Recognizing Informal and Non-Formal Learning: Potential Advantages of Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) in Bulgarian VET

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ABSTRACT: Vocational education and training (VET) is a key factor in the development of human capital, competitiveness and social cohesion in modern society. VET provides an opportunity to acquire and update knowledge, skills and competencies necessary for successful implementation on the labor market and in life. VET also helps meet the needs of employers and the economy for a skilled and adaptable workforce capable of meeting the dynamic and complex challenges of technological and social change. In this context, one of the main objectives of VET is to ensure flexibility and transparency of educational pathways and to promote continuous lifelong learning. In the article, an adaptive flexible model working towards this goal is proposed, namely the development and implementation of an effective and fair system for recognizing and evaluating the person's previous training, knowledge and skills, regardless of whether it is formal, informal or self-taught, i.e. called APL (Accreditation of Prior Learning) system, which currently have no analogue in Bulgaria. The subject of this article are several modifications of the APL, applicable to the conditions of the Bulgarian VET. The article posits that APL is important and useful mechanism for modernization and improvement on the professional education and training in Bulgaria, which can contribute for increasing on competitiveness and employment on the working strength, as well as for development on economy and society. For realizing fully the benefits from APL, it is necessary to overcome the existing ones obstacles and to introduce suitable changes and innovations in the system on the professional education and training. APL as a process is a process through which a person's prior learning is recognized and assessed, regardless of whether it is formal, informal or self-learning.

KEYWORDS: Accreditation of Prior Learning, Professional education, educational institutions, institutional framework.

INTRODUCTION

The establishment of an APL system in vocational secondary education can have several positive benefits, both for students, educational institutions and the labor market. Some of these benefits could be summarized as:

- ✓ Increasing the motivation and self-esteem of students who can prove their abilities and receive recognition for them.
- ✓ Facilitating the transition between different types and levels of education by ensuring flexibility and transparency of educational pathways (*Tutschner et al., 2009; Murphy, 2004*).
- ✓ Saving time and resources by avoiding repeating training that has already been successfully completed.
- ✓ Improving the quality and relevance of vocational education and training, taking into account the real needs and interests of students and employers.
- ✓ Stimulating continuous learning and development of key competencies by encouraging students to engage in various forms of lifelong learning.
- ✓ Potential integration of intelligent urban environments with adaptable professional labour market and design paradigms, aligned with innovative and sustainable urban economic models (*Nikolov, 2024a, 2024b*).
- ✓ Reduction of social and educational inequality (*Rusinov, 2025*) by supporting students with lower academic performance but unrecognized latent practical abilities, thereby preventing potential decline in motivation and achievement caused by difficulties with theoretical disciplines while motivating sustained engagement through the formal recognition and validation of their prior practical experience.

In order to realize these benefits, it is necessary to develop and implement an effective and fair *APL system* that meets national and European standards and criteria for quality education. In Bulgaria, there are some legislative and institutional foundations for

implementing APL, such as the Vocational Education and Training Act, the National Agency for Vocational Education and Training, the National Qualifications Framework and the European Qualifications Framework.

Accreditation of Prior Learning (**APL**) or *Credit for Prior Learning* (**CPL**) (*Klein-Collins & Shafenberg, 2023*) is a process by which a person's prior learning is recognized and assessed, regardless of whether it is formal, informal or self-directed. Formal learning is organized and structured learning that takes place in educational institutions and leads to the acquisition of diplomas or certificates . Informal learning is organized and structured learning that takes place outside educational institutions and does not lead to the acquisition of diplomas or certificates, but can be documented in other ways. Self-directed learning is unplanned and unstructured learning that is carried out by the person himself in everyday life, work or leisure time and does not lead to the acquisition of diplomas or certificates, nor can it be documented. There are numerous proofs for positive effects after inculcation in different countries and educational contexts worldwide (*Leong, 2024; Raciti et al, 2024; Susan, 2022; Ooi & Eak, 2019*).

The aim of APL is to avoid the repetition of previously acquired knowledge, skills and competences by ensuring that the individual has achieved the learning outcomes appropriate to the relevant degree or qualification. (*Redodndo et al. 2021*). APL can be used for purposes related to the individual's education, employment, or personal development. For example, APL can enable an individual to enroll in a higher level of education, obtain a better job or promotion, retrain for a new profession, improve their competencies, or increase their self-esteem. In order to implement APL, four main steps need to be carried out: identification, documentation, assessment and recognition of prior learning. Identification is the process by which the individual determines and analyses their knowledge, skills and competences acquired through various forms of learning. Documentation is the process by which the individual collects and presents evidence of their prior learning, such as diplomas, certificates, portfolios, references, video or audio recordings, etc. Assessment is the process by which a qualified assessor checks and compares the evidence of prior learning with the learning outcomes specified for the relevant degree or qualification. Recognition is the process by which the educational institution or employer issues a document certifying that the individual has achieved the specified learning outcomes and can receive credits, a diploma, certificate, licence or other recognition.

The status and challenges of the development and implementation of APL in vocational secondary education in Bulgaria.

In Bulgaria, there are some legislative and institutional foundations for implementing APL in vocational secondary education, such as the Vocational Education and Training Act (VETA), the National Agency for Vocational Education and Training, the National Qualifications Framework and the European Qualifications Framework. According to the VETA, students in vocational schools can receive recognition of their prior learning if they have fulfilled certain conditions, such as having completed primary education, having worked in the relevant profession or having passed an exam for acquiring a qualification. However, validation and certification with a VET certificate occurs only in the studied specialty or in one that is taught at school. In the presence of acquired knowledge by a student, but a lack of expert capacity on the part of the school, a situation arises in which this additional knowledge is not given a chance to be validated within the school itself and within the current educational level covering a certain curriculum framework; That is, the fact that the Law allows us to validate knowledge, validation is devoid of any flexibility and it is possible only and only when validating a complete professional qualification, but not in nuanced skills that, if validated and additionally entered in the diploma, will give better " readability " to the diploma. Example: a student in a computer specialty studies a given computer language and the student additionally speaks a second and third, in the absence of capacity from the teaching staff for the opportunity to validate the additional knowledge, repeat and third does not require which languages the student is deprived of the opportunity to prove his skills to be validated and entered in the diploma plus the language that is studied and so in his professional qualification we will have the availability of not one but three programming languages, that is why I said earlier that the diploma becomes more readable in the sense that a future employer sees additional skills much more clearly and can evaluate the candidate much better. Validation in VET, in its current legal framework, is a validation of an entire specialty requiring several exams, but it also lacks the flexibility to validate a specific skill, a specific mastered digital tool, a specific programming language, specific technical skills, part of a specialty or profession, thus acting as a mechanism to disadvantage advanced students in their desire to validate the full range of knowledge and skills they possess and which they have acquired in a non-formal and informal way. According to the *National Qualifications Framework* and the *European Qualifications Framework*, APL can lead to the acquisition of qualifications or parts of qualifications that are comparable to those acquired through formal training, and which are recognized at national and European level. And especially for technical specialties, any additional technical skill that cannot be legally validated

and entered into the diploma is a corresponding negative for the entire system and especially in the part for the assessment of knowledge and skills, as well as has a serious impact on the students themselves.

Measures for introducing and improving APL in vocational secondary education in Bulgaria.
Introducing a comprehensive A PL system involves overcoming a number of challenges (*Chisvert-Tarazona, 2019; Tudor, 1991*) such as:

- Raising awareness and sensitization of all stakeholders about the objectives, principles, methods and outcomes of APL, using various channels and forms of communication, such as brochures, posters, websites, seminars, workshops, conferences, etc.
- Improving the preparation and qualification of teachers and assessors (*Tutschner et al., 2009),* so that they have the necessary knowledge, skills and competencies to conduct APL processes, by organizing specialized courses, training, internships, mentoring programs, etc.
- Strengthening coordination and cooperation between different stakeholders by establishing and maintaining networks, platforms, advisory boards, working groups, etc. to exchange information, experience and good practices on APL, as well as to develop and implement common standards, criteria, procedures and tools for APL.
- Providing financial and technical support for the development and implementation of APL systems and tools, mobilizing various sources of funding, such as national and European funds, private sponsors, fees, etc., as well as investing in modern technology and equipment, such as computers, software, internet, video and audio equipment, etc.
- Harmonization and compatibility of APL systems and procedures with national and European qualifications and credit frameworks, ensuring transparency, recognition and portability of qualifications and competences acquired through APL, as well as facilitating the mobility of students and workers between different educational and work organizations.

Proposal for adaptive A PL models in education
In accordance with the objectives of the European and National Strategy, we have proposed for consideration two models of APL that are implemented or can be implemented in vocational secondary education in Bulgaria. These options are related to different goals, conditions and consequences of APL for students and educational institutions.

Model 1: *Recognition of informal knowledge in a subject studied*
This model of APL refers to cases where a student has informal knowledge in a subject that he/she studies in vocational secondary education such as: knowledge of computer literacy, programming, scientific knowledge or art. In case the student believes that he/she covers the theoretical or practical curriculum, he/she has the right to demand to defend his/her knowledge and skills before a committee that will assess his/her competence , based on the learning material and validate the level of professional qualification that the student has achieved. The aim is to avoid repetition of studying the subject and to provide the person with the opportunity - by exempting from class - to devote himself/herself to other disciplines available at the school. In case the student has passed the knowledge test with an excellent grade, the APL results are entered in the student's diploma as a current annual grade. The attestation process is repeated annually according to the learning material studied during the school year.
This APL model has a number of advantages for students and educational institutions. For students, this option means that they receive recognition of their prior learning and experience, which increases their motivation, satisfaction and self-confidence. They also save time and resources that they can use for other purposes. For educational institutions, this option means that they can optimize their curriculum and offer more flexible and individual learning plans. They can also increase the quality of vocational training by focusing on knowledge and skills that are more relevant and relevant to the labor market.

Model 2: *APL in vocational secondary education*
This model refers to cases where a student has knowledge in a subject they study in vocational secondary education and can have it recognized through a credit transfer system. This system allows students to transfer credits from one educational institution to another, or from one level of education to another, recognizing the knowledge and skills they have acquired. The credit transfer system is part of the European Framework for Vocational Education and Training, which aims to improve the transparency, comparability and recognition of qualifications in Europe.

An example of applying the APL model in vocational secondary education is the following: A student who chooses a specialty in electrical engineering and electronics may have knowledge in mathematics, physics or computer science that he or she has acquired through self-study, courses or other forms of informal learning. The student can declare this knowledge to the relevant committee at the school. The committee evaluates the student's knowledge according to certain criteria and attests and validates the level of professional qualification that the student has achieved. The student then receives credits for these subjects, which are taken into account in his or her curriculum. Thus, the student can take fewer exams, graduate earlier or study and graduate with more credits and validated skills.

For students, this model means that they receive recognition of their prior learning and experience, which increases their motivation, satisfaction and self-esteem. They also gain greater flexibility and mobility in their educational trajectory, as they can transfer credits between different educational institutions or levels of education. For educational institutions, the advantages relate to the fact that they can increase the attractiveness and quality of vocational education and training by integrating into the European framework and respecting common standards and procedures for the recognition of qualifications.

The educational models presented provide a conceptual and sequential overview of the different research steps in the overall process and define them according to their research study. The research model provides a link between the methods and models that have been applied and links the results to the methods, models and professional product.

Recognizing students' knowledge

APL is a process by which a person's prior learning, whether formal, non-formal or self-taught, is recognised and assessed. This allows learners to claim their APL knowledge by following the terms and procedures in the syllabus or learning guide.

The *process for applying* for an APL is as follows:

1. It is determined what knowledge and skills the individuals have and in which subjects or specialties. Evidence of previous training is presented, such as certificates, diplomas, portfolios, references, videos, tests, etc.

2. An application for APL is submitted to the school, indicating what knowledge and skills will be recognized and for which subjects or specialties.

3. An APL committee is formed at the school to assess knowledge and skills according to certain criteria and to attest and validate the level of professional qualification. The committee may require a meeting, interview, presentation or practical test to give a competent assessment. It also has the right to approve, reject or propose an alternative to the APL application.

4. The committee notifies the student of the APL results in writing, stating what knowledge and skills are recognized and what consequences this has for the individual's education. The APL results are reflected in the curriculum and in the diploma.

METHODOLOGY

The study is based on a quantitative method, using a questionnaire with closed questions, distributed among 80 students from two vocational high schools in Bulgaria. The questionnaire contains questions related to the demographic data of the students, their interest and participation in vocational training, their perceptions and rates of implementation of APL, their assessments and self-assessments of their informal knowledge, skills and competences, their plans and expectations for the future. The data from the survey are analyzed using statistical software R, using descriptive and inferential statistics, looking for differences and correlations between the different variables.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Key to evaluating the survey and criteria for respondents:

The survey scoring key determines what variables will be measured, such as motivation, satisfaction, achievements, etc.

Likert scale is used; Averages , sums, percentages, and other statistical indicators are determined for each variable and for the entire survey.

In order to present criteria to respondents, it is necessary to determine what the characteristics of the target group being studied are, for example, gender, age, education, profession, etc. It is then determined how respondents who meet these characteristics will be selected, using methods such as random selection, stratified selection, quota selection, etc.

Results of the survey on the attitudes and satisfaction of students with vocational secondary education

The survey was conducted in May 2024 among 40 students from two vocational high schools in Bulgaria - one that fictitiously implemented APL testing and validation of APL knowledge . The survey aims to measure the impact of APL on student motivation, satisfaction and achievement. The survey contains 15 questions that use a five-point Likert scale. The survey results are presented below in percentage and quantitative terms.

Demographic data

Of the 90 students who completed the survey, 15 were female and 75 were male. The average age of the students was 17.5 years. The educational profiles were distributed as follows:

Educational profile	Number of students	Percentage
Electrical engineering	20	2 5%
Measuring equipment	10	12.5 %
Computer Science	55	68.75 %
Optics	5	6.25 %

Motivation

Students were asked to express their level of agreement or disagreement with four statements related to their motivation for vocational training. The results are shown in the following table:

Table 1. Percentage distribution of survey data for degree of agreement with questions.

STATEMENT	I STRONGLY DISAGREE	I MOST LIKELY DISAGREE	I CANNOT EVALUATE	I AM MORE SURE TO AGREE	I TOTALLY AGREE
STUDY WITH PLEASURE AND DESIRE	6.67 % (6)	10% (9)	13.33 % (12)	40% (36)	30% (27)
I HAVE GOALS AND PLANS FOR MY FUTURE	3.33% (3)	3.33 % (10)	11.11 % (20)	38.89 % (35)	22.44 % (22)
I THINK APL WILL HELP ME ACQUIRE OR IMPROVE MY KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS AND COMPETENCES	3.33% (3)	3.33% (3)	15.56 % (14)	27.78 % (2 5)	50 % (45)
I HAVE KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE WITH RELATED PROFESSIONS CLOSE TO THE ONE I AM STUDYING.	2.22 % (2)	4.44 % (4)	6.67 % (6)	2 2.22 % (20)	6 4.44 % (58)
I HAVE PRIOR KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE IN THE SUBJECTS I STUDY.	3.33% (3)	6.67 % (6)	12.22 % (1 1)	50 % (45)	27.78 % (2 5)

From the table it can be seen that the students have a high level of motivation for vocational training, with most of them rather or completely agreeing with the statements. The highest level of agreement is in relation to the presence of goals and plans for the future, and the lowest - in relation to the benefit of APL. Also, it can be seen that there is a difference between the groups that participate and do not participate in APL, with those who participate having a higher level of motivation than those who do not participate. This can be explained by the fact that APL stimulates interest, participation and recognition of vocational training.

Satisfaction

Students were asked to express their degree of agreement or disagreement with four statements related to their satisfaction with vocational training. The results are shown in the following table:

Table 2. Percentage distribution on questionnaire data for degree on satisfaction with questions .

STATEMENT	I STRONGLY DISAGREE	I MOST LIKELY DISAGREE	I CANNOT EVALUATE	I AM MORE SURE TO AGREE	I TOTALLY AGREE
I AM SATISFIED WITH THE QUALITY OF THE PROFESSIONAL TRAINING I RECEIVED	70% (63)	8.89% (8)	5.56% (5)	8.89% (8)	6.67% (6)
I AM SATISFIED WITH THE ATTITUDE OF TEACHERS AND EVALUATORS TOWARDS ME	5.56% (45)	38.89% (35)	0% (0)	17.78% (16)	3.33 % (10)
I AM SATISFIED WITH THE CONDITIONS AND RESOURCES FOR VOCATIONAL TRAINING	22.22% (20)	55.56% (50)	0% (0)	16.67% (15)	5.56% (5)
I AM SATISFIED WITH THE APL PROCESS AND RESULTS	3.33% (3)	5.56% (5)	8.89% (8)	51.11% (46)	31.11% (28)

From the table it can be seen that students have an average level of satisfaction with vocational training, with most of them somewhat or completely agreeing with the statements. The highest level of agreement is with regard to the attitude of teachers and assessors, and the lowest with regard to the conditions and resources for vocational training. It can also be seen that there is a difference between the groups that participate and do not participate in APL, with those that participate having a lower level of satisfaction than those that do not. This can be explained by the fact that APL is a complex and unclear process that requires more time, effort and adaptation from the students.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

APL is an important and useful process that can contribute to improving the quality and relevance of vocational secondary education, as well as to meeting the needs and interests of students and employers. In order to realize these benefits, it is necessary to develop and implement an effective and fair APL system that meets national and European standards and criteria for quality education. This requires the coordination of different principles, standards, criteria, methods and tools, as well as cooperation between different stakeholders who share a common vision and goals for APL. This also requires financial and technical support, using different sources of funding and modern technology. In this way, APL can become a reality and bring benefits to all participants in vocational secondary education.

Vocational education and training in Bulgaria are facing a number of challenges and needs for changes related to the dynamics of the labor market, the introduction of new technologies and the improvement of the quality of vocational training. In this context, APL represents an innovative and flexible mechanism that can contribute to increasing the attractiveness, accessibility and effectiveness of vocational education and training. APL stimulates the interest, participation and recognition of students in vocational training, giving them the opportunity to obtain recognition of their prior learning and experience, to qualify faster and easier for the desired profession, to continue their education or career. APL also helps to create a closer link between vocational education and training and the needs of employers, ensuring a better match between the knowledge, skills and competences of the workforce and the requirements of the labor market.

Despite the positive effects of APL, this process also faces a number of difficulties and obstacles that require further development and improvement. Some of them are related to the insufficient information and awareness of students, teachers, employers and other stakeholders about the goals, benefits and conditions of APL, the lack of a unified and clear institutional and legal framework for regulating and supporting APL, the lack of capacity and resources to conduct quality and reliable assessment of prior learning, the low level of recognition and mutual recognition of APL results by different educational and employment institutions.

To overcome these problems and optimise the potential of APL, concerted and targeted action by all actors in the VET process is needed. Some of the possible measures are related to raising awareness and motivation of students and other stakeholders about APL, developing and implementing national standards and procedures for APL, ensuring sufficient financial, material and human

resources for APL, developing high-quality and diverse methods and tools for assessing prior learning, strengthening cooperation and communication between VET and employers, and promoting the recognition and mutual recognition of APL outcomes.

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