

# The Lifelong Education – A Social Trend or Competence Need

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**Abstract** - This paper describes and compares the exemplified lifelong education programs in France and Norway and attempts to sketch the lifelong education programs and the intentions, expectations, and practical implications in these two countries.

Recent studies claimed increasing people's interests and engagement for life long education programs. There is a social trend that more and more people are enrolling part-time or flexible educational programs while they are working. The industries and business communities also express their needs for competence upgrading and flexible education offers.

Though illustrated French and Norwegian cases indicate the similar social trend and need for lifelong education, there is a distinction on profiles and focuses on practical implications of lifelong learners' expectations and learning approaches. The paper also intends to compare this distinction for the readers to address the national characteristics of lifelong education.

*Key words:*

*Lifelong education, Flexible education programs, Validation des Acquis et de l'Experience / Accreditation of prior learning*

## THE POPULARITY OF LIFELONG EDUCATION

Education has nowadays a new availability for most people and popularity is the key focus for this new option. Compared with the past, the university education becomes more flexible, open and available for average people. Lifelong education is a vital element of this new availability, as people are taking their education, not only by their young ages, but also at their middle or senior ages [3]. Lifelong education means also working or professional people taking their education during their work, which is also named job education [2].

However, lifelong education is also a wider definition and the implementations are certainly different from one place to another. There are obviously variant practices and standards for lifelong education at the different places, and not at least, people's intentions for lifelong education are also different.

While some use lifelong education as an option to obtain the academic degree through spare time, others just want to regain necessary knowledge from the education.

The coming description in this paper will provide readers stories and their results from a French example and a Norwegian study summary. The French case is particularly dealing with a specific higher educational procedure called Validation des Acquis, though this is a specific procedure. The procedure is used for candidates in companies for upgrading their academics titles based on their work experiences and achievement. Further description provides procedure details and how it was implemented, both in the process description and statistics in terms of number or applicants, the type of degrees they apply for, the results and outcome in a French university.

The Norwegian study summary illustrated an educational trend in Norway recently as the popularity of taking shorter courses or on job training compared with traditional formal education as for instance higher education. The Norwegian description also provides few case projects from a regional university college's flexible and continuing education programs offered for lifelong learners. Thus these programs might not only aim at the academic upgrading, but to some extent also cooperation with business communities and using companies as alternative laboratories and a part of university college's curriculum. There has been a clear intention that Norwegian governments encourage and even support financially for restructuring of the traditional and standardized higher education curriculum into continual and flexible educational offers.

## THE VALIDATION DES ACQUIS ET DE L'EXPERIENCE – A FRENCH WAY FOR UPGRADING LIFELONG LEARNING

The Validation des Acquis et de l'Experience (VAE) or Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) sometimes also coined Validation of Knowledge through Experience (VKE) is a full part of lifelong learning and has become a major concern for most universities worldwide. In this article, we will use the acronym APEL as it seems to be the most widely used throughout universities.

APEL has democratized at the European level in the recent years. As early as 1985, the French education system

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was implementing a global APEL scheme labelled Validation des Acquis 85 which enabled workers, jobless people and school / university drop-outs alike to apply and register for higher education courses and degrees though, owing to their particular situation, they did not satisfy the entry requirements for those degrees and courses from an academic point of view.

However, the year 2002 brought a big step forward with the law on social modernisation voted on January 17<sup>th</sup> of that year and enforcing a new way to graduate: the Validation des Acquis et de l'Experience. The aim of this article is to provide an insight into the basic modus operandi of such a large scale process by taking the sampled French University, l'université d'Orléans, (University of Orleans) as a case study and then comparing methods and implementation of such scheme to those existing at the sampled Norwegian university college, Høgskolen i Østfold (Østfold University College).

Firstly we will outline the origins, organisation and implementation of the system within both universities before focusing on the key figures and statistics after a 5-year experience in that field.

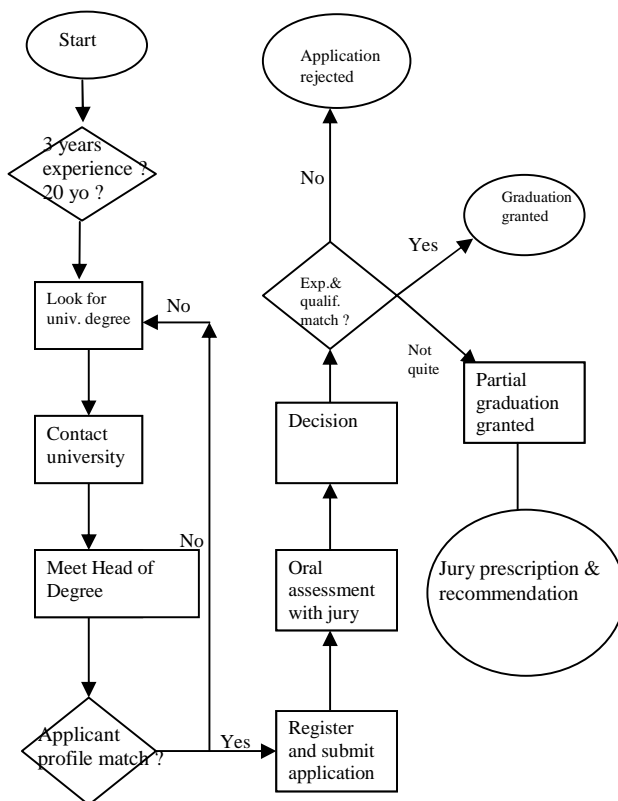


FIGURE 1  
UNIVERSITY OF ORLEANS APEL SIMPLIFIED

Less than 10 months after the law on social modernisation was passed, the Board of the University of Orleans was setting up and implementing the APEL framework. From a legal and organisational point of view, the procedure put into place is fairly simple. Each degree delivered at the university is subject

and eligible to APEL. The chart (fig.1) illustrates schematically the global procedure.

The cornerstone of this approach is the jury and the role and liberty it is given in assessing the various applications. Indeed, once the applicant has filled in and submitted the official comprehensive application form delivered by the university the application is subject to an oral assessment after which three options are offered. Either, the applicant is offered full graduation on the grounds on the information presented literally in the form and orally during the assessment and debate with the members of the jury, or the application is rejected, basically for failing to match the requirements and expertise of the degree.

There remains however a third way, called partial accreditation which acknowledges that part of the applicants' expertise matches the expectations of the jury yet some crucial notions are not yet mastered. Full accreditation is objected to and the jury may require further evidence and credit before assessing again the application. This stage is labelled "prescription". It may range from attendance of specific course and sitting for an academic exam to the writing out of a dissertation on a particular subject relevant to the degree. This prescription must however be completed within 3 years. The president of the jury may or may not demand that the applicant come forward again and present the results of his work and research.

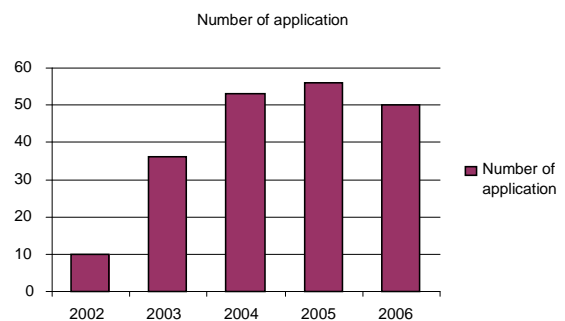


FIGURE 2  
THE NUMBER OF APEL APPLICANTS OVER YEARS

Ever since its first implementation, the scheme has proved very popular so we can assume the programme was put into place to answer a need among the population and among companies. Indeed the last 2 years have shown a growing interest among businesses for the APEL, and more and more enterprises have started a global APEL procedure for their employees by signing agreement with the university of Orleans companies such as *Credit Agricole* or even *Danone* to name but a few. The number of APEL applicants soared the first 2 years and kept increasing till 2005 but since then on the global figure tends to stabilize. (cf figure 2).

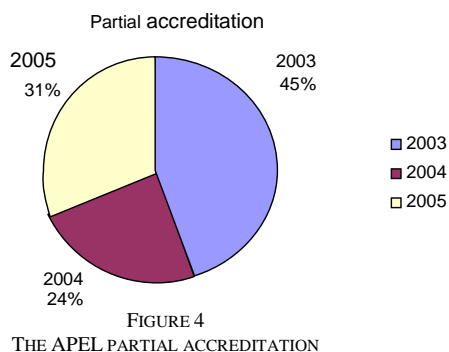
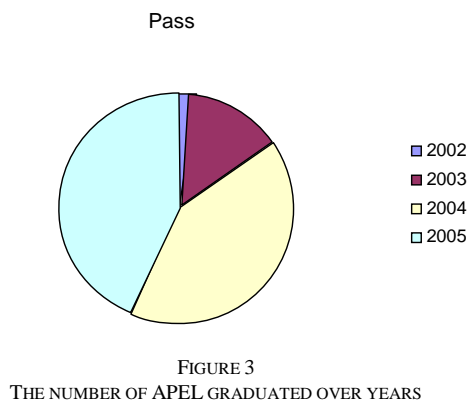
Several elements can account for the slowing number of applicants, among a wider national offer as more and more universities started their own APEL scheme, competition started de facto and nowadays applicants look for degrees in universities close to home or working place. The pricing

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policy is another element which is taken into consideration since the procedure is not free and the applicant will be charged with tuition and administrative fees. The last reason that can be put forward is linked to results and communication on those results. Candidates may have access to the statistics on the results in terms of full accreditation and we must acknowledge positive results (a large number APEL applicants graduating ) will weigh a lot when considering which university to choose, even more so since most degrees are national degrees and consequently are available throughout the country.

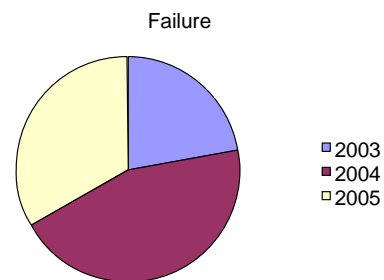
### OBSERVATIONS AND RESULTS FROM THE FRENCH SURVEYS

Figure 3, 4 and 5 (cf infra) shows a growing increase in the number of graduation among APEL applicants together will an overall decrease in the number of partial accreditation and failures.

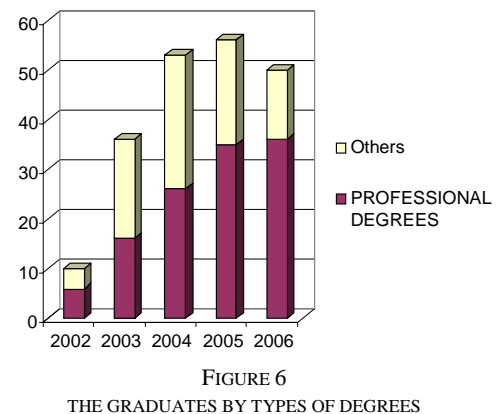


Both academic and social reasons can explained such a growth. Indeed as the procedure became more popular and more common we can clearly state that applications proved more focused and adapted to the existing degree offer, in the meantime, an endemic change in mentalities has also operated among jury members (both academics and professionals) as

people are now less reluctant to offer graduation to APEL applicants on the sole grounds of a form and oral assessment.



The APEL process is now fully integrated at all levels in the academic institution. Yet this trend shall also be attenuated if we look more closely to the distribution of graduates by types of degrees (cf fig.6).



The figure clearly shows a larger number of applicants and better results for technology and professional degrees lower down in the higher education pyramid of degrees (Diplome Universitaire de Technologie – DUT- and Licence, equivalent to 2 and 3-year grades) as opposed to those applying for general and higher up degrees such as Masters for instance.

This may be due to the fact that those courses are more practical, more work related and job-centred while traditional university courses remain more theoretical and academic.

It is important to note that in the French University Institutes of Technologies (which all belong to a mother university) at least 20% and 30% DUT and LPs courses must be taught by professionals. This one of a kind specificity confers pragmatism to the courses as students and faculty members alike are familiar with the demands and requirements of the job related to the field of study. We can imagine that they do not think in terms of theory, knowledge

and savour only but also value savoir-faire and skills among their students.

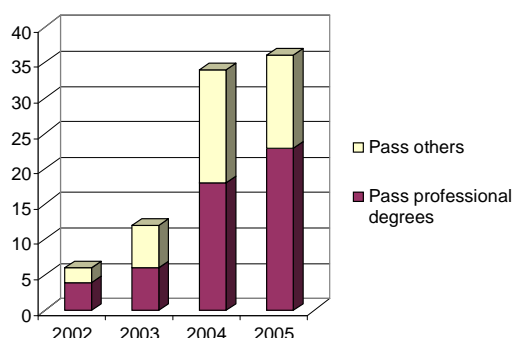


FIGURE 7  
THE PASS GRADUATES BY TYPES OF DEGREES

As a summary so far, we might conclude that APEL is a popular practice and this practice is still expanding for French professionals and career people. The motivations among the candidates are most likely upgrading their academics titles in order to meet the career requirements. We might call this phenomenon as a social trend. It is also likely to recognize the significant contributors for this process are their own working experiences, which can be accredited by educational institutes.

**LEARNING FOR DOING – A NORWEGIAN WAY FOR UPGRADING THE COMPETENCE**

The Norwegians are most active participants in lifelong learning programs and the Norwegian business communities are also engaged in this lifelong learning practice. In fact, the companies' employers are often important contributors and Norwegian employees are highly engaged in both continual education and training programs, see table I for details.

However, the same table also discloses the fact that formal education activities in Norway are not as higher as the lifelong learning ones. Countries as UK, New Zealand, USA, Australia, Netherlands and Czech Republic are all much higher than Norway regarding formal education participation. Similar trend can be observed in measurement of participating hours.

The Norwegian lifelong learning has its own characteristics as much attention is focused on learning practical and local knowledge, rather than theoretic approaches. "Learning for doing" philosophy and "learning by doing" practice are encouraged and noticed in many approaches. Hence, the rewarding of learning has also this characteristic so motivation can be explained in the same way.

The Norwegian society has a long tradition for equality cultures so there shall not be huge different rewards for different professions. This equality is also reflected on education and academic degrees, so the higher academic degrees and doctoral titles are not necessarily bringing the same height in career position or working wage, at least not without other evaluation as well. It is most likely the practical

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skills and work ability that counts. As a result, the learners, thus the lifelong learners are also consequently focusing on what learning effects and what skills are taught, not which academic degree will be awarded.

TABLE I  
EMPLOYERS SPONSORED CONTINUAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING PARTICIPATION STATISTICS SOURCE: OECD, IALS, REF. ON FAFO [1]

	Participation	Formal education	Hours	Formal education
Norway	46	1	38	3
United Kingdom	45	3	30	8
Denmark	45	1	39	2
Finland	42	1	23	1
New Zealand	36	4	30	7
United States	35	3	22	3
Canada	31	3	21	3
Australia	27	5	22	7
Netherlands	27	3	30	8
Czech Republic	20	5	18	5
Switzerland	15	0	9	1
Hungary	15	2	15	2
Italy	14	0	8	0
Belgium	13	0	10	0
Poland	12	2	10	2
Ireland	12	2	14	6

The similar trends are also noticed and confirmed in the relevant surveys, as for competence development and training for Norwegian employees in age groups 22-66 for 2003, noticed in figure 8, and preferable learning methods/ways for Norwegian lifelong learners in figure 9, and motivation for training and education for Norwegian lifelong learners, indicated in figure 10 [1].

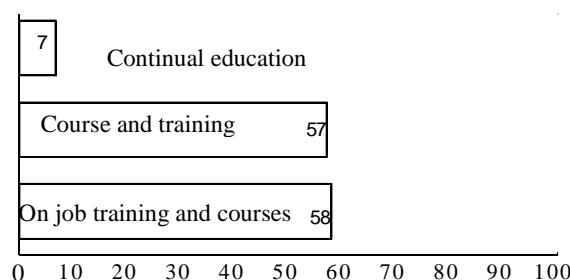


FIGURE 8  
COMPETENCE DEVELOPMENT AND TRAINING FOR NORWEGIAN EMPLOYEES AGE 22-66 IN 2003

Though figure 8, 9 and 10 are representing different measurements, their similar indications are obviously emphasized on the same direction: Thus, the lifelong learners are doing more “on job training courses, course and training”, they prefer to take “shorter courses”, and their motivations are reasoned either for “do a better job”, or because of “own interest”, or “required by the bosses” (related to a job situation or a job need), etc. These mentioned elements seem to be the main contributors for lifelong learning context in Norway.

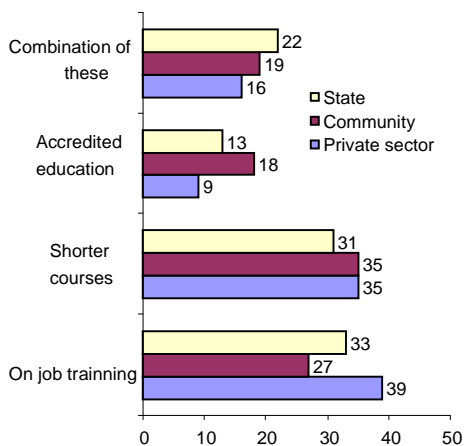


FIGURE 9  
PREFERABLE LEARNING METHODS FOR NORWEGIAN LIFELONG LEARNERS (SOURCE: FAFO, 2004)

The Norwegian private sector is a major actor for on job training, and their employees bear the majority part of lifelong learning activities. They are however less concerned for accredited education and unlikely to invest too heavy resources on this type of learning forms. The state is also concerned for on job training though not much as the private sector does. The local community appreciates most accredited education, but puts less emphasis on job training. However, the lifelong learners from all 3 actors focus almost equally on shorter courses, which can provide them updated knowledge quickly.

The clear distinction can also be noticed for learners’ motivations when comparing training courses and accredited education. As figure 10 indicated, taking “training courses” is a lot more reasonable and efficient for “doing a better job” than what accredited education can offer. The majority part of this action is logically initiated by the employers or bosses. On the other hand, in a long run, the accredited education might provide better opportunities for higher wages or further career promotions.

Further motivations for Norwegian lifelong learners’ can be noticed as their awareness for the expectations or long term effects of accredited education. Aside of wage potential, there has been mentioned motivation for accredited education as own interests, further education opportunities, better positions in a labor market, and even preparing for possibly new tasks. Hence, accredited education still has long term attractiveness for lifelong learners.

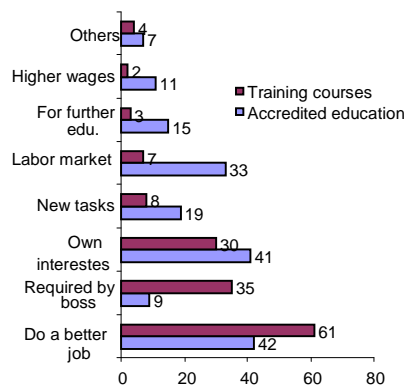


FIGURE 10  
MOTIVATION FOR TRAINING AND EDUCATION FOR LIFELONG LEARNERS (SOURCE: FAFO, 2004)

**THE NORWEGIAN UNIVERSITY COLLEGES ARE THE MAJOR CONTRIBUTORS FOR CONTINUAL EDUCATION**

There is however a challenge to realize the mentioned learning for doing philosophy and learning by doing practice. These tasks require relatively large resources to accomplish and wider network to spread to targeting learner groups. The lifelong learners are usually fulltime employees so they are seldom able to attending regular education programs, or other than on job training or short courses. It requires local solution and regional network to provide diverse educational offers for many different groups of lifelong learners.

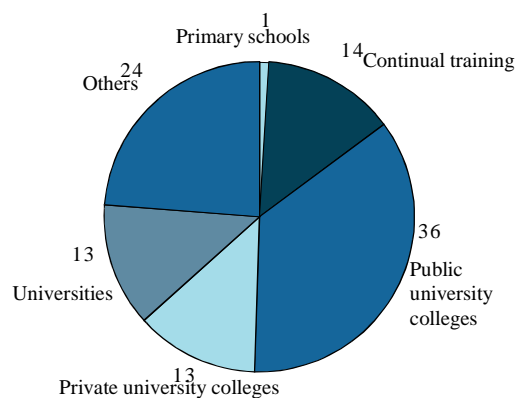


FIGURE 11  
NORWEGIAN UNIVERSITY COLLEGES ARE THE MAJOR CONTRIBUTORS FOR CONTINUAL EDUCATION

Such tasks are challengeable, but in reality are suitable for Norwegian university colleges, since their infrastructures and natures are able to meet the requirements for accomplishing these tasks. These university colleges are usually regionally located and professionally focused. The majority of college staff members are also coming from local industries or have close cooperation with local industries. In a way, it is a lot easier to undertake the continual education tasks as training

## COMPARISONS AND CONCLUSIONS

courses or shorter course at these university colleges. The proportion of Norwegian university colleges in contribution on continual education is illustrated in figure 11. As we can see, the university colleges, state and private, totally contributed almost half (36%+13%) of Norwegian continual education activities, which is a remarkable position.

TABLE II

PROJECT OVERVIEW FOR LIFELONG LEARNING OFFERS AT ØSTFOLD UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF NORWAY, FACULTY OF ENGINEERING

Year	Project	Off-campus	Degrees	Company attendants
1998	Pre-bachelor course in Physics	Yes	No	No
2001	Machine techniques for construction work	Yes	No	No
2002	Pedagogies for pre-school kids	Yes	No	No
2003	Pre-master course in Product design	Yes	Yes, partly	Yes
2004	Continual education in leadership	Yes	No	No
2005	Designing of concrete elements	Yes	No	Yes
2005	House price evaluating course	Yes	No	Yes
2006	Product design with web consulting	Yes	No	Yes
2007	Flexible education for innovation study	Yes	Yes, partly	Yes

Table II exemplified a typical category of such continual education activities offered by a sampled Norwegian regional university college, Østfold University College, Faculty of Engineering. These offers from 1998-2007 are primarily designed for off-campus attendants, in fact, most of them are company people or other professionals. Their backgrounds are all from military personnel located far away from the campus to pre-school teachers, university college staff, construction site managers and company employees. Furthermore, only two of these offers are partly connected with further degree offers, so most offers belong to “learning for doing” category, thus for knowledge updating rather than academic degree updating.

These offers also a dimension in cooperating with local business, not only as potential source for recruiting course applicants, but also as partners to create the course offers. The 2006 and 2007 projects in table II are typically in this category where business community and selected companies are also heavily involved in the project curriculum work. Both projects are also supported financially by Norwegian Open University, which is an operative affiliation under the government.

As a summary mentioned Norwegian continual education cases, we might conclude that “learning for doing well” is the key philosophy for the country’s lifelong learning context. The motivations among the candidates are most likely upgrading knowledge to do a better job or work requirements. We might call this phenomenon as a competence need. It is also likely to recognize the significant contributors for this process are business communities, companies and university colleges, who all are equally essential for the process.

Throughout the previous descriptions and illustrations on French and Norwegian cases for lifelong learning approaches, there are noticeable differences on the ways of lifelong learning practices.

The French approach APEL is rather an accreditation process to grant an academic degree through an evaluation by a determined procedure. In this context, the applicants’ working experiences, relevance and compatibility to the requirements are the essential attributes to the process. The advantage dimension is recognizing and transferring the real working experience into an academic degree within settled quality framework.

The Norwegian approach “learning for doing well”, such as, on job training, shorter courses and knowledge updating, as well as learners’ motivations for “doing a better job”, “work requirement”, “own interests” are all rather categorized as a short term, but usage focused lifelong learning strategy, which is a good element for competence upgrading. However, lack of interests and motivation for long term engagement for formal or accredited education such as degree awarding might be accounted as a disadvantage for international or R&D labor competence in a long run.

There are similar trends noticed for both countries despite of different approaches:

- Lifelong learning becomes gradually an essential education for people most, including professionals and career people
- Regional universities or university colleges are the major contributors and important actors for accomplishing the lifelong learning assignments in a detailed level
- Business communities and local industries are both locomotives for initiating lifelong learning actions and vital partners for defining or modifying the learning curriculum during this process

As the society development toward a direction of free market economy and services focused commercial activities, the education options will also be flexible and diverse for the most learners. Lifelong learning is definitely an alternative that both representing a new social trend and covering the competence need.

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