

Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL)

1. The Context of APEL

Lifelong learning and social inclusion policies are now high on the policy agendas of both the European Union and national states in Europe. The push for such policies arises from changes in the labour market and economy and globalisation in post-industrial society. Skills have to be constantly updated and new ones acquired. In the post-Fordist era people can expect to have a series of jobs perhaps interspersed by periods of short-term contracts or unemployment. In the information society the acquisition of knowledge is essential. Both the European Commission (EC) and national European governments view education as the key to economic success. The Commission's White Paper, 1995, and more recently, the Memorandum on Lifelong Learning, 2001, stress the necessity for accepting new skills and knowledge within education. Integrating work and education is viewed by governments and industrialists as essential: "Work procedures and work itself are facing restructuring ... The contents and ... structures of jobs are changing. Ever higher competence is expected in all occupations ... more and more individuals are being confronted with the stark reality that their education, completed decades ago, no longer gives them the competence they need ..." (The Round Table of European Industrialists, ERT 1989, p 170).

The development of a learning society is perceived as the key to ensuring the "future competitiveness of the European economic system" (ERT 1989, p 78). Widening access for adults is now a political imperative. The Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) has been, in some European countries, an important element in the widening access strategy and will play a still more substantial role in the future. APEL has the potential to contribute significantly towards higher education by offering a flexible approach to learning, opening up institutions to new groups of learners and developing partnerships with outside organisations. It also has a role to play in the social inclusion agenda as well as being a tool for responding rapidly to changing economic needs. APEL is used across all adult education sectors. Increasingly, in some countries, it is more significant at the higher education (HE) level in enabling "non-traditional" adult students who may lack traditional qualifications to enter university. Lueddeke argues that in relation to universities: "It involves consideration of the development of policy, procedures and infrastructure that could ... facilitate access of a vast student body presently denied entry to higher education but who may meet 'non-traditional' qualifying criteria" (1997, p 215).

2. A Changing Higher Education?

Socio-economic changes in post-Enlightenment modernity have led to a reshaping and transformation of higher education systems from elite to mass-based institutions (Trow 1973; Scott 1995). As Scott argues: "The growth of mass systems is taking place against a background of socio-economic transformations that are both rapid and profound ... New social forms and economic patterns are seen as alternative to, not extensions of, the forms and patterns generated by Fordist mass-manufacturing and the bureaucratic Weberian state. Mass higher education, it has been argued, is also more than the linear successor of elite higher education because sociologically and epistemologically it represents a break with past continuities" (Scott 1995, p 172).

The purpose of universities as elite research institutions socialising and reproducing a young, middle class minority as the next generation of intellectuals, is being questioned, redefined and reconstructed. "Academic" knowledge as traditionally provided by universities is perceived in some quarters as no longer adequate for a knowledge society requiring new demands and wider types of knowledge. Mass higher education introduced a new form of learning in universities, although elite institutions managed to maintain their structures and culture, characterised by a broader student base and curriculum. Scott (1995) highlighted a number of "procedural and structural" changes which universities have to undergo in order to become mass institutions such as modular degree and credit transfer schemes, the transformation of continuing education, Access courses and partnerships with non-higher education institutions:

APEL is one mechanism for enabling "non-traditional" adult students to enter higher education. Inevitably in the UK, and elsewhere, the new form of higher education led to declarations of "more means worse" with concerns raised about quality and standards. In the UK Scott (2000) argues that we have now moved beyond mass higher education to lifelong learning as the boundaries between the various post-compulsory sectors break down and merge. New types of universities have emerged: virtual and corporate. In this scenario Scott maintains that higher education courses are being offered outside traditional higher education institutions: "Not only have higher education institutions and systems, certainly as presently constituted, reached the limits of their own usefulness; they are also being actively subverted by new conceptions of learning, knowledge and organization. In practical terms, this suggests that while a relatively conventional higher education, such as Britain still has, can comfortably cater for up to a third of the age group, new approaches and institutions are needed if participation is to be widened to half or more of the eligible population" (Scott 2000, p 41).

In a lifelong learning version of higher education, education and training become blurred.

"The pattern of higher education development with which we have been familiar in the twentieth century – in effect, the expansion and (limited) liberalization of the university core combined with the development of 'additional' rather than alternative,

and therefore firmly subordinated, forms of higher education – may become an anachronism in the new century” (Scott 2000, pp 41-42).

Within a changing and diverse higher education system APEL serves as a tool for promoting greater flexibility in relation to access and entry, assessment and accreditation. APEL has the potential to open the door of universities to those previously denied access as a result of experiencing inequalities in initial education, and/or socio-economic structural constraints. One of the future scenarios of universities will be to provide a range of multi-level programmes to meet the needs of an adult learning population within a learning society. Higher education is no longer the preserve of the young as Heeger (1983, p 3) elaborates: “The very concept of prior learning is a recognition of the changing needs of an ageing population, which has been accumulating a far more complex learning background than higher education has had to deal with in the past.”

Evidence from a TSER project on adult access to universities indicates that in many European countries the adult student population is growing to the extent that in some institutions adults now form the majority. In Sweden adult students have always been considered the norm, although not necessarily non-traditional. Yet despite the move towards mass higher education elite institutions still remain largely untouched across a Europe in which “the university system is used to privilege a small minority in an unequal contest for high social and economic status” (Bourgeois et al. 1999, p 27). The division between the traditional and new/reform universities may further entrench a two-tier system as pockets of resistance to change remain. Dichotomies between research and teaching, elite and diverse student populations (visible in the UK) may well mark the higher education system of the future. However, as the system as a whole responds to the transformation many institutions are opening their doors to local communities and non-traditional students, and will continue to do so in the future. New forms of knowledge production are emerging, APEL among them, which enable adults to access higher education which was previously denied them.

3. What is APEL?

The essence of APEL, recognising informal learning from experience, is not new but formalising it as a recognised means of entry and learning process is. APEL bridges the gap between formal and informal learning. Prior experiential learning is recognised by HE institutions in a number of ways: for admission, as accreditation, advanced standing and as part of the learning/teaching process. Generally APEL is most commonly used for admission and advanced standing. APEL is also closely linked to systems of credit accumulation and transfer and the development of European economies (HEQC 1998) with the potential to encourage mobility of learners and workers within and between nation states. Much literature assumes that the reader knows what APEL means. Definitions are few and far between. A number of acronyms are used to mean slightly

different things, for example, Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL), and Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning (APCL) and this has led to confusion. APL and APEL are often used interchangeably yet the former refers to certificated prior learning gained in formal learning such as “organised courses, modules, workshops, seminars and similar activities” (Nyatanga/Forman/Fox 1998, p 7). In Australia the process is called Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). The ‘A’ in APEL stands for accreditation in some situations and assessment in other. APEL describes the process of giving formal recognition to learning acquired informally through experiences in the family, community, leisure activities, workplace or voluntary work. This could include caring for a relative in the home, a life transition, or acting as a committee member of a community group. Recognition is also given to learning experienced as a result of personal life transitions or “turning points” (Strauss) such as divorce, bereavement or unemployment (Luedekke 1997). It is learning that is uncertificated and as such involves reflection and analysis of past experiences – self-evaluation – to identify explicit learning outcomes or achievements (Hamill/Sutherland 1994). This may take the form of producing a portfolio, project work, reflective accounts or matching the learning with declared learning outcomes.

In a recent EU Socrates Adult Education project (project number 25019-CP-2-97-1-BE-ADULT EDUCATION, 1996-99) the use of the terms assessment and accreditation was rejected since neither adequately described the different applications of APEL as identified in our survey of European countries. For Evans: “The Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning involves students or prospective students documenting their learning from life and work experience in such a way that they can use such documentation to gain access and advance standing in tertiary education institutions” (1990, p 122).

Similarly Challis argues: “The fundamental principle underpinning APEL is that learning is worthy and capable of gaining recognition and credit, regardless of the time, place and context in which it has been achieved. It thus represents a move to accept that learning is not dependent upon any particular formal setting, and to acknowledge it as being of value in its own right” (1993, p 1).

APEL is significant as a means of promoting widening access and social inclusion for a number of reasons. Importantly it challenges existing notions of what counts as useful knowledge by recognising that learning is not confined to formal educational institutions or the workplace: “APEL is essentially about learning from experience. APEL also raises interesting questions about learning and assessment processes, what constitutes knowledge and the interaction and relationship between formal and informal learning” (Merrill/Hill 1998, p 21).

Skills and knowledge gained in personal and public domains are both viewed as important. Everyone has life experiences of learning in different contexts. APEL acknowledges that learning does not only occur in formal learning situations and that informal learning is just as valuable as a knowledge base as formal learning. Emphasis is also shifted from learning outcomes to the learning process (Storan 1988). APEL offers an

important stepping stone on the path to returning to learn for adults who may have been disaffected or let down by initial schooling. Informal learning is assessed and transferred into a commodity, a credit. APEL is also significant in enhancing the learning confidence of “marginal learners”, such as adults with few qualifications or those who have been out of the education system for a long time, in helping them to develop their learning skills, and design a learning trajectory. Importantly it places the learner at the centre of the learning process. However, the process is not without contradictions in assessing and quantifying the reflective processes of learning acquired informally as critics such as Assiter/Shaw (1993) have pointed out. Barkatoolah (1998) stresses that APEL should be used as a tool for qualifying without accreditation and that certification should only apply if it is appropriate for the individual learner. For her APEL should be “qualifying not certifying”. Despite this APEL is a valuable tool for encouraging adult learners to reflect upon their experiences in their own language, identifying the learning processes and providing evidence demonstrating that learning has taken place.

Butterworth (1992) identified two main models of APEL within higher education: the credit exchange model and the developmental model. The former model awards credit by matching informal or non-credited learning with learning outcomes within an accredited programme. It is the learners’ responsibility to demonstrate that their prior learning and competencies match those of the accredited module through a process of reflection, defining, conceptualising and a self-audit of individual experiences and competencies. This outcomes-based approach enables an adult learner to gain exemption from a particular module. For part-time adult undergraduates APEL is valuable for speeding up gaining a degree. However, APEL is also used at postgraduate and foundation levels as well as for professional courses. The credit exchange model has largely developed in response to the need by governments for a more qualified workforce. In contrast the developmental model is described by Trowler (1996) as the “credit-exchange plus” model. It draws on Kolb’s (1983) concept of the learning cycle. The learner reflects upon, evaluates and identifies previous learning experiences through the writing of a portfolio, a diary, a biography, pictures, analysing documents. Personal reflection lies at the core of this model in which the learner is central to the learning process. In higher education institutions such an approach may be used as a distinct module in its own right. In practice, Trowler (1996) argues that APEL systems operate on a continuum between the two models with institutions offering a range of APEL methodologies.

Adult educators such as Freire stressed the centrality of experience in adult learning while others such as Knowles (1990) and Brookfield (1983) point out that adults bring with them a wide range of skills and knowledge to the learning situation. A study by Hutchings/Wutzdorff (1988) looking at how people learn within the context of work-based learning concluded that how we learn is “not simply a matter of application but rather an ongoing interactive process in which both knowledge and experience are repeatedly transformed”. The concept of situated learning from a constructivist per-

spective stresses the importance of interaction between the prior experience of the learner and the context in which learning takes place. Central to APEL is the notion that “learning is rooted in the individual’s general experience” (Lueddeke 1997, p 221) entailing “a dynamic, ongoing interactive process between knowing and doing” (Hutchings/Wutzdorff 1988, p 7). For Bailey and O’Hagan: “When the developmental APEL systems are put in place the process that follows the ‘reflective learning cycle’ will empower learners by enabling them to value the learning they already have prior to any matching exercise (accreditation)” (1999, S. 57).

Adults have built up a biography of such learning experiences through their daily lives in the family, community and workplace. Higher education institutions offering APEL need to recognise the value of such learning and integrate the approach into teaching and learning across the disciplines. Drawing on the constructivist approach this would “allow learners to examine the wider circumstances, issues and problems that have influenced their lives and situate their own experience within the social organisation” (Mandall/Michelson 1990, S. 5) – not only for adults but younger students as well.

APEL is an important tool for promoting lifelong learning and social inclusion: “The question for all of us, therefore, is can APEL be regarded as one of the liberating mechanisms we as educators can employ to enable individuals to lift barriers to learning and policy makers to reach targets for lifelong learning?” (Georgious 1999, p 31)

4. The APEL Process in Europe

The practice of APEL varies across Europe. It has developed in different ways and at different rates. APEL is largely culturally determined, being shaped by national education systems. Research undertaken in two Socrates Adult Education projects indicate that while some countries are at a starting point, such as Spain and Portugal, others are well advanced, for example, France, the UK and Germany. In both Spain and Portugal there is a current policy push to develop APEL systems. APEL is largely confined to vocational learning in France, Germany and Finland. It is also generally within the university sector. APEL in Finland, for example, is linked to work-based learning in higher education. In Sweden while the life experiences of adults are assessed the term APEL is not used. APEL is now being developed in Eastern Europe.

In France the APEL system is highly centralised through national legislation which gives it a high profile and status within higher education. The 1985 decree in France allows a higher education institution to award exemption from qualifications normally required for entry to a course. A learner can also be exempted from some of the assessment requirements of the chosen course. Top-up studies may have to be undertaken. A 1993 decree allows higher education institutions to award units, modules or part of modules of a diploma course through the process of accreditation. Up to all but one unit can be achieved in this way. Legislation enables a potential learner to make a

claim to a university for validation des acquis to which universities have to respond although they are not obliged to give a reason if reject the application. As a result the number of students who go through and benefit from the APEL process in French universities can be easily quantified at the national level. In 1999 11, 150 people were successful in using APEL either in French universities or at the vocational higher education institution of CNAM. Compared to 1998 the numbers of learners opting for this process increased by 18.6 %. Barkatoolah (1998) maintains that, importantly, in the French system the learner is placed central in the process. The policy push for APEL in France has come from the Government. As a result the Ministre de l'Education Nationale is very influential in shaping APEL policy and practice. Learners are more aware of the availability of the APEL process in France than in other countries. However, there is now an increasing amount of information available about the APEL process, particularly on the internet, for example, several universities (mostly new) in the UK advertise their APEL possibilities and procedures on a website.

Other European countries use APEL as a mechanism for bridging the gap between informal experiential learning and formal academic learning. Institutionally it is organised at departmental level and as a result it is more difficult to assess the number of learners who have undergone the APEL process. APEL may be confined to certain disciplines in universities such as social policy and social work, social studies, nursing, engineering, education, management and health studies. Though HE institutions may have institutional policies on APEL these may not be implemented by all departments. New universities in the UK often have a person identified centrally as an APEL co-ordinator. If such a person exists in the old universities it is generally through Continuing and Adult Education departments or located in the administration division. Recent surveys in the UK indicate that APEL is now being used less in the further education sector (post-compulsory institutions) while universities are increasingly offering APEL. In Scotland and France APEL is linked predominantly to postgraduate level and associated with the professions, for example, social work, social policy, nursing and management, rather than undergraduate level. APEL is used by higher education institutions for the following purposes; advanced standing, assessment, accreditation, exemption from a particular module or as a contribution to learning.

A European survey on APEL across Europe (11 countries) funded by the EU (Socrates Adult Education) illustrated that: "APEL procedures are most commonly used to support applications for entry to educational institutions, whereas its use to support and contribute to learning is relatively limited, with the exception of Sweden (75.5 %) and Germany (60.8 %) and actual accreditation of prior learning is still less common" (Hill 1999, p 15).

In percentage terms the 1999 study found that the average use of APEL across Europe for admission was 61.8 % compared to 45.4 % for advanced standing, 34 % for contribution to learning and 23.9 % for accreditation.

The most common approach across European universities is the use of a portfolio for demonstrating experiential learning through documentation such as minutes of meetings, essays, letters etc. to support claims for APEL. This was substantiated through a 2001-2002 European study (EU, Socrates Adult Education). The learner submits the portfolio for formal assessment and, if successful, receives either credit or admission to a particular course or programme. In Finland, however, learners generally make a claim through a personal development plan which consists of personal information about a person's progress in study and in work based learning and evidence of achievements. The process of APEL is interpreted differently within Europe. In France emphasis is placed on the learner's ability to engage in problem-solving and critical thinking. This approach recognises that not only are the processes of experiential learning different but that the outcomes of these processes also differ. In contrast, in the UK greater emphasis is placed on establishing equivalence between the outcomes of experiential learning and the outcomes of a particular academic programme or module against which the learner is seeking credit for exemption.

The Socrates projects revealed that there is no common framework to using portfolios either within a particular country or across Europe. What is expected from a learner varies greatly from country to country (Cleary et al. 2002).

5. APEL from the Learner Perspective

Literature on APEL largely discusses the issues from the perspective of the institution, yet in order to secure good APEL systems it is important to listen to the experiences of the learners. The following section draws on the voices of learners in higher education across Europe, interviewed as part of a SOCRATES project (Cleary et al. 2002). The majority of learners in this study had not heard of APEL before embarking on writing a portfolio. All were using the developmental model of APEL. When they first learnt about the possibility of using APEL participants thought it sounded too abstract. A common practice is for universities to run initial group tutorials to explain what APEL is and what is expected of the student. Many of the learners had been out of the education system for a long time. Others were part way through part-time degree courses. Their experience of learning from initial schooling is that learning is structured, directed and prescriptive. Not surprisingly several still felt unsure about what an APEL portfolio was and what they had to do to achieve it after the initial tutorials. Some stated that their understanding was confused by the delivery given by tutors and APEL co-ordinators, whilst others articulated a need for more structure and more clarity about what a case for APEL should look like.

For many the difficulty associated with APEL revolved around the fact that they could draw on their own life experiences rather than present 'academic' material. Generally with the portfolio approach students are offered individual tutorials. Some felt that once they started the APEL process they did not require any further guidance; others

became highly dependant on tutor input. The apprehension experienced at the start of the APEL process was due to the fact that it was a new way of learning; they had to learn to be self-directive, reflective and draw on new forms of knowledge such as their own life experiences.

At the end of the process most students valued the insight gained from reflection on their life and professional experiences, especially for forcing them to link theory and practice. Most students said that they would recommend the APEL process to other adult learners.

6. The Future Scenario of APEL for European Universities

APEL is increasingly having an important role to play in opening universities to non-traditional universities in certain European countries. Those countries that are at a starting point are beginning to realise the significance of APEL for lifelong learning and social inclusion policy agendas. It is likely, therefore, that APEL will continue to expand as a learning strategy. A number of implications and future scenarios, however, can be identified by asking the following questions:

What impact will APEL have in terms of questioning traditional academic knowledge and learning processes in universities? Will the wider implementation of APEL ensure that other forms of knowledge – “really useful knowledge” (Johnson 1988) – will be valued within academia?

What impact will APEL have on the constitution of the student population and the widening access agenda? Will it result in a broader and more heterogeneous student population, characterised by an increase in non-traditional adult students?

Could APEL be used to facilitate mobility in terms of individual social mobility, mobility of students between national and European universities and employee mobility of graduates across Europe?

Has APEL the potential to blur the boundaries between formal and informal learning? APEL enables a learner to use their biographical experiences reflectively. In doing so they are constructing a self-identity (Giddens 1991). To what extent will APEL form part of the process in influencing a learner’s identity in university? To what extent will biographical experiences in the family, community or work, for example, influence the future university curriculum, thus further linking learning and experience?

The above require a cultural and organisational shift in universities if these scenarios are to be achieved, particularly within the elite, traditional institutions.

Universities traditionally are sites for the re/production of knowledge. What constitutes knowledge is narrowly defined, confined to scientific and technical knowledge across different disciplines. However, that idea of the university is now contested as the claim is made that universities are no longer the sole producers of knowledge (Lyotard 1984).

Gibbons et al. (1984) maintain that mode 1 knowledge associated with modernity is being replaced by mode 2 knowledge whereby a range of knowledge producers, from inside and outside universities, working together in applying knowledge to a particular problem. In this scenario multidisciplinary becomes the norm. This is now reflected in the requirements of key funders such as the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) in the UK who stress multidisciplinary approaches and the inclusion of end users in the research process as being essential. Delanty (2001, p 5) argues that in a knowledge society: "As a result of mass education, social protest and the new social movements, and the rise of new kinds of technologies, knowledge is more spread through society than ever before; it is no longer confined to elites but is more publicly available. Thus lay knowledge can no longer be separated from professional knowledge."

In postmodernity, it is argued, there is a move towards a reflexive turn in knowledge production. APEL questions traditional assumptions and attitudes about knowledge and academic knowledge in particular through advocating life/work experiences and lay knowledge as valid forms of knowledge. Its importance lies in bridging formal, non-formal and informal knowledge. APEL also challenges traditional ways of teaching and learning in universities. Firstly, the subjectivity and autonomy of the learner and the learner's life/work experiences are placed central to the learning process and the knowledge base. The knowledge and skills which the learner brings to the learning situation is recognised as "really useful knowledge" (Johnson 1988). Life experiences are integrated with academic knowledge. The stress is on reflective learning and the meaning of what it meant to learn this or that in a particular social context. APEL "allows learners to examine the wider circumstances, issues and problems that have influenced their lives and to situate their own experience within the social organisation" (Mandell/Michelson 1990, p 5). Secondly, innovative forms of assessment, in terms of university education, have been introduced.

As noted earlier the notion of starting with the life experiences of the learner as a focus in the curriculum on them is not new within adult education. The work of Freire is influential here. Brookfield, Kolb and Mezirow also stress the importance of experience and reflective learning for adult learners. APEL is about assessing and accrediting personal learning and experiences for self-development and thus has the potential to empower the learner and change learner and self-identities. Empowerment is a nebulous concept but for Gore: "Empowerment carries with it an agent of empowerment (someone, or something, doing the empowering), a notion of power as property (to empower implies to give or confer power), and a vision or desired end state (some vision of what it is to be empowered and the possibility of a state of empowerment)" (Gore 1993, pp 73-74).

In relation to adult education Antikainen et al. (1996) draw upon Mezirow's (1981) concept of "critical reflectivity" in their definition of empowerment. For them empowerment refers "to an experience that changes an individual's understanding of the world" (Antikainen 1996, pp 70-71). In the context of APEL Evans emphasises that: "Empower-

ment, however, implies development, or at least the opportunity for development, so the learning which is experiential, being personal, is rooted in the idea of human growth and development, hence the interest in the connections between personal learning and public recognition in relation to empowerment" (Evans 1992, p 85).

For Challis (1993) the fact that APEL is completely student-centred makes it an empowering process for the learner which also increases their self-confidence: "The assessment and accreditation of what is revealed through this process takes place against criteria that are known to the learner, and against which suitable evidence of competence has been prepared and matched. The process is therefore one of empowerment, and makes the concept of 'failure' irrelevant. The process is non-competitive, because each learner's experience and learning is different from any other's" (Challis 1993, p 6).

Many adults who use APEL at the undergraduate level are non-traditional in the sense that they lack traditional qualifications and are from lower socio-economic backgrounds. By engaging in the APEL process they are developing different kinds of cultural and intellectual capital. The acceptance of APEL as a new form/process of knowledge has been more readily evident in the new or reform universities in Europe. A key issue for the future development and expansion of APEL in universities is how to break down the resistance to 'really useful knowledge' in the traditional universities as it requires a cultural shift and institutional change. Challenging elite assumptions about the nature of knowledge will not be easy. In the past academics in new disciplines such as sociology and gender studies initially struggled to embed their subjects in academia. Although now well established they are located at the lower end of the knowledge hierarchy. There are signs in the UK that a few traditional universities are being more open to APEL systems, albeit on the margins of the curriculum and institution.

APEL has a critical function to play in bridging formal and informal learning and breaking down the boundaries and hierarchy between the two. Informal learning is 'useful knowledge' as the radical adult education tradition has advocated for a number of years. APEL recognises this. APEL processes could act as a transformative mechanism in terms of knowledge and learning. Habermas's concept of communicative action is useful here as APEL values the voices of learners and what they say about knowledge and learning. There is also, however, the danger that informal learning becomes transformed and translated into formal learning and academic knowledge by APEL processes.

Over the past twenty years the doors of universities have been gradually widening to allow, reluctantly in some institutions, adults into the world of academia at undergraduate level. However, the process has not been even either within national states or across Europe. In theory APEL is a vital tool in enabling adults without the traditional qualifications required for entrance or those who have been out of the education system for a long time to access universities and some universities do implement APEL for this purpose. APEL systems also build the learner confidence of adult students allowing

them to feel that they are capable of undergraduate study. APEL, therefore, potentially addresses the social inclusion agenda. Peters/Pokorney/Sheibani (1999) argue that: "Students from very diverse backgrounds and a broad age range have found the process of APEL useful in enabling them to position themselves within the higher education environment and developing a continuity between their previous selves and themselves as learners."

Practice, however, is far from the rhetoric. As described above the use of APEL is limited to certain kinds of institutions. The data collected for the SOCRATES project on APEL and social inclusion indicated that, on the whole, APEL is not widening access to those who have been traditionally excluded from higher education. Most of the adults undertaking APEL in the sample were at the postgraduate level, rather than for entry at undergraduate level. They, therefore, in Bourdieu's term, possess a reasonable amount of cultural capital. Universities that offer APEL at undergraduate level generally do so in terms of accreditation or as part of the learning/teaching process. Evidence suggests that APEL is not being used to its full potential in relation to widening participation, social inclusion and lifelong learning. Adults' life/work experiences could be utilised much more widely as a route for admission to higher education or as advanced standing as a strategy for increasing access for non-traditional students.

As Waterhouse, a UK vice-chancellor of a new university outlined: "The world of learning is international, its products essential to a knowledge-based economy, and today's economy is global ... The HE system (envisaged by some industrialists) is one which recognises that skilled labour in Europe is likely to become as mobile as in the US; a system which is credit-based, and where credits are portable (1995, p 8).

APEL processes could contribute towards the need, manifested by globalised capitalism, for a mobile workforce within Europe as the European Union moves towards economic union. While recognising that there is currently some employment mobility occurring the implementation of APEL for this purpose would enable more people to take up the opportunity. Higher education institutions would play a central role in this process. APEL, through a portfolio or a demonstration of skills and knowledge for accreditation would enable employers to assess the employability of potential workers from another European country, dependent upon an individual's fluency of the appropriate language. The APEL process could be a joint scheme involving higher education institutions and employers. In reality employment mobility within Europe is likely to be more attractive to younger adults and/or those without family ties as they are less likely to be tied geographically to a particular locality. Refugees, particularly the skilled and professionals may also be a group for whom APEL would be a benefit. A more fluid system in relation to employment would also help to erode national boundaries within the European Union.

APEL can also contribute towards encouraging other forms of mobility in relation to employment and education. APEL offers a learner-friendly route back into education

for those with few or no qualifications and/or who have been out of the education system for a long time. For women in particular who have spent a period of time at home child-rearing APEL provides an opportunity to get back into learning at further and higher education levels and subsequently the labour market at a higher level. Besides individual social mobility APEL also offers an opportunity for career mobility for particular professional groups such as nurses who may purposefully choose to do a degree for career enhancement or who may have to because of the professionalisation of the occupation. While APEL is used in some countries, for example, the UK, for this application it is not widespread.

7. Conclusion

The potential of APEL is still far from realised within the HE sector across Europe. Where APEL is offered it is frequently as a peripheral activity, generally confined to a specific department such as Continuing Education. Its continual marginality in most European countries originates from a number of reasons. Economically APEL is an expensive system to organise and manage, requiring one-to-one tutoring. As its knowledge base challenges traditional assumptions about academic knowledge it is perceived as lacking in academic rigour and hence is given low status within the knowledge hierarchy. Life experience, especially in traditional universities is not regarded as valid, academic knowledge. APEL learning and teaching processes are also innovative – perhaps viewed as too radical by some institutions. Universities require a cultural and organisational shift for APEL to be embraced as a mainstream activity. There is, therefore, the need for:

- a sharing and exchange of knowledge and good practice across HE institutions and European countries. This should involve those at different levels of experience and development in relation to APEL;
- higher education institutions to work more closely with other adult education providers in developing a coherent system of APEL across the sectors to encourage progression;
- development of a European network on APEL involving not only universities but other educational sectors including both educational policy makers, managers and practitioners;
- clearer understanding of APEL and its meaning through a common language while still recognising different educational and cultural contexts;
- a policy commitment at national and European levels.

Universities and higher education institutions that offer APEL are not always maximising its potential, especially in relation to widening participation and social inclusion. Fundamentally, many potential learners are not aware of the availability of APEL or if they are informed they are told different information by different people within the organisation: “What those institutions tell potential students about APEL will be driven

by the extent to which APEL is credible within the institutions and also by the reality that different institutions see APEL merely as a means of opening doors to students who 'missed out' on previous educational opportunity, or more radically, as a means of providing potential students with formal recognition of previous achievements which carries with it the possibility of exemption from parts of an academic programme or even academic credit" (Merrill/Hill 1999, p 531).

There are signs that universities are changing – the emergence of the information society and globalisation have produced the move towards mass universities and certainly in the UK universities are characterised by a heterogeneous student population. Change, however, has not been wholesale across all universities and European countries. Traditional universities have the power and autonomy to resist change and maintain elite institutions for reproducing the next generation of intellectual elites. What may happen in the future is the development of a pluralistic system with different types of universities having different functions. In the UK, for example, the future university system may become diversified between the old universities (universities in the binary era) concentrating on research and the new universities (post binary institutions) focusing on teaching. Universities have recently been asked by the Government to find ways of enhancing the differences between institutions. Currently it is the new universities that have embraced the idea and practice of APEL more than the old universities.

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