

Credit Where Credit is Due. Innovative Teaching Within the Applied Professional Studies Suite of Programmes

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Introduction

This paper will discuss teaching and learning in the programme Applied Professional Studies (APS). While there is nothing particularly new about the pedagogic principles discussed, it is rare that such market-led, student-centric and flexible approaches have been incorporated into one programme. This paper sheds light on APS, how it is structured, run and assessed with a special emphasis on the use of flexibility through learning contracts and student designed learning outcomes and the use of APEL, that together gives credit to students to know their own learning needs, to devise their own programme and to be given credit for what they know already.

The need

Applied Professional Studies was instituted in response to a number of factors which bear on the higher education curriculum. Central among these was the Leitch (2006) review which targeted 45% of the population to be qualified to higher education level by 2020 with changes in funding that demanded that all growth be linked to work with employers (Leitch 2006).

Although none of this is new at the University of Greenwich (Humphries et al. were exploring these issues in relation to healthcare education in 1994), it is fairly safe to say that very few institutions are offering programmes built upon these principles and with the flexibility and autonomy offered to students that APS offers. In a 'post-grand narrative' age of uncertainty, the aim of APS is to help produce members of society capable of reflecting on their lives and connections, making well informed decisions concerning their needs and human development, and having an effect on the processes that shape them as individuals and society in general.

This respect for the individual learner's autonomy in APS engenders independence in that learner. Central to all the learning undertaken on the programme is the harnessing of the mature student's often already developed reflective skills. Reflective processes are built into all of the APS programme courses/modules and the process of reflection and development gives a rationale for assessment and progression (Quinn 1994). The aim is to produce 'critically' reflective practitioners. The APS

record shows that it is able, over time, to produce effective independent, critically reflective problem solvers, who are able to research, find and evaluate information for application in their working environment and even to develop their role, and to help shape general practices and policy.

Flexibility

Therefore the first 'innovative' step by APS was to fully and centrally engage the employer and student in devising their programmes of learning. APS is part-time to enable it to be fully work-based, and delivered at times (through tutorials) that suit the student and employer together. The learning to be undertaken is also to be negotiated between the student and the university (usually with the help of the employer). This flexibility is further enhanced by allowing credit accumulation through short modules, the accreditation of prior experiential and credited learning and the progression to future awards.

APS is offered at foundation degree level, with a 'top-up' progression to BA/BSc. It also offers a Master's degree. All levels feature the ability for the student to design their own degree through a learning contract negotiated with the university and their employer (if the latter is involved in paying the fee). Thus 'credit' is given to the student (with guidance) to be able to ascertain and argue for the skills and knowledge that they need to be assessed in and which are often uniquely suited to their role, and career and personal aspirations.

Learning contracts

Central to this level of flexibility is the use of learning plans or contracts, incorporating student/tutor/ employer negotiated learning objectives, both at the programme level and the individual course/ module level. Though learning contracts are by no means a new thing, the use of them to this extent is not general practice. Traditional degrees (with a vocational focus), to a large extent, still use the 'empty vessel' approach. This is where flexibility at the most might mean the student's ability to choose some courses as options or electives on top of a core of 'essential' courses but where the content and the learning is researched, devised and prescribed by the 'teacher'. What is innovative here is the centrality of the student and the employer in deciding what needs to be learned, how it is to be learned and how proof of learning is to be presented.

At the programme level, the learning plan is the only compulsory aspect of APS at foundation and master's levels. At each level, the student is expected to set out their overall aims for the programme and their learning objectives for the level. The role of the tutor at this stage is to guide the student and employer and to help them to express their learning objectives in a language that can demonstrate the learning and its level and how it fits in to their overall aims and to ensure it meets the academic requisites of the institution. It is also to ensure that they can provide a rationale for the methods that will be employed to achieve them, such as undertaking work-based projects, making APEL claims, undergoing 'taught' courses/modules or even undertaking a course/module elsewhere.

An example of such a plan might be the Level 1 student who is a teaching assistant and wishes to acquire a degree so that later they might become a qualified teacher. Their plan will set out to build on their existing qualifications and experience (including that in the classroom); accumulate new subject expertise (through taking modules elsewhere in the university or through independent research) and the development of a set of appropriate higher education skills such as research and/or communications.

APS offers a number of options, or 'building blocks', that can be used to construct each level of the programme. Students can accumulate their credits by:

- Undertaking projects or similar work-based courses. Projects are devised through negotiating a 'project level' learning contract (proposal) that clearly states an aim and learning outcomes
- Producing a claim for the accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) which demonstrates appropriate learning at a graduate level (also employing learning outcomes means of enabling assessment)
- Undertaking a taught course offered elsewhere in the university (or other institution).

As with all programme design, the student must demonstrate 'alignment', in that the aims and objectives for the programme are in line with their and their employer's requirements, and that the learning proposed is appropriate to their stated aims and objectives for the programme. Likewise, the aims and objectives for individual projects and other courses should be in line with one or some of the programme outcomes. The role of the tutor is to guide the student in this task of 'mapping' out their programme through their learning outcomes; something that on a more traditional programme would be carried out by the programme team.

Using learning outcomes for assessing learning and progression

An integral part of the design of the programme learning contract, and the learning contracts for work-based projects and other APS courses/modules, are the learning outcomes or objectives. Students are coached through this by means of tutorials. They are encouraged to look at the level descriptors for APS and then to construct (with help) their learning outcomes using appropriate terms for that level. This means that the necessary level achievement is articulated and these outcomes can then be used (alongside level orientated marking criteria) to assess the work on completion.

Learning outcomes are set out within the concept of what Hall (1994) calls 'general' as opposed to 'specific' credit. Specific credit is orientated around the subject or profession-specific notions of what constitutes learning. General credit is based on learning descriptors which set out to embrace the whole of higher education; in effect to define 'graduateness' and what it is made up of. Once these general level definitions are agreed then learners are free to reflect on, and to develop, their own learning outcomes within them. As Hall (1991: 24) says, "Credit can be given for any learning that falls within the definitions."

The achievement of these outcomes in the project can be graded through the use of the level orientated marking criteria. The criteria aid the graded assessment of the work's focus (on its learning objectives), through its use of academic language, to its integration of theory and practice. In other words, it provides a framework for judging how well the learning outcomes are academically achieved. This process is important to the overall ethos of APS, as the object and context of the learning remain the property of the student while it can also be graded and assessed with academic rigour.

A project which utilises these principles might be the Level 3 student who is a pastoral worker in a secondary school which does not have an anti-bullying strategy. The project might consist of undertaking research into the nature and causes of bullying, the identification of a number of

possible strategies which have been used in other institutions and the production of a specific proposal for the student's own institution. The student should be able to set out in advance what learning will be achieved through this activity. The tutor is able to judge in advance whether these will meet the institution's level criteria and, at the end of the project, assess whether these have been achieved and at what grade.

Accreditation of prior experiential learning

The accreditation of prior experiential learning (AiPEL) is another central feature of APS. APS recognises that, unlike many students entering higher education from secondary schools, mature students in professional work have gained a lot of graduate level skills and therefore seeks to give credit for this. The ethos is one of 'not re-inventing the wheel'. If students, with some tutorage, can express their learning in an academic way, then it can be given university credit. This is usually done through a commentary, supported by relevant 'theoretical perspectives', on a portfolio of experiential evidence (Quinn 1994: 25) which demonstrates the achievement of learning outcomes.

An example might be the Master's level student who is a senior manager in a charity and who had introduced a new health and safety policy. The student should be able to describe the activity and articulate what they learned from so doing. Such learning is likely to embrace such fields as management (achievement of change, meeting legislative needs and organisational theory), social science (achieving cultural change, the psychology of health and safety) and project management (planning, sequencing and monitoring). The tutor is able to judge the extent to which such learning is proven and meets the institution's level criteria.

Referral to experts for marking

One other aspect of maintaining academic rigour in the assessment of APS students is the facility to refer students' work to subject specialists. Occasionally this need may arise if the tutor responsible for marking a student's work feels that it is too far outside their area of expertise to be confident in marking it alone. To this extent, APS has on its staff, or associated with the programme, academics from a range of backgrounds who still practice in their original field. This, along with the external examining system, serves to instil an academic parity of standards.

Conclusion

Higher education is changing – the old model of the lecturer as the 'keeper of knowledge' is in decline while the demand for customised education grows. APS embodies a growing acceptance in crediting employers and learners with the ability to know their own learning requirements and aims to help them in expressing their needs and objectives and in designing their own tailored programme. It also recognises that credit can be given for experience and expertise that a mature professional accumulates and for 'graduateness'. The innovative use of programme level and module level learning contracts and marking criteria means that credit can be given with confidence for learning at higher education level for learning directly related to the student's needs and ambitions.

References

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