

Quality Assurance on Evaluation Process Regarding Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL)

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Abstract

This paper explores the achieving quality assurance on an evaluation process of accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) for adults who want to enter in higher education. It's a common finding that people are learning throughout their lifetime where they acquire skills, abilities, and knowledge. These qualifications are achieved not only through formal but also through non-formal and informal learning. The needs of our time have created qualification evaluation procedures acquired through non-formal and informal learning. These kinds of procedures reflect mostly to labour market. In this paper we will focus on evaluation procedure for entering in higher education and the quality assurance of such procedures. Different views on the appropriate type of evaluation were recorded but also how the proposed types can be valid and reliable as a process and how quality assurance is enhanced. The data was selected through interviews where we recorded the views of academics and policy makers in Greece.

Keywords: Evaluation, quality assurance, Accreditation prior experiential learning, APEL, lifelong learning, adult's education.

Introduction

Personal development is the key word according to Rubenson (2004), where people make themselves and not being made. This anthropocentric idea is also refer in Faure report, Learning to Be, published by UNESCO (Faure, 1972) where its mentioned that lifelong learning is relative with a positive humanistic notion of progress and personal development as beneficial to both the individual and society. With this humanitarian sense the meaning of accreditation of prior experiential learning for entering in higher education was first adopted in US on 1970 to alleviate social inequalities and provide opportunities for the underprivileged to pursue higher education. However, through the years in the US it is usually used for credit towards a qualification in the higher education sector and not for access in HE (Bamford-Rees 2008). In the last decades' recognition of prior learning (RPL) has emerged as a widespread practice as well as a field of research around the world (Andersson et al., 2013) and is used internationally as a tool for lifelong learning, credit towards a qualification and access to higher education (Hornblow 2002). According to Duvekot (2014) "the recognition of prior learning offers a process-oriented approach for recognising and valuing what people have learned in their lives and it is an important cornerstone of lifelong learning». Today, recognition of prior learning is a necessity as a mechanism to recognize qualification (skills, knowledge, and competencies) for people who wish to continue education but without study again what they already know (Moss, 2011).

The concept of accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL)

At this point we have to mention that the concept of recognition of professional qualifications is found in the literature with various expressions. The most common are the following:

- Recognition of prior learning (RPL) (Castle & Attwood, 2001).
- Recognition of professional qualifications (RPP) (Healy & Meagher, 2004).
- Accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) (Garnett, Portwood & Costley, 2004).
- Prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) (Center for knowledge recognition of Athabasca University, Canada, May 2021).
- Validation of prior learning (VPL) (Duvekot, Halba, Aagaard, Gabrscek & Murray, 2014).

The above expressions-definitions are used to define and describe procedures relating to the assessment, recognition, and certification of professional qualifications and we can find them on different books, articles, directives such as:

- Texts of the Council of Europe and the European Commission e.g. The text of the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in Europe (Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region), known as the Lisbon Convention (1997).
- Text of the Bologna Process. The Lisbon Convention was fully adopted by the Bologna Process (1999) which clearly refers to the recognition of qualifications but also the recognition of prior learning (formal, non-formal, informal).
- Articles, books, announcements, publications, presentations at conferences by researchers / academics in the relevant field of research (Weber, 2010, Stensaker, 2011, Pitman & Vidovich, 2013).
- Texts and studies of organizations such as UNESCO (Singh & Duvecot, 2013), Cedefop (2007) and the Greek National Organization for the Certification and Vocational Guidance (EOPPEP).

In each case all the sources express the same substance but with different expressions that depend on the language, the culture, the local governments but also the diversity of the local development (Andersson, 2013). In this paper we will use Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) for describing the result of our research.

Quality assurance in evaluation

Quality assurance in higher education can be defined as a process by which an institution can guarantee with confidence and certainty, that the standards and quality of its educational provision are being maintained and assured' (Irish Universities Quality Board, 2008, p. 4). Countries specify quality assurance mechanisms to ensure the credibility and consistency of RPL certification (Aggarwal 2015). But what exactly is quality assurance and how it can be secured in the case of assessment of prior learning? We can understand it if we put some main quality assurance functions. The first step is to defining quality for the specific purpose. Subsequently to create conditions in order to measure this quality. And final step to adopt procedures for improve quality. Let's follow this thought step by step. Defining quality in our case is to create standards which specific characteristics reflecting in reliability and validity of the process. A *standard* (French: *Norme*, German: *Norm*) is a technical document designed to be used as a rule, guideline or definition. It is a consensus-built, repeatable way of doing something (CEN, 2021). A good standard is reliable, realistic, valid, clear, and measurable. Standards of quality can be developed for each proposed evaluation procedure. The measurement of quality refers to the quantification of the level of performance of the specific standard where we achieve it by analysing the data. For the process of improving quality we use methods such as problem solving or re - design in order to improve the quality and to achieve the expected level of quality. For improvement we focus on what must be improve, analyse the problem or the gap, design an alternative, test the new solution and check the level of achievement. Quality assurance especially in evaluation of APEL is one of the main issues of this research.

Methodological Issues

In order to achieve our aim, we followed the methodology of qualitative research, with qualitative data (written or oral texts and observable human behaviours). We choose this type as our main goal was to gather as much information and data as possible resulting from experiences, views, thoughts and the culture of the target group. A quantitative approach with the presentation of numbers would offer us nothing more than a simple recording of quantitative indicators. The tool we used was semi-structured interviews as it's not a random case but a carefully designed procedure. Once the type of our tool was designed and selected, we proceeded with the interview process, shaping the interview plan. Particularly we have compiled questions about the demographics, to see the characteristics of the participants, and questions about the purposes of our research. At this point we have to notice that this research took place from January 2020 until May 2020 in Greece where due to Covid 19 situation some of the interviews took place online, since a disruption in normal operation of the universities took place (Karalis, 2020).

For the analysis of the data we used the method of content analysis. "Content analysis" has been defined as that multi-purpose research method that has been developed specifically to investigate a wide range of problems, the investigation of which the content of communication serves as a basis for drawing conclusions. At this point we have to note that this is a method and not a tool or technique as the items around which the study revolves are "natural" quality communication material which were not created by the researcher but was produced spontaneously by the target group.

To reach our data we followed the following steps. First, we converted the recorded material into text. We then organized and indexed the data for easy retrieval and identification. The next step was to get acquainted with the data by reading the entries over and over again and taking notes. This was followed by the codification where we set criteria always keeping in mind the purpose of our research and its individual objectives. Finally, we wrote the topics and the emerging concepts that emerged from our data. The topic is the smallest part of the content which belongs to a specific category of analysis and takes into account the core of the importance that emerges through the texts of the data. As a topic we received any opinion or wording (sentence, paragraph), which has a complete meaning.

This way of development was considered the most appropriate as this particular recording unit is essential in the research of moods, attitudes, values and beliefs.

Based on the topic, we proceeded to the categorization. From the content analysis that was performed, the codification and the classification of the topics identified in the interviews, the following categories and subcategories were created, which are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Categories of analysis

Axis1 - Level of target group's awareness and involvement in the accreditation of prior experiential learning	
1.1	Do you know what accreditation of experimental learning is?
1.2	Have you participated in such activities?
1.3	If the answer to 1.2 is yes, please explain the type of the procedure and the role of the interviewer
1.4	Are you familiar with the accreditation activities in your country?
1.5	If the answer to 1.4 is yes, please open a discussion according to the answer
Axis 2 - Evaluation: personal perception of the interviewee concerning the type of evaluation	
2.1	What are the types of evaluation that you consider the most suitable for the accreditation of the experiential learning in European Universities? A list of types of evaluation that can be used is provided below, nevertheless the list is not exhaustive: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interview • Self-Assessment Questionnaire • On-site observation • Simulation with work samples • Examination (written or oral) • Portfolio of the experiences • Practice exams • Pre-survey with interviews • Others
2.2	Why this type (or types) of evaluation?
2.3	Describe the quality evaluation of the selected type(s)above
2.4	Who will evaluate?
2.5	Main characteristics of the evaluator
2.6	How to ensure the validity and reliability of this process?
Axis 3 - Recognition	
3.1	Current state of recognition system within your organization (if any)
3.2	Propose recognition procedure Other possible proposal for recognition <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognition internal (inside the university) • Local recognition (at region level) • National recognition
3.3	Characteristics of the recognition by the proposed procedure: add details
3.4	How it is ensured the quality of the proposed recognition procedure?

3.5	Describe the main criteria for an objective recognition. Types of criteria: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Credit units • Independent authority • External organization • Transparency tools (e.g.: national qualifications framework, outlines)
Axis 4 - Certification	
4.1	Current state of certification in your organization/country
4.2	Who can certify? Identify/propose a person/organization responsible for certification.
4.3	Is there any cost? If yes who is the beneficiary of this payment?

The total sample was 31 academics and policy makers where academics had teaching as well as management and administrative work experience and policy makers were involved in educational management (ministry, regional education directorate, adult education secretariat). The majority of the sample was 50-60 years old. Teaching years of academics in higher education was 12% in 0-10 years, 35% in 11-20 years, 19% in 21-30 years, 19% 31-40 years and 15% more than 40 years. 28% has educational management for 0-5 years, 24% for 6-10, 14% for 11-15, 17% for 16-20 and 17% more than 20 years.

Presentation of findings

Characteristics of the participants

More than the half of the sample (62%) did not know about accreditation of prior experiential learning. Only 38% was familiar and thus because from their professional position some of them participate in the working team of national policy. On 2006 started (in Greece) the development of NQF and occupational profiles. But due to financial crisis 2010 activities regarding adults learning stayed behind. The majority of the sample does not have any official information for such procedures as the 83% declares ignorance of the issue in Greece. The 17% certified that there is no official procedure in Greece for entering in higher education following another different path than the classic one of the national examinations. Also mentioned that in national level no discussions have taken place for accreditation of experiential learning for entering in higher education. Discussion about recognition of prior learning concerns only qualifications for labour market.

Types of evaluation

One of the crucial issues of our research was the type of evaluation that the target group will propose. There were different approaches on this subject. A significant percentage 45% claims that the only way is written examinations. Practical (laboratory) exams as well as a combination of written examinations and practical (laboratory) exams supported by 10% and 25% respectively. Another view (17%) was before the evaluation to precede a qualification process by building the personal portfolio. This process would be supervised by a person in charge who would also have an advisory role throughout the process. This supervisor would play a significant role throughout the duration of the procedure leading the interested person on the right path. Another opinion (3%) focus that the interested person has to follow different path. First a supervisor to record the qualifications, then the interested person to follow 6-month pre university program, then to give written examination for recognition of experiential learning. The idea of a combination with portfolio and exams and during the procedure support from a supervisor came up as an innovative idea. Even different types of evaluation were proposed by the target group we found out that the majority insists on the traditional process of written examinations.

Validity and Reliability of the accreditation procedure

A crucial point of our research was the quality of the evaluation. So, beside the type we try to record not only why the target group support the specific way but also in which way they believe that they can ensure the quality of the evaluation. Quality assurance in training processes includes validity and reliability. In order to keep the validity and reliability in high level the 83% of the sample suggest setting up committees of at least 3 persons. 17% claimed that according to the Constitution in Greece the Department is the basic unit to the Greek universities then each Department has to organise the evaluation procedure taking into account the department needs. Most of the sample support that the evaluators must be a team of 3 persons with specific knowledge in relation to the subject.

For example, if a participant wants to recognise qualification in ICT then must be evaluated by professors of ICT. This opinion is supported by all the participants.

Additionally, the evaluator has to be familiar with adult education principles as the candidates have specific characteristic, deriving from their phase of life, that of adulthood (Liodaki & Karalis, 2013). This opinion was supported by the 24% and 14% added that workshop or training seminar for academic must take place before they get involved in such a procedure.

The evaluators must have qualifications beyond the type of evaluation in order to check and objectively judge the knowledge, abilities and skills of the examinee. That's why they have to be familiar with the subject but also to have the ability to recognise the general qualifications. All the participants agree that such a capacity of academics is appropriate for this process.

The success of the evaluation process depends to a large extent on quality assurance. That's why during our interviews we paid special attention and we insisted on this question. Several respondents gave more than one answer. 83% claim that if different committees for each academic subject will be established, then quality assurance can be achieved. The committees must be constituted from at least 3 different person and experts of each field. Additionally, for enhance quality insurance a committee can be in charge for the exam's material and for the exam questions and a different committee for the evaluation and grading.

Another option (55% of the sample) was that choosing written exams where just at the end of the exam time the committee can seal personal data (names) and with this way the evaluation and grading committee with not know who is who. Of course, all the about can be easily solve if there is a central political decision and legislation where it will determine in detail and will ensure both the anonymity of the examiners and the examinees. This opinion has ardent supporters as 76% of the total strongly believes that this will be the best solution.

Graduate admission exams procedure it is considered ideal (66%) both because the members of the academic community are competent and because it is an accepted process in Greek society. The target group describe to us the procedure in detail as follow. The number of entrants is determined by each Department following a decision of the General Assembly of the Department. The members of the Committee of graduate admission exams arrive two hours before the beginning of the examination of each examined course at the place of the examination. The two members of the Committee who teach the subject or a related subject under consideration at the same time propose at least six subjects and the Commission selects three of them. Then follows a draw for the selection of a topic for each examined course. The drawn issue is recorded in electronic form, reproduced and distributed to the examinees. General measures are taking in order to ensure the inviolability of the procedure:

- a) In the rooms where the examinations will be carried out, all the appropriate measures are taken for their smooth conduct. A list of candidates is posted at the entrance of each examination room.
- b) For the verification of the identity of each candidate, he / she presents a police ID card or other official public document certifying his / her identity.
- c) On the first day of the exams, the candidates are obliged to be at the exam venue one hour earlier. On other days, they are required to arrive half an hour (30 minutes) earlier.
- d) Coloured inks, other than blue and black, and any other identification element in the written essay exclude the written from the grading.
- e) Any candidate who leaves the room submits his / her writing and has no right to return to continue the examination. Exceptionally, only for health reasons, it is allowed to leave the room for a few minutes and only accompanied by a supervisor.
- f) The candidate is not allowed to enter the examination room with books, notebooks, notes or other items other than those allowed according to the instructions of the Classification Committee. To the one who refuses to hand over the forbidden items, the supervisor who controls the arrival of the candidates forbids the entrance.
- g) In the written examination, the indications with the personal data of the candidate are checked by the supervisors and are covered by the candidate himself under the responsibility of the supervisors in an absolute and opaque way, at the time when each written essay is delivered.

h) Supervisors transfer the written essays of the candidates and deliver them to the Classification Committee which is responsible for their safety. Essays must not be submitted to the two assessors at the same time or to the second assessor before the grade of the first assessor has been reached, while the degree is covered.

i) The duration of the examination of each course, as well as any material that the candidate should have for the examination, are determined by the Board of the University Department.

Conclusions

The purpose of the current research was to record the opinions of the directly involved in the prior learning assessment process and in particular from the point of view of academics and policy makers in Greece. Unfortunately, most of the target group has no formal information on policies and opportunities for admission to higher education for specific adult groups and any information they have is because there was a personal interest for research purposes or because a small percentage of the sample participated in the early discussions on the implementation of the national qualification's framework. Suggested ways of evaluation are to a large extent the written examination. This form is a well-established method? and especially familiar to university professors and we can say that this stems from the teacher-centred model (Rotidi, Collins, Karalis, & Lavidas, 2016) but on the other hand the written examination is considered to enhance both objectivity and reliability. It's a method that has been consolidated in the Greek educational system and is acceptable to Greek society. A combination of written and oral laboratory examination depending on the subject of science was also suggested and, in some cases, additional value is noted that is the consulting and the assignment to a supervisor.

Special consideration was mentioned to graduate admission exams (written exams also) as a way of evaluation as this included special characteristic and standards, common and acceptable, in combination with a national level recognition will also enhance quality assurances according to the sample. Last but not least it's mentioned that quality assurance can be enhanced in recognition using knowledge transfer units, minimum scores, national qualifications framework, and the supervision of an ad-hoc independent authority.

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