Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning (RPEL) on Entry to STEM Degree Apprenticeship Programmes at the Open University: Challenges and Opportunities

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Brief background/context to research

Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning (RPEL) can help bridge the gap between what has already been learned in the workplace prior to applying for a degree apprenticeship and what is required for accreditation.

Questions arise regarding how RPEL is offered, and whether there is sufficient incentive and support for apprentices to consider an RPEL route.

- **Research question 1**: In the context of Higher Education (HE) what are the policy-level motivations and barriers when offering RPEL as a flexible entry route onto apprenticeship programmes?

- **Research question 2**: What are the opportunities and barriers for HE academic and academic-related staff when designing and implementing RPEL on apprenticeship programmes?

- **Research question 3**: What are the opportunities and challenges of RPEL from an apprentice perspective, on entry to HE programmes?
Practical stages of research
Case study - not prescriptive regarding specific methods to adopt. Case study is designed to understand subjective, lived experiences from a range of perspectives (Simons, 2009).

Methods used were both qualitative and quantitative but predominantly qualitative, with data collection via interviews, surveys and documentary review.

Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) employed in order to build a rich narrative from multiple perspectives. Codes developed, both inductively and deductively, to represent themes.
Research Question 1:
What are the policy-level motivations and barriers when offering RPEL as a flexible entry route onto apprenticeship programmes?

...we didn't have a mechanism in place to recognise prior experiential learning.

Valuing that the learning is of the same quality level as [apprentices] would study on the module.

But once people have realised that it's actually possible to do RPEL, then it seems the penny drops and it becomes a blindingly obvious, we ought to be doing this all of the time...

There has to be engagement with a wide range of stakeholders - faculty colleagues, apprenticeship programme delivery managers, credit transfer team.
Research Question 2:

What are the opportunities and barriers for HE academic and academic-related staff when designing and implementing RPEL on apprenticeship programmes?

We're trying to get them [apprentices] opportunities to minimise workload by aligning with what they're doing in the workplace.

I guess had a vague idea that it is an alternative to credit transfer really.

...need to make sure that the students who go through the RPEL routes, ...that we could justify that they've actually met all the learning outcomes or key skills.

So in terms of numeracy, programming and problem solving, and communication skills...the challenge there, was to cover all of that in the RPEL tasks in a way that would still be evident, evidence based, and at the same time be feasible to do.
Research question 3: What are the opportunities and challenges of RPEL from an apprentice perspective?

What are the uni looking for when you're applying? What would you be looking for experience wise?

So I just sort of had six months or so of extra time there, which was quite beneficial. Yeah. So concentrating on my other modules.

And then I was asked to fill it to do like, a few tests and to read some summaries of stuff. And because it was all Python based, I basically said there’s not much point with doing this. I don’t have any Python coding experience.
STEM stages of RPEL – draft flow chart
Stage 1 – after an initial discussion during onboarding about feasibility of RPEL, try a relatively quick self-assessment, the ‘are you ready for’ quiz, to indicate readiness for applying for RPEL against target module. Green light needed to proceed to stage 2.

Stage 2 – engage in a more in-depth, online quiz to assess knowledge of the key elements of the target module. 50% needed on this assessment to proceed to stage 3.

Stage 3 – three individual tasks (numeracy, programming/problem solving, and written/communication skills), portfolio-style, contained within the RPEL application form. All tasks must be completed - meet each individual learning outcome.
Initial conclusions relating to RPEL

Although fits in well with OU’s open entry policy, RPEL is not easy to implement, many people involved. HE programmes tend not to be designed to easily incorporate aspects of experiential learning.

For academics it is not easy to retrospectively align experiential learning to academic learning outcomes. The process can be time-consuming to assess.

For the apprentices it can be unclear regarding what exactly can count. Can be a significant commitment. Can help to reduce study commitments (90-credits a year on STEM apprenticeships in England/Wales, 120 credits in Scotland).
Thank You – Questions?

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Refs:
