

APEL pathways: a passport to employment?

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SUMMARY

It would seem that most policies to promote the use of APEL as a certification method parallel to that offered by formal education and training systems are based on the belief that it is a less costly and shorter method, which is more attractive. Few countries, however, have convincing surveys or observations of the real advantages of APEL for individuals, employers or society as a whole. On the basis of a survey conducted by Dares (Direction de l'animation de la recherche, des études et des statistiques), Drees (Direction de la recherche, de l'évaluation, des études et des statistiques) and Céreq (Centre d'études et de recherches sur les qualifications), this article aims to fill this gap by pinpointing some of the real benefits which applicants gain from embarking on and/or successfully obtaining APEL and the circumstances in which they obtain these benefits.

Keywords

Accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL), France, employment, unemployment, labour market, data, quantitative survey

Introduction

Accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) and its many terminological and conceptual variants (!) seems to be high up the political agenda in many countries. While the challenges are the same everywhere (immigration, mobility of students and workers,

(!) Validation of learning from experience or recognition of non-formal and informal learning are alternatives.

demographic decline, planned increases in working life around retirement age and the concomitant need for retraining, etc.), the way in which they are being met often differs. Two main features seem, however, to emerge from all the international literature on APEL: 1) most of the policies and programmes implemented are based on the belief that accreditation of prior experiential learning is useful for individuals and the various institutions in the broad sense: education and training systems or the labour market for instance (at best, there are pilot experiments and programmes, but without any real evaluation); and 2) there are almost no data to bear out or belie the merits of recognising knowledge and skills by accrediting prior learning⁽²⁾. Here we are genuinely in the realm of faith.

There are ad hoc databases in many countries. These data are only rarely used to shed light on the benefits that people have gained from the accreditation of prior experiential learning and are never data from any representative survey of a particular population group, even if marginal. They are often data collected for administrative purposes, at best containing some information on candidates' profiles and futures. They tend to be compiled by people working in the field who are highly involved in their work rather than the fruit of a coordinated resolve to understand the mechanisms of accreditation of prior experiential learning and to pinpoint their potential benefits. The longitudinal dimension, which is the only way to find out whether there has been a return on the investment in APEL in the longer term, is, for instance, completely lacking.

While the concept of APEL seems to be an interesting, even promising, approach in various cases where there are problems in terms, for instance, of equity (right to a second chance and so on), there seem to be no arguments in support of its effectiveness in most other cases; these arguments nevertheless exist but have not so far been clearly demonstrated. If there is no evaluation of the benefits gained from accreditation of prior experiential learning, it could well come to grief if the visionaries, enthusiasts and other pioneers who are in practice keeping it afloat were to become weary of doing so because of a lack of supporting evidence based on objective benefits and to give up.

In this international landscape, France is an exception from various points of view. First, it has opted for a system in which any form of certification listed in the RNCP (*Répertoire national de la certification*

⁽²⁾ See Werquin (2007) for a discussion of the comparative costs of training and APEL.

professionnelle – National Register of Vocational Certification) may be obtained by APEL methods as well as by following courses in the formal education and training system. Not all countries have gone as far (although South Africa has opted for something similar), even those which, like France, are relative pioneers in the field of APEL (Norway and Australia for instance).

In France, APEL was initially introduced for people lacking qualifications recognised in the labour market where certification has tended to become more rather than less important (Dupray, 2000; Gautié, 2004; Giret, 2005). Recognising years of occupational experience has to be seen as a way of improving the labour market situation of workers in enterprise and unemployed people looking for work. That is in any case what seems to emerge from social rationales for embarking on APEL observed in qualitative terms (Quintero and Séchaud, 2006). If these tools are to be evaluated, statistical data are obviously needed. Ad hoc longitudinal data are the best way of testing some hypotheses of the effects that APEL may have on career paths from both an objective point of view (finding a job in the case of those of who do not have one, obtaining a pay rise) and a subjective one (how people feel about their experience of the procedure). This is the aim of this article.

The survey 'Candidates' pathways to accreditation of prior experiential learning' conducted by Dares⁽³⁾, Céreq⁽⁴⁾, and Drees⁽⁵⁾ in 2007 made it possible to test some of these hypotheses. The survey undoubtedly broke new ground, as the data, because they were longitudinal and because the stress was placed on the APEL procedure and the earlier occupational situation, made it possible to go some way towards measuring what an APEL system can contribute to people's careers. People who had been deemed eligible in the first half of 2005 for APEL for a level V diploma⁽⁶⁾, chiefly in the field of social work and healthcare, were interviewed for the survey in 2007. To be deemed 'eligible', applicants have to have

⁽³⁾ *Direction de l'animation de la recherche, des études et des statistiques* (Directorate for Research, Studies and Statistics), Ministry of Social Affairs, Labour and Solidarity.

⁽⁴⁾ *Centre d'études et de recherches sur les qualifications* (Centre for Qualification Studies and Research).

⁽⁵⁾ *Direction de la recherche, de l'évaluation, des études et des statistiques* (Directorate for Research, Evaluation, Studies and Statistics) answerable to the Ministry of Social Affairs, Labour and Solidarity, the Ministry of Health, Youth and Sport and the Ministry for the Budget, Public Accounts and the Civil Service.

⁽⁶⁾ ISCED Level 2; chiefly the CAP (*Certificat d'aptitude professionnelle* – Certificate of Vocational Proficiency) and the BEP (*Brevet d'études professionnelles* – Vocational Studies Certificate).

worked on a paid, unpaid or voluntary basis, whether continuously or not, for a cumulative total period of at least three years in the field of the diploma, vocational qualification or vocational qualification certificate for which they are applying.

This survey provides a starting point for this article as it goes some way towards filling the vacuum surrounding evaluation and knowledge of the benefits of APEL. The question is then one of attempting to measure potential individual benefits from APEL (Section 5). Prior to that, the process by which prior experiential learning is accredited will be described and analysed (Section 2), positioned with respect to existing economic theories (Section 3) and data on APEL presented (Section 4).

Accrediting learning: context

Since measures to accredit prior experiential learning with a view to recognising and certifying experience gained in the labour market were introduced in 2002 under the Law on Social Modernisation, few statistical data have been produced to corroborate the real effects of this new instrument for enterprises and individuals. The lack of a standard system for data collection and processing of statistics common to the various certifying bodies also hampers quantitative analyses of applications for qualifications and their acquisition by this method (Labruyère, 2006).

In 2005, fewer than 58 000 of the over 70 000 applications lodged with the five main certifying bodies (Ministry of Education: from the CAP ⁽⁷⁾ to the BTS ⁽⁸⁾), as well as the Ministries of Labour, Social Affairs, Youth and Sport and Agriculture), were deemed eligible. 12 000 applicants, i.e. 17 %, were thus eliminated by the eligibility criterion (three years of work) which is common to many countries and is often formulated in the same way – or also in terms of age. In that same year, close on 21 000 diplomas or qualifications were acquired from these ministries by APEL. Internationally, all the countries which have introduced procedures of the APEL type have obviously done so because they believe there may be benefits for individuals, enterprises and society as a whole. Research work to test the accuracy of such hypotheses has to rely, however, on very

⁽⁷⁾ Certificat d'aptitude professionnelle, ISCED Level 2.

⁽⁸⁾ Brevet de technicien supérieur (Advanced Technical Certificate), ISCED Level 5B.

few data. Even those countries with the most advanced statistical systems (Norway, for instance) still have no survey of this issue and only a few local initiatives (in Australia, for instance) have managed to shed a very partial light on the ins and outs of APEL procedures.

In the first instance, even in the case of the survey used here, which nevertheless represents major progress, it is difficult to provide figures for APEL because the data are not comparable as they come from different certifying ministries whose collection methods have not been standardised (Labruyère, 2006). Surveys by private certifying bodies present even more problems, especially as they are in no way mandatory (DGEFP, 2007).

A first level of statistical information concerns the volume of requests for information on this new way of obtaining qualifications and certificates. Potential applicants can follow two avenues: the PRCs (*Points relais conseils* – Advice Points) set up to meet the growing demand for information on APEL, and the information services of accrediting bodies. Close on 80 000 people requested information and advice on APEL from the PRCs in 2004, half of whom were helped to embark on an actual procedure (Labruyère, 2006, 2007). Qualitative investigations show that people who had requested information, but did not take the process any further, did so largely for reasons to do with financing the APEL procedure (Personaz, Quintero and Séchaud, 2005). From the point of view of the information departments of the Ministry of Education's specialist divisions (DAVA, *Dispositif académique de validation des acquis* – Academic System for Accreditation of Prior Learning), again in 2004, close on 85 000 people requested information on APEL and over 50 000 dossiers were compiled, some 36 % of which were examined by a panel (Labruyère, 2007). To place these figures in context, it should be borne in mind that in 2004, taking all certifying ministries together, some 38 000 people applied for APEL (Labruyère, 2007). The main certifying ministry is the Ministry of Education: some 19 000 applications were lodged in 2004 with a success rate of 56 % (Labruyère, 2006). In 2006, taking all ministries together, some 60 000 applications were eligible and over 26 000 certificates were obtained by APEL (DGEFP, 2007). Overall, one-third of applicants were jobseekers (Labruyère, 2006). The proportion of jobseekers nevertheless varies depending on the qualifications for which people are applying. At the Ministry of Labour, 7 out of 10 applications for APEL came from jobseekers (Bonaïti, 2005).

The main levels for which people apply for APEL are levels V and IV ⁽⁹⁾, although it is often possible to gain certification at level III by APEL ⁽¹⁰⁾. In the local education authorities, 58 % of applications were for a level IV or V qualification. The figure varies for the different certifying ministries, and may be as much as 100 % (Labruyère, 2007). Overall, level V seems to attract most applicants for APEL, accounting for 40 % of applicants in 2004 (Labruyère, 2006). This seems to show that APEL is being used to meet the certification needs of people initially having few qualifications and its use would therefore seem to be in keeping with the goals laid down in the 2002 Law on Social Modernisation. Around 50 % of applicants successfully obtain certificates, although the figures vary for the different certifying ministries (Table 1) and for different qualifications.

Even though the demand for APEL seems to be growing and is heavily concentrated on some level V certificates such as the CAP in nursery nursing, the vocational qualification for care workers and the DEAVS ⁽¹¹⁾ (some 20 % of accreditations in 2005 were for the DEAVS), it is still not possible to speak, in the case of level V

Table 1. Levels of certification by APEL by ministry, 2004

Overall, diploma success rates are quite variable

Certifying ministries	Success rate (as %)
Ministry of Education	
• Local education authorities	56
• Higher education	28
Labour	39
Social Affairs	48
Total (including Youth and Sport, Agriculture)	49

Source: Labruyère (2006).

qualifications, of a certification route which clearly rivals the continuing training route which remains the main way of obtaining a certificate outside the initial education and training system. The vocational baccalaureate is perhaps the qualification for which the number of certificates issued by APEL methods offers the most competition to

⁽⁹⁾ ISCED Levels 2 and 3.

⁽¹⁰⁾ ISCED Level 5. A very diverse range of certification is available and varies considerably in terms of level in different sectors.

⁽¹¹⁾ *Diplôme d'Etat d'auxiliaire de vie sociale* - State Diploma for Social Care Workers.

the more conventional route of continuing training, although there are still major disparities (APEL accounting for 22 % and continuing training for 47 %, Labruyère, 2007). Labruyère (2007) notes that APEL accounts overall for 12 % of certificates of the vocational baccalaureate, CAP, BEP, *mention complémentaire* (one-year top-up course) or BTS type. Although the goals set out in the 2002 Social Modernisation Law are geared towards developing certification through the accreditation of learning, this kind of certification continues to be marginal. This has to do, however, with broader concerns such as improving access to qualifications and the goal that French education policy has been pursuing for some decades now of stepping up the number of qualified people among the population which, from the point of view of APEL, cannot but raise questions about the value of certificates awarded by this method (Maillard, 2007). This goal of increasing the proportion of people/workers certified by APEL is an attempt to provide more of a match between qualifications and work (Maillard, 2007), although the work that Céreq has been conducting for many years, especially on the first few years following completion of initial education (Giret, 2005), tends to show the ongoing lack of any strict match in the training/work relationship.

Accrediting learning: theoretical avenues for interpretation

According to the foundations of human capital theory, an increase in the quantity of knowledge, skills and competences should be reflected by an increase in individual productivity and therefore by an increase in pay. While human capital theory has been drawn on extensively to explain the return from participation in continuing training courses, it only touches on the nature of the relationship between training, employment and pay and does little to explain this relationship. In the case of accreditation of prior learning, there is no investment, properly speaking, in human capital but rather a recognition of knowledge, skills and competences by certification, clearly demonstrating the dividing line between training and certification. In theory, in the APEL process, there is no production of human capital which would give applicants cause to hope for a pay rise. From a strictly theoretical point of view, there is a basic difference between the anticipated effects of taking part in continuing training and registering for a learning accreditation procedure. This

is also true from the point of view of enterprise, which is likely to see productivity gains if continuing training is developed within the organisation (Delame and Kramarz, 1997; Aubert, 2006), even if, from the point of view of the individual, the pay return is low. Since there is no increase in individual productivity in APEL processes, they are likely to have an impact elsewhere, probably on human resource allocation in the enterprise and the reorganisation of continuing training policy, especially for people who have not obtained full certification. This could bring about a divide between certified and non-certified workers within organisations, especially in those trades covered by regulations requiring workers to obtain a diploma or to possess a certified qualification. Moreover, continuing vocational training practices in enterprise could be affected because they are competing with another certification method (Lecourt and Méhaut, 2009), especially if continuing vocational training is geared more to short training schemes for adaptation to a job (Source: *Enquête 'Formation continue'* 2000, INSEE, Céreq).

For individuals, the award of a certificate, like currency which can be spent in the labour market, should lead them to hope for gains from the point of view of external mobility. It is because people who have just been awarded a certificate are making their knowledge, skills and competences visible to enterprises in the market that they are in practice likely to obtain a better wage in a different enterprise. APEL could then offer a point of reference in opening up a new channel for transferability of qualifications (see also Labruyère and Rose, 2004). However, from the point of view of human capital theory, if the applicant for APEL stays in the same enterprise after receiving a certificate, there is in theory no reason for the enterprise to award a pay rise since there is no increase in human capital and therefore in individual productivity, unless the enterprise offers a pay rise through some kind of mechanism to encourage loyalty. APEL may also be considered to be a learning process in itself and thus becomes a mechanism for revealing latent productivity which had up to then been overlooked. In any case, it is clear here that it becomes even more difficult to distinguish between a human capital effect and a signalling effect, as explained by Spence (1973), in the market (Willis, 1986).

If there is an information imbalance between employers and people seeking to accredit their learning, obtaining a certificate should resolve this problem. Employers would be better able to gauge the competences of applicants and therefore to filter the labour supply. It would thus be in the interests of enterprise employees

to have their experience accredited so that they can send a better signal of themselves in the labour market with a view to internal or external mobility. For jobseekers, failing to find work may be the result of shortcomings in the signals they send to employers. In their case, accreditation of prior learning would be a way of acquiring a signal which removes doubts about their personal competences (knowledge, skills and competences) and therefore increases their chances of finding a new job.

From the point of view of this signalling approach, certification as the production of a signal of transferable skills should lead employers to re-allocate their workforce through promotions or movements within the enterprise, since the accreditation of learning should make the market more fluid because it makes transitions easier (Labruyère, 2007). At the same time, people are better able to apply for other posts in the enterprise as they know more about their own competences, although a competence is not fundamentally defined by the award of a certificate or qualification. In the context of learning accreditation, there is a growing link between competences (seen as a set of skills) and qualifications (level of certification needed to occupy a post), especially in a context in which wages are becoming more individual, length of service is playing less of a role and competences are to some extent becoming more important than systematic advancement based on length of service (Béret and Lewandowski, 2007; Labruyère, 2007; Lemistre, 2003).

The job-competition model (Thurow, 1975) offers a different kind of argument with similar consequences. In this set of theoretical hypotheses, productivity is not individual but inherent in the occupational post. Employers then have to adjust individual abilities to the abilities required by the post. In this particular model, employers will obviously attempt to minimise adjustment costs and recruit those applicants with the best qualifications whose adaptation and training is likely to cost the least. In this framework, qualifications are felt to be more valuable than experience of the activity. Certification by APEL may then mean that people start to compete for jobs which are not open to them because they do not possess the required qualification or certificate attesting to the required abilities and signalling their ability to adapt to the post, even though these applicants had and continue to have these individual competences. Employers then re-evaluate the individual abilities (knowledge, skills and competences) of their employees on the basis of the training that they have attended and/or, for our purposes here, a learning accreditation procedure.

There should therefore be greater prospects of mobility for applicants who have successfully completed the process as well as internal promotion in the enterprise. On the one hand, enterprises prefer to reduce recruitment costs by promoting in-house employees and, on the other, the range of jobs available increases and opens up prospects for external mobility.

Both employed workers and the unemployed can weigh up benefits and risks (Eicher and Mingat, 1975), starting from the assumption that not everyone with the same abilities will embark on an APEL procedure. Those less averse to risk and, perhaps we can moot the hypothesis, those with the best initial education, will be more inclined to embark on an APEL procedure because they feel that the return from doing so outweighs the assessed/potential risks of failure. Generally speaking, in the case of continuing training, those with the highest standard of education seem to benefit the most from continuing training policies, as employers prefer to invest in employees whose ability to learn raises fewer doubts (OECD, 2003 and 2005). The argument in favour of this trade-off between benefits and risks is also borne out by the fact that, if employers are averse to risk, training efforts will be focused on populations for whom the marginal return from training will probably be low but 'assured'. i.e. those populations who are already well trained, rather than non-qualified people for whom an investment in human capital would undoubtedly be more profitable but would be riskier.

As a result, it is likely that selection, or even self-selection, mechanisms will play a part in qualifications or certificates awarded by APEL methods and it will be necessary to measure the effects of APEL if these selection effects are to be monitored. That is the purpose of the econometric work presented below.

A pioneering survey system: the Céreq-Dares-Drees survey

The survey 'Candidates' pathways to accreditation of prior experiential learning', conducted in January 2007 in the context of a tripartite project involving Céreq, Dares and Drees, was intended to describe applicants for APEL preparing for a level V qualification, their career path and the stages of their pathway through the APEL procedure. In doing so, the survey helped to shed light on the discrepancies observed between the number of eligible applicants and the number

of certificates awarded. Bearing in mind the problems raised by any evaluation of the success of APEL schemes because so few data are available (the various ministries' monitoring systems are not at all standardised), this survey system was also intended to measure the effects of APEL on applicants' occupational situations after they had completed the APEL procedure. The sample was drawn from applicants eligible for APEL for the level V qualifications and certificates of the Ministries of Education, Labour, Social Cohesion and Housing and Health between 1 January and 30 June 2005. The survey thus covered a period ranging from 18 to 24 months, during which the applicants were undertaking their accreditation procedure. At the end of the period, there were several main cases depending on whether accreditation was total or partial, whether applicants were waiting to sit examinations or had abandoned the procedure. A questionnaire covered their occupational situation on the date of the survey and made it possible to compare occupational situations before and after the APEL procedure.

In this sample, 87 % of applicants were women with an average age of 40 (35 for men). The certificate for which they were preparing was often a State diploma for social care workers (30 %) or healthcare assistants (28 %), women accounting for the vast majority of applicants. More or less the same proportion of people were preparing for a Ministry of Education level V qualification or diploma in some cases concerning personal services trades (14 % were preparing for CAP in nursery nursing with additional home care or a BEP in health and social careers). Close on three quarters of applicants had left the initial education system at level V, V with diploma or Vbis ⁽¹²⁾, and 12 % had no qualification chiefly because they had found a job and/or did not wish to continue their education.

At the time of embarking on their accreditation procedure, 88 % of applicants were in employment and 11 % were unemployed. Of the applicants in employment, 40 % were direct personal services employees, 54 % of whom were working for associations and 39 % were civil employees and public service workers (mainly in the public hospital service). On average, they had entered the labour market at the age of 19, and 50 % had been in their jobs for more than nine years when they embarked on their accreditation procedure. Applicants who were unemployed when embarking on the accreditation procedure had been looking for a job for an

⁽¹²⁾ Level V diplomas: 28 %; below level V: 57.3 %.

average of one year following redundancy (38 %) or termination of a contract (32 %). 70 % of applicants said that they were looking for a job linked to the qualification or diploma for which they were seeking accreditation and 30 % were looking for any job whether or not linked to the qualification or diploma.

In the case of employees, the initiative to embark on the procedure had often come from the employer, either as a result of information which the enterprise had received (32 %) or because the procedure had been proposed directly by a hierarchical superior (26 %). In 35 % of cases, the initiative had not come from the employer, but was down to personal choice (62 %) or the result of advice from friends and family (18 %); advice from a training body was relatively rare (5 %). When the initiative had come directly from the enterprise, it was often the case that other enterprise employees had also embarked on an APEL procedure, although the decision to do so was not the result of any dissemination effect. Employee applicants had, moreover, embarked on an APEL procedure chiefly to obtain better recognition in their job or career advancement.

Personal choice also played a major role in explaining why people had embarked on an APEL procedure among the unemployed (50 % citing this reason), although employment intermediaries played a role which was almost as important. The hope of better chances of finding a job or a new job or the fact that the job being sought required a particular qualification or diploma provided the motivation to embark on an APEL procedure in many cases.

Ultimately, at the time of the survey, after two years of the APEL procedure, 41 % of applicants had obtained the qualification or diploma they were seeking; the best success rates had been for the other Ministry of Education level V qualifications (60 %), the CAP and BEP outside the health and social field, the care worker's diploma (53 %) and the social care worker's diploma (45 %). Among applicants preparing for a vocational healthcare assistant's diploma (DPAS) only 15 % had obtained accreditation, although this low rate can be explained by the fact that a large number of applicants were waiting to sit examinations at the time of the survey (45 %); 30 % had nevertheless obtained partial accreditation. The applicants who had obtained their qualification or diploma tended to be younger than the average (36) and already to have a level V diploma. The success rate of applicants already possessing a level V diploma from initial education was 47 % in comparison with 32 % for applicants embarking on an APEL procedure with no qualification. Mentoring

of applicants by a specialist body during the APEL procedure also tended to improve the chances of obtaining certification. Among applicants who had been mentored, 51 % obtained their diploma, whereas if they had not had any mentoring, the success rate fell to around 35 %. This indicator shows that applicants often find these APEL procedures to be 'complex and difficult' (Quintero and Séchaud, 2006).

At the time of the survey, 90 % of people embarking on APEL had a job. For the most part, applicants who were in employment when embarking on APEL were still employed at the time of the survey (94 %) – whether or not they had obtained the qualification or diploma they were seeking – and 17 % had changed employer or post. Around one-third of applicants in employment at the time of the survey said that they had received a pay increase, their work was more interesting or they had more responsibility in comparison with the last job that they had occupied. Pay increases were especially frequent if applicants had obtained their qualification or diploma by APEL: 47 % said that they had received a pay increase when they obtained accreditation, whereas 23 % had not had a pay increase. Lastly, in the case of unemployed applicants, less than two-thirds had found a job and 38 % were still unemployed.

Measuring the effects of APEL: proposals and evaluation

The effects of APEL can be measured in many ways from different indicators. People unemployed at the time of the procedure have been analysed separately, since a return to work is a natural way of measuring the effect of APEL. In the case of employed workers, APEL has more of an effect on internal or external mobility, job promotion or increased satisfaction from the post occupied. It is not possible to measure the effects of APEL without addressing the tricky problem of the endogenous selection of applicants. In all likelihood, those who embark on an APEL procedure are more likely to succeed in developing their careers. However, tackling this question would make it necessary to obtain information from people undertaking APEL and people with similar profiles who have not undertaken APEL. The data used relate only to eligible applicants. Part of this endogenous selection obviously eludes modelling, but an effort has been made to control differences in pathways between

those completing their APEL procedure and those abandoning it. Without this control, it would be possible to attribute a positive effect on careers to APEL without running the risk that the effect on career paths is down to the characteristics of those successfully completing APEL procedures. Although imperfect – like many databases – the data used make it possible to go some way towards demonstrating that APEL generates positive effects irrespective of applicants' characteristics.

APEL as a factor in returning to employment

At the time of embarking on an APEL procedure, 11 % of people were unemployed; 38 % of these had found a job during the survey period. What effect did the award of certification have on the speed of return to employment? To answer this question, we estimated a model of length of unemployment from information about the length of unemployment at the time of embarking on APEL and the length of APEL. The outcome of the period of unemployment is given by the situation at the time of the survey, i.e. a return to employment or continued unemployment (censoring).

A non-parametric estimate of the speed of exit from unemployment is given by the survival function (Graph 1) and the risk function⁽¹³⁾ (Graph 2), depending on whether the qualification was obtained (qualification=1) or not (qualification=0). Applicants obtaining their qualification by APEL methods⁽¹⁴⁾ gained employment more rapidly, at least in the first year and a half of unemployment. Moreover, the increasing form of the risk function of exit from unemployment of applicants obtaining their qualification by APEL shows that exits from unemployment increase as the length of unemployment increases and that probability levels are higher than for unemployed people not obtaining a qualification.

In order to measure the dimensions which have an impact on the probability of exit from unemployment, a parametric model with proportional risks (of the Weibull type) was estimated (Table 1). In addition to control variables such as the qualification or diploma targeted by the APEL, the level of initial education, gender and age, several other explanatory dimensions were introduced to test the effect of APEL on exits from unemployment. First, a variable

⁽¹³⁾ The risk function is smoothed in this case by the core technique.

⁽¹⁴⁾ Tests of survival difference according to the stratification variable (certification in this case) show that survival functions differ substantially from one another at a threshold of 5 %.

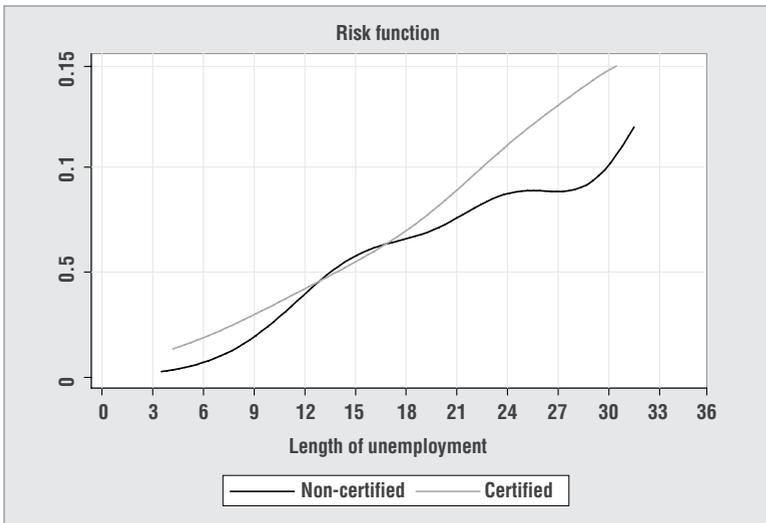
Figure 1. **Time unemployed function**

People accredited by APEL are unemployed for shorter times



Figure 2. **Unemployment exit risk function**

People accredited by APEL generally exit unemployment more quickly



relating to award of the certificate, expected to have a positive effect on exits from unemployment. The length of the APEL procedure may have an effect on the return to employment and two underlying factors may also be involved. On the one hand, it can be assumed that the longer the APEL procedure takes in terms of time, the more the chances of certification decrease. On the other hand, when the length of the APEL procedure increases, the length of unemployment also increases. It is then possible to cite the more conventional link between length of unemployment and probability of a return to employment to explain the lower chances of returning to employment as time passes. Lastly, it is likely that applicants with more experience of employment gain employment more rapidly, i.e. either here again by means of the certification variable – more experienced people will have better chances of obtaining certification – or because of the positive relationship between experience and exits from unemployment irrespective of any link with APEL.

The model estimation tends to bear out the hypotheses that have been mooted. In other words, obtaining a qualification or diploma by APEL has a positive impact on exit from unemployment: applicants obtaining full accreditation for their diploma have 33 % more chance of finding a new job than those obtaining partial accreditation or no accreditation at all. From this point of view, accreditation of prior experiential learning is an asset when looking for a job. It should also be borne in mind that nationally, taking all certifying ministries together, around one-third of applicants for APEL are looking for work, which shows that the APEL system is very attractive to jobseekers whose main goal is to return to work (Labruyère, 2006). However, when the procedure starts to lengthen, the positive effect of certification diminishes with the result that a 'successful' procedure has to be both short and culminate in the award of the diploma. It is possible to add to this rather general comment that younger applicants – as well as older applicants to a lesser extent and for different reasons, motivation being the main factor for younger people and experience for older people – exit unemployment more rapidly than the intermediate age groups. Experience in terms of employment has effects opposite to those that might have been expected. It is the least experienced who exit unemployment most quickly. The hypothesis here is that competition for jobs may work against older people who may be seen to be less adaptable to changing activities and for whom too much experience may mean that knowledge, skills and competences have been wiped out or have become obsolete. It can also be seen that

the estimation of the Weibull model scale parameter shows that the risk function first tends to increase then to decrease ($\rho > 1$): i.e. the unemployment exit risk starts to increase and then decreases if no job is found. There is therefore a threshold effect which has been observed on many occasions as regards data comparable with length of unemployment. In reality, the estimated form of the risk function probably comes from a mixture of different forms of risk for applicants obtaining certification and those not obtaining it. In the first case, the function tends to grow more, while for applicants who have not obtained a full qualification, the unemployment exit risk continues to be constant with the length of unemployment.

Table 2. Estimation of the unemployment exit risk – Time model
 Obtaining certification by APEL makes it easier to exit unemployment more quickly but the longer the APEL procedure continues, the longer unemployment continues

Weibull model, n=509	Risk ratio	P > z	Mean
Certification	1.33**	0.029	0.38
Length of the APEL procedure	0.91***	0.000	9.8
State diploma for social care workers (DEAVS)	1.23	0.260	0.12
Vocational diploma for healthcare assistants (DPAS)	1.16	0.531	0.08
Ministry of Education diploma	1.26	0.105	0.43
Care worker and other qualifications (reference)	-	-	0.37
Initial level of education 3 or 4	0.979	0.925	0.18
Initial level of education 5 bis	1.32	0.205	0.24
Initial level of education 5 with diploma	1.14	0.570	0.20
Initial level of education 5 without diploma	1.18	0.446	0.26
Initial level of education 6 (reference)	-	-	0.12
Age between 20 and 39	1.41**	0.019	0.25
Age between 40 and 49 (reference)	-	-	0.50
Age over 50	1.33*	0.067	0.25
Man	1.09	0.605	0.20
Lives with partner	1.14	0.329	0.70
Occupational experience of less than 5 years	2.14***	0.000	0.27
Occupational experience of between 5 and 10 years	1.34**	0.044	0.35
Occupational experience of more than 10 years (reference)	-	-	0.38
Choice of qualification being studied	1.88***	0.000	-
Scale parameter (P)		-415.7	-
Log-likelihood value			

***: parameter significant at 1 %; **: parameter significant at 5 %; *: parameter significant at 10 %

Effect of APEL on pay increases: a recognised channel of certification (Table 3)

Competing theoretical hypotheses (human capital theory, filter or signalling effect) together help to forge the idea that certification by APEL could be expected to have a positive effect on pay. While the survey did not include information on pay levels before and after the APEL procedure, whether or not applicants received a pay increase is nevertheless known from a qualitative point of view. Such an increase may be the result of success with the APEL, the APEL procedure itself or length of service. To try to separate out these effects, the model then includes a variable indicating APEL certification and a variable measuring length of service. It may also be argued that applicants with the most experience of the job for which they were seeking to have learning accredited had, as a result, the best chances of success with the APEL procedure, which would interfere with the estimation of the parameters relating to certification and length of service. A solution to this problem is jointly to estimate two equations, one estimating the probability of obtaining the qualification or diploma (taking account of length of service) and the other estimating the probability of a pay increase (taking account of the award of certification and length of service). In the second equation, length of service is eliminated from the effect of certification. This estimation method – a recursive bivariate Probit model (Table 3) – also makes it possible to take account of the fact that, potentially, the characteristics which have an impact on obtaining the diploma are to some extent the same as those explaining pay increases and therefore to remove these common dimensions from the estimation of the probability of a pay increase ⁽¹⁵⁾. The estimation shows that the error term correlation is significant and positive ($\rho > 0$), with the result that the same unobserved characteristics help to improve the chances of certification and pay increases (motivation, etc.).

Let us look in the first instance at the variables which have an impact on the probability of obtaining the qualification or diploma being sought. First, depending on the diploma for which applicants are studying by APEL methods, there are unequal chances of obtaining it. Fewer people managed to obtain a State social care worker's diploma and/or a vocational healthcare assistant's diploma; one reason, in the case of these diplomas, may be that examinations had not all been held at the time of the survey. For some diplomas,

⁽¹⁵⁾ Bear in mind that these common dimensions may be observed (and controlled in the model) or unobserved (in which case they are controlled by the error terms of the two equations).

this means therefore that APEL is not harder to obtain, but that the procedure may be lengthier. Among the people studying for a vocational healthcare assistant's diploma, almost half were still waiting to sit examinations. The level of education nevertheless has a clear impact on the probability of certification. The better educated (level III and IV) and those holding level V vocational education and training diplomas obtain certification more easily than those who left school with a lower level of education. This would tend to show that APEL does not make it possible to correct differences in educational pathways but rather reinforces the disparities between those with and without diplomas, even though the need to offset unequal access to education and training was one of the main goals to be achieved by introducing the system of accreditation of prior learning (Lichtenberger and Merle, 2001). Mentoring during the procedure may nevertheless counterbalance the effects of initial education, since there is a positive coefficient which is among the highest in the estimation. Successfully obtaining APEL, considered to be difficult, is thus conditioned to a large extent by the possibility of mentoring during the procedure. Moreover, a long APEL procedure is symptomatic of lower chances of obtaining the diploma, undoubtedly because people may become discouraged and abandon it ⁽¹⁶⁾.

Taking this a step further, the role played by the circumstances in which people embark on an APEL procedure also differs if applicants were in stable employment in the labour market or if the initiative for the procedure essentially came from their superiors. While, in this case, the effects are positive, when applicants are choosing between several diplomas for accreditation purposes and have decided to embark on an APEL procedure on the advice of their family and friends or their work colleagues, the chances of success are smaller. These indicators may point to people embarking on APEL procedures for reasons which are less structured around a career plan which, as we know, plays a key part in assessment by APEL panels ⁽¹⁷⁾. It would seem that the reasons for embarking on APEL are crucial

⁽¹⁶⁾ If the mentoring rates of applicants for an APEL procedure are compared with those who have taken examinations, it seems that mentoring plays a role in the length of the accreditation procedure: 51 % of those interviewed by the panel had been mentored in comparison with 44.1 % among all applicants deemed to be eligible.

⁽¹⁷⁾ Other investigations would be helpful here since procedures of different types are involved: either mentoring by the employer or individual mentoring not supported by the enterprise, each of which involve very different levels of mentoring. One key factor is probably the allocation of funds and resources.

to the success of the procedure, and these reasons may involve promotion, retraining, protection or integration, to take up the terms used by Séchaud (2007). While Séchaud (2007) points out that people embarking on APEL tend to be in unstable or insecure situations – especially those embarking on APEL for reasons of protection – the survey data show that APEL has the most beneficial effects among people in the most stable employment.

Once the differences explaining the achievement of APEL certification have been controlled, the method used here makes it possible to measure the effect of certification on chances of pay increases. It is interesting to note that applicants successfully obtaining their diplomas then saw a positive trend in their pay whether or not certification was obtained earlier or later in the APEL procedure, although this effect increases with the time that has elapsed since certification. This may point to a time delay effect which can be measured as the time that has elapsed between the date of completion of the APEL procedure and the date of the survey. The more rapidly certification is obtained after the beginning of the procedure (between 12 and 24 months prior to the date of the survey), the longer the time between the completion of certification and the survey and the more positive the effect of certification on the probability of obtaining a pay increase.

Several effects may be combined here: the effect of certification itself, positive in all cases, a length of service effect, which is not completely controlled in the survey as it is not known at what point the pay increase was awarded, and an internal or external mobility effect which is nevertheless controlled. In this case, internal mobility (change of post) or external mobility (change of employer) pays off in terms of pay increases. If the time which has elapsed between certification by APEL and the change of post is relatively short, then the impact on pay can be attributed chiefly to APEL. Otherwise, it can be attributed directly to the change of post itself. Ultimately, with both a positive effect from certification and a pay advantage from mobility, applicants obtaining their qualification by APEL and having moved internally or externally have an opportunity to increase their pay level. For these applicants, accreditation of prior experiential learning therefore leads to certification which is socially accepted and recognised in the labour market in particular.

Table 3. Estimation by a recursive bivariate Probit model
 Better qualified people have more chance of APEL certification
 People obtaining certification by APEL have more chance of a pay increase

Sample size: n=4 250	Coefficient	P> z	Mean
Equation 1: certification=1/0			
Constant	-0.18	0.186	-
Other Ministry of Social Affairs qualification	-0.44***	0.000	0.06
State social care worker's diploma, DEAVS	-0.46***	0.000	0.30
Vocational healthcare assistant's diploma, DPAS	-1.28***	0.000	0.28
Ministry of Education diploma	0.10	0.240	0.27
Care worker's diploma (reference)	-	-	0.09
Initial education level 3	0.49***	0.002	0.02
Initial education level 4	0.34***	0.000	0.12
Initial education level 5 bis	0.07	0.364	0.25
Initial education level 5 with diploma	0.27***	0.001	0.28
Initial education level 5 without diploma	0.08	0.320	0.21
Initial education level 6 (reference)	-	-	0.12
Man	-0.04	0.533	0.13
With mentoring	0.41***	0.000	0.43
Age under 30	0.02	0.873	0.03
Age from 30 to 39	-0.14**	0.014	0.19
Age from 40 to 49 (reference)	-	-	0.53
Age over 50	-0.2	0.733	0.25
Length of APEL procedure	-0.009**	0.040	10.7
Number of dependent children	0.002	0.922	1.38
Information on APEL obtained from superiors	0.23***	0.000	0.44
Information on APEL obtained from friends and family	-0.13**	0.025	0.19
Information on APEL obtained from the media	0.15**	0.026	0.13
Information on APEL obtained from labour market intermediary bodies (reference)	-	-	0.24
intermediary bodies (reference)	0.21**	0.027	0.80
Stable employment	0.07	0.475	0.14
Unstable	-	-	0.06
Stable unemployment (reference)	-0.09**	0.034	0.41
Choice of diploma for study			
Equation 2: gain=1/0			
Constant	-1.00***	0.000	-
Certification 0 to 6 months before the survey	0.31**	0.025	0.09
Certification 6 to 12 months before the survey	0.40***	0.003	0.10
Certification 12 to 24 months before the survey	0.42***	0.001	0.21
Certification not obtained (reference)	-	-	0.60
Other Ministry of Social Affairs qualification	-0.10	0.426	0.06
State social care worker's diploma, DEAVS	0.19**	0.017	0.30
Vocational healthcare assistant's diploma, DPAS	-0.39***	0.000	0.28
Ministry of Education diploma	-0.52***	0.000	0.27
Care worker's diploma (reference)	-	-	0.09

Initial education level 3	0.27*	0.089	0.02
Initial education level 4	0.07	0.422	0.12
Initial education level 5 bis	-0.15	0.841	0.25
Initial education level 5 with diploma	-0.05	0.558	0.28
Initial education level 5 without diploma	-0.05	0.499	0.21
Initial education level 6 (reference)	-	-	0.12
Man	0.09	0.195	0.13
Age under 30	-0.41***	0.002	0.03
Age from 30 to 39	0.03	0.620	0.19
Age from 40 to 49 (reference)	-	-	0.53
Age over 50	-0.10*	0.079	0.25
Occupational experience of less than 5 years	0.005	0.927	0.19
Occupational experience of 5 to 10 years	0.12**	0.013	0.35
Occupational experience of over 10 years (reference)	-	-	0.46
In employment at time of procedure	0.43***	0.000	0.93
Change of employer or post	0.64***	0.000	0.23
Selection bias (Rho)	0.15**	0.041	-
Log-likelihood value	-4 861.8		-

***: parameter significant at 1 %; **: parameter significant at 5 %; *: parameter significant at 10 %

Subjective effect of APEL (Table 4)

While the indicator tested above focuses more on the objective elements of the evaluation, a more subjective analysis of applicants' experience of APEL may help to supplement and flesh out the approach examined above. The subjective impact of APEL was measured by putting a question to all the applicants, whether employed or unemployed at the beginning of their procedure. There were three possible replies to the question 'overall, would you say that the APEL procedure ...': 'gave you more confidence in yourself and made you feel more self-assured', 'tended to demoralise you or was problematic from time to time', or 'had no particular effect'. The proposed measurement differentiates a positive impact (first reply) from the other two: 65 % of applicants said that their APEL procedure had helped them to become more confident and self-assured. At first glance, candidates successfully obtaining qualifications by APEL did not seem to be more satisfied than the others since, among all the applicants stating a positive impact, 49 % had obtained full accreditation. A bivariate analysis of the probability of certification and a positive experience of APEL shows that, all things being equal, obtaining the qualification leads to greater satisfaction. The type of qualification targeted by APEL may well modulate this result. Applicants for the vocational healthcare assistant's diploma were

probably more satisfied than all the other applicants, whereas reactions were unenthusiastic in the case of Ministry of Education diplomas. Moreover, the higher the initial education level of applicants (except for level III – few in number), the less they stated a positive impact. The form of the career path does not seem to have an impact in either direction, except for applicants unemployed when embarking on an APEL procedure and still unemployed at the time of the survey, who were less satisfied than the others by their APEL procedure. Lastly, in comparison with the younger and older age groups, it was the intermediate age groups (aged 40-49) who said that they had gained most confidence.

This model (Table 4) shows that the variables which have an impact on applicants' feelings as regards APEL differ to some extent from those having an impact on the pay increase indicator and that the same variables have different effects. It can be seen, for instance, that the best qualified from the point of view of their initial education have their qualification accredited more easily and obtain more than the others in terms of pay increases, even though they say that they are less satisfied than the other applicants. This observation highlights differences in terms of personal expectations of the system, even if it has positive effects on career paths.

Comments and prospects

Some concluding comments and prospects for development can be put forward at this point. As mentioned several times above, there are few data linking APEL procedures and career paths. France is something of a pioneer in this field. The analysis nevertheless came up against a number of limits which need to be pointed out.

First, and this is something regularly reported by researchers working with longitudinal data, especially when evaluating how effective a system is on career paths, the time period is undoubtedly too short fully to measure the effects of APEL on career path changes and for all the applicants to have at least completed the assessment process inherent in an APEL procedure. As well as data over a longer period, more data covering other qualifications should be collected and the questionnaire refined, especially from the point of view of the employment situation prior to the procedure and, in particular, after the procedure, possibly by collecting more information on the kind of work in which individuals are engaged.

Table 4. Estimation by a recursive bivariate Probit model
Better qualified people get more satisfaction from their
APEL procedure

Sample size: n=4 752	Coefficient	P> z	Mean
Equation 1: certification=1/0			0.42
Constant	-0.31**	0.014	-
Other Ministry of Social Affairs qualification	-0.34***	0.004	0.06
State social care worker's diploma, DEAVS	-0.41***	0.000	0.30
Vocational healthcare assistant's diploma, DPAS	-1.19***	0.000	0.28
Ministry of Education diploma	0.19**	0.020	0.27
Care worker's diploma (reference)	-	-	0.09
Initial education level 3	0.41***	0.005	0.02
Initial education level 4	0.30***	0.000	0.12
Initial education level 5 bis	0.03	0.646	0.25
Initial education level 5 with diploma	0.27***	0.000	0.28
Initial education level 5 without diploma	0.08	0.309	0.21
Initial education level 6 (reference)	-	-	0.12
Man	-0.07	0.289	0.13
With mentoring	0.46***	0.000	0.43
Age under 30	0.002	0.989	0.03
Age from 30 to 39	-0.14***	0.009	0.19
Age from 40 to 49 (reference)	-	-	0.53
Age over 50	-0.009	0.872	0.25
Employed at the time of the survey	0.26***	0.000	0.90
Born in France	0.004	0.939	0.78
Length of APEL procedure	-0.009**	0.018	10.7
Information on APEL obtained from superiors	0.22***	0.000	0.44
Information on APEL obtained from friends and family	-0.09*	0.065	0.19
Information on APEL obtained from the media	0.09	0.132	0.13
Information obtained from labour market intermediary bodies (reference)	-	-	0.24
Experience of less than 5 years	-0.12**	0.020	0.19
Experience of between 5 and 10 years	-0.06	0.138	0.35
Experience of more than 10 years	-	-	0.54
Employed by an individual at the time of the procedure	-0.13*	0.061	0.08
Employed in the public sector at the time of the procedure	-0.06	0.224	0.33
Employed in the private sector at the time of the procedure	-0.03	0.611	0.27
Employed in the voluntary sector at the time of the procedure (reference)	-	-	0.32
Number of dependent children	0.02	0.210	1.37
Equation 2: positive impact =1/0			0.65
Constant	-0.06	0.675	-
Full validation	0.62***	0.000	0.41
Other Ministry of Social Affairs qualification	-0.08	0.477	0.06

State social care worker's diploma, DEAVS	0.12	0.108	0.30
Vocational healthcare assistant's diploma, DPAS	0.55***	0.000	0.28
Ministry of Education diploma	-0.32***	0.000	0.27
Care worker's diploma (reference)	-	-	0.09
Initial education level 3	-0.10	0.490	0.02
Initial education level 4	-0.38***	0.000	0.12
Initial education level 5 bis	-0.03	0.708	0.25
Initial education level 5 with diploma	-0.27***	0.000	0.28
Initial education level 5 without diploma	-0.18***	0.008	0.21
Initial education level 6 (reference)	-	-	0.12
Man	-0.11*	0.076	0.13
Age under 30	-0.24**	0.024	0.03
Age from 30 to 39	-0.12**	0.025	0.19
Age from 40 to 49 (reference)	-	-	0.53
Age over 50	-0.18***	0.000	0.25
Unemployment to unemployment	-0.09	0.183	0.83
Unemployment to employment	0.019	0.851	0.05
Employment to unemployment	-0.21*	0.051	0.07
Employment to employment (reference)	-	-	0.05
Selection bias (Rho)	-0.65***	0.000	-
Log-likelihood value			-

***: significant at 1 %; **: significant at 5 %; *: significant at 10 %

Then, the work carried out here needs to be placed in a more international context at a time when there is little real information on the real and proven benefits of APEL (Werquin, 2008), not just for individuals – since APEL is an individual procedure within a career path – but also for the production organisations surrounding individuals, and on the value of certification in the qualification and certification market. Are we moving towards various kinds of market segmentation between certified and non-certified people? Is the value of qualifications acquired from learning which is essentially formal changing? Can we really differentiate formal learning from learning which is not? Many questions remain in abeyance and, overall, little is being done to answer them: this is rather surprising as at a time when almost all the countries of the OECD, for instance, are placing APEL high on the political agenda surrounding lifelong learning.

Lastly, and in particular, and although it undoubtedly plays a positive role, can it really be argued that APEL is a second chance strategy, bearing in mind the level of the applicants successfully obtaining and benefiting from it?

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