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## EXPERTISE

### **Permeability in education, vocational training and further education – the key to lifelong learning**

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<b>ABSTRACT</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>1. BASIC AIMS, CONCEPTS AND APPROACHES IN EUROPE</b> .....	<b>2</b>
1.1 VALUATION AND VALIDATION OF PRIOR LEARNING (VPL).....	3
1.2 RECOGNITION OF PRIOR INFORMAL LEARNING (RPL).....	4
1.3 ACCREDITATION OF PRIOR LEARNING (APL).....	5
1.4 WORK-BASED LEARNING (WBL).....	6
1.5 STRUCTURED FORMS OF TRANSITION BETWEEN VET AND HE.....	7
1.6 RELATIONS BETWEEN APPROACHES.....	7
1.7 OTHER FORMS OF ACTION TO IMPROVE LEARNING PATHWAYS FROM VET TO HE.....	7
<b>2. APPROACHES TRACED IN EU MEMBER STATES AND SOME RESULTS</b> .....	<b>8</b>
2.1 UNITED KINGDOM.....	8
2.2 FRANCE.....	9
2.3 SCANDINAVIA AND FINLAND.....	9
2.4 NETHERLANDS.....	10
2.5 ESTONIA AND SLOVENIA.....	10
2.6 GERMANY.....	11
<b>3. CHALLENGES OR RESISTANCES AND STRATEGIES TO OVERCOME DIFFICULTIES</b> .....	<b>11</b>
3.1 ACCREDITATION OF PRIOR EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING.....	11
3.2 WORK-BASED LEARNING.....	13
3.3 STRUCTURED CREDIT TRANSFER AND QUALIFICATION LINKAGES.....	13
3.4 GAP BETWEEN POLICY AND PRACTICE IN LIFELONG LEARNING IN EUROPE.....	13
<b>4. THE CONTRIBUTION OF NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK (NQF) AND A CREDIT SYSTEM FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF PRIOR LEARNING ACCREDITATION</b> .....	<b>13</b>
4.1 CAN NQFs INCREASE CLAIMS FOR PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENTS?.....	13
4.2 CONTRIBUTION OF A CREDIT TRANSFER SYSTEM.....	14
<b>5. VISIBLE EFFECTS IN EUROPE THROUGH IMPLEMENTATION OF APL FOR INTERSECTORAL CREDIT TRANSFER</b> .....	<b>15</b>
5.1 INCREASING PROFESSIONALIZATION OF APL.....	15
5.2 EFFECTS ON LEARNING IN HE IN GENERAL.....	15
5.3 KEY FOR KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER BETWEEN THE WORLD OF WORK AND EDUCATION.....	15
<b>SELECTED SOURCES:</b> .....	<b>16</b>

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## **Abstract**

The central function of *prior learning recognition* as a learning pathway to Higher Education (HE) is to set up frameworks so that learning – regardless of where and how it has been acquired – can be identified, assessed and recognized as equivalent to required learning outcomes of a specific course in HE. The concept is perceived as a key to increase permeability in education systems and hereby social inclusion, as well as an important strategy to reduce the effects of demographic changes. Variations of the concept are described – from a personal growth model to a credit exchange model – all able to interlink vocational education, work and higher education.

National Qualifications Frameworks and Credit transfer systems are seen as important for prior learning recognition models. Problems are perceived in case they are not constructed as integrated systems. A shared understanding of the value of learning descriptors and credits is necessary for individual and formalised credit transfer between VET and HE and vice versa. The Bologna process has a substantial effect on the recognition of prior learning, leading to new initiatives in many countries. The long term experience in France and the UK is challenged and leads to increased reflexivity on APL practice and the development of shared good practice. Outside Europe Australia and British Columbia in Canada are identified as model of good practice.

## **1. Basic aims, concepts and approaches in Europe**

In the late 1990s the EU member states recognised the importance to develop and support the principle of lifelong learning and began to set up political action. The EU definition of lifelong learning covers learning from pre-school to post retirement and includes formal, non-formal and informal learning. It encompasses all activities that improve knowledge, skills and competences, regardless of where and how they are acquired.

This very ambitious aim is accompanied by the demand, that "it is absolutely essential to develop high quality systems for the Accreditation of Prior and Experiential Learning (APEL), and to promote their application in a wide variety of contexts". With the Memorandum on Lifelong Learning (2000) the European Commission expressed a great interest in valuing prior learning and in the ways, how learning participation and outcomes can be understood and recognised. In the Memorandum a particular interest in the recognition of non-formal and informal learning is expressed, which reflects the increasing political awareness given to learning taking place outside formal education and training institutions.

The Copenhagen Declaration, convened in 2002 by the European Ministers for Vocational Education and Training, articulates the priority to investigate "how transparency, comparability, transferability and recognition of competence and/or qualifications, between different countries and at different levels could be promoted" as well as "to develop a set of common principles for validation of non-formal and informal learning with the aim of ensuring greater comparability between approaches in different countries and at different levels".

At the Berlin Conference (2003), the European Ministers responsible for Higher Education promoting the Bologna process underlined the important contribution of higher education in making lifelong learning a reality. They highlighted that within the priority lifelong learning

the concept of recognition of prior learning must become an integral part of higher education activity. As a consequence, under the headline *Developments in lifelong learning*, the 34 Bologna member states describe their procedures at the national level for prior learning/flexible learning paths every second year.

Finally with the Bruges-Copenhagen Process the European Commission tries to enhance the European Cooperation in VET, and with the initiative to set up a European Qualifications Framework (EQF) for Lifelong Learning an important instrument will be developed to strengthen the interface between Vocational Education & Training (VET) and Higher Education (HE). The EQF links the Bologna and Bruges-Copenhagen-Process together and prior learning recognition arrangements are seen as being important to enhance transitions between VET and HE.

The basic aims behind the promotion of prior learning recognition, intersectoral credit transfer and qualification linkages between Vocational Education & Training (VET) and Higher Education (HE) in Europe are as diverse as the interests of the stakeholder involved:

- to meet the growing demand for skilled and highly skilled worker and professionals,
- to supply the increased demand for labour-market flexibility,
- to reduce the risks of job-insecurity for the employees,
- to find a strategy for the necessity to change not only the workplace but the domain,
- to include citizens after unemployment or family work,
- to reduce the effects of demographic changes,
- to integrate migrants, refugees and other minorities,
- to realize the turn to a "knowledge society",
- to increase the number of students in Higher Education and
- to increase the number of non-traditional students,
- to increase participation, social inclusion and personal development.

The central concept of prior learning recognition, emerging in Europe in the 1980s, seems to be polyvalent since it has the capacity to include formal, non- and informal learning and can be implemented in different settings. Nevertheless, each country has developed specific models which relate to the national education system and the relationships between the world of work and (higher) education. The national terminology very often mirrors these systems and relationships, and the fine nuances between the use of the terms validation, recognition, assessment or accreditation reflect the different cultural habits which are underlying the practice. Processes and settings may vary considerably. In most countries the initial focus in the past was on the recognition of learning derived from experience rather than accreditation.

Let us now have a closer look at the different approaches, which can be characterized not only in terms of cultural background but also in terms of the main field they are related to or developed by (vocational training, higher education, labour market) and in terms of the purposes they are developed for (personal development, gaining access, individual credit transfer, structured credit transfer, advanced standing in a programme).

### **1.1 Valuation and Validation of Prior Learning (VPL)**

Under the umbrella Term VPL at least two strong approaches can be identified. The Leonardo Network VPL developed the *Valuation of Prior Learning model*. The approach *Identification*

*and Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning* is shaped by the Council of the European Union and put e.g. forward by the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP). Both approaches share basic assumptions and both are strongly related to the field of vocational training.

Identification and validation are seen as key instruments in enabling the transfer and acceptance of learning outcomes across different settings. The identification of non-formal and informal learning *records* and *makes visible* the individual's learning outcomes. This does not result in a formal certificate or diploma, but, that's the hope of the Council of the European Union, may provide the *basis* for such formal recognition. Comparing the EU-definition with other definitions one has to say that the term *validation* is used by the EU Council in a very specific way. By some fields (e.g. higher education) and in some EU countries (e.g. France) the term is used more broadly to encompass the identification as well as the assessment and recognition of non-formal and informal learning.

The *Common European Principles* for the validation of non-formal and informal learning, stressed as important in the Copenhagen Declaration are subsequently finalised by the Commission in collaboration with a range of partners. They include the main themes: *purpose of validation, individual entitlements, responsibilities of institutions and stakeholders, confidence and trust, impartiality credibility and legitimacy*.

The development of methods and instruments, taking these Common European principles into account, is the aim of:

- a) The *Virtual Community on the Identification and Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning*. This is a web-site provided by the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) and established in 2003. It is to support the development and implementation of methods and systems for identification and validation of non-formal learning.
- b) The *European inventory Validation of non-formal and informal learning* by ECOTEC. Throughout 2005, the European Inventory produced by ECOTEC for the European Commission covered validation initiatives (current practices and best practice examples) in 30 countries.
- c) The Leonardo-Network '*Valuation and (Validation) of Prior Learning*', short VPL-Network which published their results in 2005.

### ***Purpose of the Validation of Prior Learning***

The purpose of validating prior learning is manifold and depends on the context; the aim to make visible what has been learned and to create reflexivity on learning, using the assessment-records for better access to the labour-market and the improvement of self esteem, e.g. after long term unemployment or family work, using assessment-records for career development and higher wages and finely finding ways to utilise the assessment-records for access to formal-learning procedures within the national VET sector.

### **1.2 Recognition of Prior Informal Learning (RPL)**

The approach *Recognition of Prior Informal Learning* (RPL) is a process undertaken by learners, e.g. adults considering returning to 'learning', that involves describing the experiences, reflecting on those experiences, identifying the learning associated with the experiences, defining the learning in terms of statements of skills, knowledge & understanding and last but not least providing evidence of the learning. The learning provider has to provide support to the learner in this process and has to manage the process of recognition in a clear and consistent manner (SCQF Guidelines for RPL, 2000, p 9).

RPL shares many assumptions with VPL, has strong roots in higher education and has been implemented in Scottish and Netherlands higher education institutions in the last years.

### ***Purpose of RPL***

The RPL can form part of various activities associated with personal and career development as well as with career guidance. This process is *called formative* recognition in contrast to *summative* recognition which is the case, when RPL leads to assessment and credit-rating. RPL can lead to the accreditation (of prior experiential learning) and can be part of this process but does not necessarily have to. The proponents of RPL argue that the strength of RPL is that it creates the possibility to recognise the full potential of the person who claims for RPL and that the recognition is *not restricted by the learning outcomes* of established formal qualifications. For this reason the term RPL remains a preferred term in some Anglophone countries as well as e.g. the Netherlands. With this focus the RPL approach can be seen as a bridge between VPL and APEL.

Some experts argue that the RPL has a broader scope than the accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL); others see the accreditation of prior learning as broader, because it involves the opportunity for transition between non-formal learning and formal learning, for transition of knowledge derived from work, family and leisure activities to access or advanced standing in Higher Education (HE).

### **1.3 Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL)**

Institutions in Further Education and Higher Education engaged in the accreditation of prior learning make use of one of the following approaches:

- Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL),
- Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning (APCL). Sometimes, e.g. in the UK, the abbreviation APL is used for the accreditation of certificated learning only.

Very often the term Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) comprises the Accreditation of Prior Experiential **and** the Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning. Sometimes this is also expressed as AP(E/C)L. In this cases APL is used as an ‘umbrella-term’.

#### ***1.3.1 Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL)***

The approach *Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning* (APEL) is nowadays described as a process, through which learning achieved outside education or training systems is *assessed* and, as appropriate, recognised for *academic purposes*. APEL involves a case-by-case assessment of the individual’s knowledge, skills and competencies which may be derived from a whole range of learning experiences, including workplace learning, life experience, and family and voluntary work or caring for children and the elderly. The main characteristic is that APEL always and necessarily assesses the *individual’s competences*. When APEL is used for intersectoral credit transfer between e.g. FE and HE the main question is to which extent the *individual’s competences* are equivalent to the required learning outcomes, competency outcomes or standards in qualification of a specific course or study programme in Higher Education.

#### ***1.3.2 Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning (APCL)***

The accreditation of prior certificated learning (APCL) can be described as a process, through which previously assessed and certificated learning is considered and, as appropriate, recognised for academic purposes. In contrast to APEL, which identifies the extent of *individual’s competence* equivalent to the programme only, APCL is developed in two directions: A) the

accreditation of *individual claims for certified learning* and B) the accreditation of certificated learning as a *formal process of credit transfer*.

A) For APCL as an *individual claim* the previously certificated learning will not be assessed again by the Higher Education Institution. The question is here to what extent the *certificated qualification* is equivalent to the required learning outcomes. Applications are very often combined with APEL and can lead to access as well as advanced standing, sometimes also referred to as *exemption*.

B) The formal process of *credit transfer* assesses learning outcomes of a course or qualification in vocational education and training (VET) and further education (FE) and relates it to the learning outcomes of the HE programmes. Again, the question is to which extent the learning outcomes of the VET and FE certificates/qualifications are *equivalent* to the required learning outcomes, competency outcomes or standards in qualification of a specific course or study programme in Higher Education. But the main *characteristic* is that the *course or qualification* is assessed for equivalence, *not the student*.

There are two terms strongly connected with the formal process of credit transfer, *articulation and advanced standing*. *Articulation* means the process of connecting two or more qualifications (which are often at different levels) in order to establish clearly defined linkages that provide agreed and consistent levels of credit and enable individuals to progress from one qualification to the next. Articulation arrangements are formal agreements negotiated between education and training providers which establish an agreed amount of credit for a previous qualification in relation to a destination (target) qualification. Important basis for articulation arrangements is cooperation between the two sectors to build up trust since it creates opportunities to transfer with advanced standing. *Advanced standing* is a formal process leading to the recognition of the credit rating of a specific qualification of a higher education partner institution. The credit transfer may be granted for modules or units of competency, or in some cases for whole courses or qualifications which are deemed to be equivalent.

It is important to consider, that in some countries and some higher education institutions credit transfer based on articulation agreements is not part of AP(EL) policies. We will come back to this point in chapter 1.5.

### **1.3.3 Purpose of APL**

The main purpose of APEL and APCL is to widen participation in higher education and to offer strategies for students to make the best use of their learning experience. APEL and APCL can lead to *access* to a HE-programme or to *advanced standing*. If it leads to advanced standing, the credits can be *specific or general*. Specific credit is the accreditation for a specific module/s of the programme, in an award or qualification, a general credit is the award of credits at a particular level in a degree, which does not substitute for a specified module or modules.

Credit transfer and articulation arrangements increase opportunities for students with prior VET sector experience and qualifications to access higher education by facilitating student transition between institutions and sectors.

## **1.4 Work-Based Learning (WBL)**

“... a good deal of the problem with skills is among the existing workforce so, important as it is to fix universities and colleges, these won't have much purchase on three quarters of people in work today [who are] not meeting companies' demands and [who] will still be in work in 2010.” (Campbell 2005, in Nixon et al. 2006)

The approach *Work-Based Learning* (WBL) can be described as a work-, organisation- and

student-centred approach to program delivery in higher education (HE). The main characteristic is that the HE institution assesses employee's competencies, the specifically related organisation's business needs and develops individualized learning programmes which can lead to a Certificate, Diploma as well as to a Bachelor, - Master or PhD-Degree.

### ***Purpose of WBL***

The development of and the participation in WBL-programs can be part of employers' personal- and organisational development, utilizing an academic framework. WBL forms a part of HE institutions activities on work-related learning, which are understood as learning outcomes achieved through activities which are based in, or derive from the context of work or the workplace.

### **1.5 Structured forms of transition between VET and HE**

When we discussed the approach accreditation of prior certificated learning, variation B) – formal *credit transfer* with advanced standing –, a structured form of transition between VET and HE was already explained. Due to the strong political focus on informal and non-formal learning, the extent to which EU countries make use of formal or structured credit transfer is not assessed yet. These structured ways of credit transfer are relevant for countries with strong VET-systems and for countries realizing that the sectors do have distinct missions and structures but that the futures of both are linked.

Beside the advanced standing the term block credit transfer or block transfer agreements is used. This is the process whereby a block of credits is granted to students who have successfully completed a certificate, diploma or cluster of courses that are recognized as having an academic wholeness, and that can be related meaningfully to a degree program. Distinctions or similarities between advanced standing and block credit transfer will become visible if they are related to the national education and credit transfer systems. Australia and British Columbia in Canada can be seen as pioneers in setting up structured relationships for credit transfer between VET and HE (and vice versa), and thus developing ways like joint courses, multi-sector campuses, infrastructure sharing in regional areas and research collaboration.

### **1.6 Relations between approaches**

VPL, RPL, APEL, APCL and WBL can either be used separately or can be combined by the institution as well as by the claimer. The result of a VPL or RPL can lead to the application for APEL. Institutions using APEL can utilize methods and instruments developed in VPL. An APEL applicant can combine individual assessment and formal advanced standing. WBL makes use of the instruments of APEL and many higher education institutions offer combined APEL & APCL-procedures. Students claiming for formal credit transfer can also apply for APEL, if they are work experienced.

### **1.7 Other forms of action to improve learning pathways from VET to HE**

Besides the implementation of individualized and structured forms of prior learning recognition other strategies can be identified in National policies. EU countries with a strong history in vocational education and training, like Germany, Switzerland and Austria implemented access policies for the transition from VET to HE. In Germany, for example, master craftsman, technicians, business and health care manager get formal access to higher education institutions (Universities of Applied Sciences) and the university laws in most federal states allow for access examinations.

Other countries have chosen to strengthen support-ways for non-traditional students. Sweden, for example, has implemented preparatory studies aimed at applicants who lack the specific



qualification for a given programme, a college-year as a bridge between adult education & upper secondary education and HE has been introduced, part-time courses, evening-courses and new courses, that match the demands of students with varying backgrounds better, have been developed. More vocational training programmes in HE with a shorter duration have been set up and last but not least the Universities have been encouraged to be active in offering contract-training programmes to public and private institutions/industry for staff qualification improvement training, in order to meet the demand of a more knowledge-based labour market and economy.

Research on the improvement of non-traditional students' participation in higher education indicates that these structural dimensions are very important and have an impact on the number of claims for APCL and APEL. At the same time alternative routes into higher education for adult students, e.g. access courses, bridge course or preparatory studies - are perceived as competitive routes to recognition and accreditation of prior learning.

## **2. Approaches traced in EU member states and some results**

There is very little research into the implementation of the APL, APEL and WBL approaches in Europe. Without doubt France and the United Kingdom do have the longest traditions and experiences with the implementation and running of APL, with setting up policies and developing quality standards. For all other nations the surveys conducted during the last years come to results which differ greatly.

A survey conducted in 2005 by the European University Association (EUA) shows that only in a minority of EU countries and HE institutions explicit strategies for the accreditation of prior learning – defined as non-formal or non-academic – exist (see Reichert et al., 2005, p 25). Only for France, Ireland, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Switzerland explicit strategies are reported. The National Bologna Reports confirm the EUA findings except for Switzerland – which has implemented APL for VET but not for HE yet – and for Norway, a country which has introduced APEL in 2001 already. It also has to be stated that in some countries, e.g. Italy, single faculties in HE institutions are very engaged in APEL.

The Bologna reports 2005 can be taken as an indicator that the Bologna process has a substantial effect on the recognition of prior learning, leading to new initiatives in many countries. This is only partly reflected in surveys comparing the country situations. But the latest publications show that the long term experience in France and the UK is positively challenged by the new initiatives. This leads to increased reflexivity on APL practice and the development of shared good practice. Let's now have a closer look on selected countries.

### **2.1 United Kingdom**

While there is no national initiative the development can be traced back from the 1970s onwards, and is influenced by the assessment movement of the United States as well as the developments of access provision, especially for women. The so called post-92-sector, former polytechnic institutes which are universities now, do have a greater impact on APEL than traditional universities. The A in the abbreviation APEL originally stood for assessment. Without having to change the abbreviation the approach changed 10 years ago to accreditation. This change may reflect the way from the *personal growth model*, which has been important at the beginning in the 1980s, to the *credit exchange model*, which derived partly from the impact of the credit transfer regulations in the 1990s.

APEL and APL approaches at present established cover both, accesses to a course or programme as well as credits for advanced standing. The success is partly seen as being dependent on the modularisation of the academic programmes and the specification of learning outcomes, combined with the implementation of the Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme

(CATS). From this perspective APEL is conceived as being mainstreamed and as a process which converts experience into a tradeable academic currency.

There is, however, not much evidence, that APEL has a significant impact on the wider community in higher education. The European Commission reported in *LeMagazine* in 2000 that in the UK some 28.000 students were recognised for access or advanced standing. This presumably is a number which indicates the activity in vocational education, since the British/Scottish National Vocational Qualification framework uses APEL. The Mapping APEL survey shows that the majority of higher education institutions have APEL policies in use at institutional or departmental level (or both). Nearly all new universities and two-thirds of old universities have implemented policies. But a gap between policy and practice is reported. The implementation of APEL policies, so the Mapping APEL survey concludes, does not mean that there are substantial numbers of students gaining APEL credit. Hard data on student numbers was very difficult to obtain, but numbers were often under 100 students per year per institution.

APEL is more likely to be introduced for advanced standing to postgraduate programmes, e.g. continuing professional development and courses for managers, than for access to graduate programmes. Experts see the relative lack of APEL activity with respect to *access* to alternative routes into higher education, for example access programmes.

The UK can also be seen as the leading country for the development of the work-based learning approach (WBL). But WBL has not been mainstreamed yet. The approach is driven by a few active practitioners and very few Learning Centres in the UK who are convinced of the value in work-based learning. A cultural shift within the HE institutions would be necessary to implement WBL more widely.

## **2.2 France**

France has one of the most advanced national systems for the validation of prior learning in Europe. It has been established by a number of national laws and decrees beginning as early as 1985 with the right to validate professional skills for *access* to a university course. The 1992 law and 1993 decree 'Validation des Acquis Professionnels' (VAP) gave people with a five-year-work experience in a field that corresponds to the diploma for which they are applying the right to gain credit with respect to this diploma. The law and decree of 2002 extends the rights of every citizen in France to request validation of experience, including non-salaried family work and voluntary activities. The 'Validation des Acquis de l' Experience' (VAE) supports the validation of competences irrespective of the learning environment and it is possible, to obtain a complete diploma without having attended the university for any formal learning associated with the programme. The French approach has been very much valued for its strong emphasis on the learner's ability to engage in problem solving and critical thinking. Implementation data from 2002 show that nearly 15,000 applications were received under the 1985 decree and around 12,000 received a positive response. Under the 1993 decree only 2,000 dossiers were received with 1,700 candidates getting a positive response. Resistance however seems to occur relating to the exemption of students from curricular obligation.

## **2.3 Scandinavia and Finland**

*Norway:* Strategies for the Validation of experiential learning were integrated in the Norwegian reform for lifelong learning, the Competence Reform, launched in 1999. The Validation Project (Realkompetanseprosjektet) formed the foundation for a national system for the validation of non-formal and informal learning during 1999-2002. Similar to France, the National procedures for the recognition of informal and non-formal learning in Norway are relevant in relation to the employment sector, to the third sector, to upper secondary education and higher

education. In 2001 around 2,600 students were given access to university and college degree courses on the basis of non-formal learning, for the academic year 2002/03 already 4,500 students were accepted on this basis. The exemption of modules or parts of the course is possible. The Norwegian REFINE sub-project, finished in 2005, delivers an insight in the processes concerning assessment of candidates and conducted case studies.

*Sweden:* Starting in autumn 2003 all higher education institutions are obliged to assess prior and experiential learning of applicants who demand such an assessment and who lack the formal qualifications or the documentation of such qualifications. Sweden is an example which shows, that many countries do have a bigger experience with the assessment of prior learning than with accreditation and intersectoral credit transfer. As early as 1998 out of 100 adult education and higher education institutions 57 reported that they use methods to assess adults' life and work experience.

*Denmark:* The Danish Government presented a policy paper to the Parliament in November 2004 to strengthen the *Recognition of prior learning within the education system*. There seems to be no assessment on the effects in higher education, yet.

*Finland:* The Ministry of Education published an *Education and Research Development Plan 2003-2008* which stresses the equal right for participating in education according to their abilities. In January 2006, the Ministry of Education granted the University of Turku a pilot project to promote APEL in universities, it is scheduled for three years. In Finland APEL is has not yet been applied.

## **2.4 Netherlands**

First activities for the recognition of prior learning go back to 1993 in a continuing learning report by the Ministry of Education. A committee was set up and developed the model EVC (recognition of informally acquired skills). In 2000 the Higher Education and Research plan mentions EVC as one instrument for dealing with the necessity to make higher education more accessible and attractive to certain groups of students by granting for RPL and by creating possibilities for individual learning pathways. From 2001-2004 a centre was financed to develop prior learning assessments for secondary education, higher education and the professional sector. In 2005 work of the national centre focused on quality assurance and the evaluation of assessment procedures. The only data available reflects the very beginning of the initiatives, stating that in 2001 the universities of professional education were ahead of the regular universities in developing EVC procedures.

## **2.5 Estonia and Slovenia**

*Estonia:* The developments in Estonia have emerged from vocational education and higher education. The Applied Higher Education Act and the Universities Act have created a context within which HE institutions develop APL and APEL procedures. The 2003 version of the Universities act allows up to 50% of Bachelor Studies to be recognised through APL and APEL. Also 50% can be applied to higher education and Master's studies through APEL. At the University of Tartu around 1,500 applications were presented for AP(E)L in the academic year 2003/2004. Most applications received full accreditation, less than 10% received partial accreditation and only 28 received no accreditation.

*Slovenia:* Next to Estonia the new EU-member state Slovenia has a policy for accreditation of prior learning. The Slovenian Institute for Adult Education trains accredited assessors and vocational advisors for the validation of prior learning. The Higher Education Act from 2004 pays full attention to lifelong education. The Council of Higher Education defines the criteria for the recognition of knowledge and skills acquired prior to enrolment. They are part of the new criteria on accreditation of higher education institutions and study programmes. Data are

not available yet.

## **2.6 Germany**

In 2002 the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder (KMK) published a resolution which can be seen as the starting point for formalised accreditation of prior learning activities in higher education (Universities and Universities of Applied Sciences) in Germany. “Learning outcomes from prior learning can be accepted as equivalent up to 50% of the higher education programme”.

In 2003 the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF), the German Rectors’ Conference (HRK) and KMK jointly signed a set of recommendations for HE institutions related to the KMK resolution with a strong focus on the accreditation of prior *certificated* learning and qualification linkages between FE and HE. The accreditation of prior certificated learning, especially state-wide recognized further education certificates, should be considered as partly equivalent. But since education lies in the responsibility of the Länder, the realisation is governed by the higher education laws of the Länder.

In 2004 and 2005 four projects have been funded by the Bund-Länder Commission for Educational Planning and Research Promotion BLK, from 2005-2007 eleven projects are founded by the BMBF to develop accreditation of prior learning approaches, to identify operational good practice and to enhance the implementation of accreditation of prior learning procedures, policies and infrastructure in the German higher education sector. Since Germany has a well developed dual system in vocational education and training and around 80 state-wide recognized further education certificates, the learning outcomes of these certificates are the basis for accreditation by the projects funded by the BMBF. So the focus will be on the development of APL and more precise on credit transfer with articulation agreements and advanced standing. First implementation results can be expected at the beginning of 2008.

In spring 2007 the BMBF launched a programme for the VET sector to promote a combined approach – a credit point system for VET with an inherent credit transfer system for articulation agreements and advanced standing within VET.

## **3. Challenges or resistances and strategies to overcome difficulties**

### **3.1 Accreditation of prior experiential learning**

#### ***3.1.1 Challenging the power of the knowledge-producer?***

That APEL has not yet become common practice in Europe’s higher education sector has partly to do with the relatively little interest shown by higher education institutions. Strong resistances are reported to exist in all HE institutions but above all within universities. Strong restriction of access can be observed in nearly all countries by so called elite universities. From an academic perspective APL and APEL challenge the view of universities as producer and primary source of ‘knowledge’. Universities fear a diversification and de-institutionalization of knowledge creation activities.

Resistances can be observed not only within the university system but also within professional bodies. Professional bodies have a significant amount of control over higher education entry standards and try to implement mechanism to restrict access. As long as they are not convinced that benefit can be gained, it may be difficult to implement APL procedures. It may be helpful for professions to embrace APEL as part of the professionalization strategy.

### ***3.1.2 Need to professionalize APEL procedures***

As already mentioned above, reports on APEL in England and Scotland show, that APEL activity are either limited in practice or take place at such an informal level that it is almost impossible to monitor it. Up to the year 2000 the term APEL was very often used to describe the assessment and not accreditation. The very central exercise for *assessment* is to make experiential learning visible which means to depict self-reflexive objectivations of learner's experiences. This already is very challenging for the learner as well as for the tutor who supports the process. But for *accreditation* two bigger methodological steps have to be taken: to 'translate' the self-reflexive objectivations into learning outcomes and to relate these learning outcomes to the learning outcomes of a higher education study programme. It seems that these complex requirements were underestimated in the past. To overcome the problems associated with the 'translation' e.g. in France APEL Guidance and Counselling was increased which led to the birth of a new profession APEL adviser. Professional networking strategies were developed; advisor's roles and functions were reflected and led to the professionalization of advisor's central approaches. In the UK criteria and approaches to assessment of experiential learning were professionalized, academic standards were developed and combined with quality assurance standards. However, within the scientific community APEL raises some difficult philosophical questions like: when can learning be perceived as being equivalent?

### ***3.1.3 Separated Worlds between VET and HE***

The two sectors, VET and HE, have been developed highly separated from each other in most countries and strongly related to this segregation a long tradition of separated EU approaches to education and training policies has to be noticed, which still shows its effects. Since the instruments to identify and assess learning in VET and HE could be similar, it's surprising that there is little share of instruments or results; Leonardo-Project VPL-model and CEDEFOP-results seem to be relatively unknown in HE and vice versa the Socrates-Projects in VET.

The effect is that vocational approaches like VPL and higher education procedures like APEL create their own versions of officially recommended and tradeable knowledge. Even in countries with a National credit transfer system the credit transfer is very often only limited to the same levels. Significant barriers remain to trade VPL results to higher education since fundamental differences in assessment framework seem to exist.

### ***3.1.4 APEL as an approach to include non-traditional students and ethnic minorities?***

The need for social inclusion and the improvement of employment opportunities were seen as the main drivers behind widening access to HE at the beginning. While APEL has its roots in the widening participation agenda, in the UK and Netherlands the most significant growth and success has been in continuing professional development. Professional experience related to a specific qualification is the most common form of learning experience in APEL claims. In England, the earlier interest in APEL within further education seems to have diminished considerably. A five-country report shows that none of the countries seems to have attracted many ethnic minority students.

Since APEL does not assess experience, but the learning gained from experience there is a translation process involved in the approach. The main tool *portfolio* is strongly based on writing. The translation always involves two 'texts', the source 'text' – portfolio – and the target 'text' – the learning outcomes of the course or module. It also involves concepts of perceiving the world. Good knowledge of the language, the cultural, institutional and professional concepts are necessary. On top of this the assessment procedures are time consuming. Switzerland reported for VPL procedures in VET that around 80 hours were needed by the

claimers to prepare the portfolio. This seems to be a big barrier for claimers belonging to ethnic minorities as well as for non-traditional students.

### **3.2 Work-based Learning**

From an academic perspective the work-based learning approach challenges even more the view of universities as producer and primary source of 'knowledge'. The EU program "Developing European Work Based Learning Approaches and Methods" (DEWBLAM) contributes to the creation of knowledge, knowledge transfer and knowledge-dissemination about WBL, but additional national funding is important for better implementation.

On a National Level an increase of acceptance could be gained a) through the assessment of learning outcomes relating to the descriptors underlying the National qualifications framework and b) the integration of WBL within specific missions or standards of the HE institution. This could be e.g. the concept of knowledge transfer, response to market demands or/and through encouraging applications from under-represented groups in higher education.

Research is required to increase the understanding of work-based learning, both in terms of developing partnerships with employers to maximise knowledge creation and of establishing methods to observe how people learn in the workplace. Research also is required to build a better understanding of the pedagogy of WBL and the potentials between degrees stemming from formal programmes compared to WBL.

### **3.3 Structured credit transfer and qualification linkages**

If we talk about challenges and resistances, we have to keep in mind that the main political priority is on the accreditation of experiential learning. Despite the fact that the Memorandum on Lifelong Learning by the European Commission and other EU declarations talk about prior **and** experiential learning, there is no evidence that EU programmes focus on or give incentives to strengthen structured credit transfer or formalised qualification linkages between VET and HE. For EU countries with well developed VET systems the approach of structured credit transfer can be seen as a promising way. So the biggest challenge for this approach is that there is no data and research available for countries of the Europe Union. Best models of best practice are as mentioned above Australia and British Columbia in Canada.

### **3.4 Gap between policy and practice in Lifelong Learning in Europe**

Very few European countries have a clear strategy for lifelong learning. This gap between policy and practice affects the implementation of APEL and APCL. This gap is recognized by the European Commission since they concluded in 2003 that little or no legislation appears specifically on Lifelong Learning as such. For this reason the strategy of formal recognition of competences regardless of how and where they have been acquired has to be strengthened as well as the necessity to implement systems for guidance to support all citizens to reflect on learning and create biographical reflexivity for learning pathways.

## **4. The contribution of National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and a credit system for the implementation of prior learning accreditation**

### **4.1 Can NQFs increase claims for prior learning assessments?**

National Qualifications Frameworks are generally seen as important instruments for integration, access and equivalency. Further more it is highlighted that NQF developments are accompanied by strengthening the discourse on competence models. This debate leads to a greater awareness of the relevance of learning outcome descriptions. The change from input

to outcome models is the basis for increasing the validity of equivalences in learning outcome assessments.

NQF is the very basis to relate qualifications and levels to each other, which makes the accreditation of certificated learning much easier. Scotland, e.g., reports a much easier implementation of APEL since *The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF)* was launched and since the SCQF levels 8 and 11 are provided for the Scottish Vocational Qualifications and for Higher Education.

In Ireland the National Framework of Qualifications, launched in 2003, forms the basis of a flexible and integrated system for all sectors. As an important part of NQF in 2006 the *Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in Further and Higher Education and Training* were launched, which build up a system and accomplish the NFQ as a tool.

The Netherlands sees a strong relationship between the International Credential Evaluation (ICE) and Prior Learning Assessments and Recognition. Austria, which has not implemented APL or APEL yet, stated that the development of a national qualifications framework will be an important prerequisite for official recognition and validation in higher education.

Experts expect the development of the *EQF for Lifelong Learning* to have a profound effect on all educational providers by forming the context for the recognition of formal, informal and non-formal education. Optimists create the vision that in future it will be increasingly easy for learning to be nationally and internationally recognised wherever it takes place (Adam, 2005, p 45). The value depends on the weakness or strength of the relation between the European Qualifications Framework for Higher Education, which is already developed and the *EQF for Lifelong Learning*.

For the work-based learning approach the hypothesis is put forward, that a coherent system of learning outcome descriptions, as it is represented in NQFs, is an essential requirement for a successful implementation of WBL.

#### **4.2 Contribution of a Credit transfer System**

Main study findings referring to the general question of the impact of credit-based systems on learning come to the conclusion that they make a great contribution to a more inclusive learning culture since they are attractive to non-traditional participants. Not the credit-based system per se is the valuable instrument but the way by which the qualifications or courses are modularised and offered in a flexible manner.

“Credit-based learning systems have been designed to overcome barriers to people taking part in learning. They promote a culture of achievement since each small step in learning is rewarded. The systems are very flexible as credits can be accumulated in different ways for different purposes” (Davies et al., 2000, p 1).

The main aspect stressed in the quotation is flexibility through accumulation of credits. As the higher education area shows, a credit system can function not only as accumulation but also as transfer system. Credit transfer recognises previous learning undertaken at one institution or provider as being equivalent to the learning undertaken at another institution or provider. Credit transfer may be granted for individual modules, subjects and/or units of competency, or in some cases for whole courses or qualifications which are deemed to be equivalent.

Credit-based systems and modularisation are said to be important ‘drivers’ for APL procedures, but the failure to create an integrated European credit system is seen as an impediment to increase transitions between VET and HE. As long as there is not a common understanding of the underlying concepts of ‘credit’, neither NQF nor EQF will function as a smooth credit

transfer system between VET and HE. It will again be necessary to assess the learning outcome equivalences, which is a difficult and time consuming process.

## **5. Visible effects in Europe through implementation of APL for intersectoral credit transfer**

Given the heterogeneous situation in Europe and the fact that only France and the UK have long term experience with intersectoral approaches on prior learning accreditation it may be a bit pretentious to talk about visible effects in terms of quantity. Still only a few percent of higher education students get access or advanced standing in HE institutions via APL routes.

But given the aims connected with APL and the polyvalent importance of the concept, qualitative effects and dimensions – hopefully clearly visible in the future – are worth being put forward.

### **5.1 Increasing professionalization of APL**

- The understanding of portfolio as an important tool increased. A methodological basis is developed which is available and can be shared by APEL advisor.
- There is an increasing understanding how the learning outcome description relate to the step to identify learning outcome equivalences.
- Process models are developed, describing the most important processes, e.g. identification of learning outcomes, documentary proof, implementation process in institutions, information & guidance, and quality assurance.
- Quality assurance guidelines on the accreditation of prior learning or higher education are developed and can be shared.
- APEL Guidance and counselling knowledge is developed and assessed.

### **5.2 Effects on Learning in HE in General**

- APEL is perceived as an approach which has the ability to revise the pedagogical practices and provision in higher education and is seen as a very challenging way for renewing continuing education and lifelong learning in higher education.
- APEL supports the concepts of biographical and reflective learning and is seen as very important for the self-esteem of the socially excluded.
- New concepts for teaching and learning with work experienced students and non-traditional students emerge. This will have an increasing value once lifelong learning is practiced. The above mentioned developments on advanced standing in Australia reflect the fact that the country is as world leader in lifelong learning with a high level of mature age students and the highest number of over forties participating in vocational education and training as well as higher education.

### **5.3 Key for knowledge transfer between the world of work and education**

- Running APL and particularly WBL is seen as an excellent opportunity to increase the dialogue with companies, with non profit organisations and with individual learners. The approaches can be seen as eye-opener for the question, which of the learning outcomes are important for all students.
- It increases the awareness about the role of the labour market, on the one hand offering employees the chance to develop competences and by re-integrating the qualifications



stemming from WBL or APEL.

- All approaches have the capacity to increase the knowledge transfer between education sectors, the ‘world of work’ and Higher Education and will contribute significantly to the permeability in education, vocational training and further education.

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