

# Validation and Recognition of Experiential Learning

Final Book  
of the REACTION project

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# VALIDATION OF NON-FORMAL ADULT EDUCATION COURSES: A NEW VALIDATION FUNCTION FOR HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTES IN EUROPE

## Summary

One of the outputs from the REACTION project was the development of a model for the validation of non-formal adult education courses. HEIs and universities across Europe, have traditionally been concerned with the validation of formal education programmes only, thus the model proposed by the partners challenges them to employ a new validation function for non-formal courses. This paper argues that this new function will pose many challenges for the HEIs but it further argues that if the model is implemented, there are numerous benefits to be had for individuals and for HEIs.

**Key words:** validation, core values, group APELing, benefits.

## Introduction

The growth of recognition systems for experiential learning in European tertiary education began with the Bologna Process in 1998. Since then many institutions have embraced the concept, and consequently a diverse range of practices and approaches has emerged. Most development has taken place at the level of the individual although the recent VaLEx Gruntdvig project (<http://www.valex-apel.com> 2003-2005) advanced the useful concept of 'group APELing' as an alternative approach. However, problems and concerns for applicants and for the institutions continue to hamper

the establishment of workable systems. In particular, cumbersome and complicated assessment requirements such as the submission of extensive portfolios of evidence have made the process unattractive for many people while the high investment in resources is a concern for institutions. Consequently, applications in many countries are low. In Ireland an audit carried out as part of the VaLEx project showed that the "numbers of AP(E)L claims ranges from over one hundred per annum in one college down to single numbers in others" (Murphy, 2004). In the UK the Learning from Experience Trust (LET, 2002) published a research report called *Mapping APEL in*

*Higher Education in England*. It reported that “two thirds of HE institutions with APEL policies and procedures had less than 100 APEL students”. While a great deal of innovation has taken place in Europe over the past few years to develop equitable and accessible systems, a great deal more needs to be done to implement and promote these mechanisms in a way which is user-friendly and attractive for both potential applicants and for the institutions themselves.

As a starting point for this project the partners decided to explore the wide varieties of ways in which adults gain knowledge, skill and competency from experience. Two distinct trajectories for APEL were explored. The first approach is to have validation and recognition implemented by a university or Higher Education Institution (HEI) on an individual basis. Currently this is the most commonly used approach across the partner countries. As part of this project a generic model with relevant staff training was developed for this approach (available at: <http://reaction.vdu.lt>). The partners also recognized that there was the possibility of a second option. It became evident that non-formal learning was most commonly acquired in group settings; either through continuing professional development / workplace learning, or in community education settings. While such learning is seldom formally certified, the courses are often very structured with defined content and learning outcomes. As the non-formal courses share many of the features of formal education, the partners agreed that there was merit in developing a model to formally validate them. Although the model may not apply to all non-formal programmes, it provides an opportunity to simplify the APEL

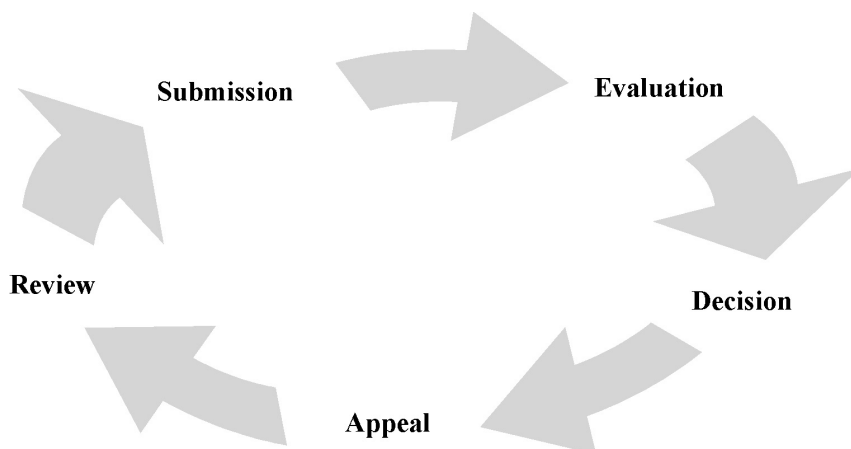
process for both candidates and HEIs.

There are many advantages for the candidates and for the institutions. Course providers rather than individuals are the focus of the process. The level of resources required by the HEIs is reduced; the process can be shortened considerably as no mentoring is required, and the burden of proof is shifted from the individual to the course provider. Through a system of ‘group APELing’ non-formal adult education courses are formalized and receive validation. There is no direct involvement by individual learners. As learners are not individually assessed, the model offers an alternative trajectory for non-formal learning. It also provides an opportunity for the development of collaborative relationships between institutes of higher education and course providers / NGOs who provide training to the voluntary and community sector; and also between institutes of higher education and work based learning providers in the public and private sector.

The model includes processes for submission, evaluation, decision-making and appeal procedures as well as a review system. While the accrediting HEI will need to satisfy itself that the course provider has the capacity and resources to offer the course, the primary focus for validation will be on the programme of study rather than on the provider. The roles and responsibilities of the HEIs, the assessors and the course providers are clearly outlined together with guidelines for submission of applications.

## **The model**

The model may prove challenging for HEIs and universities across Europe, who



**Fig.1. Model for validation and recognition of non-formal adult education courses**

have traditionally been concerned only with the validation of formal education programmes. This approach will require HEIs to adopt a new function for the validation of non-formal programmes. However since traditional views about the nature of knowledge are currently being questioned and new ways of recognising knowledge gained and advanced through experience are becoming more acceptable, perhaps the challenge may not be so great. The recent publication by the National Qualifications Authority in Ireland (NQAI) of *Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning In Further & Higher Education* endorses this shift in the opening paragraph:

*Learning occurs in many contexts that include work, involvement in social and community activities, or learning through life experience generally. In order to enable the individual to learn throughout life, value should be given to all these forms of learning regardless of source, how it is achieved or when in life it is achieved. A major objective*

*of the National Framework of Qualifications is to recognise all learning achievements. It aims to do this by supporting the development of alternative pathways to qualification (or awards) and by promoting the recognition of prior learning. (NQAI, 2006:8)*

The NQAI document records a substantial paradigm shift in approaches to learning. APEL systems will find it difficult to flourish in institutions where knowledge gained in traditional education environments is valued above everything else. In France, where APEL has been supported by legislation since 2002 research shows that:

*In 2004, VAP (Validation des Acquis Professionnels) helped 16,860 applicants in France to obtain dispensatory access to higher education on the basis of their work experience.*

*VAE (Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience) in higher education: in 2004, all over France 3,165 applicants were awarded higher education degrees through VAE. Forty per cent gained a full degree.*

*VAE in vocational education: in 2004,*

*19,136 candidates applied for secondary-level national vocational diplomas. 56 per cent were awarded a full diploma (Haeringer, 2006: 92).*

HEIs in France have designed a system that is supported by legislation; underpinned by sound pedagogical practice; but most especially they have moved a long way towards making the cultural shift necessary to make it work.

In Ireland many new initiatives are emerging in Higher Education to develop models to cultivate active citizenship, service-learning and community-based learning in society. Many universities have integrated work placement and volunteering into their programmes. They view learning gained from these experiences as worthwhile and consequently credits are awarded. Essentially these initiatives advocate the value of learning from experience and demonstrate that HEIs, in Ireland, have already begun to shift their thinking about knowledge making. Thus universities are beginning to see the added value that experience brings to learning and to the advancement of knowledge. Staff engaged in processes for APEL will need to fully understand and value learning gained from experience. The model proposed for the validation of non-formal adult education courses "incorporates core values of positivity, inclusivity, flexibility, fairness, consistency, reliability and quality" as essential (REACTION Handbook for Staff Training, 2007). The university needs to incorporate these values in its policy and into its procedures for dealing with applicants.

The development of National Quali-

fication Frameworks has the potential to expedite the introduction and implementation of APEL systems for non-formal adult education courses because it enables the designation of award at specific levels, for example at undergraduate and post-graduate levels. The European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) facilitates the allocation of credit weightings to courses. The model is to be used in tandem with national qualification frameworks, and with relevant national and regional legislation. However, it is recognised that in some countries qualification frameworks are not in place, and where this is the case it is proposed that the European Qualification Framework should be used as a reference point for validation. The model also recommends the utilization of the ECTS.

The new validation function must be able to measure the learning outcomes associated with the non-formal adult education courses: "It must be able to capture the heterogeneous nature of non-formal learning, acknowledge the fact that progression of learning has a strong individual dimension and that learning outcomes are often specific in context to an individual's work or personal circumstances" (REACTION Handbook for Staff Training, 2007). As the model is a new concept in higher education, the partners recognise that it may be necessary to train staff as assessors. Staff in higher education institutions will need to learn how to validate non-formal courses while non-formal course providers will need guidance on how to apply to institutes for validation. The partners have devised a course syllabus and an assessor's handbook to support staff training.



## Conclusions

The work of the REACTION partners attempts to devise new mechanisms for the improvement of APEL systems in Europe. Models have been devised at the level of the individual and also for 'group APELing'; generic training programmes were developed with handbooks for assessors and providers; documents providing guidance and advice to institutions as well as documents that provide recommendations to public authorities and decision makers have been developed. Adult students know the value of experience, and how it can deepen understanding and provoke critical thinking. I recently came upon a quote by Edward Thompson, an adult educator in the 1960s who succinctly describes how experience enhances learning when he says:

*What is different about the adult student is the experience which he brings to the rela-*

*tionship. This experience modifies, sometimes subtly and sometimes more radically, the entire educational process ...To strike the balance between intellectual rigour and respect for the experience is always difficult. But the balance today (1968) is seriously awry...( I wish to redress it a little ) by reminding us that universities engage in adult education not only to teach but also to learn....*

*(Thomson, 1968)*

*Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose!* Universities and Institutes of Higher Education need to reverse the traditional process and learn from their students.

If HEIs cannot bring themselves to truly value relevant learning gained through experience, and to recognize this learning, as equal in status to that gained in a traditional classroom setting, whole libraries of policy documents, manuals and handbooks will not advance the implementation of APEL systems in European higher education.

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