

European Inventory on Validation of Non- formal and Informal Learning 2010

Country Report: UK (England, Wales and Northern Ireland)

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1 NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON VALIDATION

By way of introduction, it is important to clarify that in the UK, there has been a devolved system of governance for lifelong learning (education and training) and many aspects of the skills agenda since 1997. Each of the devolved administrations has thus developed 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. Although there are still some differences in approach (e.g. each administration has a separate qualifications framework), this report aims to provide an overview of validation of prior learning in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The education and training sector has undergone a number of significant changes in recent years and most likely faces more in the near future, as a result of a change of UK Government in May 2010 and the electoral cycle in the devolved administrations. The Learning and Skills Council, a key player in relation to lifelong learning in England, was closed in 2010 and its responsibilities were transferred to the new Young People's Learning Agency, the new Skills Funding Agency and the local education authorities. Further changes to the landscape are likely in the future, as the new coalition government has made clear its intention to reduce the number of national agencies in place as part of its drive to cut public sector spending. The closure of the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Authority (QCDA) has already been announced. It is not yet clear how or whether these changes will have any effect on the policy in relation to validation of non-formal and informal learning in the future.

The Welsh Assembly Government has a different approach to England. It absorbed former agencies from 2006 onwards when ELWa, formerly responsible for funding further education and work-based learning and ACCAC, the qualifications regulator for Wales, became part of the Welsh Assembly Government Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (DCELLS).

1.1 National legal framework, system or policy on validation

There is not currently a national approach to the validation of non-formal and/or informal learning in the UK. There are methods / guidelines in place in relation to the national qualifications framework and within specific sectors of learning (e.g. adult and continuing education, higher education) but in general the application of validation is devolved to the learning provider, or at times to departments within the learning provider. As such, there is a great deal of differentiation in the approaches taken to validation, both between different providers and within providers themselves. A number of examples of validation in practice have been identified for this report, together with some small studies on good practice and specific aspects of validation methodologies. Short examples have been used to illustrate the report, in order to help to form an overview of what is happening 'on the ground' in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

In addition to the range of methodologies / initiatives in place, there are a number of different terms / acronyms in use. These range from Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) and Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) to Accreditation and Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning (ARPEL) and Recognising and Recording Progress and Achievement in Non-Accredited Learning (RARPA). It has been suggested that this lack of

consensus on terminology leads to confusion, lack of understanding and inconsistency, even within institutions¹.

A significant development in recent years, which has the potential to provide considerable support for the validation of non-formal and informal learning, is the introduction of the [Qualifications and Credit Framework](#) (QCF), which is outlined in more detail below. The QCF is not yet fully embedded at the time of writing; the scheduled implementation date is September 2011. It provides the relevant supporting structure to facilitate the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, on a par with formal learning. The QCF [Regulatory Arrangements](#)² use the term 'Recognition of Prior Learning' (RPL) and set out the following definition of RPL:

"A method of assessment that considers whether a learner can demonstrate that they can meet the assessment requirements for a unit through knowledge, understanding or skills they already possess and do not need to develop through a course of learning".

A [Guidance](#) document, published in 2008 and updated in 2010, sets out principles for the Recognition of Prior Learning in relation to the QCF. One of the aims of this document is to contribute to the simplification of RPL processes in the UK. It is also intended to help to widen access and create additional opportunities for the recognition of an individual's achievements.

The guidance in this document does not address the detail of provision or funding.

The QCF is an additional regulatory framework that, at present, operates alongside the pre-existing national Qualifications Framework (NQF). The NQF contains general and vocational qualifications; some, but not all, have credit values assigned to them. The QCF contains only credit-based qualifications composed from units and conforming to rules of combination for qualification achievement.

One national-level example of an opportunity for individuals to have their prior learning recognised can be found in the vocational education and training (VET) sector. [National Vocational Qualifications](#) (NVQs) were introduced in the 1980s and there are over 1300 of these 'competence-based' qualifications available. They are described in the box below.

National Vocational Qualifications³ (NVQs)

National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) cover a broad range of business sectors and are available from levels 1 to 8 on the [Qualifications and Credit Framework](#). There is no defined programme of learning for NVQs, since they are 'outcomes based' - they are designed to show that the learner has acquired the skills and knowledge needed for a certain job. NVQs are delivered either in the learner's workplace or in a 'workplace setting' and can be tailored to the individual learner's needs. As such, they can be appropriate for learners who have already acquired skills and can provide an opportunity for these skills to be recognised in the form of a qualification. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that in practice, currently many of these NVQs are 'taught' to people in colleges.

NVQs were designed so that the award of credit in the qualification should be independent of the mode, duration, and location of learning. The qualifications were designed to be unitised, outcomes-based, competence-oriented, and assessed through evidence of performance. Recognition of non-formal and informal learning was therefore identified as one means of generating evidence for the (accreditation) units, which comprised the qualification. NVQs continue to emphasise recognition of prior learning ('Accreditation of Prior Achievement', APA) as

¹ Dermott, A., Stillwell, R., Dismore, H., and Witt, N., (2009), Baseline Study: Pineapple APEL Project. Internet: <http://uplace.org.uk:8080/dspace/handle/10293/356>

² Ofqual, Welsh Assembly Government and Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), 2008 Regulatory Arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework. Internet: http://www.ofqual.gov.uk/files/Regulatory_arrangements_QCF_August08.pdf

a means of generating evidence.

A partnership approach is taken to the development of NVQs, in order to decide on their content, structure and assessment requirements. Sector Skills Councils, as well as other industry sector bodies and organisations, create, define and update the occupational standards which are used for NVQs.

The assessment of [NVQs](#) is based on practical assignments and a portfolio of evidence. The [key messages and principles](#) identify a number of sources of evidence which can be used for the assessment of an NVQ unit, which include:

- direct observation of the candidate;
- photographic, audio, video or other electronic recording of candidate activity;
- the presentation of artefacts produced by the candidate;
- previous achievements;
- questioning the candidate to assess the underpinning knowledge and understanding and/or to authenticate the validity of other evidence.

Each unit of learning can be 'signed off' when the candidate is able to demonstrate that he/she has reached the required standard – the learner is categorised as either 'competent' or 'not competent'. Normally, a qualified assessor interviews the candidate to find out about the work they carry out in the workplace and also observes the candidate. The assessment is intended to test the candidate's knowledge and understanding, as well as their actual performance⁴.

While National Vocational Qualifications offer individuals a chance to confirm their competences in relation to a specific occupational qualification, there are broader validation processes in place across the different learning sectors. The main RPL processes and terminology in use are described in turn below.

In relation to adult and continuing learning, in 2004, the former Learning and Skills Council (LSC) launched the **Recognising and Recording Progress and Achievement in Non-Accredited Learning (RARPA)** system for informal recognition of the learning outcomes of non-accredited courses. RARPA was accepted as a valid method of recognising and recording learners' achievement in learning where more usual measures (e.g. qualifications) are not appropriate. In September 2006, RARPA was included in the New Measures of Success programme as a way of assessing the progress of learners and also the performance of learning providers more effectively. It was seen as a method of quality assuring the learning provision within this sector and also as a way of supporting learners to make the transition from non-formal to formal learning.

For further and higher education, **Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL)** and **Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL)**, or **Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)**, which emerged in the early 1990s, are used for both admission and for awarding credit.

In Higher Education, the responsibility for the implementation of APL /APEL lies with the individual Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), in line with the autonomous nature of this sector, where HEIs are responsible for admissions and assessment, as well as the quality and standards of their awards. HEIs are overseen by the [Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education](#) (QAA), which publishes guidelines to help institutions develop effective systems, including guidelines on the accreditation of prior learning which were published in

³ http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/EducationAndLearning/QualificationsExplained/DG_10039029

⁴ See: http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/educationandlearning/qualificationsexplained/dg_10039029

2004⁵. The Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) also provides some brief guidelines on good practice⁶. The application of APL / APEL however varies both across and within providers and research has shown that there is room for a greater, and more consistent, application of the methodology in the future. There is also a separate qualifications framework for Higher Education – the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) for England, Wales and Northern Ireland, which was published in August 2008.

In Wales, the '[For Our Future: the 21st Century Higher Education Strategy and Action Plan for Wales](#)' published in 2009, includes an expectation that *"there will be greater use of accreditation of prior learning"* as part of the higher education community's *"more central, innovative and transformative role for business development in the regional and national economy"*⁷. According to the [Higher Education Funding Council for Wales](#) (HEFCW) circular on funding the accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL), APEL *"contributes to the Assembly Government priorities identified for Wales: to deliver social justice and to support a buoyant economy"*.

A 2008 NIACE study⁸ of practices in the accreditation and recognition of prior experience and learning in the UK identified a number of practices in which work-based learning was recognised through APEL, both in the further and higher education sectors. A trend towards the use of APEL for 'Personal Development Planning' (PDP) was identified, showing that validation is now being used to support individuals to look forward, as well as look back at the skills and knowledge they have already acquired. PDP is formative in nature – it is *"a structured and supported process undertaken by a learner to reflect upon their own learning, performance and/or achievement and to plan for their personal, educational and career development"*⁹. It is encouraged in all higher education provision settings, at all qualifications levels and QAA provides [guidelines](#) on its application for use by individual HEIs.

There are also a number of examples of validation projects and practices within the **third sector**, which have often been funded as innovative projects, through European or national-level sources such as the European Social Fund or Big Lottery funding. These projects often target specific groups of learners, such as volunteers or immigrants with skills which are not recognised by national-level qualifications.

However, the extent to which validation of non-formal and informal learning takes place in practice depends on the learning providers and also the awarding organisations. In stakeholder interviews carried out for this report, it was suggested that the funding framework in place in the UK may have acted as a disincentive for providers, since the incentives were for the provision of learning activities, rather than for the acquisition of learning outcomes / qualifications. This may however have changed in England with the introduction of a new funding framework, at least in relation to further, adult and continuing education, for 2009-2010 (for further detail see section 1.7).

1.2 Relationship with the existing/ developing qualifications framework and information on standards used for validation

The [Qualifications and Credit Framework](#) (QCF) was formally adopted in autumn 2008, after a two-year test and trial period. The framework covers England, Wales and Northern Ireland and encompasses all levels and types of qualifications, except for higher education

⁵ QAA, 2004, Guidelines on the Accreditation of Prior Learning. Internet: <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/apl/guidance.asp>

⁶ HEFCW Circular: Funding the accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL), to be published in December 2010

⁷ HEFCW Circular: Funding the accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL), to be published in December 2010

⁸ NIACE, (2008) 'Accreditation and Recognition of Prior Experience and Learning', JISC Funded Project July 2008

⁹ The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, Personal Development Planning: Guidance for institutional policy and practice in higher education. Internet: <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/progressFiles/guidelines/PDP/PDPguide.pdf>

qualifications which are covered by the Framework for higher education qualifications (FHEQ – see below) and linked to the Bologna process. There are three country (England, Northern Ireland and Wales) national qualifications frameworks and the QCF has been designed to be an organising structure for units and qualifications within these three frameworks.

Using the qualifications framework, credit can be awarded for qualifications and units of learning. The [Regulatory Arrangements](#) for the QCF indicate that it is intended to be inclusive and should recognise the achievements of all learners at any level and in any area of learning. Furthermore, the regulatory framework for the QCF does not prescribe the method of assessment to be used. As such, the QCF is intended to remove barriers to achievement. The QCF is now largely ‘populated’ (i.e. existing vocational qualifications have been reviewed and their recognition changed from NQF to QCF) and this work should be complete by September 2011. Many of the NVQ qualifications have been redeveloped as QCF qualifications and retain the term NVQ in their title.

In Wales, the [Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales](#) (CQFW) has, since 2002, been developed to encompass all types of learning and qualifications and is intended to facilitate “*parity in the recognition of achievement for learners of all ages, whether they are learning in the workplace, community, at school, college or university*”. The framework comprises three pillars, including frameworks for regulated general and vocational learning (the NQF and the QCF), the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ), and Quality Assured Lifelong Learning (QALL). QALL encompasses learning which is recognised outside the regulated qualifications frameworks and Higher Education qualifications. It may include adult and community learning, company training, non-formal and informal learning.

[Delivering Community Learning for Wales](#) (Welsh Assembly Government, Nov 2010) notes, “*We also wish to make progress towards the accreditation of all ACL provision funded by DCELLS. We will encourage the sector to take account of Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW) developments, including the Quality Assured Lifelong Learning (QALL) pillar of the framework. We believe the QALL pillar will improve the experience, and better recognise the achievements, of learners - whilst retaining flexibility and breadth of choice.*”

The second edition of the [Framework for Higher Education Qualifications](#) (FHEQ) for England, Wales and Northern Ireland was published in August 2008. The fundamental premise of the FHEQ is that qualifications should be awarded on the basis of achievement of outcomes and attainment, rather than years of study – thus it is the assessment of the outcomes of learning that is important, rather than the nature of any component element 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 Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF).

NVQs are based on national occupational standards, which are broken down into units for the purposes of assessment. The standards define the knowledge, understanding and competences required to perform a particular job role. As such, the standards provide a means of providing NVQs via RPL in place of or in addition to formal learning.

1.3 National institutional framework

Responsibility for policy relating to education and training is held by two Ministries in England. The new Department for Education - which was formed on 12 May 2010 and has responsibility for education and children’s services, and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills – which has responsibility for further and higher education and thus is likely to play a greater role to play in relation to APL / APEL.

In **England**, [Ofqual](#) has responsibility for the qualifications framework. Ofqual became a legal entity in April 2010, independent of the curriculum and government. Ofqual recognises a range of **awarding organisations**, which can award credits and qualifications. However, Ofqual operates a 'light touch' approach to its role in regulating the awarding organisations. It does not provide guidelines to awarding bodies on the assessment methods they should use, nor does it make a distinction between or categorise learning according to whether it is formal, non-formal or informal. Thus, in essence, any qualification awarded by a recognised awarding organisation could be attained by proving non-formal / informal learning equivalent to the required learning outcomes, since Ofqual does not impose any restrictions on how the learning should take place. The only requirement is that the learning outcomes necessary to achieve the qualification can be assessed in a robust way¹⁰.

In **Northern Ireland**, the qualifications regulator is the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), which regulates external qualifications other than NVQs. The NI Vocational Qualifications Reform Programme (VQRP) Board oversees the QCF implementation, while the CCEA and the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) NI are helping key stakeholders in Northern Ireland to get ready for the QCF.

In **Wales**, the qualifications regulator is the Welsh Minister. This work is wholly delegated to the Department for Children, Education Lifelong Learning and Skills (DCELLS); the responsible post being the Head of Qualifications and Learning.

There are a number of organisation types which can become awarding organisations and recognise prior learning by awarding credit within the QCF. The [Guidance on the recognition of prior learning within the Qualifications and Credit Framework](#) sets out principles to help individual awarding organisations to develop or review their own RPL policies. It promotes a system-wide provision of RPL.

In relation to higher education, the [Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education](#) (QAA) oversees how well individual universities and colleges meet their responsibilities for academic standards and quality in UK higher education through regular audits of individual higher education institutions. These audits include the making of recommendations to each institution indicating ways in which its management of quality and standards can be improved as well as identifying examples of good practice within the institution. The QAA also publishes guidelines – in the form of a Code of Practice¹¹ applicable across the UK - to help institutions develop effective systems. Although the QAA's guidelines on the accreditation of prior learning - published in 2004¹² - are not currently part of the Code of Practice, the QAA states that 'these guidelines have equivalent status to the Code in that HEIs are expected to give careful consideration to them when establishing or revising internal procedures for managing APL/APEL.' Nevertheless, again the actual responsibility for implementation of accreditation of prior learning lies with the individual HEIs.

In England, the former **Learning and Skills Council (LSC)** launched the RARPA (Recognising and Recording Progress and Achievement in Non-Accredited Learning) system. The Learning and Skills Council has been split into the Skills Funding Agency and the Young People's Learning Agency. The coalition government, elected in May 2010, has not at the time of writing this report confirmed if these two bodies will remain in place and thus it is not clear where the responsibility for RARPA will lie in the future.

NIACE, the **National Institute for Adult and Continuing Education**, and the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA), supported the LSC in the implementation of the RARPA approach until the LSDA closed in March 2006. NIACE continues to provide

¹⁰ Interview with representative of Ofqual

¹¹ The *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* (the *Code*) contains general principles that underpin the assurance of academic quality and standards in a range of HE activities.

¹² QAA, 2004, Guidelines on the Accreditation of Prior Learning. Internet:
<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/apl/guidance.asp>

training on the implementation of RARPA and has also conducted research in relation to this topic¹³.

Awarding organisations, which include exam boards are responsible for the delivery and quality assurance of assessment. It is their responsibility to establish opportunities for RPL within their structures. The Regulatory arrangements for the QCF specify the following requirements of awarding organisations in relation to RPL:

“The awarding organisation must have in place the necessary systems, procedures and resources to ensure [that] achievement is recognised through the recognition of prior learning (RPL) where this is appropriate.”

1.4 Division of responsibilities (national, regional, local, provider level) according to the different aspects of validation

As noted above, 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 awarding bodies. National level organisations provide guidance and principles (i.e. the Guidance on RPL within the QCF, and QAA’s Code of Practice for the HE sector, the forthcoming HEFCW circular on funding the accreditation of prior experiential learning) to ensure that there is some level of agreement on the national ‘approach’ to validation.

The [Guidance on the recognition of prior learning within the Qualifications and Credit Framework](#) re-affirms the role of the awarding organisations, as set out in the Regulatory arrangements for the QCF (see above). It states that *“Where an individual wishes to ‘claim credit’ for prior learning, awarding organisations must be able to respond positively to such a claim. ‘We don’t offer RPL’ is not an acceptable position for either an awarding organisation or a centre to adopt within the QCF”*.

1.5 Examples of regional, local or EU funded initiatives

As noted previously, examples of the delivery of validation in the UK can be found at the level of the learning provider or even at department level within the provider. In addition, a number of projects have been developed – mainly in the third sector – with support from European or national funding such as the European Social Fund, the Lifelong Learning Programme and the Big Lottery Fund.

Some examples include:

South West Opportunities for Older People (SWOOP): A Development Partnership [project] funded by the EQUAL community initiative to support older workers facing discrimination on the labour market. One element of this project was to develop an e-Portfolio to recognise older people’s experience, capacities, aptitudes and attainments to help them to access employment. The portfolio, and the face-to-face support which accompanies it, are designed to support and guide older learners to reflect on prior non-formal or informal learning. Using the portfolio, learners can record and evidence this learning.

SOUL (Soft Outcomes Universal Learning) Record: The SOUL record is used to evidence learning in the voluntary and community sector. It was initially developed in 2003, with support from the Big Lottery Fund. The initial research project led to the development of a toolkit which is available online and supported by the provision of user training. More detail on this project can be found in Section 2.4.

Validating Mentoring2¹⁴: This transnational project (funded by the Leonardo da Vinci programme) targets the disabled and disadvantaged groups. Every participant who takes part in the project’s mentoring programme receives a certificate of successful completion.

¹³ See ‘Recognising and recording progress and achievement in non-accredited learning, Evaluation report on the pilot projects, April 2003 – March 2004. Internet: <http://archive.niace.org.uk/projects/RARPA/FullReport.pdf>

¹⁴ <http://www.vm2-project.eu/>

The completion of the programme is based on the Code of Practice in Mentoring, which provides a framework for the recognition of knowledge and skills acquired through the mentoring process.

'*Shaping the future*' which is described in the box below, is a project with a regional focus. It aims to support employees of the two nuclear power stations at Wylfa and Trawsfynydd in North West Wales.

Shaping the Future

The nuclear power stations at Wylfa and Trawsfynydd in North West Wales, which employ around 1,200 people from the region, will soon be replaced by a new installation, operating with a different nuclear technology and requiring a different skill set from the workforce. Many of the current employees will have to find alternative employment, while others will want to apply to work at the new installation. While some may find work at other nuclear plants, it is hoped that many will be able to continue to work in the local area, to prevent the structural economic decline of the region.

The Shaping the Future (StF) project aims to support the talent and career transitions of the Power Stations' employees, enabling them to "shape their futures" and at the same time bring greater employment and economic diversity to the region, focusing on the new technologies and industries planned for North Wales.

Part of the project focuses on Recognition of Prior Learning. The aim is to establish skills recognition for the nuclear workforce in Wylfa & Trawsfynydd, to explain career options, and to develop appropriate training interventions to enable the region to ensure it has the skills base to transfer into other industries, thus creating a sustainable and stable economy. This will aid the development of suitable future training programmes and contribute to the employability of staff leaving the nuclear industry. It is also important to bring about changes in attitudes to further training, to increase confidence and motivation and to widen perspectives for future jobs and employment possibilities through the recognition of prior learning process.

The Project beneficiary cohort is totally comprised of energy industry workers, many of whom have had extensive training within Magnox (the power station operators), yet little or any of it is training accredited by formal qualifications.

DCELLS anticipates that recognition of prior learning amongst the "Shaping the Future" project cohort will aid the development of suitable future training programmes and contribute to the employability of staff leaving the nuclear industry. This assumption needs to be tested by means of a pilot study to investigate the feasibility of recognising prior learning (RPL) in the nuclear workplace. The planned study will include the following activities:

- To investigate the feasibility of recognising prior learning in the nuclear workplace, from the perspective of: (a) the employer, (b) the assessor and (c) the learner (candidate).
- To complete Internal Verification / External Verification using evidence presented by all candidates' portfolios within the project. To be ready to apply for certification where qualifications exist.
- To evaluate and diagnose the data gathered with regards to the process of RPL
- To compare, contrast and review the pilot activity and findings against 3 RPL models currently in use in; Scotland, the Netherlands and Western Australia
- To report and make recommendations on a way forward for RPL in the nuclear workplace and more generally in workplace in Wales

The study will review the learning of 60 individuals at two nuclear sites in North West Wales and will concentrate of five areas of assessment: (a) Health & Safety at Work (b) Magnox Operations/ Process (c) Radiological Protection and Monitoring (d)Basic Control & Supervision and (e) Life Skills (transferable employability skills from the work place into the community).

The study is due to be completed by December 2010.

1.6 Link between validation and the existing/ developing credit system, unit-based or modularised structure of qualifications

The QCF has been designed as a unit-based qualifications framework, which means that learners can combine units of learning towards a full qualification. Learners can therefore use the framework to 'fill the gaps' in their learning and to gain qualifications at their own pace along flexible routes. They can obtain credits for previous learning and combine these with further learning to achieve a full qualification.

All units within the QCF have a credit value (one credit represents, on average, 10 hours of learning). According to the [Regulatory Arrangements](#) for the QCF, all units of learning must contain learning outcomes that set out what a learner is expected to know, understand or be able to do as a result of a process of learning.

Thus, all achievements in the QCF lead to the award of credit. RPL can be used to assess a learner against any unit within the QCF and, with some exceptions (e.g. explicit requirements for a license to practise) the opportunity to be awarded credit through RPL is a universal entitlement for all individuals in the QCF. Awarding organisations are required to record all credit achieved in an electronic personal learning record, which is owned by the individual. There is no distinction between credits gained through a process of RPL and those achieved through formal learning on the personal learning record. Credits gained through RPL can count towards any qualification, at any level and in any subject/sector area, unless excluded by the requirements for award of a qualification. However, some awarding organisations may set limits on the number of credits earned through RPL that may be 'counted' towards a qualification.

In Wales, the definition of credit used for the [CQFW](#) is "*a means of recognising learning wherever, whenever and however it is achieved*". Learners aged 14 and above can earn credit for learning, regardless of where it takes place (in the workplace, in the community, at school, college or university).

As noted above, **National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs)** were designed to be unitised, outcomes-based, competence-oriented, and assessed through evidence of performance. Recognition of non-formal and informal learning was therefore identified as one means of generating evidence towards the achievement of units which comprise each qualification.

In Higher Education, the use of credit differs between the three countries. In Wales the credit system is integrated into the qualifications framework. The CQFW Implementation Plan 2009-2014 includes the Higher Education in Wales credit specification and guidance which complement the FHEQ England, Wales and Northern Ireland guidelines published by the QAA, August 2008.

In England and Northern Ireland this is not the case. Many institutions have used credit systems for a number of years, but a system was published in 2008¹⁵ to ensure that where institutions do use credit this is on a standard basis. A recent survey by the QAA indicates that eight of the 108 English HEIs which responded to the survey do not use credit systems, of which five have no intention of using them.¹⁶ While the credit system is separate from the FHEQ institutions have ensured, or are working to ensure, alignment between the two. QAA has published guidance on such alignment.¹⁷

Anecdotal evidence suggests that it is far more common for institutions to use APL, especially APEL, procedures as part of the process of admitting students to their courses than for awarding specific credit. Furthermore, there is generally a set proportion of credits

¹⁵ <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/england/credit/creditframework.pdf>

¹⁶ <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/standardsandquality/credit/creditSurveyDec09.pdf>

¹⁷ <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/FHEQCreditStatement.asp>

within any given higher education qualification that may be gained through RPL (the remainder must be gained via formal learning at the institution in question).

1.7 Funding framework

From 2009–10 the Learning and Skills Council introduced new funding arrangements for England, explicitly aligned to the QCF. These new funding arrangements included specific support for RPL, based on the principle that, within limits, providers would be able to claim Learning and Skills Council (now Skills Funding Agency) funding leading to the award of credit through RPL, in the same way as they would for a taught programme leading to the award of credit towards the same qualification. In 2009–10 this arrangement applied to the offer of assessment for up to 50% of the learning aim of a qualification. For example for a qualification with a credit value of 20, a provider would be able to claim funding from the (former) LSC for an RPL process that enabled an individual to claim up to 10 credits towards the qualification¹⁸.

In relation to higher education, there is no national-level budget specifically allocated to validation of non-formal and informal learning. As noted previously, a number of projects acquire funding through European programmes such as the Lifelong Learning Programme and the European Social Fund.

In Wales, the HEFCW circular on funding the accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) confirms that funding will be provided for institutions awarding APEL. Funding is made against specific APEL module(s) within a programme of study and also against other modules within a programme of study. Funding is not provided for the use of APEL for entry or admissions purposes, for experiential learning which has previously been accredited elsewhere, or for credits from which students are exempted¹⁹.

1.8 Data on flows of beneficiaries

Data is not collected at national level in relation to validation in any of the sectors, but at the level of the provider, apart from in relation to NVQs. Furthermore, it has been observed that even within institutions, data is not always collected centrally, rather at the level of the department. A study conducted by the Welsh Higher Education Credit Consortium for instance found that APEL plays a small part in the operations of institutions in terms of student numbers and income generated. The study also found that there appears to be no means of ascertaining the numbers of students gaining APEL, as only one institution was able to provide data²⁰.

Some trends however have been identified and it is also possible to provide information on the number of participants in some of the validation projects / initiatives mentioned elsewhere in this report:

- By 2006, around six million NVQs had been awarded in the UK since they were introduced in the 1980s²¹
- It is suggested that there has been an increase in the number of APEL applicants in the HE sector, although neither the actual number of applicants there are currently, nor projected numbers have been identified. This is partly because APEL is not recorded via HEI data submissions to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA).

¹⁸ Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), Welsh Assembly Government and the Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), 2010, Claiming Credit – Guidance on the recognition of prior learning within the Qualifications and Credit Framework, Version 2. Internet: http://www.qcda.gov.uk/images/tes-assets/Claiming_Credit_QCDA104726.pdf

¹⁹ HEFCW Circular: Funding the accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL), to be published in December 2010

²⁰ HEFCW Circular: Funding the accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL), to be published in December 2010

²¹ OECD Thematic Review on Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning. Country Background Report: UK. Internet: http://www.oecd.org/document/63/0,3343,en_2649_39263238_37141759_1_1_1_1,00.html

- In the voluntary and community sector (VCS), the numbers of participants in validation projects identified are generally lower than in the private and formal education and training sectors.
- Over 600 people have participated in training for the SOUL Record mentioned above.

In terms of subjects, at higher education level health and social work is a popular subject for APEL candidates. At the University of Plymouth for example, the Health and Social Work faculty is said to be *“the most advanced in terms of publicising APEL and processing claims”*. In this faculty, data is collected on each APEL claim and stored in a database, regardless of whether the claim is successful or not²².

HEFCW plans to liaise with HESA to introduce a way of identifying APEL modules in future but this will not be possible until 2013 /2014.

2 ORGANISATIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON VALIDATION

2.1 Role of the formal education and training sector, including providers

In the Higher Education sector, accreditation of prior learning is currently delivered at a level determined by the institution. In some Further Education providers, again validation is delivered at organisational level.

In Wales, a study conducted by the Welsh Higher Education Credit Consortium found that APEL was used by all but one of the institutions concerned. However, the study also found that there was no standardisation between – and sometimes within – institutions in the way in which prior learning is recognised. The study also identified concerns among the HE community that APEL was less rigorous than other forms of learning²³.

Guidance has been developed by QAA to support HEIs in developing and applying their own procedures for APEL. Nevertheless a considerable differentiation in the application of APEL has been identified within the Higher Education sector, not only across providers but also within providers. Furthermore, anecdotal evidence suggests that although many HEIs now have APEL policies in place, the extent to which these are used is relatively limited.

In addition, there is a SEEC²⁴ network on the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning and SEEC has prepared a ‘Companion to the QAA Guidelines on the accreditation of prior learning’ which offers advice to institutions using academic credit systems, on how to ensure that processes developed will comply with those guidelines. It supports staff by offering more detailed guidance drawn from SEEC publications and expertise in the practice of AP(E)L²⁵.

²² Dermott, A., Stillwell, R., Dismore, H., and Witt, N., (2009), Baseline Study: Pineapple APEL Project. Internet: <http://uplace.org.uk:8080/dspace/handle/10293/356>

²³ HEFCW Circular: Funding the accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL), December 2010. Internet: http://www.hefcw.ac.uk/documents/publications/circulars/circulars_2010/W10%2042HE%20Funding%20the%20accreditation%20of%20prior%20experimental%20learning%20APEL.pdf

²⁴ 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

²⁵ <http://www.seec.org.uk/home>

HEA Demonstrator Project

The Higher Education Academy (HEA) commissioned a number of 'Demonstrator Projects' in 2009, to show good practice among HEIs in delivering employer-responsive provision. One of the projects commissioned focused on the accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL), while another looked at the provision of accreditation of company-based learning.

Each project produced a report identifying a range of current approaches which it was thought could be of interest to and / or adapted by other Higher Education Institutions.

The project on the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning was led by Birkbeck College at the University of London, in partnership with London Metropolitan University, Thames Valley University and the University of Hertfordshire. Within each institution, the project representatives spoke to the 'Registry' (Academic Office) or equivalent, as well as to academic practitioners, in recognition of the fact that APEL involves both regulatory and academic practice.

All Adult and Community Learning (ACL) providers funded by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) were obliged to evaluate non-formal learning using the RARPA method. Guidance on the application of RARPA has been prepared by NIACE, the National Institute for Adult and Continuing Education.

2.2 Role of existing information, advice and guidance networks / institutions

The [Guidance on the recognition of prior learning within the Qualifications and Credit Framework](#) identifies two types of careers advice and guidance relevant to the RPL process. These are:

- *specialist advice provided by professionals who have been trained in RPL practice and procedures*
- *generic information, advice and guidance for individuals exploring their career and learning needs.*

The Guidance notes that specialist advice and guidance will mainly be offered within learning providers, by people experienced in RPL practice and procedures. Generic information, advice and guidance may be provided for example by careers advice and guidance services. There are different services in England (e.g. [Learndirect](#)), Wales ([Careers Wales](#)) and Northern Ireland ([Careers Service Northern Ireland](#)) and various other sources of information such as the [Northern Ireland Vocational Qualification Reform Programme](#) website and the Welsh Assembly Government Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales newsletter.

Organisations (learning providers) were given information on the implementation of RARPA through a website hosted by the former LSC, including examples of effective practice. Providers were also invited to contact their local LSC for further information, or to contact 'RARPA champions', who had implemented RARPA in their own organisations, for strategic support.

Within higher education institutions, the provision of information and guidance varies. It is often broken down into stages, with the first being the provision of literature / written information and the second being the opportunity to speak to a member of staff to receive advice and guidance.

In relation to work-based learning, a NIACE study from 2008 suggested that for cost reasons, limited support is provided to learners in the form of advice / guidance.

2.3 Validation in the private sector and the role of private sector actors

[Sector Skills Councils](#) (SSCs) are involved in developing the occupational standards used for vocational qualifications in the UK. The [Guidance on the recognition of prior learning within the Qualifications and Credit Framework](#) suggests that they may play an active role in supporting awarding organisations and approved centres (i.e. learning providers) to develop plans for the implementation of RPL. The Guidance suggests that the SSCs can help for example by identifying the market needs/targets of the workforce and the sector; identifying which groups of employees are a priority for RPL and/or have the most pressing need for RPL; and setting out strategies for building capacity for RPL within the awarding organisations and centres operating in a sector.

SSCs also have a role in supporting employers within their respective sectors to meet their skills needs and as such, some have developed tools for employees to record their skills and in doing so plan their learning and career. The e-skills portfolio, described in the box below, is an example.

e-skills Passport²⁶

The e-skills Passport has been developed by the sector skills council 'e-skills', which represents employers in the UK in relation to IT-related issues.

The e-skills Passport is an on-line tool for individuals and employers in the IT sector. It can be used to assess current IT skills, identify gaps, set learning targets and record improvement.

The tool can be used by individuals to as a formative tool to support the management of their career and learning, while organisations can use it to identify the skills they have available within their workforce and then target training accordingly.

The tool commences with a self-assessment, then can be used on an ongoing basis to record further achievements and set targets for future learning.

The e -skills Passport is based on a framework of skills which has been defined by employers and is linked closely to the National Occupational Standards which are used for most IT qualifications in the UK. A qualification, entitled ITQ, has been developed which is based on this framework and the e-Passport can be used to support employees to acquire this qualification.

Construction Skills, the sector skills council for the construction sector, offers two summative methods of assessment for qualifying experienced workers, to enable them to convert their skills into an NVQ.

Construction Skills – qualifying experience workers through RPL²⁷

[Construction Skills](#) offers two different methods of assessment for the award of NVQs to experienced workers within the construction sector.

The first, On-Site Assessment and Training (OSAT), is the most widely available route. It is offered in most trades/ occupations and by assessment providers throughout the UK. The experienced worker is supported by an assessor to build up a portfolio of evidence to prove their skills. Generally, four or five visits are required over a period of approximately six months in order to complete this process.

The second route is the Experienced Worker Practical Assessment (EWPA). This route is available for a smaller number of trades/occupations and open to workers with extensive experience, who do not need any further training. The worker must undergo an assessment of their practical skills, followed by a professional discussion with an assessor. The assessment itself involves spending approximately a day at an off-site NVQ assessment centre, producing a bank of evidence as a result.

Further information can be found on the [Construction Skills](#) website.

²⁶ <http://www.e-skillspassport.com/>

²⁷ Construction Skills. Experienced Worker Assessment, Getting Qualified with OSAT and EWPA. Internet: <http://www.cskills.org/workinconstro/onsite/osat/index.aspx>

Employers themselves are beginning to take account of experience in selection processes, rather than formal qualifications, according to QCA (now QCDA) research on trends in the use of qualifications²⁸. Nevertheless, anecdotal evidence suggests that there is a relatively low level of awareness among employers of RPL.

2.4 Validation in the third sector and the role of third sector actors

A number of examples of validation projects in this sector can be identified, which tend to be formative in nature. These have mainly been supported through short-term funding, either from European (e.g. ESF), regional or national sources (e.g. Big Lottery Fund). Third sector projects often focus on specific groups, such as refugees, older or younger people and supporting them towards employment / employability. The projects are not necessarily specifically focused on validation and may include a validation procedure as part of a wider approach to supporting the specific target group.

In terms of the different stages of validation outlined below (see 5.1), the focus in this sector tends to be on initial guidance, reflection and recognising and identifying skills, and gathering evidence. The allocation of funding allows more personalised, intensive support to participants. It has been suggested that good practices identified in the voluntary and community sector could be applied to other sectors, for example HE.²⁹

The Soft Outcomes Universal Learning (SOUL) Record is an example of a validation project from the third sector. It is described in the box below.

Soft Outcomes Universal Learning (SOUL) Record³⁰

The Soft Outcomes Universal Learning (SOUL) Record is used to evidence learning in the voluntary and community sector. It was initially developed in 2003 by a partnership of voluntary organisations in Norfolk, with support from the Big Lottery Fund. Voluntary Norfolk led the project and worked together with the Research Centre at City College Norwich to undertake a research project to develop a system to monitor and measure progression in 'soft' outcomes. The resulting tool not only supports learners but also supports third sector organisations to evidence the outcomes of their work.

The SOUL Record can be used to measure progression in soft outcomes and informal learning, such as increases in confidence, self-esteem and motivation. It is made up of sections which are relevant for adults, children and young people.

The toolkit is available online and is supported by the provision of user training and also training for trainers – all staff wanting to use the record must take an initial training course which costs around EUR 6 500.

Since its launch in 2006, over 600 users from across the UK have been trained. The toolkit can also be used for RARPA (Recognising and Recording Progress and Achievement in Non-accredited Learning). The toolkit has also been translated into Polish and Portuguese.

²⁸ UK Refernet Thematic Overview. Internet: <http://www.refernet.org.uk/35.htm>

²⁹ NIACE, (2008) 'Accreditation and Recognition of Prior Experience and Learning', JISC Funded Project July 2008 pp35-39

³⁰ <http://soulrecord.org/home>

2.5 Costs to organisations

It has been suggested that the cost of assessing learners through APL (e.g. for NVQs) can be as high as those associated with delivering a formal course³¹.

In the HE sector, anecdotal evidence suggests that it is costly to deliver AP(E)L procedures, mainly because it is frequently based on the assessment of a portfolio and is therefore more costly in terms of staff time. A study conducted by the Welsh Higher Education Credit Consortium found that APEL was considered to be complex and expensive in terms of staff time³².

3 INDIVIDUAL PERSPECTIVE

The [Guidance on the recognition of prior learning within the Qualifications and Credit Framework](#) states that the individual is “*central to the RPL process; it will ultimately be their choice and responsibility to decide whether to claim credit in the QCF through an RPL route*”. However the Guidance also notes that individuals are dependent on the support and resources provided by stakeholders in order to access RPL using the QCF.

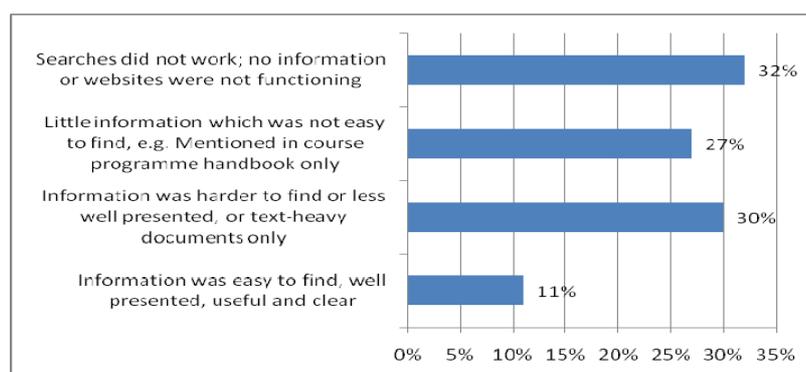
3.1 Awareness-raising and recruitment

There is no specific information provider for the various types of validation in place in the UK.

In Higher and Further Education, individual providers – or even departments or faculties within providers - are responsible for awareness-raising of their own AP(E)L / RARPA procedures and thus again the methods used will vary.

A review of 166 HEI websites from across the UK (England, Wales and Northern Ireland) was undertaken for the baseline study of the [Pineapple APEL project](#)³³ produced in 2009. The results of the review are presented in Figure 4:1 below:

Figure 4:1: APEL/ APL information provision on websites of 166 HEIs in England



Source: Baseline Study: Pineapple APEL project

Although this study recognises that the review was an informal exercise, which served only to provide a ‘snapshot’ of APEL information for students, it did seem to show that there is

³¹ OECD Thematic Review on Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning. Country Background Report: UK. Internet: http://www.oecd.org/document/63/0,3343,en_2649_39263238_37141759_1_1_1_1,00.html

³² HEFCW Circular: Funding the accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL), to be published in December 2010

³³ <http://www.pineappleproject.org.uk/>

room for improvement in the provision of APEL information, in terms of delivery and ease of access³⁴.

A study conducted by the Welsh Higher Education Credit Consortium found that all of the institutions concerned had APEL policies, but that these were mostly contained within broader institutional documentation, and were therefore not obvious to students. In addition, little evidence was found of active marketing of APEL by the institutions³⁵.

Thus, a lack of awareness among learners in the HE sector has been identified, suggesting that there is a need for more IAG provision – and learning could be transferred from the third sector, where IAG is often a more central part of the validation process. The limited support provided to learners in the HE sector is attributed to the associated cost implications.³⁶

Information about [NVQs](#) is available on directgov, the UK government's digital information service (see http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/educationandlearning/qualificationsexplained/dg_10039029), where individuals are advised to seek help and advice from their careers advisor, local FE college or employer. In addition, there is a free national Careers Advice helpline.

3.2 Provision of guidance and support

As noted above, the provision of information, advice and guidance in relation to the various methods of validation in place in England, Wales and Northern Ireland takes place through existing IAG providers and IAG departments / staff within learning providers.

The QAA guidelines for HEIs state that *“clear guidance should be given to applicants about when a claim for the accreditation of prior learning may be submitted, the timescale for considering the claim and the outcome”* and *“appropriate arrangements should be in place to support applicants submitting claims for the accreditation of prior learning and to provide feedback on decisions”*.

In terms of providing advice on preparing an application for AP(E)L in the HE sector, some institutions provide short courses or modules for candidates. Often documentation is also provided such as a handbook and other relevant literature and forms. More direct contact is also offered in some cases, i.e. telephone/ e-mail or face-to-face advice from an AP(E)L coordinator or academic staff.

In Wales, the umbrella organisation for the six careers services - Careers Wales – has developed an e-portfolio tool which is available from its website. The ‘e-Progress file’ is a formative tool which enables users to manage their own career development through the recording of achievements and the comparison of progress against set targets. It also provides tools to create and store CV letters and application letters, and has age-specific sections.

3.3 Costs to individuals

There is no national guidance or regulation in relation to the costs which can be charged to individuals for validation procedures. Costs vary across providers and sectors – for instance in the third sector some validation projects do not charge their beneficiaries.

Some examples of costs charged to individuals by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) were identified in the literature and through stakeholder interviews. 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

³⁴ Dermott, A., Stillwell, R., Dismore, H., and Witt, N., (2009), Baseline Study: Pineapple APEL Project. Internet: <http://uplace.org.uk:8080/dspace/handle/10293/356>

³⁵ HEFCW Circular: Funding the accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL), to be published in December 2010

³⁶ NIACE, (2008) ‘Accreditation and Recognition of Prior Experience and Learning’, JISC Funded Project July 2008

others charge per hours of advice and guidance received. Specific examples of costs identified in the literature were GBP 75 (EUR 90) for the assessment of an APE (L) portfolio at one HEI, although this institution does not charge for the initial consultation (or for direct credit transfer), while another charges EUR 115 (GBP 95) for an APL module which forms part of a work-based learning route. Nevertheless, the cost of AP(E)L is 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.

3.4 Initiatives focused on specific target groups

A number of initiatives focusing on specific target groups can be identified. For example, the aforementioned SWOOP project focused on older workers and the SOUL Record is targeted at volunteers and others involved in the voluntary and community sector. In England the former Learning and Skills Council (LSC) conducted pilots to develop ways of recognising informal learning at youth centres³⁷ and the Refugee Assessment and Guidance Unit (RAGU) at London Metropolitan University delivers an APL project to support refugees and asylum-seekers.

Refugee Assessment and Guidance Unit (RAGU), London Metropolitan University³⁸

The Refugee Assessment and Guidance Unit (RAGU), which is part of the Department of Applied Social Sciences at London Metropolitan University, provides a number of services to support refugees with high level education or professional qualifications into employment and education. This includes specialised one-to-one guidance and support for job search, professional re-qualification and entry/re-entry into education and training.

Specialist advisers at the centre provide, among other services, support in identifying transferable skills, knowledge and experience, and understanding and preparing for the APEL (Assessment of Prior and Experiential Learning) process.

3.5 Evidence of benefits to individuals

A number of potential benefits to individuals of the Recognition of Prior Learning are identified in the literature. However no data was identified through the research, which specifically demonstrates the benefits of RPL to individuals. The potential benefits include for example:

- Reducing the time required to complete a qualification;
- Reducing the cost of acquiring a qualification;
- Receiving recognition of skills and competences already acquired, for example in the workplace;
- Avoiding the need to study things the learner already knows.

The APEL qualification in work with children described in the box below is an example of how RPL can benefit individuals with prior work experience, who do not have formal qualifications to confirm their knowledge and competences.

³⁷ UK Refernet Thematic Overview. Internet: <http://www.refernet.org.uk/35.htm>

³⁸ <http://www.londonmet.ac.uk/ragu/ragu-home-page.cfm>

APEL qualification in work with children³⁹

The APEL qualification in work with children was developed by Duo Training, in response to the new Day Care standards in the UK, which meant that people working with children increasingly require a level three qualification in order to meet the requirements set out in the standards.

The APEL qualification is intended to recognise the working practice and experience of early years and play workers who have already been working in the sector but do not have current formal qualifications. The qualification is recognised by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED) and Estyn (the education and training inspectorate for Wales) and is classified as level 3 on the National Qualification Framework (NQF).

The qualification can be achieved by recognising previous experience and knowledge alone (i.e. no further training is required).

Candidates are required to submit the following for the assessment:

- At least two professional testimonies, set out against a detailed set of criteria.
- A reflective account demonstrating their sector knowledge and understanding in relation to practice. The account is broken down into ten sections, each one requiring about 5-700 words.

Candidates must succeed in both assessment elements (one per unit) in order to achieve the qualification.

The evidence is compiled in a portfolio by the candidate, which is assessed by an APEL 'scrutineer' who will make a recommendation to an Expert Panel. The APEL scrutineer provides feedback and marks achieved for each candidate for the expert panel. The expert panel checks a sample from each candidate's reflective account and their professional testimony, checking they are content with results from the scrutineer. The panel then recommends award of qualification.

Candidates can use a toolkit, prepared by Duo Training, for guidance in preparing the portfolio. They can also receive support from a mentor when putting together their application.

In the voluntary and community sector, validation projects often aim to increase the employability of their participants. In the Higher Education sector, APL /APEL is used to facilitate access for non-traditional learners. In further education, RARPA can be used to support learners to make the transition from non-formal learning to formal learning.

4 QUALITY ASSURANCE AND EVALUATION

4.1 Quality Assurance Framework

The [Guidance on the recognition of prior learning within the Qualifications and Credit Framework](#) recognises that while there is a need for an agreed national approach to RPL, this approach should allow for institutional autonomy and for practice to vary according to the context. Thus, the guidance aims to *"contribute to simplifying RPL processes, building mutual trust among practitioners and underwriting the reliability and validity of credit achievements made through RPL"*.

The Guidelines set out national principles for RPL. These five principles are:

- 1) *RPL is a valid method of enabling individuals to claim credit for units in the QCF, irrespective of how their learning took place. There is no difference between the achievement of the learning outcomes and assessment criteria of a unit through prior learning and through a formal programme of study.*

³⁹ <http://www.apelme.co.uk/>

- 2) *RPL policies, processes, procedures, practices and decisions should be transparent, rigorous, reliable, fair and accessible to individuals and stakeholders to ensure that users can be confident of the decisions and outcomes of RPL.*
- 3) *RPL is a learner-centred, voluntary process. The individual should be offered advice on the nature and range of evidence considered appropriate to support a claim for credit through RPL, and be given guidance and support to make a claim.*
- 4) *The process of assessment for RPL is subject to the same quality assurance and monitoring standards as any other form of assessment. The award of credit through RPL will not be distinguished from any other credits awarded in the QCF.*
- 5) *Assessment methods for RPL must be of equal rigour as other assessment methods, be fit for purpose and relate to the evidence of learning. Credit may be claimed for any unit in the QCF through RPL unless the assessment requirements of the unit do not allow this, based on a rationale consistent with the aims and regulations of the framework.*

Awarding bodies are responsible for assuring the quality of the qualifications they offer. They are also responsible for ensuring that their approved centres (i.e. learning providers) have in place arrangements for the recognition of prior learning. According to the *Regulatory Arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework*, it is up to the awarding organisations to recognise, and monitor on an ongoing basis, the centres offering assessment leading to awards within the QCF.

With regards APL in Higher Education, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education provides a national 'academic infrastructure' outlining the expectations of Higher Education Institutions. As noted previously, the QAA published a set of [guidelines](#) to support Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in accrediting prior learning in September 2004. These guidelines provide an important quality assurance framework for higher education but do not set out any one particular approach to the accreditation of prior learning. Although they are not included in the Code of Practice for HE Institutions, they are closely linked to the Code and there is an expectation that HEIs will 'seriously engage' with the guidance provided by the QAA. The academic infrastructure will be updated in the UK in the coming year (2010-2011), which may have an impact on the current status of the QAA AP(E)L guidelines.

RARPA 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 has 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"⁴⁰.

From September 2006, the LSC introduced RARPA as the 'New Measure for Success' for non-accredited learning. The five stages of RARPA were set out against the Ofsted Common Inspection Framework and providers were required to take it into account in future self-assessments and in scoping for inspection.

In relation to NVQs, the award of individual NVQ units as they are achieved by the learner is intended to guarantee some consistency on a national basis. Furthermore, there is a set of [key messages and principles](#) which must be followed for the assessment of NVQ

⁴⁰ LSC (2005c). Recognising and Recording Progress and Achievement - RARPA. Coventry: Learning and Skills Council, cited in McKenzie, S., 2009, Recognising and Recording Learner Progress and Achievement (RARPA) in Non-Accredited Learning in Adult and Community Learning. Internet: http://www.loncett.org.uk/uploads/documents/doc_221.pdf

portfolios and all awarding bodies are subject to the same quality assurance processes which are outlined in the [NVQ code of practice 2001](#) and the [NVQ code of practice 2006](#).

4.2 Quality assurance systems / procedures

The QAA conducts regular (at least every six years) audits/reviews of Higher Education Institutions in the UK and during these audits one area for consideration is how the HEI has engaged with the guidelines for APL.

Standards and quality apply to APEL in the same way as formal learning. Within individual higher education institutions, the quality assurance methods in place might 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 AP(E)L and / or larger volumes of applications, may have specific APEL examining boards and external examiners.

In **England**, the RARPA method has been embedded into the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) and Ofsted's¹ 'Common Inspection Framework' (CIF). The CIF is the methodology used by all training providers in England to monitor and evaluate training provision. By making RARPA part of this framework, providers commit to monitoring non-formal learning.

4.3 Evaluation framework

No information about a national-level evaluation framework was identified. Some individual projects –for example those funded by the EQUAL Community Initiative in particular – have undertaken their own internal and / or external evaluations.

5 ASSESSMENT METHODS

5.1 Methods used

The [Guidance on the recognition of prior learning within the Qualifications and Credit Framework](#) sets out the following general stages in the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) process (more detail on each process can be found in the guidance document, including an illustrative example of an RPL process):

- 1) General awareness about claiming credit — information, advice and guidance
- 2) Pre-assessment — gathering evidence and giving information
- 3) Assessment/documentation of evidence
- 4) Feedback
- 5) Awarding Credit
- 6) Appeal

With specific reference to the assessment stage, the guidance notes that *“assessment must be valid and reliable to ensure the integrity of both the award of credit and the RPL system as a whole. The assessment process for RPL must be subject to the same quality-assurance procedures of awarding organisations as any other assessment process.”* It does not provide specific recommendations for the type of assessment method to be used.

It has been reported that prior learning is typically assessed using a portfolio to evidence the learning, indicating the level and areas of expertise, then the level and content of the learning that will be assessed⁴¹. E-portfolios are often used to gather the evidence required for an NVQ and some individual learning providers develop their own, while others use

⁴¹ Refernet, 2008, UK Thematic Overview. Internet: <http://www.refernet.org.uk/35.htm>

commercially available products⁴². However, other methods are used, such as the completion of specially designed assignments, or by requiring a student to undertake the assessment(s) associated with the module for which accreditation is being sought.

As noted previously, in the HE sector the application of AP(E)L varies and it can be said that *“there is little practice on which to base any generalised patterns of activity”*⁴³. A combination of portfolios and interviews is often used for assessment and some institutions use detailed application forms in order to compare the applicant’s experience to entry criteria. However, assessment for smaller units of learning, e.g. one module, can sometimes be carried out on the basis of a report for example. Other possible assessment methods include for example projects, essays on ‘applied’ topics, interviews, practice-based documents, reports on observations of practice, or analytic and evaluative descriptions of practice.

An interesting finding of the HEA Demonstrator APEL project is that while assessment has until recently focused on the individual, an important development within the context of work-based learning is the ability to recognise group learning experiences. Where an organisation has delivered the same continuing professional development to a group of employees, a common assessment process – or ‘group APEL’ - can be used for the whole group.

A small study conducted by NIACE of practices in the accreditation and recognition of prior experience and learning⁴⁴ identified seven stages to the full A/RPL process. These stages are:

- 1) Initial Guidance
- 2) Reflection and the recognising and identifying of skills
- 3) Relating these skills to an agreed set of outcomes and criteria
- 4) Gathering evidence of these skills
- 5) Documentation of evidence
- 6) Assessment of the evidence
- 7) Accreditation

However, among the ten case studies conducted for the NIACE report, most indicated that their methodology incorporated only some of the above-mentioned stages. While in the formal learning sector, the latter set of stages tended to be included, in the voluntary and community sector (VCS) there was a greater focus on the provision of guidance and support. In the VCS, the use of electronic tools to support participants to identify and present their prior and experiential learning seemed to be more common, since this can enable users to manipulate the information they have collected and present it in different formats as required (e.g. for job applications).

The RARPA method comprises five stages:

- 1) Clearly stating course aims, suitable for an individual learner or groups of learners.
- 2) Starting out from an initial assessment of the learner’s preliminary position and needs.
- 3) Through discussion and negotiation, identifying appropriate and attainable goals for the participant.

⁴² OECD Thematic Review on Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning. Country Background Report: UK. Internet: http://www.oecd.org/document/63/0,3343,en_2649_39263238_37141759_1_1_1_1,00.html

⁴³ Challis, M. (2005), Challenging Issues: the accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL), Forward 5, Spring, page 25, in Dermott, A., Stillwell, R., Dismore, H., and Witt, N., (2009), Baseline Study: Pineapple APEL Project. Internet: <http://uplace.org.uk:8080/dspace/handle/10293/356>

⁴⁴ NIACE, (2008) ‘Accreditation and Recognition of Prior Experience and Learning’, JISC Funded Project July 2008

- 4) Formative assessment to identify and document achievements made during a programme of learning.
- 5) Summative assessment through self-assessment and tutor review at the end of a programme of learning, to measure overall progress and achievement.

5.2 Advantages and disadvantages of the methods used

According to the Refernet Overview of VET in the UK⁴⁵ “*the burden of providing evidence [for NVQs] and the practicalities of assessment of non-formal/informal learning are considerable*”. The report goes on to say that there are wide reports of problems of cost and complexity associated with NVQs.

A 2009 review of RARPA also identified paperwork as a challenge for practitioners involved in delivering this particular validation method. Six providers were consulted for the study, which found that it was important to reduce the paperwork involved and to ensure that any paperwork associated with the process was ‘meaningful’⁴⁶.

Anecdotal evidence gathered during the production of the baseline study for the [Pineapple APEL project](#)⁴⁷ suggested that some learners prefer to repeat the learning required rather than undertake the reflection process required for an APEL claim. The baseline study suggests that learners often struggle to understand and carry out reflection in other contexts (e.g. as part of personal development planning) and therefore it is not surprising that they favour learning over APEL⁴⁸.

6 VALIDATION PRACTITIONERS

6.1 Profile of validation practitioners

In general, the practitioners implementing validation in the UK are existing staff members within the organisation providing the validation procedure. Staff undertaking validation roles vary across providers and while some may have AP(E)L specialists, others do not. In Higher Education, 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.

6.2 Provision of training and support to practitioners

Lifelong Learning UK (LLUK), the sector skills council responsible for the professional development of people working in the lifelong learning sector (further education, community-based learning, work-based learning, library and information services, careers guidance and non-academic roles in higher education), has established new initial teacher training qualifications for some categories within the lifelong learning sector (not Higher Education). Within the Diploma to Teach in the Lifelong Learning Sector qualification, an optional unit at level 3 on RPL has been developed. This unit is available to all awarding organisations and universities to use. The unit was developed through the European Recognition of Prior Learning Outcomes (RPLO) project (www.rplo.eu)⁴⁹.

⁴⁵ Refernet, 2008, UK Thematic Overview. Internet: <http://www.refernet.org.uk/35.htm>

⁴⁶ McKenzie, S., 2009, Recognising and Recording Learner Progress and Achievement (RARPA) in Non-Accredited Learning in Adult and Community Learning. Internet: http://www.loncett.org.uk/uploads/documents/doc_221.pdf

⁴⁷ <http://www.pineappleproject.org.uk/>

⁴⁸ Dermott, A., Stillwell, R., Dismore, H., and Witt, N., (2009), Baseline Study: Pineapple APEL Project. Internet: <http://uplace.org.uk:8080/dspace/handle/10293/356>

⁴⁹ Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), Welsh Assembly Government and the Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), 2010, Claiming Credit – Guidance on the recognition of prior learning within the Qualifications and Credit Framework, Version 2. Internet: http://www.qcda.gov.uk/images/tes-assets/Claiming_Credit_QCDA104726.pdf

There is no national-level requirement for validation practitioners to undergo specific training. In HE, the QAA guidelines do state however that *“appropriate arrangements should be developed for the training and support of all staff associated with the support, guidance and assessment of claims for the accreditation of prior learning”*. In practice, most HEIs provide guidance materials relating to AP(E)L. Some also provide training in the form of development sessions or access to an expert practitioner for support. At the University of Bradford, for example, APEL seminars and occasional workshops are held, while Thames Valley University runs an APEL module for staff at Masters level.

Furthermore, staff involved in a number of the validation projects identified in the course of this research – in the formal education and training sector and also in the voluntary and community sector - received induction or training courses. There are also a number of guidance notes, either developed by organisations such as NIACE or by individual providers.

For example, trainers wishing to use the aforementioned ‘SOUL’ (Soft Outcomes Learning Record) must take a training course in order to use the learning record. The fee for the course (around EUR 6 480 – GBP 5 375) includes the SOUL Record CD which can be used in the organisation of the staff member participating in the training.

NIACE provides training for managers on the use of the RARPA methodology, which explains how RARPA can be used to support quality improvement. In addition, case studies of good practice in the implementation of RARPA show that individual providers have given their own internal training to practitioners in using the RARPA process⁵⁰.

⁵⁰ For example, Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council
(<http://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/page.aspx?o=barnsleymbcrarpa>)

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Stakeholders consulted:

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Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA)

HEA Demonstrator Project, Birkbeck College

Higher Education Funding Council for Wales

Ofqual

Qualifications and Curriculum Development Authority

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