

OAK HILL COLLEGE

ACCREDITATION OF PRIOR LEARNING

POLICY & PROCEDURE

2025-26

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1. INTRODUCTION

The **Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL)** is the process by which a student applies for and, if successful, is granted an exemption from some of the modules on their future programme of study, because an academic judgment has been made that they have already met most or all of the Learning Outcomes for that portion of their future Oak Hill College programme.

The aim of this policy is to outline the circumstances in which the College uses APL and its processes for applicants.

2. PRINCIPLES OF APL

The principles underpinning any APL request are as follows: applicants are seeking to be registered on an Oak Hill programme, leading to an award (such as a Diploma of Higher Education or a Bachelor of Arts degree). Each programme is designed to ensure that a series of Programme Learning Outcomes for each level in that programme are met before the award can be made. These Programme Learning Outcomes are set out in the programme's **Programme Specification** document. The student's receipt of the award will depend upon successful demonstration of these Programme Learning Outcomes having been achieved.

Each programme of study is a combination of compulsory and optional modules that, if passed, will allow the student to meet all the Programme Learning Outcomes for the award. In turn, each of these modules also has its own Module Learning Outcomes, set out in the relevant **Module Outlines**. The College's **Curriculum Mapping** documents indicate which modules on the pathway are deemed to meet which Programme Learning Outcomes.

Each assessment for APL judges whether an applicant has met the Learning Outcomes, at programme or module level, for that portion of the programme for which they are seeking exemption.

If approved, its recognition results in the award of a number of credits equal to the credit-weighting for each module from which they are being exempted, at the same level as those modules. Thus, the student is exempt from completing these requirements for the programme.

3. TYPES OF APL

There are two main types of APL:

Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning (APCL)

APCL is awarded when the student is judged to have met these Learning Outcomes by passing all or part of a course of study that was formally assessed and certificated by a higher education provider, thereby gaining credits at a specific level, as defined by the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ). Where APCL is approved, they will receive a number of ungraded credits equal to the credit-weighting of each module from which they are being exempted, at the same level as those modules.

Frameworks: in assessing the level and amount of credit achieved, the College will, wherever possible, refer to the UK's nationally-recognised reference points for higher education qualifications eg the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications of Degree-Awarding Bodies in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ), the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in Scotland (FQHEIS), etc. For international qualifications, it shall also, where appropriate and possible, use guidance from agencies such as the ENIC (European Network of Information Centres) and NARIC (National Academic Recognition Information Centres in the European Union) Networks.

Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL)

APEL is awarded when the student will have met these Learning Outcomes in other ways, perhaps through work, through private study, or through uncertificated training. The learning from the experience (not the experience itself) is awarded credit as a result of the APEL process.

APEL also includes the recognition of prior learning (such as a vocational course or an employment-based award) which may be at higher education level but which has not led to the award of credits or qualifications within a recognised UK higher education qualifications framework and so is outside the formal Higher Education setting.

In certain circumstances, an APEL application may be submitted where prior *certificated* learning is too old (see *Exhaustion of Credit* below) for the purposes of an APCL application. Applicants will be asked to describe the activities by which they have kept their learning current, and provide evidence that will allow an assessment of the quality of their current learning. If the certificated learning is only just out of currency, the additional evidence required can be correspondingly light.

There are a further two variations of APCL and APEL applications:

Direct Entry

Direct Entry is a special case of APCL, in which a student is granted exemption from the whole of Level 4 of a BA programme, and enters directly into Level 5. See more on Direct Entry below.

Taster Modules

In the event that the college offers Taster Modules in an academic year, a student may take a 'taster module' to help them decide whether to undertake full Common Awards study without being formally registered on a Common Awards programme. Where they take and successfully pass *one* 10- or 20-credit 'taster module', these credits and marks shall be added to their programme when they subsequently register for a Common Awards programme, or where he or she has taken a taster module but has not registered for a Common Awards programme until later in the academic year. Where a student takes *more than one* 10- or 20-credit 'taster modules', as the submitted assessments for these non-accredited modules will not have been ratified by the normal Common Awards assessments process, the student must make an APEL (not APCL) application to have that learning recognised in the Common Awards programme for which they subsequently register.

4. ADVANTAGES OF APL

The recognition of prior learning may be useful for applicants who:

- Wish to avoid repeating learning that they have already achieved elsewhere;
- Wish to 'top-up' an existing qualification to a higher award;
- Have exited a Higher Education award prior to completion and who now wish to count that learning towards another award;
- Individuals with prior work-based learning (certificated or non-certificated) looking for recognised credit for the learning towards an academic qualification.

5. GENERAL PRINCIPLES

1. Applications for the approval of APL shall be permitted for the following College Common Awards programmes:

- Certificate of Higher Education in Theology, Ministry and Mission
- Diploma of Higher Education in Theology, Ministry and Mission
- BA (Hons) in Theology, Ministry and Mission
- Postgraduate Certificate in Theology, Ministry and Mission
- Postgraduate Diploma in Theology, Ministry and Mission
- MA in Theology, Ministry and Mission
- MA in Contemporary Christian Leadership

2. The College's APL policy and processes shall be guided by Durham University's Detailed APL Guidance for Common Awards.
3. All applications for APL will be assessed in accordance with the College's admissions, programme and assessment regulations, on a case-by-case basis, that are current at the time of each APL application.
4. APL is awarded at the discretion of the College in accordance with the criteria in this Policy and as guided by Durham University.
5. Applications for APL may normally only be made during the Admissions process by applicants before they commence a College qualification, not once a student has commenced their studies at Oak Hill.
6. APL applicants must additionally meet the standard undergraduate or postgraduate entry criteria for the programme in question, as set out in the relevant programme specification and College Admissions Policy as available on the College's website.
7. Applicants shall be provided with full and transparent information on how to apply for APL, the evidence required in the application, the process timescales, the possible outcomes and the implications for their programme of study should APL be approved.
8. The College Admissions Officer shall provide support to applicants throughout an APL application.

9. Which learning outcomes?

An APL application will involve the student demonstrating either:

- that they have already met all, or nearly all, of the *Module Learning Outcomes* for each of the modules from which they wish to be exempted; or
- that they have already met all, or nearly all, of those *Programme Learning Outcomes*, at the appropriate Level, that would have been covered by the modules from which he or she wishes to be exempted.

In principle, an APL application shall focus on demonstrating that the applicant will still be able to meet all Programme Learning Outcomes required for the award that they are joining.

Thus, in the first instance, APL applicants will be encouraged to review the College's **Curriculum Mapping Table** (on the College website) that lists which modules are deemed to meet which Programme Learning Outcomes at each level of each programme offered by the College. In principle, they may simply look up which of the Programme Learning Outcomes for their whole pathway are met only in the modules from which they wish to be exempted, and ensure that just those Learning Outcomes are covered by their prior learning.

Where a single Programme Learning Outcome may be met by several modules in a pathway, and the contribution of each of those modules might be needed to secure the full breadth of the Outcome, it may be necessary for an applicant seeking exemption from one of those modules to demonstrate that their prior learning has covered that module's contribution to this Programme Learning Outcome, even though the Curriculum Mapping on its own makes that look unnecessary.

In some cases, the College may therefore advise that the module's contribution to the programme are better captured by focusing on the Module Learning Outcomes rather than by assessing exactly what a module's contribution is to the Programme Learning Outcomes.

In these instances, the College shall exercise academic judgment, based on its awareness of the carefully designed programmes and the cumulative development of skills, knowledge, experience and personal characteristics required for pastoral ministry. Each module will have its own contribution and the College shall ensure that an exemption from one of them will not disadvantage the student from acquiring the full breadth of knowledge.

On this basis the College shall advise the applicant on whether their application should list simply those Programme Learning Outcomes that on their pathway are only met by the modules from which they seek exemption, or a broader set of relevant Programme Learning Outcomes, or the Module Learning Outcomes for each of those modules.

10. The College shall ensure that students who are granted APL are left with a coherent programme of study, and one that makes sense for them at a level appropriate to them in the subject areas they will be studying. APL is a way of recognising existing work that a student has done, so that they can then build on it and progress from it. The modules that a student takes under Common Awards should therefore allow them to progress through their programme toward the highest level covered by it, both overall and within each major subject area. APL shall not be used as a means to allow a student who has already reached a higher level to gain an award by means of an arbitrary collection of modules at lower levels.
11. Decisions regarding the level and amount of credit shall be based only on demonstrable evidence of assessed learning outcomes, normally in the form of certificates and/or detailed programme information or a portfolio of assessments, provided at the time of the application.
12. Credit will not be awarded where no official documentation can be produced for the prior study/experience on the basis of which the exemption is being sought.
13. The College shall ensure that applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds or under-represented groups, or applicants with disabilities are given every opportunity and support to identify appropriate ways of demonstrating their prior learning.
14. Where an application for APL has been rejected, full reasons for the decision will be given to the applicant in the feedback in writing.
15. The College shall retain all APL records in accordance with its Privacy Notices.

6. SPECIFIC PRINCIPLES AND OUTCOMES

1. APL will result only in the award of credit towards a specific named qualification. The College will not give consideration for an award of 'general' credit that is not to be allocated towards a qualification.
2. APL credit will be ungraded i.e. no mark will be attached to the credits granted by APL. As such, APL credit will contribute to the satisfaction of the credit requirement criteria for a qualification, but will not contribute grades for the classification of an award.
3. APL shall be clearly recorded on a student's final transcript/diploma supplement as Accredited Prior Learning.
4. APL is not available for the Foundation Award.
5. The smallest unit for which exemption may be awarded is a whole module in its entirety; exemption may not be awarded for part of a module.

6. Maximum APL Permitted

The maximum number of APL credits that may be counted towards a qualification shall:

- Be normally one third of the total required for the qualification;
- comprise no more than 60 credits as APEL, and
- include no more than 40 credits at Level 5 and no more than 40 credits at Level 6.

Award	Total Programme Credits	Maximum APL Claim (APCL and APEL combined)
Foundation Award	60	Not permitted
Certificate of Higher Education	120	Normally one third i.e. 40 credits
Diploma of Higher Education	240	Normally one third i.e. 80 credits
BA (Hons)	360	Normally one third i.e. 120 credits
Postgraduate Certificate	60	Normally one third i.e. 20 credits
Postgraduate Diploma	120	Normally one third i.e. 40 credits
Master of Arts	180	Normally one third i.e. 60 credits

7. Within the totals set out above, APL credit may be awarded at any level. So, for instance, a student might be awarded 60 Level 4 credits and 20 Level 5 credits towards a Diploma.
8. APL may not be awarded to exempt students from a dissertation or major project (i.e. one worth 40 credits or more) or from a 20-credit Independent Learning Project. APL exemption may not be applied to the requirement for BA students to complete either a Dissertation, the Extended Project or a Level 6 Independent Learning Project.
9. APCL may be awarded only for studies that have been completed, and where the credit has been formally awarded by the institution.
10. The number of credits of exemption granted on the basis of an APCL request will be no greater than the number of credits that an applicant gained for the relevant work in their previous institution. For example, an applicant applying for a place on the Diploma applies for exemption from modules amounting to 80 credits, but submits evidence of a successful course of prior study for which they gained only 60 credits of certificated learning, they will be granted no more than 60 credits of exemption.
11. APCL may be given irrespective of whether the credits gained previously contributed to a final award or an exit award. In other words, it is possible to 're-use' credits that have already been used towards some other award.
12. For programmes primarily designed to run at a *single* level above Level 4 (the MA, PG Certificate and PG Diploma at Level 7), any APL granted should normally be at that level: e.g., only Level 7 APL can be used toward an MA, PG Certificate or PG Diploma. Exceptions to this may only be approved exceptionally by Durham University.
13. At the discretion of the College, APCL may be awarded despite the evidence showing a minor gap in the subject knowledge in the prior learning but where it is deemed that the subsequent higher level study will cover this gap. In these circumstances, the College will assure itself that the student is well prepared to take the higher level module.

14. Exhaustion of credit

Credit towards a new qualification should normally have been gained no more than five years before the APL application is submitted. For APCL, the duration will be measured from the point at which the relevant certificate/transcript was issued. For APEL, we measure from the point at which either the original learning took place, or the events or practices in which the applicant has demonstrated that they have kept that learning fresh, current and up-to-date.

15. Direct Entry

Where direct entry into Level 5 of the BA is requested, this will most often be approved where an applicant has already achieved 120 credits at Level 4 in Theology. This prior learning is likely to map well onto the Level of the Common Awards programme. However, the College will consider applications from applicants without a prior award in Theology at Level 4 or above, for Direct Entry into Level 5, if demonstrable evidence is provided to confirm their readiness for work at Level 5. Such applicants are likely to be students with a graduate or postgraduate qualification in any discipline and will have evidence demonstrating that they have met the 'key skills' associated with Level 4 of the BA. The evidence would also need to demonstrate, however, that their prior learning had prepared them to tackle the specific subject matter of the Common Awards programme at Level 5.

The core principles governing such applications for direct entry to Level 5 are the same as those governing any APL application. The College must be able to make an academic judgment, on the basis of the evidence available to it, that the student will be able by the end of the programme to meet all the Programme Learning Outcomes, and that they will not be disadvantaged in their ability to meet those outcomes by an exemption from the preparation for higher level study normally gained by students completing of Level 4 of the programme.

7. APPLICATION DOCUMENTATION

1. Applications for APL shall normally be made as a part of the College Admissions process prior to entry at the College. The College website shall provide full information on how an application may be made. An application for APL shall be made direct to the College Admissions Office.
2. Applicants who have completed study in Theology before and would like to be considered for APL, shall submit supporting evidence and information (listed below) to confirm prior learning as part of their application form. In the case of APEL applications, where possible, an example portfolio may be provided to help applicants compile an APEL claim.

3. Evidence for APCL Applications

An APCL application shall include the following information about the prior certificated Higher Education learning which is submitted for assessment of APCL:

- Modules studied, including levels¹ and credit weightings;
- Institution at which they were taken;
- Awarding/validating Institution (if different);
- Grades awarded;
- Dates of study (i.e. the date the relevant certificate/transcript was issued);
- Qualification(s) achieved;
- Programme Learning Outcomes and Module Learning Outcomes.

It is expected that this information will be provided in the following documents:

- Qualification certificate (if relevant);
- Qualification transcript/diploma supplement, and
- Module outlines/descriptions giving module content.

4. Evidence for APEL Applications

An APEL application shall include the following information about the vocational, employment-based or unaccredited prior training/learning which is submitted for assessment of APEL:

- Nature of the prior learning/employment/training;
- Organisation;
- When it happened;
- If it involved the study of modules/content;
- Learning aims (if relevant), and
- Any qualification(s) achieved (if relevant).

It is expected that this information will be provided in any or all of the following documents or equivalents, designed to allow the College to assess the breadth and depth of learning gained and demonstrated:

- a portfolio of existing pieces of work;
- new pieces of work, produced to the College's specification, designed to assess the breadth and depth of the prior learning;

¹ Levels within a higher education setting eg Framework for Higher Education Qualifications

- a structured interview with an appropriately qualified assessor to discuss the detail of the prior experience/learning on which the exemption request is based. The College would keep a note of the interview discussion;
- an assessment of performance, by an appropriately qualified assessor.;
- Training/learning handbook (if relevant);
- Any certification (if relevant), or
- Module outlines/descriptions (if relevant).

The College shall assure itself that:

- all the claims made in the APEL application are substantiated by evidence;
- all the evidence provided by the applicant is authentic; and
- the evidence relates to and demonstrates the applicant's personal efforts and attainments.

To achieve this, applicants may be asked to sign a declaration regarding the authenticity of evidence provided; to submit a detailed reflective account to provide assurance; or by corroborating or authenticating the claims and evidence by obtaining reports or references from objective sources such as employers.

Whilst reports or references from objective third parties such as employers may provide important corroboration of the evidence supplied in an APEL application, unless they record an *academic* judgment made by an appropriately qualified person in relation to the Learning Outcomes in question, at the appropriate academic level, their report will not replace the need for the College's APL Panel to make their own academic judgment of the student's learning.

5. Submission Deadlines

The deadlines by which full and complete APL applications should be submitted to the College Admissions Office shall be published on the College website.

6. APL Fees

No fee shall be payable to the College for the consideration of APL applications.

8. CONSIDERATION OF APL APPLICATIONS

1. Each APL application will be reviewed by the Academic Registrar in the first instance and may progress to be considered by a meeting of the College's APL Panel, acting as a sub-committee of the Teaching & Learning Committee. The Panel shall comprise the:

- Vice-Principal (Teaching & Learning);
- Assistant Manager (Teaching & Learning);
- Academic Registrar.

When required, the Panel will seek advice and guidance from other College academic staff regarding the level and content of the prior academic learning within the appropriate subject area.

2. The APL Panel will satisfy themselves that the:

- The Programme/Module Learning Outcomes which the applicant is claiming to have met in their prior learning are clearly expressed on the application;
- Evidence is valid, authentic and the work of the applicant;
- Evidence is adequate to make a judgement;
- The learning achievements have academic currency (normally obtained within the previous five years).

3. For each APL application, the College APL Panel shall assure itself that:

The evidence genuinely demonstrates that this applicant has a broadly similar level, scope and quality of learning in the appropriate areas to someone who has passed the relevant modules under Common Awards (even if the precise syllabus is different);

- the student will be able to cope with the proposed Common Awards study, even though they have been exempted from some of the preparation that other students will have done;
- absence from the relevant modules will not create any problems for the student's wider experience of study;
- the student's overall pathway will still have sufficient coherence;
- For APEL applications, the student's learning has truly been kept current, even if it formally falls within the five-year time limit;
- the evidence supplied is sufficient to allow these judgments to be made with reasonable confidence.

4. The outcomes of the APL application – whether successful or not - shall be communicated to the applicant by the Admissions Office. Comprehensive feedback on the outcome of the application shall be provided to the applicant.

5. Wherever possible, the College shall endeavour to provide an outcome within six weeks (or earlier) of the receipt of a full and complete APL application (with full evidence), depending on the point in the Admissions process at which the application is received.

6. All APL decisions shall be reported to the College Assessment Board and to Durham University via the recording of APL credits on students' records and the sharing of APL application forms and evidence. This shall be done in accordance with the deadlines published by Durham and shall normally be in the October after the students' commencement on the programmes. The APL for late entrants shall be in the following March.

7. Referral to Durham University

Applications may be referred to Durham University where either:

- The College is minded to approve an application for APL but where the application is not straightforward. (A straightforward application is where all the relevant Learning Outcomes are clearly met, or where they are largely met and where the minor gaps will be straightforwardly plugged by subsequent Common Awards study; where the quantity of APL falls within the limits set out above; and where the prior learning counts as current.); or
- The College does not feel able to make a judgement on the application.

In the first instance, the University's Chair of the Common Awards Management Board will decide whether or not to confirm the College's judgement to approve. In the second case, the Chair will make an independent judgement based on the evidence provided. In both cases, the College will communicate the University's decision to the applicant.

9. ARTICULATION AGREEMENTS

This APL process shall not be used in place of an 'articulation agreement' – that is, a general agreement to allow non-Common-Awards programme of study to stand in for some portion of a Common Awards programme. For example, the College shall not enter into a general agreement to allow all students who in future successfully complete a particular non-Common-Awards Certificate to have direct entry into Level 5 of a Common Awards BA.

10. POLICY APPROVAL, REVIEWS & AMENDMENTS

This APL policy shall be approved by the College's Academic Board and shall be reviewed annually.

Author	Academic Registrar
Date of Approval	27 November 2024 - Updated 06 November 2025
Approving Committees	Teaching & Learning Committee
Status	Approved by CA Team.
Previous Reviews	n/a
Next Review	November 2026 or earlier if required