

The impact of the SEEC Credit Level Descriptors: case studies

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SEEC publishes the widely-used SEEC Credit Level Descriptors (revised and reissued in 2016). In this publication we showcase the impact of the Descriptors in developing innovative qualification pathways in five universities and two professional bodies.

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About SEEC

SEEC is a membership consortium of universities and HE providers working to foster the creation of learning opportunity through the use of academic credit. Our formal purpose is ‘to advance education for the public benefit by developing credit accumulation and transfer and promoting lifelong learning, at the higher education level’. Since our formation in 1985, we have served as a reference point on credit-based learning, structures and processes in the UK and in the developing field of European credit.

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The use of the SEEC Level Descriptors in the development of the Leeds Trinity University Work-Based Learning Framework

By Emeritus Professor Jonathan Garnett and Professor Ruth Helyer (Leeds Trinity University)

Introduction

Leeds Trinity University (LTU) has a long tradition of professional education. The LTU WBL Framework (WBLF) was designed using the SEEC Level descriptors to provide the University with a strategic approach to employer responsive provision.

The LTU WBLF

The LTU WBLF comprises a stock of work-based learning modules which can be used to construct programmes leading to all the main qualifications of the University from undergraduate Certificate through to Masters degree. The use of the SEEC level descriptors was a key enabler in the development of modules at all HE levels within five broad strands of learning activity:

1. **Learning Review:** these modules are available at Levels 4,5,6 and 7 and facilitate a review to establish the knowledge/skills the learner brings to the programme. The SEEC level descriptors provided the key benchmark not only to differentiate between the module across all the levels it is offered at but also to calibrate the level of claims for general academic credit made by students undertaking the module.
2. **Planning Personal and Professional Development:** these modules are available at levels 4,5,6 and 7 to enable learners to develop action plans for continued personal and professional development. As well as ensuring differentiation between planning modules at different levels the SEEC level descriptors also provide a key reference point to determine the level of academic work proposed in a programme plan where this does not exactly correspond to an existing university module.
3. **Designing Practitioner Research:** these modules are available at levels 4,5,6 and 7 to introduce learners to practitioner research approaches that they will use in a work-based project. The SEEC level descriptors provided a key reference point to ensure differentiation between the different level of modules.
4. **Negotiated Learning:** these modules allow learners to undertake negotiated learning on a topic which is related to their work. The WBLF provides shell negotiated modules for work at levels 4, 5, 6 and 7. Level differentiation is assured by reference to the SEEC level descriptors.
5. **Work-Based Project:** these modules allow learners to undertake projects directly related to their work. The WBLF provides shell project modules for work at levels 4, 5, 6 and 7. In WBL programmes it is often the work-based project that is the main mechanism for providing tangible outcomes of direct potential benefit to the employer or other stakeholder. Level differentiation is assured by reference to the SEEC level descriptors.

Using the LTU WBLF to meet the requirements of Degree Apprenticeships

A major use of the LTU WBLF has been to facilitate the development of Degree Apprenticeships customized to the needs of specific employers. Apprenticeships are a good example of how WBL can map against HE learning descriptors (at level) as apprentices continuously learn from doing their jobs, progressively becoming more sophisticated in their application of knowledge and skills, and learning new things all the time.

Degree Apprenticeships are based on an accepted 'standard', created by sector experts for use within their own sector and validated and published by the Government. The HE level learning integrated within each standard ensures that apprentices become adept and competent at Level 6 in all of the knowledges, skills and behaviours (KSBs) required within their particular apprenticeship programme, and therefore expert in their job role. By using the SEEC descriptors in the original creation of the WBLF the University has ensured that the framework's modules offer an excellent tool for mapping this achievement.

The WBLF is built around predominantly 'empty' modules giving it the ability to adapt quickly and easily to many different job roles and work scenarios. This is mostly because the framework and its proponents embrace the learning that is actually happening in the workplace, rather than requiring the apprentices to attend university formal session more often than they would be realistically able. Instead the framework is validated to foster facilitation rather than mere transference of facts. By using clear reference to level descriptors the WBLF tutors and the apprentices can work together to make clear and evidenced claims for learning in appropriate areas and at the required level.

Apprentices therefore become adept in their use and understanding of how HE credit works and this is vital to their progress as they often undertake several large modules and/or work-based projects, rather than the more traditional 20 credit modules, for example, where they would be very guided. They are required to take responsibility for showing how their workplace learning is fulfilling the module, and programme outcomes. Obviously, they are helped and guided through this process but they still become experts in how their award is put together.

Conclusion

At a time when Higher Education institutions continue to come under pressure to demonstrate the value of what they do, the "relevance and flexibility" of degree courses has become a central point of concern. Higher education institutions are increasingly required to respond flexibly and rapidly to labour market changes and to work in partnership with employers or collaboratively with other providers of high level learning in order to meet the learning and development needs of organizations as well as individual learners. A common understanding and definition of academic level is at the very core of the capability to develop and deploy this flexibility while retaining control of academic standards.

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Developing the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) using SEEC Level Descriptors

By Helen Pokorny and Stephen Fox (University Campus St Albans, Oaklands College, St Albans)

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Summary

This case study is located within University Campus St Albans (UCSA), a joint venture between a University and a College of Further Education, with an explicit mission to promote part-time education. It provides a review and evaluation of the successful development of an undergraduate programme in leadership and professional development, BA (Hons) Leadership and Professional Development, two-thirds of which is awarded through the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), thus reducing the cost to the learners. The process described in the case study uses SEEC level descriptors to design the RPL process. This form of RPL process has also been developed to provide an accelerated route to the Chartered Management Degree Apprenticeship (CMDA) for experienced managers.

Motivation and aims

Our motivation was to provide formal recognition of experienced learners' extensive prior learning by providing an accelerated degree route, thus also saving the learners' time and money. This cost reduction is important as many part-time students are self-funding. Figures from the Higher Education Statistics Agency show that part-time student numbers in England have fallen by 56% since 2010 with the most rapid decline taking place after the government raised the cap on part-time fees to £6,750 per year in 2012, doubling or tripling the cost of many courses (Fazackerley, 2017). Consequently, our first aim was to provide a route that would enable all learners to gain the maximum formal Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) permissible within the University's regulations i.e. 2/3 of their undergraduate award (240 credits).

This led to our second aim which was to have a cohort approach to RPL design. RPL has its roots in the widening participation and social justice initiatives of the early 1990s but has not achieved mainstream status in the UK, despite most universities having RPL processes enshrined within their regulatory framework. When investigating this lack of take-up, Harris (2000) observed that the onus was on the RPL student to take the initiative and to negotiate a process she described as a lone one. This would still hold true for many students attempting to access this process in universities today. The view of the isolated learner is at odds with the thrust in contemporary higher education which is to develop sustainable learning communities with a strong sense of belonging and to promote feedback environments rich in peer dialogue (Boud and Molloy, 2013).

What we did

The University which validates UCSA awards has an established, but little used, Flexible Credit Framework (FCF) which includes a detailed RPL quality assurance process. This process has at its heart the SEEC level descriptors (SEEC, 2016) which facilitate the award of credit at both

undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The process requires an RPL applicant to provide a narrative account of their learning with supporting evidence which is directly mapped to the SEEC level descriptors. In this way learners can draw on a range of learning contexts and individualise their applications. It is a process which requires close mentoring and guidance, which is generally done on an individual basis. It also demands of the learner a measure of independence and confidence in the articulation and demonstration of learning which can be off-putting. The numbers of applicants accessing this process annually is small.

We were clear that providing a rich feedback environment was key to making the RPL process both welcoming and transparent, thus opening it out to greater numbers of applicants. The RPL workshop process we designed provides for the development of a strong sense of learner identity as a knowledgeable person as opposed to a novice learner. It supports Whittaker et al (2006) who argue that RPL has the potential to alter social identities in a transformative sense through the recognition participants get from others as well as from assessors. This sense of belonging and transformation was achieved through the development of the RPL tasks set and feedback activities provided which allowed the tutors to deal with images of “otherness” in learners’ minds, of what being a student means (me/not like me). Most importantly for RPL, through the feedback rich, dialogic environment it was possible to create a community of learners developing together images of what knowledge is - and where it comes from. The focus of the sessions was on generating feedback from self-assessment, peer and tutor activities.

For the RPL curriculum design the SEEC descriptors are key. The University validation process requires that programme learning outcomes are developed using the SEEC Level Descriptors (2016) and these provided an overarching framework for the design of the taught programme and the RPL process. The programme itself has four 30-credit taught modules. The remainder of the credit is awarded through the RPL process. The SEEC level descriptors enabled us to design both a rigorous assessment process for quality assurance purposes and to design assessment tasks which were meaningful to the learners. Learning outcomes and level descriptors are abstracted from context and difficult for learners to work with. However using the SEEC level descriptors as benchmarks to design specific tasks that are related to the learner’s own context made the process concrete and accessible. The RPL assessment tool is the portfolio which has a number of pre-determined contents. These include documents which provide context and support the authenticity of the claim – a job description, curriculum vitae and employer reference for example. A written task and professional dialogue were mapped to the SEEC level 4 descriptors along with other contextual portfolio documentation. Further assessment tasks, called Areas of Learning were designed to meet the SEEC level 5 descriptors and to underpin the SEEC level 6 Programme Learning Outcomes. These tasks were themed in relation to leadership and professional development activities – managing change, stakeholder engagement, developing self and others, leadership challenges etc. They are supported by a small amount of carefully selected evidence. A final overarching piece of written work which draws on the learner’s current leadership challenge brings in relevant ideas, models and theories covered on the RPL short-course thus providing a bridge into SEEC level 6 academic work. The RPL short-course comprises four one-day workshops across a four-month period. This process is now well established and has seen a number of successful cohorts of graduates since its inception in 2014 (Pokorny, Fox and Griffiths, 2017).

Successes and lessons learnt

This approach to RPL has worked extremely well. We have recruited a steady stream of learners on a cohort basis. They have worked hard and enjoyed the RPL process, going on to achieve excellent results. The majority of learners gain First Class or Upper Second Class degrees and non-completion is very rare. The RPL process has also been adapted for other courses in Construction, Business and for the Chartered Manager Degree Apprenticeship.

The main challenge in delivering the process is to meet the demand in terms of skilled facilitators. RPL cannot be taught. It has to be facilitated by tutors who understand the nature of learning from experience and how to support mature learners in the demonstration of this learning. It is a very different from the facilitation of novice learners and requires a respect for and a sophisticated approach to understanding mature learners; and the process by which experience can be translated into academic learning for credit.

There are also significant funding challenges. RPL requires tutor guidance and support, assessment and a full quality assurance processes. However it is excluded from part-time student loan funding and from Apprenticeship Degree funding.

A video in which learners' share their experience of the RPL process can be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OfX2_cWa2AM

Scalability and transferability

The process of RPL described above has been designed to be scalable and transferable across HE disciplinary contexts. It takes around two months to develop a specific RPL programme. Each cohort of learners attends four workshops over a four-month period. In addition to the workshop delivery for each cohort there are tutor feedback and assessment costs.

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Common language, common currency: how the College of Policing used the SEEC Descriptors and guidance in building a platform for Recognising Prior Experience and Learning

By Finbar Lillis (from an interview with Kathleen Harrison-Carroll, Professional Development Manager at the College of Policing)

Information for this case study comes from a recorded interview with Kathleen Harrison-Carroll, Professional Development Manager at the College of Policing (CoP). The interview focussed on the use of SEEC credit descriptors and SEEC guidance (SEEC2016) and their use in establishing the CoP Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) tools and guidance on the [‘Professional Development Platform’](#).

‘The SEEC credit descriptors gave us a simple to understand language... one which could be applied across a whole range of different roles in Policing.’ (Kathleen Harrison-Carroll)

The Professional Development Platform (PDP) (CoP, 2019), launched in April 2018, allows serving officers and staff to gain formal recognition for their learning achievements, resulting from both certificated and uncertificated police training and from experiential learning at work.

The potential of the Platform for use in Degree Apprenticeships was explored as part of a HEFCE funded project in 2018. The PDP RPL model has potential application for use in other sectors, as it appears to have overcome some of the common obstacles to operating a standardised RPL system across HEIs (Lillis 2018: 26 - 28). However, getting the Platform established was not straightforward. The CoP attempted to kick start a common RPL process and tools by seeking common agreement among 21 HEIs (in England and Wales) on the level and credit value of prior learning achieved through National Policing Curriculum Programmes (NPC). Only 4 HEIs responded with wide differences of view on level and credit value assigned by the CoP.

The CoP then adopted a different approach which proved more successful. Working with HEIs and Police Force representatives, the CoP used knowledge of professional practice and scrutiny of the SEEC credit descriptors, to identify 6 generic core skill areas of learning, recognisable to an officer of any rank, role or specialism:

- People Management
- Relationships
- Personal Effectiveness
- Decision Making
- Communication
- Knowledge and Understanding

These were aligned with the SEEC credit descriptors. The descriptor ‘setting’ anchors understanding of learning at each level (operation and degree of autonomy), with expectations of ‘knowledge and understanding’, ‘cognitive skills’, ‘performance and practice’, ‘personal and enabling skills’, applied to instances and examples of professional practice – helping to ground deliberations on level and credit, by exemplification.

Processes for assigning credit values followed SEEC guidance, using agreed reference points (CoP 2017).

The SEEC level descriptors ('simple and explicable' in the view of the CoP) enabled a mutually trusted discourse between practitioners and the academy – and introduced to Policing the common (and consistent) language of credit.

This shared language was:

- Accessible to and understood by serving police officers and staff, and once contextualised in their experience and practice, unlocked and revealed the value of their learning achievements at work.
- Shaped a common understanding of the value of experiential learning across police forces and HEIs – moving away from an individualised approach to RPL.
- Provided the language to build a structure for a new national framework which could help articulate 179 different roles in police forces; identify common and transferable learning; improve mobility within and across roles; and make explicit the value and currency of all learning and experience – formal and informal, in policing work practice.

The SEEC descriptors were essential for developing a common understanding of the value of cumulative achievements from uncertificated short course programmes and from certificated learning, prior to national standardisation of police officer initial training in 2006¹.

The PDP has used the SEEC descriptors to establish:

- A common understanding of the (RPL) value of national initial police training;
- A means for valuing and recognising the diversity of initial police training prior to 2006;
- And a process for recognising the value of previously unassessed learning outcomes (experiential or short course programmes).

From a Police Officer and staff member perspective, this helps them to identify and see that their learning achievements have a value, a currency, and can count as Higher Education achievements. This is incredibly important for self-confidence and motivation in the value of learning at and for work. This heralds the beginning of an understanding that there is a right to recognition for learning achievement, with a place for the Police Officer or staff member in the discourses that lead to that recognition.

Control of recognition of achievement discourses lies with education suppliers, funders and their intermediaries (Lillis 2016: 88-89). 'Learner entitlements' are granted by these interests and can be withdrawn by them. A *right* to a place in and conduct of the discourse of recognition of achievement changes the power relationship between these interests and the learner exercising these rights; the 'academy' then has to position itself to respond to an exercise of such rights, rather than delineate what they are prepared to offer. These rights do not exist yet. But one potential effect of the PDP over time, may be to encourage Police Officers to better understand the value of their experiential learning in gaining and expanding their competence. Establishing a right to recognition of that learning by the academy will

¹ From 2006, initial police learning became more consistent and formalised across most Forces.

come from Police Officers exercising their rights through negotiation, *inside* the discourses of recognition of their achievements, notwithstanding those interests which will act to limit and control those rights (Stott, Lillis 2018).

Motivations for engagement in RPL through the PDP have included:

- Using the RPL process to write a new CV, start a new career, move into new areas of HE learning;
- Reflecting on 'where I am now and where could I go from here', within and across Police services (Forces and Agencies);
- Enabling retired officers to gain credit for the experience of many years of service that is transferable into a qualification.

(CoP RPL workshop feedback January 2019)

Progression may enable access to Degree or Master's Degree Programmes with a 'Bridging Module' to develop the study skills needed for HE. Progression into the Police Constable Degree Apprenticeship and (to and from) the Police Community Support Officer Apprenticeship can be facilitated through RPL via the PDP.

HEIs both understand and accept the principles and language of the SEEC credit descriptors. This was crucial to building mutual trust and acceptance by the HEIs involved, of CoP objectives, developing shared processes and protocols and assuring HEIs that the processes leading to common agreements on credit and level were valid, reliable and conformed to QAA requirements and standards. *Minimum* credit values were agreed, rather than fixed values – for all forms of learning achievement accepted for RPL within the PDP. How HEIs award credit across (currently 116) HEI programmes will be monitored by the CoP, as use of RPL through the PDP is established. The CoP experience also shows how the SEEC descriptors provide HEIs with a language that employers (and employees) can trust and understand – crucial for HEIs looking for ways to connect to and speak with employers and their workforce.

The SEEC credit level descriptors:

- Enabled the CoP to identify and benchmark all aspects of higher-level learning in policing work with consistency and clarity.
- Provided a common language and access to the common currency of credit for policing work learning and opened up and widened access to higher education for people in police forces, operating in 179² different roles.
- Provided an essential resource for serving police officers and staff to gain professional status, aligned with the CoP Police Education Qualification Framework.
- Have aligned learning gained through professional practice with the learning expectations of higher education qualifications.

² There are many more roles in Police Services than 179; a variety of staff roles and other unique police specific roles.

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Using SEEC Credit Level Descriptors to support the accreditation of professional learning in the NHS: a case study

By Ruth Miller (Director of Programmes Accreditation, RPL and Work Based Learning - Middlesex University)

Ongoing professional development post-qualification is a requirement for all nurses to maintain their registration and meet the workforce development needs of the organisation (NMC 2019). In particular ongoing training is essential to provide a quality and safe service for patients that adheres to current NICE guidelines and Care Quality Commission (CQC) standards. Whereas in the past NHS Trusts may have sent nurses and allied health professionals to HEIs to gain post-qualifying modules in such areas as mentorship, preceptorship, and clinical specialisms, Trusts are increasingly undertaking such training in-house. Barts Health NHS Trust has its own training academy and states that '*Training and development are a crucial part of our work, and fundamental to securing our future workforce and developing a learning culture across our organisation.*' Through our Accreditation processes, Middlesex University is able to offer these Trusts formal recognition of the learning gained from these in-house training courses (Middlesex University 2018).

The SEEC level descriptors (SEEC 2016) provide benchmark indicators at levels 3-8 to underpin sound assessment decisions. These descriptors are routinely used in the Middlesex University accreditation process to help the Trusts develop clear learning outcomes and assessment criteria at the appropriate level, for each course for which they seek accreditation. Often these training courses are well established and the practice education team have already developed the content and learning activities to meet the learning need. However such courses don't always include assessment or where they do, in the case of a preceptorship course for example, it is in the form of a skill or competency checklist. Accreditation requires individual participants to be assessed to achieve the HE credits, so it is now essential that the learning outcomes are both explicit and able to be assessed at the required level.

A particularly useful feature of the SEEC level descriptors for the purpose of accrediting NHS workplace training is that they include a section on 'Setting' where the operational context and extent of autonomy and responsibility is articulated for the different levels 3-8. This helps the practice education team identify the most appropriate level for that particular course by considering the level the participants are actually operating at in their role e.g. the extent of autonomy, complexity, supervision or leadership. Operational context is something readily understood in the workplace, as opposed to academic levels that are not always as meaningful outside the university.

There is sometimes a misconception with our partners that HE accreditation will require the course to become more 'academic' and that it must be assessed through written essays. NHS workplace training is always applied to practice and the SEEC descriptors help the practice education team consider and specify both the knowledge and the particular skills that they want the participants to achieve. They have found the different type of descriptors (knowledge; cognitive skills; performance and practice; personal and enabling skills) that SEEC

have outlined for the different levels, very useful in articulating the emphasis for different types of courses. For example the learning outcomes for a level 7 Emergency Nursing Care course focussed on knowledge, understanding and performance whereas the learning outcomes of a level 7 Mentorship course focused more on practice and interpersonal skills.

Level 7 Emergency Nursing Care course example of a learning outcome:

- Critically analyse and synthesise advanced evidence-based knowledge of critical care nursing and incorporate new ideas into practice.

Level 7 Mentorship course example of a learning outcome:

- Demonstrate highly effective communication, facilitation and leadership qualities in your role as a mentor in supporting learning practice.

The SEEC descriptors are also used to help practice educators who are experienced trainers but not always experienced in assessment, to assess work at the appropriate level. They were recently used in a training session at Barts Health NHS trust to help practice educators differentiate between level 6 and level 7 work, something they told us they found quite difficult. The courses being discussed were for qualified nurses but due to the development of nurse education not all participants are graduates, so the courses are often offered at both level 6 and 7 to suit different learning requirements.

The practice educators undertook an activity comparing the descriptors for level 6 and 7 and identifying the key differences in what was expected. While they noted that both levels required a critical approach to the field of study and required reference to current best practice, they identified that level 7 required a higher level of specialised knowledge and research. Although participants at both levels needed to demonstrate how they operated in complex contexts, the extent of initiative, flexibility and originality expected was greater at level 7. Although both levels needed to demonstrate a level of autonomy and effective team working, they identified that level 7 required more consideration of the wider context and a greater extent of multi-professional working. At level 6 someone would be expected to demonstrate initiative and some leadership but they recognised that at level 7 there was an expectation of greater responsibility for managing issues and considering the impact of alternative courses of action. The practice educators found this level of detail really useful in making accurate and consistent assessment decisions and to help provide participants with developmental feedback.

In summary the SEEC descriptors have been used very effectively to support the accreditation of professional workplace training courses in the NHS. Practice educators have found the consideration of context and the articulation of both skills and knowledge for the various levels particularly useful to articulate the specific learning required for practice-based courses.

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The WBIS framework at the University of Chester

By Dr Jon Talbot (University of Chester)

Since 1998 the University of Chester has used its Work Based and Integrative Studies programme (WBIS) to meet the requirements of adult learners in the workplace. At the beginning there were 6 students: currently approximately 1200 are enrolled. WBIS is an example of a 'shell framework' – where subject is not pre-determined but negotiated between the learner and university. The student negotiates an award title to reflect the focus of their study such as 'BA Leadership in Health Services (WBIS)' or 'MA Urban Regeneration Practice (WBIS).' The programme or curriculum is described as the 'Student learning pathway' or simply 'Pathway' for short. Pathways can be created for individuals or cohorts depending upon the requirements of learners. They can be for full awards (Bachelor or Masters) or intermediate - such as a Professional Certificate, Professional Diploma or Postgraduate Certificate and Postgraduate Diploma. All awards are constructed within the framework of the European Qualification Framework (EQF). The United Kingdom is part of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) so that all awards are comparable with those elsewhere in the UK and all 49 participating nations. Learning is therefore modularised and credit rated with appropriate level descriptors.

The title of the award must be compatible with the professional context and practice of the learner. That is, it and the associated learning must be consistent with the professional role of the learner. The title must clearly convey to others the focus of both the work and formal study of the student. The title should not be confused with widely accepted terms used in more traditional programmes, especially those validated by professional bodies. In explaining how WBIS works we will assume the learner is an individual. In practice most students are in cohorts and their pathway is negotiated by a training organisation or company but this introduces an additional level of complexity so is not referred to here.

Following Registration the learner is allocated to a Personal Academic Tutor (PAT). The student/PAT relationship is an extremely close one so it is important the student is matched with an appropriate PAT. The first job of the PAT is to arrange a tutorial where the tutor and the student together discuss the background, current work role, aspirations and motivations of the learner. Most students begin their programme by registering for a module called '*Self Review and Negotiation of Learning*' which is similar to modules at the beginning of other shell programmes and fulfils a number of functions. Students review past learning achievements, assess their professional competence in their current and past roles and from this identify areas where they believe they require additional learning. From this they complete an Approved Studies Learning Agreement (ASLA) on a draft basis and return to the tutor before concluding agreement. The ASLA is a form of programme learning contract which identifies their learning pathway within WBIS and creates an award title. Part of the discussion with their PAT involves the identification of potential claims for past learning. Up to two thirds of a named award at the University can be obtained through what is called the Accreditation of Past Learning (APL).

The Self Review module comprises four elements of which three are assessed on a Pass/Fail basis only - a brief resume of learning of achievements, an annotated description of the learner's current role and a reasoned justification for the chosen pathway (the 'Pathway Rationale') along with the ASLA. The final element is a reflective review which introduces the learner to the principal pedagogic method used in WBIS - that of reflective learning. Students are invited to formally reflect on something in their professional experience using academic literature to inform and deepen their reflections. They are introduced to the literature on reflective learning and related topics such as experiential learning, self-directed learning, autonomous learning, situated learning, praxis and so on. They are also assisted by their PAT to use formal literature to develop fresh perspectives on lived experience. For example, a learner who has experienced difficulties at work because of office politics will be directed to literature which helps them analyse their experiences more formally. Students are able to negotiate their award – either full (Bachelors, Masters) or short (Professional Certificate/ Diploma, Postgraduate Certificate/Diploma) and can complete their studies by means of claims for past learning, current trans-disciplinary experiential learning (usually in the form of workplace projects) or complete 'taught' (i.e. subject) modules. They can complete modules created on the basis of demand or any module in the university, provided it is relevant and at the appropriate level.

An important feature of WBIS is the capacity to recognise past learning, identified during the facilitation of Self Review. Under University of Chester regulations it is possible to obtain up to two thirds of an award by this means, provided it is compatible with the focus of study and at the appropriate level. Past learning can be either formal, non-formal or informal. Formal learning comprises any current (i.e. obtained within the last five years) credit rated learning the student may have. The awarding of credit for past formal learning is known as the Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning (APCL). The awarding of APCL is a fairly straightforward process academically and procedurally so the student pays no fees.

Non-formal learning refers to planned, structured learning gained outside the formal educational system, whilst informal learning is best understood as unplanned and unstructured learning gained from direct experience, especially in the workplace and can include learning from structured, in-house training and development, unaccredited or non-NARIC recognised qualifications or other forms of structured learning such as completion of a programme of study on a MOOC. Informal learning is experiential - the day to day accumulation of learning which occurs incrementally over time. The awarding of credit for Non-formal and Informal learning is known as the Accreditation of Past Experiential Learning (APEL). Credit is awarded where the student can demonstrate informed (by the literature) reflective learning on the basis of demonstrable experience.

Professionalising sales and forging futures: integrated degree apprenticeship case study

By Paula Nottingham, Louise Sutton, Darryll Bravenboer, Faye Stevenson, David Williams and Ellie Phillip (Middlesex University)

Summary

This case study presents recent innovative practice for an integrated Degree Apprenticeship in Business to Business Sales that was designed in partnership with Middlesex University and Consalia Ltd. Based on a framework developed by the main Trailblazer group, the degree has collaborative programming that incorporates flexible work-based pedagogies (Nottingham, 2016) that add to the professionalisation of sales in the United Kingdom. This programming is a good example to other degree apprenticeships of what can be achieved through partnership. It uses concepts of professional competence and academic learning in sector specific qualifications that integrate apprenticeship standards with negotiated work-based tuition. The curriculum, as it was conceived, utilised the SEEC level descriptors (SEEC, 2016) which had been developed with workplace practice in mind. This model of practice can be used by others to design and deliver this important new route for UK higher education.

Introduction

New government policies have expanded the need for degree apprenticeships (DAs) in England. In answer to this call, the pioneering BSc (Hons) Professional Practice Business to Business Sales (B2B Sales) Degree Apprenticeship creates unique provision for work-based learners that supports negotiated study in the workplace and actively embeds learning that widens participation at university level for vocational learners.

The new DA is the result of the on-going collaboration between Middlesex University and Consalia Ltd. (leaders in professional sales education). At the start of the journey the Director of Consalia undertook a Professional Doctorate at Middlesex University that sought to contribute to the Professionalisation of Sales through the pursuit of organisational learning (Squire, 2009). Consalia subsequently became a founding member of the Association of Professional Sales (APS) as a pathway to formal recognition for sales professionals.

Aims

The integrated DA forges new ground for the sector by championing 'professional competence' (Lester and Bravenboer, 2016), developed through 'work-integrated' learning (Billett, 2009). The discipline of sales is underrepresented within the Academy and this model overcomes existing obstacles to become a front-runner in the field. Professionalising sales requires expanding our collaboration with employers who can provide the knowledge, skills, behaviours and values required for establishing professionals in this sector. While some professional bodies are offering apprenticeship models that separate degree learning from the apprenticeship assessment, we are offering an integrated approach to professional learning.

Activity

The partnership has pooled resources with goodwill and resilience to deliver an early prototype of the integrated DA model for the University. The programme leadership is shared between the University and Consalia which has led to new internal processes and bespoke pedagogies that have aligned the University's and Consalia's expertise for workplace coaching. The pedagogy for working with sales professionals has also benefitted from the long history of development with Middlesex University and Consalia (Critten, 2016a, Critten 2016b).

Results and achievements

Creating and maintaining an integrated DA in a key area of business has been challenging. Initial Trailblazer meetings with Employers and Universities demonstrated excellent collaborative practice but had to respond to changing directives from the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfA). The University validated the degree in November 2017 to coincide with the publication of the Apprenticeship Standard, however the Apprenticeship was only fully approved for delivery in June 2018.

Cohort 1 apprentices began their tuition as part of a non-integrated DA model, returning to the integrated DA their second year of study. Cohort 2, including apprentices from Royal Mail, British Telecom, Stannah, Whitbread, Hyster-Yale and Aon, has started directly on the integrated model. The newly established Centre for Apprenticeship and Skills at Middlesex has worked closely with Employers, Faculty and Professional Services to develop, implement, manage and support the broad range of DA requirements for delivering high quality apprenticeships. The Centre for Academic Practice Enhancement has been active in developing new online technologies (such as e-portfolios) to accommodate the requirements for delivery and reporting. Employers offer value-added resources and lead on mentoring/coaching initiatives and training events. Apprentices have made terrific pioneers for the degree and Apprenticeship Standard.

We have collectively achieved a dynamic new integrated model. Middlesex actively promotes the DA: <https://www.mdx.ac.uk/study-with-us/degree-apprenticeships> with Consalia providing sector leadership: <http://www.consalia.com/b2b-sales-apprenticeships-services/>. At the heart of this approach is our work-based pedagogy for professional competence, which the collaborative partnership has advanced.

Key achievements are:

1. Highly effective collaborative work with Employers through the Trailblazer group in the context of significant challenge (the IfA delays);
2. Collaborative development that has resulted in a model of workplace coaching that is specifically designed for degree apprenticeships;
3. Establishing sales as a graduate profession through the development of the degree apprenticeship working closely with APS;
4. Providing opportunities for learners employed in sales to access higher education and a vehicle for their ongoing professional career progression.

As the Business School designs and delivers more apprenticeships, the External Programmes team has been moulding existing processes to suit this programme and creating the framework for expanding provision. As a 'vocational route', the capacity to take on new students has been a stated aim of the University mission. The DA is a forerunner for corporate apprenticeships and the Apprenticeship Standard is now being used at other universities. The DA builds on the development in marketing education (Marcos-Cuevas et al., 2015) but in a new direction.

Business Development acknowledges that the DA is ground breaking for the sales sector. This is still a relatively new, and growing, development for vocational higher education. DAs are designed to propel young people into the world of work and fill high-level skills gaps by tailoring learning to specific business needs; they also support established staff in upskilling and being able to take on greater responsibility at work. The interest in the B2B Sales DA has been substantial and as people learn and progress the standards in Sales will certainly rise.

Consalia sees evidence that the work-based pedagogy for professional competencies is extending beyond the apprenticeship and apprentices into the work-place for all sales employees, showing both impact and transferability. The B2B Sales Professional Trailblazer Chair, previously Sales Director at Royal Mail, has publicly stated that the DA is transforming the sales culture and sales organisation in Royal Mail. Bringing in the apprentices, who are being trained in the latest, leading-edge tools and frameworks in sales, and are then reflecting on their benefit, in terms of their own productivity, the organisational goals and customer impact, has been a game-changer for the sales team. Knowledge transfer is taking place, subconsciously and consciously as the more established sales people facilitate new ways of working. Interest and support for the apprentices within the work-place is significant and reflection is becoming a more established practice with proven results.

Apprentices have a clear sense of progression in the role as they are constantly learning and improving; they feel valued due to the extensive training and support given. As our Student Voice Leader acknowledged:

'As a person, so far, I have gained so much confidence through the course, constantly venturing out of my comfort zone and bettering myself. I am excited for what the future holds within the course and excited to see what type of sales person I could be.'

Conclusion and looking forward

The programme has great potential with 40 apprentices now studying and working, and we celebrate this success with Consalia. Gaining educational and professional qualifications whilst getting experience will put the apprentices in a beneficial position for lifelong pursuits. Integrated DAs present a more cohesive environment for professional learning that can be transferred to other partnerships and institutions. We will use forums, such as UALL, to share with colleagues the new paradigms we have been exploring. Finally, we will continue to explore the flexible approaches to the e-portfolio and content management systems that incorporate the Employers' organisational goals as well as the behaviours and values of the workplace in a wider variety of disciplines and areas of professional practice.

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Professional standards and the use of SEEC Descriptors

By David Jenkins-Handy (International Compliance Association)

Introduction

The International Compliance Association (ICA) was founded in 2001 by Wilmington Plc, as a company limited by guarantee. ICA became a member of SEEC in 2012. ICA and International Compliance Training (ICT) have continued to work together over the development of qualifications, programmes of study, student guidance and CPD materials.

ICA has sought to align its qualifications with best practice standards, including SEEC's level descriptors.

1. Applying standards: using SEEC's level descriptors

To facilitate accessibility and understanding of the SEEC credit level descriptors (2016) for academic teams, examiners and content developers, ICA has undertaken a project to map the level descriptors visually and through providing indicative command words producing definitions associated with each level. The outcome is a tool to help assessors, content developers, and standards setters understand and deliver standards for compliance programmes, and the implications for assessment and awarding. This forms part of a package of work at ICA that contributes to the professionalisation of compliance officers, helping them develop the necessary skills, knowledge and behaviours to support their careers. The decision to base the visual image on diagrams representing Bloom's Taxonomy was predicated on the familiarity of internal staff, examiners, the teaching and educational development team, along with the broader group of L&D specialists in our client organisations, with the concepts found in Bloom.

The first step was to evaluate the SEEC level descriptors and how they aligned with other external standards for assessment and development purposes. The focus of this investigation was the QAA's framework for Higher Education (FHEQ) and the Scottish Qualification Authority's levels and credits represented in the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework.

What became immediately apparent was that, while the national occupational standards (NOS) are integral parts of the ICA approach to qualifications and on-programme content development, these standards are generic and not benchmarked to an academic level. SCQF descriptors could be used to support the use of NOS, as a lifelong learning framework by design, focused on the application of the framework's five characteristics...

While this is a useful model, it did not translate well into the understanding of assessment and training staff more familiar with the FHEQ. SEEC's level descriptors, on the other hand, are sufficiently delineated, which gives it utility in terms of ICA's own approach.

2. The project

The initial aspect of the project was to generate a visual mapping by level. Effectively, this meant leveraging Bloom with the descriptors making an alignment that is sufficiently close to make a meaningful association. In this case, a decision was made to align on the basis of testing associated with the level-characteristics identified in the descriptors.³

The logical transcription of assessment activities based upon SEEC's descriptors are to:

- generate test items where **setting**, in terms of requirements in operational contexts and for autonomy, becomes decreasingly predictable the higher the level
- assessment articulates **knowledge and understanding** that moves from awareness to increasing levels of comprehension the higher the level.
- assessment of **cognitive skills** (specifically, conceptualization and critical thinking, problem solving, research and enquiry, synthesis and creativity, and analysis and evaluation) is a fundamental attribute of testing competence of compliance practitioners at every level and in each role. the challenge for **performance and practice**, where testing is based on assessment tools (i.e. written assignments) involving scenarios, case studies, which reflect incidents in practical situations, concerns validity and authenticity. assessment methods vary and **personal and enabling skills** are more open to be tested by some methods, nonetheless, ICA's assignments dramatize skills through scenario testing.

The outcome of the model is a spreadsheet that covers levels 3 to 7 and has an array of indicative command words directly mapped against the SEEC level descriptors, but are also colour-coded to map against the diagrams based on Bloom.

3. The design

Considerations about the visual image, therefore, became crucial in linking Bloom's Taxonomy as a graphical representation of weighting test elements for different aspects of learning at a level, leveraging with both the SEEC level descriptors and the indicative command words generated to map the level (either in assessment design or, in a more limited way, in learning objectives and outcomes).

General research into the approach taken by a range of assessment bodies suggested that the weighting should reflect upon the nature of job roles, lending increasing focus on particular areas: for example, at level 4, generally professional qualifications in financial services environments are concentrated around practicalities. Effectively, this means a greater proportion of assessment should target application of knowledge and understanding.

This form of evaluation is the basis for the underlying approach to mapping each segment at each level. The practical application of the descriptors is found in the relationship between levels and definitions of command words.

³ At this point I must acknowledge that, lurking at the back of a pragmatic and sometimes impressionistic evaluation to make decisions about defining the margins of the segments in the diagrams, is Anderson's approach to cognition. Norman. H. Anderson, (1996), *A functional theory of cognition*, Hillsdale, N.J: L. Erlbaum Associates. Anderson proposed information integration theory (IIT), a cognitive theory that is primarily concerned with how an individual integrates information from two or more stimuli to derive a quantitative value (such as a boundary assessment or cut score).

Reviewing existing constructions of command words within professional bodies working in the financial services domain helped to formulate the indicative command words mapped to the SEEC level descriptors.⁴

4. Application

The tool has been used to support understanding of training and assessment content.

Evolution of the tool should enable a consistent approach to development work in all areas of awarding and content development. The strategy, going forward, integrates the tool's use so that it engages designers and developers, and guides tutors and learners in a way that informs individual's intellectual growth increasing organisations' intellectual capital.

⁴A variety of sources were assessed, but the Chartered Institute of Marketing (CIM), which utilises command words defined by levels, proved most useful in completing the exercise.

Using SEEC Descriptors to develop assessment rubrics and staff assessment literacies

By Kamilah Jooganah, Rodney Coombridge and Aaron Cooper (University of Reading, Centre for Quality Standards and Development)

The introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), national league tables and changes to the National Student Survey have brought employability sharply into focus as a key outcome for UK universities. Alongside developing the employability of their graduates, the introduction of subject-level TEF means there will be much greater scrutiny of the standards of Teaching and Learning provision. In response, one research-intensive university implemented eSubmission, Feedback and Grading (eSFG) across the majority of courses during the 18/19 academic year. This institution-wide approach will enable a 'consistently good assessment experience', but also recognises that additional improvements are needed to the practices surrounding assessment rubrics and course design, particularly how the full range of graduate attributes are embedded and assessed in the curricula.

In preparing for the transition to eSFG, a review of institutional practices indicated significant variation in staff understanding and use of assessment rubrics. In many of the cases where rubrics were utilised, it was observed that the marking criteria did not always reflect the level of the module, and subject knowledge tended to be prioritised over other desirable graduate attributes. This raised several challenges, including in relation to: (a) the validity of assessment design and marking practices; (b) course design and coherency, specifically the alignment (or lack thereof) between course and module learning outcomes, assessment criteria and the assessment; and (c) the achievement of the course level learning outcomes, particularly the graduate attributes. This situation can have negative consequences on student learning within and beyond university. To help address these challenges, a three-step heuristic was constructed by a team of Academic Developers in the University where this case study is situated.

Step 1: Establishing course level criteria and statements of performance at each level

The first step involves devising criteria based on course level learning outcomes. This course level criteria may include communication skills, cognitive abilities and team work. The SEEC level descriptors can be adapted to align with the course learning outcomes to inform the threshold statement of performance for each criterion and at each level.

Table 1: Course level criteria (snapshot)

Course criteria	Progression of achievement		
	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6
Criterion 1	Threshold statement of performance (informed by SEEC)	Threshold statement of performance (informed by SEEC)	Threshold statement of performance (informed by SEEC)
Criterion 2	Threshold statement of performance (informed by SEEC)	Threshold statement of performance (informed by SEEC)	Threshold statement of performance (informed by SEEC)

This first step has several benefits for ensuring coherence and alignment between the course learning outcomes, the generic criteria for the overall course, and the different levels of study within a course. This first step ensures that the pass threshold for each level is set using national benchmark indicators and there is clearly articulated progression across the levels for each criterion.

Step 2: Devising generic statements of performance across the institutional grade bands for each level

The second step involves taking the statement of performance for the criteria and using this to generate generic performance descriptors at each level. This process consists of articulating higher standards of performance from the pass threshold in line with the institutional grade bands. The performance descriptors for the fail grade bands are not included in this ‘snapshot’ but could be added and written in non-deficit language to aid student learning.

Table 2: Generic level performance statements (snapshot)

Course criteria	Generic performance standards for Level 5			
	1 st Excellent	2.1 Very good	2.2 Good	3 rd Pass threshold
Criterion 1	Statement of Performance	Statement of Performance	Statement of Performance	Threshold statement of performance (informed by SEEC)

Step 3: Contextualising generic level statements of performance to the module assessment task

The final stage involves selecting the appropriate criteria to be assessed by the module assessment task. It provides a crucial opportunity to ensure that the assessment criteria and assessment itself are aligned to the module learning outcomes. This step also requires the customisation of the generic descriptions of performance to the specific context of the assessment brief. Working in partnership with students can aid this process and help ensure the rubric is inclusive and accessible.

Table 3: Task specific performance statements (snapshot)

Course and module criteria	Task specific performance standards for Level 5 module			
	1 st Excellent	2.1 Very good	2.2 Good	3 rd Pass threshold
Criterion 1	Contextualised statement of performance	Contextualised statement of performance	Contextualised statement of performance	Contextualised statement of performance

Using the heuristic to develop staff assessment literacies

The heuristic has been used to support staff in designing their assessment rubrics and build staff and students' assessment literacies. Through drawing on the SEEC level descriptors staff can enhance the rigour applied to their marking practices, as the heuristic can be used as a reflective tool to help ensure that marking criteria, and even assessment design, are aligned to the appropriate module level.

The heuristic is designed to provide a course level perspective to the design of module assessment rubrics, however, it can be adapted and used in a number of settings such as in one-to-one staff developmental conversations, workshops with course teams undergoing programme review, and even to stimulate dialogue between staff and students on rubrics and assessment.

Courses that are in the process of undergoing programme review have found the heuristic useful in considering how curricula design supports the scaffolding of student learning across the levels of study. This can strengthen course coherence and the narrative communicated to students around course level progression and their learning of the course and module learning outcomes, thus enhancing the student experience through assessment. The heuristic, supported by the SEEC descriptors, also helps course teams to more clearly reference the full range of graduate attributes, encompassing more than subject knowledge, by including, for example, personal and enabling skills which are important to developing students' self-regulatory and interpersonal skills as well as their professional identities. This reconfiguration in conceptualising the narrative of a course can take time, especially in a research-intensive university, where sector and institutional policy discourse around quality assurance standards and employability can seem alien, and even at odds, with the academic identities of some staff members.