

PRIOR EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING (APEL): A WAY TO SHORT-CUT THE UNIVERSITY STUDIES IN TECHNICAL DEGREES?

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Abstract

This paper presents the activity carried out inside a work package (WP7) of the ISEKI_Food 3 Academic Network project (2008-2011) dedicated to the facilitation and promotion of Life Long Learning in higher education. In fact, recognition of prior learning is an essential tool to foster lifelong learning within the European Higher Education Area. Professionals could be more attracted to go back higher education if their competences would be adequately recognised as credits in the programmes they want to study and complete. Within the aims of the cited work package, recognition or accreditation of learning performed in non academic environment ("prior learning") by means of the network partners was investigated. Owing to the presentation of the aim and objective of the topic, we present the results of a questionnaire set-up to be filled on-line by ISEKI_Food partners, in order to collect information around the consideration of prior experiences and /or learning activity, certificated when possible, are recognized by University to obtain ECTS in order to facilitate the student's curriculum. Maximum of credits to be recognized, disciplines more frequently subjected to this procedure of recognition, type of agreement between university and other institutions (secondary schools, training agencies, etc.), prior experience/learning, are all items covered by the survey. Many of the partners participating in the survey and/or attending the meetings where the prior experiential learning was explained showed interest in reporting their own experience whose results are changing from country to country.

Key words: *Recognition of Prior Learning, Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning, Lifelong Learning, European Higher Education Area*

INTRODUCTION

Recognition of prior learning could be a key point in implementing lifelong learning within the European Higher Education Area, as part of the so-called Bologna Process. Food Professionals could be more attracted to go back to higher education if their experiences and competences would be adequately recognised as credits in the study programmes they want to complete.

In the frame of the ISEKI_Food 3 Academic Network project (www.iseki-food.eu), the activity inside a work package (WP7) was dedicated to the facilitation and promotion of Life Long Learning in higher education. To perform this objective, the work package was designed to have different activities corresponding to actions in different fields and related deliverables. Within the aims of the WP7, recognition or accreditation of learning

performed in non academic environment ("prior learning") was studied. APEL/RPL is the formal acknowledgement (based on professional assessment) of learning acquired from previous experience, usually from experience unrelated to an academic context. Accreditation here means recognition of individual experience/learning.

APEL is the accreditation of prior experiential learning, that is, the award of credit for learning based on prior experience -- from work, community or volunteer experience -- which has not previously been assessed and/or awarded credit. By converting informal learning into certificated learning, APEL provides cost-effective routes to qualifications. It has potential significance for people who, through life and work experience, have learned knowledge, skills and analytical abilities that are comparable to those in a higher education award.

The objective of this work was to collect and to evaluate the procedure of APEL /RPL in different countries / academic environments. Data were collected from many partners, in order to deliver the final document *Report on deliverable D7.2: Recognition of Prior Learning (Task Lead Beneficiary University of Bologna, document prepared by Marco Dalla Rosa with the contribution of Rui Costa)*.

This document reports a survey of university network partners about APEL /RPL organization and methods used. It will include the identification of the cycle where the prior learning is recognized and the methodology applied to do it.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

A questionnaire was set-up to be filled on-line by ISEKI_Food3 European and ISEKI_Mundus2 extra-Europe partners. In the questionnaire, questions were placed to collect information around the consideration of prior experiences and /or learning activity, certified when possible, were recognized by University to obtain ECTS in order to facilitate the student's curriculum. For "accreditation" here means **recognition** of individual experience / learning in a specified subject or areas of expertise **not necessarily** awarded by a duly recognized and respected accrediting organization (ISO, BS, etc.).

Maximum of credits to be recognized, disciplines more frequently subjected to this procedure of recognition, type of agreement between university and other institutions (secondary schools, training agencies, etc.), prior experience/ learning, were all items covered by the questionnaire. At the end of it, for the universities where no ECTS are usually recognized, the final question regarded the possibility / idea or prediction to apply this type of facilitation in own institutions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This survey on which this paper is based had a total of 71 answers, 44 (62%) from Europe and 27 (38%) from the other continents. All the ISEKI_Food3 partners resulted to have implemented the Bologna process, whilst only 3 partners among the Mundus also did it.

Less than 50% of the partners who answered showed to have RPL system, as indicated in Fig.1.

Around 79% of the ISEKI_Food3 partners had an RPL process whilst 8 partners of ISEKI_Mundus2 participating to the survey had an RPL process.

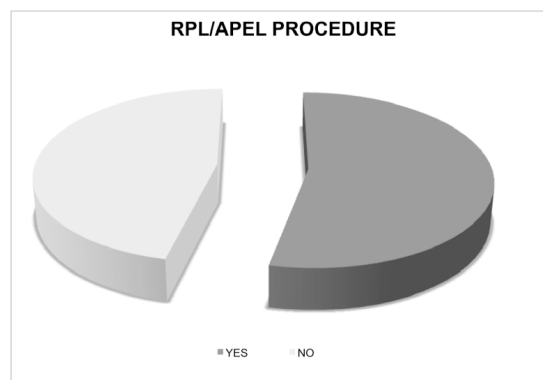


Fig. 1. Recognition of Prior Learning among partners participating in the survey

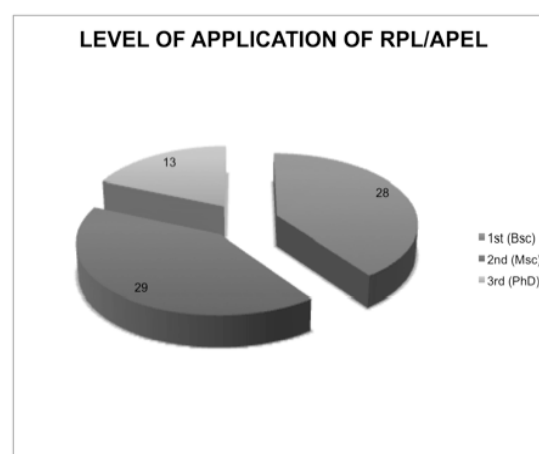


Fig. 2. Recognition of Prior Learning on the basis of degree level

In Fig. 2, the data of number of answers for the three cycles of high education were reported, mainly for the first and second degree level (bachelor and master degrees). Only in few cases, RPL was found to be applied for PhD.

Most of the recognized prior learning or experiences found were related to **foreign language certification**, followed very closely by the **working experience**, and then a few cases of credits recognized for **non-academic certification** or other not well defined experiences were showed. Credits in

informatics and demonstration of **personal skills** were also considered.

The main types of prior certified experiences (APL) to be recognized were those related to volunteer language courses able to deliver language certification (TOEFL, FIRST, etc.) or computer license and to the working experiences. In some cases, other types of experience were recognized as well as different BSc degrees to enter the MSc Food Technology, formal courses from other institutions, subject credits within a Qualification for advanced entry with a portfolio of evidence, courses taken in an other University or College, Technological Specialization Courses (CET), similar courses with similar hours/credits, or only academic records.

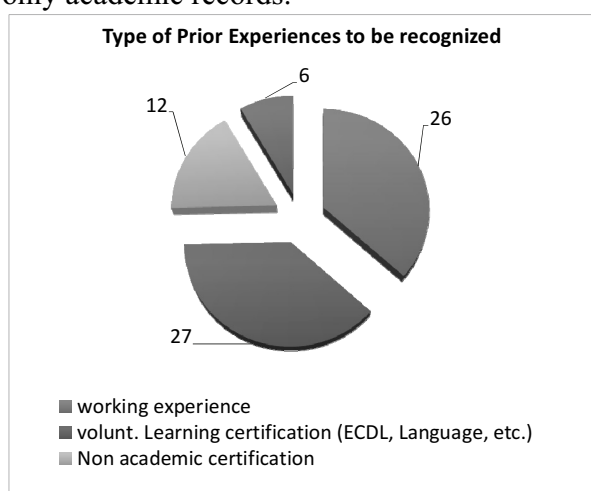


Fig. 3. Recognition of Prior Learning on the basis of type of certification / xperience

A critical point on the recognition of prior learning for the sustainability of the degree courses of in the frame of the learning outcomes perspective, was related to the maximum of credit (ECTS in he European system) to be recognized. In fact, for the 50% of the partner having an RPL system, a limit of recognized credit number was fixed, as reported in Figure 4. In some cases, this maximum value was imposed by national law issued by Ministry of Education and in other institutions was fixed by internal regulation.

The value of this maximum of credits to be recognized was found to be very different among countries, and even within the same country.

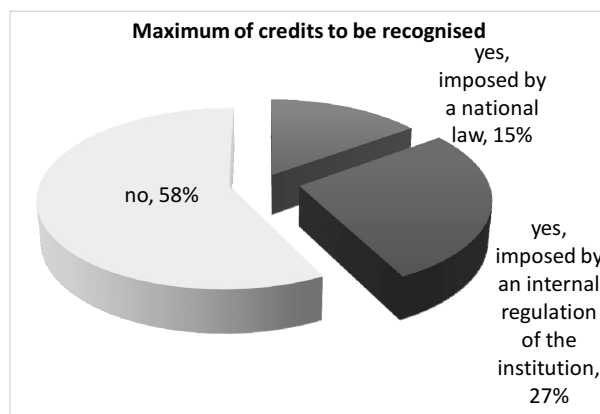


Fig. 4. Presence of a threshold of credits to be recognised in Recognition of Prior Learning systems

In Italy, for example, at Udine University there was a limit of 9 ECTS whilst at University of Bologna the limit was fixed on 30 ECTS. At Algarve University (Portugal) the value went up to 60 ECTS and at London Metropolitan University (UK) the threshold was up to the 50% of the total ECTS. Almost 50% of the partner universities permitted that recognized ECTS might be used for both BSc and MSc degree levels.

In relation to the area of discipline or academic activities in which the prior learning experiences were mainly recognized, the principal area was found to be the training, where completion of academic courses was compulsory.

An object of discussion was related to the methodology of how to perform the recognition of prior experiential learning (or Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning - APEL). As well as resulted from the questionnaire answers, most of the recognitions were performed by a special committee, followed by the presentation of a portfolio of experiences, a written examination or an examination specifically done by the teachers interested in the program proposed for recognition.

Other question regarded when the university accepted a student through recognition of prior learning, if the institutions designed a specific study plan. In most of the universities (53%), there was a specific study plan for the applicants, whilst in the 7% of cases the plan was general and not individually driven;

however, in 40% of answers no specific plan was designed.

Another interesting point to evaluate learning experience prior to the start the academic studies, was the possibility to have special agreements between university and secondary schools or higher education activities (as well as technical school programmes) where special courses could be given by university professors. This possibility seemed very interesting, looking to the Higher Education Area in Europe. Nevertheless, as resulted from our survey, in only around 1/3 of the answers (35%) resulted that there was an agreement between University and other Institution to recognize credits that the incoming students could ask for the accreditation, and thus the facilitation to obtain a bachelor or master degree.

This type of recognition, regarding the agreement of learning experience between university and secondary schools, was limited according to local / national rules.

CONCLUSIONS

Among the universities participating in this ISEKI_Food3 activity, many of them showed interest in reporting their own experience on recognition of prior learning, which led to very differentiated results from country to country. Partners that did not implemented an RPL system yet mostly confirmed their interest in the procedure, and some of them declared that they would try to establish such a system in their own institution.

In conclusion, RPL/APEL procedure did not appear to be simply a way to short-cut the course programmes, but a methodology to recognize experiences and /or previous learning activities able to be included in the degree curriculum in order to facilitate the pathway to obtain the degree on the basis of valuable professional working or learning experiences. The establishment of a maximum of credits to

be recognized resulted to be useful in order to avoid distortion in the learning programs and outcomes.

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