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Where does AP(E)L fit in Higher Education?

Anne Murphy, Learning and Teaching Centre

Abstract

This paper summarises the findings of five research reports produced in Ireland and the UK since 2002 on the subject of accreditation of prior experiential learning (AP(E)L) in higher education. Cross-cutting themes among the reports are identified. The models of AP(E)L-in-use identified in the reports are then contrasted with what has become known as 'the French model' which was developed under their most recent specific piece of enabling legislation for validation of experiential learning: la loi de modernisation sociale 2002.

Introduction

This paper is written against a background of concurrent policy development, research and pilot projects related to validation, accreditation or recognition of non-formal and informal learning, both nationally and across the EU.

On an EU policy level the paper acknowledges the impact on thinking about AP(E)L as a result of the agreement of common European principles for validation of non-formal and in-formal learning in 2004 at the Dublin Conference during Ireland's presidency of the EU.¹ This conference also addressed the possible areas of agreement across vocational education and training (VET) and higher education (HE) on contiguous issues such as a common European Qualification Framework, common arrangements for credit transfer and common arrangements for quality assurance. Additionally, the paper is written contemporaneously with the introduction of such mechanisms as the *Europass*, *European CV*, *Mobilipass*, *European Language Portfolio*, *Diploma Supplement* and *Certificate Supplement*, which are all underpinned by the broad principles of flexibility, mobility, transferability and mutual recognition of qualifications and learning.²

¹ Document; Irish Presidency Conference 8 March 2004, 'Towards 2010 – Common Themes and Approaches Across Higher Education and Vocational Education and Training in Europe', [Background Research Paper February 2004](#), and [Conference Report April 2004](#), written by Cynthia Deane and Elizabeth Watters, are available on <http://www.nqai.ie/en/International/>

² Information on the *Europass* (a single framework for the transparency of qualification and competences) *Certificate Supplement* and *Diploma Supplement*, etc is available at http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/programmes/europass/index_en.html

At the philosophical level, the paper is written against current debates on the role of higher education in supporting a knowledge society in a differentiated, transitional, post-industrial phase of economic development, where the distinction between VET and HE is becoming increasingly blurred in the rhetoric of lifelong learning.³

At the national policy level, the paper is written in the context of accelerated development of principles, operational guidelines and mechanisms for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) by all tertiary level awarding bodies⁴ and across tertiary levels of the new national framework of qualifications in 2004 and 2005.⁵

The paper is however, more about AP(E)L research into practice than about policy development. The specific research reports selected for discussion here, therefore, are as follows:

(i) The Learning from Experience Trust (LET) Research Report (2002) *Mapping AP(E)L in higher education in England*, commissioned by the Department of Education and Enterprise (DfEE), and available from <http://www.learningexperience.org.uk>

(ii) The EU Joint Action Project (2003), *TRANSFINE (TRANSfer between Formal, Informal and Non-formal Education) Project Final Report*, written by Pat Davies on behalf of the project partners; EUCEN, EAEA, AEF, FIEEA, and SEFI⁶ and available at <http://www.transfine.net>

³ OECD Review of Irish HE 2004, and the Michael Skilbeck Report 2001, *The University Challenged*: a review of international trends and issues with particular reference to Ireland, Dublin; HEA and CHIU.

⁴ The Further Education Awards Council (FETAC) established an RPL Technical Working Group in 2004; The Higher Education Awards Council (HETAC) is currently in the process of re-defining its procedures; the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) has supported both practice and research in AP(E)L: the university sector is represented, together with the other HE sectors, on the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) Advisory Group on Recognition of Prior Learning 2004–2005.

⁵ The development of a coherent set of principles and national guidelines for RPL is led by the NQAI representatives of the awarding bodies, Trade Unions, Community Education and employers.

⁶ EUCEN European Universities Continuing Education Network; EAEA European Association for the Education of Adults (Belgium); AEF French National Association for Adult Vocational Training;

(iii) The Socrates-Grundtvig VaLEx Project (2004) *VaLEx National Report for the UK*, produced jointly by Glasgow-Caledonian University, the University of Stirling and the University of Warwick.

(iv) The VaLEx research project (2004) *Report of Audit of AP(E)L in higher education in Ireland*, produced by the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) with the co-operation of the Irish AP(E)L Network.⁷ VaLEx reports are available on

<http://www.valex-apel.com>

(v) The University Vocational Awards Council (UVAC) commissioned report, (2004) *Bridging rhetoric and reality: accreditation of prior experiential learning (AP(E)L) in the UK*, produced by Middlesex University with support from the Learning and Skills Council <http://www.uvac.ac.uk>

The paper is organised into three parts. In the first part, the reports named above are summarised in terms of purpose, scale, methodology and key findings.

In the second part the cross cutting themes among the reports are indicated.

In the final part the models of AP(E)L systems in higher education described in the reports are contrasted with the model now operating in France under the 2002 legislation.

FIEEA International Federation for Children and Youth Educative Exchange (France); SEFI Societe Europeenne pour la Formation des Ingenieurs.

⁷ The Irish AP(E)L Network is an informal grouping of third-level practitioners who are currently involved in planning and/or implementing AP(E)L systems in their institutions. It was convened initially on 20 February 1997 in the University of Ulster, with joint convenors Sam Bailie and Celia O'Hagan. The current joint convenors are Anne Murphy, Dublin Institute of Technology, and Geraldine Mernagh, Waterford Institute of Technology. The Network seeks to research and develop AP(E)L and to contribute to policy developments nationally and internationally. The Network communicates through national seminars, college-based seminars and working groups.

Part 1

Summary of Reports

Mapping AP(E)L in higher education in England 2002

The Executive Summary of the report defines AP(E)L as ‘the award of credit for learning based on experience...from work, community or volunteer experience...which has not previously been assessed and/or awarded credit’. This research was conducted by the Learning from Experience Trust (LET) and funded by the Department of Education and Enterprise (DfEE) to achieve the following specific aims:

- (i) to provide accurate data on the extent of AP(E)L in higher education in England through survey research and case studies; and
- (ii) to identify practices which would inform a cost-effective model of AP(E)L for large numbers of students across higher education.

The report was designed to inform policy on implementation of the new foundation degrees, flexible learning modes, widening access, work-based learning and the development of lifelong learning.

In terms of scale and methodology the research involved a two-stage survey distributed initially to identified key personnel in the colleges. A total of 107 higher-education institutions responded to the first stage of the survey (80%), and forty-two responded to the second phase (81%). From the respondents, ten colleges where AP(E)L provision is well established, were then selected for in-depth case studies, and 85 interviews were conducted for this purpose. Both the Northern Universities Consortium on Credit Accumulation and Transfer (NUCCATS) and the Southern England Consortium on Credit Accumulation and Transfer (SEEC) were consulted on the draft report before the final version was issued.

The survey found that the majority of higher educational institutions have AP(E)L policies in place at institutional or departmental level, or both, but that there is a gap between policy and practice. The adoption of AP(E)L policies did not mean that there were substantial numbers of students gaining AP(E)L credit. It was estimated that the numbers were under 100 students per year.

The growth in AP(E)L was found to be in continuing professional development courses, particularly for management level. One reason given is that such a sector is more likely to have the resources to pursue AP(E)L where there is a cost involved. Other reasons for the low take-up in AP(E)L include resistance by academic staff, lack of understanding of AP(E)L principles and processes, and the assumption that it is too time consuming. Additionally there was an expectation that AP(E)L applicants would prove learning achievement beyond that of students on taught courses where a 40% pass grade is traditional practice. With regard to administration, the general consensus was that AP(E)L is more costly than taught courses, and that it is sometimes a loss-leader for colleges anxious to widen participation.

The recommendations focus on changes to learning and teaching practices in higher education, including the following:

- active recruitment efforts utilising the potential for AP(E)L with groups of students sharing common experience
- increased visibility and clarity of information about AP(E)L availability
- guidance offered in cost-effective ways to groups of students, using new media, and making procedures more transparent
- a greater range of assessment tools and more streamlined assessment procedures emphasising evidence for learning (not experience), agreement on levels and volume of credit, and training for assessors.

The report further recommends that AP(E)L should be ‘scaled up’ with appropriate institutional structures, preferably centralised within the quality assurance arrangements for all provision, but devolved to departments for academic ownership and equity purposes.

The Mapping AP(E)L report clearly places AP(E)L within discussions about pedagogical practices, and regards it as a dimension of flexible approaches to learning. As with any major change in teaching and learning arrangements, AP(E)L requires information, training and resources supported by national policy.

TRANSFINE Project Final Report 2003

The TRANSFINE research project 2002–2003 was funded under the EU Joint Action Initiative. The main aim was to consult widely on real-world practice towards the development of a consensus on key principles which would form the basis of a European ‘architecture’ and common tools for systems of transfer between informal, non-formal and formal education.

In scale and methodology, there were three discrete phases to the research. The first phase involved the formation of inner and outer circles of experts. The inner circle was composed mainly of academics with an extensive knowledge of AP(E)L in their own countries – England, Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales, Estonia, France, Italy, Norway, Germany and Switzerland – who compiled research reports based on data collected from the results of responses to a common questionnaire. These country reports formed the basis of phase two of the research, which was centred around a consultation seminar in the University of Lille in April 2003 involving the outer circle of sixty experts from nineteen countries, drawn from vocational education, adult education, the youth sector and a number of Grundtvig and Leonardo projects, as well as higher education.

The final phase was the presentation of key results of the TRANSFINE research at the EUCEN conference in Brno, the Czech Republic, in May 2003. This phase also involved the production of a synthesised report on the entire project and the presentation of key principles and tools which could form the basis of a practical architecture for articulation between formal, informal and non-formal education.

The TRANSFINE research was extended to a follow-up stage of development called REFINE (January 2004 to December 2006) which aims to test the principles and tools recommended in the final report from TRANSFINE, with seventeen partners across twelve countries. With regard to the findings of the TRANSFINE research 2002 using the common questionnaire, the summary offered in the [Final Report](#) (p. 28) is as follows:

The responses were generally very positive. There was a willingness and interest in experimentation and in collaboration and co-operation; and clearly support from Ministries. However, considerable obstacles were foreseen, in particular the wide variation in existing policy and practice, the clash of educational cultures, suspicion, lack of trust and competition between institutions, the widespread ignorance about the idea of recognition, and legal constraints in some countries. There was also a considerable fear of heavy technicist systems.

From the EUCEN conference 2004, key issues and challenges for the university sector regarding AP(E)L were summarised in the Final Report (p. 33) as follows:

- the shift from an input to an outcome model of learning
- curriculum structure and examinations
- what makes a university diploma if the learning has taken place elsewhere?
- tools and procedures – lack of confidence and currency
- new skills and competences for assessors and counsellors
- quality and legitimacy – social value as well as individual added value
- cost and payment – financing of higher education acts as an incentive in some countries and a disincentive in others

In the report's recommendations the following are prioritised.

- AP(E)L/RPL should be contextualised in the wider issues of the Bologna and Copenhagen processes, and in the debates about lifelong learning in a knowledge society, as it impacts on social and institutional values and challenges the role of higher education itself
- an inclusive approach is required to accommodate the varied policies, mechanisms and practices already in place
- existing tools and mechanisms should be built on rather than new ones being developed
- AP(E)L/RPL 'language' should be commonly understood across countries
- a common framework with credibility and legitimacy needs a set of common, agreed principles

- the individual should be at the heart of the system
- comprehensive information, advice and guidance is essential
- common tools should be used across the EU
- common credit systems for VET and HE are required
- quality assurance for providers, including training and support for staff, is essential
- flexible and holistic RPL systems for recognition of prior knowledge and competence need to be tested and evaluated, towards agreement on common approaches across Europe.

The key findings and recommendations of the TRANSFINE research are being progressed in the REFINE project, with emphasis on testing the tools for a Europe-wide methodological framework in a trans-national, trans-sectoral collaboration. The target group for such RPL tool testing are experienced practitioners, managers and policy makers with no (or few) formal qualifications but with extensive skills and knowledge acquired outside the academy. Results of the project are expected to be disseminated at a conference in Autumn 2005.

The summary of AP(E)L in the UK (p. 22) includes a list of its strengths and weakness as follows:

[T]he main strengths of existing UK AP(E)L systems are seen as: rigorous, transparent assessment procedures, its position as part of mainstream and therefore subject to broader institutional regulations. AP(E)L is seen as part of a broader set of strategies to widen access to and participation in lifelong learning opportunities.

The main weaknesses of AP(E)L systems are seen as: over bureaucratic and resource hungry arrangements, a lack of credibility for some, often a marginal activity, the absence of a unified credit framework, staff resistance as AP(E)L is seen to be a threat to 'normal' entry requirements.

VaLEx: Valuing Learning from Experience

The 2003–2005 VaLEx Research Project (Valuing Learning from Experience) is a Socrates-Grundtvig project. It is tasked with taking forward the work of an earlier EU project, *AP(E)L from the Learners Perspective 2001–2003*, which was led by Glasgow-Caledonian University/University of Stirling TRANSFINE research project described above. The partner universities in VaLEx are: Stirling, Warwick, South Brittany, Brussels, Tartu (Estonia), Turku (Finland) and the Dublin Institute of Technology.

The main aim of the VaLEx project is to develop and test a model of AP(E)L in higher education, based on a biographical and guidance model which provides expert ‘accompaniment’ to adult learners as they progress through a personally identified higher-education learning plan towards a qualification. The model takes particular cognisance of the French VAE model (Validation des Acquis de l’Experience), where the notion of future capability as well as current competence is central.

The model of AP(E)L is tested in each of the partner countries in collaboration with locally identified agencies/organisations, since a key principle in the model is that experiential learning in occupational spheres is gained in the specific contexts of practice, and indeed that valuing of learning should not be solely within the hegemony of the higher education sector in any case. The VaLEx project specifically aims to provide a robust defence of the theoretical underpinnings of the model in higher education, so that it might positively inform the policy context as well as the practice context.

The first activity of the project was to produce comparative reports on the status of AP(E)L in the partner countries. For the most part, these report drew their data from previous Socrates projects, from publications in each country and from the TRANSFINE data.

VaLEx National Report for the UK

Detailed analytical reports on the status of AP(E)L in the UK (Scotland, England and Northern Ireland) were prepared in 2003 by the pre-VaLEx Socrates Project, AP(E)L from the Learners' Perspective, by the Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning (CRL), based at Glasgow-Caledonian and Sterling. The key issues from those reports were used to inform the VaLEx UK background report for the UK, the summary of which is as follows:

In Scotland and England AP(E)L was enabled through the Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme (CATS) in England and SCOTCATS in Scotland in the 1990s. Since then it has remained a marginal institutional activity both in FE and HE. There is no overall national framework for AP(E)L in either England or Scotland and it has developed mostly in the post-1992 universities, which generally place a higher emphasis on widening participation than the older universities. AP(E)L has developed too through EU funded projects such as Leonardo and Socrates, generally in vocationally oriented or adult learning areas with the emphasis on access/entry rather than on exemptions at advanced standing, or on whole-award processes. From the reports, AP(E)L is generally regarded as time-consuming and overly-cumbersome relative to conventional approaches to course design and delivery.

AP(E)L has been connected to work-based learning (WBL) through the Scottish Vocational Qualifications system (SVQs) as a mechanism for fast-tracking of experienced workers towards qualifications. This is especially so at postgraduate-level entry for particular sectors. AP(E)L for professional accreditation at undergraduate level has been less successful, though. This may be because undergraduate courses have tighter curriculum design approaches where 'college knowledge' is central to modules and courses, making it difficult to translate experiential learning across the systems.

A compounding issue is the centralised approach to the award of credit in Scotland and England where only the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) and the English National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) and the universities can award credit. This may be resolved in Scotland through the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework currently in development.

VaLEx Report of Audit of AP(E)L in higher education in Ireland

The audit of AP(E)L in higher education in Ireland was conducted as the first activity in the DIT VaLEx project. The Republic of Ireland had not been included in the TRANSFINE research and therefore there was no comparative data of the same nature already in the public domain.

It was decided at the outset of the Irish research to use an extended version of the TRANSFINE experts' questionnaire as the main research instrument, and to use a similar structure of inner and outer circles of experts for consultation and feedback. Accordingly, the DIT VaLEx project-management team invited four colleagues with experience of AP(E)L to act as an in-house consultation panel. An Inner Circle of Experts was formed with representatives of key stakeholders including the Higher Education Authority (HEA), The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI), The Higher Education Awards Council (HETAC), The Further Education Awards Council (FETAC), FAS the national training authority, and a joint convenor of the Irish AP(E)L Network.

The Outer Circle experts consisted of all the questionnaire respondents and the members of the Irish AP(E)L Network in both the Republic and Northern Ireland.⁸ The perceived role of these experts was both to complete and return the questionnaires, and to contribute to the analysis of the data and the recommendations for future development of AP(E)L in higher education. Initial findings were available to respondents for comment in late April, leading to case studies and formulation of recommendations at a VaLEx AP(E)L seminar in DIT in June 2004.

The research was conducted in the higher education sector only, since FETAC had already established a representative RPL Technical Working Group with the aim of having principles and procedures agreed for the further education sector between 2004 and 2005.

Research was not conducted in the adult and community sectors for VaLEx since considerable data were available already from the consultation processes for the

⁸ Available on <http://www.valex-apel.com>

Green and White Papers on adult education ([Adult education in an era of learning](#) (1998) and [Learning for Life](#) (2000) respectively),⁹ from the AONTAS (1995) study,¹⁰ from the [Ni Mhaolrunaigh](#) (2003) study for the HEA and Dublin City University (DCU),¹¹ and from the [Deane and Watters EU Irish Presidency Conference background discussion paper](#) (2004).¹²

The VaLEx questionnaire was distributed in late February 2004 to thirty third-level colleges. Country reports from TRANSFINE and the earlier Socrates project were included with the questionnaire, together with the main literature to be used as an analytical framework for the final report.

The following colleges responded to the questionnaire:

Blanchardstown Institute of Technology
Carlow Institute of Technology
Centre for Development Studies, Kimmage Manor, Dublin
Cork Institute of Technology
Dublin Business School
Dublin City University
Dublin Institute of Technology
Dundalk Institute of Technology
Dunlaoghaire Institute of Technology
Griffith College, Dublin
Limerick Institute of Technology
Milltown Institute, Dublin
National College of Art and Design, Dublin
Open Training College
Sligo Institute of Technology
Tralee Institute of Technology
Trinity College Dublin

⁹ Available on <http://www.education.ie>

¹⁰ AONTAS/Combat Poverty Agency/NOW report, *Can You Credit It? implications of accreditation for learners and groups in the community sector*, written by Mary B. Kelly.

¹¹ Available on <http://www.valex-apel.com>

¹² Available on <http://www.nqai.ie>

University College Cork
University College Dublin
University College Galway
University of Limerick
Waterford Institute of Technology

Limitations of the survey data

In presenting and interpreting the survey data below, it is necessary to indicate some limitations. First, some responses were the collective response from the colleges about their experience of AP(E)L rather than a separate response for each case of AP(E)L practice. In one instance the responses represented experiences over eight college courses, while in another responses represented experiences over four areas of study. Second, the questionnaire itself may not have given sufficient scope for respondents to elaborate the conceptual and theoretical underpinnings of their AP(E)L practices. Third, colleges which have discontinued, or have never used, AP(E)L may need to be offered a further opportunity to elaborate the conceptual, policy and procedural problems they identified. Fourth, Recognition of Accredited Prior Learning (RAPL) is widely used across Irish higher education for access, for transfer and, perhaps less frequently, for exemptions from modules/units of study or entry at advanced standing. (This applies to both undergraduate and postgraduate levels.) Some colleges regard this as evidence of acceptance of prior experiential learning for entry and credit exchange. Finally, HETAC pro-actively encourages recognition of experiential learning, and AP(E)L systems have been available for both the further and higher non-university sectors for over a decade. The DIT and the universities have autonomy in this regard, and practice has tended to be at course, school, or departmental levels, rather than through a centralised system.

The survey data are presented under broadly similar headings to those used in the TRANSFINE UK country reports, with additional headings as required. A text summary only is offered in this paper. The numeric data can be viewed at on the VaLEx website: <http://www.valex-apel.com>

Summary of questionnaire data

Where AP(E)L is used

The data are from higher education contexts only, with most cases of AP(E)L related to existing course provision. A small number of cases within the higher education context are from adult education, work-based learning, partnerships with industry, and from collaborative projects with community and voluntary organisations. Fields of learning include nursing studies, adult and community education courses, adult literacy management, postgraduate professional development, business studies, design, maths and computers, applied biology, engineering, and construction studies. The range would be wider if non-standard entry to postgraduate courses were taken into account.

How AP(E)L is supported by college policy

Only five colleges reported having college-wide policy in place, though others were currently either developing or awaiting approval for such a policy. Nationwide there was only one full-time member of academic staff with the specific responsibility of an RPL Officer. Four colleges have staff with an AP(E)L role as part of their remit, especially in the cases of access officers. Colleges which use AP(E)L have supporting in-house documents, but only one has web-based support for applicants. Only two colleges have AP(E)L modules.

Types of AP(E)L modules

In the two colleges offering AP(E)L modules, the modules are available in-house, to registered students only. One college offers two module types: a broadly developmental/existential model with the potential for module exemptions, and a credit exchange/exemptions model. The second college with an AP(E)L module uses the credit exchange model only. All three cases are linked to European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) credits.

Levels of AP(E)L in use

AP(E)L is used at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels for non-traditional access by mature students and postgraduate applicants. Some colleges refer AP(E)L claims to the new NQAI framework of levels, but in general the existing levels of certificate, diploma and degree are used as benchmarks for assessment of experiential learning. Internationally acknowledged professional standards are used in some cases.

There is no case reported where an entire award is achievable through AP(E)L: the maximum achievable is 50%. Grades are awarded for AP(E)L in one case only, with a maximum of 35% of the course AP(E)L-able in an award bearing year.

Use of learning outcomes

Learning outcomes are used where AP(E)L is related to specific modules or courses, with the expectation in some cases that applicants will meet all the learning outcomes to a specified sufficiency. Some respondents stressed that the use of learning outcomes for AP(E)L is conceptually difficult in a higher-education context where knowledge is not generally pegged to measurable occupational competence standards. Curriculum design, syllabus content and assessment in higher education generally operate from a different philosophy in this regard, and the university preference is for assessment of experiential learning in-the-round, drawing on the teaching experience of academic staff and panels of experts closest to the field of learning in each case. Additionally the assessment of work-based learning is regarded as problematic since the requirement to prove transferability of learning is both conceptually and procedurally difficult. The contextual situatedness of experiential learning proves challenging, especially where applicants are required to provide evidence of both practical and theoretical knowledge. Assessment therefore may need to involve interviews, reflective accounts, analysis of theoretical document, essays and research assignments.

Numbers of applications

Numbers of AP(E)L applications range from over 100 per annum in one college down to single numbers in others. Rejection of claims is rare, and not all colleges have an appeal system.

AP(E)L tools

Tools for AP(E)L include portfolios, reflective logs, performance tests, written tests, essays and interviews, as appropriate to the particular context. Colleges do not generally consider claims processed in other colleges, and only two offer bridging studies.

Strengths

Contact and mentoring support by the Access or AP(E)L officer are regarded as an essential strength of a successful system. AP(E)L allows for consideration of a range of intelligences in a claim rather than the narrow range in traditional assessment. A developmental or transformative AP(E)L model stresses the capabilities and potential of the applicant rather than current competencies. AP(E)L tools encourage more reflective thinking than taught course tools, with the expectation of sustainable independent learning as a result. Accelerated progress through exemptions and credit accumulation are regarded as a strength for mature students, offering them greater flexibility and accessibility.

Weaknesses

Generally, the data indicated that AP(E)L is experienced as hugely time-consuming and sometimes over-cumbersome for both staff and students. AP(E)L claims require sophisticated conceptual skills that are not always required of traditional learning and teaching modes, exposing a possible contradiction with schemas of learning levels such as is elaborated in the NQAI framework of qualifications. Staff may not be appropriately trained in AP(E)L, and where training is available it may not be learner-needs driven. Thus the emphasis may be on the technical and procedural rather than on the epistemological and developmental. Methods of presenting individual experiential learning on a case-by-case basis may not be acceptable to traditional academics, especially in context where norm referencing is used in relation to cohorts of learners. The lack of fixed assessment criteria, lack of grading, and apparent lack of uniformity are regarded as weaknesses of AP(E)L in higher education.

Academic problems encountered

In many cases, academic resistance to AP(E)L is related to fears about standards and quality assurance. This leads to over-caution with documentation. Restrictions on the type of evidence of learning permitted sometimes results from academic unease about the ‘difference’ of AP(E)L. Some academic arguments centre on acceptance of the proposition that non-formal and informal learning could be ‘valorised’ as legitimate relative to learning guided by academia. In some cases there was resistance from the fields of science and engineering, yet in other cases leadership was from these fields.

In some cases there was unease about the assessment processes involved, especially in theoretical aspects of learning.

Procedural problems

In all cases the lack of resources was a problem for colleges. The fact that AP(E)L was available for a limited number and type of modules/courses was a problem for applicants. The system did not necessarily allow for transfer of approved AP(E)L claims between courses within a college. The fact that all claims have to be individually negotiated for exemptions was seen as procedurally difficult for staff and applicants, in terms of both time and structures.

Origin of AP(E)L

In a number of cases AP(E)L resulted from EU funded, or nationally initiated, research projects which became mainstreamed into practice for particular occupational sectors or social groups. The promotion of recognition of experiential learning by HETAC (formerly NCEA – National Council of Educational Awards) through its accumulation of credits scheme during the 1990s led to structures and expertise being developed in the institutes of technology in particular. In some cases the drive came from professional bodies with staff-development needs, particularly from nursing and related social care occupations. In other cases, models of AP(E)L were brought to Irish colleges from newly recruited staff who had experienced it in UK universities. Consequently the models of AP(E)L which developed did not follow any particular blue-print or philosophy. They were variously influenced by literature from the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), Learning from Experience Trust (LETS), Making Your Experience Count, and the existential model developed in the University of Ulster at Jordanstown. The Waterford Institute of Technology literacy-training model and the Cork Institute of Technology whole-college model were noted as influential in some later cases. The DIT OMNA project for early childhood care and education was also known. No case mentioned taking examples from FAS, City & Guilds, Cedefop, or the French and Norwegian models of national statutory provision.

Why some colleges do not use AP(E)L

The universities have not traditionally accepted experiential learning as a basis for entry or credits, except in cases where it is used in support of applications for mature student entry or non-standard entry to postgraduate studies. However, this is changing, with one university currently processing the necessary policy and procedural changes required for AP(E)L and seeking resources for its implementation. Other universities are currently preparing for such changes. At least three colleges indicated that there was no demand for AP(E)L, and one provider had ceased to offer it, as it had become too cumbersome and time-consuming relative to the benefits for learners.

Colleges which have discussed, but not used, AP(E)L, considered that it raised a number of academic challenges especially around the forms of assessment used, and their comparability with traditional modes which lead to grades and awards. The restriction of AP(E)L portfolios assessment to non-graded status was considered problematic. Colleges which opted not to introduce AP(E)L had concerns about the expertise of staff to use it successfully without on-going training.

Attitudes to a Europe-wide AP(E)L system

Respondents were generally favourable to the notion of a Europe-wide framework. However, a number of difficulties were identified regarding recognition of learning acquired outside the state. It was considered that formal test may be required to assess the nature and extent of informal learning acquired abroad to establish benchmarks, but this would probably be field-of-learning/occupation/trade specific. This specificity was regarded by some as the greatest potential of such a system. It was further suggested that this notion might give an impetus for a review of the arguments for general categories within the NQAI framework of qualifications. If international recognition were to be developed there would need to be transparent and clear procedures and agreed quality controls. Some responses indicated that difficulties experienced in developing common systems at home would be a good indicator of the potential to operate a Europe-wide system, and that progress should not be over-rapid. Mutual recognition of experiential learning was regarded as essential to facilitate the mobility of students and workers, especially in the cases of economic migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. It was indicated that legal frameworks could be worked

out for pan-European recognition of experiential learning, taking account of international professional regulations.

There was general consensus that the weakness and challenges of AP(E)L experiences in Ireland would probably emerge in a Europe-wide system, and that probably the beneficiaries would be individuals with the motivation and resources to pursue it. It was not greatly regarded as a mechanism for social inclusion in its current forms.

Respondents indicated that there were no obvious benefits for existing stakeholders at this time from a Europe-wide AP(E)L framework alone, other than easier facilitation of mobility and student exchange. The issue of resources would remain in any case, with the added complication that in a differentiated third-level system as we have at present, there would be greater difficulty in motivating colleges to take responsibility for the development of a system to facilitate disadvantaged individuals at a European level without considerable stimulation at EU policy level.

Respondents did not perceive of any additional cultural barriers to a Europe-wide system that do not exist within the ‘cultures’ of academia. It was suggested that globalisation would inevitably reduce pockets of differentiation and lead to more interchange of systems in any case.

Bridging rhetoric and reality: accreditation of prior experiential learning (AP(E)L) in the UK

The purpose of this analytical report on the development of AP(E)L in higher education in the UK and elsewhere was to provide data for a series of policy-oriented national fora on the issue in London, Cardiff and Belfast in 2004, with the intention of developing a national plan for AP(E)L. With regard to scale and methodology, this short report is essentially an analytical review of research literature on AP(E)L, with brief case studies of AP(E)L policy and practice in Europe, Australia and North America. It was produced by Jonathan Garnett, Derek Portwood and Carol Cosley, Middlesex University, under commission from the University Vocational Awards Council and the Learning and Skills Council.

The immediate UK contextual issues of the report are acknowledged as the roll-out of the widening-participation policy programme and the introduction of foundation degrees: both of which require new thinking about how learning is framed and acknowledged. The report was required to answer the specific question: *what next for AP(E)L in the UK?* It outlines the power of AP(E)L rhetoric and the weaknesses in its implementation over twenty-five years. A persistent weakness was identified as the lack of acceptance by traditional, subject-based academics who cannot concede that there could be a clear match between evidence of experiential learning and the learning which is planned through taught programmes. Despite modularisation and the use of credit, practical issues of costs, training of staff and allocation of resources have persisted. Additionally, the university sector rarely engages in work-based learning (WBL) as the further education sector does, and therefore the links between AP(E)L and WBL have never been fully exploited by the university sector.

The research for this report deliberately set out to build a case for a pro-active stance on AP(E)L systems for both HE and FE, based on successful practices in Europe, North America and Australia. The conclusions of this comparative research include the truisms that AP(E)L enables universities to engage with ‘a wider constituency of learners’, to widen participation and to provide equal opportunities for learners. The conclusions include an acknowledgment that, traditionally, knowledge is constructed in a consistent way due to the hierarchical structures of universities, where interdisciplinary knowledge is rarely shared between and among faculties. Knowledge resulting from experiential learning, therefore, is perceived as of less worth since it cannot be commensurate with the structured learning of modules and programmes. It is additionally of less worth as it emanates from vocational or competence-based contexts where there is a perceived lack of criticality.

The challenge, therefore, for AP(E)L in the university sector is to develop a ‘forward-looking’ policy-driven model where prior learning experiences of adults act as the starting point for new learning projects and for work-based learning activities, as is the case in the French model. To achieve this, the report recommends that AP(E)L, WBL, and vocational training for the labour market should present an integrated front and should seek a coherent and cohesive policy position in higher education.

Additionally the report acknowledges the shift in power-knowledge from the education providers to the creators of knowledge outside the academy. It recommends that universities should be alert to the risk that AP(E)L might become yet another means of exclusion, by creating new ‘micro-circulation of power’ which might impact negatively on issues of access and equity. Within this power-shift, AP(E)L represents a means by which university awards can be achieved without the university’s traditional total ownership of the learning and knowledge for such awards. Universities, therefore, need to recast their definitions of credible and legitimate knowledge and to forge partnerships with new knowledge producers.

The final part of the report deals with what it calls a ‘productivity model’ of AP(E)L where the emphasis is on promotion of intellectual capital. In such a model the university would not simply deal with the individual AP(E)L applicant/learner in a private transaction between two parties, with the university in the dominant position. Rather, as is the case in Canada, the universities would work in collaboration with research councils, employers, trade unions and the community at large. ‘This would radically effect how AP(E)L is perceived, organised and practiced’ (p. 22). AP(E)L would therefore be scaled up from the individual learner/applicant, and the funding of AP(E)L would become a shared responsibility between all beneficiaries. Ultimately, AP(E)L might move from the quality-assurance systems of individual universities towards a specialised national agency with statutory competence to quality assure and audit practices on behalf of all stakeholders.

The barriers to such a productivity model of AP(E)L are described as political, cultural and infrastructural. A Learning Recognition Division (LRD) productivity model is proposed for the forward-looking model of AP(E)L underpinned by the principles of inclusivity, coherence, collaboration and communality, with continuous feedback systems. In the model there could be a lead agency supplemented by an AP(E)L forum, and a forum of specific stakeholders who provide funding. The combined effect of these three groups would be to enable benefits for individuals, organisations and universities. In the medium to long term, development of the LRD new model of AP(E)L is recommended as the most likely means of increasing

intellectual capital. Recommendation number eight encapsulates the thinking as follows:

Any new AP(E)L model should be developed as a useful, critical and reflective mechanism that can be used by individuals and organisations as part of a customised and flexible programme of study. Such a model would be able to include a more forward-looking perspective for the learners where previous experience is used to act as a starting point for new projects and work-based activity. Crucially, the model would enable AP(E)L to be used as an essential tool to support workforce development.

Part 2: Cross-cutting themes

The TRANSFINE Final report (p. 35) summarises the EU-wide status of AP(E)L in this way:

We recognise that there are a number of tensions and political debates that form the context for our proposals. In particular there is the struggle between the academic and vocational communities over the appropriate concepts, structures and tools that should be used in this domain; between the employers and the vocational training sector over ownership of the certification process in the workplace; and between the institutions and the third sector organisations over the extent to which such processes should be learner-centred and open-ended. It has been clear from our work that there has been little co-operation or collaboration between these different sectors at national or European level and considerable tensions at both levels. However, our work has also shown that practitioners find working together both stimulating and fruitful and while differences remain there is also a considerable degree of agreement about core principles and practice.

Across the reports there are areas of convergence on both the problems and potential of AP(E)L becoming a mainstream activity across all VET and HE. A number of those themes are listed below, without priority.

Terminology

There is still considerable divergence on terminology and meanings, which then translate into divergences in practice. There is not yet general acceptance of the EU/Cedefop definitions of formal, informal and non-formal learning. Nor is there agreement on definitions of ‘validation’, ‘valorisation’, ‘accreditation’, ‘assessment’ and ‘recognition’ of prior learning.

Credit and levels systems

The lack of a common credit system across VET and HE is seen as a barrier to an inclusive approach to learner access and progression through AP(E)L. This is compounded by nations/regions having definitions of levels of learning which are not sufficiently compatible to enable mutual recognition of prior learning, both certificated and experiential.

Marginalisation and stereotyping of AP(E)L

National policies and institutional policies enabling AP(E)L in the UK and Ireland have not necessarily resulted in it becoming a mainstream activity. Rather it is generally driven by individuals or sectors, usually with the individual applicant being obliged to pursue their own interests. Stereotypically it is regarded as time-consuming and cumbersome relative to the benefits for learners.

Views of knowledge and learning

Those in HE do not seem convinced that it is appropriate to become involved in the acknowledgement of problematic learning outside the academy, while there remains a lack of clarity about what exactly is to be assessed: inputs or outcomes. There may be a view in HE that AP(E)L is not necessary at all as a major activity, since it could just represent a transitional phase in development from an industrial society to a learning society where there will be a greater need for worker mobility in a market-driven workplace. If this is the case, then there are other key changes required such as a focus on the rights of the individual to achieve his/her optimum potential in society generally.

AP(E)L Tools

There was a general theme that AP(E)L tools should not be discriminatory among and between groups and individuals from groups. Tools should build on what is already tested and which have achieved a high degree of credibility and acceptability.

Curriculum, teaching and learning

AP(E)L is an opportunity to examine how curricula and pedagogical approaches are organised in VET and HE. Academic and administrative staff need opportunities to deal with the theoretical and practical implications for their own practice, and this should be supported with extensive staff training opportunities, including opportunities to contribute to the developing scholarship of teaching in varied contexts. Changes in pedagogies should start from existing reference points, and be developed from practice rather than from imposed policy.

Linking AP(E)L to work-based learning

The potential to link AP(E)L to work-based learning and contractual, negotiated learning is regarded as hugely under-developed.

What is greatly needed:

- Financial support for extensive AP(E)L provision is essential so that it becomes a rights-based rather than an individually pursued option for learning
- Easy-to-access information is essential with guidance provision, as is the case for traditional modes of access to VET and HE
- Capacity building for staff
- Compatibility and cohesion of credit and levels systems with existing regulation
- Flexible approaches to assessment of learning greatly underpinned by learning theory
- Integration of AP(E)L into all quality assurance systems
- Views of learning which are non-hierarchical and which focus on both capabilities of learners as well as current competence for a market-driven model of education.

Part 3: The French AP(E)L Model

The French 2002 *loi de modernisation sociale* strengthened the mechanisms for ‘Validation des Acquis de l’Experience (VAE) as the new mode for accreditation of experience in an approach to the award of qualifications. Before 2002 there were three procedures for accrediting experiential learning in higher education, namely the ‘Ingenieur DPE’ procedure 1934; the 1985 decree for access; and the 1992 and 1993 decrees for accreditation of part of the diploma in higher education, secondary education, agricultural education, and youth qualifications. There were also experimental systems to award workplace learning within companies, and for unemployed adults.

Though qualifications in health, security and defence were excluded from the 2002 law, considerable changes were made, with the emphasis shifting to the rights of the socially/economically active individual to access and support from higher education. Those rights now include the following:

- the right to claim accreditation for learning provided the individual was employed or working (including voluntary work) for at least three years
- the right to request a response from an education institution
- the right to paid work leave to meet their AP(E)L accompanier/adviser
- the right to a full award on the basis of experiential learning provided that award is included in a national list of awards
- the right to have the whole experience of the individual taken into account, not only professional/work experience

The conditions for application for AP(E)L in this manner must be on the basis of a clear learning plan. This plan should ideally relate to the professional work of the applicant or the work of the employing organisation.

The procedures of progressing an AP(E)L claim may include the following:

- development of a portfolio by the candidate/applicant
- observation of the applicant at work

- interview with a panel/jury
- decision by the jury on full award or recommendation for partial award and completion of a learning plan

The jury must be constituted and chaired in accordance with the course leading to the award sought. Its membership should include representative of the occupational sector, excluding staff of the applicant's employing organisation. There must be a gender balance, and the AP(E)L adviser cannot be in a decision-making position, except in higher education where there can be an advocacy role.

The jury can decide to award a full award or recommend the areas of new learning required by the candidate. This extends the role of the jury beyond that of mere assessors, and this is key to the principle that there is no AP(E)L without a future learning plan. In this way, a guidance role is required, and the remit of the AP(E)L 'accompanier' includes monitoring and counselling the learners throughout their learning project toward the identified qualifications.

In this model there is a 'weighing-up' process where prior learning is matched against specific course modules, and a continuing professional development process. This combination of processes is regarded as more holistic and dynamic than the American or Anglo-Saxon models of AP(E)L where the emphasis has always been on current competence rather than capability and future development.

Some comparisons and contrasts

The French Law of 2002 could be regarded as radical in a number of ways, compared to the models of AP(E)L presented in the earlier reports from the UK and Ireland. First, it places the rights on the side of the applicants and the obligations on the side of the providers. Second, it promotes the award of full qualifications through AP(E)L. Third, all learning is regarded as legitimate in a claim, rather than the narrow notions of learning generally at play in other models. Fourth, all key stakeholders are mobilised in the process: information providers, employers, training bodies, and higher education colleges. Fifth, advice is available to all citizens on a local and

regional basis through *points-relais-conseil*. Sixth, higher education colleges are obliged to consider claims presented to them. Finally, colleges are financially supported in implementing AP(E)L equally with support for taught course through traditional entry routes.

Compared to UK and Irish models of AP(E)L, the French model has established the principles of equity at all stages, rather than marginality and differentiation. Additionally there is a huge emphasis on guidance through the *accompagnier* role, and this provision is key to the success of the scheme both for the applicant/candidate and for the colleges. The *accompagnier* assists with the application, assists with the portfolio (dossier) preparation, assists with formation of the jury and tracks the candidate throughout the learning project identified by the jury with tutorial support and with advice on administrative and financial matters. This amounts to combining the principles of ‘access’ and ‘accessibility’ in ways that have not been achieved in the other models but which is an aspirational principle for all mature students support.

The models of AP(E)L-in-action, and indeed the models in development in the UK and Ireland fall quite short of the French provision. Enabling legislation and financial resources on the French scale are not yet in the discourse here in any case, though there is significant rhetoric, significant development work on principles and on operational guidelines, and many models already tested. What is perhaps noteworthy though, is that there is now a general willingness to think about experiential learning towards credits and awards in ways other than just in terms of the skills and competencies approach so entrenched in vocational training and FE. There is a greater willingness to consider the reservation about that approach expressed in the research by the higher-education sector where the range of knowledge and learning arising from experience are not necessarily encompassed in pre-defined national standards and benchmarks of competence levels.

In summary, the research findings dealt with in this paper do not indicate that providers/colleges themselves are willing to be *pro-active* with regard to AP(E)L without considerable enabling legislation, greater support from the exchequer and greater scaling-up to sustainable levels. It is likely that colleges will remain re-active until such time as the student profile and relationships with professional bodies,

commerce and industry threaten the colleges' traditional control on awards and qualifications.