

Learning *from* Experience Trust

A Guide for Learners – the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL)

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THE ORIGINS AND PURPOSE OF THIS GUIDE

This guide is about promoting an understanding of Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) amongst adult learners in a variety of educational settings across Europe. The information in the guide on APEL for learners derives from interviews undertaken with adult learners in adult, community, further and higher education sectors across five European countries (England, Finland, France, Scotland and Spain). The guide is the outcome of an EU Socrates Adult Education funded project entitled *Social Inclusion through APEL: A Learners' Perspective*. The aims of the project were:

- to look at different APEL practices across Europe in adult, community, further and higher education institutions
- to understand the APEL process from the perspective of the adult learner
- to share good practices of APEL within and across educational sectors at both national and European levels

The following partners were involved in the project and the production of this guide:

- Glasgow Caledonian University, Scotland
- University of Barcelona, Spain
- University of Lille, France
- University of Turku, Finland
- University of Warwick, England

Although literature is available explaining what APEL is, particularly in the UK and France, little is known about the APEL process from the perspective of learners themselves. This project set out to redress this imbalance by talking to learners to develop a greater understanding of APEL processes in order to improve policy and practice and above all the learning experience of adult learners.

APEL offers an important tool for enabling adult learners to return to learn in educational institutions, particularly those who have been out of education for a long time or who may lack formal qualifications. APEL recognises the value of life experiences which we gain in the family, through voluntary and paid work, caring roles, community participation, leisure activities etc.

Who is the guide for?

This guide reflects the voices of adult learners and is written primarily for adults across Europe who are considering returning to learn, or who are taking a learning programme which offers the possibility of undertaking APEL either as a module or as a means to gain exemption from part of the programme. Many learners initially find the APEL process confusing and unclear. The aim of this guide is to help you as learners:

- understand what APEL is and how it is used
- help prepare you for the APEL process
- be aware of the processes, issues and problems involved
- have knowledge of other learners' experiences
- know, as learners, what you can do to address any issues
- find out more about the APEL process
- encourage more learners to use APEL

APEL co-ordinators, tutors, guidance and support staff will also find the guide useful as it will help to:

- understand the APEL process from the learner perspective
- reflect upon the APEL process in your institutions
- identify strategies to improve the APEL process in your institutions
- access further literature on APEL

How to use this guide

This guide is divided into several sections. The first section explains what APEL means, its purposes, what different APEL processes involve and what APEL can do for you as a learner. The second section outlines who APEL learners are and what kind of people can undertake APEL. In the next section adult learners express their experiences and feelings about undertaking APEL. This includes the positive experiences as well as problems and issues that they have experienced in order to help you to be more prepared. Section five offers practical advice, based on the experiences of APEL learners, in order to help you get the best out of the APEL process and avoid possible problems. The following section includes recommendations to make APEL work better. These relate to policy and practice to be taken up by educational institutions, national governments and the EU. The final section provides you with ideas for further reading and obtaining further information about APEL.

This guide will be of use primarily to:

- adult learners and adults considering returning to learn

But also to:

- APEL/access co-ordinators in adult, community, further and higher education
- policy makers
- admissions tutors
- adult education tutors

WHAT IS APEL?

The term APEL stands for the **Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL)** and is based on the principle that **people can and do learn throughout their lives in a variety of settings**. People can gain a range of strengths and skills through:

- work (paid or unpaid)
- community , voluntary or leisure activities
- key experiences and events in life

We call this experiential learning, or **learning from experience**.

Often the skills, knowledge and abilities that are gained through this type of learning can be equal to those gained by students following traditional routes through formal education. Learning from experience is different from ‘formal learning’: it is largely unstructured; it is more personal, more individualised and is often unconsciously gained. It is however, just as real as learning which is gained in a formal academic setting. What is more, it is usually more permanent: it is not readily forgotten or lost.

APEL is a process that can give people of all ages and backgrounds the opportunity to gain recognition for achievements they have gained outside the ‘classroom’. APEL is about how people can claim credit or recognition for the learning they have gained from personal experience so as to gain entry or access to a course or programme of study or to gain exemption from certain parts of a course or programme of study.

The Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) is about recognising your prior experience and learning. It acts as a process of social inclusion for everyone who wants access to training and assessment by not requiring you to have any prior qualifications.

APEL can impact on adult learning by acting as a transformative process in our society which is characterised by demands for high levels of information and communication skills. The APEL process is understood as a process through which people can attain certification and accreditation of their prior learning, which has not yet been formally evaluated by a recognized form of qualification. These certifications are important to assure access to academic studies, the labour market and for acquiring new qualifications. In this sense, APEL can help to overcome barriers and provide the means for people to become more highly valued socially and economically as members of our society.

The APEL process allows people to establish a link between their skills and (non-academic) knowledge and forms of academic knowledge that are highly regarded in our ‘knowledge’ society.

What can APEL do for you?

This recognition of your learning from experience is achieved through assessment. The assessment process is called the **Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL)**. If, as a result of this assessment, your experiential learning is formally recognised by a college, vocational institute or university, it can be used to gain **entry** to a programme of study offered by that institution (if you do not have the normal entry qualifications) and also to accumulate **credit** towards a programme of study and so allow you to join at a later level. This reduces the amount of time needed to complete the programme.

So there can be definite advantages to having your learning from experience assessed for credit.

The experience of undertaking APEL can have other advantages too.

You will think about what you have achieved so far through your experiences in terms of strengths and skills. You will think about your goals and what you need to do in order to achieve them, eg do a training course; join an educational programme at college, vocational institute or university; apply for, or change, jobs. APEL can help you consider your options and make decisions about the direction you want to take. It also helps to build your confidence - it enables both you and others to value your achievements and to recognise the importance of your learning through experience.

Here are what some of the learners who have undertaken the APEL process say about it:

It was straightforward but it demanded you to look closely at yourself and what you'd done - But it wasn't very complicated or anything.

It was time-consuming and you were always thinking about it.

I think really the reflective side of it was quite good once I had got into it and could see what they were trying to get from that. It was trying to get you to see that .. for you to prove that throughout the whole time you were not doing tasks, but learning each day you were learning something new

I felt a great sense of personal and professional accomplishment which undoubtedly contributed to my will to continue with the program and ultimately gave me the confidence I needed both in writing and commitment necessary to complete the dissertation

It just gives you a little bit more confidence at the start because it was quite a thought coming onto a course like that

In sum then, APEL can benefit you in the following ways :

- Access to further learning at all levels
- Confidence-building
- Gaining credit within academic programmes
- Personal/Self-development
- Professional development
- Valuing life experiences
- Gaining qualifications

What does the APEL process involve?

Before you go through the process of APEL there is an important guiding principle you should know about:

It is what you have learned that is being assessed not what you have done.

So, for example, two people might have the same experience through doing identical jobs but one might have learned much more from the task(s) involved than the other. You may have said about someone, 'They never learned any lessons from'. People who have learned something are able to use that learning to help them in other related situations. Again you will have heard it said, 'They used all their experience to overcome the problem'. So you need to demonstrate what you have learned from your experiences, not just describe what you've done.

The process of undertaking APEL involves a study of your past experiences. No one but you can reflect on your experiences in order to discover what they have taught you. It is for you to discover, through reflection, your significant learning experiences and then express what you have learnt. Of course college or university staff will help you to do this!

You will be encouraged to value your personal experience as a way of helping you to make choices and prepare for moving on to further opportunities in education or work.

How do you learn from experience?

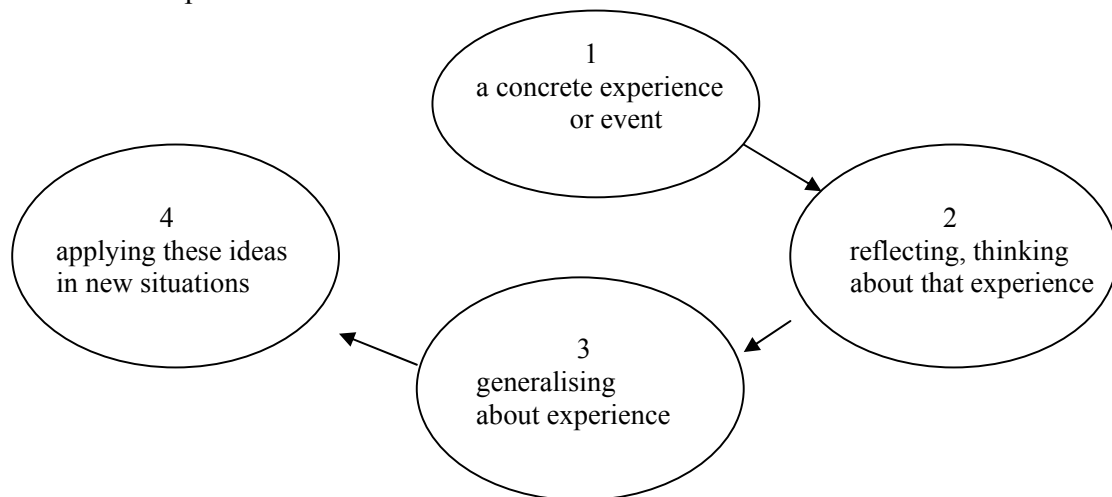
Most people like yourself

- learn a great deal from doing something (or seeing someone else do something)
- and experiencing (or seeing) the consequences of that action
- and so 'learning a lesson' from it.

People may often learn more by 'trial and error' than from reading books or from listening to a teacher or lecturer.

Varied attempts have been made to describe the process of learning but perhaps it is most useful to view it as a **learning cycle**.

This can be represented as follows:



According to this cycle:

- **Stage 1** Learning begins with a concrete experience - any experience or 'event'. This may be a specific experience or a series of related tasks/experiences (such as a job we have done, bringing up a child, learning to drive, the experience of being unemployed or homeless, or some type of event that we observe).
- **Stage 2** The experience or event may 'make us think'
- **Stage 3** Thinking about the experience may result in a realisation that 'there is more to it than meets the eye', that the experience is simply an isolated example of a pattern of things. You may begin to make connections to form ideas or theories about what that pattern is. We may make generalisations about the experience. We may, of course, then confirm those ideas by repeating similar experiences and maybe observing similar results.
- **Stage 4** However, we may go on to apply those ideas to new or different situations in order to test them out. If our ideas are borne out in practice then the 'lesson has been truly learnt' and is likely to be applied in future situations/experiences, and so the cycle may be repeated.

Of course, we may never learn from an experience because we never get beyond the experience itself. It remains an event without meaning for us. **Unless we get as far as stage 3, then we have not really learned from the experience.** It is at Stage 3 that we make the connections. Without these, the experience remains something to be talked about but from which we have not learnt anything.

It is important to realise that **we are not all equally effective in each stage of the cycle.** Some individuals are stronger at generalising, expressing themselves in theory, while others are more effective in putting into practice what they have actually learned. Different individuals have different learning styles.

What types of experience can you learn from?

You can learn from any **experience** you have had or some **event** you have observed which was **significant** for you in some way.

Any experience/event will do: it could be from your work, home, leisure - anything at all, as long as you feel it was significant.

It might be significant because:

- it was enjoyable;
- it affected you deeply; eg, the death of a relative, personal injury; some incident you observed but were not directly involved in;
- it changed your outlook on life;
- you feel it taught you a great deal;
- it had successful outcomes - or
- it was an experience you never want to repeat!
- it gave you a sense of achievement;
- it earned you respect and recognition from others;
- it involved a major investment of time, energy or effort;
- it changed the way you did things.

Examples of types of learning experience you could consider include;

- A particular piece of work, task or project that you undertook at work, or through community or voluntary work, or through independent study;
- The experience of doing a particular job (paid or unpaid) over a period a time;
- An educational or training course that you attended, which may have been assessed, but not accredited by an academic institution;
- The experience of training or teaching others, either formally or informally
- Going through a life-changing event such as divorce, homelessness, unemployment, substance misuse, etc.

What type of learning results from experience?

This learning is not the formal learning of the type which takes place in a classroom, or on a course.

It is important that you understand some of the ways in which it differs.

How is the learning gained from experience different from formal learning?

- In the first place, it has not been as organised as the way in which a class might be taken through a subject or a syllabus by a teacher or lecturer. It is largely **unstructured**.
- This is because the learning process has begun with the experience of a real-life, **specific** situation. **The idea comes from the experience.** By contrast formal learning tends to start with a broad foundation in general principles or basic concepts and moves ultimately to specialist applications of them. So, a course in business studies begins with a study of the principles of, for example, accounts, economics, law, quantitative methods, and only in later years applies these principles in fields such as industrial relations, management, accounting, marketing and business decision-making.
- Because the learning is derived from experience it is **more personal**, more individualised - and therefore less likely to fall easily into the academically devised frameworks which we call 'courses' or 'programmes' of study.
- Often it is learning which is **unconsciously acquired**. It may therefore be difficult - even for the learner - to identify and describe it.
- In consequence, the assessment and evaluation of experiential learning is different from assessing and evaluating formally acquired learning. The methods used to assess formal learning - examinations, essays, for example - may not be appropriate to assess experiential learning.
- Experiential learning is therefore just as real as learning which is acquired in a formal academic setting. What is more, it is usually more permanent: it is not readily forgotten or lost.
- After all, learning through experience is in itself a **form of self-development** because the learner has responsibility for his/her own learning. It therefore becomes part of you.

The learning gained from experience - experiential learning - is therefore different from the more formal learning of the 'classroom' but can be just as valuable.

How do you identify what you have learned from experience?

In putting together your APEL claim the emphasis is on identifying what you have learned from your experiences up to the present: that is your **prior** learning.

Reflection

The key to identifying what you have learned through experience is **reflection**. Reflection involves a detailed study of past experiences. No one but you can reflect on your experiences in order to discover what they have taught you. It is for you to discover, through reflection, your significant learning experiences and then express what you have learnt. Of course you will be helped to do this.

One way of describing what reflection on experience involves is to think about it in terms of the four stages of the learning cycle described previously.

- 1 Think of any experience you have had or some event you have observed which was **significant** for you in some way.
2. Now think carefully about your experience. This is a difficult stage especially if you have not done this sort of thing before and are not accustomed to analysing your thoughts and feelings.

It may help you to ask yourself questions about it, such as:

- What happened?
- When did it happen?
- Where did it happen?
- Why did it happen?
- Who else was involved and what part did they play?
- Was the outcome expected or unexpected?

What were your **thoughts?** (ideas, assumptions, etc.)

- immediately before?
- during?
- immediately after?
- sometime after?

What were your **feelings?**

- immediately before?
- during?
- immediately after?
- sometime after?

What were your **actions and why?**

It often helps to discuss your experience, or the event, with someone else .

This will help you to activate your thoughts, make you more aware of what the experience/event meant for you.

3. The next stage is to think about **how the experience changed you. What do you think you learnt ?** You should be as specific as you can and try to identify
- ideas,
 - principles,
 - connections,
 - patterns of relationships or behaviour which you came to recognise.

Ask yourself such questions as:

- What lesson/s has it taught me?
 - How did my thoughts, feelings, attitudes, judgements change.
 - In what way/s did my thoughts and feelings affect my behaviour?
 - What new concepts have I developed?
 - What knowledge did I gain?
 - What skill/s did I acquire? What can I do now that I could not do before?
4. Finally to complete the cycle think about any subsequent situations in which:
- you used the lessons learned;
 - the skill/s acquired; or
 - the knowledge gained;
 - your handling of the situation was better as a result of the previous experience.

or:

Think about a situation or problem which you yourself have not yet encountered, in which what you have learnt from your previous experience could be applied/might be useful.

When you have finished sit back and take stock.

Perhaps, you have learnt a great deal from your experience.
It is likely that you learnt more than you realised.

Expressing your Learning

When you have identified what you have learnt from your experience it is important to express your learning in a way which indicates as precisely as possible its nature and level. You need to give both yourself and others as clear an indication as possible of what you can do and how well you can do it

By this stage you will have identified various skills and areas of learning gained from your past experiences. It is important that these are expressed in terms which might be more generally applicable to future situations. In other words, you must try and indicate the extent to which the learning you have gained is transferable to another context eg another course or job. This involves describing your learning as learning statements. These are usually called 'learning outcomes'.

Learning statements are therefore statements of what a student can do as the result, or the outcome, of a learning process.

Example:

An APEL learner was involved in organising a large-scale fund-raising event. Her particular role was to publicise the event as widely as possible. This is how she went about writing learning statements

Activity	What I Did	Skills Used	What I Learned	Learning Statement
Publicity work for fund-raising event	Wrote press release	Literacy Typing Keyboard skills	I can write and type a short press release giving details of a future event to meet a deadline	I can identify and use information relevant to an intended purpose I can plan work to meet deadlines I can write in the form relevant to a particular context

Note that what the learner had identified as what she had learned from the experience (column 4) was quite specific to the experience. The learning statements (column 5) broadens out her learning to indicate that she can use these skills again in a variety of different situations, i.e. not just in writing a press release.

You will be guided by the college, institute or university tutor who is helping you with your APEL claim in how to express your learning in a way which meets the requirements of the programme, university, vocational institute or college.

How do you provide evidence of this learning?

The major challenge of learning gained from experience is:

How do you persuade other people that you have really learnt what you say you have?

With formal learning this is usually achieved by passing examinations or other types of formal assessments such as writing essays, presenting reports, skills tests etc.

There are several different ways of making an APEL claim. The type of claim you make will be determined by the nature of your learning and the requirements of your particular programme, college, vocational institute or university. You will discuss and agree the type of claim you should make with the tutor who is supporting you. Possible types of claim include:

- **assessment on demand** - you may be asked to undertake the existing assessment for the particular course, or element of the programme, for which you are seeking credit, such as written examination or assignment, or you will undertake one that has been specially devised.
- **a structured project** - such a project might resemble those undertaken by conventional students but would contain direct reference to your experiences and current working practices.
- **a portfolio** - this term refers to a claim for learning based on a collection of suitable pieces of evidence of that learning. A portfolio is a collection of materials, usually compiled in a folder, which demonstrates a person's strengths, skills and experience. In other words it contains evidence of what a person has learnt. It describes the learning which has been gained through experience. It matches the person's learning with the skills or 'learning outcomes' they are required to demonstrate for entry onto a programme, or for credit within that programme. It also contains evidence which can be evaluated by others. Evidence can be something you have produced (eg letters, accounts of relevant key learning experiences; reports; leaflets etc) or something someone else says about you and your strengths and skills (eg written testimonials from employers, colleagues; fellow team/committee members; feedback by others on a presentation or talk you have given or a task you have carried out)

If it is agreed that a portfolio is the most appropriate way for you to make an APEL claim you will be provided with detailed guidance. A portfolio is the most flexible form of assessment. It can be a very rewarding process but is often the most time-consuming. It allows you to make very clear connections between your experiences and the learning which has resulted.

- **a personal development plan** – this is the basis for APEL claims in Finland. The personal development plan or scheme (a widely known acronym in Finnish is **hops**) is a scheme where a student forms a individual plan and objectives for his/her study programme based on the curriculum. The personal study scheme is usually agreed at the beginning of the programme and in collaboration with a teacher or a tutor. The

scheme is flexible and a student will come back to it to evaluate his/her studies. Previous studies, experiential learning and know-how on the respective field will be taken account when a student is forming the plan. The individual study scheme is widely in use especially in vocational education, in new universities and in adult education. The theoretical idea behind the personal study planning process is to support self-directed learning. (Opetussuunnitelman perusteet ammatillisen)
In the UK, systems for personal development planning (PDP) for students in further and higher education are currently being developed and will be in place by 2005. The reflective element of PDP could well incorporate APEL processes.

- **an interview** –you might be asked to undertake an oral assessment, or an interview, as part of the process of making an APEL claim. In Spain this is the principal form of seeking accreditation within adult schools. It is based on the dialogical model which is considered to be more accessible and egalitarian than other forms of assessment, like written exams. It can enable learners to express the full extent of their prior achievements rather than being constrained by the boundaries of conventional assessment. In Spain interviews can be conducted on either a group or individual basis.

How will the learning be recognised or accredited?

The process of recognising experiential learning varies between country, sector, institution and department. In all cases however, your APEL claim will be assessed by an expert(s) at the college, vocational institute or university to confirm the learning claims made. If the assessor is satisfied that you have already acquired the knowledge and skills **either** to gain entry to a programme **or** the knowledge and skills that would be gained from successfully completing a formally taught course or module you would be awarded **entry** or **credit** accordingly by that institution.

If you have used a portfolio to make your APEL claim you can also use it, or just the parts that are relevant, to support such things as applications for jobs or other courses. You can use it to remind yourself of what you have done and what you are capable of doing and of your experience, strengths and skills. You can use it to help you see which skills you still want to develop and to plan what to do next. Most important of all, a portfolio **belongs to you**. You look after it and decide when and how to use it.

Becoming a self-directed, confident learner

It is important to realise that the process of preparing and putting together an APEL claim is itself a form of learning about yourself. You will come to appreciate where your own strengths and weaknesses lie. You will also become more aware of **how** you learn, and therefore of how to become a **more effective learner**. In this sense, it is also a self-development exercise. It is possible, by trying to develop a reflective approach to your experiences to manage your current and future experiences more effectively. This will benefit your self-development as a student, as a manager, as a parent, a salesperson, a nurse or whatever.

The process of APEL enables you to recognise and value the knowledge, skills and understanding you have gained through your experience. This, in itself, is an important and valuable outcome of the process. Another possible outcome is that it can help you to make connections between the type of learning you have achieved informally, through your experiences, and the more formal learning you would undertake at a college, vocational institute or university. This is described as a *transformative* process, as you recognise that the skills you have developed in everyday life can be translated into the skills you need to become an effective learner, such as communication and problem solving skills. By making these connections, crossing the bridge between informal and formal learning becomes a much less daunting task. The learning you have gained through your experience is a rich and useful resource to draw upon as you embark on further learning.

What kind of support can I expect to get?

The process of making an APEL claim does not happen overnight. It develops stage by stage and you will be supported by the college, vocational institute or university as you go through each stage. Tutors who are experts in providing APEL support will work with you individually, in a group, or both.

The range of support mechanisms for APEL learners varies between and within colleges and universities. You will be advised by the college, vocational institute or university of the type of support you are entitled to receive.

Group and tutorial support

The ways in which support is offered for students undertaking APEL claims is evolving, with many institutions providing group support. The use of group sessions, either on their own or in combination with individual tutorial support can often be an effective form of APEL support. Group approaches at stages where guidance of a more general nature can be delivered to a number of students also have the advantage of enabling you to draw upon the support of your fellow learners as well as the tutor. The exchange of ideas and experiences between students is a valuable learning process. Group sessions can take the form of a formal 'course' such as a 'Make Experience Count' - type programme and more informal meetings of students. Because APEL claims are by their very nature highly individual, individual support, either within the context of a group session, or through tutorials is normally also provided.

Written materials

Written materials in the form of student handbooks or guides to APEL are often used to supplement the learning support provided by group sessions or individual tutorials. It is likely that increasingly these written materials will be in the form of computer-based materials, and possibly supported by computer-mediated conferencing and other interactive activities such as 'answer gardens'.

Employer

If your employing organisation is supporting you in your APEL claim- if it is connected directly with your career or professional development, then your employer can also provide you with support. This can be through providing you with access to relevant resources, materials or learning opportunities to assist you with your claim or through a work-based mentor.

Costs of the APEL process

The cost of undertaking an APEL claim will depend on the college, vocational institute or the university and the type of claim being made. The cost will reflect the amount of time spent by college, institute or university staff in supporting you in putting together your claim and in assessing it.

WHO CAN UNDERTAKE APEL?

APEL is undertaken by a wide range of adult learners. In particular the following groups of learners often choose APEL to help them either re-enter learning or as a contribution towards a programme of study:

- women returning to education
- unemployed people seeking accreditation for past skills or informal learning
- people wanting to improve upon existing qualifications
- those wanting to re-train or change careers
- people who left courses before achieving the formal qualifications
- undergraduate and postgraduate students
- people who have been out of the education system for a long time and who may lack formal qualifications
- people who have disabilities of some kind
- minority ethnic groups and asylum seekers

The following are examples of learners who have undertaken APEL

- One woman worked as an unqualified social worker. She realised that she would not get any further promotion without a social work qualification so she decided to study for a degree and use her work experience to undertake APEL portfolios to gain exemption from some of the modules.
- Another woman had enjoyed school and, after leaving school, participated in adult education courses. After a divorce and becoming a single parent she decided to go to university to train as a teacher, not only to support the family financially but because she also enjoyed learning.
- One man had also undertaken various types of courses since leaving school. His experiences of school were negative as he had disliked the culture and ethos of the school he attended. Opting for a degree in social work in his thirties was a way of achieving a learning ambition which he felt schooling had denied him. He also used APEL to gain exemption from some modules.
- A man who had worked in the coal industry for many years started studying an engineering programme when he became unemployed and was given exemption from parts of the course through APEL because of what he had learned through his previous work experience.

All kinds of people can undertake an APEL process - young and older people, men and women, people of all ethnic backgrounds, employed or unemployed people, people with some qualifications and people with no qualifications. You don't need to have a good academic education - but you do need to be keen to learn from and about your own experiences and about yourself.

OTHER LEARNERS' EXPERIENCES OF APEL

In the UK, Finland and France APEL seems to be more commonly used in higher education rather than in further education (post-compulsory education institutions) - in the UK a few years ago it was the other way round. Writing a portfolio is the most common form of APEL process amongst our sample of learners in the UK. Some learners produced a portfolio prior to starting a degree course in a professional area of study as a means of gaining exemption from one or more of the degree modules. APEL allowed them to complete their part-time degree in a quicker time. For others APEL was offered as a module within a part-time degree with the aim of enabling a student to obtain academic credit for learning gained prior to starting the degree programme.

Many learners are initially unsure what APEL is about

APEL is a different process to other forms of learning as it focuses on the learners' life experiences and takes this as a starting point rather than academic knowledge. It is also a relatively new process. As a result the majority of learners we talked to had not heard about APEL before they made contact with an educational institution. One woman, for example, explained that she heard about APEL through the Director of Part-time degrees. She decided to opt for it even though she felt that she had limited knowledge about it – *'I think he put it to us as well as the reading the literature. He actually put it to us that we would be eligible to take part in it'*. Another woman on the same programme stated that after the Director of Part-time degrees informed her about it she instantly thought that it sounded a bit *'wishy washy'*.

Getting started and making sense of APEL

All the learners in this study viewed APEL positively for a number of reasons;

- it is a flexible way of learning
- for part-time students in employment it means that they do not have to attend all seminars and lectures
- the learning is focused on their life experiences
- their life experiences are viewed as being worthwhile and valuable

However, at the beginning of the APEL process they felt confused and unsure about what APEL was and what was required of them. APEL is different to previous learning experiences which are generally based on traditional approaches as used in schools. For many the idea of APEL was too abstract and unstructured.

Oh a portfolio which was very difficult to get your head round in terms of how this is going to fit in with what is required in an academic sense. Then I thought - no this is about your learning experience.

Several were initially confused about how to combine academic knowledge with their prior learning experiences. One woman asked:

How do you then put that together in a portfolio that is going to get your credit in terms of APEL? They gave us some understanding of that but I have to say that even then it was very mystifying.

The learners in this study were introduced to APEL either through an individual tutorial or a group workshop of two or three days.

From March through to May we had three full days of explaining what APEL was and suggestions on how to put it together. We were also given a portfolio of another candidate who had put one together. Some of the students found this really useful and others said it just threw them off track altogether. We were given the course descriptors and what it was you claim for

Some people would have liked to have looked at a number of different past portfolios to help them understand what type of structure and content was required.

Understanding the APEL process

Many learners would have liked more guidance and structure to have been given by tutors at the start of the APEL process. They felt that the information given to them needed to be more prescriptive.

I think it needs to be a more structured framework. I am not sure how people would need their fears allayed really. That's what has to happen right from the start. I think there has to be very clear guidelines saying this is what is required. This is what it really is. Yes of course you have got to be able to put a claim of academic standard but you have also got to recognise that it is about your past experiences and what you have got to do is link them very closely to what the model descriptors are. I think it could be made more simple. It's too cloudy and the lifelong learning person came along and made it very cloudy. Very difficult initially to get started.

I think perhaps a little bit more in the workshop about actually structuring your portfolio and perhaps letting people have a look at what's expected. I mean not one particular one because I am sure everybody approaches their work in a completely different way. So it might be an idea to have a range of portfolios available for people to see which way is best going to suit their background.

Tutor Support

Writing an APEL portfolio means that you are largely working on your own in your own time. After an initial tutorial or workshop tutors will generally offer further tutorials for those students who would like support. Many of the learners did not feel the need to attend tutorials. One man preferred to meet regularly with other students doing APEL rather than a tutor. Doing so made the learners feel less isolated as they shared problems even though he claimed 'we were all clueless'. Supporting each other as learners was viewed as very important:

We have very tight bonds with each other and support each other and we all achieve by it.

One person would have liked group tutorials 'to see what other people were doing and to hear their difficulties would have made it less isolating'. Another woman decided to go and see her tutor towards the end of writing her portfolio:

because I needed some sort of reassurance really about what I had done and I was getting a bit panicky. I needed somebody to look through and say yes, you are on the right track.

One or two felt that tutorials did not help to make them any clearer about the APEL

process. Instead just getting started on the writing of the portfolio helped:

I think we would benefit with hindsight. I think we would all seek more open discussions at the outset really to make sure that what we were covering was right. As it worked out I think I have covered the right topic. But yes I would have thought that right at the start - that once I started the work I don't think I needed any guidance - then it comes out alright and I am pleased with it. But the not really knowing what the examiners were looking for was a bit disconcerting.

Writing about experience

Many learners explained that they felt confident about writing about their life experiences but felt less confident about the type of structure and approach that was required:

I didn't find it difficult to write from my experience. The problem I had was one of format. I didn't know how to - I didn't know what was going to catch the reader's eye to actually enable them to give me credit for something I have already done. So it was style and content.

We did have quite clear guidelines about what APEL was about. The bit I wasn't particularly clear about was actually writing my own portfolio for APEL accreditation. That was all a bit confusing for me. I mean it's difficult really because I am not sure how valuable the workshops were.

APEL is different to being given a subject essay;

Yes there was feedback. Then he offered to see us individually if we wanted to. But I knew which direction I wanted to go in and it was just a case of making myself start. I think it is quite difficult when you are used to being given a title. It was that that I found difficult - just going and doing it independently. I did find that hard.

Another person declared:

Yes I think once I knew what I was writing about I actually enjoyed it.

Linking experience to theory and practice

Learners who were taking a professional qualification found the APEL process extremely helpful in enabling them to reflect upon their work practices and link their experiences to theory and practice.

It is very valuable in terms of the depth and where you are at and what you might consider is that you are contributing to the environment in which you work and how you contribute to the social work aspects of what you do. So it did help in terms of the reflection aspect and then obviously we needed some guidance saying well you know you perhaps need to recognise the theory behind some of these practices and need to recognise how you bridge the gap between theory and practice. That is not always easy to recognise and I think that's probably the biggest thing with APEL. It's not just the fact that I've done this, this and this - you have got to identify what it is that you are actually doing and that is hard.

Assessing APEL

In some cases learners were asked to give an oral presentation of their portfolio as part of the assessment procedure. In other institutions portfolios are marked in the traditional way. One woman explained that she was nervous about doing an oral:

That surprised me because I am normally nervous about written exams but I am not normally nervous at talking to people.

However, on reflection she felt that the oral examination was conducted more like a conversation than an examination. She continued to explain that the examiner was:

Very openly critical and I suppose openly giving praise for what he saw in the project. I would quite like to have seen him before I started writing it actually. But no I felt he was very open and I was very aware that the oral was my opportunity to make my point if it was a borderline case as my oral would have made a difference.

Several learners mentioned that they would have liked to have been given a copy of the marking criteria as they felt that this would have helped them to identify the type of content required for a portfolio.

Recommending APEL to others

Despite the confusion about what APEL is and how you write about your experiences at the start all the learners stated that they would recommend the APEL process to others.

I would yes definitely. Its hard initially to get going and you have to be very motivated because you have got an open ended model of learning and it is down to you - But that in itself is no bad thing because it is about your own life.

Others recommended APEL for more instrumental reasons:

I would recommend if people were saying right I need some CATS points (credit points towards a qualification) . I would say do the APEL thing. It is a great way to do it. But again it probably is not the right way to look at it because that is not the objective of it.

Yes - for us it allowed us to go onto this level of work without having to spend more time at university. We just wanted to get our degree. So for that reason I think I would recommend it just to complete the module quite quickly without having to attend lectures but not from the experience of learning from it.

Learners' experiences of APEL in Spain

In Spain, systems of APEL are in the early stages of implementation: these systems evaluate different forms of accreditation of prior experience. The contributions of the learners involved in these processes is very important, including their perspectives, experiences and the difficulties they encounter in the accreditation process. All of these elements help to create a formal accreditation system that is appropriate for the needs and competencies of the people it is directed towards.

From the analysis of interviews that were carried out in Spain and from the outcomes of a workshop in which the voices of the participants were reflected, the following points are raised:

- An important factor is the lack of information there is with regard to the current state of the system of accreditation of prior experience in Spain. For example, in other countries in the European Union (like Germany), there are offices which are dedicated solely to AP(E)L.

- From the perspective of the participants: they ask for high quality support with regard to infrastructure as well as a voice in the institutions. One way in which the voice of participants can influence these policies is through the adult education associations, through which they can establish an egalitarian dialogue.
- An idea that was stressed was the need to undertake the accreditation process in the workplace rather than in another setting which is unfamiliar to the learner. Another basic need is to develop of a policy of accreditation of prior experience on a European level, unifying the types of criteria.
- Policy-makers and practitioners in Spain insist on having a space in order to be able to work on the theme of accreditation and recognition, listening to the ideas of participants and practicing an egalitarian dialogue. This type of dialogue considers the contributions made by people based on the validity of their arguments, instead of valuing them based on the positions of power they hold.
- APEL undertaken at adult schools through interview can provide a means of accreditation for people with very basic skill levels and those with literacy problems. The dialogical model that is used promotes transformative practice which, unlike some forms of conventional assessment, like written exams, opens, rather than closes, doors to them.

WHAT CAN LEARNERS DO TO MAKE APEL WORK?

As a learner undertaking APEL, there are several things you can do to make the APEL process work better and avoid some of the problems that previous learners have encountered.

- You should request detailed guidance from the tutor at your college, vocational institute or university on the APEL process **at the outset** so that you have realistic expectations of what it involves, what will be required of you and what the possible outcomes are;
- Think about how making an APEL claim would be useful to you in terms of your personal, academic or professional development and discuss this with the tutor;
- If there is any aspect of the APEL process that you are unclear about, **at any stage**, ask the tutor to explain it again until you understand it fully. The tutor will not mind – they are there to help;
- Find out what types of support will be available to you eg tutorials, group sessions, and at what stages in the process;
- Find out what options are available to you regarding the types of APEL claim you can make e.g. portfolio, project, personal development plan, assessment on demand. Ask whether these are negotiable or prescribed by the institution;
- Ask to see examples of APEL claims so you have a clear grasp of what will be expected of you;
- Before you start putting your claim together make sure that you have details of the assessment criteria that will be used in assessing your claim. Clarify what the balance between the ‘academic’ and ‘personal’ content of your claim should be;
- Once you have agreed to undertake an APEL claim, discuss what your commitments will be, in terms of time and effort, with the tutor. Break down the process of putting together your claim into a series of tasks or stages. Agree a work schedule, or action plan, with the tutor, including target dates for completion of each stage and the times when you will meet with the tutor and /or other learners to discuss progress;
- Once you have embarked on the process, be proactive in establishing and participating in supportive peer groups or networks of learners. You can do this even if there are no formal group sessions relating to APEL. Meeting regularly with other learners either face to face, or by telephone or email to discuss progress and share experiences can be invaluable. It is more than likely that the uncertainties, problems and questions that you may have are shared by others.
- You should try and engage in networks of solidarity among learners in order to ensure that the processes of accreditation of prior experience can provide a positive experience for all participants

In sum, you should aim for as much control over the process as possible. Your relationship with the institution should be an egalitarian one. By ensuring that you fully understand the APEL process, the roles and responsibilities of yourself and your tutor and the desired outcomes in terms of your personal, academic and professional development, you will become a more empowered learner.

WHAT CAN OTHERS DO TO MAKE APEL WORK?

at the European Union level

at the national level

at the institutional level

at the programme level

At the European Union level:

- To emphasize the importance of the associations, and the dialogue APEL can generate among people who are seeking accreditation and those providing opportunities for accreditation;
- In the accreditation process there is a need for the greater inclusion of people from traditionally excluded groups through more effective marketing of the value and relevance of engaging in the processes of the recognition of prior learning;
- Relating the accreditation process with new technologies should be pursued in order to disseminate more effectively the processes of accreditation of prior learning that are successful in various countries;
- The development of a European credit transfer and accumulation system for lifelong learning would enable more flexible use of learning opportunities across levels, institutions and countries. This flexibility, and the intrinsic recognition of a wide range of learning opportunities, both formal and informal, would facilitate the increase of APEL provision;
- It would be interesting to have a standard on certification on a European as well as worldwide level, in order to promote the mobility of workers.

At a national level

- To support greater dissemination amongst potential learners of the concrete uses and results that can be attained from the processes of the recognition of prior experiential learning . The learners must have access to all of the information available in order to be able to see how they can benefit from access to training or lifelong learning opportunities. This dissemination should be targeted principally at those groups who are not currently taking up APEL opportunities;
- Systems of accreditation of prior experiential learning must facilitate the encouragement of adults to continue learning and to keep adapting their competencies to meet the demands of the changing labour market, counteracting processes that are based on hierarchical relationships.

At an institutional level

- Institutional policy should support the use of APEL within its programmes as a means of widening access to learning opportunities to traditionally excluded groups of people. The value of APEL as a transformative mechanism, easing the transition from informal to more formal learning opportunities, should be actively promoted within institutions;
- Advice on the processes of accreditation by the institutions should be generated on a basis of egalitarian and democratic dialogue, in order to for the learners to achieve their full potential and realise their academic as well as work-related goals.
- It is important to disseminate other types of examples of innovative mechanisms of accreditation for prior experience, like group interviews or sessions. These allow participants to regard the process of accreditation in a more accessible way, and it does not present the problem of participating in an individual interview which is often based on hierarchies of power;
- The processes of the recognition of prior experiential learning should allow learners to undertake systematic reflection on all of their relevant experience in order to respond effectively to their needs and demands. To simply carry out interviews or fill out questionnaires does not allow people to fully articulate the knowledge, skills and understanding gained through their experience;
- In order for them to be able to express their opinions it is important for the institution to facilitate the voices of people who are in situations of social exclusion and emphasize the need for an egalitarian dialogue between them and other participants in the process.

At a programme level

- Tutors should not underestimate the level of confusion, and uncertainty of learners as they embark on the APEL process. High levels of support and guidance should be made available to learners particularly at the beginning. Adult learners are often lacking in confidence in themselves as learners;
- A more structured framework of support and assessment within which learners can develop their APEL claims needs to be provided. Learners generally seek a more prescriptive, rather than open-ended approach, to the content of their APEL claims;
- Explicit support in developing the skills of reflection will require to be provided ideally through group sessions to facilitate peer support and supplemented by written or computer based materials;
- Learners themselves have expressed the view that all types of knowledge and skills should be valued, not only academic forms of knowledge;
- There has to be a degree of flexibility of the process of APEL. For example, there has to be flexibility in the schedule and timing of the process to be appropriate to the learner;
- The option of providing information about the process in different languages, including languages appropriate to minority ethnic groups should be considered;
- An equality of relationships between learners and tutors involved in the process should be established;
- A degree of informality about the process is necessary to make learners feel more at ease - there should be no feelings of inequality or hierarchies;
- The process of APEL must take into account the broad range of skills and abilities of the learner and give him/her an opportunity to express those skills and abilities;
- The learner must be encouraged to engage with the APEL process in an active way;
- The views of learners who have already undergone processes of APEL should be taken into account in shaping further processes of APEL;
- It is important the learners should be able to share their experiences with others going through processes of APEL.