

**Creating Opportunities for APEL:**  
Recommendations for Change

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## **Introduction**

This document is produced as a companion to the learners' guide to APEL (Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning), entitled Making Your Experience Count. The learners' guide to APEL aims to show the ways in which APEL should operate for learners who are undertaking APEL in a range of settings. Unfortunately our research has found that in practice APEL does not always work in the way that it should. For this reason, we have produced this document to help educational institutions and other bodies look at ways of successfully creating opportunities for APEL to operate. The aim of this guide, therefore, is to set out ideas and recommendations for institutions at all levels to be able to create the best opportunities for APEL.

This document has been produced as part of a Socrates-Grundtvig funded programme looking at the issue of social inclusion through APEL from the learners' perspective. As part of the study, we concluded that examples of APEL across certain European countries - Scotland, England, Finland, Spain and France - are not widely spread and that APEL is not strongly connected to policies and strategies of social inclusion in lifelong learning. We also concluded that APEL as an educational process has considerable potential to act as a personally and socially transformative mechanism. For example, we concluded that processes of APEL essentially involve the transformation of certain types of everyday discourses associated with experiential learning into discourses which are more closely associated with academic knowledge and learning. This transformation allows people to be 'fitted' into existing structures of academic learning in a way that gives them access they otherwise would be excluded from. However, this is not the sole aim or role of APEL. Perhaps more importantly, we concluded that APEL processes themselves act as a personally transformative process; through processes of reflection which are central to APEL, individuals engage with their own experiences in a way that challenges their assumptions and uncovers hidden knowledge and learning. In this sense, APEL processes embody elements of personal and social development that can be liberating and motivating for the individual as a learner.

It is in this context that we wanted to explore ways in which the potential of APEL could be more fully exploited and look at ways that organisations and institutions at local, national and European level could help to create further opportunities for APEL to work. This document sets out some recommendations for change.

## **The concept of APEL**

The concept of APEL is essentially a British one. The term 'Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning' is used to describe processes whereby there is formal recognition of prior learning and where there is a formal process of assessment of evidence for that prior learning, with credit being given in the form of points or credits.

At the start of our research on APEL and social inclusion we were faced with the problem of trying to locate examples of APEL activity in the higher education sector, the further education sector and community based education settings. This proved difficult. Our findings were that it was easier to locate examples of APEL in the higher education sector than in other sectors. At this level, formal and explicit processes of accreditation were being implemented which made it possible to identify that activity as APEL. However, in the other sectors

it was more difficult to identify such processes. What we learned was that there was often a level of more informal activity taking place whereby prior experiential learning was being recognised and acknowledged in educational settings (for example, by allowing learners access to study programmes or by giving them enhanced standing on programmes) but where there was little evidence of formal processes of accreditation. In this sense, we were made aware that processes of *recognition* were in evidence, but processes of accreditation were less common.

This finding has led us to question the usefulness of the term 'Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning' in favour of the idea of Recognition of Prior (Experiential) Learning. The term RP(E)L is one that is used in other international contexts, for example, in Australia and South Africa. In our view, the term RPL is a broader term which can encompass both formal processes of accreditation of prior learning and more informal processes.

### **The potential of APEL/RPL for strategies of social inclusion and lifelong learning**

APEL/RPL processes can be targeted at those groups who are traditionally excluded from academic education and who experience particular disadvantages - for example, those from working class backgrounds, older learners, women, learners who have experienced racism or other forms of discrimination, learners with specific disabilities, adults who have experienced problems of homelessness or addiction, etc. People from these groups have inevitably accumulated life experiences which can provide the basis for learning. While these are the very experiences which often result in exclusion from other socio-economic opportunities, APEL/RPL processes can provide the mechanisms through which the learning is recognised.

This involves, firstly, the transformation of everyday discourses derived from experiences being 'translated' into discourses - usually in the form of learning outcomes or learning statements - that 'fit' more easily into the discourses of academic knowledge and learning. This enables the learner to make a transition from the non-academic to the academic sphere and provides a firmer basis on which to gain access or credit towards an academic programme. In this way, APEL/RPL can provide a means to access the academic sphere in a way that would otherwise be closed to those who have no or few academic qualifications. APEL/RPL processes therefore have considerable potential to open up doors to social inclusion in ways that other educational approaches may not have.

Secondly, APEL/RPL processes revolve around a central approach which involves the learner reflecting and analysing their own experiences as a basis for extracting the main themes of learning. This learning is often expressed in the form of statements of learning or learning outcomes. This process often involves a level of personal transformation that does not characterise other types of learning. The process of reflection is one in which the learner engages with his/her own experiences by analysing and dissecting the meanings of those experiences to gain insight into accumulated knowledge and learning. The learner is assisted through APEL/RPL processes to view their experiences in a new way - as learning experiences - and encouraged to express that learning in the form of statements or

outcomes. These statements and outcomes can then be assessed as 'indicators' of ability, knowledge and skills of the individual. For the learner, being able to identify this knowledge and understanding can be a strongly liberating and motivating experience in itself, boosting confidence and self-esteem. This, in turn, can provide the basis for the formation of a new learner identity in which individuals can see themselves - perhaps for the first time - as learners. This has considerable significance in relation to notions of lifelong learning and learner identity.

### **Creating a climate for change: opening up opportunities for APEL/RPL**

In order for the potential of APEL/RPL to be realised, the right conditions have to be set. APEL/RPL processes have to become more widely available to learners and greater awareness of the potential benefits of APEL/RPL have to be more widely disseminated. In the learners' guide to APEL/RPL (*Making Your Experience Count*) we have tried to encourage learners to take greater control over the learning process and be more assertive in their efforts to make APEL/RPL work for them. In this document, we are concerned to highlight ways in which policy at institutional, national and European levels can help to make APEL/RPL work better not only for practitioners, but for learners as well. When we consider the practical issues surrounding the implementation of APEL/RPL it is important that we start with the needs and expectations of the learner participants themselves. We have tried here to consider from the learners' perspective what kinds of changes and developments are needed to create better opportunities for APEL/RPL to work effectively.

#### *Institutional policies and practice*

Individual institutions have direct responsibility for the ways in which APEL/RPL processes are offered and structured. In the first instance, it is essential that educational institutions such as adult education centres, vocational institutes, further education colleges and universities take responsibility for heightening awareness of the benefits of APEL/RPL, particularly in relation to strategies of social inclusion, widening access and lifelong learning. Policies and strategies need to be developed at an institutional level to target non-participant groups in education more effectively. At institutional levels, there needs to be a recognition and a valuing of APEL/RPL as a potentially transformative mechanism.

How can educational institutions help to create better opportunities for APEL/RPL ?

- By devising clear policies on APEL/RPL within the institution

Many educational institutions already publicise their support for APL and APEL/RPL, but more is needed than a simple statement of support. We believe that every institution should have clear and easy-to-follow policies on how APEL/RPL processes are to be promoted within that institution and clear strategies on how these policies are to be implemented. For example, institutions should make clear statements in their prospectuses and quality assurance documents about APEL/RPL, confirming their commitment to APEL/RPL and setting out in detail where appropriate the ways in which APEL/RPL can be implemented within the institution and how this relates to other aspects of policy implementation.

- By organising training and support for staff involved in implementing APEL/RPL within the institution

APEL/RPL involves different teaching and learning styles to traditional approaches. For this reason, staff involved in APEL/RPL need to be familiar with the different types of demands that will be made on them and they need support to allow them to devote the necessary amounts of time to APEL/RPL learners. In particular, staff should be made familiar with skills and techniques on reflection so as to be able to facilitate these processes for learners. Staff handbooks on APEL/RPL should be developed so that written information is widely available within the institution.

- By establishing more effective mechanisms for disseminating information to learners about APEL/RPL opportunities

The benefits of APEL/RPL need to be more widely publicised through prospectuses and other literature and more information given about these processes. Literature targeted specifically at community-based locations (e.g. libraries, community centres, adult education centres) would help to reach groups of people who are traditionally excluded from academic study. The use of web sites to promote APEL/RPL could also help to broaden target audiences. There should also be greater communication and links between institutions and other organisations - for example, with adult education centres, community groups, student associations and trade unions. In this way, stronger networks of communication about APEL/RPL can be established and information can be shared between organisations. Institutions should also consider offering information about APEL/RPL in languages other than English, particularly aimed at ethnic minority groups within their respective countries.

- By ensuring that APEL/RPL policies are prioritised in funding for widening participation and access

In order to make APEL/RPL successful within an institution it needs to be fully funded. We argue that APEL/RPL can be directly linked to strategies of social inclusion and widening participation and this may mean that funding can be sought from government sources directly linked to these areas. In addition, however, APEL/RPL policies and practices need to be resourced in a way which will sustain its implementation on a long term basis and as a mainstream activity within the institution. Institutions should therefore try to secure funding from outside sources for APEL/RPL initiatives. In addition, financial planning should incorporate strategies for implementing APEL/RPL initiatives from mainstream resources within the institution.

- By encouraging the use of APEL/RPL by all departments within the institution

Centralised policies within the institution should be promoted widely and all departments should be encouraged to view APEL/RPL as a means to widen participation and increase access to specific programmes. Dissemination should ensure that the potential of APEL/RPL as a transformative mechanism is highlighted and that staff awareness of APEL/RPL for traditionally

excluded groups is heightened through clear information and training and support. All departments within the institution should be encouraged to look at possibilities for introducing APEL/RPL, either into existing programmes of study, or by setting up new programmes based on reflective practices central to APEL/RPL.

- the institution working groups/committees should be established to discuss issues surrounding the implementation of APEL/RPL and to communicate between departments about APEL/RPL where appropriate

Ongoing communication about APEL/RPL and its implementation is essential. Working groups/committees can provide important support for staff involved in implementation and can help to generate ideas about implementation that can then be introduced in ongoing practice. Within the institution, working group(s)/committees can act as a focus for discussing issues arising from the implementation of APEL/RPL and for generating new ideas about implementing APEL/RPL. Such a forum should provide staff with a (small) network of colleagues with whom to share problems and discuss issues of implementation, provide a focus for generating information about APEL/RPL and act as a support mechanism within the institution for those seeking advice.

- By ensuring that strong support and guidance networks exist within the institution for learners

Institutions should recognise the importance of providing strong networks of guidance and support for learners. For example, it is important for tutors to be aware of the uncertainty and confusion that learners can experience when confronted initially with APEL/RPL processes. Tutors should provide learners with clear and detailed information about all aspects of the APEL/RPL process to enable learners to understand their own position within the process and to take effective charge of their own learning as far as possible. Tutors should also encourage the formation of peer group support networks and facilitate these as far as possible amongst learners, especially since APEL/RPL can involve considerable autonomy and sometimes isolation amongst learners. We recommend that an egalitarian atmosphere be created by encouraging an environment of group sharing and team working as far as possible. Tutors should help learners to engage actively in the learning process and facilitate a balance between autonomy and support, making the process as open as possible.

- By including APEL/RPL plans when drawing up quality assurance policies

Institutional policy on quality assurance issues needs to take account of APEL/RPL and the different approaches to teaching and learning that are associated with it. These differences in approach need to be carefully accommodated within policies and incorporated into mainstream quality assurance documents. In this way, APEL/RPL processes can be seen as a regular activity within institutional teaching and learning and not something which is outside mainstream activities.

- ensuring that flexibility is built into APEL/RPL processes

APEL/RPL needs to be carefully structured to ensure its flexibility for different groups of learners. Each group may have very different needs and demands from APEL/RPL processes and these need to be taken account of. For this reason, discussions about APEL/RPL need to take place and strategies developed to make accreditation processes and assessment as flexible as possible. In addition, the scheduling and timing of APEL/RPL needs to be carefully thought about so as to ensure that it is made as accessible as possible to learners at times to suit them.

Another issue to be considered is the purpose and role of APEL/RPL in relation to both the awarding of credit and the granting of access to programmes of study. In various circumstances, the awarding of credits or points may be of particular benefit to the learner who may be able to 'carry' these into a particular programme of study and gain enhanced standing. In this respect, certification of APEL/RPL may be important as a mark of official and formal recognition of achievement. In other circumstances, APEL/RPL processes can be used as a means to grant access to learners into a programme of study which otherwise would not be open to them.

In this sense, the flexibility of APEL/RPL processes should allow for both these options.

- By ensuring positive and active support for senior managers

Institutions need to ensure that senior managers are also supported in their activities to manage and supervise APEL/RPL processes within the institution. Senior staff need to be appraised of the value of APEL/RPL to policies of widening access and participation and strategies in lifelong learning in order to motivate them to support the promotion of APEL/RPL within the institution and provide active support to other staff more directly involved in APEL/RPL processes.

### *National policies and practice*

At a national level, considerable influence can be exerted to ensure that more explicit links are made between APEL/RPL and policies on lifelong learning, social inclusion and social justice. Wider understanding of APEL/RPL and its potential for contributing to policies of widening access and participation needs to be gained by national parliamentary bodies and personnel, government ministers for education, relevant educational committees, government departments dealing with education and lifelong learning, education funding bodies and regional governments and departments.

Recognition at a national level of the potential of APEL/RPL is needed in order to ensure that appropriate funding is released to institutions so that they can implement the recommendations made above.

What can be done at a national level to help to create opportunities for APEL/RPL ?

- Active promotion of APEL/RPL in strategies of social inclusion and lifelong learning

The benefits and potentially transforming nature of APEL/RPL needs to be acknowledged at a national level and endorsed through policies of social inclusion and lifelong learning. Greater awareness at national government level about the potential benefits of APEL/RPL within education would help promote APEL/RPL generally and thus result in creating more opportunities for widening access and participation. Government departments for education and government ministers responsible for education and lifelong learning can actively promote APEL/RPL as a strategy within education and actively disseminate information about APEL/RPL to other bodies. To some extent, government initiatives need to champion the cause of APEL/RPL until it becomes more firmly established within the educational mainstream of activities.

APEL/RPL has benefits not only in relation to social inclusion and lifelong learning but also in relation to worker mobility and flexibility. APEL/RPL provides opportunities to enable access to education and training and to enable transfer between different forms of education and training and therefore, facilitates movement between different spheres of work. These economic benefits are often ignored, but APEL/RPL can help link education and work in the way that it prepares learners for further education or training and in the confidence and self-esteem that it endows.

- Positive funding initiatives for APEL/RPL activities

Funding bodies need to accept APEL/RPL as a specific strand of educational activity through which social inclusion and lifelong learning are promoted and through which traditionally excluded groups are targeted. Mainstream funding for APEL/RPL activities would make a considerable difference in terms of stabilising existing examples of APEL/RPL and facilitating the establishment of more examples. It would also help to ensure longer term activity which would consolidate the benefits of APEL/RPL in particular geographical locations.

- Dissemination of information about APEL/RPL at national level to learners

National education policies and policies on social inclusion and social justice should make explicit reference to the importance of APEL/RPL and the potential benefits particularly to traditionally excluded groups. In this way, APEL/RPL can become an important strand of social inclusion and social justice strategies with clear links to educational institutions. Careers services also need to be able to promote APEL/RPL as providing access to educational opportunities to those who are traditionally excluded from such opportunities. Information about APEL/RPL should be targeted at those groups who are at present not taking up the opportunities of APEL/RPL to enable them to have the confidence to approach educational institutions and seek APEL/RPL provision.

- The creation of national networks of APEL/RPL practitioners and interested parties

There is a real need for national networks of communication about APEL/RPL so that educational bodies, student associations, trade unions, enterprises, etc are made aware of the potential benefits of APEL/RPL and its value in relation to lifelong learning and social inclusion. We recommend the establishment of nationally-supported networks of practitioners and representatives of interested agencies to actively promote APEL/RPL and to act as working groups to discuss and find solutions to issues surrounding the implementation of APEL/RPL policies. For example, there is a need to explore innovative approaches to APEL/RPL that help to reduce some of the time-consuming aspects of the process and alleviate some of the bureaucracy associated with some APEL/RPL processes.

### *European policies and practice*

At the European level there are also measures which can be taken to help promote APEL/RPL. We believe that APEL/RPL has European-wide currency within education and that it deserves greater recognition and support on a Europe-wide level by the European Commission and other European agencies concerned with education, social justice, social inclusion and lifelong learning.

Within a European context, national policies and practice on APEL/RPL could have a supportive framework that would also provide a reference point for sharing ideas and strategies on APEL/RPL. Such a framework would be particularly important for those countries where APEL/RPL is less used - for example, Spain - and could lend authority to strategies on APEL/RPL in a much more significant way than at a national level.

What can be done at a European level to create better opportunities for APEL/RPL ?

- More explicit mention and recognition of APEL/RPL in policies of social inclusion, social justice and lifelong learning

As at national levels, we believe that APEL/RPL needs to be recognised at European levels as a transformative force within education and strategies of social inclusion. For this reason, we believe that APEL/RPL deserves more attention from agencies at the European level and particularly in relation to policies and strategies relating to social justice, social inclusion and lifelong learning. We believe that APEL/RPL has benefits not only within education but also within the economy in that it can help to facilitate mobility within the labour market as well as within educational spheres. The raising of the profile of APEL/RPL at a European level would have significance in relation to national policies in education and policies and strategies at an institutional level. There is a need to market and promote the value of APEL/RPL as a transformative mechanism within education and this should be done at every opportunity. Only by doing so can those who have traditionally been excluded from educational opportunities gain insight into the value of APEL/RPL and seek advice from careers services and educational institutions.

- Funding by the European Commission of a Europe-wide network to support APEL/RPL developments and specifically to develop a Europe-wide framework for credit accumulation and transfer

The role of such a network could initially be to formulate a set of statements or standards on APEL/RPL that individual countries could adhere to. This type of network would also serve to provide a level of international support for the implementation of APEL/RPL and would improve communication and dissemination of information about APEL/RPL across Europe. Such a network could prove crucial in facilitating the wider implementation of APEL/RPL through policies of social inclusion, social justice and lifelong learning. The development of a European framework for credit accumulation and transfer would enable more flexible use of learning opportunities across levels, institutions and countries and in turn would facilitate an increase in APEL/RPL provision.

### **Summary**

In general, information about APEL/RPL and its potential benefits to learners needs to be disseminated more widely than it is at present and incorporated into wider policies and strategies of social inclusion and social justice. The potential of APEL/RPL to act as a transformative mechanism, both socially and personally, means that it is particularly suited to meet the needs of traditionally excluded groups from education and the labour market. By promoting APEL/RPL and by supporting its implementation governments and other agencies can actively take responsibility for targeting these groups and take positive measures to address real issues of social inclusion and social justice.

The promotion of APEL/RPL at European and at national levels would benefit considerably from the establishment of appropriate networks of relevant agencies and representatives from education. Such networks would primarily be responsible for actively promoting APEL/RPL at national and European levels and for monitoring developments in APEL/RPL across Europe or within specific countries. The main role of such networks would be to share ideas and communicate good practice on APEL/RPL and provide a forum for dealing with problems of implementation and sustaining of APEL/RPL.

At a European level, the establishment of a Europe-wide framework for credit accumulation and transfer would have many benefits. It would complement a number of national initiatives in education, facilitate the mobility of people between countries and provide a framework for the facilitation of opportunities for APEL/RPL and other educational initiatives.

If strategies of social justice and social inclusion are to be pursued and to have real effect we believe that the profile of APEL/RPL in education must be raised. The means to progress the implementation of APEL/RPL already exists - there are numerous examples of approaches to APEL/RPL that can be used. However, there needs to be greater motivation and improved funding before APEL/RPL can really take root as a mainstream activity within education.

## **Conclusions**

In this document we have tried to list ways in which opportunities for APEL/RPL can be created which would help to promote its implementation and increase access for people who are traditionally excluded from educational opportunities. We believe that APEL/RPL policies have a positive contribution to make to strategies of social inclusion and social justice which is at present not being exploited.

We have made some recommendations for change at all levels - within institutions, at national level and at a European level. Overall, these changes are designed to strengthen communication about APEL/RPL across Europe and within nation states and provide support networks within which APEL/RPL developments can be actively promoted. We believe such change is necessary in order to lend coherence to arrangements which are currently very ad hoc and to bring APEL/RPL initiatives into the mainstream thinking of policy makers and implementers.

To date we feel that the potential benefits of APEL/RPL to education and to the economy have been neglected or have gone unrecognised. The changes we have suggested would help to redress this imbalance and help to give practical support to the wider implementation of APEL/RPL.

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