

Accreditation of Experiential Learning From Personal Initiative to Supervised Realization an Experiment at Bordeaux 1 University

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Introduction

In her report “La formation professionnelle – Diagnostics, défis et enjeux” published in 1999, Nicole PERY, State Secretary to Women’s Rights and Vocational Training, formulates the stakes of AEL in such terms:

‘In the face of accelerating changes, how can the 40% of the men and women in the current working population with an academic level below CAP (French Vocational Training Certificate) adapt, prone as they often are to being excluded from vocational training? Fortunately, many have acquired skills through their work experience. How can these be accredited so that they are more widely recognized through collectively devised guidelines?’

Similarly, a skilled worker, a junior manager or a senior manager will struggle to get their level recognized when they change companies or apply for a higher position if they have not completed graduate or post-graduate qualifications.

AEL (VAE in French), established by the 2002 Law of social modernization, aims at giving more flexibility to the job market by enabling the active population to get their career acquired skill recognized through obtaining a qualification or professional accreditation.

At the University of Bordeaux 1, between 2004 and 2008, 54 applicants obtained partial or total accreditation through this procedure, for a total of around 100 portfolios supervised per annum.

After a brief presentation of the legal framework of AEL, we shall present the context in which the procedure was set up at Bordeaux 1, the people involved in it and the workings of it. We shall pinpoint the key steps of the process as well as the impact of this new system on the teaching practices of the various departments. Finally, a preliminary assessment will enable us to offer a few suggested routes for the future development of AEL.

Legislative framework

The law of social modernization passed on January 17, 2002, has modified both the Education Code and the Labour Code, and states that ‘*any individual engaged in a working life is entitled to get accreditation for life long experience learning, particularly if it is professional, so as to acquire a qualification or diploma.*’

‘*Qualifications (...) are obtained through academic paths, vocational training, continuing education or, totally or partially, through accreditation of prior and experiential learning.*

Such accreditation entails the same effects as other modes of assessing knowledge and skills.

The whole of one’s professional competencies acquired in the course of a salaried, non-salaried or voluntary activity can be taken into account for accreditation, if corresponding to the contents of the qualification (...). The minimal required period of work is three years.’

Decree n°2002-590 of April 24, 2002 on the accreditation of experiential learning by Higher Education institutions specifies the following:

‘Is qualified for accreditation, experiential learning acquired through continuous or discontinuous, salaried, non-salaried or voluntary activity, totaling at least three years. Such competences should account for part or all of the knowledge and skills required for achieving the qualification the applicant has aimed for.’

Local context

At Bordeaux 1, the practice of validation of professional experience towards obtaining a qualification was initiated thanks to the VAP93 procedure implemented by a bill of law in 1992 and a decree in 1993. Such a procedure

took into account the professional activities derived from a minimum of five years of experience and made it possible to deliver all but one credit of a given qualification.

The AEL procedure adopted by the Board of Directors of the University in 2004 has taken up the specificities of the implementation of VAP93 at Bordeaux1, which now stand as the strong points in the current procedure:

- A unique cross-disciplinary panel (physics, IT mathematics, chemistry, Biological Sciences, Earth and Marine Science).
 - Monitoring provided by the Department of Continuing Education.
 - Head of studies for the requested qualification is involved right from the onset of the procedure.
- Two new elements are to be highlighted:
- Candidates are guided throughout the procedure.
 - The panel aims at truly taking into account the specificity of each applicant by exploring accreditation practises and distancing themselves from an academic assessment of the candidate's knowledge and skills.

These elements shall be discussed hereafter.

Chosen approach, devising the ael procedure and implementation

Main and secondary actors. The AEL procedure relies on a series of meetings with the key actors in the process which literally prepare the ground both for the candidate and the university. The candidate needs to take into account the specific requirements set by the university as well as reveal his own professional history, skills and projects. For the university, these meetings are steps in discovering the candidate's professional environment, and getting to know his/her own specific way of being professional. The main actors of AEL, in their order of intervention in the process involved, are the AEL Adviser and his/her assistant within the joint Department of Continuing Education and Vocational Training (Service Commun de la Formation Continue et de l'Apprentissage-SCFCA), the Studies Coordinator for the targeted qualification, a tutor, assessors in charge of assessing the candidate's application portfolio for the AEL jury, and finally, AEL panel members along with the Director.

At the **acceptance stage**, the candidate is supervised by the Continuing Education and Vocational Training Department (SCFCA), trained to inform professionals who are not very acquainted with academia.

If the candidate's project is legally acceptable, a *guidance and counselling meeting* is organised with the Studies Coordinator for the requested qualification and the university AEL adviser. It is essential for them to coordinate. This makes it possible to co-build an AEL procedure with the candidate, referring to the diploma's list of required skills and tasks, pedagogical modalities, should supplementary training be necessary, and checking the validity of the procedure in connection with the candidate's personal circumstances, including financial situation. The cooperation, from the onset of the procedure, of the teaching services and the department in charge of professional candidates is a source of coherence and cohesion for our university.

Finally comes the **tutor** whose role is to help the candidate enhance his/her professional experience, compe-

tences, skills and ability to complete his/her AEL portfolio. It can be a difficult task to write about oneself and keep an objective look at one's own writings. The tutor has the ability to help isolate essential aspects which one no longer analyses when at work, at the same time encouraging the candidate to tell his/her story, and boosting motivation when necessary because the process can be demanding and sometimes tedious!

Tutoring clearly contributes to the quality of the portfolios submitted to the panel. The candidates who have been supervised up to this stage all complete the process and go to the AEL panel.

Then comes the **assessment stage**. Two assessors, both experts in the field of competence of the requested qualification are in charge of evaluating the experience and competencies of the candidate. Two complementary viewpoints: one from an academic in the speciality, the other from a professional outside university. After they have read the candidate's portfolio, these assessors hold separate interviews with him/her.

The final meeting takes place between the **AEL panel** and the candidate. The panel listens to the Studies Coordinator and the two assessors, discusses with the candidate and deliberates.

All in all, the candidate will have met up to about fifteen different actors before total or partial qualification is granted to him/her. The candidate will have paid the university seven or eight visits for private meetings.

Hence, AEL is definitely not an administrative procedure, neither is it the granting of a qualification to a perfect stranger to university.

This step by step and thorough supervision is the only way to promote a technically difficult match between an individual experiential profile built through one's professional life, and the contents of a qualification stemming from a university curriculum.

Amongst secondary actors, we could mention the candidate's own company and the financing bodies in vocational training, which, by providing for the cost of AEL, greatly facilitate the candidate's involvement in the process, and enable him/her to complete the procedure in the best possible conditions.

The AEL procedure:

1. The first portfolio is sent to the candidate at his request, the aim of which is to study the legal and academic acceptance of the request.
2. After filling in this first portfolio, the candidate will submit it to the Joint Department for Continuing Education and Vocational Training (SCFCA) and pay the submission fees.
3. Guidance and Counselling meeting with the Studies Coordinator of the field of qualification and the university AEL Adviser (except when the application is not legally admissible)
4. If the application is admissible, the candidate is sent an AEL agreement.
5. He/she will sign the agreement – along with the financing body if such is the case- and pay for 30% of the AEL fees.
6. The candidate is then sent the AEL portfolio, which he/she will complete on his/her own or with guidance.

7. Final submission of the completed portfolio, along with payment of the balance on total fees and qualification enrolment fees.
8. The candidate is then officially registered at university.
9. The portfolio is then examined by 2 assessors appointed by the president of the AEL panel (one professional in the field and the other from the teaching faculty)
Each assessor meets the candidate and reports to the AEL panel.
10. The application is then examined by the AEL panel of the University of Bordeaux 1, which is composed of a representative of each sector, the Head of the IUT, the Head of the SCFCA and presided over by the Vice-President of CEVU [Council for University Studies]. The Head of Studies and the two assessors involved also sit on the panel.

Interview with the candidate.

AEL panel decision over requested accreditation.

Key points :

- Interview with three people for guidance and counselling at the beginning of the procedure,
- Tutoring
- A single and cross-disciplinary panel
- Participation from professionals on the AEL panel
- Steering from the Department of Continuing Education,
- Documentation drawn up for each person.

Variations: total or partial AEL. Nowadays, most applications submitted to the AEL result in total accreditation. However, university qualifications with openings to a broad spectrum of employment, accredit diverse abilities which are not all represented by each candidate's profile. Logically speaking, there should be numerous partial accreditations. This is not the case and this also explains the relatively low number of applications dealt with by the AEL panel.

This is where AEL implementation at our university appears to have its limits. Often, candidates cannot obtain training leave to follow the supplementary courses. From then on, if partial accreditation has been diagnosed at the beginning of the procedure, the candidates prefer to abandon their project.

However, the stakes for quantitative development of AEL at university – so keenly requested by the government – seem to us to lie in the combination of a partial AEL and tailored courses.

Experiment and first assessment

Testing the procedure. To widen the access to AEL device, the Bordeaux1 university experiments new teaching modalities intended to come as a supplement to an AEL approach.

The 1st one allows to answer a lack for technical or technological culture or/and regulation knowledge. A program of readings will be given to the candidate and the University assessor to the AEL panel will question the candidate during the interview about what he/she retained of his/her readings.

The 2nd one consists in suggesting to the candidate drafting a bibliographical synthesis or leading a project on a theme which is outside the field of his/her experience. He/she will also proceed from personal readings, but with

some guiding meetings with a professor. The synthesis is joined to the AEL portfolio.

The 3rd one is a guided selftraining. An individualized program of autotraining is established in dialogue between the candidate and the professor in charge of the diploma. A remote individualized educational supervision and stage meetings are planned. A written evaluation is organized. This last formula takes place within the framework of a training agreement.

An individualized training path, based on a precise analysis of the gaps of the candidate, is also proposed when the candidate lives near the university. It takes place within the standard face-to-face courses offered by the university. This training path may include full or part of credit.

In every case, these experiments allowed the total delivery of the diploma. But they are not numerous enough to make a first assessment. They need flexibility and availability of teaching staff, what is possible for one candidate from time to time, but would raise certainly problems in case of quantitative development of these particular cases. Hence, the university turns at the moment to the development of remote training courses which match ideally with an AEL approach.

Experience feedback from teaching staff

For the involved teaching staff, experience feedback creates the following main points. First of all, when the teaching team is sought for the first time for an AEL initiative, an understanding of the device and its implementation is a first stage which takes time, arouses questions and often requires numerous exchanges in particular with the SCFCA. Furthermore, for the following AEL applications, the human investment for the orientation and follow-up of the candidate remains consequent. Besides, in the absence of coded evaluation (no marks), the question arises to establish a form of balance between the key points and the weak points identified in the knowledge and skills of the candidates. This can lead to a certain difference of treatment between initial training and AEL for the attribution of the same diploma, and requires a quite particular attention of the teaching staff.

Finally, regarding the development of new educational modalities of training, the implementation of the AEL device and its evolutions are sources of teaching practices improvement for the whole department (supervised autotraining, synthesis writing and balance between face-to-face / remote training).

Strong points

The strong points we underline here are the ones only bound to choices of university Bordeaux1; they do not meet in all the universities.

Steering from the Department of Continuing Education (SCFCA) facilitates the adoption of a specific approach of the AEL public compared with the student public. It guarantees the consideration of the professional and family context of the candidate in the AEL approach. It gives to the candidate a referent common to all the stages of the AEL process. The AEL adviser coordinates all the actors and insures, as well as the unique panel, homogeneity of treatment of all the candidacies.

The tripartite Guidance and Counselling meeting at the beginning of procedure (Studies coordinator for the diploma, AEL Adviser, candidate) is a key factor of success of the approach. It allows estimating the relevance of the project and its feasibility from a diagnosis jointly elaborated and, consequently, shared with the applicant.

It allows to anticipate the possible difficulties and to elaborate an adequate answer. It gives to the candidate the means to decide then to continue or not his/her application with a good level of information.

The unique AEL panel, common to all the departments and diplomas of the university allowed elaborating a common practice in evaluation of candidacies. These never offer indeed a complete conformity with the frame of reference of the diploma. Linking the skills of the candidate to those aimed by the diploma, bases on a know-how which the panel acquired gradually. Besides, having a unique panel contributes to homogenize the criteria of evaluation in all the departments of the university [1].

Conclusion

The University of Bordeaux¹ has become involved in implementing the AEL procedure set up by 2002 law, by identifying the actors and a steering mode which has rewarded them with positive feedback from the candidates who accomplished the whole procedure.

A few years into the implementation of the procedure, the university now aims at *developing pedagogical training methods* enabling professionals' access to an accreditation package combining a partial AEL, specific courses while pursuing their career.

One response to this challenge over the last two years can be seen in the reorganization of work-based learning, which now concerns seventeen vocational degrees and five master specializations. The project for opening new e-training courses is another response.

Furthermore, the university is working on a complete recasting of information on qualifications through a new website which will particularly take into account the specific needs of working people and companies.

This project will contribute, on the one hand, to expanding AEL procedures – which, at the moment, only concentrate on very few diplomas - to the range of vocational degrees and masters, and on the other hand, to the quantitative upsurge of AEL as well as to optimizing the cost of getting the information to the public.

References

1. **Barbier J.-M.** Savoirs théoriques et savoirs d'action (Theoretical knowledge and knowledge of action). – PUF, 1996.

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AEL (VAE in French) was set up at the University of Bordeaux 1 in accordance with the provisions of the law of social modernization of January 17, 2002. After a brief rundown on the legislative framework and the local context, the article focuses on the role of the actors involved in a series of meetings with the applicant - steps giving the AEL procedure its pedagogical dimension. It highlights the approach at Bordeaux 1, as to those aspects in the procedure which depend on the choice and initiative of the universities themselves. Through current experimentation, this article also presents the effects of such a procedure on the academic contents and teaching methods used in our university. Finally, we shall complete this presentation by assessing the procedure and indicating the stakes for the future. Bibl. 1 (in English; abstracts in English, Russian and Lithuanian).

И. Санд, Г. Духамп. Внедрение эмпирического обучения в Бордоском университете // Электроника и электротехника. – Каунас: Технология, 2010. – № 6(102). – С. 39–42.

Описываются принципы и процедуры эмпирического обучения в разных университетах мира. Указано, что это зависит от самих университетов и взгляда. Даны принципы для будущего учебного процесса. Библи. 1 (на английском языке; рефераты на английском, русском и литовском яз.).

I. Sand, G. Duchamp. Empirinio mokymosi akreditacija Bordo 1 universitete: nuo asmeninės iniciatyvos iki realizacijos // Elektronika ir elektrotechnika. – Kaunas: Technologija, 2010. – Nr. 6(102). – P. 39–42.

Empirinis mokymasis pradėtas Bordo 1 universitete 2002 metų sausio 17 dieną pagal socialinės modernizacijos įstatymus. Pateiktas Bordo 1 universiteto požiūris į tokį mokymą. Įvertinti procedūrų aspektai, kurie priklauso nuo pačių universitetų pasirinkimo ir iniciatyvos. Apžvelgti universitete taikomi mokymo metodai, atėties nuostatai. Bibl. 1 (anglų kalba; santraukos anglų, rusų ir lietuvių k.).