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**ASSESSMENT OF PRIOR EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN HIGHER  
EDUCATION CONTEXT**

Master's Thesis

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<p>Referaat</p> <p>Kogemusest õpitu hindamine on protsess, mille tulemusena hinnatakse ja tunnustatakse õppimist, mis on toimunud formaalsest haridussüsteemist väljaspool. Kogemusest õpitu hindamine kui kontseptsioon lähtub arusaamast, et õppimine on väärtus ning väärtuslik olenemata sellest, kus, kuidas ja millal on õppimine toimunud. Kogemusest õppimine rõhutab kogemuse olulisust õppimise lähtealusena ning ühtlasi viitab, et õppimine ei ole enam ainuüksi seotud õppekava loogikaga. Ülikoolide jaoks saab väljakutseks hinnata õppimist, mis ei ole toimunud ülikoolis.</p> <p>Toetudes järgmistele autoritele (Andersson 2006; Evans 2006; Murphy 2006; Kasworm &amp; Marienau 2002; Fenwick &amp; Parson 2000; Harris 1999; Challis 1993) on käesoleva töö probleem sõnastatud küsimusena: Kuidas hinnata kogemusest õpitut kõrghariduse kontekstist?</p> <p>Magistritöö eesmärk on kogemusest õpitu hindamise võimaluste analüüs ning soovitud kõrghariduse institutsioonidele kogemusest õpitu hindamiseks.</p> <p>Lähtuvalt töö eesmärgist on püstitatud järgmised ülesanded: analüüsida teoreetiliste allikate põhjal kogemusest õpitu hindamist kui kontseptsiooni ning erinevaid hindamise võimalusi; viia läbi poolstruktureeritud intervjuud ekspertidega; analüüsida ja üldistada teoreetilisi seisukohti ning empiirilisi tulemusi; koostada soovitud kõrghariduse institutsioonidele kogemusest õpitu hindamiseks.</p> <p>Magistritöö teoreetilises osas analüüsitakse kogemusest õpitu hindamist, kui kontseptsiooni kõrghariduse kontekstis ning analüüsitakse erinevaid hindamise aspekte rõhuasetusega täiskasvanu õppimise hindamise printsiipidele. Empiirilistest tulemustest võib järeldada järgmist: kogemusest õpitu hindamine on uudne lähenemine ülikoolide jaoks ning ei sobitu ülikoolide olemasolevatesse struktuuridesse; kogemusest õpitut on võimalik hinnata õppekava kontekstis ning kõrgharidusega samal tasemel; hindamisprotseduurid peavad lähtuma eesmärgist, olema selgelt mõistetavad, lähtuma konkreetsetest kriteeriumitest ning kasutama asjakohaseid meetodeid; hindamise meetodite valik lähtub õppekava eripärast.</p> <p>Magistritöös on andmete illustreerimiseks kasutatud viite joonist ning kolme tabelit. Allikate loetelus on 89 allikat.</p>		
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<p>Abstract</p> <p>Assessment of prior experiential learning (APEL) is a process through which learning achieved outside formal education systems is assessed and recognized for academic purposes. The concept of APEL values learning despite the place or time learning has been acquired. Experiential learning emphasizes experience as the basis for learning and thus learning is no longer attached solely to curriculum logic. A challenge rises for higher education institutions as universities learn to evaluate knowledge they had not themselves imparted.</p> <p>Based on the following authors (Andersson 2006; Evans 2006; Murphy 2006; Kasworm &amp; Marienau 2002; Fenwick &amp; Parson 2000; Harris 1999; Challis 1993) the research question has been formed: How can prior experiential learning be assessed in the higher education context?</p> <p>The aim of the research is to analyze the assessment of prior experiential learning possibilities in higher education context and to make recommendations for higher education institutions for assessment of prior experiential learning.</p> <p>The following tasks have been set: to analyze literature about the key concepts of assessment of prior experiential learning; to analyze theoretical underpinnings of assessment of prior experiential learning; to carry out semi-structured interviews with experts in the field of APEL; to analyze the results of the interviews and generalize theoretical apprehensions and empirical results; to compile recommendations of assessment of prior experiential learning for higher education institution.</p> <p>The theoretical paragraphs analyze the essence of APEL in the context of higher education. Different aspects of assessment have been analyzed and emphasis is on key principles of adult learning assessment. The results of empirical research show that assessment of prior experiential learning is a new concept that does not easily fit into university structures; assessment needs to be done in the context of a curriculum and on the same level as learning is in higher education institutions; assessment procedures need to fit for purpose, be perspicuous, have explicit assessment criteria and use relevant assessment methods; the methods in use need to depend on specifications of the subject field and curriculum.</p> <p>This thesis consists of an introduction, three chapters and a conclusion. Five figures and three tables illustrate the thesis. The study is based on 89 references.</p>			
Keywords: experiential learning, assessment, accreditation/assessment of prior experiential learning (APEL)			
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## **PREFACE**

I want to tell my story as a researcher finding a way to the topic that excites me and makes me want to know more.

A few years back I was participating in a Grundtvig partnership ‘Recognition and accreditation of experiential learning – a way for better accessibility of adult education’ (REACTION). It certainly had a ‘reaction’ on me and that led to learning about accreditation/assessment of prior experiential learning (APEL). I discovered that APEL is about the values that I have had. It is about valuing learning in every aspect – no matter where, when, and how learning was acquired. The value of experiential learning should be recognized not just by the learner, but also by the university.

Designing my research was a long process, much longer than I had expected, but I found my interest in the assessment aspect of APEL. I realized that very little had been researched before and this was an opportunity to create new knowledge which could benefit APEL practices.

I decided to interview experts of APEL from different countries and contact people who I had met through REACTION project and several conferences. I also contacted people who were recommended by the experts themselves. It was a struggle to find experts who were willing and interested to talk about assessment of prior experiential learning. Therefore I am very thankful to Josephine, Anne, Andreas, Marge, Aili, Vaiva, Anita and An for taking the time to share their thoughts with me. Most of the interviews were done in an unusual way using Skype to call and to record the interviews, so I can say that technology worked in my favor. The international sample of experts let me discover a wide perspective on APEL, and I have hope that these results will benefit higher education institutions.

I would like to thank Larissa, my supervisor, who had patience with me and trusted me on my decisions as researcher.

I would also like to thank Kim, a very special friend of mine, who taught me to speak English. It has been an enormous gift that I have been given by her. I’m very grateful to Kim also for the proof-reading she did for my thesis.

It has been an exciting journey that will make a stop here to continue again in a short while.

Marin Gross

April 2008

## **INTRODUCTION**

Enormous structural processes in society such as globalization and individualization have given rise to increasing differentiation in the learning environments available to members of learning society. This is accompanied by a diversification of the learning trajectories pursued by individuals and a redistribution of learning over the entire life of the individual (Luit, Kamp & Slagter, 2006). Learning no longer has a predicted time frame, place or content – learning is everywhere, in every moment of life.

The concept of assessment of prior experiential learning (APEL) gathers the idea of lifelong learning and the notion that learning is valuable in no matter the place or time learning has been acquired. Therefore learning itself is valued and not as much where learning has taken place or how learning has been acquired. Assessment of prior experiential learning (APEL) is a process of recognizing individuals' knowledge, skills and competencies acquired through lifelong and life-wide learning (Evans 2006; Andresson & Fejes 2005; Gallcher & Feutrie 2003; Donoghue, Pelletier, Adams & Duffield 2002; Evans 2000; Lueddeke 1997). The process shifts focus to the learner and the learning, and away from the learning site or the time spent in acquiring the knowledge (Starr-Glass 2002; LeGrow 2000). Assessing and recognising prior experiential learning means acknowledging that people can learn from 'non-formal' and 'informal' learning situations. It is also admitting that knowledge gained through experience can be considered equivalent to knowledge acquired in more traditional teaching and learning situations (Hearinger 2006; Field 1993). APEL is a procedure for giving official public recognition to a person's learning regardless of how it was acquired. It is based on the understanding that to ask people to learn again what they already know is a waste of resources for the individuals concerned and for the higher education institutions involved (Evans 2006; Evans 2000). APEL has the potential to widen access, increase flexibility in the curriculum and enable a positive value to be placed on non-formal and informal learning. It can also serve as a vehicle for learners to integrate theory with practice, for promoting reflective practice through the identification of learning from experience and the application of this learning in changed practice (Alheit & Piening 1999).

Prior experiential learning means the knowledge and skills acquired through life and work experience and study, which are not formally assessed through any educational or professional accreditation. It can include instruction-based learning provided by any institution, which has not been examined in any of the public examination systems (Evans 2000). Prior experiential learning is uncertificated learning, for which no formal evidence exists.

The main trigger for APEL developments in higher education at the policy level has been the Bologna Process, where the latest London Communiqué (2007) declares that recognition of non-formal and informal learning is an essential component of the European Higher Education Area. The Bologna Seminar in 2007 posed recommendations that all European higher education institutions are encouraged to put in place clear processes and practices that transparently detail their internal APL/APEL systems and procedures.

Assessment of prior experiential learning is an essential issue in European Union agendas both in higher education and adult education. APEL has been identified as a European priority on repeated occasions, including the Communication on Lifelong Learning (2001), the Education Council Decision's *Concrete future objectives for European education and training systems* (2001), and the Copenhagen Declaration (2002). The communication *Adult Learning: It is never too late to learn* from the European Commission (2006) emphasizes in particular recognition of prior experiential learning stating that the learning outcomes should be recognized and valued, regardless of where and how they are achieved. Such recognition of non-formal and informal learning enables learners to identify their starting point, gain entry to a program of learning at a particular level, achieve credits towards a qualification and/or achieve a full qualification based on competences.

Research on assessment of prior experiential learning is often descriptive and prescriptive and critical analyses are rare (Andersson & Fejes 2005). Therefore, looking at the current situation where higher education APEL is emphasized (Valk & Saluveer 2006), there is a noteworthy need for innovative solutions and research (Andersson & Fejes 2005; Castle & Attwood 2001; Evans 1999). The recommendations formulated by the Grundtvig project REACTION declare that

research is urgently needed to critically review developments in APEL theory and practice and essentially research is needed about the elements of APEL such as assessment procedures and practices (Recommendations to the Decision Makers... 2007).

Awareness of the importance of experiential learning is clear but there is not much precedent in assessing such experiences as part of accrediting learning (Bron 1999). Assessment of prior experiential learning is a problematic issue due to the complexity of the process where single solutions for best practices do not exist (Castle & Attwood 2001; Evans 1999; Clark & Warr 1997; Trowler 1996). Conceptions of assessment have broadened from assessment of learning in a formal situation to assessing learning in non-formal and informal situations (Andersson & Fejes 2005). Traditional methods and approaches to assessment need new directions and origination from the characteristics of experiential learning (Castle & Attwood 2001). It is important to note that it is not experience that is being assessed, but the demonstrable learning that has resulted from that experience (Evans 2006; Houston, Hoover & Beer 1997; Howard 1993).

The research problem has been phrased as a question: How can prior experiential learning be assessed in the higher education context?

Research aim: The analysis of assessment of prior experiential learning possibilities in higher education context and recommendations for higher education institutions for assessment of prior experiential learning.

The following tasks have been set:

- To analyze literature about the key concepts of assessment of prior experiential learning
- To analyze theoretical underpinnings of assessment of prior experiential learning
- To carry out semi-structured interviews with experts in the field of APEL
- To analyze the results of the interviews and generalize theoretical apprehensions and empirical results

- To compile recommendations of assessment of prior experiential learning for higher education institutions.

Research methods:

- Literature analysis
- Semi-structured interview
- Data analysis
- Analysis and generalization of empirical results and theoretical apprehensions

This master's thesis provides insight into the current issues concerned with the assessment of prior experiential learning. Expert interviews have been held in order to learn more of the current assessment practices, developments and research. Recommendations have been formed for developing procedures for assessment of prior experiential learning in higher education institutions.

## **1. KEY CONCEPTS AND HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY OF APEL**

*Granting college credit for 'noncollege learning' appears to be another one of those ideas whose time has come in higher education (Nolan 1976).*

All of us learn from our activities and experiences, whether these take place at work or in everyday life. Nevertheless, it is only recently that this form of learning has started to be recognized as being, in some way, equivalent to learning in formal situations such as in universities. Assessment of prior experiential learning (APEL) recognizes learning outside the formal situation and attributes a certain value to such learning. Thus higher education institutions are going through major changes as learning is recognized in diverse settings, which gives the institution a need to adapt to the new situation. This chapter will explore the notion of assessment of prior experiential learning by clarifying the terms that are currently in use, and explaining and analyzing the key concepts and models of APEL. Emphasis is put on APEL in the higher education context.

### **1.1 Key Concepts of APEL**

The concept and practice of assessment of prior experiential learning (APEL) have been formed and shaped by the inter-relation of historical, cultural, economic and political forces in different social contexts (Harris 2006). The roots of APEL can be found in the post-World War II United States of America where there was a growing demand for retraining and up-skilling as traditional industries declined and new ones emerged. Universities could no longer accommodate adult learners returning to universities for additional training. In response, in late 1960s and early 1970s many new colleges were devoted to adult learners and a system of assessment and recognition of experiential learning was implemented (Murphy 2006; Heyns 2004; Evans 2000). The main principle upon which prior learning was assessed and recognized was the acknowledgement that people learn in formal, non-formal and informal settings outside of education and training institutions, and that such learning

could be equated with the learning acquired in formal institutional environments (Heyns 2004). Following the developments of APEL in USA in the 1980s, several steps were made in the UK for promoting assessment of prior learning but higher education did not yet have what was needed: modular courses, credits and learning outcomes (Murphy 2006). The widespread modularization and credit-rating of academic programs in the 1990s were hailed by APEL activists as offering a framework not only for measuring the volume and level of experiential learning, but also its incorporation through exemptions and advanced standing into academic programs (Garnett, Portwood & Costley 2004). The APEL developments in the USA and UK have been the baseline for the evolvments of the APEL concepts elsewhere worldwide.

Assessment of prior experiential learning is defined as assessing and accrediting learning from life and work experience as the basis for creating new routes into higher education, employment and training opportunities (Weil & McGill 1989 in Peters 2005). APEL is the shorthand term commonly used to refer to a complex process of identifying, assessing, recognizing and certificating learning that people have developed through their lives and in different contexts, e.g. through education, work and leisure activities. The purpose is to make visible the entire scope of knowledge and experience held by an individual, irrespective of the context where the learning originally took place (Feutrie 2005; Colardyn & Bjornavold 2004). Prior experiential learning can be acquired formally, non-formally or informally but the determining factor is that it is not currently accredited or certificated (Harris 2006). It thus represents a move to accept that learning is not dependent upon any particular formal setting, and to acknowledge it as being of value in its own right. The fact that learning accumulates and exists outside an educational or training environment cannot be disputed. Yet it is traditionally only institutional, certificated learning that carries any status (Bailie & Hagan 1999; Challis 1993). Uncertificated learning, such as that gained during a period of employment, or partial completion of a course of study, or during voluntary or unpaid work, is acknowledged, informally, as being somehow useful or valuable, but until now, there has never been an attempt to quantify the learning that has taken place (Bailie & Hagan 1999; Challis 1993). In lifelong and life-wide learning, APEL is a crucial element to ensure the visibility and to indicate the appropriate value of the learning that took place anywhere and any time in the life

of the individual. (Cedefop 2000; European Commission 2001; Colardyn & Bjornavold 2004).

The concepts of learning sites and learning processes are central to APEL as are the concepts of formal, non-formal and informal learning (Murphy 2006). Therefore it is necessary to clarify what is meant by these terms. As a point of reference Cedefop (2003) definitions are in place as these are widely used (Murphy 2006; Feutrie 2005) and give a clear distinction between formal, non-formal and informal learning:

#### *Formal learning*

Formal learning occurs within an organized and structured context: it can be in formal education as well as in company training, etc. The context is designated as a learning one. Formal learning may lead to a formal recognition (diploma, certificate etc.)

#### *Non-formal learning*

Non-formal learning is embedded in planned activities that are not explicitly designated as learning, but which contain an important learning element. In contrast to formal learning, non-formal learning encompasses what is sometimes described as semi-structured learning, that is learning embedded in environments containing a learning component (i.e. quality management), and accidental learning resulting from daily life situations (including those at the work place) and defined as informal learning.

#### *Informal learning*

Informal learning is learning resulting from daily activities related to work, family or leisure. Informal learning is part of non-formal learning. It is often referred to as experiential learning and can to a certain degree be understood as accidental learning.

The outcomes of APEL can involve non-traditional access, the award of advanced standing (or credit) within formal education and training, or serve as a basis for an individually-negotiated learning program (Motuang 2007; Harris 2006). APEL is positioned as a central pillar of redress, seen as having the capacity to widen access to education and training and to enhance the qualification status of historically disadvantaged adults (Harris 1999).

The intensions of APEL have been generalized as follows:

- To identify learning, wherever and whenever it has taken place;
- To give a second chance, principally to those who have not succeeded in initial education or have no qualifications;
- To promote development of personal and professional routes throughout life;
- To facilitate and support internal and external mobility in companies and also European mobility;
- To support changes in Higher Education, e.g. The Bologna Process;
- To facilitate links between the job market and educational institutions and respond better to the needs of the job market ;
- To respond to the formalization of job market.

(Murphy 2006; Harris 2006; Evans 2006; Pouget 2006; Feutrie 2005).

The complexity of APEL is obvious as it merges values related to lifelong learning and personal development on one hand and on the other political interests driven by formalization of labor market and the reforms of higher education. Thus APEL engages interests of different parties such as the learners, providers, higher education institutions, policy makers, employers etc. APEL has a demanding role to serve in the society.

The complexity is enhanced by a number of terms that can be used, and are currently used to refer to APEL, the process of articulating the knowledge and skills which have been derived from experience in order to make them assessable and subject to accreditation (Corradi 2006; Harris 2006).

The following are the key terms related to APEL:

- *Accreditation* stands for giving credit for experiential learning.
- *Recognition* means to give formal acknowledgement and approval.
- *Validation* means to confirm and collaborate, and to give official force. Makes learning not only visible but also official.
- *Assessment* means to evaluate, as used with respect to a student's achievement in a course. In APEL, assessment is the necessary first step by which experiential learning can be validated and recognized.

- *Certification* giving a formal certification for prior experiential learning that has been assessed and recognized by the awarding body (e.g. university). (Motuang 2007; Corradi 2006; Harris 2006)

Another point that needs clarification is that there is a clear divide between two terms APEL and APL. APL (Accreditation of Prior Learning) refers to the recognition of certificated learning that is learning formally assessed by another body. Recognition aims access to program or exemption from part of a program of study (Murphy 2006; Pouget & Orborne 2004; Fraser 1995). APEL (Accreditation/assessment of Prior Experiential Learning) refers to the process whereby the individual's learning gained in non-formal and informal contexts are accredited, assessed and recognized. (Adam 2006; Houston, Hoover & Beer 1997; Fraser 1995; Mckelvey & Peters 1993; Howard 1993; Challis 1993). APL and APEL are often used as synonyms or it is argued that APL functions as generic term and includes APEL, but this thesis draws a clear distinction between the two terms.

In different countries the assessment of prior experiential learning carries a different term for naming the process:

- Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) in USA
- Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) in Canada;
- *La Validation des Acquis de l'Experience* (VAE) in France;
- Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in South Africa, Australia and New Zealand;
- Assessment of Learning; Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) or Accreditation/Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) in UK;
- *Varasema õpi-ja töökogemusega arvestamine* (VÕTA) in Estonia
- Validation of non-formal and informal learning by Cedefop (Evans 2006; Harris 2000; Storan, 1999)

Whatever the name, its reference is essentially to the same thing and denotes learning which has already been acquired and which its possessor is seeking to use in a different context. (Evans 2006). In this thesis, the term APEL is being used in its widespread context, which stresses not only prior learning, but also experiential learning.

It is essential to note that APEL is a process that comprises learning that has been acquired formally, non-formally or informally. It is a process of valuing every aspect of learning by assessing, recognizing and certificating learning.

## **1.2 Experiential Learning and APEL**

The concept of learning from experience is central to APEL theory and practice (Murphy 2006). The importance of experience in learning has been pointed out by Dewey, Piaget, Vygotsky and many others who differently stressed the socially-situated nature of human learning, the importance of individual control of personal learning for human growth, and the importance of collectively-constructed learning for civic action and the maintenance of democracy (Murphy 2006). Experiential learning is a complex, vague and ambiguous phenomenon (Malinen 2000) that is referring to learning from experience, one of the most fundamental and natural means of learning available to everyone. Experience cannot be bypassed; it is the central consideration of all learning. Learning builds on and flows from experience: no matter what external prompts to learning there might be (Boud, Cohen & Walker 2005; Fenwick 2000).

The influence of Kolb (1984) on how learning from experience is conceptualized in APEL has been enormous (Murphy 2006; Harris 1999; Fraser 1995). In fact Kolb's theory has been one of the only theoretical underpinnings of APEL process. Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle suggests that there are four stages which follow from each other: *concrete experience* is followed by *reflection (reflective observation)* on that experience. The next step would be the application of known theories to it (*abstract conceptualization*), and hence to the construction of ways of modifying the next occurrence of the experience (*active experimentation*), leading in turn to the next *concrete experience* (Figure 1). Kolb (1984) argues that all four stages in the experiential learning cycle are essential for the full integration of concrete experience and action with knowledge and theories about the world. The critique to Kolb's theory

of experiential learning can be directed at the fact that learning occurs in social realities, accompanying contextuality and situativeness of learning.

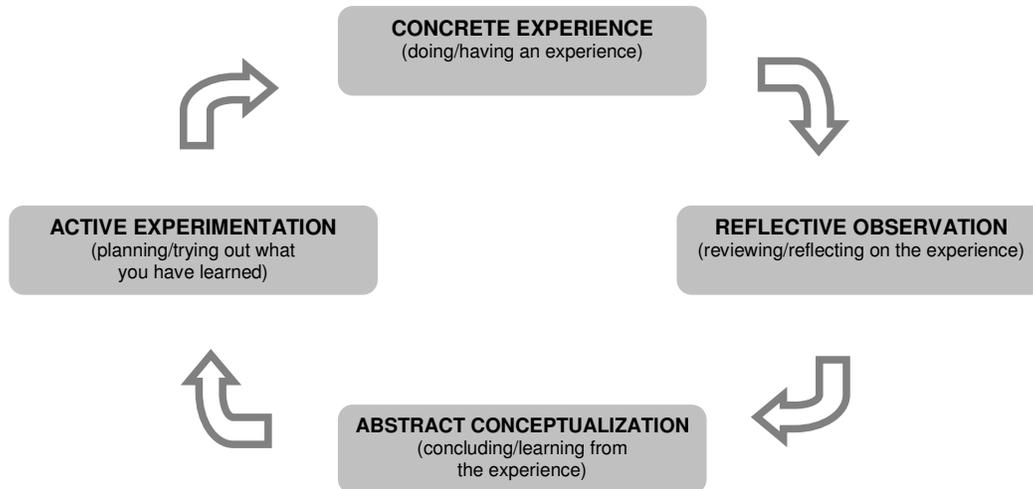


Figure 1. Kolb's experiential learning cycle

We learn in relationship to our present and prior experiences since the prior experience guides how we respond to a present experience (Moon 2004). As Dewey (1938/1997) articulated, learning is the recognition of the continuity of experience, with the process of reflection providing the necessary connection between our experiences. Thus experiential learning can be seen as a process in which an experience is reflected upon and then translated into concepts which in turn become guidelines for new experiences (Saddington 1992 in Moon 2004). Experiential learning can be defined as the insight gained through the conscious or unconscious internalization of our own or observed experiences, which builds upon our past experiences of knowledge (Beard & Wilson 2006). Experiential learning can be incidental, unintended and sometimes unconscious (Illeris 2004; 2007). Five propositions about experiential learning are presented as follows:

- Experience is the foundation of, and the stimulus for, all learning.
- Learners actively construct their own experience.

- Learning is a holistic process.
- Learning is socially and culturally constructed.
- Learning is influenced by the socioemotional context in which it occurs.

(Boud, Cohen and Walker 2005).

A postmodern interpretation suggests that individuals have an innate need to make meaning of their lives in an increasingly fragmented and anxious world, and that APEL processes can contribute to a sense of coherence between the individual's experience of the world and their structured understanding of these experiences (Murphy 2006). Therefore a holistic model for learning is needed that represents the universe as a unitary, interactive, developing organism (Knowles, Holton, Swanson 2005). Holistic theory defines knowledge as a social construct with three distinctive and interrelated facets—explicit, implicit, and emancipatory knowledge (Yang 2004; 2003). Knowledge is viewed as human beings' understanding about reality through mental correspondence, personal experience, and emotional affection toward outside objects and situations. The explicit facet consists of the cognitive component of knowledge that represents one's understanding of reality (Yang 2004; 2003). The implicit facet is the behavioral component of knowledge that denotes the learning that is not openly expressed or stated, and the emancipatory facet is the affective component of knowledge and is reflected in affective reactions to the outside world (Yang 2004; 2003).

Learning from experience is a broad concept that emphasises experience as the foundation of learning. It is a process that involves every aspect of human life and needs a holistic view on learning as the whole person is engaged in the activity of learning and meaning making. Experiential learning can not be separated from the social notion of learning and the socioemotional context of learning. Learning from experience relates solely to the meaning making process of the individual from direct experience.

### **1.3 APEL in Higher Education Policy**

The introduction of APEL in higher education is a challenge for complex changes in commodification of education in a neo-liberal marketplace, around globalization of information, around increasing participation, and around the future of the university as a public good (Murphy 2006; Fraser 1995). Barnett (2003; 2000) calls it an age of ‘super-complexity’ that is both post-industrial and postmodern.

APEL sits at the privatization, globalization, marketisation and commodification of higher education where on one hand it defends the traditional concept of university and on the other it promotes a neo-liberal global market system with higher education regarded as a tradable commodity (Murphy 2006, 2003). Marketisation in higher education encompasses several developments such as the spread of market discourse, massification, and the increased numbers of private providers that signals the arrival of increased mobility and increased competition (DeBoer 2002 in Murphy 2006). Murphy (2006) argues that the move to common national and transnational frameworks of qualification is evidence of ‘the standardization of trading within the educational marketplace’ within an enterprise culture where education products can be purchased, moved, compared and traded with ease.

The massification of higher education participation has led to commodification of knowledge and to a culture of performativity, with an emphasis on operational competence as opposed to academic competence (Murphy 2006; Barnett 2000). Many experts predict a continuous growth towards “universal higher education” or even a “post-massification” era of higher education (Teichler 2003). These changes have led to fundamental shift in power relations between who defines what counts as useful knowledge, and whose discourses achieve dominance (Murphy 2006). System theory suggests that expanding systems are likely to diversify (Teichler 2003). Higher education is likely to diversify in the process of expansion of higher education in order to protect the traditional functions of “elite higher education” amidst “mass higher education” (Teichler 2003).

The issue of diversification of higher education will continue to be among the major issues in future debates about the development of higher education systems. Therefore in the continuous process of expansion, higher education aims to respond to the growing diversity of students in terms of motives, talents and job perspectives (Teichler 2003). Adulthood of universities threatens the academic identity of staff where they are forced to acknowledge adult learners as producers of knowledge, since this acknowledgement is at the heart of APEL (Murphy 2006). The struggle for admission and acceptance of the non-traditional adult is a microcosm of the broader issue of access to and membership of the dominant society and its culture (Bourgeois 1999 in Murphy 2006). The growing importance of lifelong learning calls for reconsideration of the role of higher education. Institutions of higher education tend to interpret these challenges differently, and this is likely to persist (Teichler 2003).

A possible way of representing the complexity of how APEL impacts higher education policy is by plotting it in schema. Murphy (2006) uses a model of quadrants to position academic cultures and policy orientation of higher education (Figure 2).

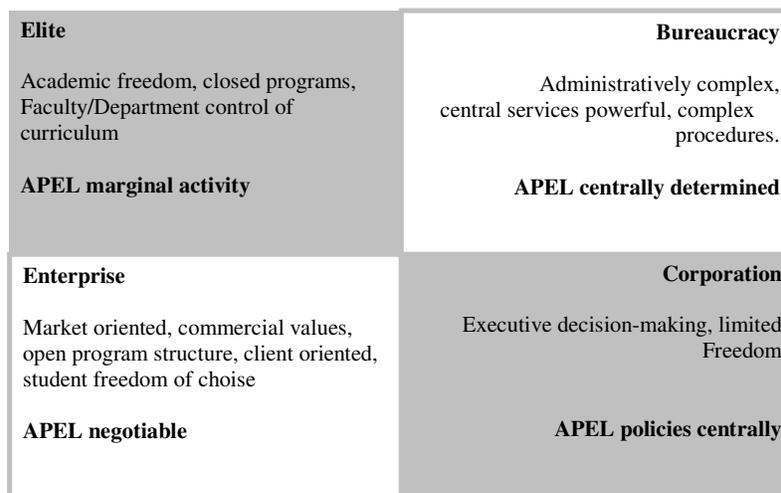


Figure 2. Academic cultures and policy orientation of higher education (Murphy 2006).

In the *Elite* culture, APEL is a marginal activity since there is traditional academic control over programs. The ideas of knowledge production are bound within traditional practices and therefore learning is recognized when it has been acquired in a formal setting and preferably in higher education context.

*Bureaucratic* culture of APEL has procedures tightly under the control of a centralized quality assurance arrangement. APEL becomes a technical exercise of matching appropriate learning with the learning outcomes of existing college programs.

*Enterprise* culture knowledge and APEL are negotiable with partners outside the academy as the university is encouraged to be innovative and respond to market demand.

In the *Corporate* culture, APEL is decided by an executive, which could be at the faculty level. The innovation is managed by centers which may have a market orientation, but which impact minimally on the main corpus of the university (Murphy 2006).

Implementation of APEL depends greatly on the dominant academic culture and policy orientations of higher education. The key challenges for higher education institutions for implementing APEL are:

- The shift from an input to an outcome model of learning
- Curriculum structure and examinations
- What makes a university diploma if the learning has taken place elsewhere?
- Tools and procedures – lack of confidence and currency
- New skills and competences for assessors and counsellors
- Quality and legitimacy – social value as well as individual-added value
- Cost and payment – financing of higher education acts as an incentive in some countries and a disincentive in others.

(Feutrie 2005)

The concept of APEL is problematic in the higher education context because the predominant perception of an institution of higher education is as a place where people come to learn or to be taught, rather than one where people bring their existing knowledge for recognition or sharing (Peters 2005). The effect this ethos has had on approaches to APEL is that emphasis is placed on the importance of learning being presented in a form which meets academic criteria, even though it has not taken place in an academic setting (Peters 2005). Thus the power of recognizing knowledge and its value rests uniquely with the university and therefore in order for knowledge or learning to be recognized by the university it must be presented according to norms and regulations laid down by the institution.

Another view on APEL is that it is one of the most student-centered activities in which universities can engage because it is totally individual (Challis 1993). From the moment a university agrees to recognize the fact that an equivalence can be made between knowledge acquired on the job or in life in general and formal studies, that university has evolved into something different. (Feutrie 2000). A university must understand the context in which knowledge is produced, so the emphasis is on the candidate's ability to formalize this knowledge in an explicit way. Therefore in APEL, it is the candidate who chooses the experience and evidence s/he is presenting and the way s/he will argue the case: 'in some way the candidate takes ownership of the right to set in part the rules of the game, thus entering into a relationship of recognition and mutual trust, is almost contractual' (Aubert 1999 in Pouget 2006).

Within a changing and diverse higher education system APEL serves as a tool for promoting greater flexibility in relation to access and entry, assessment and accreditation. APEL has the potential to open the door of universities to those previously denied access as a result of experiencing inequalities in initial education, and/or socio-economic structural constraints. One of the future scenarios of universities will be to provide a range of multi-level programmes to meet the needs of an adult learning population within a learning society. Higher education is no longer the domain of the young.

## 1.4 APEL Models

Models of APEL are introduced to give insight to different practices of APEL as there are great divides within those. Harris (1999) developed models of APEL that comprises *Procrustean, learning and development, radical* and *Trojan-horse APEL*. Each of the different practices is analyzed as follows and a concluding table of APEL models (Table 1) is presented at the end of the paragraph.

### *Procrustean<sup>1</sup> APEL*

These forms of APEL are most likely to be found in contexts where knowledge is weakly classified and framed, such as further education and vocational training, and are usually underpinned by a market-led philosophy in which education is consumer-oriented and utilitarian and viewed mainly in terms of its usefulness to the labor market (Harris 1999). APEL in this model is relatively unproblematic because there is a long tradition of valuing learning from experience and utilizing that learning as a tool for the further development of knowledge and skills. However Procrustean APEL practices recognize only those aspects of individuals' prior learning which 'fit' or match prescribed outcomes or standards.

The emphasis in Procrustean APEL model is on generating evidence for assessment, rather than on learning anything new. Individuals represent themselves as 'evidence' in relation to prescribed performance-oriented standards. In some senses, the people who benefit most are those whose competence is closest to that which is formalized in standards (Harris 1999). This kind of practice is also referred to as the 'credit exchange' model because learners 'exchange a successful work record for course credits' (Butterworth 1992).

Breier (2005) calls the Procrustean model the *technical/market perspective* of APEL that accompanies a human capital view of education which prioritizes knowledge, skills and values that will be of benefit to the economy, and sees learners as

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<sup>1</sup> Procrustean APEL was taken from Jones and Martin (1997 in Harris 1999). Procrustes - A mythical Greek giant who would capture travellers and tie them to an iron bed. If they were longer than the bed, he would hack off their limbs until they fit it. If they were too short, he would stretch them to the right size (The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy 2002).

‘consumers’ or ‘clients’. APEL within this tradition includes the accreditation of learning from informal experience, provided it can be matched against pre-defined learning outcomes.

The critique of this approach relates to the lack of engagement with the nature of knowledge. APEL undertaken in this manner challenges the “site of knowledge production,” but not “what counts as knowledge and who produces it” (Heyns 2004). It is a purely technical application, dislocated from a particular individual and the broader context where knowledge is decontextualized and discrete parts of qualification are assessed.

#### *Learning and Development APEL*

These forms of APEL are common in higher education contexts around the world, particularly those parts of higher education where knowledge is less strongly classified and framed (Harris 1999). In traditional universities, hierarchical disciplinary knowledge is valued and there is little tradition of valuing learning from experience. There are concerns regarding the equivalence between experiential and formal learning and therefore it has been difficult to introduce APEL (Murphy 2006; Harris 1999). *Learning and Development APEL* is essentially a translation device, a one-way bridge-building process between different cultures of knowledge. As the name suggests, there is an emphasis on gauging whether individuals already possess, or have the capacity to develop, cognitive capacities equivalent to often implicit academic standards. The portfolio development process is essentially one of self-representation.

The emphasis is on what the learner has learnt through the experience. Therefore, the articulation of equivalence between experiential and formal learning is highly contested unless the experiential learning fits into the hierarchical disciplinary knowledge. In addition, yet again, APEL assessment is on discrete parts of the curriculum and the knowledge underpinning the curriculum is not challenged (Heyns 2004). Learners are taught to recontextualize their prior learning and experience in terms of academic norms.

### *Radical APEL*

Experience, learning and knowledge become closely inter-related in radical traditions. Experience is seen as a social product and as the foundation for the development of authentic and oppositional forms of knowledge (Harris 1999). Learning in radical APEL is seen as a collective process, which is socially constructed (Motuang 2007). In the radical tradition, knowledge cannot be neutral, it must either work to change the world or to reinforce the status quo (Boud 1989 in Harris 1999). Harris (1999) warns that radical practices have the tendency to exclude diversity, obscure difference and silence the voices of those falling outside the dominant grouping.

Breier (2005) names it as the *critical/radical perspective* that is associated with social movements and critical, emancipatory discourses which view education as a means to transform the individual and society. Learning from life experience is seen to result in forms of knowledge that are distinctly different from those of the academy. APEL is seen as a strategy for social redress, a means whereby subjugated or marginalized groups or forms of knowledge can gain access to the academy and challenge the authority of hegemonic discourses.

### *Trojan-horse APEL*

The indications of *Trojan-horse APEL* can be found in some higher education contexts where there are flexible curricula and weakening knowledge boundaries (Harris 1999). Experiential learning would be recognized but attempts would be made to value learning itself rather than in terms of its degree of fit with existing standards or curricula. *Trojan-horse APEL* means that untraditional groups enter the (higher education) system as a result of APEL (Andersson, Fejes, Ahn 2004). These untraditional groups gain access to the system not just because their competence meets the demands of the system, but also because the system recognizes the individuals' experience and competence on their own merits.

*The Liberal/humanist perspective* named by Breier (2005) emphasizes that the prior experience of learners, and particularly adult learners, should be valued and used as a

resource for further learning; and that learning should be active, meaningful and relevant to real-life agendas.

Table 1. APEL models (after Harris 1999; Breier 2005)

	Where found?	What prior learning is recognized?	How is prior learning recognized?	Social purposes
<b>Procrustean</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Further Education</li> <li>Vocational training</li> <li>Qualification frameworks</li> <li>Economic, human capital discourse</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>That which matches pre-determined standards</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Assessment foregrounded</li> <li>New learning reargrounded</li> <li>Behaviourist methodologies</li> <li>Specific credit</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Human resources as economic resources</li> <li>Site of knowledge production challenged</li> <li>Convergence/standardising of knowledge</li> <li>Advantages the advantaged</li> <li>Containment and appeasement</li> <li>Reinscription of dominant discourse</li> </ul>
<b>Learning and development</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Higher Education</li> <li>Social Sciences</li> <li>Humanist and progressive discourses</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>That which matches or approximates to often implicit academic standards</li> <li>Cognitive capacity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Through learning and assessment</li> <li>Experiential learning methods</li> <li>Portfolios</li> <li>Psychological approaches</li> <li>General and specific credit</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Humanistic goals of self-actualisation</li> <li>Site of knowledge production challenged but knowledge converged etc</li> <li>Reclassification of individuals</li> <li>Advantages the advantaged</li> <li>Reinscription of dominant discourses</li> </ul>
<b>Radical</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In contexts where the concern is radical social change</li> <li>Emancipatory discourse</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Subjugated knowledges (learning from struggle)</li> <li>as alternatives to dominant forms of knowledge</li> <li>Social and collective ways of knowing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Through participation in social movements</li> <li>Conscientization</li> <li>Ideology critique</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Radical transformation and redress on a collective basis</li> <li>Recognises divergence but not necessarily diversity</li> <li>Challenge to dominant discourses</li> </ul>
<b>Trojan horse</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Higher Education</li> <li>Massifying systems</li> <li>History of curriculum flexibility</li> <li>Where there is pressure for educational reform and (to varying degrees) social change</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Prior experiential learning in and of itself</li> <li>Prior learning as socially constructed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Through learning and assessment</li> <li>Prior learning examined critically as an individual and a social phenomenon</li> <li>Portfolios and 'critical framing'</li> <li>Sociological approach</li> <li>General and specific credit</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>More socially inclusive</li> <li>Critical engagement with curricula and pedagogic change</li> <li>Diversity and divergence of knowledges recognised and power relations</li> <li>Critique of dominant discourses</li> </ul>

Diverse models of APEL have different implications for assessing prior experiential learning, but it is essential to initially examine the various views to learning, knowledge and the value of learning. *Procrustean APEL* falls into a market-oriented

philosophy where the emphasis is not on learning but instead the demonstration of evidence that is matched against pre-defined learning outcomes. Strong academic norms and traditional hierarchial knowledge generates *Learning and Development APEL* where the learner has to adjust and learn to recontextualise the learning undertaken. The social essence of learning is noted in *Radical APEL* which leads to the understanding that learning is not neutral but socially constructed. As a result of that distinction, experiential learning also differentiates from academical ways of knowing. *Trojan-horse APEL* values learning on its own right and sees it has a resorce for further development.

Assessment of prior experiential learning is a concept for valuing learning from diverse settings with the purpose of giving formal recognition to learning. Thus universities have to learn to evaluate knowledge they have not themselves imparted. The problematic feature is that the university sees itself as an elite, dominant culture where learning is bound to traditional practices and tied to curricula. Experiential learning is far from traditional; it is learning that occurs over the lifespan, within the learners' active participation. APEL is an actor for change in higher education institutions as the dominant position of the university as the knowledge creator is about to evolve.

## 2. ASSESSMENT OF PRIOR EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

*APEL process always involves assessment (Andresson 2006).*

Assessment of prior experiential learning is a different task than assessing the work of students who have followed a formal course where a syllabus makes clear the areas to be evaluated (Evans 2006b, Klenowski 2004; O’Grady 1991). Learning in a university is different, because the act of learning is usually separated from social practices in which “natural” learning is embedded (Bowden & Marton 1998). Experiential learning on the other hand follows no syllabus, is occurring in social realities, and is highly contextualized. The learner is directly in touch with the realities being studied and learning involves not merely observing the phenomenon, but also doing something with it. This chapter looks into various aspects of assessment and focuses on the purpose of assessment in APEL. Emphasis is on the key principles of adult learning assessment, since APEL involves adults as key actors.

There have been recent changes to assessment in relation to the social-political context:

- A shift from inputs to outputs in consideration of education
- Improving access through recognition or prior learning. Assessment has become more powerful by the way it reaches into the sphere of experiential learning. It exerts new and subtler forms of control through the commodification of experience that occurs in the assessment of prior learning (Boud 2000).

It is a conceptual shift towards valuing learning and providing access for adult learners to education. The instructor-based education changes into the learner-based education in this new paradigm. It shifts from being an institution that provides instruction to learners to an institution that produces learning in learners. APEL assessment becomes a possibility as there is change in education from inputs to outputs. Traditionally higher education curriculum development has been driven by institutional inputs to the curriculum. Outputs-based curriculum focuses on learning,

not that much on how it has been acquired, and therefore assessment of prior experiential learning becomes a possibility.

The construction of assessment is a process of defining valid knowledge, but the assessment process itself defines knowledge (Boud 2000). The selection of content for an assessment requires a definition of what knowledge or competence is most important within a subject/discipline. The content of assessment is a clear message about what knowledge counts and what knowledge is unimportant or beyond the content of the specific subject area. APEL has a function as a meeting ground between the academic and nonacademic cultures of knowledge. APEL institutionalized the recognition that knowledge gained outside the walls of the academy could be both *credible* and *creditable*, and that knowledge was created through human activity in many places and forms (Michelson 2002).

David Boud (2000) discusses a complementary, not alternative, purpose of assessment – sustainable assessment. Boud argues that assessment practices should not only be an assessment of competence for the moment, but also a presentation for lifelong assessment of learning in a learning society. The consequence of this would be a greater focus on the formative aspect and the potential of the individual. Sustainable assessment can be defined as assessment that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of students to meet their own future learning needs (Boud 2000). Assessment involves identifying appropriate standards, criteria, and making judgement about quality. Sustainable assessment encompasses the knowledge, skills and predispositions required to underpin lifelong learning activities (Boud 2000).

The explicit purpose of assessment in APEL is summative (certification); the assessment is meant to look back and sum up the learning that has already taken place. But if you have a developmental approach (Butterworth 1992), there is a more or less explicit ambition to transform or change. The assessment becomes formative (aiding learning), which means that the purpose is to inform and change the continuing learning process (Andersson 2006; Black 2003; Boud 2000).

Summative assessment acts as a mechanism of control exercised by those who are guardians of particular kind of knowledge – teachers, educational institutions etc.

(Black 2003; Askov, Van Horn, Carman 2002). Summative assessment places responsibility for judgment in the hands of others and undermines learners' ability to be effective by simultaneously disguising the criteria and standards of performance, while convincing them that their interests are being served by assessment schemes (Black 2003; Boud 2000).

Formative assessment requires a criterion – or standards-based framework. Without a standards-based framework, learners cannot know whether their achievements are a result of meeting an acceptable standard or simply doing better than other students in the same cohort (Boud 2000). A belief that all learners can succeed is essential. This involves respect for all learners, not putting them down or implying that they might be anything but successful in the process of assessment (Rushton 2005). Assessment practices must contribute towards the building of learners' confidence in their ability to learn, not undermine it. The focus of assessment should be on learning, rather than just performance (Torrance 2007). Formative assessment by others can only have an impact on learning when it influences a learner's own self-assessment. Thus development of self-assessment is vital (Boud 2000).

Both formative and summative assessment influence learning. Summative assessment provides an authoritative statement of 'what counts' and directs learners attention to those matters. On the other hand, formative assessment guides us in how to learn what we wish to learn, and it tells us how well we are progressing.

Another concept related to the widely-used formative and summative assessment is convergent and divergent assessment. A convergent assessment means assessing *if* you know/can do certain things. There are usually some criteria for what is acceptable knowledge/competence, and these control the assessment (Andersson 2006; Torrance & Pryor 2001). In the context of APEL convergent assessment has been discussed in terms of "Procrustean APEL". In divergent assessment, the ambition is to assess *what* you know, in more 'unprejudiced' way. It is the matter of 'exploring' the knowledge of the individual (Andersson 2006; Torrance & Pryor 2001). The concepts of convergent and divergent assessment should not be interpreted as a dualism, but rather as the ends of a continuum (Andersson 2006). Divergent assessment is probably formative. It focuses on the potential of the individual, and this divergent and

formative assessment could form the basis of planning future learning and studying. Convergent assessment is more likely to be summative assessing competence in relation to certain standards.

The concepts of dynamic and non-dynamic assessment conclude the ideas of formative, summative and divergent, convergent assessment (Fenwick & Parson 2000). Traditional approaches to learning assessment use predetermined standards to measure learning outcomes. Dynamic assessment uses holistic measures, grows with the learner's growth, assesses the meanings the learner creates rather than measuring against some abstract ideal, and places high value on the prior knowledge (Fenwick & Parson 2000). Dynamic assessment is grounded in four main ideas:

- Learning constantly unfolds during the assessment process. Dynamic assessment is situated within the whole process of learning, acknowledging that learning is multi-layered.
- Focus is not only on what the learner knows, but also on how the learner is developing knowledge. Assessment of learners' meanings and practices, and the process through which they create these meanings, is followed by assistance and further evaluation. Therefore learners are active participants in the process of assessment.
- Learners are individuals, and context affects learning. Dynamic assessment examines external conditions and internal impulses that affect the learning process.
- Dynamics of the community is where learning unfolds. Learning is interconnected with the shared meanings and relationship dynamics of a particular knowledge community.

(Fenwick & Parson 2000)

The generic concept of dynamic and non-dynamic assessment is compared in Table 2. There is a clearly renewed focus on the role of formative assessment. This is needed in order to focus learners' attention on these processes, rather than the ones to which they are subjected (York 2003; Boud 2000).

Table 2. Comparison of dynamic and non-dynamic assessment (after Fenwick & Parson 2000).

	Dynamic assessment	Non-dynamic assessment
<b>Orientation</b>	<b>Process</b>	<b>Product</b>
<b>View of the learning process</b>	Dynamic, unpredictable	Predetermined, linear
<b>Assumptions about the learner</b>	Active, creates new knowledge	Passive, acquires existing knowledge
<b>Focus</b>	Whole learner situated in particular context	Learner's knowledge, competencies are isolated
<b>Origin of standards</b>	Evolves with the knowledge created in the process	Externally determined and applied to learner
<b>Role of assessment</b>	Ongoing, part of the learning process	End-point of learning
<b>Interpretation</b>	What people learn, what they say they learn, and how they learn it	What learners can produce
<b>Purpose</b>	Recording, interpreting, and reinterpreting process	Measure and judge according to existing norms

Dynamic assessment is focusing on the process, not particularly on the product of assessment that could be the credit or award. For APEL assessment certification, the explicit purpose of it as assessment is looking back and summing-up prior learning, which is called as summative function of assessment. On the other hand, learning in APEL discussions is seen as experience bound, contextual, unpredictable, and often involving cognitive, affective and conative domains of learning which fall into the dynamic assessment practices. Assessment in the dynamic frame is seen as an ongoing learning process which means that during the act of assessment learning can and will happen. As for the non-dynamic assessment, it is expected that learning has occurred in the past or that assessment is finalizing the learning activities. APEL practices tend to summarize the learning that has taken place, which could lead to producing evidence instead of conceptualizing why and how something has been learned. Thus dynamic and non-dynamic assessment hold different purposes. One has its focus on interpretation of learning and the other on measuring based on existing standards.

## **2.1 Principles of Adult Learning Assessment**

The complex lives of adults and their varied patterns of participation in learning challenge traditional assessment practices. The making of meaning is often interconnected with a sense of themselves as adults, as learners, and as social citizens (Kasworm & Marienau 2002). In spite of their growing prominence in universities, adult learners are typically ignored by the strategies that inform most collegiate institutional assessment programs (Banta 1993 in Kasworm & Marienau 2002). Universities must learn to evaluate knowledge they had not themselves imparted, and to devise new systems for assessing and accrediting students' expertise (Michelson 2002). Current institutional assessment programs tend to assume linear, continuous participation oriented to a residential academic learning community (Kasworm & Marienau 2002). The nature of adult learning and the complexity of adult students' lives challenge the historic assessment frameworks of higher education.

Key differences exist between assessment for abstract knowledge and objective, noncontextual problem solving, and the real world of solving messy problems and creating knowledge in the complex contexts of adult lives. Assessment of adult learners moves beyond knowledge of abstract content to the world of situated cognition. Here the importance of context in establishing meaningful connections among knowledge, skills, and experience becomes one of the cornerstones for the creation and implementation of assessment approaches. (Kasworm & Marienau 2002). Five key premises of adult learning are interrelated with principles of adult-oriented assessment practice (Table 3).

Table 3. Premises of Adult Learning and Interrelated Principles for Adult-Oriented Assessment Practice

Key Premises of Adult Learning	Key Principles of Adult-Oriented Assessment Practice
Learning is derived from multiple sources	Recognizes multiple sources of knowing, that is learning that occurs from interaction with a wide variety of formal, non-formal, and informal knowledge sources.
Learning engages the whole person and contributes to that person's development	Recognizes and reinforces the cognitive, conative, and affective domains of learning.
Learning occurs in context; its significance relates in part to its impact on those contexts	Embraces adult learners' involvement in and impact on the broader world of work, family, and community.
Learning from experience is a unique meaning-making event that creates diversity among adult learners	Accommodates adult learners' increasing differentiation from one another given varied life experiences and education.
Learning and the capacity for self-direction are promoted by feedback	Focuses on adults' active involvement in learning and assessment processes, including active engagement in self-assessment.

The most distinctive characteristic of adult learners is that they bring rich and varied experiences to the learning setting. They learn by integrating formal academic knowledge with their personal experience in their life context. There are adult learners who selectively learn, apply, synthesize, and critically reflect on new and old sources of knowledge from the world of their everyday life and work, and the world of formal knowledge. Adult assessment must not focus exclusively on academic knowledge structures, rather, it should focus as well on the social learning of the adult world and the relationship between multiple sources of knowledge that create meaningful learning.

Learning involves the whole person, the cognitive, affective and conative domains of learning. Traditional learning assumptions including assessment practices have focused only on cognitive dimensions of learning. All learning is an emotional process (Illeris 2004). The affective aspect of learning is a crucial aspect to be

considered in assessment practices because it involves feelings, emotions and attitudes that are part of learning. The conative domain of learning encompasses motivation and volition.

Adults learn in various contexts and their learning is highly contextualized. Assessment practices raise the question of how to consider contextuality of learning. One possibility is to involve other parties in the assessment such as employers, family and social partners to reveal the learning that is context bound. Assessment must also satisfy multiple stakeholders, each with different purposes for assessment and interests in the outcomes of the program (Kasworm & Marienau 2002). Rømer (2002) argues that we cannot speak about assessment of individual knowledge, because knowledge cannot be located inside the head of the individual, but is distributed across the whole community of practice. Traditional forms of assessment, where the assessment is taking place in laboratory-like situations disconnected from the community of practice, will never be able to demonstrate knowledge, according to how knowledge is understood by situated learning theory. (Rømer 2002).

The uniqueness of experience, the unpredictability of its interpretations, and the individuality of meaning-making lead to a staggering diversity among adult learners and a challenge to practitioners of assessment. Thus the university must assess each case individually.

Feedback is seen as a powerful tool for supporting learning, but that does not mean that feedback has to be coming from an external body. The importance of self-assessment is a key feature for the assessment practices as well. Self-assessment, self-analysis and reflection unfold the content of learning for the learner.

It has become apparent that there is no single APEL assessment theory and there is large scale “borrowing” of assessment principles (Evans 1999). The focus on assessment of prior experiential learning needs to be on the adult learner. The learner, who is unique, has learned in various learning sites over the lifespan. The learner has experienced both contextual and situative learning, which have cognitive, emotional and conative domains. Thus higher education institutions need to find ways to assess learning that are not linear or attached to curricula. APEL assessment in its purpose is

summative assessment, as it needs to lead to a certification. Although formative, dynamic assessment can be conceptualized for the use of APEL, the focus of assessment must be not only on performance, but also on learning.

### **3. EMPIRICAL DATA AND ANALYSIS**

#### **3.1 Research Method**

A qualitative, phenomenological approach was used in order to better comprehend the subjects' experience and understanding. Phenomenology, which seeks the meaning of participants experience from the study of their lived experience, is essentially an interpretive process. This view implies that both researcher and participant acknowledge interpretive distortion and assumes the distortion itself constitutes the source of interpretation (van Manen 2002). In phenomenological human science, the interview serves the very specific purpose of exploring and gathering experiential narrative material that may serve as a resource for developing a richer and deeper understanding of a human phenomenon (van Manen 2002).

Data was collected via semi-structured interviews. Compared to a structured interview or standardized interview, a semi-structured interview has the strength of being open to pursuing topics that participants bring up. Compared to an unstructured or informal conversational interview, it has the strength of making data collection somewhat systematic for each participant (Byrne 2001). Semi-structured interview is flexible, allowing new questions to be brought up during the interview as a result of what the interviewee says.

Interview questions were formed based on theoretical underpinnings (Andersson 2006; Evans 2006; Murphy 2006; Kasworm & Marienau 2002; Fenwick & Parson 2000; Harris 1999; Challis 1993). Experiential learning is seen as the central pillar for APEL process as it frames the understandings of APEL process. Assessment of prior experiential learning is a complex and difficult phenomena that can not be grasped with one insight. Therefore several questions focused on aspects of assessment such as the problems and challenges, as well as important or significant issues related to assessment. A distinction was made between the learner and the institution as the needs and purposes of APEL process differ. Methods of assessment were also targeted as a means for arriving at a better understanding of the process of assessment as a whole.

Following questions were used:

1. What is it that you understand by experiential learning?
2. How should we assess experiential learning in higher education?
3. What are the possible problems/challenges in assessing experiential learning in higher education?
  - a. Learner
  - b. Institution
4. What is important/essential in assessing experiential learning in higher education?
  - a. Learner
  - b. Institution
5. What would the university and learner get out of assessment of experiential learning?
6. What kind of methods should be used for assessing experiential learning?

### 3.2 Sample

Purposive sampling was used. A prerequisite for experts was prior experience **in** the subject area that included research experience on APEL (Andreas, Anita, Anne), experience in various national or international projects on APEL (Aili, Marge, Josephine, Anne; Vaiva) or experience as APEL practitioner (An, Aili). The sample is illustrated by figure (Figure 3) where detailed information **about** their prior experience linked to APEL can be seen.

The expert interviewees are from six European Union member states: Estonia (2); Ireland (2); Belgium (1); Sweden (1); United Kingdom (1) and Lithuania (1). Out of eight experts, seven are women and one is a man. Four interviewed experts hold a doctoral degrees, one has a master's degree and three have bachelor's degrees. All interviewed experts are working in universities in various academic (Andreas, Anita, Vaiva) or administrative (Aili, Marge, An, Josephine, Anne) positions.

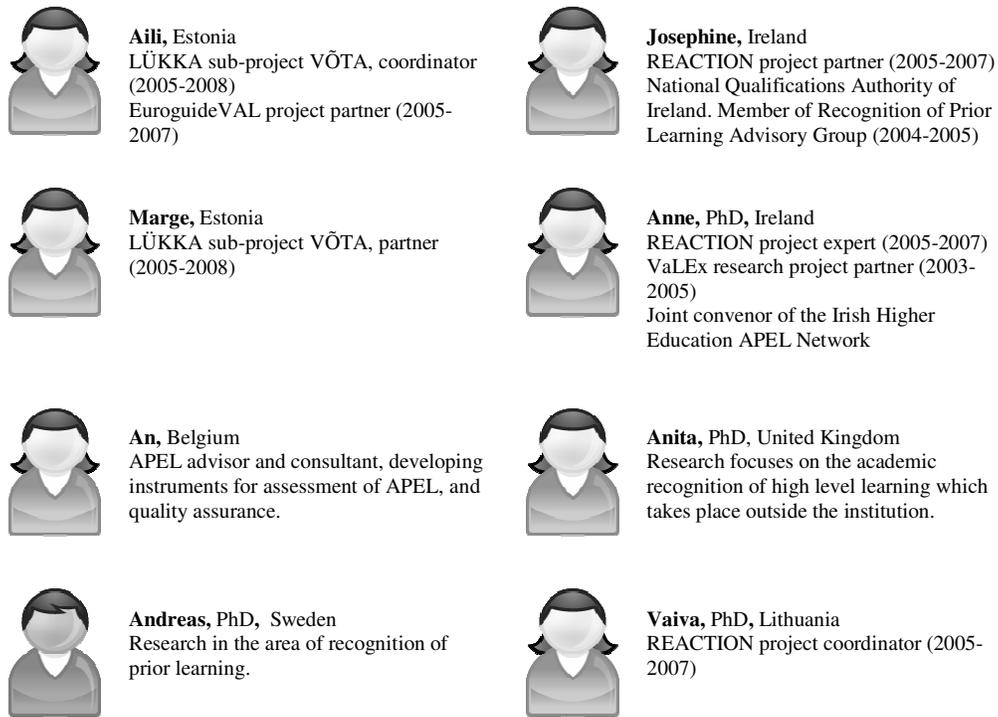


Figure 3. Interviewed experts

### 3.3 Data collection procedures

The interviews were held between January and March 2008. The experts were contacted by email where the interview and the form of interview (Skype call, phone, face to face, written) was proposed. Interview questions were also attached to the email. Six of the interviews were held in English and two in Estonian (Aili, Marge). The form of the interviews was either online phone interviews by Skype (An, Andreas, Anita, Anne) and recorded by Pamela Call Recorder or face-to-face (Josephine, Aili, Marge) recorded by voice recorder or written interview (Vaiva). The form of interview was chosen by the experts. The average length of the interviews was 26 minutes. All interviews were transcribed shortly after the interview.

### **3.4 Analysis of Research Results**

Inductive analysis was used, which is defined as working from the data of specific cases to a more general conclusion (Schwandt 2001). Inductive analyses involve transcribing material, coding data into themes, and drawing conclusions regarding the phenomena based on these themes. The purposes of using an inductive approach are to (1) condense extensive and varied raw text data into a brief, summary format; (2) establish clear links between the research objectives and the summary findings derived from the raw data and (3) develop a model or theory about the underlying structure of experiences or processes which are evident in the data (Thomas 2003). The primary purpose of the inductive approach is to allow research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant or significant themes inherent in raw data, without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies.

Data analysis is determined by both the research objectives (deductive) and multiple readings and interpretations of the raw data (inductive). Thus the findings are derived from both the research objectives outlined by the researcher(s) and findings arising directly from the analysis of the data (Thomas 2003). The primary mode of analysis is the development of categories from the data into a model or framework that captures key themes and processes judged to be important by the researcher (Thomas 2003). The research findings result from multiple interpretations made from the data by the researcher who codes the data. Inevitably, the findings are shaped by the assumptions and experiences of the researchers conducting the research and carrying out the data analyses.

Data was categorized into six categories that were formed based on the data:

- Experiential learning as a concept
- Assessment of prior experiential learning
- Problems related to assessment of prior experiential learning
  - Higher education institution
  - Learner
- Important issues related to assessment of prior experiential learning
  - Higher education institution
  - Learner

- Methods for assessing prior experiential learning
- Benefits from the assessment of prior experiential learning
  - For higher education institution
  - For the learner

### **Experiential learning as a concept**

Experiential learning is seen as a broad concept, as one of the most important ways of learning. Experience is emphasized as the basis for learning, but not every experience leads to learning. Experience needs to be given meaning and reflection in order to learn from it. Experiential learning occurs in everyday activities and a certain place or time need not be attached for learning to occur.

*...actually all learning is through experiences (Marge)*

*Experiential learning is learning gained through experience and it can be anything. (Josephine)*

*I have an understanding that people learn through their experiences much more than they learn at school. Even what is learned at school, if that has no connection to everyday life and experiences has no value. I think that the most important learning occurs through experiences. (Aili)*

*... every experience is not learning, it's just experience. Experiential learning is when the experience is given meaning to... (Marge)*

*I think ... experiential learning ... [is] when we reflect on what we have done, reflecting on what we did in our practice ... (Andreas)*

*It's one of the most important modes of learning, actually, I would even say, the only one. What I mean is: when we hear things, when we read books, we find out some information, but only in the process of experiencing what the information/facts/theories/ mean personally or in situations we attach authentic 'our' meaning to the things that we read or heard. (Vaiva)*

### **Assessment of prior experiential learning**

The basis of assessment of prior experiential learning is formed by a notion that experience is not the object for assessment. In other words experience can not be assessed, rather the learning that has occurred through the experience is the object for assessment.

*It should be results, products that are assessed. Firstly, we can then apply criterion, equal to all. (Vaiva)*

*I think it's really important that the student realizes that what we are assessing is the learning they gained from their experience so we aren't assessing their experience we are assessing the learning from that experience. (Anita)*

Assessment of prior experiential learning in higher education has to take place in the context of the relevant curriculum. Assessment has to be in relation to awards, which are either derived from framework of qualifications or are related to the curriculum.

*First of all if we want to award a diploma or part of the curriculum we must assess in the context of that curriculum because there is no other way we can do that. (Aili)*

*I suppose the first thing you have to do is to identify the relevance of the learning gained from experience to the course of study. (Josephine)*

*We can only give recognition of prior learning in relation to awards, which are on the framework of qualifications and generally those awards are attached to programs delivered by providers and awarded by awarding body. In terms of how to assess it is always assessed against existing or passed programs. (Anne)*

Assessment can be done against the whole curriculum, single modules of the curriculum or a single subject of the curriculum.

*We can assess experiential learning against the whole program or against individual modules within the program or individual subject within the program. (Anne)*

Common viewpoints of assessment of prior experiential learning did not appear in experts interviews. The experts' point of view on assessment was fragmented. However, substantial principles of assessment were present, e.g. learning from the experience is the object for assessment; assessment can be conducted in the context of curriculum; and assessment can be done against the whole curriculum or ~~its~~ single parts (eg modules, single subjects).

### **Problems related to assessment of prior experiential learning**

Problems and difficulties related to assessment are analyzed in two categories: higher education institution as the provider of assessment practices, and the learner as the applicant for the APEL procedures.

#### ***Higher education institution***

Assessment of prior experiential learning is seen as a new concept for higher education institutions and therefore it demands major changes in the prevailing understanding about learning and assessment. Instead of considering APEL as something that is complicated and demanding, institutions need to be open to assessing prior experiential learning.

*I would say that the problems would be mostly related to the idea that this kind of assessment is quite new (Andreas)*

*I think the challenges are probably that higher education is much more familiar with theoretical knowledge that is delivered and assessed in the institution and therefore there is often lack of confidence that higher level learning can take place outside the institution. (Anita)*

*From the university side I think certainly needed is a change in university teachers understanding and as well recognising the readiness for it... (Marge)*

*I think assessing experiential learning trolls up very interesting questions it may be a about the nature of knowledge...and the structures of knowledge. ... Well...and how do you asses that I mean ... it's complicated. Any kind of learning gained from experience in terms of assessment is very, very difficult to do. And I think it really*

*trolls up more questions about the nature of knowledge and maybe it is the idea of structure of knowledge that needs to be tackled in order to make some kind of theorize about how we assess. (Josephine)*

Major changes related to APEL in higher education institutions bring up another problem. Assessment of prior experiential learning does not fit to university structures, since universities have traditionally taught based on strict curricula and related assessment practices.

*I think that APEL processes do not fit easily into university structures sometimes because university structures are based on people being taught and assessed in the institution and again experience based learning doesn't fit comfortable in that module. (Anita)*

*The assessment regulations are generally written for taught programs not for experiential programs so it takes a conceptual shift to understand how these learning outcomes would look if they were acquired outside the academy. (Anne)*

*I think that is a problem for the academy as they are not accustomed to anything that hasn't some formula. (Josephine)*

Learning outcomes that are set for curriculum may not consider that learning has taken place elsewhere than the university, since the outcomes are set for taught courses.

*How they would assess the same learning outcomes to experiential learning. What would they accept as evidence of appropriate equivalent experiential learning for those learning outcomes? (Anne)*

*...we have a program of learning and we write learning outcomes what the student should know in the end. I think we also need to write outcomes if the student is being assessed through APEL and look how we write those. (Josephine)*

A risk of over assessment occurs in higher education institutions who are adopting APEL, as there is a fear that learners might not meet the curriculum demands as the traditional learners do.

*APEL applicants are over assessed because we want to be sure that they meet the standards so often they can be required to do more than someone on taught course at least initially when we get to know APEL processes. I think that's a difficulty. (Anita)*

The use of relevant methods that are adopted for assessment practices is problematic as there is a need to determine accurate criteria for assessment and transparency.

*For the institution the difficulties in assessing experiential learning are to do with appropriate methods to assess it and appropriate criteria that are transparent, fair and equitable. (Anne)*

A major challenge to assessment of prior experiential learning relates to assessment procedures and the value that this assessment carries.

*What is the relation between educational systems and work life, who is doing the assessment, how is the assessment being done, people in educational system ask if this kind of assessment is as valuable as the one done in regular way in curriculum. (Andreas)*

*...it can be challenging to design a mode of assessment in which they [higher education institution] have confidence. (Anita)*

### ***Learner***

The problems related to learners in APEL are underlined by the fact that learners are not aware of the opportunities for having their prior experiential learning assessed and recognised. APEL procedures need to be explicit and clear for the learners.

*For the learner first of all knowing that it exists. Secondly getting information about it. Thirdly knowing where to contact first (Anne)*

*I don't think they will apply in 100s or 1000s to do APEL until it is made very easy and until the procedures are explicit. ... the proof of it can be very challenging for the student and I think that's a problem a big problem. (Josephine)*

Learners may not understand the structure of curriculum or the learning outcomes as the basis for assessment. Access to the necessary curriculum documents may also prove difficult.

*It's very difficult for learners to get access to program documents, to understand what learning outcomes mean and to know how to provide evidence against learning outcomes if they have never seen this process before. (Anne)*

Learners who go through the assessment process and are awarded a diploma or an exemption of studies do not have sufficient information about the value that this diploma can have for employers.

*These sort of problems are related to the learner because if you get a degree based on prior learning will this kind of degree have the same value in the eyes of employers? (Andreas)*

Assessment of prior learning takes place in the higher education setting, so there is a risk that the learner will not meet the requirements for the award and will fail the assessment process.

*We are talking about experiences of learners, their personal experiences but as the assessment is in formal setting it means that there is a chance to fail. Therefore it is not a priori that if you have your learning from experience then for sure you will pass and get an award. (Marge)*

Problems related to the assessment of prior experiential learning were organized as a concept map (Figure 4). Problems related to higher education institution are generally related to the novelty of APEL at universities. They must make a shift from taught programs to learning that no longer is related to just formal setting. Current university structures are based on taught programs and related assessment practices, which applies learning outcomes that are set for curriculum that is being taught in university.

This raises the question of how to assess experiential learning in relation to current learning outcomes. Assessment of prior experiential learning can be seen as a problematic because it needs relevant methods, criteria and evidence. There is a risk for over assessing learners and the value for APEL is not clear for the university.

The learners are facing different problems than the university, and the only common point is the value for APEL. The learners need to know the value of an award they receive through APEL in the eyes of the employers. Learners require information about the APEL in general, knowledge that it exists, information about APEL procedures and process, and knowledge about the curriculum. On the other hand, looking at the problems that universities are facing, there is not a notion that information about APEL might be problematic for the institution or for the applicants, learners.

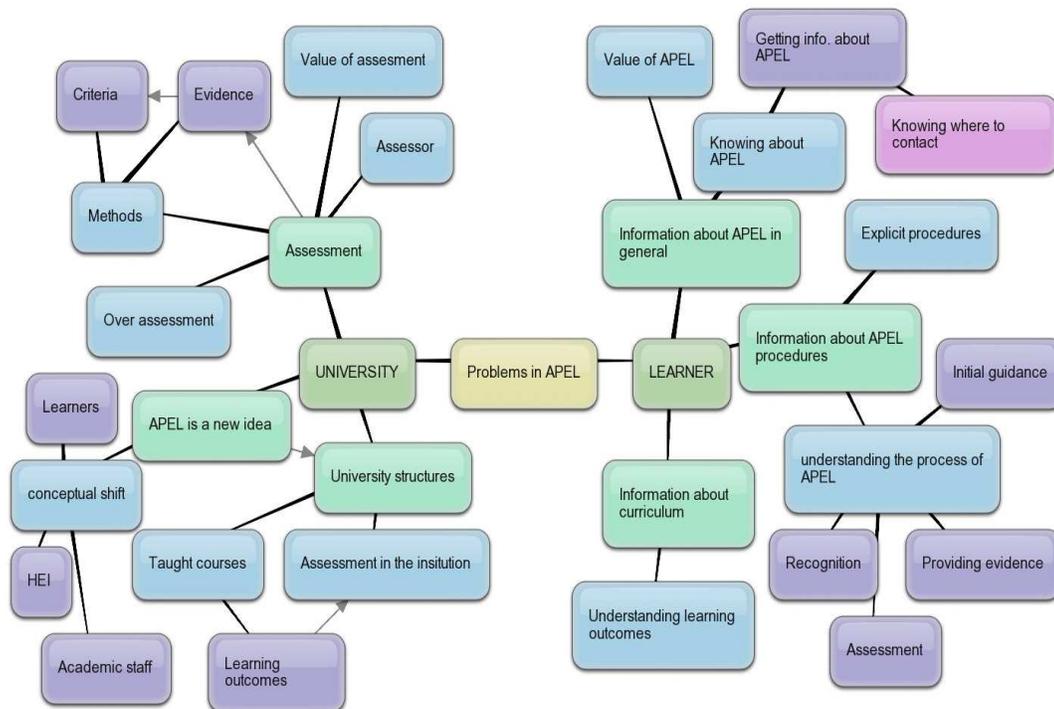


Figure 4. Problems related to assessment of prior experiential learning.

### **Important issues related to assessment of prior experiential learning**

Important, essential issues related to assessment are analyzed in two categories: higher education institution as the provider of assessment practices, and the learner as the applicant for the APEL procedures.

#### ***Higher education institution***

Universities need to have confidence in learners and trust that the learners have actually learned from the experience.

*I think that the institution needs to be able to have confidence that the learner who is claiming learning based on experience actually has that learning at the level one needs it (Anita)*

Assessment of prior experiential learning has to be on the same level as learning in higher education institution.

*I think level is really important because as with formal learning experience based learning can take place over a range of levels and in higher education we need to be confident that experience based learning is performing at higher education level. (Anita)*

*If university is giving out a diploma, then the university needs to make sure that learning has been at the same level as if the learning would have taken place in university. (Aili).*

Learning outcomes that are set for the program are essential because clear learning outcomes form the basis for assessment of prior experiential learning.

*Another thing to be very specific about are the learning outcomes that are being assessed, so everybody knows that these learning outcomes are similar to those taking place in the regular way for taking the degree, so openness and being clear about it is very important. (Andreas)*

## ***Learners***

Assessment of prior experiential learning needs to be clear for the learners as they need to understand what is expected from them and the purpose of assessment.

*In terms of the learner they need to be very clear on what is expected of them so I think we need to be able to explain to them what we want them to demonstrate and also why we want them to demonstrate it... In other words I don't think you can expect students to be able to identify and resident their learning without support and guidance from academic staff. (Anita)*

Learners need guidance in the process of APEL in order to understand what is expected and to recognize the learning that they have.

*You need guidance for learners, you need very explicit assessment methods and very explicit assessment criteria – known to the applicant and known to the academic staff. I think it needs to be very clear, very plain ... it needs to be fit for purpose (Anne).*

*They need a lot of guidance to see and to reflect on their learning, that is the most important for the learner. (An)*

*For the learner it's important that the learner has all this information in order to know if to participate in it or not. (Andreas)*

*I think to have a very open mind about it. And to understand that it is different...that the person has learned and they are not even fully aware of what they've learned. So they are probably going to undersell themselves. (Josephine)*

A concept map was drawn in order to analyze important and essential issues related to APEL (Figure 5). For a higher education institution it is important that assessment of prior experiential learning is in the context of curriculum. Therefore assessment needs to be at the level of higher education. Clear learning outcomes can give guidelines for the level of learning. Learning outcomes need to take into consideration experiential learning and its assessment. Assessment procedures need to be explicit and fit the purpose. It is important for the university to trust the learners and have confidence that the learners have the learning on the level that is demanded by university.

For learners it is important that they have support and guidance throughout the APEL process. Initial guidance is needed for awareness of APEL as an opportunity, followed by information and guidance on APEL process. Learners need clarity about what is expected, what is assessed, what kind of evidence is acceptable and what is the purpose of APEL.

There is a divide between what is seen important for universities and for learners. Important issues on APEL for higher education institutions are related to curriculum. Guidance and support that is most essential for learners is not mentioned as something that is crucial for universities for better assessment practices. The purpose of APEL must be clarified because both the university and the learner must understand the reasons why assessment of prior experiential learning is carried out.

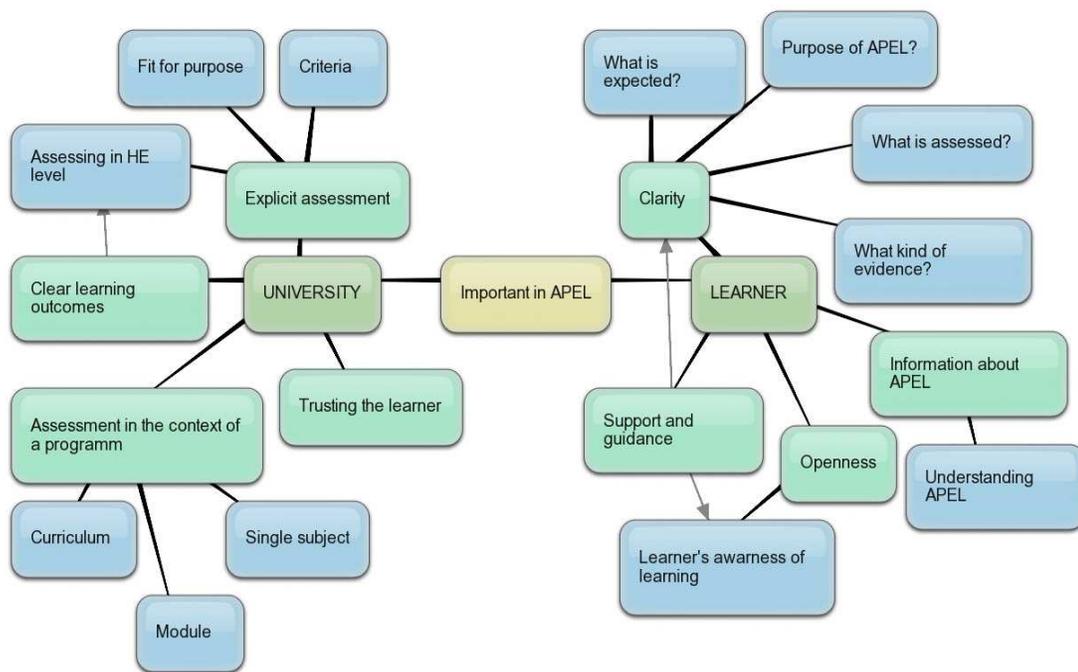


Figure 5. Important issues related to assessment of prior experiential learning.

## **Methods for assessing prior experiential learning**

Methods used for assessing prior experiential learning must fit the purpose and must depend on specifications of subject field and curriculum. The choice of appropriate method depends on the program team and experts.

*I think it should be fit for purpose depending on the receiving program. (Anne)*

*The program team should say that against their program documents what we accept as evidence for these learning outcomes and if we impose a single model with a portfolio with paper evidence we are not doing good service to learners or to the notion of APEL. (Anne)*

*I think there is not one and only way for it. Surely it very much depends on subject area, in what are the learning is taking place and in what subject are it is assessed. (Aili)*

*If you talking about APEL to gain credit against the demands of an award, so that I can join the program after the beginning of a course then I think the form of assessment for APEL needs to be decided by the program team because the recognition of APEL and the assessment of APEL is an academic process in the same sense that other assessment is. (Anita)*

There are a variety of methods that can be used for assessing prior experiential learning:

### **Portfolio**

*Portfolio is a very wide method that is rich in opportunities. (Aili)*

*Portfolio is a good instrument but you can not assess everything with it. (An)*

*I think portfolio is conceptually too difficult. It is much easier to get learners to articulate their learning in other ways and not stick them into a portfolio that is pre-decided by academics who don't know each program in detail. (Anne)*

*Portfolio is also difficult to assess, even though that everyone uses it. (An)*

### Competency tests

*It's probably the simplest thing to do and it shows that you can do it and shows what ever you can do. I defiantly think that competence tests are excellent as they are very short for the students as it's very easy. (Josephine)*

### Interview

*I think the interviews are about the student telling a story and holding in to the areas that are relevant to the subject to which they are applying. (Josephine)*

### Observation

*I think that one way to have is to follow these persons in daily practice, and assess what they are doing in daily practice and follow them, observe them, speak with them about what they are doing, that way you'd be able to see what kind of knowledge they have in this specific practice. (Andreas)*

### Group discussion

*...one thing is to use group discussions to be 5-6 persons together with the teacher, together they reflect on their experiences, either it's experiences that the participants have raised themselves, reflecting about the case which is distributed by the teacher and by doing this kind of reflection these teachers argue that they can really see if these people really know and have this kind of knowledge. (Andreas)*

### Case study

*Another way would be to use cases. To have a case and let the participants write an essay where they reflect on this case and how they can solve the case, like a problem solving case. (Andreas)*

## **Benefits from the assessment of prior experiential learning**

### ***Higher education institution***

Higher education institutions will receive several benefits from the APEL process, but these benefits may not be clear at the beginning of APEL implementation.

*The university can get quite a lot out of it even if it is very cumbersome in the beginning. (Anne)*

Universities can widen participation through APEL and reach wider groups of learners. Widening participation can make higher education more accessible to learners and attract adult learners to universities.

*I think certainly widening participation and lifelong learning that institutions that are committed to those areas are able to recognize valid learning from outside their institution and learning often achieved by adults. (Anita)*

*In my experience APEL tends not to apply to younger students but is often mature students who claim APEL. So the university can recognize learning from a wider group of learners and also depending on a university that sometimes it can encourage students to apply. If I'm an experienced professional and I recognize that university is willing to assess my professional expertise and perhaps to give me credit for that, then often that can be attractive to me. (Anita)*

*...this kind of way of learning is good for some groups in society who normally wouldn't dream of taking 3 or 4 year curriculum instead they are offered an opportunities to get these kind of assessment made. (Andreas)*

APEL is a learning process that also engages the university. The university learns about assessment practices, curriculum content and the structure for improving it. APEL also triggers discussions within the institution about knowledge, assessment and learning outcomes.

*It's a mutual learning process in which university learns by helping the learner and assessing. That helps to understand better, why something is being taught at the university. (Aili)*

*...to think more about what you really need to know to get this kind of degree, how can we do the assessment, and find other ways of doing assessment than it traditionally has been done. It's also good for the persons working in higher*

*education as they start speaking more about knowledge, assessment and learning outcomes. (Andreas)*

The university benefits from learners who are motivated to learn and will be valuable alumni for the university.

*Learners are valuable and very motivated to learn, even the subject or areas where they lack knowledge. It is quite sure that people who have been recognized like this will graduate the university and the university wins really valuable alumni. (Aili)*

*The benefits for the higher education institution are of course that you don't need to have students, participants who already know what you are teaching and you become more flexible in terms of learning ... (Andreas)*

Universities must serve society. Engaging in APEL can be one of the ways to accomplish this aim.

*Well the university has to serve society, that's its role, that's its function. Through APEL it has a duty to do this. University is not an organization that is there of interest even that it often seems like that but that should not be its role or function. If APEL can be proved to be serviced to society and to development of society, then universities got to engage with it. (Josephine)*

### ***Learner***

The benefit of assessing prior experiential learning for learners is time savings, since they do not need to go through the whole curriculum. Studying for a shorter time may also save money that learners would otherwise spend on tuition.

*...so if they can demonstrate that some of the course is based on what they already know that can save them time in the sense that they don't have to study that long and it can also save them money in the sense that they don't have to pay so much tuition fees. (Anita)*

*I would say that the learner by acquiring the degree this way, the learner will first of all shorten the time for education, instead of taking the whole curriculum in the normal way you can shorten the time that you need to do normally. (Andreas)*

APEL is a process that helps learners become aware of what they have learned, how it relates to the curriculum, and how to prove and demonstrate their learning. The process empowers the learner to recognize his/her place in society.

*First of all what the learner has to do is to understand what he has learned, how is it related to the curriculum, he has to be able to describe it and prove it. And if he has been able to do all of that then this is a learning process. (Aili)*

*It's not even about confidence, it's about personal value. Having your role in society recognized and valued as something important. (Josephine)*

The greatest benefit from the assessment of prior learning to higher education institution and to the learner is the learning process. APEL invites universities to learn about their current assessment practices, the curricula and its content. For the learner, the APEL process provides value by helping recognize the learning that he/she possesses. The university gains new learners through APEL who are likely to be highly motivated adult learners. The learners save time and money by having their prior experiential learning assessed.

## CONCLUSIONS

*How to assess prior experiential learning?  
That is a complicated question and the first  
thing is to understand it. (Anne)*

Assessment of prior experiential learning is a complex process to which higher education institutions are bound. The purpose of APEL is to make visible and to value the entire scope of knowledge and experience of the individual, irrespective of the context where the learning took place. That is a major shift for the universities as only institutional learning has traditionally carried any status.

Assessing learning that is not tied to curriculum logic, that emphasizes experience as the foundation of learning, and that engages the whole person in meaning-making process is a challenge to higher education institutions. The predominant perception of a higher education institution is as a place where people are taught, rather than as a place where people bring existing knowledge that has a meaningful value. APEL can be considered the most learner-centered activity that the universities can engage in, since it provides access, flexibility and opportunities for learners.

The purpose of assessment in APEL is summative in its nature. The assessment looks back and certifies prior learning even though formative assumptions are part of the assessment. Assessment focuses on the potential of the individual as learning continuously unfolds in the assessment process. The learning of adult learners is interconnected with their lives, and thus it is derived from multiple sources, is contextual, situative, and has cognitive, affective and conative domains. Assessment practices need to consider the complexity of adult learning as there can not be only one way for assessing prior experiential learning.

The experts emphasize that assessment of prior experiential learning is a new concept that does not easily fit to university structures. Instead, assessment needs to be done in the context of a curriculum and on the same level as learning is in higher education institutions. Universities and learners seem to be at opposite ends of the continuum in APEL as the needs and interests differ greatly in the process. Universities must regard

APEL as a process that originates from learners interests and needs. It becomes crucial for higher education institutions to establish assessment procedures that fit the purpose, are perspicuous, have explicit assessment criteria and use relevant assessment methods. The methods in use must depend on specifications of subject field and curriculum. Assessment of prior experiential learning is a tailor-made process for higher education institutions as there are no ready-made solutions for assessment practices. It is a process of learning where the learner and institution are both engaged, because there is still much to discover about it.

Based on the current research results it can be identified that further research is needed on APEL. In order to develop better assessment practices, it is essential to know what is happening to the learner in the process of assessment. On the other hand, it is also important to concentrate on institutional learning and how to make use of prior experiential learning in higher education context.

Assessment of prior experiential learning is not an aim on its own, but rather an opportunity for learners and for learning.

## **Recommendations for higher education institutions on assessment of prior experiential learning**

- Assessment of prior experiential learning is a major shift for higher education institutions, therefore it is important for the universities to recognize that learning is valuable irrespective of where it has occurred, as this is the premises for APEL.
- Assessment of prior experiential learning is based on the assumption that experience is not assessed but the learning from it is. Thus experience alone does not lead to assessment or to an award but learning from the experience does.
- Assessment in a higher education institution can be carried out only in the context of a curriculum and must be on the level of higher education. The level required for higher education can be set by clear learning outcomes that consider learning acquired from experiential settings.
- Assessment procedures need to be explicit, purposeful, clear in terms of what is expected from the learner and what kind of evidence is valid.
- Assessment practices need to consider characteristics of adult learning. Learning can be derived from multiple sources; learning engages the whole person including cognitive, conative and affective domains; learning is highly contextualized and situative and learning is a unique meaning-making process.
- Learners need information and knowledge about APEL process and procedures, as well as about curriculum and learning outcomes.
- Guidance is a key feature for learners to succeed in the APEL process. Guidance is needed in the initial stage of APEL and throughout the process, since learners may not be accustomed to this kind of assessment practices.

- There is no single method that suits assessment of prior experiential learning. Methods used for assessing prior experiential learning need to fit the purpose and must depend on specifications of subject field and curriculum.
- Portfolio is a method that has many opportunities that suit the concept of APEL but portfolio development is conceptually difficult and learners need guidance. Portfolio assessment is a complicated process and thus caution is needed before deciding to use portfolio as a method.
- There is a danger of over-assessing learning which can be avoided by clear, purposeful assessment procedures and is based on confidence that learners who claim for APEL have actual learning at the level one need.
- Dynamic assessment should be used as a frame of reference when planning assessment of prior experiential learning as dynamic assessment considers characteristics of adult learning.

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