



**QAA
Scotland**

Recognition of Prior Learning

National Framework for Scottish Higher Education

Sector level

Institutional level

Student level

PSRB level

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Foreword

The Scottish higher education sector is often regarded as being at the forefront of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) development within Europe. This reflects the significant work that has been undertaken across the higher education sector to develop RPL as a means of supporting widening participation and workforce development.

As part of wider policy developments within Scotland, RPL is explicitly linked to developing more flexible, efficient learner journeys. The centralising focus for much of this work has been the QAA Scotland and Universities Scotland RPL HEI Network since its establishment in 2008. The network comprises policymakers and practitioners from Scottish HEIs along with representation from QAA Scotland, Universities Scotland, the SCQF Partnership, Scottish Social Services Council and NHS Education Scotland. The network has successfully led a range of development and research activities to push the RPL agenda forward in Scotland and to address some of the residual barriers which have prevented its use as a widespread, mainstreamed practice in universities.

I am delighted that, as a result of this earlier work, the Network was commissioned by QAA Scotland to develop the National RPL Framework for Higher Education. This represents a step change in supporting the further growth of RPL across the Scottish higher education sector. The Framework firmly locates RPL within broader developments linked to a more flexible, accessible curriculum, enabling greater participation in higher education by learners from a wide range of backgrounds.

We very much hope that this resource will assist the higher education sector in continuing to drive RPL forward, enhancing policy and practice through critical reflection, development and collaboration. I would like to thank the HEI RPL Network for their support and input in the Framework development and in particular my fellow co-authors, Julie Brown (Glasgow Caledonian University), Sandra Menzies (University of Stirling), Lea McKay and Mary Young (University of the West of Scotland), Marty Wright (Glasgow Caledonian University) and Linda Proudfoot (RPL Researcher). Finally I would like to thank Heather Gibson, QAA Scotland, for her coordination of the RPL Network and for her effective management of the different strands of work led by the QAA under the banner of the Flexible Curriculum.

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Introduction to the National RPL Framework for Higher Education

1.1 Overview

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) Scotland and Universities Scotland RPL Higher Education Network has been working with Scottish higher education institutions (HEIs) to develop a National Framework for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). The purpose of the RPL Framework is to help expand, enhance and embed RPL to a much greater extent within HEIs.

This work on RPL forms part of a broader agenda to develop more flexible and efficient learning pathways within higher education linked to widening participation and workforce development. The work also links to the wider post-16 education reform proposed in the Government's White Paper 'Putting Learners at the Centre' and the Quality Enhancement Theme in Scotland 'Developing and Supporting the Curriculum'. In addition to supporting these national and institutional policy agendas, the Framework also aims to support HEIs in the implementation of the new UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code), *Chapter B6: Assessment of students and the recognition of prior learning*.¹

The National RPL Framework for Higher Education initiative is funded by QAA Scotland with the endorsement of Universities Scotland and the Scottish Government. The Framework endeavours to address the issues that make it difficult for key stakeholders to engage with RPL, specifically students, university staff, and professional, regulatory and statutory bodies (PRSBs). The importance of these stakeholders is reflected in the structure of the Framework. Each stakeholder group is represented by a section designed specifically to help expand, enhance and embed RPL within their particular context.

The RPL Framework is developmental in nature and is not prescriptive. It builds on the earlier *Streamlining of Recognition of Prior Learning Guidelines*² developed through the Network. While it is a national RPL framework, it aims to be flexible enough to reflect different institutional contexts. It has also been designed to complement *Chapter B6: Assessment of students and the recognition of prior learning* of the Quality Code.

1.2 The purpose of the National RPL Framework

The purpose of the National RPL Framework is to:

- expand and embed RPL to a much wider extent in the sector within the context of 'flexible learning pathways'
- address the barriers to the more widespread use of RPL through the sharing of effective practice and signposting to resources and guidance
- raise awareness of and increase transparency of RPL processes for staff, students and professional, regulatory and statutory bodies
- reduce inconsistencies in RPL processes between and within HEIs
- allow HEIs and other organisations to share and develop practice in RPL in a consistent and sustainable manner
- enhance and streamline support and assessment processes to ensure that these act as enablers rather than barriers to further learning
- support the implementation of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) core principles of RPL in the university sector.³

¹ *Chapter B6: Assessment of Students and the recognition of prior learning* of the Quality Code is available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/quality-code-B6.aspx.

² *Streamlining of Recognition of Prior Learning Guidelines* is available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/streamlining-rpl-guidelines.aspx.

³ *SCQF Credit Rating Criteria Explained: Learning Outcomes, Notional Learning Hours and Assessment* is available under Resources for Credit Rating Bodies (CRBs) at: www.scqf.org.uk/Resources.

1.3 What do we mean by RPL?

The Recognition of Prior Learning is the process for recognising learning that has its source in experience and/or previous formal, non-formal and informal learning contexts.

This includes knowledge and skills gained within school, college and university and outside formal learning situations such as through life and work experiences.⁴

SCQF RPL guidelines make a distinction between two forms of recognition:

- RPL for personal/career development or formative recognition
- RPL for credit, or summative recognition.

RPL for personal/career development, or formative recognition, is a process of recognising learning achieved outside formal education or training systems within the context of further learning and development. This form of RPL may take place as part of a guidance process. This process can be linked to confidence-building; identifying individual learning pathways; a notional mapping of learning within the context of the SCQF; supporting the transition between informal, non-formal and formal learning; and preparation for the process of RPL for credit.

RPL for credit or summative recognition is a process of assessing learning achieved outside of formal education or training systems which is recognised, if appropriate, for academic purposes. RPL can enable a learner to gain entry to a programme if the outcomes of their prior informal learning are judged as comparable to the entry requirements of the programme; and to gain credit within a programme if the outcomes of his/her prior informal learning are judged as comparable to the outcomes of the programme to which he/she is seeking credit.

Please note that a range of different terms for RPL are still used within the university sector; these include APEL and APL. This RPL Framework, however, uses the SCQF definitions and terminology of RPL as previously noted.

This RPL Framework places particular emphasis on the recognition of prior informal and non-formal learning as this presents greater challenges to universities than the recognition of prior formal learning, which can also be described as credit transfer.

Articulation from a Higher National Qualification to Years 2 or 3 of a degree level programme is a form of credit transfer. However, the articulation process is undertaken through the normal university admissions routes rather than through an RPL process.

Work-based learning recognises the opportunities and value of learning both formally, informally and experientially gained within a work environment. The integration of principles of RPL recognises and awards credit to such learning.

Box 1: What do these terms mean?

Formal learning takes place within the context of programmes delivered by learning and training providers. It is assessed and credit-rated and leads to recognised qualifications

Non-formal learning takes place alongside the mainstream systems of education and training. It may be assessed but does not typically lead to formal certification, for example, learning and training activities or programmes undertaken in the workplace, voluntary sector or trade union and through community-based learning

Informal learning can be defined as experiential learning and takes place through life and work experiences. It is often unintentional learning. The learner may not recognise at the time of the experience that it contributed to the development of their skills and knowledge. This recognition may only happen retrospectively through the RPL process, unless the experiences take place as part of a planned experiential or work-based learning program (SCQF).

⁴ Further information about the definition of RPL is available at: www.scqf.org.uk/RPL.

1.4 What are the benefits of RPL?

RPL supports widening participation as well as flexible delivery, such as work-based learning and part-time provision. Effective systems for RPL also support institutional strategies in relation to learning, teaching and assessment; internationalisation; employability and graduate attributes.

1.4.1 For students, RPL can:

- increase self-confidence and motivation for learning
- identify existing skills and knowledge and areas for further development
- contribute to planning career development or a learning or training pathway
- gain a place on a programme without the formal qualification entry requirements
- gain credit within a programme or qualification in order to enter with advanced standing and shorten their period of study
- support progression within their employment or career, or support a career change
- enable access to some postgraduate taught programmes for individuals with relevant professional experience, but without undergraduate qualifications.

1.4.2 For universities, RPL can:

- widen access to a broader range of learners
- support transitions and inform student choice
- support meaningful partnerships with employers and the community
- help to develop more flexible entry routes at undergraduate and postgraduate levels
- support career development planning, employability skills and graduate attributes and the hear (higher education achievement record)
- contribute to curriculum/programme development and delivery, particularly in relation to work-based, part-time and distance learning.

1.4.3 For employers and PSRBs, RPL can:

- increase employee retention
- reduce recruitment and training costs
- support workforce development planning and targeting of training/continuing professional development
- assist in recruitment and career advancement decisions
- increase motivation of employees and enhancing workplace/professional practice
- support legislative requirements for a qualified workforce.

1.4.4 At a national level, RPL can:

- address the needs of all types of learners
- support economic growth and the workforce development agenda
- support social inclusion; lifelong learning and widening participation
- support creative use of the SCFQ in developing flexible, efficient learning pathways
- promote learning and personal and professional development as an inherent part of the business activity of employers
- enhance collaboration between sectors.

1.5 Why do we need a National RPL Framework for Higher Education?

RPL is becoming increasingly prominent in policy contexts at institutional, national and European level because of its perceived value in relation to developing more flexible, efficient learner journeys, supporting workforce development and widening participation.

Scottish Government policy indicates the role of higher education in supporting Scotland's economic growth (Scottish Government, 2007a, 2007b, 2011). 'Regional Coherence' in particular features prominently in the Scottish Government and the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) agenda with a number of expectations, highlighting universities' roles in supporting the delivery of this plan. This includes 'improved articulation and progression routes for students, including those already in work, which use the SCQF creatively to respond to the needs of the region' (SFC, 2011).

There is some excellent practice in RPL and ensuring such practice is adopted as a minimum benchmark across the sector, ensuring that entry to courses happens at SCQF levels which properly reflect people's academic and wider experience is a requirement (Scottish Government, 2011, p20).

The National RPL Framework will also support Scotland's response to the agreement by EU Council of Ministers in December 2012 to adopt the recommendation that all member states should have, by no later than 2018, comprehensive national RPL systems in place.

Citizens should have access to the validation of their knowledge, skills and competences, including via the use of Open Educational Resources (OERs) and obtain full or part qualifications through this validation.⁵

1.6 Barriers to RPL

A number of barriers to the more widespread use of RPL within the university sector in Scotland persist:

- lack of awareness of the potential for RPL opportunities in students and staff
- inconsistent policies and practices between and within institutions which make it difficult for key stakeholders to engage with RPL, specifically professional bodies, staff and students
- the need for more streamlined approaches to support and assessment
- pockets of good practice being developed but not being shared
- lack of staff development opportunities to help build capacity in RPL practice
- perceptions that 'informal learning', or learning outside traditional the contexts, is worth less than 'formal learning' by some stakeholders.

1.7 Developing the National Framework

The National RPL Framework project was supported by QAA Scotland and coordinated on behalf of the Scottish Higher Education RPL Network by Ruth Whitaker and Julie Brown, Glasgow Caledonian University. The work involved five work streams, four of which are linked to the different aspects of the RPL Framework (see Figure 1, page 5), in Figure 1 of Section 2. These work streams were led by RPL Network members drawn from different universities following an invitation to Network members to express interest in undertaking this activity. The work stream leads also drew upon the wider body of expertise and interest located in the membership of the RPL network. This approach reflects the collaborative nature of RPL development in the higher education sector in Scotland, supported by QAA Scotland and the Network. Each work stream used a mixed-methods approach to the research and development required to achieve the agreed outcomes. Ethical approval was granted by Glasgow Caledonian University for the project.

⁵ The published agreement by EU Council of Ministers in December 2012 is available at: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2012:398:0001:0005:EN:PDF>.

2 RPL: Sector level principles

Authors: Ruth Whittaker, GCU LEAD and Julie Brown, Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning, Glasgow Caledonian University

2.1 Introduction

The sector level principles have been developed following a scoping exercise of national and international policy documentation and resources which have supported the development of benchmark principles and guidance. This builds upon the outcomes of earlier QAA/RPL Network research and development. Most notably this includes the *Streamlining of Recognition of Prior Learning Guidelines*,⁶ in addition to the outputs gained from the other work streams involved in this project: institutional level, professional, statutory body and student level.

A consultation process was undertaken with the Universities Scotland Learning and Teaching Committee. This included feedback on the extent to which the benchmark principles were achievable for the sector; what changes and barriers (if any) and recommendations for overcoming these in order to ensure engagement and implementation of a National Framework for RPL at a strategic level.

The sector level principles form one of the four dimensions of the RPL Framework and are designed to support Scottish HEIs and other organisations to share, develop and enhance RPL practice in a consistent and sustainable manner.

The principles aim to raise awareness among sector level organisations, and staff in strategic and policy levels in HEIs, of the value of RPL as a method of widening participation, developing more flexible, learner-centred curricula and supporting meaningful engagement with employers and the community. They provide a threshold standard for RPL in Scottish HEIs and are supported by QAA Scotland, Universities Scotland and Scottish HEIs.

The principles have been designed to support HEIs to meet the mandatory Expectation of the Quality Code, set out in *Chapter B6: Assessment of students and the recognition of prior learning*.⁷

2.2 Sector level principles for HEIs in Scotland

Figure 1 details the four major key principles which HEIs should implement in relation to RPL. This is followed by Box 2, which provides guidance points for universities to consider when implementing the principles. This guidance is aligned to the mandatory Expectation as set out in *Chapter B6* of the Quality Code.

- 1** Embed the principle of RPL within the context of widening participation and flexible curriculum initiatives
- 2** Develop and implement an RPL policy
- 3** Develop and implement an RPL process
- 4** Develop and implement a Communication and Promotion Strategy for RPL

Figure 1: Sector level RPL principles

⁶ *Streamlining of Recognition of Prior Learning Guidelines* is available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/streamlining-rpl-guidelines.aspx.

⁷ *Chapter B6: Assessment of Students and the recognition of prior learning* of the Quality Code is available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/quality-code-B6.aspx.

Box 2: Sector level principles and guidance points

1 Embed the principle of RPL within the context of widening participation and a flexible curriculum

Guidance points for consideration by higher education institutions in implementing Principle 1

- It would be helpful if a consensus could be reached with regard to the definition of RPL used by all Scottish HEIs. A common definition helps engagement by external stakeholders (including students and employers) with RPL and helps practitioners develop, share and embed good practice. QAA Scotland recommends that the SCQF definition of RPL should be used for this purpose:

The Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is the process for recognising learning that has its source in experience and/or previous formal, non-formal and informal learning contexts. This includes knowledge and skills gained within school, college and university and outside formal learning situations such as through life and work experiences.

- Institutions are encouraged to view RPL as being part of flexible curricula and widening access strategies and to situate RPL into institutional policies accordingly.

2 Develop and implement an RPL policy

Guidance points for consideration by higher education institutions in implementing Principle 2

- It is up to institutions to decide how best to approach the development of their RPL policy depending on their institutional mission and context. However, past models from institutions that have worked well include: developing a separate RPL policy or developing a RPL policy embedded into other institutional strategies such as for example Admissions or Learning, Teaching and Assessment.
- Experience has shown that policy statements which are transparent and accessible to staff, students, prospective students and external organisations, such as employers or PSRBs are particularly effective. This is helped by linking to RPL policy and information on university websites, particularly in the admissions areas of university websites for potential applicants.

3 Develop and implement an RPL process

Guidance points for consideration by higher education institutions in implementing Principle 3

The institutional level part of the Framework gives guidance on how to achieve this and institutions might find it helpful to engage with this part of the Framework. There are also other sources of information that might also be helpful to institutions. Some practice points are given below.

- Experience has shown that making the processes for guidance, support and assessment of RPL clear and transparent, and then communicating these widely across an institution help with implementation.
- It is useful to consider the nature and purpose of the RPL claim when considering what modes of assessment and technology might be used.
- Considering how to resource RPL, in terms of staff development and supporting staff to guide, support and assess RPL claims, is something that other institutions have found important. This is reflected in *Chapter B6* of the Quality Code.
- Quality Assurance arrangements for RPL should comply with *Chapter B6* of the Quality Code, and all other relevant parts of the Quality Code.
- Monitoring RPL activity in terms of measuring numbers of students undertaking RPL and the nature and extent of RPL provision, in a similar way to which articulation students and provision are monitored, is viewed as being important in measuring the effectiveness of RPL.

4 Develop and implement a communication and promotion strategy for RPL

Guidance points for consideration by higher education institutions in implementing Principle 4

- Developing a Communication and Promotion Strategy helps make the institution's stance, policy and process for RPL clear for internal and external stakeholders.
- It can also help to make clear the various approaches and models of RPL which recognise the different needs and interests of each stakeholder.

2.3 Key sector resources

European policy/guidance
European Parliament Council. European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2008:111:0001:0007:EN:PDF
European Commission (2004) Common European principles for validation for non-formal and informal learning www2.cedefop.europa.eu/etv/Information_resources/EuropeanInventory/publications/principles/validation2004_en.pdf
CEDEFOP (2009) European Guidelines for Validating non-formal and informal learning www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/Files/4054_en.pdf
European Council Recommendation on the Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning (Dec. 2012) http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2012:398:0001:0005:EN:PDF
See OBSERVAL website for individual country policies www.observal.org
European RPL Network link www.ehea.info/work-group-details.aspx?wkgroupld=17
National policy/guidance
Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) (2005). Guidelines for the recognition of prior informal learning (RPL). Now contained in the SCQF Handbook and User Guide (2009) www.scqf.org.uk/content/files/SCQF_handbook_FULL_-_amended_Dec_09.pdf
Scottish Government (2007) Skills for Scotland: a Lifelong Learning Skills Strategy www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/197204/0052752.pdf
Scottish Government. Putting Learners at the Centre - Delivering our Ambitions for Post-16 Education (2011) www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2011/09/15103949/0
QAA: UK Quality Code for Higher Education. Part B: Assuring and enhancing academic quality. Chapter 6: Assessment of students and the recognition of prior informal learning. www.qaa.ac.uk/Scotland/DevelopmentAndEnhancement/Pages/Recognition-of-prior-learning.aspx www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/informationandguidance/pages/quality-code-b6.aspx
Examples of institutional policy/guidance
Aberdeen University www.abdn.ac.uk/registry/quality/section4.shtml
Dundee University www.dundee.ac.uk/academic/apel.htm
Glasgow Caledonian University RPL policy and guides www.gcu.ac.uk/lead/leadthemes/wideningparticipationandprogression/recognitionofpriorlearning/
Edinburgh Napier University RPL policy www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Documents/EdinburghNapierRoss_RPL.pdf

<p>Heriot Watt University www.hw.ac.uk/registry/resources/aplguidancenotes.pdf</p>
<p>Open University in Scotland www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Documents/OUScotland_RPL.pdf</p>
<p>Queen Margaret University www.qmu.ac.uk/quality/documents/RPL%20summary%20guide.doc</p>
<p>University of Abertay www.abertay.ac.uk/searchresults/?q=prior+learning&cx=011633375780149589858%3Aw_cvhmmq6fo&cof=FORID%3A9&ie=UTF-8 www.abertay.ac.uk/about/registry/admissions/apel</p>
<p>University of West of Scotland RPL Staff Guidelines (policy) www.uws.ac.uk/study-at-uws/part-time/academic-credit---awards www.uws.ac.uk/search/site-search/?search=RPL%20policy</p>
<p>University of St Andrews RPL policy www.st-andrews.ac.uk/staff/policy/tlac/transfer/priorlearning</p>
<p>University of Stirling RPL policy www.quality.stir.ac.uk/ac-policy/Recognition.php</p>
<p>University of Highlands and Islands RPL policy www.uhi.ac.uk/home/search?SearchableText=RPL</p>
<p>Additional resources</p>
<p>HEA: Review of credit accumulation and transfer policy and practice in UK higher education www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/flexible-learning/FL-review-of-CAT-policy-and-practice</p>

Table 1: Key sector resources

3 RPL at the institutional level

Author: Sandra Menzies, Stirling University

3.1 Purpose of institutional section

The purpose of this section is to provide guidance on a range of issues associated with RPL integration at an institutional level and includes the following.

- Introductory guidance for institutions who plan to engage with RPL, linked to the RPL Streamlining Guidelines (Section 3.2). This guidance was informed by a survey carried out across Scottish HEIs by the Scottish RPL Network (Appendix 1).
- A chart which replicates key stages in the development of institutional RPL processes articulated in the guidance in diagrammatic form. It aims to help institutions develop route maps for engaging with RPL (Section 3.3).

This section has been developed by drawing upon current practice in the Scottish HEI sector, reviewing QAA Scotland's *Streamlining Recognition of Prior Learning Guidelines* and undertaking a sector-wide consultation process.⁸

3.2 Introductory guidance for institutions

This section provides some preliminary notes and guidance about how to introduce RPL within a HEI and what should be considered in the development of RPL processes. The guidance is based upon QAA Scotland's *Streamlining Recognition of Prior Learning Guidelines* and the reader is encouraged to consult these.

This guidance is most effective if the reader has prior understanding of RPL, the SCQF, work-based learning and concepts associated with widening participation in higher education. This guidance is also intended to support HEIs in meeting the mandatory Expectations as laid out in the Quality Code.

3.2.1 Getting started...what are good questions to ask?

Box 3 highlights six prompts which may be useful to consider when implementing RPL within your institution. Guidance to help answer these questions is given in Section 3.2.2.

Box 3: Starting point questions for RPL

- 1 Are you clear about your institution's rationale for implementing RPL?
- 2 Is there an agreed definition of RPL that you will use in all processes, documentation and marketing within your institution?
- 3 Are there any of the RPL Streamlining Guideline 'Enablers' already in place in your institution?
 - Policies and processes that mainstream and integrate RPL within admissions, learning, teaching and assessment strategies and quality assurance mechanisms.
 - Curriculum design that explicitly addresses flexible modes of entry, progression and delivery, linked to a wider understanding and recognition of RPL across the institution including quality assurance.
 - Clear points of contact for RPL for potential applicants, existing students and staff.
 - Building staff capacity and capability (academic and support staff) in terms of providing effective forms of RPL support and appropriate forms of assessment, which is linked to initial and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) opportunities and the increased visibility of RPL across the institution and in staff workload.

⁸ *Streamlining of Recognition of Prior Learning Guidelines* is available at:
www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/streamlining-rpl-guidelines.aspx.

- Greater use of technology-enhanced RPL provision through virtual learning environments and e-portfolios as part of a blended learning approach to support and assessment.
- Integration of RPL processes within related developments such as personal development planning (PDP), employability, work-based learning and distance learning; employer engagement strategies, widening participation and college-university articulation strategies.
- Data gathering and analysis that ensures effective monitoring, tracking and evaluation as part of a process of reviewing and enhancing RPL practice.

4 Which model of RPL is the institution planning to support: centralised or devolved model, or a hybrid approach?

5 What is the maximum number of credits toward an award that your institution will award for RPL?

6 How will RPL be used?

a) RPL for admission to a programme of study.

b) RPL for entry with advanced standing.

c) RPL that leads to an award.

d) RPL as a formative experience to help students gain confidence and develop academic skills.

These initial questions should help you:

- develop an agreed definition and scope for RPL within the institution
- develop awareness of the rationale to develop RPL within the institution
- identify processes, policy, partnerships with colleges or employers which can support or hinder RPL development
- review and establish the technology required to support the RPL process: the guidance, support and assessment process, audit/tracking of applications, outcomes and links to student experience surveys
- support agreement about how RPL will be used and maximum credit limits
- support articulation and adherence with quality assurance processes within the institution and national RPL Framework.

3.2.2 Making it happen

This section is intended to help institutions answer the key questions listed in Box 3.1.

A Planning and setting up an RPL system

Agree a policy and strategy that supports the planning, development and integration of RPL within your institution. Consider the drivers for RPL within and outwith your institution. These can include drivers such as: engagement with widening participation agendas locally and nationally, links with workforce planning, an understanding of the economic drivers within the graduate work environment and the reality of supply and demand in workforce planning. When developing RPL policy and process it is useful to aim to fully integrate RPL with admissions, teaching and learning, assessment strategies and quality assurance mechanisms, as well as take into account external reference points, such as the Quality Code.

Box 4 provides main guidance points on developing RPL policy and guidance for institutions.

Box 4: Developing policy and guidelines for institutions

- Institutional policy and guidelines for RPL should reflect the university commitment to recognising all forms of learning and the embedding of RPL in the university's quality assurance system.
- The policy guidelines should make explicit the range and scope of programmes for which RPL applies and details of credit limits and any impact on grading or classification.
- The roles and responsibilities of the learner, adviser/mentor, assessor, and other relevant roles/units/committees in the RPL process should be clarified.
- The key phases and elements of the support and assessment process should be outlined, allowing for a flexibility of approaches to support and evidence gathering in order to meet the needs of the learner and the demands of the programme.
- The need for support and professional development for staff involved in support and assessment should be addressed.
- The processes and mechanisms for monitoring, reviewing and revising RPL processes as appropriate should also be made explicit.

Developing the RPL process requires consideration of which institutional model (**centralised or devolved or a hybrid**) is to be developed. This consideration will be informed by existing institutional structures.

Figure 2 identifies the key features of centralised and devolved RPL models. Both approaches depend upon effective institutional partnership working and form two ends of a continuum, enabling hybrid approaches as appropriate. Whatever model is decided upon, the creation of a cohesive knowledgeable team whose membership is drawn from across the institution will help implement any new RPL initiative.

Centralised model	Devolved model
<p>A centralised model involves a central RPL coordinator or unit, or faculty RPL coordinator working in partnership with subject experts, but acting as a central point of contact, providing support and guidance for staff and students, and monitoring the process and the outcomes.</p>	<p>A devolved system of RPL is one in which university-wide policy and procedures are operated at a faculty/school/department level, with more limited or no central coordination or support.</p>
<p>The advantage of the centralised model is that the HEI is explicitly investing in RPL activity and ensuring a coordinated, transparent and consistent approach across the institution. It also facilitates effective monitoring, tracking and evaluation of RPL activity.</p>	<p>The principle underpinning the devolved model is that it enables the mainstreaming of RPL processes within the admissions process and programme delivery, and recognises that RPL claimants largely require subject expert support in terms of understanding and meeting the requirements for entry and the award of credit.</p>

Figure 2: Centralised and/or devolved models for RPL

Key issues to be considered:

To ensure coordination and integration of RPL processes at an institutional level does not necessitate a centralised model for RPL but does require:

- a common definition of RPL across the institution
- consistent practices or terms of quality assurance
- joined-up working between and across academic schools and faculties and central services, such as admissions and student support services
- an explicit recognition of RPL activity in staff workload
- CPD opportunities for staff engaged in RPL support and assessment
- effective institutional data capture and analysis to enable monitoring and evaluation in order to enhance practice and the student experience.

Costing RPL: the costs of developing and administering RPL include staff preparation and associated workload in the support, administration and assessment of RPL, an understanding of central funding, student fees structures and marketing/advertising costs within online and hard copy materials.

B Preparation of resources and support/CPD of staff

Experience has shown that preparing staff for RPL activity requires recognition that any RPL advisor role requires investment in development and preparation. Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for RPL advisers can involve institutional and sector workshops, seminars and reflective/RPL practitioner modules as part of CPD programmes. Additional approaches can include Communities of Practice which can help form cross and inter-institutional peer support networks for staff engaged in RPL support and assessment to build capacity and confidence in the process.

In addition, the need to design assessment mechanisms appropriate to informal learning and the workplace, and design curricula that facilitate flexible entry and delivery, requires greater staff awareness, understanding and professional development.

This need for RPL guidance, support and assessment activity will need to be built into staff workload models.

Other issues to take into consideration when developing RPL guidance and materials:

- advertising and marketing materials should integrate accurate information and identify named sources for information/guidance
- school/faculty/department policy and guidance material for RPL should align with overarching HEI policy and guidance
- awareness of widening access agreements is required
- awareness of changing policy on overseas students, TIER4 arrangements, European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) is required.

C Designing a flexible curriculum

QAA Scotland, as part of their work to support the Developing and Supporting the Curriculum Enhancement Theme, has produced a Flexible Curricula Toolkit. This may help institutions develop curricula to support RPL. This can be found on the Enhancement Themes website.⁹

Box 5 lists guidance about developing flexible curricula for RPL from the *Streamlining Recognition of Prior Learning Guidelines*.

⁹ More information about flexible curriculum is available at: www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/enhancement-themes/current-enhancement-theme/the-flexible-curriculum.

Box 5: Guidance for developing flexible curricula for RPL

- Flexible entry routes and alternative routes to credit, whether through RPL, credit transfer, articulation, or work-based learning, should be addressed at the point of programme design rather than programme delivery. This requires learning outcomes that facilitate a range of different routes for their achievement which link into delivery and assessment methods.
- Alternative assessment frameworks for RPL should be considered to simplify the process for students and staff, and to develop assessment processes which are appropriate to the nature and outcomes of informal learning, while still ensuring integrity of the process and outcome. This might include, for example, the use of programme level outcomes or SCQF level descriptors rather than module level learning outcomes to enable an easier comparison between the outcomes the curriculum seeks to achieve at that level in terms of capacity and competence and those demonstrated through personal or professional experiences (Whittaker and Brown, 2013).
- Programme design should enable students to build on the range of competencies and knowledge gained through work-based and other experience which learners bring to the curriculum.
- RPL should also be integrated within work-based learning programmes, forming an intrinsic part of the planning and evidence-gathering process, rather than viewed as a discrete activity before the programme commences.
- As part of regional and national workforce development agendas, there is clearly potential for HEIs to explore opportunities to strengthen the use of RPL with employees in the workplace and to support more flexible, part-time provision.
- There is also scope to make the links between RPL and educational or personal and professional development planning and the development of employability skills and graduate attributes more explicit.

D Developing assessment of RPL

Assessment of RPL requires careful consideration and planning. Institutions may need to consider the questions: 'Who, where, when and how?' with respect to assessment. One of the aims of the National RPL Framework will be to support broadening engagement in the range of assessment methods with which prior learning can be evidenced in light of advances in educational technology. The traditional, written portfolio is being transformed to include e-portfolio developments in which podcasts; video, oral presentations are now seen as being part of the evidence of prior learning.

The streamlining guidelines for RPL highlighted the development of assessment systems/processes. Findings are given in Box 6.

Box 6: Development of assessment systems and processes for RPL

- While the predominant form of assessment for RPL is via a portfolio, the need to develop more effective, simplified assessment mechanisms is recognised. This is linked to the need to enhance the understanding of the nature and process of informal learning in order to develop appropriate forms of assessment.
- Module learning outcomes, predicated on a formal learning process, can be a barrier rather than an enabler of RPL if an exact comparison with the outcomes of informal learning is demanded. Alternative approaches include:
 - mapping against programme level outcomes or level descriptors for large amounts of credit rather than against programme modules
 - greater use of level descriptors to enable the articulation of prior informal learning in learning outcomes that are more relevant to this type of learning
 - greater use of e-portfolios to enable a more structured, iterative approach to building evidence
 - more use of structured interviewing as a single evidence source
 - greater use of video-conferencing

- greater use of workplace-derived artefacts
- greater use of existing workplace learning practices in evaluation and assessment, particularly as part of work-based learning programmes.
- The increasing use of mapping learner-defined statements of learning or workplace-derived skills and knowledge against SCQF level descriptors to demonstrate the transferable competencies and capacities required for successful progression within. A programme indicates this growing understanding of the nature of informal learning as well as a greater parity of esteem between different types of learning.
- While templates and exemplars can be provided to support the evidence gathering and assessment process, the advisor or mentor plays a crucial role as an 'interpreter' of academic language and requirements and in supporting the learners' transition from informal and non-formal learning contexts.
- In terms of the quality assurance of the RPL assessment process, in most cases this mirrors the normal quality assurance processes for programme assessment, again indicative of the principle of establishing RPL as a 'normal' route to entry and credit.

E Monitoring and evaluation

Increasingly, data relating to RPL will be audited within education institutions, form part of their annual review data and be an integral part of the QAA processes and student admission statistics. Systems that facilitate an integrated approach whereby school/faculty/department data is accessible and can be compared within the overarching RPL statistics of the institution will become increasingly important. Box 7 highlights examples of monitoring and evaluation RPL processes and has been taken from *Streamlining RPL Processes: facilitating the award of credit for prior informal learning*.¹⁰

Box 7: Monitoring and evaluating RPL processes at institutional level

- Monitoring the use and impact of the RPL process can include:
 - monitoring the success rate of RPL claims and recording the number of learners undertaking RPL
 - tracking the progression of learners who have undertaken RPL
 - monitoring the actual student experience of this group.
- Institutions should address the issue of improved data capture and analysis within the context of integrated student management information systems. This may form part of wider institutional agendas to improve the evidence base in terms of recruitment, progression, retention and completion to inform planning and evaluation. Virtual learning environments and e-portfolios can also support the tracking of RPL claimants and monitoring of their progress throughout their claim. Feedback on the student experience can be undertaken through feedback forms, focus groups and personal interviews.
- Embedding the processes for recording, data capture and analysis within mainstream developments in this area and as part of the normal quality assurance processes for programmes.

¹⁰ *Streamlining RPL Processes: facilitating the award of credit for prior informal learning* is available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Streamlining-RPL-Processes.aspx.

3.3 Chart to aid institutions in developing a route map for engaging with RPL

The following flow chart provides institutions with points for consideration:

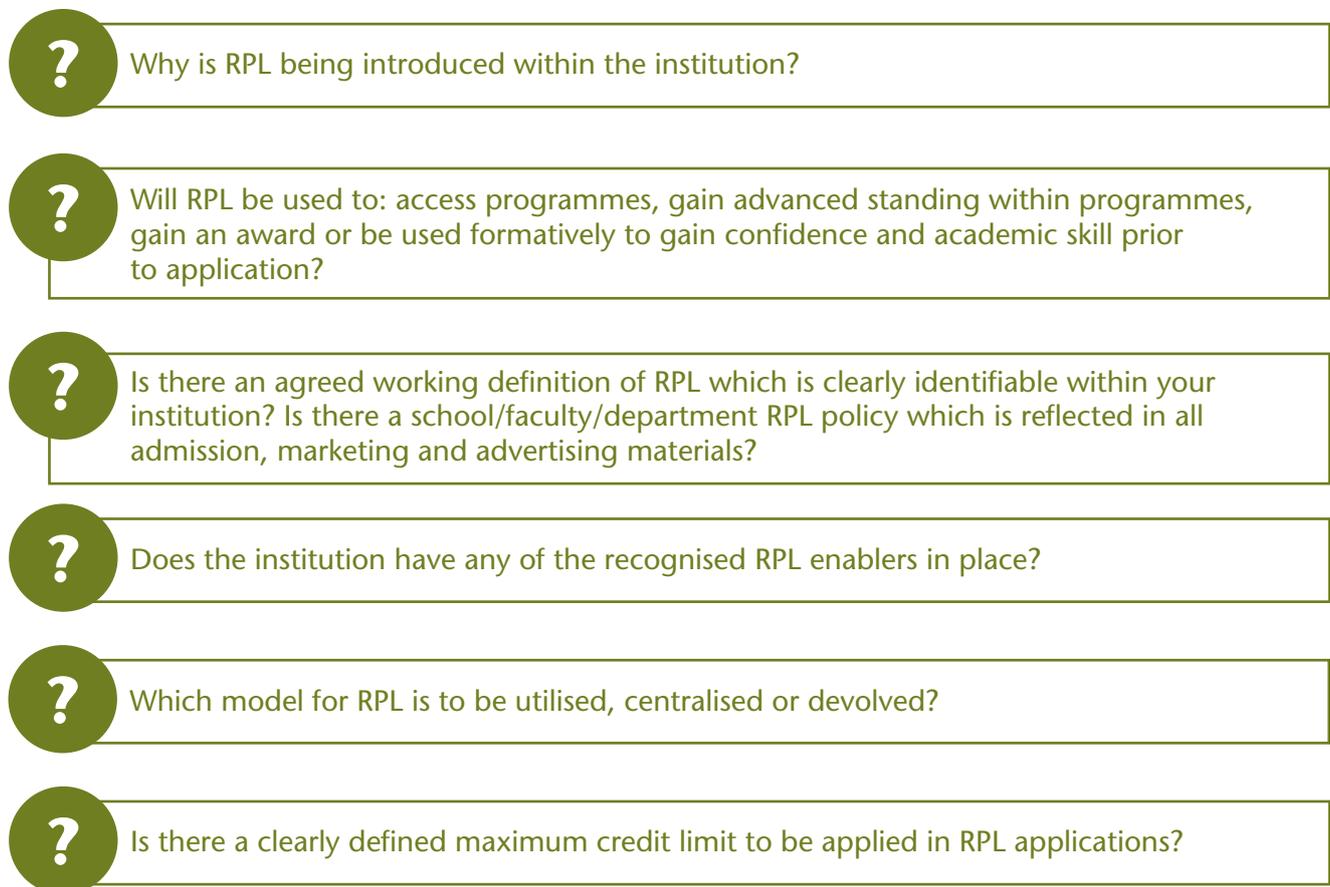


Figure 3: Chart for institutional considerations for RPL

Appendix 1

Identification of core RPL principles and variances within and between differing disciplines

The following section presents key findings from a survey issued to the QAA RPL Network.

- The survey respondents were from Strathclyde University, Glasgow Caledonian University, University of Stirling, University of the Highlands and Islands, and University of the West of Scotland. RPL was noted to be applied within the following disciplines: healthcare, social care, child care, hospitality, education, law, behavioural sciences, accountancy and tourism.
- A range of staff are involved with RPL; academics, admission staff, student programmes staff, programme leads, RPL designated post holders and student support.
- Reasons listed for utilisation of RPL within these institutions included the Scottish political agenda, social responsibility, social inclusion, widening participation, access to HE, national economics and regeneration, HEI business development, increasing intake figures for specific programmes, links with local employers/organisations and their need for specific skill sets/knowledgeable workforce, support recruitment onto fee paying programmes, support for international development and supporting external businesses with organisational development.
- The preparation of individuals involved with RPL within these institutions demonstrated a varied pattern from formal learning opportunities in staff induction programmes, to the more common approach whereby most staff access information on RPL from senior colleague instruction/guidance, self-directed learning from current policy, participate as an observer at RPL panel.
- A high proportion of institutions work within a centralised framework for RPL with only one HEI commenting that it used a devolved model.
- The requirement for an agreed institutional RPL definition, demonstration by the potential student of evidence of prior learning which could be reviewed in keeping with the preset programme learning outcomes and an adherence with the SCQF as a framework to assess level and credit of prior learning were noted by all respondents as essential considerations in the application of RPL.
- Application of RPL at beginning of programmes and retrospectively were highlighted an increasingly accepted and applied.
- Discipline - specific academics are the most involved in assessing RPL claims with the other respondents citing the use of an RPL panel comprising academics and admission staff being the second most common.
- Pre-set costs to the applicant are variable with some institutions having fees for formal and informal/experiential claims; however most only have fees for claims resulting from informal/experiential claims as this is noted to have significant institutional workload.
- The 'capping' of credit was increasingly accepted as the same for formal and informal/experiential learning; however the variance of maximum credit being accepted for RPL is still inconsistent between institutions. This is a key point when considering the implementation of RPL as this may be a significant factor in the applicant's decision to apply to your institution if they are self-funding, part-time or full-time students.

These responses are included to provide indicators and consideration points for institutions new to RPL; they are not exhaustive or representative of all HEIs in Scotland. Table 2 highlights core and discipline specific principles in RPL.

Core principles for implementing RPL within your HE institution	Specific considerations for differing disciplines
<p>Adherence with the Scottish Credit Qualification Framework for recognition and award of credit and SCQF RPL core principles:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • learner focused • accessible • flexible • reliable, transparent and consistent • quality assured. 	<p>Programmes may have links to specific hours of practice to be completed (nursing and midwifery programmes).</p>
<p>Adherence to the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, <i>Chapter B6: Assessment of students and the recognition of prior learning.</i></p>	
<p>In developing RPL it is essential to ensure the institution is informed of local, national and international practices in RPL to ensure any new activity can be integrated out with a local context.</p>	
<p>Quality assurance mechanisms are adhered to and provide transparency, reliability and consistency in decisions relating to claims, the setting of credit limits being set and advanced standing.</p>	<p>Work experience/internships may form an integral part of the programme which needs to be completed to achieve award.</p>
<p>Credit gained through informal and experiential learning should have equal value to that gained through formal learning, ie parity of esteem.</p>	
<p>Formative and summative approaches can be applied to RPL claims ensuring it aligns with the SCQF RPL core principles. RPL should be (as noted by the SCQF) a gateway rather than a barrier to learning. It should promote the positive aspects of an individual's learning experience, not its deficiency.</p>	
<p>Initial guidance is essential: including an accessible named point of contact, information on fees, support mechanisms and advice on how to collate evidence of learning</p>	
<p>Comparability, currency and authenticity of learning are essential criteria in assessing RPL claims.</p>	
<p>RPL should form an integral component of the development and implementation of admission processes, design and validation/review of programmes, assessment and not be viewed as an additional extra.</p>	

Table 2: Core and discipline specific principles in RPL

4 RPL at the student level

Authors: Lea McKay and Mary Young, University of the West of Scotland

4.1 Introduction

This section is designed to be used with and by students. The section contains some introductory information about the RPL and some case studies which we hope you will find helpful.

Universities now accept that people can learn in many different ways. Learning can take place formally in a classroom or by following a course, but learning can also take place informally through work, volunteering or even leisure activities. This learning can now be recognised and assessed either for entry to a course or programme of study or, where the learning is at the right level, for credit towards an award. This is called Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL).

This section has been designed to make you aware of some of the terminology and the process of recognising and assessing prior learning and to help you decide whether this might be an option for you. There are examples of RPL policies and guidelines and case studies which we hope will make RPL more accessible as there can be real benefits for you as a student:

- you may gain credit and/or recognition for learning you already have; boosting your confidence, motivation and self-esteem
- you may be encouraged to undertake further learning
- your employment opportunities can be improved by gaining a recognised qualification more quickly saving you time and money.

Recognising and/or awarding credit for prior learning is supported by the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF).¹¹ By encouraging access to education, learning and training the SCQF supports the development of progression pathways from qualification to qualification maximising opportunities for RPL.

Further information on RPL terminology can be found in the Section 1 (page 1) of this Framework. This section also includes further information which may be relevant to students.

Details on policies and guidelines can be found in Section 4.6.

4.2 RPL for formal learning

This is sometimes called credit transfer and you will see these terms used in some of the policies and guidelines. For credit to contribute to a programme of study, shortening the length of time it will take you to complete, it must have been assessed. An increasing number of qualifications offered through higher education institutions (HEIs), by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) and by professional bodies are mapped onto the SCQF according to level and have a credit rating. Some professional qualifications and short courses have also been awarded a credit rating. For credit to be transferred into a programme of study at a university it must be at SCQF Level 7 or above and meet the criteria for the programme you wish to study. Regulations on RPL and the transfer of credit will vary between universities and even sometimes between programmes within the same university. Information on qualifications which have been given a credit rating can be found on SCQF's website. For information on the transfer of credit see Section 4.6.

RPL for formal learning is possible if your learning is at the right level and where the subject content fits with study at the university. The university will check that the content and level of learning you already have is relevant to the course or programme of study you want to take. This can be really useful if you want to build on or top-up credit rated courses or professional qualifications to degree level.

¹¹ More information about the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework is available at: www.scqf.org.uk.

Articulation is a well established progression route to degree level study which may allow entry to a course or degree programme at an advanced level often building on credit achieved through completing higher national qualifications. Articulation is undertaken through established university admission processes rather than through the RPL process.

4.3 RPL for informal and non-formal learning

RPL is learning which has taken place outwith a formal teaching setting through work, volunteering or even leisure activities; non-formal learning is the result of completion of a non-credit rated course or training programme and can be considered for assessment in line with procedures for RPL. RPL procedures for informal or non-formal learning will vary between universities and even sometimes between programmes within the same university. It is important to note that it is your learning, not just your experience that is important so you need to think about what you learned and how that relates to the course or programme you want to study. Where universities consider RPL for informal learning you will be given guidance and support throughout the process. For more information see Section 4.6.

If you decide that RPL for informal and non-formal learning is right for you, staff within universities will help you with this. There are usually three main stages to preparing an RPL claim and you will be given guidance and support all the way through.

- You will normally be asked to think about or reflect on your learning experiences.
- You will then write down what was actually learned. In some cases you will be asked to map your learning against learning outcomes from modules or programmes while other procedures may be more flexible.
- You then need to gather evidence in support of your learning which can be assessed; this usually takes the form of a portfolio, but other approaches can be used.
- Academic staff then assesses your evidence and decide whether or not to approve your RPL claim.

Once you have identified the areas where you have significant learning you will need to think about whether or not your learning is at the right level. The SCQF level descriptors can really help in determining levels of learning and can make it easier for you to express your learning clearly. They are used by several universities within their guidelines on RPL. There are 12 SCQF levels going from very basic or low-level skills at the bottom, right up to master's and doctoral level skills at the top. University undergraduate degree programmes start at SCQF Level 7 and go up to SCQF Level 10 (Honours).¹²

The type of evidence you will be asked to provide in support of your claim for learning varies between courses/programmes and universities, but you will most likely need to show that your learning:

- is at the appropriate academic level
- is your own work
- has a balance between learning gained from your practice and academic learning
- focuses on the subject area you intend to study
- has been kept up to date.

RPL claims are assessed by academic staff following RPL policies and procedures. You will usually be supervised by a member of staff with expertise in the subject area who will give you guidance and support.

¹² More information on SCQF levels and descriptors is available at: www.scqf.org.uk.

4.4 What do students ask most often?

We thought it would be useful to include some frequently asked questions and answers.

Q. Can I gain an award through RPL alone?

A. You will probably not be able to gain an award through RPL alone. You will usually be expected to build on any prior learning you may have through study on your chosen course or programme of study. The amount of RPL which can contribute depends on the programme or course you are taking and on the university's regulations for RPL.

Q. Can both formal and informal learning be claimed?

A. It may well be that a claim for credit will include both certificated and experiential learning. This is not a problem providing appropriate evidence can be provided to support the claim.

Q. How recent does my learning need to be?

A. Normally formal or certificated learning has a valid shelf life of five years but some universities accept older qualifications providing you can provide evidence that knowledge and learning has been kept up to date. The same principle is applied to informal or experiential learning.

Q. Will I get the same credit at all universities?

A. Not necessarily, universities have different policies and agreements in place. Also it depends on your chosen programme of study and how well your prior learning relates to the course or programme you wish to study.

Q. How do I make a claim for RPL?

A. This varies between universities so you really need to take a look at the policies and guidelines. You need to contact universities on an individual basis for details.

Q. Can I get credit for partially completed credit rated qualifications?

A. You may be able to gain credit for partially completed qualifications providing they are at an appropriate level and that your learning has been kept up to date.

Q. How much does it cost?

A. This depends on various factors. There is some information on this within university policies and guidelines in Section 4.6.

Q. Will my full-time funding be affected?

A. It may be if your RPL claim is for less than 120 credit points (one year full-time study). You might want to consider making an RPL claim and 'topping up' to 120 point through part-time study.

4.5 Case studies

The following are real examples of where students gained entry to a degree programme at an advanced level having made a successful claim for RPL.

Kelly's story

I wanted to study part-time to get the correct balance between work, family life and study. I found out about the programme on offer through my lecturer at college. I had already studied a Personal Development Award, however, as my National Nursery Examination Board (NNEB) qualification was not credit rated, I was offered the possibility of making up my missing credit by undertaking a claim for experiential learning which allowed me to gain enough credit to join the programme at Level 9.

I thought that University would be challenging and I would get to meet new people and share practice with them. While studying I followed a clear path of study and I have now almost completed my degree. I have gained knowledge of theory from my studies and how it is used to implement practice. I have also used this knowledge while participating in practice projects and when mentoring other employees within the nursery.

I have found studying really worthwhile and enjoyable but it is very hard work. I would definitely recommend studying part-time, it is really rewarding and gives a massive boost to your confidence and ensures that the children in your workplace are given the best start possible. Also when you are challenged by inspectors in the workplace you have the depth of knowledge to explain why you do things a certain way, based on theoretical principals.

Davy's story

When I left school many years ago I took a foundation course in Graphic Design at a further education college. After that I enrolled with Glasgow School of Art, but left after just two months in order to accept contracts with a major record label and publisher. Since then I have worked as a songwriter, performer and producer, branching out into work in broadcasting, writing, large-scale community music projects and teaching.

Over the years I have published well over 300 songs in a professional capacity, some of which have appeared in my own performances/recordings, some of which have appeared on other artist's recordings and in stage, film and television productions. I learned how to develop a persona as a performer, including the ability to communicate effectively in musical terms, spoken word and physical gesture. This has been achieved through years of touring experience and the study of great performers. Throughout my career the overarching learning theme has been how to bring technical elements of the craft to bear on emotional meaning. This experience-based learning has been enhanced by personal study in the form of musical analysis of classic songs and extensive reading.

I also have well developed broadcasting and writing skills. The research and analysis required in the fields of broadcasting and writing has provided me with the skills to develop a teaching role within the field.

For me the construction of learning outcomes was the most difficult part of the RPL process. I had to reflect on learning experiences and focus on areas where significant learning had taken place and, crucially, for which I was able to provide supporting evidence. Assessment was based on a portfolio which was made up of the learning outcomes, a written account providing a link between theory and practice and a selection of published recordings, including CD, scripts of BBC broadcasts and a collection of music commentaries and lectures.

I found the RPL process a positive educational experience and was delighted to be awarded 300 credit points towards my degree, which I completed on a part-time basis

Craig's story

Craig has been filmed talking about his experience of making a claim for RPL.¹³

¹³ The video of Craig's experience is available at: <mms://streaming.uws.ac.uk/craig1>.

4.6 RPL policies and guidelines

Examples of institutional policy/guidance
Aberdeen University www.abdn.ac.uk/education/courses/basp/advanced www.abdn.ac.uk/registry/quality/section4.shtml
Dundee University www.dundee.ac.uk/academic/apel.htm
Glasgow Caledonian University RPL policy and guides www.gcu.ac.uk/lead/leadthemes/wideningparticipationandprogression/recognitionofpriorlearning
Edinburgh Napier University RPL policy www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Documents/EdinburghNapierRoss_RPL.pdf
Heriot Watt University www.hw.ac.uk/registry/resources/aplguidancenotes.pdf
Open University in Scotland www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Documents/OUScotland_RPL.pdf
Queen Margaret University www.qmu.ac.uk/quality/documents/RPL%20summary%20guide.doc
University of Abertay www.abertay.ac.uk/searchresults/?q=prior+learning&cx=011633375780149589858%3Aw_cvhmmq6fo&cof=FORID%3A9&ie=UTF-8 www.abertay.ac.uk/about/registry/admissions/apel
University of West of Scotland RPL Staff Guidelines (policy) www.uws.ac.uk/study-at-uws/part-time/academic-credit---awards www.uws.ac.uk/search/site-search/?search=RPL%20policy
University of St Andrews RPL policy www.st-andrews.ac.uk/staff/policy/tlac/transfer/priorlearning/
University of Stirling RPL policy www.quality.stir.ac.uk/ac-policy/Recognition.php
University of Highlands and Islands Millennium Institute RPL policy www.uhi.ac.uk/home/search?SearchableText=RPL

Table 3: Examples of institutional policy/guidance

5 RPL at the professional, statutory and regulatory body level

Authors: Linda Proudfoot, RPL researcher and Marty Wright, Glasgow Caledonian University

5.1 Introduction

This section of the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) National Framework for Higher Education in Scotland has been written for professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs). QAA Scotland recognises that the relationships between PSRBs and higher education are complex and is keen to encourage possibilities for closer collaboration in using RPL to meet the lifelong learning needs of students, professionals and employees.

Higher education institutions (HEI) are subject to the regulatory and accountability requirements of many organisations and in recognition of this the Higher Education Better Regulation Group (HEBRG), formerly The Higher Education Review Group, is charged with promoting efficient and transparent approaches to regulation. HEBRG define PSRBs as 'a diverse group of bodies including a large number of professional bodies, regulators and those with statutory authority over a profession or group of professionals'. This diversity is reflected in the broad range of activities which characterise PSRB engagement with higher education, including programme approval, conferring chartered status/professional titles and initial and continuing professional development.¹⁴

RPL is defined as:

The process for recognising learning that has its source in experience and/or previous formal, non-formal and informal learning contexts; this includes knowledge and skills gained within school, college and university and outside formal learning situations such as through life and work experiences.¹⁵

This acknowledges and encompasses learning in its many forms, including non-formal and informal activities and could usefully align with the development of PSRB members and higher education standards. It would therefore be beneficial if PSRBs considered a commitment to and engagement with the National RPL Framework, albeit within the parameters appropriate to the specific nature of the individual organisation. In subscribing to the National RPL Framework PSRBs would serve to expand and embed the principles of RPL, raise awareness of RPL processes and promote consistency in the approach to RPL. Furthermore, sharing and developing RPL practices as a specific and integral part of PSRB activity would add greatly to the existing resource regarding the utilisation of informal and non-formal learning.

Creation of this online resource is timely for QAA Scotland and PSRBs alike. The value of recognising the informal learning aspect of RPL to support workforce development, widen participation to HE and enable flexible learner journeys has emerged as an important feature of the contemporary education landscape in Scotland, Europe and beyond (OECD 2007, a&b).¹⁶ RPL offers a means of closer collaboration between higher education, PSRBs and employers in addressing these agendas while also meeting the lifelong learning imperative and needs of students, professional members and employees.

¹⁴ *Professional, statutory and regulatory bodies; an exploration of their engagement with higher education* is available at: www.hebetterregulation.ac.uk/NewsEventsPublications/Publications/Pages/default.aspx.

¹⁵ *Scottish Credit and Qualifications Handbook User Guide. Section 7: The process for the recognition of prior learning* is available at: www.scqf.org.uk/Resources.

¹⁶ *OECD a) Qualifications Systems: Bridges to Lifelong Learning b) Qualifications and Lifelong Learning, Policy Brief* available at: www.oecd.org/dataoecd/10/2/38500491.pdf.

¹⁷ Further information about the QAA Scotland project is available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/developmentandenhancement/pages/recognition-of-prior-learning.aspx.

This section of the National RPL Framework has been constructed from a range of information and resources gathered as part of the QAA Scotland project.¹⁷ PSRBs are encouraged to consider RPL as a means of adding value to learning within their organisation and draw upon the guidance and resources contained within this area to:

- view RPL as **added value** for PSRBs
- make a **commitment** to the principle of RPL
- gain a **shared understanding** of RPL
- **engage** with RPL
- **support** working with RPL
- **enhance and progress** engagement in RPL.

5.2 Professional, statutory and regulatory body guidance

5.2.1 RPL as added value to PSRBs

Formal learning has in the past dominated policy thinking, shaped the way in which education and training are provided and coloured understanding of what counts as learning. Perhaps previously considered as not equal to 'real' learning and of little current value in the labour market, RPL policies, guidelines and frameworks now offer opportunities to place greater value on informal and non-formal learning. Contemporary policies outline a clear need for a continuum of lifelong learning which bring non-formal and informal learning into the foreground (OECD 2007, a&b). PSRBs commonly require their members to attain a standard for membership and then demonstrate continuing professionalism for the purpose of re-registration and development. RPL offers a means of fulfilling these objectives, subject to clarity within the PSRBs Continuing Professional Development (CPD) frameworks or equivalent processes.

Professionals work in environments characterised by constant change, the parameters of which are mediated by the requirements of PSRBs and employers alike. Evolving roles require quality educational opportunities and an employment infrastructure that permits and authorises change management to be implemented. Collaboration between higher education, PSRBs and employers in relation to RPL embraces lifelong learning and CPD agendas and offers professional members the added value of recognition for their efforts.

The involvement of higher education and PSRBs in the attainment of academic reward for learning achieved in the workplace also provides further opportunity and value. Scotland's higher education authorities acknowledge that the outcome of the recognition of non-formal and informal learning may increase the number of graduates, at either undergraduate or postgraduate level while impacting positively on the quality of attainment for PSRB members. Successful RPL strategies could have a positive impact, not only on an individual's future performance and motivation, but on an organisation's ability to build and organise knowledge into a learning culture that becomes self-perpetuating and lifelong.

To enhance RPL learning opportunities as added value for students, members and employees PSRBs are encouraged to consider:

- if they knowingly place greater emphasis on formal rather than non-formal and informal learning of their members
- the contribution of the workplace and learning through professional practice make to developing and enhancing the person, their employer and the profession they represent
- if there is a place for closer collaboration with employers and education providers to translate non-formal and informal learning into a tangible strategy that makes learning through these means visible, appreciated and recognised as comparable with, and integral to, the development of a professional
- ways in which qualification frameworks can validate PSRBs credentials and ensure quality assurance by making progression routes transparent and coherent

- RPL as an acknowledgment of achievement to motivate members to enter or gain partial credit towards academic programmes, and where relevant elevate membership status to graduate and/or postgraduate levels.

5.2.2 A commitment to the principle of RPL

QAA Scotland would welcome an increase in the commitment from PSRBs to RPL. Using the Joint Academic Coding System (JACS) a selection of PSRB websites from the HEBRG database were reviewed for terms related to RPL. PSRB websites representing medicine and dentistry, subjects allied to medicine, biological sciences, physical science, business and administrative studies, mass communication and documentation, architecture, engineers and technology, building and planning, maths science, and education were explored.

This revealed the diverse nature of PSRBs and determined that subject areas and varied remits influenced the extent to which a commitment to the principle of RPL is possible. Amidst this diversity was an equally important acknowledgment that PSRBs shared common goals including a commitment to the represented profession, recognition that learning contributes to the integrity of members, and monitoring to determine the extent to which individual responsibilities are met. Identifying and sharing good practice of members, as well as making recommendations for improvement were also common to PSRB remits.

Reference to RPL within PSRB websites is, however, scarce and is usually implied rather than explicit. There is a risk that the place of RPL within PSRB remits is not as transparent as it might be, hindering both an awareness of the activities and the contribution PSRBs can and do make to the RPL agenda.

In working towards a commitment to the principle of RPL, PSRBs should consider:

- making the stance on RPL explicit for key stakeholders and where engagement with RPL is not possible, the reasons for this should be made clear
- in making the stance explicit incorporate the higher education sector level principles of RPL
- communicating the commitment to RPL via the PSRB website and any other PSRB specific materials or resources
- when progression of professional status within the PSRB or re-registration is pending, the inclusion of RPL should be reinforced and any higher education links or potential attainments highlighted.

5.2.3 A shared understanding of RPL

The phrase RPL is not universally adopted by PSRBs or higher education. The lack of agreement regarding RPL terminology and the accompanying definitions prohibits shared understanding and consistency of approach between PSRBs, higher education and other key stakeholders.

In working towards a shared understanding of RPL, PSRBs should consider:

- adopting RPL as the accepted term and the SCQF definition
- when RPL is permissible, utilising the SCQF definitions as a means of differentiating between formal learning, non-formal learning and informal learning.

5.2.4 Engaging with RPL

PSRBs are actively engaged in providing opportunities which enable students, those seeking professional status and members to demonstrate and in some way gain recognition based upon formal, non-formal, informal learning or a combination therein. The nature of engagement with RPL among PSRBs is not uniform and is utilised in a number of different ways to:

- gain membership of the PSRB
- gain enhanced professional status with the PSRB
- demonstrate a commitment to professionalism through continuing professional development
- enable membership through recognition of status with other PSRBs.

Where a PSRB is involved in accreditation and approval of formal learning for entry to the profession, RPL is utilised as a component of programme approval/validation and monitoring with formal education providers including HEIs. Additionally, RPL forms a component of the specified CPD activities prescribed and non-prescribed by PSRBs. Within these activities the recognition of formal learning remains a prominent feature of the RPL process while for CPD purposes a combination of formal and informal learning are frequently adopted. Utilising informal learning alone is less common although engagement at this level is evident in relation to gaining membership, enhanced professional status and in particular CPD. This information is commonly contained in 'membership' or 'registration' and 'CPD' or 'Professional and Occupational Performance' sections of PSRB websites.

In working towards extending the possibilities of increased utilisation of RPL, PSRBs should consider opportunities to:

- explore in partnership with higher education and other key stakeholders common areas and barriers for the utilisation of RPL
- facilitate transferability of RPL between PSRBs and higher education including:
 - articulate, where applicable, the parameters (maximum proportion of qualification or CPD) of RPL and RPL that are permissible by the PSRB
 - where appropriate, align RPL with relevant qualification frameworks including Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework
- expand recognition of experience and informal learning as part of the RPL process ensuring acknowledgement in partnerships with government and non-government organisations, employers, PSRBs and educators that their agendas are of equal importance
- design and establish reliable RPL systems that take cognisance of the PSRB level of responsibility in the validation of professional credentials and how individuals and enterprises use these credentials in everyday life
- dedicate a resource to advocate the use of RPL
- acknowledge and illustrate the attainment of professional learning gained informally and from experience.

5.2.5 Support for PSRBs working with RPL

The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework Handbook User Guide and QAA Scotland *Streamlining of Recognition of Prior Learning Guidelines* outline processes which enable the support and assessment of RPL. Information and guidance, support mechanisms, assessment and monitoring and evaluation are identified as central in enabling an effective RPL experience. For PSRBs, existing support for RPL is often reflective of these areas but does not necessarily refer specifically to these guidelines. In working towards a common understanding there is merit in PSRBs and HE drawing upon the same guidelines to develop and enhance the support for RPL.

In working towards enhancing the support for RPL, PSRBs should consider the extent to which:

- the RPL process is open and transparent for users
- information regarding the support for RPL is easily accessible for users and available in different forms
- a designated point of contact to support user engagement in the RPL process is evident; this might be an identified person or a team/department within the organisation
- a range of assessment methods are adopted enabling users to demonstrate their informal learning
- criteria for assessment are explicit and take cognisance of SCQF criteria of acceptability, sufficiency, authenticity and currency
- mechanisms exist to monitor and evaluate the process and outcomes of RPL.

5.3 Professional, statutory and regulatory body resources for RPL

Table 4 provides a range of resources which might be of interest to PSRBs in developing and enhancing engagement with RPL. The materials encompass literature, websites and examples of existing PSRB practices and are intended to aid dissemination and increase transparency. Although arranged in relation to the five areas which delineate PSRB guidance for RPL, the resources are not mutually exclusive and are intended to be used holistically to develop practices across the five areas.

5.3.1 RPL as added value to PRSBs
Relevant documents
Freidman, A., Williams, C., Hopkins, SL., Jackson, L. 2008. Linking professional associations with Higher Education institutions (HEIs) in relation to the provision of Continuing Professional Development (CPD). Professional Associations Research Network
OECD (2007a) Qualifications Systems: Bridges to Lifelong Learning (Paris, OECD). OECD (2007b) Qualifications and Lifelong Learning, Policy Brief, (Paris, OECD) www.oecd.org/dataoecd/10/2/38500491.pdf
QAA recently worked with PSRBs representing teachers, nurses and social workers on a project related to practice based learning. The report shows 'work based practice' is a place of important and large scale informal and non-formal learning. The report recommends that PSRBs make explicit and recognise, the provision and receipt of mentorship or supervision of students, trainees, or more junior staff by making it a continuing professional development (CPD) activity which counts towards continuing registration. This recommendation demonstrates the close alignment between WBL and RPL. The report also confirmed the benchmarking of practice placements support/mentorship is aligned to the Scottish Credit and Qualification Framework therefore gives mentorship and supervision a more explicit value for professionals. www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/practcie-based-learning-guide.aspx
RPL Framework - Sector level resources Section 2.3 - Sector level resources
5.3.2 Commitment to the principle of RPL
Relevant documents
Higher Education Better Regulation Group. 2011. HEBRG Database of Professional, Regulatory and Statutory Bodies. www.hebetterregulation.ac.uk/OurWork/Pages/Professional,StatutoryandregulatoryBodies(PSRBs).aspx
5.3.3 Shared understanding of RPL
Relevant documents
The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Partnership. 2009. Scottish Credit and Qualifications Handbook User Guide. Section 7: The process for the recognition of prior learning. www.scqf.org.uk/Resources
5.3.4 Engaging in RPL
Relevant documents
PSRBs remit and websites: Higher Education Better Regulation Group. 2011. HEBRG Database of Professional, Regulatory and Statutory Bodies. www.hebetterregulation.ac.uk/OurWork/Pages/Professional,StatutoryandregulatoryBodies(PSRBs).aspx

Qualification frameworks and credit rating:

Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework information regarding The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework Partnership. Credit transfer in the context of Recognition of Prior Learning.

[www.scqf.org.uk/content/files/Old%20Vs%20New%20\(low%20res\)%20-%20Updated%20July%202013.pdf](http://www.scqf.org.uk/content/files/Old%20Vs%20New%20(low%20res)%20-%20Updated%20July%202013.pdf)

The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework. 2012. Revised Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework level descriptors. Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework : Glasgow

www.scqf.org.uk/content/files/SCQF%20Revised%20Level%20Descriptors%20-%20Aug%202012%20-%20FINAL%20-%20web%20version.pdf

The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework. 2012. Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework credit points explained: notional student effort hours. Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework: Glasgow.

www.scqf.org.uk/content/files/Notional_Learning_Hours_February_web.pdf

The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework. 2012. SCQF data base explained: a guide for credit rating bodies. Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework: Glasgow.

www.scqf.org.uk/content/files/Database%20Explained%20-%20FINAL%20-%20August%202012.pdf

Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework Database

www.scqf.org.uk/Credit%20Rating%20Bodies/Database

Examples of existing practice

Gaining membership of the PSRB:

The Royal Meteorological Society

This body is responsible for those who range from having an interest to being employed in meteorology

www.rmets.org

The Scottish Skills Council of Community Learning and Development for Scotland

This is the professional body for practitioners working in community learning and development.

As part of their work the Council provide an Individual Recognition route for full membership. Select the link to the right to access the approval area of the website and access information and the Individual Recognition Guidelines.

The Council are currently in the process of formulating a pathway for practitioners who do not hold formal qualifications and will enable entry via experience and informal learning.

www.cldstandardscouncil.org.uk/CLD_Standards_Council/CLD_Standards_Council

www.cldstandardscouncil.org.uk/Approval_of_training/Individual-Recognition

www.cldstandardscouncil.org.uk/Approval_of_training/Approval_of_training

www.cldstandardscouncil.org.uk/files/Registration_System_Document.pdf

The Scottish Social Service Council

SSSC represents those working in social services and oversees the regulation, education and training of these professionals. This organisation enables members of other PSRBs to apply for registration with SSSC.

www.sssc.uk.com/Applying-for-registration/who-can-apply-to-register.html

Gaining enhanced professional status with the PSRB:

The Chartered Institute of Architectural Technologists.

This Chartered Institute represents professionals working in and studying in the field of Architectural technology. It is an international body and offers recognition and profession within the Institute for those with and without qualification using their Professional and Occupational Performance Records.

www.ciat.org.uk/en

www.ciat.org.uk/en/Join_CIAT/POP_Records/

The Institute of Food Science and Technology (IFST)

IFST is the independent qualifying body for food professionals in Europe and the body concerned with food science and technology in the UK.

The Institute offers three pathways to gain enhanced membership and assign a points tariff in relation to formal and informal learning. To find out how they utilise informal learning as a mechanisms for these pathways visit their website via the link below. This will take you to the professional development area of the website. Then select Chartered Scientist, Registered Scientist and Registered Science Technician to learn more.

www.ifst.org/about_ifstwww.ifst.org/professional_development/

Continuing Professional Development:

The Institute of Faculties and Actuaries

The chartered professional body involved in the education, development and regulation of actuaries in the UK and abroad. To find out more about this organisation click on the following link to the right. The Institute operates a CPD scheme for members which utilises informal learning as part of this activity. Click on the link to the right to find out more.

www.actuaries.org.uk/about-us/pages/about-us

www.actuaries.org.uk/members/pages/continuing-professional-development-scheme

To gain a wider sense of how PSRBs use and support informal learning as a mechanism for CPD:

General Pharmaceutical Council

www.pharmacyregulation.org/education/continuing-professional-development

Institute of Chartered Accountants for Scotland:

<http://icas.org.uk/regulation-ethics/cpd/>

Institute of Food Science and Technology:

www.ifst.org/professional_development/cpd/

Scottish Skills Council of Community Learning and Development for Scotland:

www.cldstandardscouncil.org.uk/CPD/CPD

www.cldstandardscouncil.org.uk/files/CPD_Strategy_for_CLD

The Law Society Scotland:

www.lawscot.org.uk/members/membership-and-registrar/cpd

5.3.5 Support for RPL

Relevant documents

The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Partnership. 2009. Scottish Credit and Qualifications Handbook User Guide. Section 7: The process for the recognition of prior learning.

www.scqf.org.uk/Resources/

The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Partnership. 2010. Facilitating the recognition of prior learning toolkit.

www.scqf.org.uk/Resources/

Whittaker, R., Brown, J. 2012. Streamlining Recognition of Prior Learning Guidelines Streamlining and Enhancing Recognition of Prior Learning Support and Assessment. GCU LEAD and CRL.

www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Documents/Streamlining_RPL_Guidelines.pdf

Examples of existing practice
<p>PSRBs:</p> <p>The BCS Institute of Information Technology</p> <p>This body represents those professionals within the IT industry. The Institute offers three pathways to gain chartered status which enable professionals to utilise experience and academic credit for recognition. The pathways adopt a range of assessment methods in enabling candidates to demonstrate learning. To access information visit their website via the link below. Then select to Chartered IT Professional, Chartered Engineer or Chartered Scientist to review the application process and assessment methods.</p> <p>www.bcs.org/category/5651. www.bcs.org/category/10966</p>
<p>The General Pharmaceutical Council</p> <p>This PSRB stipulate set assessment criteria for their CPD processes which incorporate informal learning.</p> <p>www.pharmacyregulation.org/sites/default/files/Standards%20for%20continuing%20professional%20development%20s.pdf</p>
<p>HEIs:</p> <p>Institutional level Section 3</p> <p>Student level Section 4</p>
<p>Employers, PSRBs, learners and education providers:</p> <p>SCQF Recognition of Prior Learning resources.</p> <p>www.scqf.org.uk/RPL</p>

Table 4: Resources for PSRBs

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