

**Professional Accreditation – Challenging But Worth It**

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For people working in Higher Education, the word “accreditation” can hold a particular horror. Departments can be subjected to inspections by stoney-faced strangers, who make high-stakes judgements against lists of criteria that are at once arcane and contradictory. Reams of documentation need to be prepared, meetings need to be scheduled, and gaps papered over. While important, I doubt many people look forward to accreditation visits, or look back at them with a nostalgic smile.

However, that is not always the way that it has to be. I personally recently completed a personal accreditation with the British Association of Lecturers of English for Academic Purposes (BALEAP) and am now pleased to call myself a Senior Fellow. For those not aware, BALEAP provides a number of development and accreditation activities in the UK (and increasingly beyond). One of these is the accreditation of teachers at one of three levels. Becoming Senior Fellow was a process I found challenging, and ultimately very professionally satisfying. This article will explain why.

BALEAP measures their fellowships against a set of criteria that they have laid out in their [handbook](#). These criteria range from the scholarly to the practical, and prospective fellows need to show a strong awareness of theory and practice around areas such as teaching and learning, assessment, and scholarship, all interlinked by robust professional values. These values do, however, underpin what we do, and work by writers such as Hyland (2018) can give a well informed and balanced overview of how the field has developed in these areas in the recent past.

Application for fellowship involves submitting a portfolio online which highlights professional achievements. The portfolio will also include at least one case study. These are not defined as tightly as they often are in academic study (Dornyei, 2007). What is expected is a demonstration of how the applicant has applied their professional and scholarly expertise to a situation, and an honest and balanced assessment of its success. Take, for example, a teacher who has created some teaching materials which are based around theoretical insights from corpus linguistics. She would use the written account to explain what the theoretical insights were, and then include the teaching

materials in a portfolio of supporting evidence. Finally, she would evaluate their success in the classroom.

It is well understood that writing these kinds of documents can be a challenge, especially if it is the first time you have attempted this. Therefore, the BALEAP scheme offers mentors to help you prepare the portfolio. They can talk through the expectations and also offer guidance about how you can demonstrate that you have met the criteria. I certainly found the discussions with my mentor invaluable in the process of preparing my professional account and my portfolio.

The experience itself was not easy- but then again, I suspect it was not designed to be. The first thing to consider was that it took time. For a Senior Fellow account, I needed to write 6,500 words. Before I even started writing this, I needed to spend a significant amount of time considering the criteria and considering how to provide evidence for them. In addition, I will admit, I needed to refresh my understanding of a fair amount of theory. It also took time to gather and organize the evidence into a portfolio. Inevitably, I then wrote too much, and had to spend time cutting the number of words and editing the writing to maximize its efficiency when demonstrating the criteria. I do not think I could put a number of hours on the amount of time I spent, but I think it took me about three months (while doing another job) between making my initial notes and finally submitting.

It would be a mistake to think that the portfolio needs to be uncritical self-congratulation. Any experienced EAP practitioner will encounter contradictions and structural concerns, whether they be about 'The Butler Stance' (Raimes, 1991), the growth of managerialism in the academy (Hadley, 2017), challenges around new technologies (Zhou et al., 2022) or the multitude of other tensions practitioners face at all levels of our professional role. That said, it is important to turn the reflection into a document that balances the positives (Hyland, 2018) with the negatives, and explain how you, as the practitioner, can pragmatically navigate these issues with your values intact. These positives include the way that EAP is able to integrate ideas critical to it, be they around the genre-based pedagogies, the global Dominance of English, or the lack of criticality in its practice, and

integrate them, without losing focus on language and pedagogy. In fact, Hyland suggests that EAP needs to be more assertive of its expertise, which is fully in line with the wider goals of the scheme. In addition, it would not be correct to think that the process itself is without issue. For example, due to the thoroughness of the process, it is slow to change. There is very little in the current criteria, for example, specifically about the use of digital technology, let alone the current challenges around Online Translation and Generative AI.

It should also be remembered that BALEAP is very focused on EAP, including, for example, emphasis on language as discourse, academic literacies and genre-based pedagogies. Other accreditation schemes exist, but are generally institutional, not individual, and may have other priorities. As an example, the British Council accreditation scheme in the UK oversees things like summer schools, among others (British Council, n.d). For them, a section on teaching and protecting younger learners is vital<sup>1</sup>. However, whatever the context, and whatever the outcome, research such as that done by Vadivel et al. shows the value of organized and collaborative CPD over that done in a more solitary manner (Vadivel et al., 2021)

And what did I get out of it? A surprising amount, it turns out. Of course, there is the line on the CV, and the certificate on the wall. But, more importantly, there is the sense of professional validation that comes out of this. EAP teachers can sometimes feel a little lost, and a little marginalized in the wider academy and having an organization such as BALEAP giving formal validation to the work I have done does give a sense of professional grounding which brings me confidence when asserting my professional expertise (Ding & Bruce, 2017). The conversations with the mentor were not just about how to evidence a criterion (although that was included), but they were based on a wide-ranging and informed discussion between two colleagues about the wider issues and goals of our profession. This included thinking about how scholarship informs our practice, and also how our lived experience mediates our interactions with the theories. The

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<sup>1</sup> I am aware that this is quite Anglocentric. This is because most of my career has been in the UK, or Branch Campuses/TNE ventures of UK universities. In addition, an informal survey of colleagues in Hong Kong did not reveal similar schemes in Hong Kong

portfolio can then show how the scholarly and the quotidian co-exist in our professional selves, and how we navigate between the two. In our daily work, it is important for us to focus on the details of a particular course, or even a particular lesson - but it is extremely rewarding to pull back, to consider how our values inform our knowledge and practices, and to look at our own personal and professional frameworks, and it was great to do this with a colleague. This has also had positive washback onto my own teaching - I feel. Taking this step back has reminded me of things from earlier in my career, and has made my course and class preparation more informed by insights from across my career, both theoretical and experiential.

Most importantly was the chance that it gave me for personal reflection. It was important for me to understand where I needed to refresh or update theoretical knowledge. But at the same time, it was very gratifying to be able to lay out a wide set of skills and understanding, and encouraged me to take a professional pride in my accumulated skill set - something we sometimes forget about in the daily dash from meeting to class and back again.

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