

Accreditation of prior experiential learning and the development of higher education

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SUMMARY

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This article analyses the specificity of the French accreditation system in higher education as regards lifelong learning. The changes in higher education may thus take on a new significance. The article describes the changes that could come from wider deployment of the system in higher education.

The accreditation system introduced in France in 2002 has practically no equivalent in Europe or the world (1). Many accreditation systems outside France grant conditional access to courses leading to a qualification, especially for graduate training, but only the French system offers the possibility of acquiring a qualification, full or partial, without prior instruction. Against the background of the changes in higher education – particularly its inclusion in a different form of linkage to the needs of economic development – it is interesting to assess what is riding on the introduction of this new right and to try to grasp its current and future implications.

To understand the role that the accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) could play in the development of higher education, it is important first to establish the nature of this certification system – which for the moment is very typically French – and how it fits in with the possibilities opened up by lifelong learning. Then we need to examine the problems facing higher education today in relation to the questions asked of it by prior learning. It will then be possible to set out the problems that this system could solve, both in France and abroad, provided that certain resistance can be overcome.

(1) This was a clear finding of CAPLA's Sixth International Forum on Prior Learning Assessment and Qualification Recognition, held on 14-18 October 2006 in Fredericton, Canada. See [http://www.capla.ca/2006_conference/pages/e/ \[04/06/2008\]](http://www.capla.ca/2006_conference/pages/e/ [04/06/2008]).

Accreditation ‘à la française’ for university

Why is such *generous* accreditation offered in France? Even if this apparent generosity is not borne out in practice, it appears at least to illustrate France’s fondness for qualifications. This fondness can be understood only in the light of the role of qualifications in the production system (Germe, 2000) as well as in the education system (Duru Bellat, 2006).

APEL and other means of obtaining certification

Qualifications between education system and production system

Promoting a right to acquire a qualification through accreditation no doubt reflects France’s *structural* fondness for qualifications, which is far more than symbolic. What this involves is the merit-based school system’s need for feedback. Benchmarks need to be found to allow the efficient circulation of student flows. Add to this the system’s pronounced social differentiation – a product of the *Ancien Régime* and modernised with the advent of the Napoleonic Empire (from 1802): birth of the baccalaureate, differentiation of pathways, ‘scholarisation’ of vocational training and a major expansion of university while intermediate training marks time. Qualifications literally make the initial training system function by defining and legitimising the selection process and the modes of learning it entails.

Moreover, in a production system marked by a difficulty in establishing social compromises and collective regulation, it is important for a third party to be able to intervene to define the value of work. This value will be determined by laws but also by the external third party, which is constituted by the education system. In addition, there is also a place system, characteristic of relatively immobile societies, which requires that qualifications be able to contribute to legitimising these places and their continuity. ‘Closure strategies’ (Lallement, 2007) are developed, in which qualifications play a crucial role. Thus, the education system and the production system combine to give public certification a global reference function in the educational pathways of individuals, from childhood to adulthood. This favours not only the qualification itself but also all procedures granting access to it. This is the historical backdrop to the expansion of accreditation.

APEL in universities

The desire to promote accreditation is particularly marked in French universities; unlike other levels, the university level is characterised by the coexistence of three measures: Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL), VES (*Validation des études supérieures*) Validation of Higher Education Studies, and APEL. The first measure, which many countries now also have, is the product of a 1985 decree and provides access to degree studies, with possible partial exemptions. The second, initiated at European level and actually implemented in universities since 2005 (in many cases only slowly), aims at establishing equivalence between higher education qualifications awarded in France and abroad. The third measure gives the right to obtain a qualification, partial or full, on the basis of the accreditation of experience, professional or otherwise. In fact, these measures are an expression firstly of a differentiation and hierarchisation of the various modes of access to qualifications. The latter reflect the conflicting stresses at work between a desire to protect higher education qualifications and the need for international openness of certification.

Although APEL dates from 2002, its precursors go back even further. Access to qualifications through validation of prior experiential learning emerged for engineers in 1933, when the Malthusian elitism of engineering colleges created tensions in the market for technical executives (*cadres supérieurs techniques*); it emerged in activities dominated at once by the intrinsic selectivity of the tasks to be carried out and the material nature of their results. It was a matter of simultaneously solving a problem with the operation of the labour market and a failure of the initial training system.

The real innovation of 2002 is its *universality*, with a few notable exceptions: certain sectors (health, social work, and personal care), certain types of qualification (university degrees, *diplômes d'État* – State qualifications), etc. Even these exceptions are currently being reduced: APEL for special education teachers, home helpers, nursing assistants, and soon for nurses. At university, a strong incentive is emerging to replace *diplômes d'université* (DUs) with LMD degrees ⁽²⁾, particularly the vocational degree, to enter them

⁽²⁾ LMD – *Licence, Master, Doctorat* – is the French version of the triptyque introduced under the Bologna process and the European Higher Education and Research Area. In English: Bachelor's Degree, Master's and Ph.D.

in the National Professional Certificate Register (RNCP) ⁽³⁾ and thereby make them ‘accreditable’.

The meaning of APEL

To understand the significance of the changes brought about by the introduction of a right to APEL, we need to distinguish the certification from the actual training and identify the nature of what is ‘translated’ in and by this procedure ⁽⁴⁾.

Differentiating training and certification

The right to APEL dissociates certification and the path by which it is reached, which usually consists of training. This is clearly the spirit of the 2002 reform: favouring a certification analysis over a training analysis. This implies that certification is somehow in demand for its own sake, like a currency whose marketplace is the only internal or external labour market (and its segmentation). This separation appears to be linked to the fact that, in France, qualifications have become increasingly necessary to gain entry to the labour market or to protect careers that have become uncertain.

This demand for certification for its own sake creates the fear, expressed in some quarters ⁽⁵⁾, that the value of qualifications will diminish further as APEL expands. However, this alone cannot constitute a factor that reduces the value of higher education degrees. Not only has the increase in the number of degrees remained moderate, with barely 1 to 2 % of degrees conferred by universities awarded by this route, but, to be permanent, the devaluation must be based on a loss of the intrinsic value of degrees induced by APEL. However, this is not borne out by the enormous effort required of candidates and by employers’ increasingly insistent demand for the right to be exercised.

As we shall see, in a context where there is little continuing training leading to a qualification, APEL can provide an alternative.

⁽³⁾ The National Professional Certificate Register (RNCP) is a database of certificates for vocational purposes (degrees, diplomas, CQPs (vocational qualification certificates) (*certificats de qualification professionnelle*) recognised by the State and the social partners, classified by field of activity and/or by level, available on the website of the CNCV (Commission nationale de la certification professionnelle) National Vocational Certification Commission.
See <http://www.cncp.gouv.fr/index.php?page=23> [04/06/2008].

⁽⁴⁾ Certification Commission. See <http://www.cncp.gouv.fr/index.php?page=23> [04/06/2008].

⁽⁵⁾ See, in particular, the joint work coordinated by F. Neyrat (ed.), *La VAE: la reconnaissance d'un nouveau droit*, Bordeaux: Published by du Croquant, 2007.

It is a peculiarity of France that it has one of the highest proportions of young people educated to age 18 in Europe and, at the same time, 'a proportion of adults aged 25 and over who are studying or resuming their studies lower than anywhere else' (Marion et al., 2006). This situation is no doubt related to a historical tendency to transfer responsibility for vocational training to the initial education system. This has led, in particular, to the relative weakness, until recently, of apprenticeship and to the 'scholarisation of vocational education' (Pepel and Troger, 2001).

In fact, the growing dissociation of training and certification is part of a historic trend in the labour market and its regulation: a logic of human capital and signal is gradually being replaced by – or combined with – a dynamic of investment in form; labour supply regulation is giving way to labour demand regulation. In fact, companies formulate 'the need to promote certification as an indicator of the productive value of individuals and not endorsement of training' (Grandgérard, 2007). For this purpose, they are seeking to increase the number of long-term confidence indicators and elements that reduce uncertainty as regards the value of work (Rose, 2006). APEL appears to be of this ilk.

A way of translating the collective to the individual

APEL has to do with *distillation*, in three ways. Firstly, the experience submitted for accreditation is necessarily the result of a shared activity; the candidate therefore has to extract himself from this collective so that he can be picked out. Secondly, the candidate is necessarily the product of organisations marked by an entire set of characteristics which are collective in both the functional and legal senses of the term. The majority of failures of managers in APEL at university are attributable to what candidates owe to functionally and conventionally divided and segmented organisations offering too little scope for independence and responsibility to authorise personal enhancement leading to accreditation (Triby, 2004). Finally, candidates come to the APEL process following a career weighed down by a set of social conditions from which it will be difficult for them to *separate themselves*, literally speaking.

However, it has to be recognised that French universities are heirs to a school system based essentially on the construction of a highly individualised process of evaluation, selection and orientation. This process has now been reinforced with the extension of schooling and the arrival of 'nouveaux lycéens' in higher education. So-called merit and 'healthy competition' have merely created processes

justifying an orientation that denies quite systematically the entire collective dimension of 'the school experience'. In this context, the triple distillation carried out by APEL places academics at odds with the conception of their role and their power of approval.

APEL and LLL. Certification of the pathway versus protection of the pathway

Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) is clearly in line with the concept of lifelong learning (LLL). In this respect, one may therefore wonder whether certification during working life, as permitted by APEL, in particular for the most highly qualified people, is liable to increase the security of these pathways or simply to accustom people to a working life marked by insecurity. Benefiting from phenomena such as the extension of schooling, itself associated with qualification holders being *churned out* and devalued, universities have been able, until recently, to consider themselves as being unaffected by such concerns, with their qualifications protected against unemployment and, above all, guaranteed a sustainable position in the labour market (Germe, 2000). It has to be accepted that this is no longer the case today.

To understand this change, it is necessary to remind ourselves of the meaning of lifelong learning. It is not just a statement or a political slogan; this project sanctions the desire to overhaul the modes of regulation between the educational sphere and the productive sphere. However, from the point of view of APEL, it is rightly noted that 'the valuation of "practical" knowledge and experience originates, along with other parameters, from a desire to reconstruct the relationship between education and production, between national and local' (Grandgérard, 2007). Lifelong learning operates on the basis of four guiding principles, each questioning both higher education and APEL (Mahieu and Moens, 2003):

Access to learning has to be freed of all constraints linked to the ages of the learners and the context of its acquisition. The issue for universities is clear: they must no longer reserve their essential educational activities to initial training but should be more open, not only to adults but also to other ways of studying for degrees: apprenticeship, alternance training, continuing training, etc. The development of APEL fits very naturally into this approach not just because it encourages adults to go on to university to make up any unaccredited parts of their qualifications, but also because this system provides a strong incentive to resume studies.

Giving adults the means to respond more flexibly to the changes at work within society. University education has been able to function for decades on the basis of the belief that general training constituted the best preparation for any necessary adaptation to changes in working activity and environment. This has now been called into question. APEL, in this respect, addresses the problem in two ways: by allowing access to a degree, it increases the potential for mobility and hence adaptability to change, and by favouring reflection on one's experience and thinking in terms of transferable skills, it is likely to help individuals get back on their feet in changing occupational circumstances.

Countries are invited to 'reflect on their education systems, focusing on individual requirements'. Initial training, particularly higher education, not only has to open itself up to training adults, but to become the place to implement a guidance plan and to respond to certain characteristics of the education demand coming from this section of the population. 'Downstream management' of the university training system is emerging, less through the search to meet the requirements of the production system than through the realisation of what adults are entitled to expect from universities.

Any acquisition of knowledge or skills is accorded equal legitimacy. It is not simply a question of 'the equivalence' of experiential learning and formal knowledge, but more the process of accessing knowledge, particularly formal or academic knowledge, called upon to justify what its purpose is, in real terms. This is no doubt the most crucial change that has occurred with respect to higher education and it affects the very presuppositions of APEL: 'the strongest resistance, particularly among teaching staff, is not to the principle of the accreditation of learning, but to this kind of equivalence of learning methods presupposed by the law in according the same approval to both forms of learning' (Merle, 2004).

This questioning operates on three levels. Firstly, success in higher education requires the most radical 'conversion'. As we know, in France, this takes place at least as much through an autonomisation that is as brutal as it is anarchic (particularly in undervalued courses) as through the rigour of an education that requires people to part with their conceptions (Coulon, 1997). With APEL, the need for conversion becomes less urgent. Secondly, university teachers are selected on the basis of a distinction: not only knowledge but first of all a mode of access to this knowledge; they are subject to tests that prove their admission to a type of *higher* knowledge. With

APEL, university teachers have to recognise that this hierarchy is losing its legitimacy. Thirdly, it is, in a way, the social standing of the university that is called into question: universities produce scientific knowledge and have the task of passing it on and subjecting it to debate. With APEL, they are called on to approve knowledge that they have neither produced nor passed on and have to recognise that this knowledge *is equivalent* to their own.

The direction of change taking place in universities

APEL is developing in a higher education context that is far from exclusive to France. Even the rather general nature of these conditions poses a problem. We feel that three of these conditions should be looked at in more detail given the questions raised by APEL: the purpose of extending schooling, internationalisation and vocationalisation.

The purpose of extending schooling

The continual extension of schooling, which began in the 1980s, now seems to be slowing down. However, an inherent momentum continues to drive young people to pursue their studies well beyond what they need to fill the posts that will be offered to them, giving them skills that are ill-suited to current work requirements (Duru-Bellat, 2006). Universities are particularly affected by this phenomenon. This momentum has a cost for the individual and for society, and is ultimately unproductive. To stop this momentum, two changes are needed: first, a change in the terms and conditions of students' learning activity, and secondly, greater selectivity of education levels. When designing courses, priority should be given to creating and implementing learning environments and to an activity/situation-based approach. Moreover, like other European systems, the education system in France, particularly the university education system, cannot avoid introducing selection thresholds and, in particular, favouring returns to certificate courses after a period in the workplace rather than initial training qualifications that are incomplete or difficult to take full advantage of in the market.

This approach means acknowledging the inability of continuing training to be a 'second chance' for those who failed at school. Like V. Merle, it is possible to make the following hypothesis about the various reforms in continuing training: 'it is as if the reformers were regularly trying to find a solution to impossible school reform

by promoting continuing training' (Merle, 2004). Efforts towards continuing training have to be increased, but if we want to approach equity somewhat, they need to be supplemented by two other elements: development of APEL and a preoccupation with enriching vocational activity to make it more 'learning-based'.

Internationalisation and the *need for mobility*

As with other needs in a market economy, the need for workforce mobility is first of all relative to a state of market operation and to the justifications produced to secure recognition of the apparent needs for mobility; the real, social need is different, but it is not necessarily the reason why people move. Except in a few specialised professions (particularly in IT), mobility within initial training is not necessarily expected as a 'signal' of high qualification levels: it is possible that the LMD system, which promotes the comparability of degrees, is making mobility less desirable (not to mention distance training designed 'in order to' avoid mobility). Universities and the *Grandes Écoles* are trying hard to increase the number of qualifications recognised around the world (Master's, MBAs), which, in the end, further serve to keep the best students and introduce new recruitment criteria rather than favour genuine mobility. Therefore, from an international perspective, the equivalence of qualifications could produce an effect opposite to that sought: a decline in mobility.

However, internationalisation remains in the background under the pressure of globalisation: all work activities and their modes of performance need to be profitable, irrespective of where they are carried out and without requiring workers to move. Mobility is perhaps more inter-sectoral than international. The striking thing about the 'university expectations' of university degrees (Bachelor's and Master's) is the 'cross disciplinary' nature of this knowledge and know-how (cf. Table 1). Even for vocational degrees, it is the transferability of knowledge and skills that counts. This tends to show that, particularly for higher education qualifications, the constraint of mobility is an incitement to have the ability to perform functions in different activity fields. It is also worth noting that the fields of reference refer less to vocational provisions than to an ability to generate efficiency and maintain this 'valorité' ⁽⁶⁾ (Stankiewicz, 2002).

⁽⁶⁾ 'Valorité' is a neologism invented by Stankiewicz to refer to a person's or object's ability to contain a potential value or a potential of value. This corresponds to a desire to attach importance once again to value and to its place in economic and social mechanisms.

Table 1. Fields of reference for skills to be evidenced at university

Fields of reference	Bachelor's level	Master's level
<i>Knowledge</i>	Knowing the basics of a field and placing them in the development of this field	Having expertise in one's field
<i>Information skills</i>	Determining information needs and mastering the tools and techniques required to meet them	Assessing the quality of the information and of its sources
<i>Methodology</i>	Understanding the contribution and the limits of intervention methods	Having expertise in intervention methods
<i>Implementation</i>	Using a body of knowledge and a set of tools in practice	Completing an intervention project that meets the standards and requirements of one's field
<i>Interdisciplinarity</i>	Demonstrating an openness to other disciplines and placing one's own field	Considering the perspective of other disciplines in one's research and intervention
<i>Continuing learning</i>	Identifying one's need to bring oneself up to date in one's field	Continually developing one's skills in research, creation and intervention

Source: Ministry of Education, France.

The vocationalisation of higher education studies

The growth of APEL makes it easier to understand the modes of professionalisation of higher education. This does not come down to increasing the number of vocational courses; it concerns the content of the teaching and its modes of transmission when 'the ability of the initial training system to transmit knowledge is hindered by the multiplication of modes of learning' (Merle, 2004, p. 130). This is, above all, a reflection of the questioning of the hierarchy and the stability of knowledge underlying university education.

Putting in doubt. This operates on two levels: the level of the individual who is being asked to recognise the latent impoverishment of his skills in an increasingly demanding market, and the level of the university, which is seeing the monopoly of its principal social functions seriously challenged. The challenge to qualification from individuals is based on new concepts, 'the main one being based on the notion of an individual as a purposeful and rational actor, who is responsible for his employability, and the value accorded to

a mobile and flexible individual who is quick to learn and explain and has obtained or is able to obtain qualifications, in other words who is always required to prove himself in the name of mastering his own career pathway' (Maillard, 2007).

At university level, the change in perspective is no less radical. The social standing of universities is based on the coherence of three main functions: the production of academic knowledge, the transmission of this knowledge and control of the discussion and exploitation of this knowledge. However, universities are increasingly required to come to terms with other actors in relation to each of these functions. Moreover, the coherence between these three functions is itself being challenged by an ever greater interdependence with phenomena such as the growth of corporate research, necessarily shorter innovation cycles, the socialisation of scientific debate and the growing popularisation of knowledge through the media.

Putting into practice. The vocationalisation of universities does not correspond so much to the increase in the number of vocational courses to the detriment of academic courses as to the intrusion of the question of vocational practices into the very heart of the transmission of knowledge. This operates on three levels: the intelligibility of these practices, the transformation of practices and the production of legitimate representations of this change. 'The analysis of professional practices – understood as a research tool, a training tool and a tool for transforming practices – has acquired enormous social significance' (Barbier, 2001). Even general courses have been affected. They have to think about what they can teach their students, formally and informally, and about which employment-like learning situation they can place them.

Putting to the test. The translation of qualifications into skills and knowledge accessible through work experience flows very naturally from this development. This exercise only makes sense if the training itself is organised on the basis of tests and assessment tools capable of confirming that these skills have been acquired. As a partial response to this requirement, the *Europass* was conceived at European Community level in order 'to give each individual a passport proving their career pathway in terms of formal, informal and non-formal learning' (HCÉÉE, 2004). Benefiting from the introduction of the LMD, French universities are incorporating this into their training by drafting the 'diploma supplement' with the dual aim of being able to enter all of their degrees, including 'general'

qualifications, in the national qualification framework (RNCP) but primarily of gradually introducing an overhaul of the very design of their training. This reform should be implemented all the more quickly because it has found fertile ground among students who are fearful that their position in the labour market is being weakened. An approach to training that focuses more on making them 'operational' would more readily win their trust.

What is striking here is the fact that the rise in the popularity of APEL in universities is fully in line with the requirements of this vocationalisation so that it also confirms the characteristics of the 'diversification' in which higher education in Europe is engaged (Dunkel and Le Mouillour, 2006, p. 10).

Prospects. The future of APEL in higher education

Whatever the national context, the introduction and development of APEL at universities require certain conditions to be met (Triby, 2006), and France may not be ahead of its main competitors in this respect.

The obstacles and how to overcome them

The knowledge-to-be-acquired approach. This knowledge is usually acquired as a result of training, the existence of which is proven by examinations. This approach incorporates the idea, which is widely accepted in higher education, that such knowledge is all the more substantial because of social and academic selection on entry to a training level. This belief sets little store by the impact of the evaluation system itself, which translates knowledge into units of measurement and selection, and still less by the actual learning activity. This activity lies at the heart of the construction of an APEL dossier, which cannot confine itself to simply weighing up the knowledge acquired.

The implicit hierarchy of knowledge. The higher education system in most Western countries is based on a more or less implicit hierarchy of knowledge that resolutely places academic knowledge at the level of higher education, above a whole range of forms of knowledge derived from practice – from professional knowledge, which is often highly sophisticated, to low-level and routine practical knowledge. APEL does not turn this hierarchy on its head, but demands, firstly, that experiential learning be considered to have the same standing as academic knowledge, provided it has been subjected to critical

appraisal, and, secondly, that academic knowledge be considered appropriate only if links can be found to actual skills and knowledge required in employment.

The importance of qualifications for individual careers. When the value of the work is still determined to a great extent by collective and legal measures, it is hard to challenge the criteria of qualifications and experience in the labour market. As soon as there is any tendency to call those criteria into question, particularly by introducing a skills-based approach, the methods of accessing qualifications, and the individual characteristics of the qualifications, assume greater importance. This is precisely what is happening with APEL, which is proving to be a system necessarily linked to a different approach to the value of work based on a different relationship to knowledge. It is also characteristic of this procedure that it translates collective experience into individual value while the effectiveness of skills 'that are difficult to formalise usually remains collective' (Lallement, 2007, p. 145).

Available resources

The downstream logic of training. Training practice has shown that the determining factor in the learning activity is all the testing and outcomes. It is what comes after training that gives this activity form and meaning. We have to overcome the belief that the training activity is intrinsically motivated and, and above all, that testing is neutral as regards the trainee's performance of his or her activity. The shift required by APEL involves taking full measure of this determination downstream to try to give meaning to the experience being acquired while creating the possibility of its exploitation from initial training on.

The value of human capital. The consensus on the efficacy of the level of education has been a considerable obstacle to more extensive studies into the nature of this particular form of capital, which is capable of increasing its value through its very use, and into the importance of the psychosocial relationship with the job and with attitudes to change. However, 'priority should be given to approaches (proposing) better measurement of the yield of human capital, (or) integration of psychological or behavioural features into the economic model for determining salaries (...) rather than an umpteenth estimation of the traditional *Mincerian* model' (Baudelot et al., 2004, p. 220). It is not simply an invitation extended to economists: it is another way of looking at what generates the value of the training offered. APEL assumes this other point of view, which to a considerable extent remains to be constructed.

Those conditions prove that APEL cannot be conceived of as a simply as a system of access to qualifications. It tends to call into question what lies at the foundation of higher education practices, particularly in France: not so much structures and references as beliefs and intentions. These are no longer sufficient when higher education becomes mass education and has to form part of lifelong learning.

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