful to mention.
- *Experience gained in voluntary work.* This can be voluntary work undertaken in your home country, such as working for an NGO, political, environmental or trades union work, or voluntary work done anywhere else, including the UK.
- *Education and Training.* This includes all education from schools, colleges and universities. Also relevant here are vocational training, training at work or at voluntary work, and training that took place during military service.
- *Life Experience.* This section includes any life experience that you feel has contributed to your learning, such as experience derived from being a parent or carer, it could also relate to experiences related to being a refugee, such as: civil war, imprisonment, separation from family or friends, or re-building their life in a strange country as a refugee.
- *Hobbies, Interests and Sports:* these are analysed for useful transferable skills.

When writing up their portfolios, students are encouraged to reflect on their personal attributes, such as patience, friendliness, or being a hard worker, and their transferable skills such as problem solving and teamworking as well as technical knowledge, skills and abilities related to their profession. In this way, the student is able to build up a fuller, more engaging self-image. Giving "the whole picture" projects the impression of someone who is flexible enough to work in a variety of contexts.

### *Flexibility*

These categories of experience gained in employment, experience gained in voluntary work, and so forth, are not obligatory for students, rather they are a guide to what should go in the portfolio. For instance, the heading "Professional Practice" might be more appropriate for a senior manager or academic with two decades experience than the more work-a-day "work experience". Students do not have to write something for every category. Likewise, students can, in consultation with their tutors, add extra categories of experience. Similarly, the order of in which the categories appear and their relative length are entirely up to the student.

### *The Evidence*

Two main types of evidence can be included in the AP(E)L portfolio:

- **Indirect Evidence:** this is what others write about you.
- **Direct Evidence:** this is evidence that you have produced.

### *Indirect Evidence*

Indirect Evidence may include the following:

- Certificates from universities, schools, colleges and other bodies.
- References from employers, colleagues, teachers, business partners, and others.
- Articles from newspapers, magazines and journals about you or that describe work in which you participated.
- Curricula, programmes of training and other events that you have organised.

### *Direct Evidence*

Direct Evidence might include:

- Reports written by you.
- Articles for newspapers, magazines or journals written by you.
- Essays, dissertations or theses written by you.
- Samples of artwork, photography or IT work that you have produced.
- Plans, diagrams, or blueprints made by you.

There are many other examples of direct and indirect evidence, and students are encouraged to approach the gathering of evidence in as imaginative way as possible. Evidence can be from any country where the student has lived or worked, and translations, transcripts or abstracts of written work can be used if that is appropriate. Photographic evidence of work is particularly relevant to students interested in fields such as architecture, art and design, fashion, technical drawing or photography. Video evidence or evidence on floppy-disc or CD-ROM is also useful.

### **Validity of Evidence**

Evidence must be:

- *Relevant* -- any evidence presented in the portfolio should be clearly related to the aims and objectives written in the portfolio's introduction.
- *Current* -- -- this will depend on your subject area. In some areas such as IT or Medicine, up-to-date knowledge is essential
- *Sufficient* -- evidence should supply sufficient information on your knowledge, skills and experience without being too long. Abstracts and summaries should be used instead of full-length dissertations, articles and essays.
- *Authentic* -- it should be clear that the evidence relates to you, it should have your name on it and an explanation of how the evidence relates to you in the written account. Evidence from universities and colleges must bear the institution's official stamp, and have your name written clearly in Latin letters on all certificates. Translations of certificates should be verified by another person. For uncertified evidence generated in the UK, you should try to obtain a witness statement from a manager or supervisor to verify the skills, knowledge or experience being claimed.