

REMA 2025

**6th International Conference
Education Across Borders**

Reimagining Education in the Modern Age

CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

Bitola, 2026



UNIVERSITY "ST. KLIMENT OHRIDSKI"



UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN MACEDONIA



FAN S. NOLI UNIVERSITY

University St. Kliment Ohridski – Bitola,
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ACCREDITATION OF PRIOR EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING FROM THE PERSPECTIVES OF HEIs

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Lifelong learning and continuous education: As the nature of work and career paths evolve, how do we foster a culture of lifelong learning? How can educational institutions support reskilling and upskilling throughout one's life?

Abstract

Although the policy framework of “Lifelong Learning for All” was adopted by OECD Ministers of Education as early as 1996, access to such learning opportunities remains limited and poorly supported in many regions, including the Western Balkans. Defined as a social mandate to ensure adequate and equitable learning opportunities, lifelong learning requires the coordinated functioning of various subsystems within education. This paper explores how higher education institutions (HEIs) in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Greece can advance lifelong learning through mechanisms such as the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). Drawing on qualitative data from institutional self-assessment questionnaires completed by representatives from six HEIs across the three countries, the study reveals a shared structural limitation: none of the national legal frameworks currently permit credit recognition beyond traditional educational pathways. Despite this constraint, the findings - though based on the perspectives of individual academic staff - indicate a strong potential for initiating APEL (Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning) through policy reforms in higher education. These reforms should aim to create more dynamic, responsive systems aligned with the evolving demands of the labor market. The paper recommends launching structured pilot initiatives, supported by national guidelines, as a first step. A phased implementation - initially allowing APEL for selected diploma types or programs - would help ensure quality assurance and institutional preparedness for broader adoption.

Keywords: Lifelong learning, continuous education, recognition of prior learning, higher education, Western Balkans, upskilling, reskilling

1. Introduction

Today's world is marked by rapid technological, economic, and social changes. The rapid development of technology, digitalization, and automation, alongside with population migration and environmental changes, necessitates new approaches, laws, and policies in higher education to better serve all types of learners, particularly non-traditional learners. Although the policy framework of ‘Lifelong Learning for All’ was adopted by OECD Ministers of Education as early as 1996 (OECD, 1996), access to lifelong learning opportunities remains limited and insufficiently supported in many regions. Conceived as a social mandate to ensure equitable and inclusive opportunities, lifelong learning requires the coordinated functioning of multiple subsystems within education. The ‘Lisbon Recognition Convention’ (Article IV.8, Council of Europe & UNESCO, 1997) underscores the importance of recognizing learning acquired through self-education, work, and life experiences, and highlights the necessity of accrediting such learning: if a country does accept non-traditional qualifications (which may include life/work experience/self-education), then foreign non-traditional qualifications of similar type must be assessed similarly to its own non-traditional qualifications. That means not discriminating simply because the learning was experiential, informal and/ or non-traditional. Said differently or in the spirit of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, “competence, knowledge and skills may also be acquired in other ways, such as through self-education, or work and life experience”.

According to Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research of the Republic of Austria (BMBWF, n.d.), learning acquired through work-life experience or self-education can be part of ‘non-traditional qualifications,’ if that Party's system formally considers them as such (i.e., if access to higher education is possible via non-traditional qualifications). That it is means they allow access to higher education via non-traditional qualifications.

2. Literature Review

To facilitate recognition, the European Commission funded the European Area of Recognition (EAR) project, which produced the European Recognition Manual for Higher Education Institutions (EAR-HEI Manual) offering practical guidelines for fair and consistent recognition procedures. The first edition was published in 2009, the second edition was published in 2016 (Nuffic & ENIC-NARIC Networks, 2016), and a third revised edition appeared in 2020. The Manual defines a flexible learning path as ‘any situation in which a graduate has obtained a qualification through a route other than the standard path followed by mainstream students’ (The European Recognition Manual for Higher Education Institutions, 2020, pp. 103-106).

At the same time, organizations are evolving into “intelligent” entities, characterized by digitized expertise, expert systems, and structured knowledge (Evers, 2010). This dynamism compels universities to reassert normative control over knowledge production and governance within increasingly market-driven systems (Fuller, 2018: 125). One significant development in this context is that higher education has embraced competency-based learning, making the awarding of academic credits for prior learning more consistent with its mission and strategic objectives.

In several European countries (See Table 1), the recognition and accreditation of prior learning (RPL/APEL) has moved from being an experimental initiative to becoming embedded in higher education policy and legislation. France has a long-standing system of Validation des acquis de l’expérience (VAE), which grants individuals the right to have work and life experience formally assessed toward qualifications. Austria has progressively introduced validation procedures within its National Qualifications Framework, linking non-formal and informal learning to recognized educational pathways. In Iceland, validation of prior learning has been incorporated into adult education and vocational training policies since the early 2000s, while Estonia has developed comprehensive RPL regulations in higher education, allowing prior work-based and non-formal learning to be accredited toward degrees.

Country	Key Policy / Legal Facts
France	Validation des Acquis de l’Expérience (VAE) is provided for by the Social Modernisation Act (Loi n° 2002-73 of 17 January 2002). Anyone in working life has the right to request recognition of work experience toward a professional qualification (Ministère de l’Éducation nationale, de l’Enseignement supérieur et de la Recherche, 2016)
Austria	Recognition of skills acquired in formal, non-formal, and informal settings is legally regulated; up to 60 ECTS credits can be recognized for prior learning in HEIs (in some cases), and professional & non-professional qualifications are included (AQ Austria, n.d.).
Estonia	Estonian legislation / higher education regulations require RPL procedures; prior learning (formal, non-formal, informal) may be taken into account in curriculum completion under certain institutional and legal rules (Tallin University, n.d. Recognition of Prior Learning, RPL)
Iceland	Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in higher education is developing actively in Iceland. Recent legislative changes (March 2024) to the Icelandic Qualification Framework allow institutions to recognize prior learning with the same academic weight as conventional coursework, validated by ECTS credits (Euroguidance Network, 2024)

Table 1. Key policy and legal facts on recognition and accreditation of prior learning in some European countries

In the Western Balkans (WB), Recognition and Accreditation of Prior Learning (RAPL) remains underutilized. From the other side, Western Balkans (WB) is on a path toward European integration - the EU is fully committed to the EU integration of the Western Balkans. Accession talks are underway with Montenegro and Serbia. In March 2020, the Council agreed to open accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo are potential candidates for EU membership. The prospect of EU membership is an incentive to bring forward reforms in the Western Balkans. Adopting Recognition and Accreditation of Prior Learning will align WB’s education system with the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) standards, facilitating easier recognition of qualifications and mobility for students and professionals within the EU. Furthermore, WB has a history of migration, with many individuals living and working abroad, and a significant number of returnees, while many people are choosing WB as their new home, who often face challenges in having their educational qualifications recognized in their new country. Recognition and Accreditation of Prior Learning could help recognize the qualifications and skills they acquired abroad, which may not be formally recognized within WB’s education system, aiding their reintegration into the labor market and society.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Questions

Given that institutional practice depends on enabling national frameworks, this study limits its scope to two core research questions: familiarity with APEL at the institutional level, and its positioning within national legal and normative provisions. Without a legal mandate, HEIs cannot engage in formal APEL practices; therefore, questions on engagement and implementation are treated as exploratory rather than central research questions.

1. To what extent are higher education institutions (HEIs) in Albania, Greece, and Bosnia and Herzegovina familiar with the concept and practice of Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL)?

2. How is APEL currently positioned within national legal and normative frameworks across Albania, Greece, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and are there explicit legal provisions or restrictions?

3.2 Study Design

This study uses a cross-sectional survey (pilot phase) to assess perceptions, practices, and institutional readiness regarding Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Greece. The pilot was conducted during the application stage of the APEL - WB, 'Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning Capacity Building in the Western Balkans' Project, No. 101236402, ERASMUS-EDU-2025-CBHE-STRAND-3, providing preliminary descriptive insights that were instrumental in the project's preparation and successful approval. The partner European Universities of this project will provide a detailed methodology and data collection guidelines so that all WB Partners can accurately document the existing conditions and institutional and legal frameworks in their respective countries.

3.3 Data collection

To establish a solid understanding of Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning in the WB and to gather empirical evidence on its relevance, a two-pronged data collection strategy was employed during the application stage of the project.

First, each Western Balkan university partner prepared a short report on the legislative framework for recognizing prior learning in their national context. These reports provided the foundation for comparative legal analysis, clarifying whether APEL was provisioned in law, prohibited or restricted, or simply absent from the normative framework.

Second, a structured questionnaire was administered to one representative from each of the six higher education institutions: four based in Albania, one in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and one in Greece (see Annex). The instrument was designed to capture both institutional familiarity with the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) and the legal–normative conditions shaping its adoption. The questionnaire consisted of nine items, all closed-ended, which included questions on whether respondents and their institutions were familiar with APEL; whether APEL was provisioned in national normative or accreditation frameworks; whether it was prohibited by law or subject to restrictions; and whether the higher education institution (HEI) had engaged in APEL practices or recognized APEL for credit transfer. Respondents were also asked to indicate whether their answers were representative of the views of the majority of academic staff within their HEI and, more broadly, within their country. The questionnaire was administered to one representative from each participating HEI (N = 6 in the pilot phase). This approach ensured that responses reflected an institutional perspective, while acknowledging that representativeness at the national level remained limited and exploratory.

This pilot provided a first insight into the situation and contributed to the project's successful selection. In the implementation phase, data collection will be expanded both in scope and depth: the questionnaire will include additional items, and responses will be gathered from all partner countries, including Kosovo, represented by the University of Prishtina and the Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Innovation. This broader dataset will provide the robust evidence base required for the implementation of the project.

4. Results and discussions

Analysis of the reports and questionnaire revealed that in none of the participating WB countries does the law permit HEI enrolment without a diploma obtained through a traditional educational path, highlighting the need for reform. However, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the adoption of the Qualification Framework is in process, which will address the issue of recognition of prior learning, so participation in this project would help its HEIs strategically solve this issue within the provisions of laws and other acts. This step ensures APEL is backed by concrete evidence, strengthening its role in creating a more inclusive and responsive higher education system in WB. In Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), the student demographics in BiH show that higher education institutions

are predominantly attended by so-called traditional students - young individuals who enrol in university immediately after completing high school. The percentage of non-traditional students (e.g., minorities, individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, older adults, parents with children, etc.) opting for formal education is minimal. For such individuals, informal learning and workplace training are far more accessible. Moreover, a significant number of people in BiH work in roles for which they lack formal education, having acquired their competencies through workplace learning. Recognizing these competencies would be highly valuable. The University of Sarajevo operates within the Sarajevo Canton under the Framework Law on Higher Education and the Canton Sarajevo Law on Higher Education. Regarding RAPL, University follows guidelines based on the (CIP) and internal university regulations. To date, the University of Sarajevo has recognized one set of non-formally acquired qualifications. However, no law or bylaw currently governs the recognition of prior learning that has not been verified through formal or informal education systems.

In Albania, while Article 89 of the Law No. 80 / 2015 “On Higher Education in the Republic of Albania” provides the possibility for HEIs “to offer possibilities for recognition of credit,” such possibilities are limited to formal learning acquired in a university setting. At the moment there is no established system for Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning. But Albania is in the process of transposing the EU legal framework on recognition of qualification, in accordance with the requirement of the EU Acquis in this regards. The Ministry of Education and Sports of Albania is responsible for elaborating and proposing the legal instruments that are going to effectively achieve the transposition of the respective Directives concerning recognition of qualification. This project would be of essential relevance for this ministry.

4.1 Familiarity with APEL

Most institutions reported familiarity with the concept of Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL). Out of six higher education institutions (HEIs), five (Sarajevo, POLIS, WISDOM, Democritus, LOGOS) indicated awareness, while only one institution (Kolegji Universitar Qiriazi, Albania) reported no familiarity. This indicates that at the institutional level, the concept of APEL is relatively well known, even if not yet widely implemented.

4.2 Normative and Legal Provisions

When asked whether APEL was included in national normative provisions, all responding HEIs indicated “No.” Two institutions (WISDOM University College and LOGOS University College, Albania) specifically pointed to restrictive elements in national legislation: WISDOM referenced Decision No. 41/2018, while LOGOS highlighted the Higher Education Law in Albania, which limits recognition to traditional credit transfer mechanisms. These responses suggest that although institutions are familiar with APEL, the lack of explicit legal frameworks—or, in some cases, restrictive provisions—remains a critical barrier.

4.3 Institutional Engagement

No institution reported active engagement in APEL. This aligns with the legal environment: without enabling provisions, HEIs cannot formally implement APEL procedures.

4.4 Credit Transfer

Despite the lack of engagement, five institutions affirmed that APEL could merit credit transfer in principle. This reflects a conceptual openness to the idea of recognizing prior learning, even if practice is blocked by legislation.

4.5 Representativeness of Responses

Only two institutions (POLIS and WISDOM) indicated that their responses reflect the views of the majority of staff at both institutional and national levels. For the remaining institutions, the responses appear to represent individual viewpoints. This limitation underscores the pilot nature of the survey and highlights the need for a broader, more representative data collection during the implementation phase.

5. Conclusions

5.1 Key Findings

- Awareness exists at institutional level, but legal and normative frameworks lag behind, preventing practical implementation.
- Conceptual openness to credit transfer is evident, even in the absence of enabling policies.

- Barriers are structural, not institutional: universities see the potential but are constrained by restrictive or missing provisions.
- Pilot procedures outlined by HEIs resemble international models of APEL, but require national-level authorization to be operationalized.

5.2 The impact of applying APEL –WB Project

The impact of applying APEL –WB Project can be significant across multiple dimensions:

1. Policy and Legal Reforms.

The project will deliver a White Paper & Policy Brief that directly addresses EU- and national-level decision-makers, informing strategic policy development and legislative adjustments to improve Higher Education accessibility (Legal possibility of accessing first-cycle higher education through the validation of non-formal and informal learning and other alternative access routes). Also, it will deliver clear and practical information about the legal and institutional frameworks in all participating countries. It will be written in plain language, including explanations of legal procedures and definitions of key terminologies. By producing transparent and accessible information, the report will facilitate the access of students into Higher Education in each of the WB Countries, in region and across Europe. Institutions and policymakers can use the report as a foundation for policy development and student support services. **1.2** Supports WB's integration into the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by drives updates to national legislation in line with EU standards and regulations.

2. Increased Access to Higher Education the disadvantaged groups.

The project aims to enables individuals without formal qualifications to enter HEIs, particularly adults, dropouts, and migrants. Also, expands opportunities for lifelong learning and professional development.

3. Stronger Alignment with the Labor Market.

The HEIs recognize and validate work-based skills, enhancing employability; helps bridge the gap between academic qualifications and industry needs.

4. Economic and Social Inclusion.

Reduces educational inequality and fosters social mobility.

5. Higher Education System Modernization.

Encourages universities to adopt more flexible and inclusive learning pathways.

6. A phased implementation - initially allowing APEL-WB for selected diploma types or programs - would help ensure quality assurance and institutional preparedness for broader adoption.

6. Ethics

Participation in the pilot survey was voluntary, with informed consent obtained prior to data collection. No personally identifying information was gathered, and data are reported in aggregate. Data collection and analysis followed institutional ethical standards and aligned with the requirements of Higher Education programme.

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7. Limitations (pilot)

This pilot was conducted during the application phase of the APEL-WB project (prior to the official start), with a small sample (N≈6). The small N limits precision, precludes factor analysis, and means that findings are exploratory - used primarily to refine the instrument and procedures for the project's implementation. The pilot nevertheless provides an initial evidence base for regional development, aligning with existing European policy on validation of prior learning and examples from EU Member States that already regulate APEL (validation of non-formal and informal learning) in law and/or national frameworks.

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