

Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning in higher education: A European-North American comparison based on the French-Mexican cases

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the authors examine the specificity of a new process for obtaining qualifications in a French higher education, based on the recognition of professional experience (APEL or VAE in French) and the potential of its replication to other countries. Firstly, the purpose focuses on the pertinence of the notion of « competence » in accreditation of prior (experiential) learning (AP(E)L). Although APEL approaches in the French higher education system tend to lean toward the notion of « knowledge », it appears that an approach structured by competences and based on specific frames of reference, offers great potential. Secondly, the question of the replication of APEL process in the North American context is raised with a study of the Mexican case. If educational systems of both countries don't differ much, it appears that the transfer of the APEL process could be hazardous considering the cultural and social contexts and the difficulties associated to foreign educational transfers.

Key words: APEL - VAE – Higher education - Competency approach - France – Mexico

INTRODUCTION

Based on an action-research experience in the field of APEL (Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning)¹ in French higher education (Ansart, Sanséau 2008, Sanséau-Ansart, 2008), we undertook studies on the transferability of educational models from one context to another. APEL invites actors in the French education and teaching sector to follow a new direction whereby qualifications are granted essentially on the basis of individuals' acknowledged professional experience. In a country where access to qualifications remains a strong factor of recognition and professional advancement, the State sought to create qualifying conditions for those populations traditionally excluded or distanced from academic programs. In this paper, we set out a comparison of application of the experience of APEL from France to Mexico.

In the first section we shall outline the evolution of the accreditation of prior learning in France over the past 10 years

¹ The original designation for APEL in French is VAE for *Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience*.

and our position with respect to the concepts of competences and knowledge. The second section goes on to deal with the opportunity in implementing this accreditation process and the potential of such a process in a north-American country, Mexico.

1. APEL, A PROCESS LINKED TO A COMPETENCY APPROACH

APEL: stakes and issues

The accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) comes with a dual statement related to the evolution of the professional world and the specific nature of the French context. On the one hand, one can observe the necessity to establish solid references, certifying knowledge and know-how acquired in an unstable and estranged professional environment. On the other, in a country where qualifications and credentials receive enormous credit, it seems appropriate to give those with a lower level of education or suffering from discriminatory situations, recognition for their competences, thus facilitating their career evolution and further education. French education system is recognized, both for the primary education or secondary level, like largely centered on general disciplines general: French, mathematics, languages, history, geography, etc. Even if this tendency is no that strong in higher education, the courses comprise many theoretical lesson, and little of which one can describe as teaching practices centered on “knowledge in action”.

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the possibility of a transfer of the APEL experience to another continent, North America and another country, Mexico. In Mexico where qualifications and diplomas also receive huge credit, in the society and around the educational system, the study of the French case could be rich and highlight new tracks of experimentation.

Observations on APEL: background, nature and potential

APEL as defined in France within the frame of the social modernization act of 2002 pursues an approach that dates back to 1984. The law n° 84-52 of January 27, 1984 followed by the decree n° 85-906 of August 23, 1985 had introduced a certain number of changes in the traditional French process for

accessing higher education. Within this new framework, candidates seeking to access various levels of higher education could file a request for qualification exemption. Law n° 92-678 of July 20 1992, together with its decrees, bylaws, memorandums and circulars brought about huge changes in a process which began in 1985. Indeed students were offered the possibility of exemption from part of the qualification exams. This exemption was based on the accreditation of prior professional skills.

Law n° 2002-73 of January 17 2002 and its decree of application, so-called «the social modernization law » takes a new step forward in a process initiated in 1985 and completed in 1992: the possibility to obtain all or part of a qualification by means of Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL). This law modified the education and labor legislation².

APEL therefore has different issues at stake in comparison to the previous accreditation of professional skills, in so far as it gives a whole new perspective to life-long learning and the principles which govern the French education system. For the legislator, the most important issue was to have a whole new outlook on the notion of competences and qualifications for a European scene entailing more and more mobility, legibility and qualification.

It seems that the accreditation of professional skills only met with limited success³. This is probably what prompted the development and design of APEL. First of all, the accreditation of professional skills only gave access to a partial diploma. Thereafter, the accreditation of prior experiential learning gave access to the whole diploma or credential. The scope of accessible diplomas and credentials extensively broadened since APEL addressed diplomas and professional or technical qualifications issued by either secondary, higher, consular or branch institutions. Secondly, the duration and the type of experience evolved considerably. The required duration of prior professional experience was reduced from 5 years to 3. This experience could be acquired in a continuous or intermittent fashion. The types of experiences become more open and diversified. Any salaried or voluntary professional experience related to the targeted qualification was potentially acceptable. One could also request the accreditation of accomplished higher studies, notably in foreign institutions.

Indeed quite a considerable and intentional evolution took place between the accreditation of professional skills and that of prior

²To this effect, section L. 900-1 of the labor legislation act is completed by the following paragraph summarizing the spirit and will of the legislator: « Any professionally active person may request accreditation of prior experience in view of acquiring a diploma, professional credential or qualification figuring on the list drawn by the professional branch of the national joint labor commission and registered in the national directory of professional qualifications under article L. 335-6 of the education legislation ».

³ According to the Ministry of Education, only 16000 people benefited from the accreditation of professional skills in 2001. Paris II University underlined that, with respect to the provisions set in 1984-85, the 1992 accreditation of professional skills is « much more difficult because it demands the precise analysis of the competences of the candidates in terms of training modules ». For its part, Lille 3 University accused the accreditation of professional skills to have been « diverted from its original objective, the validation of studies over-riding the validation of professional experience ». For more details, refer to « Les universités face à la VAE (1^{ère} partie) » in *La lettre de l'étudiant*, n° 672 dated March 3, 2003, pp. 4-6.

experience. It now seeks to give a heavier emphasis to professional competences as opposed to points of referential knowledge. The notion of competency therefore lies at the heart of the APEL approach. It is experience that enables one to develop, employ and justify competences. The intention to extend APEL to encompass paid or unpaid activities exercised in a continuous manner or otherwise, clearly highlights an « experience » aspect in direct relation with the « competency » approach.

Positions surrounding the concept of competency

It seems important to make a clear distinction between « knowledge » and « competency ». Although on the one hand mastering a competency implies possessing relevant knowledge, possessing knowledge does not necessarily mean that the related or ensuing competences have been acquired.

The notion of competency has always been at the heart of corporate management. A rift however did take place when the traditional notion of required competences gave way to that of acquired competences (Retour, 2002). Although Human Resources Management was based on and oriented toward the notion of job position and employment, the mutations and evolutions induced by technological change and a perpetually unstable environment rendered this approach obsolete. For the company, it is human resources above all else that maintain relative stability. So the key now lies in the competences acquired by men and women in organizations, which indeed, is the founding principle of the competency model. Possessing the right competences at the right time and in the right situation is a success factor for many companies.

We can thus direct us towards the following posture: the concept of competence would revolve around APEL process. However, in the implementation of APEL, that creates a new situation which raises basic problems. Indeed, for the training companies and the institutions delivering the diplomas, the challenge becomes major because APEL rests on this concept of competence so discussed and sometimes difficult to apprehend (Robichon and Josenhans, 2004). So we move away from the approach “knowledge”, historically dominant in French higher education. Also, according to us, APEL constitutes a major change which load would seem not always perceived like it is. Accustomed and qualified to deliver titles and diplomas by delivering knowledge then by validating knowledge, the swift would be to consider APEL under a less academic and institutional new approach for the actors of higher education, the one of competences.

2. TOWARDS THE REPLICATION OF THE APEL IN THE MEXICAN CONTEXT? OBSERVATIONS AND MAIN ISSUES

In this part, our main goal is to evaluate the opportunity of transferring the APEL from the French context and educational system to the Mexican context. These countries have different histories, social systems, different geographical situations and too positions in our global economies: the top 6 world position for France for its economy and the situation of an emerging country for Mexico but part of the NAFTA (OECD, 2006, 2008). Our purpose is to evaluate the opportunity to transfer the APEL practice to the Mexican context and educational system, based on an evaluation of the two educational systems and a

prior experience of transfer of a competency based approach in education.

Main characteristics of the Mexican and the French education systems

A comparison of educational systems in nine countries of three large geographical regions: Europe, East Asia, and the Americas (Keating and al., 2002) analyses characteristics, behaviour, and apparent success of vocational education and training systems and the impact of change.

This study points out that the structure of the Mexican education system appears to be similar to the French system. Both systems are organized around a common platform of primary and lower secondary education. The upper secondary education is in both countries divided into general, technological and vocational streams. At the upper secondary level students enter either a general or a technical high school. In Mexico, for the post secondary education, similarities with the French system extend with different forms of university and technical education and training, including a short cycle “universidad tecnologica”. As has occurred in France, it has been proposed to allow the terminal vocational upper secondary programs to progress into higher education. Students exiting lower secondary education can also enter short-term training programs. Another similarity, the complexities related to the private and public administration plus the different levels of administrative actors involved. In Mexico technical and vocational, schools are divided in their administration as federal, state, private and independent (or autonomous). Further complexity is added through the existence of different authorities at the federal level.

This division is repeated at the higher education level. In France, private business and engineer schools (called “Grandes Ecoles”) attract the best students after a very selective process. Afterward, the students can pretend to the best job opportunities and usually will become part the business and administrative elites. In Mexico, university is highly differentiated and increasingly privatised. Quality varies within both the public and private sectors, but there is a stronger orientation of the private sector to the labour market.

In Mexico as in France, the system of initial vocational training is typical of the traditions of education and public provision and is symptomatic of a provider-led system. It may be surprising that Mexico has never intended to adopt the Latin American model of a payroll-based training levy as it has been used in France. It could be the result of the failure to ever introduce an apprenticeship system and the lack of orientation towards industry. It is also explained by the OECD (2008) conclusion that the system is primarily oriented towards successive levels of screening of students for entry into higher education. Moreover, it explains the heavily academic orientation of the technical programs (OECD 2008; Gutek, 2006; Hanson, 2006; Andere, 2004).

So, considering these similarities in the design and the operation of the Mexican and French educational systems, we can consider that the French APEL process could be a way to explore in Mexico to face the necessity for the people to get higher education degrees. In term of education, both countries have similarities: equivalent organization of educational systems, importance of titles and diplomas to have access to qualified jobs and to obtain recognition, private and public

higher educational system, strong higher technological degrees. The French experiment of APEL and the considerations around the central role of competences could be adopted in this country in order to facilitate the access to diploma.

But these similarities shouldn't hide other realities and strong differences. According to Minowa (1998), the Mexican system is also seen to be characterized by:

- poor preparation of workers for vocational/technical education and training;
- supply-driven programs, which lack flexibility and relevance to changing labour market needs;
- uneven quality of training programs, with no objective measures available to gauge the quality of outputs;
- lack of adequate institutional framework for private sector involvement in the design and provision of training.

Questions raised around the potential success of APEL in Mexico

We have considered that the core success of an APEL process, according to the French experiment, could be linked with the competency approach. What about such an orientation in Mexico?

In 1996, the establishment of a ‘Modernization Project’ by the World Bank has been funded to introduce a competency based approach to Technical Vocational Education Training (TVET) in Mexico. Following an Australian approach, this project has led to the establishment of a national authority, CONACER, with responsibility for the development of national industry-based ‘norms’ (competency standards), and a national system of assessment and certification.

According to (Keating and al., 2002) Mexico has invested with the CONACER a large amount of hope in the development of competency based training. This hope was based upon the assumption that such a system could help to reform supply-side orientation and its attendant problems of industry irrelevance, poor quality and low efficiency. It is also assumed that these established norms will provide a framework for a private training market and for the recognition of industry-based training.

The results of the CONACER project can be considered with two aspects (Keating and al., 2002). Firstly, the norms were broadly based, have avoided problems of atomisation and reductionism. On the other hand, this development has not been accompanied by any attempts to stimulate demand for training or incentives for private training providers. Mexico has avoided the Latin American models of payroll taxes and levies. But this alternative tended to ignore the demand side, and its assumption that the norms-based system could help to establish the missing link between supply and demand is difficult to understand.

A potential success based on the capacity to transfer foreign models

The question raised by the potential transfer of the APEL to the Mexican context must also be considered in term of transfer of a practise to another context or country.

Schriewer (2000), White (1986), Tanaka (2005), Kai (2005), focus in their researches on the role of culture in educational development in the situation of adoption of systems from one culture to another. Two main conclusions can be identified from their studies. The first one is that culture always reflects a pluralistic approach and that there is no one way to characterize appropriate environments for learning. Every attempt to transfer an educational model to another continent/country show that cultural environment is the key factor for acceptance or resilience. The second one is about the structural and contextual dimension. Even if it seems obvious and even profitable to transfer an educational model, the contextual factors can be the main difficulty, even in case of positive acceptance from the people. Historical, societal and structural factors always influence the success and the failure of such attempts. Another point to be considered, the way the transfer occurs. Hudson (2006) argues that according to Tanaka (2005) "the transformation of educational practices and concepts often occurs during their transfer from one cultural context to another and that this transformation can be understood as being due to both translation and implementational indigenisation of these practices and concepts".

Considering the CONACER example in Mexico, it clearly indicates the limitations to adopt other cultural models or practises (Keating and al., 2002). It particularly seems that the contextual dimension has been crucial. The difficulty of recognition of a competency based approach in Technical Vocational Education Training (TVET) in Mexico underlines the necessity to consider all aspects of TVET: both Initial Vocational Training and Continuous Vocational Training and the relationship between demand and supply. The Mexican reforms are an attempt to reform the provider-based system through an industry-oriented competences and recognition framework. But it has been pointed out by the OECD mission (1996) and this is the case in a number of countries, that TVET has historically been a residual aspect and the filtered outcomes of a selective academic system. Consequently its demand orientation has been essentially hierarchical rather than competency- or skills-based, and this is reinforced by a labour market that is not occupationally based. Attempts to strengthen the skills orientation of TVET, therefore, are unlikely to lead towards a stimulation of demand, especially in the absence of other demand-oriented interventions. The existence of a significant informal sector and the growth of small enterprises only add to the doubts about the effectiveness of these reforms imported from other contexts (OECD, 2006, 2008).

Nevertheless, replication of the French APEL could be a unique opportunity for Mexico with of course an adaptation to the Mexican educational, social and economical contexts. The lessons of the French experiment should be considered (opportunities vs obstacles, role of competences vs knowledge, transferability of competences, APEL track for the candidate) and not to be directly transferred to avoid difficulties such as the ones identified with CONACER. Such an experiment started in 2008 in Quebec (Canada) in order to develop and to recognise professional competences for workers who learnt their job 'in situation' or abroad. In Quebec, this process has been implemented with the reform of the law about competences. Specific norms for several jobs are at the moment being elaborated in order to create a real system of validation based on competences.

3. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper was the study of a new way to get diploma in France in higher education by the recognition of the professional experience and the adaptability of such a new process in a North American country, Mexico. Our main conclusions are the followings:

- The transfer of educational models are risky considering historical, cultural and social differences but it appears that each country or educational system should be aware of the potential of foreign experiments in the field of education. Analyzing other practices is a good way to question itself and to improve a system, which most of the time is not revisited very often.
- It should be interesting to test in real situation the transfer of the APEL from France to Mexico, as it's started in 2008 for Canada. Mexico as Canada is part of the NAFTA and a continental approach of the APEL could be developed and then implemented for the three North American countries: USA, Canada and Mexico. It would also highlight the proximity and the fundamental differences of these countries social and educational systems. It also would help to progress in the context of the social and educational issues of the NAFTA.
- Finally, the purpose of this paper was also to focus on a European experiment which is quite recent, not yet very popular worldwide, but which could help many countries in the world and its education specialists to improve their way to recognize experiment in order to maximize their work force and offering their economy certified and recognized competences.

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