Country report

UK, England and Northern Ireland

2016 update to the European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning

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1 Introduction and Evaluation

1.1 Abstract

There are a number of routes through which learners can have their non-formal and informal learning recognised and validated in England and Northern Ireland. Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is used in relation to formal, regulated qualifications. In vocational education, RPL is mainly used to tailor the learning offer and in higher education (HE), it can be used for access, exemption and award. Progress and achievement in non-regulated learning (non-accredited learning) can be recognised through a five-stage process known as RARPA, which however does not lead to any form of certification. National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) represent an opportunity to validate workplace learning. They are aimed mainly at people in work and lead to a nationally-recognised qualification, proving the ability to perform an occupation to a nationally-recognised occupational standard. There are also some separate validation initiatives in the third sector. However, there is no system in place to coordinate validation activities taking place in the different sectors.

There have been no notable developments relating specifically to RPL in the UK since 2014. There is no specific strategy devoted to RPL but it is referenced in both the Skills Funding Agency and Ofqual policies for funding and qualifications, respectively. The Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) has been replaced by the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF), which is part of a policy approach seeking to devolve responsibility from national level to Awarding Organisations and learning providers. This means that the actual offer of RPL depends on the providers themselves. The process is designed to be self-governing and allow for RPL to be accredited where it is relevant to do so, but not to impose an overly rigid model on those who deliver qualifications. The advantage is that each validation process and even each individual procedure of validation can be tailored to the learner(s) in question but the potential disadvantage is that without a greater drive at national level, it is likely that the numbers of people actually benefiting from RPL opportunities will remain low.

1.2 Main changes since the 2014 update

There are a number of routes through which learners can have their non-formal and informal learning recognised and validated in England and Northern Ireland. At national level, Ofqual's General Conditions of Recognition refer to RPL in relation to regulated qualifications (i.e. mainly vocational qualifications). There is a UK-wide Quality Code for the HE sector, which includes a mandatory 'expectation' relating to assessment and RPL. Recognising and Recording Progress and Achievement (RARPA) is a process which must be used by providers of non-regulated learning to record learners’ achievements – it applies to England only. National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) represent an opportunity to validate workplace learning. There are also a number of individual projects and initiatives in the third sector.

The SFA’s funding rules, which refer to RPL and RARPA, apply to providers it funds from across the private and third sectors. However, there is not a comprehensive validation strategy or policy covering all sectors of education and training, the private sector and third sector, nor is there a system in place to coordinate validation activities taking place in the different education sectors (e.g. a national institution coordinating good practice, national principles to promote consistency). The General Conditions and SFA’s funding rules do not apply to an activity which is not supported by public funds.

Where qualifications are awarded through RPL, these are the same as those earned through formal learning opportunities, although it may not be possible to achieve the same graded outcomes (instead, the outcomes of RPL are either ‘pass’ or ‘fail’). As such, there is no question of whether the outcomes of validation are ‘trusted’ by stakeholders and in society, since they are the same outcomes.
There is no data to show the extent to which RPL takes place in England and Northern Ireland, but it is thought that, in practice, it is relatively small-scale. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that for vocational qualifications (referring here mainly to regulated qualifications), it is a generally accepted practice to assess a learner in order to determine the training s/he requires to achieve a qualification. This process of initial assessment, leading to a tailored learning opportunity, is not generally referred to or understood as a specific process of ‘RPL’ but where it happens it is a recognised practice and leads to the discounting of funding so that government only pays for the activity that is delivered. In the higher education (HE) sector, RPL is more commonly used for access into university programmes; data is not collected to show the extent to which this takes place.

There have been no notable developments relating specifically to RPL in the UK since 2014. The new RQF is part of a policy approach which is seeking to devolve responsibility from national level to Awarding Organisations and learning providers. This means that the actual implementation of RPL depends on the providers themselves. This arrangement has some advantages, as it means that each validation process and even each individual procedure can be tailored to the learner(s) in question, with some consistency ensured through the national frameworks. However, there are also disadvantages, including the risk of misinterpretation of the national frameworks by practitioners who may not fully understand the processes without adequate training and may perceive them to be time-consuming and complicated. Furthermore, without a greater drive at national level to encourage the wider implementation of RPL, it is likely that the numbers of people actually benefiting from RPL opportunities will remain low. For the application of RPL to increase, further support and awareness-raising amongst providers and other practitioners involved in working with learners would be needed. This includes resources in terms of staff numbers and staff development, as well as a funding methodology which supports the RPL process and makes it a viable option for providers to offer.

Moreover, without opportunities for peer learning or more detailed guidance or training on implementation of RPL, practitioners who are responsible for delivering RPL may lack the confidence or knowledge to implement RPL opportunities on a wider scale. At a time where public funding is relatively constrained, it may be that providers have less capacity to support their staff to ‘take time out’ to develop comprehensive processes and procedures for RPL, inform learners about these opportunities and deliver them on a larger scale than is currently the case.

2 National perspective

It is important to note that in the UK, there is a devolved system of governance for lifelong learning and many aspects of the skills agenda. Each of the devolved administrations has its own strategy for skills and lifelong learning. Scotland has an education system with particularly notable differences from other parts of the UK, dating back to long before 1997, and has therefore been addressed in a separate report for this project, which can also be accessed from the European Inventory website. The Welsh Credit and Qualifications Framework (CQFW) also provides a separate opportunity for recognition of prior non-formal learning through its Quality Assured Lifelong Learning (QALL) pillar, and a separate brief report for Wales has also been prepared for this 2016 edition of the Inventory. Although there are still some differences in approach (e.g. funding provision differs), this report aims to provide an overview of validation of prior learning in England and Northern Ireland.

2.1 Overarching approach to validation

There is no national strategy for validation in England and Northern Ireland. Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is referred to in the ‘General Conditions of Recognition’ (September 2015) which set out rules for regulated qualifications (outside the HE qualifications system) and is included in the QAA Quality Code for HE. In England, learners’ achievements in non-regulated learning are recorded through the Recognition and Recording Progress and
Achievement in Non-Accredited Learning (RARPA), use of which is compulsory for non-regulated learning providers funded through the Skills Funding Agency (SFA). National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) represent an opportunity to validate workplace learning. They are aimed mainly at people in work and lead to a nationally-recognised qualification, proving the ability to perform an occupation to a nationally-recognised occupational standard.

RPL in the HE sector has been used for many years and is mainly seen as a way of widening access to higher level education. RARPA, which applies to non-accredited learning, is seen as both a way of recording progress and a means of assuring the quality of provision of non-regulated learning.

2.2 Validation in education and training

There is no single national framework for validation, covering all sectors of learning and all levels. There are however four clear structures by which individuals can have their prior learning validated, which apply to different types of learning:

- Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), linked to formal, regulated qualifications, mainly offered through the new Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF);
- National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), which recognise workplace learning and are therefore covered under Section 2.3;
- Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) (formerly referred to as Accreditation of prior (Experiential) Learning, APL/APEL) in relation to Higher Education (HE); and,
- Recording Progress and Achievement in Non-Accredited Learning (RARPA), which relates mainly to adult and community, non-regulated, learning in England only.

Each of these ‘opportunities’ is discussed in turn below. We also refer briefly to access courses which are offered in the further education sector, as well as qualifications which sit outside of qualifications frameworks.

RPL relating to regulated (RQF) units and qualifications

The ‘General Conditions of Recognition’ (Ofqual, 2015a) set out the regulatory requirements for all regulated qualifications, which all awarding organisations (AOs) must follow. According to the document, ‘recognition of prior learning’ (RPL) is defined as the:

“(a) identification by an awarding organisation of any learning undertaken, and/or attainment, by a Learner –

(i) prior to that Learner taking a qualification which the awarding organisation makes available or proposes to make available, and

(ii) which is relevant to the knowledge, skills and understanding which will be assessed as part of that qualification, and

(b) recognition by an awarding organisation of that learning and/or attainment through amendment to the requirements which a Learner must have satisfied before the Learner will be assessed or that qualification will be awarded”.

The General Conditions of Recognition set out the requirements of an AO’s RPL policy:

“Where an awarding organisation has in place a policy for the recognition of prior learning it must:

(a) ensure that the policy which it has in place enables the awarding organisation to award qualifications in accordance with its Conditions of Recognition,

(b) publish that policy, and

(c) comply with that policy”.

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The Guidance to the General Conditions of Recognition (Ofqual, 2015b) gives examples of ‘positive indicators’ that would suggest an AO is likely to comply with the policy (as per point (c) above). These examples are provided below.

“The awarding organisation’s published policy for recognition of prior learning (RPL):

- is open, transparent and clear to Learners and Users of qualifications;
- sets out the evidence of prior learning that will be required by the awarding organisation;
- sets out the various stages to be followed in considering an application for RPL and the timelines to be followed at each stage;
- sets out the criteria which will be used when making a decision about the appropriateness of RPL;
- identifies the range of possible outcomes to a successful application for RPL;
- sets out a complaints process;
- identifies any role to be taken by a Centre in making a decision about RPL;
- identifies any limit on the amount of RPL available for any qualification which is subject to such a limit.

The awarding organisation ensures that:

- any decisions on an application for RPL are carried out by staff who are competent to consider and make decisions about RPL;
- its policy for RPL is regularly reviewed and, where appropriate, amended; and
- any qualification awarded to a Learner who has made a successful application for RPL provides a valid and reliable indication of that Learner’s knowledge, skills and understanding”.

Alongside this, RPL is also acknowledged in the Skills Funding Agency’s funding rules which apply to England (see Section 2.7.1 below for more details of the funding rules). The SFA defers to Ofqual’s policy on RPL.

RPL in the Higher Education Sector

For HE, the responsibility for RPL lies ultimately with the degree awarding body or other AO (as that is where ultimate responsibility for academic standards lies). Although there is no legislation that regulates RPL, there is a long tradition of recognising prior learning and encouraging mature students to participate in higher education.

In the academic year 2012-13, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) introduced the UK Quality Code for HE, which is ‘the definitive reference point for all UK higher education providers’. The Quality Code sets out the ‘expectations’ that all providers of UK HE are required to meet (the Code applies to England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland). Each expectation is accompanied by a series of indicators that reflect ‘sound practice’ and, through which, providers can demonstrate they are meeting the relevant expectation.

RPL is specifically included in a chapter of the Quality Code entitled ‘Assessment of students and the recognition of prior learning’ (Chapter B6) as well as in the chapter on Admissions (Chapter B2). By bringing together assessment in relation to formal learning and RPL in one chapter, the aim was to demonstrate that both forms of assessment share common principles and that the quality assurance of RPL should be as firmly embedded as quality assurance for any other aspect of HE provision.

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1 Harris, J., Breier, M. and Wihak, C. (eds) Researching the Recognition of Prior Learning, PLIRC/NIACE includes a chapter on this.
In Northern Ireland, the then Department for Employment and Learning (which is now the Department for the Economy) developed a set of good practice guidelines for colleges and universities in association with all six Further Education Regional Colleges and the Northern Ireland universities. The aim of the guidelines is to increase the number of learners accepted to study in HE, and in particular in Foundation Degrees (HE vocational qualifications) in Northern Ireland via a process of RPL, and in doing so to widen access to more people who do not have (relevant) formal qualifications. Although the guidelines recognise that institutional autonomy applies, they propose that the Colleges and Universities subscribe to and apply the procedures set out therein (Northern Ireland Colleges and Universities APEL Good Practice Guidelines, no date).

Recognising and Recording Progress and Achievement in Non-Accredited Learning (RARPA) – applies to England only

RARPA is a process to measure the progress and achievement of learners taking part in non-regulated learning provision, i.e. mainly adult and community learning. It is seen as a method of quality assuring learning provision and also as a way of supporting learners to make the transition from non-formal to formal learning. It is used as a mechanism to build confidence and support learners who have few or no qualifications, ideally enabling them to progress to further levels of education which may be qualification-based or support them back into work or society (e-mail correspondence with RARPA trainer, 2016).

It is mandatory for organisations funded by the SFA delivering non-regulated training provision to use the RARPA standards and keep the necessary evidence within each learning agreement, and to provide the learner with a clear record of their achievement; this record can be in the form of a certificate (SFA, 2015). In addition, some providers which deliver accredited/regulated learning are now also using RARPA. It encourages a learner-centred way of planning and delivering learning that puts the learner at the centre of the learning process, which is in line with Ofsted’s (the Education Inspectorate) approach to collecting evidence on how progress is being made by all learners (e-mail correspondence with RARPA trainer, 2016).

Guidance on the application of RARPA was prepared by Learning and Work (formerly the National Institute for Adult and Continuing Education, NIACE). At the time of writing, the way that non-regulated learning is currently being quality assured (which is currently through RARPA) is under review (telephone correspondence with RARPA trainer, 2016).

Access Courses

One specific example of RPL in practice in the FE sector is entry to Level 3 Access to HE Diploma courses, which, once successfully completed, enable adult learners who left formal education without the qualifications needed to enter higher education to progress to courses in higher education. Applicants to Access to HE Diploma courses are mainly mature (80% are over 21) and come from a variety of backgrounds, and the colleges concerned may assess their potential to enter the Access to HE course by taking into account their prior learning and experience. The Access to HE Diploma is a regulated qualification, regulated by the QAA in England and Wales. The regulatory requirements relating to the availability of RPL are contained within the Access to Higher Education Diploma specification (2013). Up to 50% of the qualification can be gained by RPL; either prior formal learning or prior experiential learning and Access Validating Agencies (AVAs) must have procedures in place for the management of RPL. RPL is defined in this context as “the generic term for processes used to recognise learning achieved outside the formal course of learning designed to support student achievement of a named Diploma. It includes recognition of both experiential and certificated learning”. Experiential learning is described as ‘learning achieved in a range of learning contexts’. Units achieved via RPL are not graded. Claims

http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk/Pages/Default.aspx
must be made by students on an individual basis. (QAA, 2013). There is, however, little evidence that this facility is widely used or that significant numbers of credits are achieved by learners in this way.

Non-funded provision

There are also many qualifications which are not included on the RQF or FHEQ, which can be achieved through a process of validation, as it is up to the learning provider to decide what processes individuals are required to undertake in order to achieve the qualification in question. This privately-funded provision is responsive to the needs of the market and decisions regarding the use of validation are not subject to national level policies and guidelines. For example in Management, there are numerous private consultancies which offer management training and certificates, which allow individuals to gain exemptions from their training if they can prove they have relevant competences.

The stages of validation:

The extent to which the four stages of validation (identification, documentation, assessment, and certification) are used in RPL in the UK depends, to some extent, on the education sector and on the purpose of the RPL process. For instance, in the HE sector, RPL is often used to support access to higher level education programmes, so focuses less on certification. In the third sector, the focus tends to be on initial guidance, reflection and recognising and identifying skills, and gathering evidence.

The Pearson RPL policy (Pearson, 2015), gives an example of an RPL process with four stages:

1. Awareness, information and guidance,
2. Pre-assessment, gathering evidence and giving information,
3. Assessment/documentation of evidence,

RARPA is a five-stage process, as outlined below, with stages 4-5 relevant to the validation of learning:

1. Establish aim(s) of the learning programme, appropriate to the learner(s),
2. Initial assessment to establish learner’s starting point (this must be recorded),
3. Identification of appropriately challenging learning objectives,
4. Recognition and recording of progress and achievement during programme,

Open Educational Resources:

The Open University offers free educational resources through its ‘OpenLearn’ website. OpenLearn courses do not carry formal credits towards a qualification but learners can obtain a Statement of Participation or digital badge which they can use to show their learning achievements.

Other universities also offer free online courses. For example, the University of Derby Online Learning (UDOL) offers MOOCs which lead to an e-certificate. In addition, each unit can be recognised through a universal Mozilla open badge.
2.3 Validation and the labour market

National vocational qualifications (NVQs) are work-related, outcomes-based, competence-oriented qualifications which are based on national occupational standards (NOS\(^3\)). They are mainly targeted to people who are currently in work and provide evidence of professional competence. They can be taken as a qualification on their own, or as part of an apprenticeship. NVQs are assessed through evidence of performance against certain work-related tasks, rather than formal examinations. They can be individualised to the learner, to fit around his/her work commitments. There are no time limits on the completion of NVQs, no age limits and no special entry requirements\(^4\).

Validation opportunities in the HE sector and linked to the RQF tend to be linked to vocational or work-based formal learning opportunities, thus helping people to gain skills for the labour market.

At sector level, Skills Passports have been developed, as described in Section 2.3.1.

2.3.1 Skills audits

The National Careers Service in England\(^5\), Wales\(^6\) and Northern Ireland\(^7\) provides voluntary Skills Health Checks, which can be undertaken using online tools or face-to-face with a Careers Advisor.

At sector level\(^8\), Skills Passports have been developed which aim to provide employees with a transferable record of their qualifications and experience and which can be easily assessed by future employers. A Skills Passport is a portable, online record of an individual’s career history, current skills and training. The information in a Skills Passport can be independently verified and includes an individual’s education, qualifications, competencies, employment history, training record and objectives. It is accessible securely via the internet at any time, from anywhere.

Take-up has been mixed in the sectors which have developed them. Take-up has been influenced by: how essential it is for employees to have a passport (for example, this can be affected by whether there are regulatory or health and safety drivers, or if other similar licences to practise already exist within the sector); how tightly focused the sector is (and therefore how transferable the skills passport will be); cost; and, the attitudes of employers and employees. Skills Passports have therefore had greater impact in some sectors (e.g. Health and Nuclear) than others (e.g. Process).

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\(^3\) National Occupational Standards are no longer a mandatory requirement in England for either qualifications or apprenticeships. The Devolved Administrations (i.e. Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) plan to maintain use of NOS and are currently considering next steps on how this will be done. The National Occupational Standards Governance Group will ensure the contents of the NOS database will remain publicly available and employers throughout the UK can continue to use NOS if they so choose. (Information provided by Welsh Government, August 2016).


\(^5\) Please see: [https://nationalcareersservice.direct.gov.uk/Pages/Home.aspx](https://nationalcareersservice.direct.gov.uk/Pages/Home.aspx)


\(^8\) Examples include: Construction, Financial Services, Food and Drink, Manufacturing, Creative and Cultural, Hospitality, Nuclear, Process Industries, IT, Retail, Health, Sport and Active Leisure.
2.4 Validation and the third sector

It is possible to identify individual examples of validation projects in this sector, which tend to be formative in nature. There is no overarching approach however, for example to cover youth or voluntary work.

The Soft Outcomes Universal Learning (SOUL) Record® is an example of a validation project from the third sector, which was described in detail in the 2010 update. This toolkit continues to be used to evidence learning in the voluntary and community sector. The SOUL Record was developed with the third sector as a means of benchmarking and measuring progression on soft outcomes. It was originally published in hard copy (revised 2011, 2012) and is now sold online under annual subscription. The SOUL Record online offers automatic collation of results, presented in graph form and allows both group and individual monitoring. Training in the use of SOUL Record is available online as well as bespoke, classroom-based delivery (correspondence with City College Norwich, 2016).

The Informal Learning in Communities (ILIC) project, described in the 2014 country update, has now come to an end. One of its outputs was training modules for practitioners in the field of adult education wanting to develop and validate informal and non-formal learning within different communities.

Merseyside Expanding Horizons has now commenced a new EU-funded project, entitled ‘Motive’ (Motivate, Innovate, Validate, Evaluate). It is described in the box below.

**Box 1 Motive (Motivate, Innovate, Validate, Evaluate) project**

Merseyside Expanding Horizons – a voluntary community organisation with a focus on social inclusion, based in Liverpool – is working with partners from four European countries (Italy, Lithuania, Austria and France) and another partner from the UK, to elaborate a methodology for validation of informal learning, aiming to boost skills and employability of adult learners and to boost community development. The methodology includes accompanying training and learning resources.

The learning resources developed through the project will be targeted at community learning champions (CLCs). These CLCs will be supported to develop ‘Credos’, which are ‘Community resilience and employment development opportunities’. The idea is that they will deliver training that has a positive impact on the community they are interested and living in. A validation toolkit will also be developed as part of the project and tested by the CLCs. This toolkit will support the adult learners engaged through the project to recognise existing and developing skills and competencies which are identified as key skills for employability. CLCs will also be able to validate their own skills and learning using the Validation toolkit.

In addition, the Partnership will also develop other open educational resources (OERs) which enable learners to validate their skills, for example through a personal learning journey, action planning, or a learning portfolio linking to Europass and EQF.

*Sources: interview with Merseyside Expanding Horizons and Motive website: [http://motiveproject.eu/#credo](http://motiveproject.eu/#credo)*

3 Links to national qualification systems

Qualifications and qualifications frameworks

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9 [http://soulrecord.org/home](http://soulrecord.org/home)
There are two qualifications frameworks in place in England and Northern Ireland, as discussed below.

The ‘Regulated Qualifications Framework’ (RQF) was introduced in October 2015. It replaced the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) and the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). The RQF is made up of the same levels as the QCF but it now applies to all regulated qualifications (previously, qualifications which did not meet the QCF criteria were developed to fit the NQF). Unlike the QCF, the RQF does not set qualification design rules, which means that there is now no requirement to develop qualifications using units of assessment (which comprise learning outcomes, assessment criteria, credit value and level of the unit). As noted above, the General Conditions of Recognition, which set out the regulatory requirements for all regulated qualifications, include a definition of RPL.

The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) for England, Wales and Northern Ireland is based on the fundamental premise that qualifications should be awarded on the basis of achievement of outcomes and attainment, rather than years of study. Qualification descriptors are therefore used to describe the outcomes and attributes expected for the award of individual qualifications. The FHEQ forms part of the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales and the numbering of the FHEQ levels correspond with levels 4 to 8 in the RQF. The FHEQ is part of the Quality Code for HE (Part A) and adherence to it is one of the expectations in Part A.

The outcomes that can be achieved through validation vary across the education sectors and across providers of learning, as discussed below.

The General Conditions (Ofqual, 2015a) refer to the result of RPL as “recognition by an awarding organisation of that learning and/or attainment through amendment to the requirements which a Learner must have satisfied before the Learner will be assessed or that qualification will be awarded”.

In the HE sector, credit is used by most degree-awarding bodies in England and Northern Ireland in the design and management of their taught programmes. A credit framework for higher education has been agreed and all degree-awarding bodies which use credits, must use the framework, which is designed to be complementary to the FHEQ (QAA, 2014). The FHEQ guidance on academic credit arrangements (which is part of the Quality Code for HE, under Part A) recognises the use of RPL for the award of credit and states that HEIs may make reference to credit level and credit volume when deciding how much and at what level they might formally recognise the learning presented for accreditation as part of a specific programme (QAA, 2008). The Quality Code for HE states that any limit on the award of credit (where used) or exemption through RPL must be clearly stated in the HEI’s regulations, as well as the way in which this credit can be used for the purposes of progression, the making of an intermediate or final award, and any grading or classification of that award. To give two examples, the University of Derby and the University of Middlesex allow credits to be awarded through RPL as follows.

At the University of Derby, credits for prior learning can only be awarded for whole modules. The limits on credits that can be awarded for prior learning are set out in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Award</th>
<th>Total credit required for award</th>
<th>Maximum credits available as RPL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professional Doctorates or Practice-based Doctorates</td>
<td>120 Level 7 , 420 Level 8</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master of Professional</td>
<td>180 Level 7</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although UK higher education providers are not required to use credit and some do not
University of Derby RPL policy

At the University of Middlesex, the maximum amount of credits which can be counted towards a qualification is higher – normally two-thirds of the total required. For example, 240 credits can be recognised towards the 360 credits required for a Bachelor’s degree with honours or 40 credits can be recognised towards the 60 credits required for a Postgraduate Certificate. However, some study programmes have compulsory modules against which RPL is not possible, which may mean that the amount of credits one is able to claim is less than two-thirds. Prior learning claims are assessed on a pass/fail basis, are not graded and cannot contribute to degree classifications. Where academic credits are awarded, they are recorded by Middlesex University Registry and identified on the student’s Diploma Supplement on successful completion of his/her programme of studies (Middlesex University website, accessed March 2016).

The Northern Ireland Colleges and Universities APEL Good Practice Guidelines state that where RPL is used for exemptions, the minimum that can be applied for is one full module, and the maximum is 50% of a full Foundation Degree, i.e. 120 CATS at Level 4.

The Pearson RPL policy states that “not all qualifications allow the use of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). Where the use of RPL is permitted, this will be stated within the qualification specification”. It also states that “the use of Recognition of Prior Learning is not mandatory. However, if centres choose to implement it, centres must have an internal policy on RPL and the appropriate resources to do so”. The policy later states that “Provided that the assessment requirements of a given unit or qualification have been met, the use of RPL is acceptable for accrediting a unit, units or a whole qualification. Partial unit completion is not acceptable”. The policy also explains that “most often RPL will be used for units. It is acceptable to claim for an entire qualification through RPL although this is not the normal practice because it would be unusual for a learner to be able to offer prior achievement that completely matches every aspect of a qualification’s assessment requirements”. With regard to the certificates awarded through RPL, where evidence of Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning is being assessed against graded units, only pass criteria can be awarded, according to the Pearson policy. The Pearson RPL policy is not concerned with allowing for exceptional entry to, or exemption from, a programme of study.

City and Guilds policy states that “If an individual can demonstrate that they meet all the learning outcomes and assessment criteria in a unit, then they can claim credit for that unit solely on the basis of their RPL achievement. If however, evidence from RPL is only sufficient to cover one or more learning outcomes, or to partly meet the need of a learning outcome, then additional assessment methods should be used to generate sufficient evidence on which to base a safe assessment decision”.

There is no data to show the extent to which RPL takes place in England and Northern Ireland, but it is thought that, in practice, it is relatively small-scale. Nevertheless, it is worth

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**Practice - Research Skills modules**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Programme</th>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Credits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Masters Stage</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PG Diploma</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PG Certificate</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate awards</td>
<td></td>
<td>50 % of the credits for the level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programmes with no stage</td>
<td></td>
<td>50 % of the total credits (or less if specified by national awarding body)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>awards e.g. OCN, NVQ, GNVQ, HNC/D</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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noting that for vocational qualifications (referring here mainly to regulated qualifications), it is generally accepted practice to assess a learner in order to determine the training s/he requires to achieve a qualification. This process of initial assessment, leading to a tailored learning opportunity, is not generally referred to or understood as a specific process of ‘RPL’, but where it happens it is a recognised practice and leads to the discounting of funding so that government only pays for the activity that is delivered.

4 Standards

The standards used for RPL are the same as those used for the provision of formal learning. The AO Pearson for example states in its RPL policy that “all evidence must be evaluated using the stipulated learning outcomes and assessment criteria from the qualification or unit being claimed. In assessing a unit using RPL the assessor must be satisfied that the evidence produced by the learner meets the assessment standard established by the learning outcome and its related assessment criteria. Centres must have personnel with appropriate expertise and knowledge to facilitate this and make decisions about RPL. Evidence used for RPL will be subject to standards verification as normal.”

The University of Derby RPL policy states that “previous certificated and experiential learning should be mapped directly to the learning outcomes of individual modules that comprise the programme” (University of Derby, 2015).

NOS, which are the basis of the aforementioned NVQs, are ‘statements of the standards of performance individuals must achieve when carrying out functions in the workplace, together with specifications of the underpinning knowledge and understanding’12. These are prepared by the relevant Sector Skills Council or Standards Setting Organisation. They can be used for example to support training needs analysis, learning programmes and performance appraisals. Most qualifications used in the workplace are based upon NOS. The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) announced in 2016 that NOS were no longer a mandatory requirement in England, although employers can choose to continue using them. They will continue to be used in Northern Ireland.

5 Organisations and institutions involved in validation arrangements and its coordination

Oversight

Responsibility for policy relating to education and training is held by two Ministries in England. The Department for Education, which has responsibility for education and children’s services and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, which has responsibility for further and higher education.

In Northern Ireland, responsibility for policy relating to education and training is shared by the Department of Education (schools) and the Department for the Economy (further and higher education).

There is no national institution with specific responsibility for RPL. As outlined above, there are guidelines within specific sectors of learning (e.g. non-accredited adult learning, higher education) but in general the application of validation is devolved to the AO/learning provider, or at times to departments within the learning provider.

With regard to RPL linked to the RQF, responsibility for the regulation of RQF qualifications is held by Ofqual in England and the CCEA in Northern Ireland (as of 4 May 2016).

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12 See [http://nos.ukces.org.uk/Pages/index.aspx](http://nos.ukces.org.uk/Pages/index.aspx)
In England, the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) sets out the funding arrangements for further education provision, i.e. apprenticeships and (mainly) regulated vocational qualifications, including reference to RPL. In Northern Ireland, the Department for the Economy is responsible for the financing of the statutory further education sector; there are no separate funding arrangements for RPL.

In HE, institutions are overseen by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). As outlined above, the QAA developed the Quality Code for HE, which includes references to the importance of HEIs offering RPL. The actual application of RPL however varies both across and within HE providers. QAA is also the regulator of the Access to HE Diploma and the Access to HE Recognition Scheme, which licenses Access Validating Agencies.

Sector Skills Councils are involved in the development of the Skills Passports described in Section 2.2.

Learning and Work Institute (formerly NIACE) is an important player in the RARPA process. It provides training to practitioners in the application of the RARPA process.

Responsibility for the implementation of all stages of validation (from the design of the approach through to its evaluation and review) lies with the learning providers and AOs. National level organisations provide guidance and principles, as outlined above.

Implementation

Awarding Organisations (AOs)

Ofqual recognises over 150 AOs, which can award credits and qualifications. Two AO RPL policy/process documents were reviewed for the purposes of this report. These were:

- City and Guilds,
- Pearson.

Learning providers or ‘centres’

In line with the General Conditions of Recognition, ‘Centres’ (organisations which are accountable to an AO for assessment arrangements leading to the award of credit or qualifications, i.e. learning providers) have the responsibility for putting in place arrangements that allow for RPL. A 2013 study carried out by the Learning and Work Institute into RPL relating to formal qualifications found that “there is a high degree of commitment from providers to making an RPL offer to learners, and a clear understanding of the benefits that such an offer has for many different kinds of learner”.

However, RPL in practice varies across both AOs and Centres.

Higher education institutions

In the HE sector, recognition of prior learning is currently delivered at a level determined by the institution.

The SEEC network on recognising learning through credit, established in 1992, continues to be active. SEEC has produced a number of publications to support providers, including advice for external examiners, models and processes. In addition, the credit level descriptors (which are “a useful reference point for anyone with a responsibility for contextualising and credit-rating learning whether this learning derives from within or without the formal

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13 This study looked at RPL within the QCF. However the findings are likely to apply to providers perceptions of RPL in relation to the RQF as well.

14 Originally the South East England Consortium for Credit Accumulation & Transfer, SEEC has grown to cover institutions in the south and southern midlands of the UK. NUCCAT is the corresponding consortium for the northern half of UK, and HE organisations can belong to both consortia

15 http://www.seec.org.uk/; There is also a Northern Universities Consortium - http://www.nuc.ac.uk/
curriculum”) developed by SEEC\textsuperscript{16} are used by many institutions to support RPL implementation, especially for large quantities of credit.

Private sector actors
The aforementioned Learning and Work Institute report found that in some industries or sectors (notably the construction industry), RPL seems to work well in line with established training and assessment approaches, and is well supported by employers. In the construction industry for example, the majority of learning takes place ‘on site’ and so assessment of the skills employees have acquired while working is an effective way of capturing this learning. NIACE suggested that other industries must have similar approaches to learning but noted that, at the time of writing it was the construction industry where “the strongest case for RPL as a cost-effective process of recognising achievement can be made”.

6 Information, advice and guidance

6.1 Awareness-raising and recruitment
The provision of information, advice and guidance in relation to the various methods of validation in place in England, Wales and Northern Ireland is delivered by the individual learning providers which offer validation opportunities.

The QAA Quality Code includes the following indicator regarding RPL “Those who might be eligible for the recognition of prior learning are made aware of the opportunities available, and are supported throughout the process of application and assessment for recognition.” The Code goes on to state that the form of support offered to individuals who wish to undergo an RPL process will vary according to the “higher education provider’s approach to RPL and the nature and number of claims it receives”.

With regard to Foundation Degrees, the Northern Ireland Colleges and Universities APEL Good Practice Guidelines state that ‘the responsibility for the claim lies with the applicant. However Colleges will provide Guidelines to support students in the understanding of the Guidelines and the production of an APEL claim’.

Awareness of RPL opportunities amongst individuals appears to be low. For example, a case study report of RPL in the private sector (Recognition of Prior Learning and how sectors are using it in the UK and Europe, unpublished) undertaken by the UK EQF National Co-ordination Points in 2012 found that the learners within the organisations concerned were not always aware of the opportunity to have learning from their previous experiences recognised, suggesting that there is a need for greater promotion of the RPL opportunities available to individuals, even within organisations with their own RPL initiatives.

6.2 Information, advice and guidance
There is no specific information provider for the various types of validation in place in the UK. Individual learning providers will offer information and advice to individuals taking part in the RPL processes they offer.

In HE and FE, individual providers – or even departments or faculties within providers – are responsible for providing information and advice on their own RPL procedures and thus again the methods used will vary.

\textsuperscript{16} http://seecwp.pipeten.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/seec-files/SEEC%20Level%20Descriptors%202010.pdf
6.3 Measures to enhance the awareness of validation initiatives and practices amongst guidance practitioners

For guidance practitioners working outside of the actual RPL delivery process, one interviewee for the 2014 Inventory update suggested that it is likely that there is a need for more awareness raising and capacity-building in terms of their knowledge of and ability to provide guidance on RPL.
7 Validation practitioners

7.1 Profile of validation practitioners

Practitioners implementing validation across England/Northern Ireland tend to be existing staff members within the organisation providing the validation procedure. There are no formal requirements in terms of skills or qualifications for validation practitioners. However, as mentioned above, the Guidance to the General Conditions of Recognition (Ofqual, 2015b) gives examples of ‘positive indicators’ that would suggest an AO is likely to comply with its policy for RPL. One of these is that the awarding organisation ensures that “any decisions on an application for RPL are carried out by staff who are competent to consider and make decisions about RPL”. No indication is given of what ‘competent’ might mean in practice.

Individual AOs or learning providers may set their own requirements. For instance, City and Guilds (City and Guilds, 2013) requires that RPL is carried out by “designated staff with relevant levels of expertise to meet the requirements of the assessment strategy/guidance for the qualification concerned”. Pearson (Pearson, 2012) requires that centres wishing to carry out RPL must ensure that “There are designated personnel with the appropriate expertise to support and assure the RPL process” and that “Centres must have personnel with appropriate expertise and knowledge to facilitate” the assessment of RPL evidence against the learning outcomes of the relevant qualification specification.

In HE, the QAA Quality Code contains the following indicator:

“Higher education providers assure themselves that everyone involved in the assessment of student work, including prior learning, and associated assessment processes is competent to undertake their roles and responsibilities”.

However, it is up to each HEI to identify what is appropriate for each role and how competences will be demonstrated. There is normally a requirement for the assessor to be a member of the academic staff, with relevant subject knowledge of the course in question and associated learning outcomes. Advice and guidance is also often provided by an academic member of staff in this sector.

The University of Derby, for instance, has dedicated RPL advisers in its University of Derby Corporate (UDC) commercial company. The advisers provide support to potential RPL and Work Based Learning (WBL) applicants, notably helping them to prepare their written and e-portfolios and reflective writing, outlining and analysing recent work-based projects (Treadwell, 2014).

The Northern Ireland Colleges and Universities APEL Good Practice Guidelines recommend that “final decisions on APEL applications will be signed-off by two members of College staff, namely the APEL Adviser/Higher Education Coordinator plus the subject specialist”. The Guidelines state that the guidance relating to an RPL process should be delivered by the HE Coordinator or Careers Guidance/Student Support/Information Services staff, while the assessment should be carried out by Course Coordinators/Directors/Subject Leaders. The guidelines also outline the role of an APEL coordinator, which is to “maintain an overview of the APEL process and procedures to ensure all quality assurance requirements are met, to receive information and track entry, progression and retention of APEL students”.

7.2 Qualification requirements

There are no mandatory qualification requirements at national level for validation practitioners in the UK.

7.3 Provision of training and support to validation practitioners

There is no national-level requirement for validation practitioners to undergo specific training. Indeed, in the report on RPL within the QCF (April 2013), the Learning and Work Institute
(formerly NIACE) found that several providers saw the costs associated with staff development or specialist training as a barrier to the development of a widespread RPL offer. The Learning and Work Institute found that providers expected AOs to provide guidance and support for their RPL offer and that the AOs did indeed provide some kind of support to their learning providers. The report states that “all three AOs interviewed offered briefing notes, training and supporting documentation for centres making an RPL offer. One AO – City & Guilds - has a substantial RPL training programme in place as well as thorough and accessible documentation for centres. Its positive role in supporting RPL was referred to consistently by providers and its expertise and reach in this area will clearly be important in growing a future RPL offer”. However, the Learning and Work Institute suggested that providers still need more information and guidance about RPL and recommended that the SFA should take forward the commissioning of such guidance (NIACE, 2013).

There are also a number of guidance notes, either developed by organisations such as the Learning and Work Institute (formerly NIACE), Awarding Organisations or by individual providers themselves. For instance, City and Guilds has produced a document called ‘Recognition of Prior Learning – Assessment Policy and Guidance Document’ (City and Guilds, 2013), which is intended for staff who are responsible for supporting learners in their choice of qualification, staff responsible for planning, making and quality assuring assessment, as well as staff involved in teaching and learning. This document is intended to provide support, clarification and guidance to City and Guilds stakeholders on implementing the institute’s policies regarding the recognition of a learners’ previous achievements and/or qualifications.

The Learning and Work Institute (formerly NIACE) continues to provide training to practitioners in the application of RARPA in England.

8 Quality assurance

There are no separate quality assurance processes for validation. AOs are responsible for assuring the quality of the qualifications they offer. They are also responsible for ensuring that their ‘approved centres’ have in place arrangements for the recognition of prior learning.

The City and Guilds policy states that “the RPL process must be subject to the same quality assurance requirements as any other assessment method”. It also states that “evidence obtained through the RPL process must be assessed, to the same rigorous quality as evidence obtained through any other process. In no circumstance does the RPL process mean that any required qualification summative assessments can be avoided e.g. mandatory exams, practical/theory tests or assignments. This is because the prescribed summative assessment is the process through which evidence (produced via any prior assessment method or through the RPL process) is evaluated.”

According to the aforementioned Learning and Work Institute study on RPL (2013), AOs monitor RPL processes offered by learning providers during visits to the centres and quality assurance interviews.

As mentioned above, in HE the QAA oversees how well individual universities and colleges meet their responsibilities. The introduction of the ‘expectations’ in the QAA Quality Code marked a significant change, as previously the Academic Infrastructure did not set out any mandatory requirements. RPL has now been included in the expectation relating to assessment:

Higher education providers operate equitable, valid and reliable processes of assessment, including for the recognition of prior learning, which enable every student to demonstrate the extent to which they have achieved the intended learning outcomes for the credit or qualification being sought.

This means that RPL will be taken into account in the reviews of HE institutions which are carried out by the QAA on a four to six yearly basis. Nevertheless, the actual implementation
of RPL remains very much within the hands of the individual HEI. The quality assurance methods HEIs might use include, for example, double marking, separating the role of the assessor and the advisor, or if the volume of demand is sufficient, utilising an external examiner. Some institutions, with established systems of RPL and/or larger volumes of applications, may have specific RPL examining boards and external examiners.

As mentioned above, RARPA (England only) is seen as a quality assurance mechanism in itself, as its aim is to support the recognition and recording of learner progress and achievement on courses where no external qualification or certification is offered. The LSC defined RARPA as:

“an approach to the quality assurance of provision in the learning and skills sector that focuses on individual learner achievement. The RARPA approach gives providers a framework for supporting the progress and achievement of learners, through consistent and effective methods of recognising and recording” (LSC, 2005).

From September 2006, the LSC in England introduced RARPA in the ‘New Measure for Success’ for non-accredited learning as a way of assessing the progress of learners and also the performance of learning providers more effectively. The five stages of RARPA were set out against the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted) Common Inspection Framework (CIF) and providers were required to take it into account in self-assessments and in scoping for inspection. In September 2012, Ofsted revised the CIF. It no longer makes specific reference to RARPA but does focus strongly on ‘how learners achieve’ – something which RARPA can help providers to evidence. As noted above, at the time of writing, the way that non-regulated learning is currently being quality assured (which is currently through RARPA) is under review (telephone correspondence with RARPA trainer, 2016).

There is no national-level evaluation framework relating to RPL.

9 Inputs, outputs and outcomes

9.1 Funding

The SFA common funding rules for the 2016-2017 funding year (SFA, 2016) for England require that providers maintain information on an individual’s prior learning that affects the learning or the funding of any of the learning aims of the programme. Providers are required to assess the prior learning of each individual learner against the learning outcomes of the qualification concerned and tailor the learning accordingly, so that the learner is not required to repeat learning already achieved. Where prior learning is accredited, funding awarded to the learning provider for the delivery of the qualification has to be reduced proportionally. Where prior learning is not accredited, the training provider still receives funding for providing the qualification, to cover the costs of the assessment activity required to ascertain whether the learner has achieved the learning outcomes in question and accredit that learning (Interview with Richard Mole, SFA, 2016).

The SFA common funding rules for the 2016-2017 funding year state that:

“A learner could have prior learning that has been previously accredited by an awarding organisation or could be formally recognised and count towards a qualification. If this is the case you [the learning provider] must:

A35.1. reduce the amount of funding claimed for the learning aim by the percentage of learning and assessment that the learner does not need [this refers to prior accredited learning]

A35.2. follow the policies and procedures set by the awarding organisation for the delivery and assessment of the qualification [thus if the AO has a policy for RPL, the learning provider can receive funding for a qualification which is achieved (in part) via RPL]
A35.3. not claim funding if the prior learning meets the full requirements of the awarding organisation to achieve the learning aim

A36. You must not use prior learning to reduce funding for English, maths and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) qualifications up to and including level 2. For further information see paragraph E11 and E12 in the adult education budget funding rules.”

In Northern Ireland, there are no specific funding arrangements for RPL. It is funded in the same way as formal learning would be.

In relation to HE, there is no national-level budget specifically allocated to RPL. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) does not provide any direct funding to institutions to cover the costs associated with RPL carried out in connection with admissions, nor for costs associated with awarding credit for prior learning.

9.2 Distribution of costs

As noted above, the SFA funding rules for England clarify how providers should calculate the funding they can claim, or the charges they should make for RPL to learners who are funded by a loan. It has not been possible within the scope of this report to determine the actual costs to organisations of implementing RPL procedures, or of the costs to individuals of undergoing an RPL procedure. Costs to AOs are said to be the same as for formal learning provision, since they are required to carry out the same registration, certification and quality assurance processes (NIACE, 2013).

In the HE sector, institutions have the autonomy to decide whether/how much to charge for an RPL procedure – the QAA Quality Code states only that there should be clear information on how much they charge. Research carried out for the 2010 country update found that the element of the validation process which is charged for can vary as well as the amount charged. Some HEIs might set charges according to the number of credits applied for/awarded, while others charge per hours of advice and guidance received. Nevertheless, at that time the cost of APEL was generally lower than taking a course in full, plus the individual saves on time by not having to repeat learning already achieved, which is an indirect cost saving. For example, RPL candidates to the University of Derby’s online learning provision pay 30% of the fee for any module(s) for which they are claiming credits (UDOL website, accessed March 2016). Middlesex University charges GBP 650 for the assessment of prior learning evidence portfolios (Middlesex University website, accessed March 2016).

With regard to Foundation Degrees, the Northern Ireland Colleges and Universities APEL Good Practice Guidelines state that, once the pilot phase has been completed, colleges will be permitted to charge a fee for APEL for Entry up to a maximum of GBP 30 (EUR 35) and a sliding scale of fees for on-course exemption up to a maximum of GBP 30 per 20 CATS points (equivalent to GBP 180/EUR 211 for maximum exemption of 120 CATS points).

9.3 Evidence of benefits to individuals

Some benefits are suggested in the small study undertaken by the UK EQF National Co-ordination Points in 2012 of the use of RPL in the private sector (Recognition of Prior Learning and how sectors are using it in the UK and Europe, unpublished), as outlined below:

- RPL can be applied in a diverse range of working contexts, regardless of the vocational content or level of knowledge and skills required;
- RPL enables learners in a work-based environment to achieve their qualification more quickly;
- RPL can be low cost compared to the normal qualification route;
Some RPL processes, especially those that are online and systematic, are easy to administer; 

- The RPL process often improves the confidence and self-esteem of the learners; and, 

- The opportunity to reflect on prior experiences through RPL can be very useful.

### 9.4 Beneficiaries and users of validation processes

#### 9.4.1 Validation trends

Data is not collected at national level in relation to validation in any of the sectors, but at the level of the provider (where it is collected) and where data is collected by providers, it does not appear to be used strategically. With regard to the RQF, national data collected relates to qualification achievement rather than validation method. Anecdotal evidence suggests that RPL in relation to the RQF takes place on a very small scale. With regard to RPL in the HE sector, although the majority of HEIs now have systems in place for RPL, again anecdotal evidence suggests that application of these systems in practice is relatively low.

The aforementioned Learning and Work Institute study into RPL (NIACE, 2013) suggested that data collection is an issue. This is because RPL should ideally be incorporated into a wider offer of assessment for the learner, so if a learner has taken up an RPL opportunity, there is no documented evidence to confirm this, as explained in the report:

“Both AOs and providers had procedures in place to ensure that an RPL offer was made to learners in appropriate circumstances (as the QCF regulations require) but where such an offer was taken up there was not necessarily any documented evidence to demonstrate this. For example, a provider’s records would show that a group of learners were successful on a particular unit or qualification; that assessment had been conducted to required standards; and that credits or a qualification had been achieved. However there was nothing in the data record to distinguish between a learner achieving credits via RPL and another learner achieving credits through assessment on a taught programme. Some qualitative evaluation of delivery did record RPL processes, but such information existed at course or programme level – it was not lodged in institutional records on learner achievement”.

Moreover, credits awarded within the QCF through RPL are recorded in the same way as any other credits, and claims for funding from the SFA do not have to identify which achievements were attained via RPL or through a taught programme. This means that data on RPL is not systematically collected.

#### 9.4.2 Validation users

There is no data on the distribution of validation users according to age, gender, qualification level, target group, citizenship status, etc.

#### 9.4.3 Validation and migrants / refugees and other disadvantaged groups

The Refugee Assessment and Guidance Unit (RAGU), which is part of the Department of Applied Social Sciences at London Metropolitan University, continues to provide support in preparing for the APEL (Assessment of Prior and Experiential Learning) process to refugees, with a particular focus on refugee health professionals, as outlined in the 2014 Inventory Update.

### 10 Validation methods

The assessment methods to be used for RPL are not prescribed at national level and, in practice, may vary considerably, even from one application to another. City and Guilds (2013) for example states that “the methods of assessment used will be determined by the assessment strategy for the qualification being assessed but might, for example, include:
The Northern Ireland Colleges and Universities APEL Good Practice Guidelines do however state that an individual’s APEL claim should be supported by a portfolio of evidence of learning, which should contain:

- Title page
- Table of contents
- Curriculum Vitae
- Employment History
- Education & Training History
- Training and Professional Qualifications
- Informal Learning Activities e.g. conferences/workshops, etc.

The Guidelines also state that the assessment of the portfolio should be supplemented by a Viva Voce with the subject specialist to “establish authenticity and reliability of evidence, understanding of the student on expectations of studying at Level 4 and their motivation to progress to Foundation Degree level study”.

The QAA Quality Code also states that the assessment of portfolios is widely used to assess experiential learning. Other methods it suggests could be used for an RPL assessment process include structured interviews, the completion of a piece of work accompanied by a reflective account of the learning achieved, artefacts, a performance-based assessment, or completion of the assessment used to demonstrate learning in the module / programme concerned.

As an example, the evidence accepted by the University of Middlesex to support an RPL claim is presented in the box below.

**Box 2 Evidence of experiential learning accepted at the University of Middlesex**

The University of Middlesex sets out on its website the different types of evidence that can be used in a portfolio to support an RPL claim:

- A job description that clearly and comprehensively outlines the RPL candidate’s duties and level of responsibility;
- A detailed curriculum vitae (CV) that presents the candidate’s personal, professional and career development;
- Professional qualifications or certificates that may or may not have an established academic credit value;
- Evidence of continuing professional development activity, in-company training, professional updating;
- Evidence of significant work projects and activities;
- Case studies. An evaluation of a particular case or event in which the candidate has been involved, which demonstrates evidence of the learning he/she is claiming;
- Artefacts produced by the candidate such as reports, policy and procedure documents, websites, designs, photography, video, audio files, articles etc.; and,
- Statements by a line manager or other independent source familiar with the candidate’s work projects and the requirements of his /her job roles. These statements can be used to confirm other evidence but are not adequate evidence in themselves.
Each item of evidence in the candidate’s portfolio must be supplemented by an evaluation of how it has contributed his/her learning. Normally this should also be specifically related to identified learning outcomes in selected modules from the HE programme concerned. Significant work projects or case studies can be used to form the basis of specific examples or ‘areas of learning’ that structure the claim for academic credit.

The University offers a range of ‘Review of Learning’ modules, designed to develop learners’ capability to reflect on their prior learning and to produce a portfolio of evidence in support of their claim for academic credit. Review of Learning modules are available at each higher education level (from academic level 4 through to 7) and in some cases can form part of the programme of study at Middlesex.


The aforementioned small project undertaken by the UK EQF National Co-ordination Points in 2012 looking at RPL in the private sector (Recognition of Prior Learning and how sectors are using it in the UK and Europe, unpublished) found that the processes and tools used to assess RPL varied considerably between organisations. Amongst the six case studies that were produced for this project, the methods used depended on the rationale and target groups of workers involved and included:

- Using tests and interviews to confirm practical skills already held by the individual
- Observing tasks, professional discussion and mapping the experiential skills workers already had against a skills and knowledge framework
- Professional discussion and verification of evidence by peers to confirm high level specialist skills
- Mapping prior experiential knowledge and skills against learning outcomes of units of qualifications for entry to a profession
- Identifying and confirming evidence during induction to meet the requirements of units within the required qualification

With regard to RARPA (England only) providers increasingly use technology to capture and record the learning journey from initial identification of starting points to evidencing formative and summative assessment. Examples include Data Bridge (a software tool to record learners’ progress), use of photographs, video, bespoke websites, twitter and e-portfolios (e-mail exchange with RARPA trainer, 2016).

NVQs are assessed through portfolios and observations. Candidates must give evidence that they have the competences set out in the NVQ standards. Assessors then test the candidates’ knowledge, understanding and work-based performance to make sure they can demonstrate competence in the workplace. Each unit of learning can be 'signed off' when the candidate is able to demonstrate that he/she has reached the required standard (City and Guilds, NVQs and SVQs).

11 References

11.1 References

2014 References:


Europass website 2013 activity report.

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UK Quality Code for Higher Education, Part B: Assuring and enhancing academic quality, Chapter B6: Assessment of students and the recognition of prior learning


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Web links:

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http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk/Pages/Default.aspx


http://www.delni.gov.uk/hestrategy

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University of Derby, 2015, Regulation on Recognition of Prior Learning. Internet: http://www.derby.ac.uk/about/organisation/academic-regulations/

Web links:
http://www.derby.ac.uk/online/course-credits-past-study-and-experience
http://www.mdx.ac.uk/courses/help-with-your-application/undergraduate-application/accreditation-of-prior-learning

2014 Sources:
- Department for Employment and Learning, Northern Ireland
- CCEA
- NIACE
- Independent expert
- Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
- HEFCE

2016 Sources:
- EQF Advisory Group
- Skills Funding Agency
- Department for the Economy, Northern Ireland
- Merseyside Expanding Horizons
- Learning and Work
- Learning and Work
- City College Norwich
Country report UK, England and Northern Ireland
2016 update to the European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning

The 2012 Council recommendation on validation encourages Member States to put in place national arrangements for validation by 2018. These arrangements will enable individuals to increase the visibility and value of their knowledge, skills and competences acquired outside formal education and training: at work, at home or in voluntary activities.

This country report is one of 36 that, together with a synthesis report and thematic reports, constitute the European Inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning. The inventory is a regularly updated overview of validation practices and arrangements in all Member States, EFTA countries and Turkey. It is a reference point for information on validation in Europe. It is organised around the principles defined in the 2012 Council Recommendation that were further elaborated in the European guidelines for validation. This is its sixth update (2004, 2005, 2008, 2010, 2014 and 2016).