Recognising Credit to support social mobility
Keynote address by Professor Tim Blackman

Widening access and accrediting prior learning

As access to higher education has been widened over the last few decades, so we’ve seen the development of new and more inclusive modes of study, such as e-learning, m-learning, foundation degrees, ‘no frills’ and accelerated degrees, foundation programmes, professional doctorates and now degree apprenticeships.

Accreditation of prior learning has also grown, pushing the boundary of what higher education is, especially with the accreditation of prior experiential learning. An estimated 130,000 students use APL as a route into higher education each year, mostly via qualifications such as HNCs or foundation degrees.

The pathway, though, from a skilled trade or routine administrative job to a professional occupation can still often be long and difficult, especially when combined with earning a living, raising a family and other commitments.

But it can be done. We’ve proved that at Middlesex with, for example, our flexible work-based degree pathways for teaching assistants. Ruth Miller and her team at Middlesex have successfully enabled teaching assistants to progress to qualified teachers, based on recognition of prior learning for general credit followed by work-based projects.

We’ve similar success stories with health care assistants progressing to nurses, a vital contribution to meeting NHS workforce needs, and very much supporting social mobility.

The amount of credit that universities will provide for prior learning has come in for some criticism as parsimonious – especially by FE - often not helped by professional body requirements. Others - especially in HE - point out the dangers of pathway students not being sufficiently prepared for degree study.

Our experience at Middlesex has been that clear guidance on the structure and focus of RPL credit claims helps optimise the potential of prior learning for the award of degree credit.

We’ve also found that the experience of achieving this credit on the basis of past practice has contributed to better future practice, especially in developing critical reflective skills. These stay with the graduate and enhance their ongoing professional practice, and chances of further career progression.

However, as Carol Costley and others have argued at Middlesex, widening participation is not just a matter of providing the same curriculum to more people, whether with APL or not. It is also about curriculum innovation because, by its nature,
widening participation is about widening the scope of what is recognised as higher-level knowledge and skills.

Disciplines, subjects, fields of study, professions, apprenticeship standards, trades, crafts – these are all socially constructed branches of knowledge, and by being so create structures that reflect and sustain particular interests. Whether any of these branches are recognised at degree-level is a question deeply enmeshed with social status.

The boundaries of what is recognised as higher learning – complex learning I think is a better term – has been expanded most notably by the development of work-based learning.

Middlesex has been a pioneer of work-based learning, making ‘work’ the main focus of learning rather than the academic discipline. Our Institute for Work-Based Learning has pioneered ways of recognising and accrediting practice-based knowledge and experience at different levels right up to doctorates.

Modularisation, and accreditation and credit transfer schemes, have helped this innovation by providing frameworks within which work-based learning can be integrated with higher education courses and assessment.

The award of general credit, though, has enabled learning from a wide range of work and life experience to be recognised.

Although aligned with higher education frameworks, general credit has gone beyond mapping experiential learning onto existing modules to recognising as the subject matter the intrinsic knowledge and skills acquired through experience outside university.

Work-based learning can essentially create new subjects, which its advocates argue can lie outside academic traditions and epistemologies, even challenging conventional views about the origin of knowledge itself, with intellectual capital generated from practical experience and not just research.

**Liberal education and work-based learning**

This challenge is again enmeshed with issues of social status, such as when set against the views of the likes of Cambridge academic Stefan Collini.

Collini argues that a liberal education is something to be defended against the incursion into education of training to earn a living, an awful instrumentalism in his view.

Collini argues instead for the importance for its own sake of understanding and explaining, governed by – to quote - ‘canons of accuracy and precision, rigour in argument and clarity in presentation, respect for evidence and openness to criticism’.

He sees these attributes as common to, and characteristic of, all scholarship, with scholarship something distinct from everyday life, and with its own communities, communities of disciplinary research and teaching.
This idea of knowledge as something beyond everyday experience is also found in Young and Lambert’s criticism of emphasising competencies rather than subject knowledge in school education, in their book *Knowledge and the Future School*.

They argue that it is the job of school teachers to ensure that students understand what the best answers are to particular questions, and they see the source of these best answers to be university disciplines.

What surprises me about these ideas is that these authors see these attributes as somehow pure and separate from the world of work, when actually they’re pretty useful attributes for work.

In my view, Collini presents these attributes as pure and separate because this gives them a higher status. They are written about in terms of ‘intellectual challenge’, sometimes as ‘human flourishing’, but definitely not as preparation for a job or career – that’s something for those FE colleges and ex-polytechnics.

You go to Cambridge to flourish, be intellectually challenged and then, because of your cognitive ability, you’ll find a great job anyway.

And therein lies Collini’s real argument that this liberal education is really just for the brightest and best. This has become so ingrained in our educational thinking that we measure how good universities are by how selective they are. The more people they keep out the better they are.

There is nothing natural or intrinsic about the basis for this selection. We create a certain type of education and certain types of assessment and then decide who is smart enough to benefit, the deserving and undeserving.

The ability to benefit from higher education is not seen as widely distributed – as surely it is – but as something to be selected for.

Although access to higher education has expanded considerably in recent decades, this has created a pecking order of institutions so that rather than universities being mixed and comprehensive we have a social class hierarchy, with the proportion of students with parents in senior professional and managerial occupations ranging from 90% in some institutions to less than half in others.

Modularisation and credits have introduced a veneer of equality across the sector but not a common currency. A fundamental reason for this is selection. The range in average UCAS tariff score by institution is huge, from 234 to 600. The published admission requirement for a Computer Science degree, for example, ranges from two Cs at A-Level to three A-Levels at A*A*A. The actual grades that some students are admitted with are likely to be even lower at the former institution and even higher at the latter.

It is unlikely that these are all valid or fair assessments of what is needed to succeed on a particular course. If instead they are about rationing places on high demand courses, then there are serious problems about how the highest of these requirements discriminate systematically and at scale against both students from low income families and the teaching assistants, health care assistants and tradespeople.
I mentioned earlier. For these high tariff, so-called high-status, institutions admit few such students.

However much we finesse credit level descriptors, and their inclusiveness of different types of learning, the reality is that the social status hierarchy of British universities – driven by their degree of selectivity – works against social mobility.

Credits may formally be the same across institutions, but it is just not the case that a credit earned by a student coming to university with four ‘A’ grade A-levels is seen as the equivalent to the credit earned by a student coming to university with two BTEC Merits.

That’s the reality, and it reflects both how little priority and how little expectation are placed on teaching expertise that adds value to what students come to university with.

Knowledge and competencies

Most employers do not rank the university attended high among their selection criteria. We do have a problem of discrimination in favour of Russell Group graduates but that is largely one confined to so-called ‘elite professions’ and is sadly probably largely a class bias. Most employers rank much more highly specific skills, professional experience and area of degree specialisation.

Academic culture, however, values ‘being smart’ much more than ‘developing smartness’. As Alex Astin has argued, this is a large part of the reason for the under-representation of disadvantaged groups in higher education.

A move to competency-based learning and assessment across the sector would help immensely, but instead this is often seen as crowding out the academic subject knowledge that students ‘need to know’ to pass exams and course work.

As my colleague at Middlesex Professor Martin Loomes puts it, we need to move away from learning as ‘stuff’ that is taught in lectures and assessed in exams, with practical application an adjunct to learning rather than intrinsic to it. We need an approach based on the ‘primacy of the problem’. What the student needs to know and be able to do is driven by what they want to achieve.

This of course is so often what prior learning has been, and why it has the value it does. The primacy of the problem is a challenging way of teaching, requiring teaching staff who are willing to give up control and can respond to students’ needs by engaging in problem-solving with them, explaining the material as it arises, but also ensuring coverage by selecting appropriate problems.

Recognise that? It’s familiar to most people who’ve been involved in APEL.

In a teaching context, it’s a method also suited to mixed abilities: all students have knowledge and skills they can use in teams. The weaker students are supported and the best are stretched.

At Middlesex, assessment on our Computer Science degree is based on observing students as they solve problems, and matching the knowledge and skills
demonstrated against a checklist informed by employability requirements, disciplinary expectations and professional body requirements.

The approach also enables us to use a wide range of opportunities for learning outside the classroom, such as in outreach events with schools or participating in national competitions, and our approach to assessment means these can be assessed as well.

It is an approach that recognises knowledge is changing all the time and that we need to teach students how to learn autonomously: that will last them a lifetime.

There are no modules or courses: all the activities run across various sessions during the week. Assessment is not based on exams but on Student Observable Behaviours, or SOBs, using profiling.

There are three types of SOB. Threshold SOBs must be passed and students finding that harder receive extra support to meet this level. Typical level SOBs are what’s needed to obtain a good honours degree. Excellent level SOBs are more stretching and for students ready to be stretched. The progress of every student is tracked by their personal tutor - including their attendance - using a dashboard, a version of which can be accessed by the students themselves.

The evaluation results are striking. Attendance, engagement and progression have all been excellent, with the large majority of the students progressing beyond the level required to pass the first year. Given the backgrounds many of our students come from, this is driving social mobility – it’s a method that works for learning gain.

It’s important to note that this is not a minimally guided approach of the type shown to be ineffective by some studies of problem-based learning. This is guided learning, based on development and progression, and mastering the concepts needed for the next stage. Lectures are still used and self-study materials with worked examples are available to support the workshops. But assessment is by practical demonstration of what the students have learned.

**John Macmurray on knowledge and action**

I’ve long been a fan of the Scottish philosopher John Macmurray. His criticism of the idea that knowledge is somehow prior to action is reflected in this approach. Action is actually prior to knowledge because there can’t be knowledge without an actual activity that supports it. Knowledge is actually knowing why we do something. We can begin to see now why the critical reflective skills our work-based learning students developed have been so useful to them.

There might in theory be true and false knowledge but what is actual is right or wrong action. Education, Macmurray argued, is learning about actions that are purposeful and then, in relation to that purpose, right.

Advocates of liberal education tend to emphasise qualities such as understanding and explaining – very cognitive. Important though these are, less is said about making. Yet making is fundamental – whether making a robot, a diagnosis or an artwork.
Richard Sennett argues in his book *The Craftsman* that ‘making is thinking’ - whether as a computer programmer, surgeon or artist - and we could do with a lot more making in our universities: Graduates who can actually do things right.

This is, of course, about skills development, and skills come with practice and repetition. There is too little opportunity for practice and repetition on many university courses because of concern with content and detail. Another impediment to APEL.

The conventional education model is learn something and then move on to something else, with all students following the same timetable, and all expected to take the same time. This unfortunately has been fuelled by credit systems.

For Sennett, the artist, computer programmer and surgeon are all engaged in the same kind of activity. He calls this craftsmanship, but another framing that I think works better for institutions that are about complex learning is design thinking.

Design thinking is about making things better. It is about how designers think: practical, creative problem solving that explores alternative solutions for a better future design of products, artworks, services or policies. It is iterative, experimental, context-dependent and user-led. And it is about people working together.

This brings me to the next main thing I want to talk about, and that’s diversity. This is key to social mobility.

**Diversity in learning environments**

Macmurray, in coming to his conclusion about action being prior to knowledge, arrived at another important insight: that when we act, we act among others. It can’t be avoided. This brings into play how learning is social because it is about action, and action is always among others. Above all, it is among diverse others.

Diversity is often discussed in terms of deficits – achievement gaps by gender or ethnicity for example – when it is actually a positive resource.

Universities are cognitively demanding environments, but developing just cognitive abilities is one-sided learning. The other side is diversity and, in particular, using diversity.

Scott Page’s book *The Difference* discusses the effects of two types of group attribute when groups are solving difficult problems or making decisions in complex scenarios. The first is average ability. No surprises there. The second is diversity, and there are some surprises here.

In these problem solving scenarios, Page shows that diversity of perspectives can be more successful than average ability. Combining diversity and ability works best. High average ability is likely to reduce diversity and be less successful than a combination of diverse perspectives and abilities that are relevant to the task.

The diversity effect that Page identifies involves bringing to bear on a problem or choice different ways of seeing solutions (we can call these perspectives) and different ways of constructing solutions (and we can call these heuristics). These tend to be associated with identity diversity because attributes such as age, gender,
class and ethnic identity have important influences on our ways of seeing and thinking.

Page also argues that cognitive ability is diverse; that we all have ‘toolboxes’ of cognitive skills, partly reflecting latent abilities and partly education, training and experience.

While cognitive ability matters, its significance is not in terms of some abstract average measure like an IQ test but in terms of the toolbox of relevant competencies we bring to a situation.

If a problem-solving group comprises people all with the same tools, it is likely to be less effective at solving complex problems than if some members bring tools that others do not have.

The diversity effect has striking potential in education. In schools, peer-to-peer learning has been shown to be a very effective method that uses diverse abilities as a resource that the teacher can work with to raise everyone’s attainment.

We do a version of this at Middlesex hiring our higher attaining third year students part-time to support struggling students in first year classes – and we have evidence that it works.

Evidence about the benefits of diversity for students in higher education is mainly from the US. Many studies demonstrate a positive relationship between student learning and exposure to peers from different backgrounds, including evidence of positive effects on problem-solving ability, satisfaction, motivation, general knowledge and self-confidence.

Other benefits are reducing prejudice and implicit bias towards particular groups, and enhancing critical thinking and perspective-taking by students, including more complex thinking. Studies have also shown that college diversity increases civic engagement.

These very important findings are highly relevant to the demands on higher education to extend students’ capabilities to think creatively and work with others.

Modules and credits are just a means to an end: which is student learning. Work-based learning as a field of study took this in radical directions: that assessment could validate learning from any source, challenging fundamental tenets of academia.

Competency-based education takes this further: it is about what students can actually do with their learning, or have done in the past that be recognised now. It’s needed a rethinking of time-based curricula, learning resources, the coherence of programmes and assessment approaches. This unfortunately has actually stifled the extent of innovation because of the systems changes needed to realise this new thinking, but apprenticeships have been a further stimulus to move towards a competency-based approach.

The new apprenticeships replace the old apprenticeship framework with standards for each apprenticeship, led by employers. These standards comprise the knowledge,
competence and behaviours needed to perform an identified job role along with a plan for assessing achievement of the standard. The standard may or may not be delivered through a qualification.

Which is a problem. In contrast to current Government policy in England to bifurcate ‘academic’ and ‘vocational’ pathways from age 16, there needs to be one tertiary framework that is far less defined by academic and vocational distinctions.

**Education and skills**

Current Government policy is to strengthen a separate technical education sector and apprenticeships, both as alternatives to more costly degree education and to meet labour market needs. Influential work by Alison Wolf and others has argued that the higher education sector is over-providing full-time degree graduates, pinning much of the blame on favourable loan finance.

However, this is unlikely. The latest UCAS data show that fewer than two-in-five 18-year olds apply to university, and this declines to only just over one in five in areas of the country least represented in higher education. For an advanced knowledge economy, this is hardly excessive, as the low graduate unemployment rate shows.

In addition, the earnings benefit for graduates compared to non-graduates for those from poorer families is about double that for graduates from richer families, so any reduction in university places is likely to make the sector’s social mobility performance even worse.

The challenge for debt-burdened students is the high employment, low productivity economy into which they will graduate in the UK. The millennial generation may well be the first to have lower real earnings than the generation before them if there is not a step change in the UK’s flagging productivity growth.

Skilled graduates able to improve performance and innovate are crucial to turning this around, but skilled graduates are different to experts in academic subject knowledge, taught within a research rather than practice paradigm.

Scott Kelly’s recent HEPI paper on the importance of BTECs to widening access to higher education is important, but fails to problematise the nature of much teaching in higher education.

He concludes that BTEC students need help to adjust to ‘theoretical study’, rather than university teachers needing to adjust to the needs of students for professional, entrepreneurial and vocational skills. He reports that lecturers in the most selective universities are most likely to see BTEC students as deficient.

This is not surprising in a system where there is little expectation on lecturers to achieve learning gains in applied skills and every expectation that only those students who find it easiest to learn academic knowledge should be selected onto degree courses.

Unfortunately the prestige of learning in a research rather than a practice environment is part of the problem and has seen many post-92 institutions seek to
emulate the Russell Group rather than establish advanced practice-based learning as an alternative model.

This model is surely the alternative that an economy with lagging productivity and social mobility needs.

**Conclusion**

Finally, is this all too instrumental? What about an education that cultivates flourishing lives, explanation and understanding?

The missing link is livelihood. The cultural theorist and political campaigner Raymond Williams defined livelihood not as work that exploits people and the planet as resources to be used up, but as means of living that can be improved and passed on for future generations. This is all about making improvements and finding solutions, which should be what modern universities are about.

Above all, solutions and improvements are ‘made’, and they are best made by combining abilities and diversity in the same environment, in universities that are socially and cognitively mixed, with learning frameworks that are about demonstrated competencies and behaviours, and that support personalised goals and different paces of learning.

To sum up:

I’m suggesting that credit can impede innovation and, in a status hierarchy which is what the higher education sector is, cannot be a common currency.

I’m arguing for more competency-based learning and assessment, based on demonstrating competencies in practice. APEL fits this well. Credits don’t.

I’m arguing that competency is about both cognitive ability and diversity, and that universities should be mixed environments of both.

Thank you.