

## NEW CHALLENGES IN RECOGNITION: THE RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING

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### Why is the recognition of prior experiential learning important and what are the national and institutional implications of this for lifelong learning?

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### 1. Introduction - the recognition of prior learning

There have been significant developments in the area of international recognition since the inception of the Bologna educational revolution in 1998-1999. In 2007 a formidable array of recognition tools, techniques and processes exist. The challenge facing us now is not to create more devices but to ensure the existing ones are properly and extensively employed. The 'recognition of prior experiential learning' is a good example of one aspect of recognition that has existed in some countries for a long time, where considerable good practice has been developed but remains, with a few notable exceptions, generally underused and underexploited by European higher education institutions (HEIs). This is unfair to students, wastes resources and is symptomatic of inefficient education systems. The Bologna Process has to date produced minimal improvements in the area of experiential and lifelong learning.

It is understandable that the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), at first glance, does not appear an exciting topic.<sup>1</sup> To many it is a dry, technical area of little general importance. This official 'Bologna' seminar is a perfect opportunity to expose such erroneous thinking and place it, and particularly the recognition of experiential learning, at the middle of many educational reforms. If it is not given serious consideration many of the Bologna

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<sup>1</sup> Recognition of prior learning (RPL): any formal process that establishes and acknowledges that learning has taken place. In the Netherlands this is referred to as Valuation of Prior Learning (VPL) and in Canada the term Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) is used.

improvements to higher education structures and practices are undermined. This is particularly true of various aspirations associated with the lifelong learning, the Lisbon Strategy and national and international attempts to 'widen participation' designed to meet the needs of individuals, employers and institutions in the twenty-first century.

The Bologna educational revolution is bringing about a series of quite fundamental changes to the structure, approach, content and conduct of higher education. Collectively, the various individual reforms amount to more than the sum of their parts and this is not widely understood. When developments in qualifications frameworks, cycles, learning outcomes, quality assurance, credits, recognition and lifelong learning are put together something new and powerful will be created. The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) will provide immense opportunities for countries and institutions providing they fully embrace the changes inherent within the new architecture for higher education that is emerging.

In the context of recognition this has profound implications. The new levels of transparency created by qualifications frameworks and the expression of the curriculum and levels in terms of learning outcomes will mean that much greater precision is possible when recognition judgements are made. However, it must be remembered that for most countries the difficult task of producing and implementing qualifications frameworks and learning outcomes is just commencing.

This second Riga Bologna seminar devoted to recognition is indeed timely. This background paper seeks to focus primarily on the recognition of prior experiential learning; explore its implications and challenges for states and higher education institutions; identify some of the techniques employed; and place it in the context of the Bologna reforms with special reference to lifelong learning.

## 2. Definitions, boundaries and scope

The recognition of prior learning confronts us with the familiar problem of multiple definitions and that reflect the diversity of practice and understanding across Europe. It is clear that there are variations in meaning and terminology. The recognition of prior learning encompasses the recognition of formal, informal and non-formal learning.

*Formal learning is learning that occurs in an organised and structured environment (in a school/training centre or on the job) and is explicitly designated as learning (in terms of objectives, time or resources). Formal learning is intentional from the learner's point of view. It typically leads to certification.*

*Informal learning is learning resulting from daily activities related to work, family or leisure. It is not organised or structured in terms of objectives, time or learning support. Informal learning is in most cases unintentional from the learner's perspective. It typically does not lead to certification.*

*Non formal learning is learning which is embedded in planned activities not explicitly designated as learning (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support), but which contain an important learning element. Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner's point of view. It normally does not lead to certification.<sup>2</sup>*

There are therefore important distinctions to be made between the traditional and more familiar recognition of prior 'formal academic' studies and the recognition of 'experiential learning' that has taken place outside the normal academic environment.

In the emerging world of European higher education the preoccupation with lifelong learning naturally highlights the need to evaluate learning wherever it has taken place. In this paper the Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning (APCL) refers to the recognition of certificated learning (learning formally assessed by another body) for the purposes of access (credit

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<sup>2</sup> Source Cedefop glossary, 2003.

entry) to a programme, or exemption (credit exemption) from part of a programme of study within the national and/or international context.<sup>3</sup> The Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) refers to the process whereby the individual's competencies (knowledge, skills, attitudes and abilities) gained in non-formal (work-based) and informal (life experience) learning environments are accredited (assessed and recognised). APEL involves the comparison of the outcomes of the previous 'experiential' learning against the requirements of existing qualifications for the purposes of credit access and credit exemption.<sup>4</sup> This is consistent with the CEDEFOP understanding of APEL that describes the validation of informal and non-formal learning as the process of assessing and recognising a wide range of knowledge, know-how, skills and competences which people develop throughout their lives in different contexts.

APEL is based on the simple notion that it is pointless to ask citizens to re-learn what they already know and that modern education systems need to remove such barriers. It is predicated on the notion that people learn throughout their lives in a variety of settings: in family life (home making, caring, domestic organisation); at work (paid or unpaid) undertaking community, voluntary or leisure activities; and through life experiences. The skills, knowledge and experience gained can be equal to those gained by students following traditional routes through formal education. This sort of learning from experience is normally unstructured in comparison with formal learning but this does not invalidate it. APEL highlights an untapped reservoir of knowledge, skills and abilities that deserves recognition.

It is obvious from this short explanation that APCL and APEL are complex tools that have implications for any institution or country that uses them. Furthermore, developments in credits, credit systems, qualifications frameworks, learning outcomes, quality assurance, and linking different sectors of education into frameworks for lifelong learning all relate to APCL and APEL.

The rapidly changing European educational environment is becoming more supportive of coordinated international action to boost the introduction of lifelong learning, APCL and APEL techniques. Obviously, European HEIs have huge experience in the use of APCL but even here artificial barriers between vocational and academic education hamper recognition. However, the main focus of this paper is the challenges and implications of APEL in the context of lifelong learning.

### **3. National and international applications of APEL**

It is likely that the national and international application of APEL will become a more prominent element in the fast-changing vocational and higher education environment. Students will become increasingly mobile and seek the formal recognition of their learning wherever and however it was gained and wherever they find themselves. The development of systems to record lifelong learning encourages the need to introduce APEL processes that create the opportunity to recognise and assess learning, no matter where it has taken place. Across Europe there is an expanding range of courses, units and programmes associated with Continuing Professional Development (CPD), Continuing Education and part-time vocationally related studies. These all benefit when APEL is integrated into individually customised learning programmes (based on learning contracts) that can lead to recognised first and second cycle qualifications. Furthermore, the relationship between traditional universities and non-traditional education providers is likely to be transformed by APEL and the development of 'new style' qualifications frameworks that characterise the Bologna reforms.

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<sup>3</sup> The term 'accreditation' is often used synonymously with the terms 'recognition' 'acknowledgement' 'evaluation' 'assessment' and 'validation' as all these terms are often employed to denote largely the same thing. However, it must be recognised that there are subtle differences of meaning in English. This is a source of confusions especially when terms are translated across Europe.

<sup>4</sup> Much pioneering work on the detailed processes associated with APEL has been done in Canada, USA, France and the UK.

APEL has increasingly important applications for refugees and displaced persons who cannot produce certificated evidence of their skills and competencies.

Unfortunately, European institutional and national progress in developing and using APEL has often been localised, isolated in nature and relatively ineffectual. The greatest progress has been made in France, Ireland, UK, Netherlands and Denmark but in most European countries there is relatively little advancement. This was confirmed by the Trends IV report in 2005 that indicated:

*Research shows that prior learning is still not perceived as an important topic in many institutions...Only in a minority of countries and HEIs explicit strategies for the recognition of non-formal or non-academic exist, notably in Belgium, France, Ireland, the Netherlands, the UK and Switzerland (Trends IV, page 23).*

*The recognition of non-formal/non-academic qualifications (APL/APEL) needs to be put on the agenda of more HEIs as it will be an increasingly important topic in the future national and European discussions on higher education and vocational training (Trends IV, page25).*

It is difficult to gain precise information on the full national situations but even in countries where advanced systems are in place this does not mean that such systems are extensively used.<sup>5</sup> A survey in the UK of universities by the Learning from Experience Trust (LET) in 2000 found that the majority of institutions had public policies on APEL but only a minority actively employed them.<sup>6</sup> APEL is often misunderstood and regarded with uncertainty and suspicion.<sup>7</sup>

The good news is that this situation may well alter under the combined impetus of changes currently affecting European higher education instigated by Bologna Process and European Commission education and training initiatives. Regarding the latter, the European Commission has developed a comprehensive '*European Inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning*'. This is a catalogue of good practices designed to make informal and non-formal learning more visible. It is a collection of information drawn from a wide range of countries.<sup>8</sup> The Inventory is a good example of a recent step taken towards harnessing non-formal and informal learning for the public good.

#### 4. The European Higher Education Area (EHEA), lifelong learning and APEL

The Bologna-inspired transformations that are being experienced by European education and training spheres are not just surface alterations but are deep-rooted changes to the structure, content, methodology, purpose, delivery and nature of our higher education systems. European states are adjusting these to cope with the newly discovered rigours of the global market - which means ensuring that more qualifications clearly relate to employment. Consequently, the relationships between traditional higher education institutions, non-traditional providers (in-house company universities, etc.) and business and industry are being re-examined. This is long overdue and it is forcing more attention on the lifelong learning agenda.

Lifelong learning encompasses all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills/competences and/or qualifications for personal, social and/or professional reasons. It thus encompasses the whole spectrum of formal, non-formal and informal learning.

<sup>5</sup> A useful source of recent information on APEL is the text produced by the EULLearN project: Corradi C, Evans N, and Valk A, (2006) *Recognising Experiential Learning - Practices in European Universities*, Tartu University Press.

<sup>6</sup> Learning from Experience trust (2000) *Mapping Experiential Learning: a survey of APEL in English Universities*. London, LET.

<sup>7</sup> A common misunderstanding is that APEL is just measuring 'experience' the number of years an individual may have been working in a particular area. This is far from the truth as it concerns the evaluation of the skills, abilities and knowledge that any individual has gained - expressed in terms of appropriate learning outcomes. It is never a measurement of time served.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.ecotec.com/europeaninventory/>.

Ministerial commitment to reform is clear from the various Bologna Communiqués that have been issued. When Ministers met in Prague in 2001 they indicated:

*Lifelong learning is an essential element of the European Higher Education Area. In the future Europe, built upon a knowledge-based society and economy, lifelong learning strategies are necessary to face the challenges of competitiveness and the use of new technologies and to improve social cohesion, equal opportunities and the quality of life (Prague Communiqué, 2001).*

Meeting again in Berlin in 2003, their next Communiqué stressed the significance of lifelong learning and specifically included a mention of prior learning:

*Ministers underline the important contribution of higher education in making lifelong learning a reality. They are taking steps to align their national policies to realise this goal and urge Higher Education Institutions and all concerned to enhance the possibilities for lifelong learning at higher education level including the **recognition of prior learning**. They emphasise that such action must be an integral part of higher education activity. Ministers furthermore call those working on qualifications frameworks for the European Higher Education Area to encompass the wide range of flexible learning paths, opportunities and techniques and to make appropriate use of the ECTS credits. They stress the need to improve opportunities for all citizens, in accordance with their aspirations and abilities, to follow the lifelong learning paths into and within higher education (Berlin Communiqué, 2003).*

The concept of lifelong learning as set out in these two Communiqués clearly indicates the Ministers' view that lifelong learning is an inclusive way to define all learning activity and that, within this, higher education has a vital role. The real challenge still with us is how to make such changes a reality - to move from theory to common practice. A recent Bologna initiative that will have a further fundamental impact on this is the creation of 'new style' national frameworks of qualifications and the overarching European framework for qualifications of the European Higher Education Area.<sup>9</sup> The Ministers at their Bergen meeting in May 2005 indicated in their Communiqué:

*We adopt the overarching framework for qualifications in the EHEA, comprising three cycles (including, within national contexts, the possibility of intermediate qualifications), generic descriptors for each cycle based on learning outcomes and competences, and credit ranges in the first and second cycles. We commit ourselves to elaborating national frameworks for qualifications compatible with the overarching framework for qualifications in the EHEA by 2010, and to having started work on this by 2007. We ask the Follow-up Group to report on the implementation and further development of the overarching framework.*

*We underline the importance of ensuring complementarity between the overarching framework for the EHEA and the proposed broader framework for qualifications for lifelong learning encompassing general education as well as vocational education and training as now being developed within the European Union as well as among participating countries. We ask the European Commission fully to consult all parties to the Bologna Process as work progresses (Bergen Communiqué, 2005).*

The agreement to create 'new style' national qualifications frameworks articulated to the overarching framework represents a fundamental change that encompasses the adoption by European higher education of levels, level descriptors, qualifications descriptors and learning outcomes. These form a series of 'external reference points' that will provide transparency and a common methodological approach for European higher education systems. These tools lay the basis for more accurate international recognition decisions as well as facilitating the introduction of APEL and APEL techniques. A major objective of many new style

<sup>9</sup> Following the adoption of the report was produced by a working party established by the Bologna Follow up Group BFUG: [http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main\\_doc/050218\\_QF\\_EHEA.pdf](http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main_doc/050218_QF_EHEA.pdf).

qualifications frameworks is to recognise all learning achievements by supporting the development of alternative pathways to qualifications. Indeed without the introduction of learning outcomes and the rest of the innovations, effective and fair APEL systems are severely hampered. The common international use of learning outcomes at the level of the module, qualification and national descriptors is fundamental to further progress in national and international recognition. Indeed, progress in this area is closely linked to the advances in European approaches to quality assurance. The 2005, ENQA, Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, mark a major step forward in creating common approaches that closely complement the creation of qualifications frameworks.

Progress in the field of lifelong learning under the Bologna Process has been slow. This is tacitly acknowledged in the Bergen Communiqué which charged the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) with widening the stocktaking process, to report in 2007:

*In particular, we shall look for progress in...creating opportunities for flexible learning paths in higher education, including procedures for the recognition of prior learning (Bergen Communiqué, 2005).*

It is quite possible that the stocktaking report for the London Ministerial meeting in May 2007 will report some marginal improvement in the situation as more countries draft principles and guidelines for the recognition of prior learning (APCL and APEL) including France, Norway, Denmark, UK, Germany and the Netherlands. There is also in existence the European Commission's set of 'Common Principles for the Validation of non-formal and Informal Learning' published in 2004 (detailed in the next section). But guidelines and principle do not alone change hearts, minds and practice on the ground.

## **5. The European Commission's European Qualifications Framework (EQF) for lifelong learning and APEL**

European Union Ministers of Education have for some years declared lifelong learning an important area for progress but unfortunately few countries have clear and effective national strategies to implement it.

The EU Member States in the late 1990s recognised the necessity to develop and support the principles of lifelong learning and began the process of introducing the necessary reforms to help make it a reality. This began with the Lisbon Declaration of March 2000, when the Heads of State and Governments set out the strategic goal that the European Union should become the world's most competitive knowledge-based economy by 2010. This is the heart of 'the Lisbon Strategy'. Education and training are considered to be key factors in achieving this goal. In order to develop, sustain and benefit from this evolving economic and social order, it states that EU citizens need to acquire and update, on an ongoing basis, the requisite knowledge, competences and skills to become a world-class workforce.

In 2002 31 European Ministers of Education and Training called for common guiding principles for the validation of non-formal and informal learning, stating that there is a need to:

*Develop a set of common principles regarding validation of non-formal and informal learning with the aim of ensuring greater comparability between approaches in different countries and at different levels (European Commission, 2003).*

This reflects the increasing political attention given to learning taking place outside formal education and training institutions. A progress report was published in 2003 and titled 'Validation of non-formal and informal learning - contribution of the Commission expert group'. This put forward a detailed basis for such common principles that were subsequently finalised in 2004.<sup>10</sup> The principles are designed to apply at the local and national levels and cover the purpose of validation, individual entitlements, responsibilities of institutions and stakeholders,

<sup>10</sup>[http://www.ecotec.com/europeaninventory/publications/EC\\_common\\_principles\\_validation\\_20040303.pdf](http://www.ecotec.com/europeaninventory/publications/EC_common_principles_validation_20040303.pdf) .

confidence and trust, impartiality and credibility and legitimacy of any system for the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

The Lisbon strategy evolved further when the Council and Commission agreed a Joint Interim Report on 26 February 2004, "Education and Training 2010". This reviewed progress in implementing the working programme on the future objectives and set out a number of priority areas for future work. Progress was deemed to have been disappointing.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, the rapid progress in higher education reform by the Bologna Process underlined the relatively poor pace of development in the vocational education and training (VET) area. This led the Commission to attempt to match the speed of the Bologna reforms by linking them with the slower 'Bruges-Copenhagen Process' designed to enhance European cooperation in Vocational Education and Training (VET).<sup>12</sup> One positive and potentially landmark outcome of this has been the rapid development by the European Commission of their proposals '*Towards a European qualifications framework (EQF) for lifelong learning*'.<sup>13</sup> This is an ambitious initiative that seeks to fuse vocational education and training (VET) with higher education (HE). The EQF is conceived as a broader 'meta-framework' that would subsume the Bologna higher education framework. In effect, the Commission is seeking to unite the Bologna Process with the Bruges-Copenhagen Process.

It is now becoming clear exactly what sort of arrangement for lifelong learning will eventually emerge across Europe with the EQF potentially playing an important role. APEL will be a significant component and it is likely that any system will eventually feature a credit-based process for recording credits and breaking down the barriers between VET and higher education.

The objective of the planned EQF is to create a European qualifications framework, which will enable qualifications systems at the national and sector levels to relate to each other. This reference structure will be used on a voluntary basis and will facilitate the transfer and recognition of qualifications held by individual citizens. It is specifically designed to be a device that will stimulate national systems to create compatible, flexible lifelong learning frameworks. The EQF consists of:

- the core, which would be a set of common reference points – referring to learning outcomes located in a structure of 8 levels;
- reference levels would be supported by a range of tools and instruments addressing the needs of individual citizens (an integrated European credit transfer and accumulation system for lifelong learning);
- a set of common principles and procedures providing guidelines for cooperation between stakeholders at different levels - in particular focusing on quality assurance, validation, guidance and key competences.

The EQF is a learning outcomes based framework for cooperation where each country would establish its own compatible national qualifications framework. It is designed to facilitate the development, transparency and recognition of non-formal and informal learning using APEL. It also supports a better match between the needs of the labour market (for knowledge, skills and competences) and education and training provisions and facilitates the transfer and use of qualifications across different countries and education and training systems. It subsumes the Bologna cycles and encompasses all education from school education to doctoral level study in a true lifelong learning framework.

Member States will be expected to relate their national qualifications systems to the EQF (by 2009). It will therefore enable individuals and employers to use the EQF as a reference tool to

<sup>11</sup> In 2005 a mid-way review of the Lisbon strategy confirmed this: [http://europa.eu.int/growthandjobs/index\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu.int/growthandjobs/index_en.htm)

<sup>12</sup> Details of the Bruges-Copenhagen Process can be found at: [http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/copenhagen/index\\_en.html](http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/copenhagen/index_en.html)

<sup>13</sup> Commissioner Jan Figel launched the Commission's consultation on the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) at the informal meeting of European education ministers in London on 12 July. The consultation document can be downloaded from the European Commission website: [http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/policies/2010/consultations\\_en.html](http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/policies/2010/consultations_en.html).

compare the qualifications levels of different countries and different education and training systems, for example vocational training and higher education. The EQF is designed to function as a type of translation device to make relationships between qualifications and different systems clearer. Associated with the EQF is the parallel development of a European credit system for vocational education and training (ECVET). Its objective is to facilitate the transfer, validation and recognition of learning outcomes acquired by citizens moving from one learning context to another or one qualifications system to another. Consultations on the ECVET proposals end in March 2007.<sup>14</sup>

In the long term the development of the EQF could have profound effects on all educational providers by forming the context for the recognition of formal, non-formal and informal education. In future, it could become increasingly easy for learning to be nationally and internationally recognised wherever it takes place. However, much depends on the implementation of the EQF and its relationship with Bologna reforms (see section 7 of this paper).

The Commission's new lifelong learning programme has a battery of initiatives designed to 'support learning opportunities from childhood to old age in every single life situation'. It has a budget of €7000 million for the period 2007-2013.<sup>15</sup>

## 6. APEL: benefits, applications, approaches and implications

There are numerous reasons why APEL is an important element in the development of twenty-first century European higher education. It brings with it a number of clear benefits. It straddles academic and vocational education and training. It raises challenging pedagogical questions and can be applied using a number of different techniques within conventional quality assurance arrangements. These dimensions are explored in this section.

### 6.1 Benefits of APEL

APEL represents a process by which people of all ages and backgrounds can receive formal recognition for the skills and knowledge they already possess. This can help citizens in number of ways. It is of particular value to:

- Mature students and socially excluded minority groups returning to education who lack the formal qualifications required for entry to a course of study. APEL can be used to gain access to a course of higher education;
- Students of all ages who wish to study overseas, and whose domestic qualifications are not automatically accepted for entry to the overseas course of study. Here, APEL can be used to gain access to the course of study;
- Past students who have previous educational qualifications but now seek to add to those qualifications in order to broaden their expertise or change careers. APEL can be used to avoid repeating specific modules/units of learning by providing evidence that prior learning has already taken place and to allow appropriate exemptions;
- Students who wish to return to courses of study that have been interrupted by work or family commitments. APEL can provide evidence that learning in the intervening period has occurred;
- Anyone seeking professional qualifications that need to provide evidence that specific training and practical work experience has taken place. APEL provides the framework for collecting and presenting this sort of evidence;

<sup>14</sup> Details can be found at: [http://ec.europa.eu/education/ecvt/index\\_en.html](http://ec.europa.eu/education/ecvt/index_en.html) .

<sup>15</sup> [http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/static/en/lip/index\\_en.htm](http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/static/en/lip/index_en.htm) .

- Students on full or part-time courses who wish to gain recognition for informal learning that has taken place through work or leisure-related activities.<sup>16</sup>

The benefits of APEL extend to students and institutions. Students have the value of their accomplishments recognised, enjoy a shorter time to complete formal qualifications, can save money by being exempted from course elements and have their particular career needs met. It facilitates their entry to programmes and addresses the needs of disadvantaged groups, part-time and mature students. The individual can also benefit from the actual APEL process itself. There are also potential gains for institutions. APEL allows them to maximise the use of their resources, better meet the needs of students and employers, and widen participation. In the workplace the worker's employability can be enhanced. The use of APEL and the acknowledgement of its potential to enrich the teaching, learning and assessment process have major benefits for curriculum design and delivery, particularly in the area of Work Based Learning (WBL). APEL can also be used as a way to encourage disadvantaged groups in the population into formal education by acknowledging the skills and abilities they possess. APEL can aid social inclusion by introducing more flexible pathways into and within education systems.

## 6.2 APEL and Work Based Learning (WBL)

There is no agreed definition of Work Based Learning (WBL). The definition adopted by the DEWBLAM project is useful:

*Work based learning is an educational and training approach in which competence development is given a central position, and in which prior and experiential learning, formal learning, informal learning and non-formal learning complement each other in the progress toward formal recognised and accredited qualification by the higher education and training (HET) institution.*

*Work based learning is an experience-centred teaching and learning approach in which the learner will develop competencies in multiple contexts, especially in the workplace and because of the workplace. The learner undertakes a theoretical, (applied) scientific project, which is essential and relevant for study and work environments.<sup>17</sup>*

The application and tools of APEL are clearly applicable to WBL. There are many different types of WBL including sophisticated approaches that use negotiated and tailored learning agreements. These involves three partners; the employer, the employee and an academic. A process is undertaken where a draft learning agreement is created that would indicate the qualification to be awarded, and any elements of APCL and APEL being sought. At some stage the learning outcomes for all the components, including any project work, would have to be approved before the learning agreement is finalised. The APEL part would include an appropriate process where the student would submit evidence of the learning claimed. The nature and method of this varies from institution to institution. The remaining strands of learning would then be undertaken at the workplace and the university.

It should be remembered that many existing qualifications involve different patterns and elements of WBL including placements, internships, sandwich years, etc.<sup>18</sup> An interesting manifestation of WBL are Professional Doctorates (PD) which include an APEL dimension. These originate from the USA with first being awarded in 1921. They are increasingly being awarded in the UK and Australia in such subjects as Education, Business, Law, Psychology, Health Sciences, Humanities, Design and Architecture.<sup>19</sup> Professional Doctorates are

<sup>16</sup> This list is partly based on information 'a practitioner's guide' prepared by John Wilcox and Richard Brown of Bradford College and drawn from the UK Higher Education Academy, UK Centre for Materials Education, Resources Library: <http://www.materials.ac.uk/resources/library/apelintro.asp>.

<sup>17</sup> Developing European Work Based learning Approaches and Methods (DEWBLAM) DG EAC funded project (2006) *Work Based Learning Guidelines*, page 3, Florence.

<sup>18</sup> In 2000 the UK government introduced a new award 'Foundation degrees' in which a WBL component is a requirement. This new award is part of the UK widening participation agenda to introduce more vocational qualifications that use APEL to facilitate entry.

<sup>19</sup> Long and Pool, page 12.

distinguished from the PhD in both form and rationale: they involve a significant proportion of teaching as well a research thesis. Commonly they integrate academic and professional knowledge. Professional Doctorates are usually designed to develop the capability of individuals to work within a professional context. They are typified by flexibility of delivery, integration in the workplace and widespread use of a portfolio model of assessment rather than coursework plus dissertation. Most students who study for them are experienced and practising professionals who study part-time. PDs can include APEL elements for the purposes of admission and/or as part of the programme. In the case of a PhD by published works APEL plays a central role.

### 6.3 APEL tools, techniques and approaches

Several different techniques are employed in the process of evaluating experiential learning. It is not possible to detail all these in this paper. The process and techniques vary between countries and institutions.<sup>20</sup> The following are some of the approaches used to measure and make judgements about the value and relevance of any particular APEL claim:

- Undertaking an existing assessment for a course e.g. by written **examination or assignment**. This is done without attending the course. On occasion an examination might be specifically designed for an APEL candidate and assignment work include the observation of performance;
- Creating a **portfolio** as the basis of a claim for learning. This would contain suitable evidence of the learning that demonstrates the candidate's skills, achievements, knowledge and experience and matches this with the learning outcomes of the academic or vocational programme that they seek to enter or get exemption from some part. It will contain evidence and reflection of the learning that has been gained by experience;
- Submitting a **project** that encapsulates and demonstrates the prior learning claimed by an individual;
- The development of **Personal Development Plans (PDP)** where the student plans his/her individualised plan and objective for study with the aid of a mentor/tutor. The previous learning experiences are included in such a process;
- Oral assessment by **interview** can be used, as part of an APEL process, to establish an APEL claim.

There are variations in the application of the techniques briefly described above. Several options can be used or a combination of approaches. In the UK the QAA 2004 '*Guidelines on the Accreditation of Prior Learning*' encourages HEIs to the use of a range of tools to assess APEL claims.<sup>21</sup> In France there is a highly developed system in place for APEL based on the evaluation of competences. France has two legal frameworks *Validation des Acquis Professionnels (VAP)* established in 1985 for experiential admission to higher education and *Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience (VAE)* established in 2002 for the partial or complete award of all qualifications. These unequivocally acknowledge that people gain valuable learning from non-formal and informal learning and that this learning is capable of being officially recognised as equivalent to knowledge gained in the classroom. The French approach places greater emphasis on the learner's ability to engage in problem solving and critical thinking than establishing equivalence with the outcomes of academic programmes. French universities employ an exhaustive system for APEL under their VAE arrangements based on the use of a 'Jury' (assessing panel) and the use of mentors and portfolios. Following the law adopting VAE in 2002 the French government ran a widespread national campaign to promote the concept.<sup>22</sup> VAE processes involve a partnership between the

<sup>20</sup> Useful information on the application of different techniques can be found on many HEI websites and a further useful source is the UK Learning from Experience Trust: <http://www.learningexperience.org.uk/>. There are also a host of different practitioner guides in existence.

<sup>21</sup> Principle 7 of the QAA guidelines: <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/apl/guidance.asp>.

<sup>22</sup> Details of the French systems for VAE can be found at: <http://www.education.gouv.fr/vae/default.htm>.

universities and social partners (employers and unions). The innovative French approach is consistent with the lifelong learning aspirations of the Bologna Process and much good practice has been developed there.

#### 6.4 APEL theoretical and pedagogical dimension

APEL challenges orthodox views about knowledge, pedagogy and learning. It raises important questions by exploring the terrain between adult experience and learning and traditional academic knowledge and the institutions where this is delivered. In Europe higher education provision is largely delivered by HEIs many of which have been in existence for centuries. In many countries there are clear institutional and practical distinctions made between different types of education, which is most pronounced where any sort of binary divide exists. Constructivists challenge traditional approaches to learning and suggest the learner constructs knowledge and that the learning process is best when it is active and involves 'learning by doing' (kinaesthetic learning). Learners learn by experimentation and the more structured the learning environment, the harder it is for learners to construct meaning. This sort of position promotes the idea of teacher as facilitator and promotes student-centred learning and the use of learning outcomes. It also emphasises that deep learning can take place outside the academic institution and questions many of the customary university approaches to teaching, learning and assessment.

Constructivists confront the distinction between academic and vocational learning as being based on the assumption that de-contextualised, theoretical learning (taught in a university) is superior to contextual applied learning (recognised by APEL). They suggest that the context of learning is critically important and that many academics need to rethink the time-honoured approaches to education and eradicate artificial barriers between vocational and academic education.

#### 6.5 APEL and Quality Assurance

When APEL systems and techniques are employed an important dimension is how they relate to existing quality assurance arrangements for traditional formal learning. Institutions responsible for APEL must have transparent and consistent processes for their APEL arrangements. Rules for the amount of APEL learning that can be credited against qualifications need to be established.<sup>23</sup> The validation, review and monitoring of APEL processes and decisions should not be substantially different from normal quality assurance arrangements. The development of common quality assurance standards and approaches benefits from the existence of clear national guidelines and principles that cover APEL. There are several examples of such guidelines and a number of countries are in the process of adopting something similar.<sup>24</sup> If APEL is not part of thorough systems to ensure the quality of recognition processes and decisions EHEA qualifications will be devalued outside Europe.

### 7. Obstacles to the introduction of APEL and lifelong learning

Despite exciting and positive developments a number of issues remain to be resolved before any integrated and effective approaches to APEL and lifelong learning can become a reality across Europe. Barriers exist that slow the rate of progress and undermine the implementation of pan-European and national lifelong learning initiatives. Some of these are explored below.

<sup>23</sup> A national decision in Italy 2006 has led the Ministry of Education (MIUR) to indicate the Italian universities may validate informal/non-formal learning by allocating a maximum of 60 ECTS credits within a *Laurea* (first cycle) degree and a maximum of 40 ECTS credits within a *Laurea Specialistica* (second cycle) degree: <http://www.cimea.it>.

<sup>24</sup> Examples of existing national guidelines can be found at: <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/apl/APL.pdf> and <http://www.ngai.ie/en/LatestNews/File1,1756,en.pdf> and <http://www.scf.co.uk/downloads.asp#D144> and [http://www.hetac.ie/docs/hetac\\_learning\\_policy.pdf](http://www.hetac.ie/docs/hetac_learning_policy.pdf). In Finland a national committee is in the process of putting forward principles to ensure all HEIs have uniform, reliable and transparent systems for the recognition of prior learning: <http://www.minedu.fi> (currently only available in Finnish). In addition, a useful source of information on the overall quality dimension is the text by Professor Johnson, B (2002) *Models of APEL and Quality Assurance*, SEEC publications.

The stated aim of the Bologna Process is to create a European Higher Education Area by 2010 and credits are one of the tools envisaged as playing a major role in the convergence of flexible education frameworks. Two meetings of European higher education ministers in Prague 2001 and Berlin 2003 acknowledged the need to develop national credit systems, preferably based on the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System ECTS, to encourage lifelong learning. Credit systems in general and ECTS in particular, are ideally suited to organise and record both formal and non-formal learning.

The Bologna Process has given the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation system (ECTS) a new impetus but it has been slow to redevelop. The current ECTS Users' Guide is flawed and inappropriate for current lifelong learning requirements. Many national education systems are based on the ECTS inspired 60-credits per academic year approach. ECTS is naturally, but haltingly, evolving as the basis of a pan-European credit accumulation framework that encompasses and integrates all post-school educational activities. In so doing it has the potential to facilitate the measurement and comparison of a range of learning achievements in the context of different European qualifications, programmes and educational environments.

However, a problematic relationship exists between APEL and ECTS. For the purposes of APEL academic and vocational qualifications need to be expressed in terms of learning outcomes and credits linked to levels. This facilitates the evaluation of experiential learning against formal learning. It gives precision to the whole process of recognition. Once all ECTS credits are all expressed in terms of learning outcomes the problem will not exist but it must be recognised that the process for introducing learning outcomes is slow and difficult. Currently, learning outcomes are only just beginning to be used to describe learning.<sup>25</sup> Once they become the standard way to express the curriculum it will be easy to use APEL techniques. Similarly, the divide between higher education and vocational education will become increasingly blurred. In order for this to happen there would need to be a real change in attitude by many academics towards VET and APEL. A high degree of prejudice and misunderstanding about the status and nature of experiential learning exists. This would be exacerbated by the existence of rival qualifications frameworks (the Bologna framework and the EQF) based on levels that are expressed and understood differently. Furthermore, it is important that the development of ECVET does not lead to conflicts with ECTS.<sup>26</sup> Rival and incompatible overarching credit frameworks would be a disaster for the development of integrated education systems for lifelong learning.

It is important that APEL systems are not made overcomplicated, time-consuming, bureaucratic and expensive to administer. This deters academics who run schemes and the citizen seeking recognition of their skills and abilities. It creates a false sense of flexibility into educational frameworks and APEL loses credibility.<sup>27</sup>

The benefits of a pan-European credit-based approach to lifelong learning are immense as this would ensure transparency, transferability and consistency between national frameworks in the European High Education Area. Credits have the flexibility to take into account the potentially enormous range of study opportunities open to citizens across Europe.

The benefits of adopting a credit-based approach to lifelong learning can be summarised as promoting:

- **Flexibility** - credits have the flexibility to take into account the enormous range of study opportunities open to citizens in Europe. Credits allow bridges and links to be built between different forms, modes and types of education. They allow multiple entry and exit points to education. The delivery and development of such

<sup>25</sup> In June 2004 an official 'Bologna' seminar was held in Edinburgh that focused on *the use of learning* outcomes and the Bergen Communiqué endorsed their widespread use.

<sup>26</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/education/ecvt/index\\_enhtml](http://ec.europa.eu/education/ecvt/index_enhtml) .

<sup>27</sup> An example of good practice is the clear information and 'frequently asked questions' fact sheet, designed to empower students, provided by the Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials (CICIC): <http://www.cicic.ca/en/page.aspx?sortcode=2.20.23.24>.

programmes would be greatly facilitated by a common international credit-based system of recognition;

- **Mobility** - credit systems facilitate regional, national and international mobility. They achieve this by improving transparency between different educational systems and therefore promoting academic and professional recognition. This mobility (whatever type it is - student, course, qualification, credit, etc.) widens student choice, employment opportunities and the recognition of learning – wherever it has taken place;
- **Continuing Education** - which is highly fragmented in terms of time and place, Continuing Education is delivered by a host of providers in many different modes. Here, a system for the accumulation of credits is obviously of benefit. Students study in a variety of different settings (home, workplace, academic institution) and move between them and different countries. A credit system would facilitate this and make the recognition of prior learning much easier. Indeed, lifelong learning accounts, work-based learning, negotiated individual programmes, and employment-based schemes would all benefit from a common credit framework. Credit accumulation, credit transfer and credit recognition are essential to this process, and ECTS most of the necessary tools to make it work. The overdue finalisation and refinement of ECTS requires the involvement of higher education institutions, initial education providers, professional bodies, students and employers;
- **Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning** - there are particular benefits to using credits when expressing learning and competencies associated with APEL. This is important for purposes of access and exemption from study, as well as the recognition of learning that has taken place in the workplace. APEL promotes active collaboration between academics and employers by 'recognising' work-based learning and in-house company training schemes. Credits are a useful tool to help the recognition of learning – wherever it has taken place;
- **Collaboration** – a perfected ECTS credit system is essential for promoting comprehensive multilateral collaboration between the main stakeholders involved in lifelong learning. It also stimulates institutions to enhance their quality assurance arrangements, to benchmark best practice and evaluate the value of qualifications and competencies;
- **Recognition and Currency** - the creation of an over-arching, credit-based, lifelong learning framework would promote recognition and give 'currency' and 'respectability' to the skills and competences gained within a personal, civic, social and/or employment related arena. It would achieve this by linking these dimensions to academic credits.

## 8. Conclusions and challenges

Since the onset of the Bologna process it is clear that European education has been undergoing a period of rapid change. The creation of the European Higher Education Area by 2010 is about developing compatible educational structures and approaches. Many of the barriers and distinctions between higher education, vocational training, Continuing Education and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) are starting to break down under the impact of globalisation. There is now a clear European political will to fuse the 'Lisbon strategy' with the 'Bologna Process' in order to increase the pace of educational change.

Furthermore, the European Commission's proposals for a European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning are likely to have a profound impact on national and international development - the EQF will act as a powerful enabling tool for overdue change. 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 in life that

improve knowledge, skills and competences, regardless of where and how they are acquired. This definition rightly challenges the traditional mindset that equates learning with the formal acquisition of knowledge and skills within the formal education and training system. The EQF has the potential to focus the wide range of existing European initiatives into one powerful framework for lifelong learning.

ECTS is slowly evolving into a pan-European credit accumulation and transfer framework that should be able to encompass the needs of lifelong learning. This requires mechanisms for recognising and crediting all relevant learning, wherever it takes place. These new approaches are designed, in part, to put the learner at the centre of the curriculum and involve a commitment to provide more flexible approaches towards education and training. It is important that all forms of learning are integrated into one credit framework and that lifelong learning is not relegated to any sort of educational ghetto.

The use of APCL and APEL should be regarded as an essential aspect of any evolving approach to lifelong learning. APEL is an integral part of any credit system and can easily be accommodated by ECTS. The introduction of APEL systems opens up a number of exciting possibilities that help change the focus of universities and their relationship with employers, citizens, professional bodies and colleges; rethink the way qualifications are earned and recognised; and promote the importance of non-formal and informal learning. The concept of lifelong learning places the focus on the individual learner rather than learning systems and institutions. This questions the traditional boundaries between different types of education and training. It challenges the principles underlying the development, packaging, delivery and evaluation of knowledge and know-how, the nature of institutions, the teaching and learning processes and how learning is valued.

APEL techniques have an, as yet unexploited, role to play in international credential evaluation, to aid the mobility and recognition of citizens. This role will blossom as more countries introduce learning outcomes at all levels of their educational systems. In the immediate future APEL will play an important role in both academic and professional recognition and will blur the artificial distinction between the two, as employers and academics focus more on learning outcomes. Modern conceptions of lifelong learning centre on social inclusion, wider participation, employability and partnership with business and community organisations. Learning opportunities at work, both paid and unpaid, and through individual activities and interests must be recognised. The tools to do this are largely in place. We just need to face up to the opportunities presented by this new educational world.

The landscape of European education is being transformed by the requirements for lifelong learning and the remaining barriers to change need to be addressed. The accreditation of learning and achievement is one of the central functions of any education system and European providers must acknowledge that in this century learning takes place in multiple contexts that require rigorous and effective recognition processes.

Integrated and flexible educational systems, at the local national and international levels, that maximise the possibilities for fair recognition of appropriate learning wherever and however it has been acquired, are an important precondition for lifelong learning in Europe. In order to have effective systems to promote APEL and lifelong learning the following recommendations are put forward for consideration:

### **8.1 International challenges:**

- The Ministers at the Bologna meeting in London, May 2007 should reaffirm their commitment to lifelong learning and support effective ways to implement national lifelong learning strategies that promote the widespread use of APEL to increase the flexibility of their educational systems and minimise artificial barriers between academic and vocational education and training (VET).
- The Bologna Process countries and the European Commission should ensure that potential disjunctions between the '*Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area*' and the '*European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong*

*Learning* (EQF) are not allowed to emerge. A fully integrated trans-national credit based framework for lifelong learning that aligns national systems is essential to ensure transparency, transferability and consistency between higher education and vocational education and training.

- The European Association for Quality Assurance Higher Education (ENQA), in conjunction with other appropriate bodies, should explore the creation and implementation of good practice (models, procedures and guidelines) for APEL (consistent with their 'Standards and Guidelines') in the context of lifelong learning developments, with particular reference to higher education.
- The ENIC/NARIC networks should be tasked with responsibility to provide national and international information on the existing national and international provision of APEL, and advice for citizens in terms of gaining recognition.

### **8.2 National challenges:**

- Existing and planned developments to create national lifelong learning systems, including the development of 'new style' qualifications frameworks, should include systems to facilitate APEL. Appropriate authorities should develop a strategy to promote the widespread implementation and acceptance of APEL and lifelong learning by academics, employers and students.
- National authorities should introduce operational guidelines and principles for APEL fully integrated with national quality assurance processes.

### **8.3 Institutional challenges:**

- Institutions in the process of reconsidering their traditional curriculum in the light of current needs should acknowledge that learning takes place in many contexts and this has implications for the design of their study programmes in terms of structure, delivery and assessment. Work placements, blended learning, company in-house training and learning through work schemes need to be increased and formally integrated with mainstream education programmes. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) need to develop institutional strategies towards APEL and Work-Based Learning (WBL) for all three Bologna cycles.
- HEIs should put in place clear processes and practices that transparently detail their internal APEL systems and procedures for staff, students and employers. They should also adopt appropriate staff development strategies to overcome resistance to APEL and ensure that all processes are transparent, fair, rigorous and efficient.

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