European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2014

Country report UK (England and Northern Ireland)

By Jo Hawley

In partnership with

CEDEFOP
European Centre for the Development
of Vocational Training

A project carried out by

ICF
INTERNATIONAL

Education
and Culture

Contents

1   Introduction

Validation, known more commonly as Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), in England and Northern Ireland is developed mainly from a national perspective. At national level, regulatory arrangements (for qualifications within the national qualifications framework, the QCF) are in place, as well as a UK-wide Quality Code for the HE sector, which includes a mandatory 'expectation' relating to assessment and RPL. There are also a number of individual projects and initiatives in 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.

RPL is understood to refer to recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning. In relation to the QCF, RPL can lead to the award of units or full qualifications. In HE, it is used for both admissions and exemptions but most university regulatory frameworks limit RPL credit to between half and two thirds of an award. In practice, it is unlikely that a candidate will have sufficient skills and competences to meet all of the learning outcomes to acquire a full qualification on the basis of prior non-formal and informal learning.

The 'model' of validation used in England and Northern Ireland combines a top-down approach through the creation of national 'arrangements' for learning in certain sectors, together with a decentralised approach to the actual implementation of validation, which is left to individual learning providers or in the HE sector, to the degree awarding body or other awarding organisation. There have been positive developments with regard to RPL since 2010, perhaps most notably in the HE sector, where RPL has been given a clear place in the QAA's Quality Code. Moreover, there is some commitment to pursuing RPL in relation to the QCF, as evidenced by studies[1] which have taken place to determine the extent to which RPL is currently being implemented. However, actual application of RPL is thought to be relatively low in the UK and if this is to be increased, further support and awareness-raising amongst providers and other practitioners involved in working with learners is required.

2   National perspective on validation

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 Qualifications Framework also provides a separate system for recognition of prior non-formal learning, and a separate brief report for Wales has also been prepared for this 2014 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   National legal framework, system or policy on validation

There is no single framework for validation at national level in the UK. There are four main routes by which individuals can have their prior learning validated, which apply to different types of learning:

■ Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), linked to formal qualifications, mainly offered through the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF);

---

[1] NIACE (2013). *Using the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) within the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF), A report to the Skills Funding Agency.* http://www.niace.org.uk/current-work/using-the-recognition-of-prior-learning-rpl-within-the-qualifications-and-credit-framew; *Recognising Non-formal Certificated Learning within and outside frameworks in the UK, Netherlands and Finland, Draft interim project report, October 2013* (unpublished); *Recognition of Prior Learning and how sectors are using it in the UK and Europe* (unpublished)

- Recognition of non-formal certificated learning via the QCF;
- 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 learning.

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 these enable 'non-traditional' adult learners to enter HE, as well as qualifications which sit outside of qualifications frameworks.

<u>RPL leading to (QCF) units and qualifications</u>

The 2008 Regulatory Arrangements for the QCF introduced an obligation on Awarding Organisations (AOs) and centres (i.e. learning providers) to establish systems and procedures to support the recognition of prior learning (RPL). Recognition of prior learning (RPL) is defined in the Regulatory Arrangements as:

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.

In this definition of RPL, it is understood that the prior learning of the individual is not already recognised by a certificate.

Alongside the Regulatory Framework, 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 funding rules and the Regulatory Arrangements are reported to provide an impetus for providers to offer RPL[2].

In addition, a Guidance document, published in 2008 and updated in 2010, set out principles for RPL in relation to the QCF. One of the aims of this document was to contribute to the simplification of RPL processes in the UK. It was also intended to help to widen access and create additional opportunities for the recognition of an individual's achievements. However this document is no longer available online and it is not clear what status it now has.

It is worth noting here that National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) which were presented in the 2010 country update for the UK as a separate RPL 'initiative' have now been discontinued. Although they have been discontinued, QCF units and qualifications can still be achieved on the basis of evidence of work-based learning and this remains a widely used approach. Thus the new replacement occupational qualifications are competence-orientated and assessed through evidence of performance, similarly to the old NVQs. In addition, apprenticeships and BTEC vocational awards all include an element of work-based learning, which is recognised in the final qualification award.

<u>Recognition of Non-formal certificated Learning via the QCF</u>

Whilst some would consider learning which has been certificated, albeit outside of the QCF or other formal certification processes, to have been 'recognised', we have included this process of validation here because it gives greater transparency or 'weight' to the individual's learning. By awarding QCF credits/units, the level and volume of the learning can be more easily understood and it may be possible to use it towards further learning, either in the form of an exemption or as evidence to support an application to take up another learning opportunity.

Learning resulting in certificates and qualifications which are not included in the QCF can be recognised in three main ways.

Firstly, AOs can grant exemptions from QCF units for certificated learning which sits outside the QCF. The QCF Regulatory Arrangements define 'exemption' as *"the facility for a learner to claim exemption from some of the achievement requirements of a QCF qualification, using*

---

[2] NIACE (2013). *Using the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) within the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF), A report to the Skills Funding Agency.* http://www.niace.org.uk/current-work/using-the-recognition-of-prior-learning-rpl-within-the-qualifications-and-credit-framew

evidence of certificated, non-QCF achievement deemed to be of equivalent value."[3]
According to the Regulatory Arrangements, AOs are expected to have in place *"the necessary systems, procedures and resources to ensure any claims for exemption identified by learners are considered and a record of any valid claims is kept"*. Where exemption can be predicted and planned (i.e. where the qualification developer can predict what type of relevant certificated achievements learners who are likely to take a particular qualification might already hold), the units to which exemptions apply should be included within the 'rules of combination' of a QCF qualification. Where this is not possible, the AO and provider should consider requests on an individual basis (and if necessary update the rules of combination).

However, it seems that the exemption function of the QCF is not widely used. Moreover, some awarding organisations apply different rules of exemption to the same qualification, which means there is a lack of consistency in the application of the arrangement[4].

The second way of recognising non-formal learning via the QCF is the recognition (within the QCF) of learning gained through participation in employer in-house training. In both England and Northern Ireland, initiatives have taken place with the aim of engaging employers to use the QCF more and to incorporate their in-house training into the framework[5]. There have been numerous projects to do this, in different ways depending on the nature of the employer and the training:

■ Employers might work with a third party such as a learning provider, which already has in place the necessary QA arrangements which are required to provide an accredited qualification. In this instance the qualification would be developed by the third party, either together with an AO or through its own status as an AO;
■ They might work with an existing AO, to have their training programme recognised through the award of an accredited qualification (which might be through the development of specific units which can be combined with existing units, or through the development of a full qualification); or
■ They might become an AO in their own right, as is the case for example with McDonald's, the Ministry of Defence, Flybe and Network Rail.

The third type of non-formal learning which can be recognised on the QCF is adult and community learning. In particular, the Open College Network (OCN) provides a wide range of learning, through 2,500 centres across the UK. When the QCF was introduced, many of the OCNs became AOs in their own right and many now offer regulated provision alongside non-regulated provision.

RPL in the Higher Education Sector

For HE, the responsibility for RPL lies ultimately with the degree awarding body or other awarding organisation (as that is where ultimate responsibility for academic standards lies). Although there is no legislation that regulates RPL, there is a long tradition of recognition of prior learning and encouraging mature students to participate in higher education[6].

A major change has taken place in the HE sector since 2010 – the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) has introduced the Quality Code for HE, which is 'the definitive reference point for all UK higher education providers'. This new Quality Code replaces the set of national reference points known as the Academic Infrastructure. The Quality Code sets out the 'expectations' that all providers of UK HE are required to meet (the Code applies to

---

[3] NB, Learners cannot be awarded credit for exemption because awarding credit for certificated learning outside the QCF would mean awarding credit for achievements twice.

[4] *Recognising Non-Formal Certificated Learning within and outside frameworks in the UK, Germany and Finland*. Draft final project report, 2014 (unpublished)

[5] For example, the Employer Recognition Programme (see http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20090506150202/qca.org.uk/qca_14937.aspx) and the Recognition of Training in Employment Programme (see http://www.rewardinglearning.org.uk/docs/regulation/employer_engagement/report_on_the_recognition_of_training_in_employment_programme.pdf)

[6] Harris, J., Breier, M. and Wihak, C. (eds) *Researching the Recognition of Prior Learning*, PLIRC/NIACE includes a chapter on this.

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 given significantly more emphasis in the new Quality Code and is specifically included in a chapter entitled 'Assessment of students and the recognition of prior learning' (Chapter B6, which refers only to experiential learning, not credit transfer) 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. In a separate development, the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) in Northern Ireland has developed a set of good practice guidelines for colleges and universities. The guidelines were developed 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[7].

Recognising and Recording Progress and Achievement in Non-Accredited Learning (RARPA)

The RARPA system relates to non-accredited provision in a range of settings for adult learners. 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. Its use was mandatory for all foundation level courses, Entry tot Employment (E2E) programmes and non-accredited programmes funded by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). In 2008 RARPA also became a mandatory requirement for programmes/courses delivered as part of the Community Grants Project which focuses on third sector organisations. Although the LSC has now been replaced by the Skills Funding Agency (SFA), RARPA is still a mandatory requirement. 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. Guidance on the application of RARPA has been prepared by NIACE(the National Institute for Adult and Continuing Education)) which also provides events and training for practitioners in the application of RARPA.

Further Education

One specific example of RPL in practice in the FE sector is entry to Access to HE courses[8], which, once completed, enable adult learners from 'non-traditional' backgrounds to enter a HE course. Applicants to Access courses come from a variety of backgrounds, and the colleges concerned will assess their potential to enter the access course taking into account their prior learning and experience. The Access to HE Diploma is a regulated qualification, regulated by QAA. Up to 50% of the qualification can be gained by RPL.

Qualifications outside of qualifications frameworks

There are also many qualifications which are not included on the QCF, NQF 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. 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.

---

[7] Northern Ireland Colleges and Universities APEL Good Practice Guidelines
[8] http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk/Pages/Default.aspx

2.2   Skills audits

The Government's new Work Programme[9], launched in June 2011, is being delivered through a range of private, public and voluntary sector organisations, which are supporting people who are at risk of becoming long-term unemployed to find work. As part of the current review of welfare-to-work outcomes and services[10] a number of measures are being looked at to improve programme implementation going forward – one of these includes the proposal to include a robust initial, diagnostic assessment for individuals on the Work Programme to support the learning and skills needs of each participant[11].

The National Careers Service in England[12], Wales[13] and Northern Ireland[14] also provides voluntary Skills Health Checks, which can be undertaken using online tools or face-to-face with a Careers Advisor.

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.

Skills Passports operate at sector level[15] although 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). Examples of successful implementation are highlighted below.

Skills Passport for Health[16]

The Skills Passport for Health covers the NHS and independent sector, permanent, contract temporary and volunteer workers, clinical and non-clinical staff across all four UK countries.

For the individual, the Skills Passport for Health is intended to: provide a single verified and portable career record from education to retirement, giving mobility and flexibility across the sector and beyond; speed up career progression; provide easily identification of training needs; offer a personal development planner to define and track objectives; allow easy demonstration of suitability for new role(s) or revalidation for professional registrations. For employers, the Skills Passport for Health is intended to: provide visibility of the skills and abilities of the entire workforce; reduce duplication of training and enable employers to target training more effectively and efficiently. Employer investment in more relevant training is expected to bring productivity and efficiency savings and a better skilled workforce.

After significant employer consultation, interim modules of the Passport are in use in two regions. The full Passport is being developed and will be rolled out on a region by region basis starting in

---

[9] Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/49884/the-work-programme.pdf

[10] Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/225753/dwp-commissioning-strategy-2013.pdf

[11] Please see:

http://www.niace.org.uk/sites/default/files/dwp_commissioning_strategy_consultation_sept_2013.pdf

[12] Please see: https://nationalcareersservice.direct.gov.uk/Pages/Home.aspx

[13] Please see: http://www.careerswales.com/en/

[14] Please see: http://www.nidirect.gov.uk/index/information-and-services/education-and-learning/careers.htm

[15] Examples include: Construction, Financial Services, Food and Drink, Manufacturing, Creative and Cultural, Hospitality, Nuclear, Process Industries, IT, Retail, Health, Sport and Active Leisure.

[16] http://www.skillsforhealth.org.uk/developing-your-organisations-talent/skills-passport

2013. Ultimately a three year licensing model is to be agreed with a significant number of employers to ensure Passport usage will endure and spread.

NUCLEAR Skills Passport[17]

The Nuclear Skills Passport is bringing about a step change for the nuclear sector by introducing an effective vehicle for the introduction of **industry agreed and cross site recognition of internal and external skills development training.** Historically all nuclear sites have trained their employees and contractors to their own high standards, but when transferring staff to different facilities, the training that they have already completed has not been recognised, leading to additional training being carried out. Nuclear employers have worked with the Sector Skills Council and the National Skills Academy for Nuclear to agree training standards which will be recognised across different sites. This is known as the Nuclear Industry Training Framework, and forms an important part of the Nuclear Skills Passport.

The Nuclear Skills Passport is different to other industry Passport schemes, as it has been designed by Nuclear employers, specifically for the requirements of the nuclear sector. Piloted originally in 2010 the Nuclear Skills Passport has been rolled out across the sector since 2011 - with strong industry support.

The Nuclear Skills Passport is a system which offers all nuclear organisations instant secure web access to information on the nuclear skills base, offering a detailed overview of the training completed by their workforce as well as contracting organisations. For contractors, the Nuclear Skills Passport provides a simple, highly secure method of aiding in the demonstration of Suitably Qualified and Experienced Person (SQEP) – an industry benchmark for employees. This enables organisations to effectively assess and plan their training, skills and people requirements.

The Skills Passport Concept comprises five key elements:

1. A web based accessible learner database that provides a registry of training records for individual passport holders and the facility to generate a skills passport card. Roles, qualifications and Industry Training Standards are held on the Nuclear Industry Training Framework (NITF). The Nuclear Industry Training Framework has been developed by the Sector Skills Council and endorsed by employers through the Skills Passport User Group and the Nuclear Employers Steering Group.

2. Dataset repository for Job Contexts. Job Contexts are agreed common job roles across industry with which associated competencies are aligned.

3. Benchmarking tool that supports and enables up-skilling and workforce mobility across the sector – enables existing employee's skills to be recognised and mapped against defined standard industry Job Context roles, highlighting gaps in skills and/or training.

4. Training signposting tool which supports up-skilling by signposting learners to Skills Academy Quality Assured training provision (courses/programmes/qualifications) to meet any identified Skills Gaps. Offers a simple modular approach to closing skills gaps through continuous learning and development with accreditation against national industry standards.

5. A reporting suite that generates statistics at industry, regional and corporate levels.

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

Qualifications and qualifications frameworks

There are three qualifications frameworks in place in England and Northern Ireland, as discussed below.

The Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF), formally adopted in autumn 2008, covers England, Wales and Northern Ireland. It covers mainly vocational and pre-vocational education and training areas and does not include general school qualifications such as

---

[17] http://www.nuclearskillspassport.co.uk

GCSEs and A Levels or HE. QCF qualifications are made up of units and therefore provide flexible ways to get a qualification. 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. 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 operates alongside the pre-existing National Qualifications Framework (NQF). Qualifications that do not meet the rules of the QCF are developed to fit the NQF, which groups qualifications according to their difficulty. The levels are based on the standards of knowledge, skill and competence needed for each qualification. Unlike the QCF, the NQF does not include any reference to RPL. Furthermore, the QCF enables a much wider application of RPL than the NQF because its units of assessment allow for the wider recognition of a set of achievements, as individuals do not have to demonstrate completion of a full qualification to be awarded credit.

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. 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). The FHEQ is part of the new Quality Code for HE (Part A) and adherence to it is one of the expectations in Part A.

It is worth noting here that the Higher Education Strategy for Northern Ireland[18] outlines plans to develop a formal, recognised credit framework for higher education in Northern Ireland. The Strategy states that "By 2017, the Department [for Employment and Learning] aims to have in place a single credit and qualifications framework to support flexible learning, in which progression routes are easily identifiable and understandable. The new credit framework and flexible learning system will support modular learning, whereby courses are made up of individually credited modules which, when combined, can lead to a higher education qualification." This would be a significant step if it were to be taken forward, but is currently still only at the exploratory stage.

Credit systems

Using the QCF, credit can be awarded for qualifications and units of learning. RPL claims must be made in relation to a whole unit or a number of units within a qualification (i.e. credit cannot be awarded for the partial completion of a unit). The credits awarded are identical, regardless of the route taken to achieve them. Learners can thus use the QCF 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. 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 working towards QCF qualifications.

Although it is not possible to achieve credits for the partial completion of a unit through RPL, the regulator in England and Northern Ireland (Ofqual) states that RPL can be used to cover individual learning outcomes within a QCF unit, in combination with other assessment methods. Ofqual recognises that learners are unlikely to have all the evidence they need to achieve a full unit and may need to produce additional evidence, thus RPL may be used in conjunction with other assessment methods such as examination of recent products, professional discussion or observation to assess current competence[19].

---

[18] http://www.delni.gov.uk/hestrategy

[19] http://www.readonpublications.co.uk/pdf/Course%20Resources/Ofqual%20FAQs,%20January%202012.pdf

Awarding organisations (AOs) 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 AOs may set limits on the number of credits earned through RPL that may be 'counted' towards a qualification.

The FHEQ and its qualifications are based on learning outcomes and the qualifications are linked to ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) or ECTS-compatible credits. The FHEQ guidance on academic credit arrangements (which are now formally part of the Quality Code for HE, under Part A[20]) 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[21]. The new 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.

The Northern Ireland Colleges and Universities APEL Good Practice Guidelines[22] 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.

Standards

There are National Occupational Standards (NOS), which 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'[23]. 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; for example, the former NVQs were based on NOS.

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 relevant qualification specification. 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"[24]*. National institutional framework

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 Employment and Learning (further and higher education).

There is no national institution with specific responsibility for RPL. As outlined above, there are requirements in place in relation to the QCF and guidelines within specific sectors of learning (e.g. non-accredited adult learning, higher education) but in general the application

---

[20] Although UK higher education providers are not required to use credit and some do not

[21] QAA for Higher Education (2008). *Higher education credit framework for England: Guidance on academic credit arrangements in higher education in England.*
http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Documents/creditframework.pdf

[22] http://www.delni.gov.uk/index/publications/pubs-higher-education/ni-apel-guidelines.htm

[23] See http://nos.ukces.org.uk/Pages/index.aspx

[24] Pearson (2012). *Recognition of Prior Learning Policy and Process.*
http://www.edexcel.com/Policies/Documents/Recognition%20of%20Prior%20Learning%20Policy%20v2.0.pdf

of validation is devolved to the awarding organisation/learning provider, or at times to departments within the learning provider.

With regard to RPL linked to the QCF, responsibility for the QCF is held by Ofqual in both England and Northern Ireland.

In England, the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) sets out the funding arrangements relating to learning within the QCF (including learning recognised by RPL – see below for more detail)

■ Ofqual, as the regulator of vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland, also has responsibility for the QCF in Northern Ireland.

In HE, institutions are overseen by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). As outlined above, the QAA has recently developed a new 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.

Sector Skills Councils[25] are involved in the development of the Skills Passports described in Section 2.2.

Another important player is NIACE, which recently carried out a study on behalf of the SFA into RPL within the QCF. NIACE also provides training in the RARPA method.

2.4   Governance and allocation of responsibilities

2.4.1   Please describe the allocation of responsibilities (at national, regional, local, social partner, provider level) according to the different aspects of validation

In terms of the design of the procedure/approach, the term RPL was adopted within the Regulatory Arrangements for the QCF in 2008 after two years of consultation and development activities, involving not only representatives of AOs and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (then the regulator of the QCF) but also representatives from Higher Education, from Scotland and from Europe[26]. The term RPL was only recently adopted in the HE sector too and incorporated into the new Quality Code for HE, which was developed on the basis of consultations with HE providers, their representative bodies, the National Union of Students, professional, statutory and regulatory bodies, and other interested parties.

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.

2.4.2   Explain more specifically the role of the formal education and training sector, including:

Education and training providers

Awarding Organisations (AOs)

Ofqual recognises over 150 AOs, which can award credits and qualifications (and are the only organisations which can award QCF qualifications). As outlined above, these AOs are required in the Regulatory Arrangements for the QCF to establish systems and procedures for RPL. The Regulatory Arrangements state that:

Awarding organisations must have in place the necessary systems and procedures and resources to ensure...achievement is recognised through the recognition of prior learning (RPL) where this is appropriate (5.6h)

Two AO RPL policy/process documents were reviewed for the purposes of this report. These were:

---

[25] http://www.sscalliance.org/

[26] NIACE (2013). *Using the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) within the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF), A report to the Skills Funding Agency.* http://www.niace.org.uk/current-work/using-the-recognition-of-prior-learning-rpl-within-the-qualifications-and-credit-framew

- City and Guilds[27]
- Pearson[28]

Both documents apply to qualifications both on the QCF and outside it (e.g. on the NQF), although they refer back to the definition of RPL given in the QCF Regulatory Arrangements.

Learning providers or 'centres'

'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, according to the Regulatory Arrangements. In its recent report on RPL within the QCF[29], NIACE 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, the Regulatory Arrangements do not specify how the RPL should be delivered and as such, RPL in practice varies across both AOs and Centres.

Higher education

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

The SEEC[30] network on the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning[31], established in 1992, continues to be active. It offers a forum for the sharing and further development of AP(E)L (RPL) practice. SEEC has produced a number of publications to support providers, including advice for external examiners, models and processes[32]. 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 curriculum"*) developed by SEEC[33] are used by many institutions to support RPL implementation, especially for large quantities of credit.

Private sector actors

The aforementioned NIACE 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 learned while working is an effective way of capturing this learning. NIACE suggests that other industries must have similar approaches to learning but notes that, currently, it is the construction industry where *"the strongest case for RPL as a cost-effective process of recognising achievement can be made"*.

As part of the UK European Qualifications Framework (EQF) 2011/12 implementation activities funded by the European Commission and undertaken by the UK EQF National Coordination Points (NCPs) responsible for the implementation of the EQF in the UK, a

---

[27] City and Guilds (2012). *RPL Assessment Policy and Guidance.*
http://www.cityandguilds.com/~/media/Documents/About-us/Qualification-Consultants/CityGuildsRPLPolicyandGuidancepdf.ashx

[28] Pearson (2012). *Recognition of Prior Learning Policy and Process.*
http://www.edexcel.com/Policies/Documents/Recognition%20of%20Prior%20Learning%20Policy%20v2.0.pdf

[29] NIACE (2013). *Using the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) within the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF): a report to the Skills Funding Agency.* http://www.niace.org.uk/current-work/using-the-recognition-of-prior-learning-rpl-within-the-qualifications-and-credit-framew

[30] 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

[31] http://www.seec.org.uk/; There is also a Northern Universities Consortium - http://www.nuc.ac.uk/

[32] http://www.seec.org.uk/resources/publications/seec-publications

[33] http://seecwp.pipeten.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/seec-files/SEEC%20Level%20Descriptors%202010.pdf

report was produced on the use of RPL in sectors. The report identifies six case studies of RPL activity across the private sector in the UK. Four of these were in England and NI (the remainder in Scotland – see the Scotland Inventory Update for more information). In brief, these four case studies were as follows:

- **Belfast National Health Service (NHS) Trust** undertook an initiative to upskill and improve the qualification levels of support workers and enable them to move on to other careers such as nursing. Using the NHS Knowledge and Skills Framework (KSF), the support workers undergo an assessment process which recognises transferable skills based on experience and skills from their own lives. The assessment process is carried out by registered nurse mentors and involves a combination of observing tasks on the job and a discussion about demonstrable competencies. Non-formal learning, from other Trust training programmes, can also be taken into account in the accreditation package.

- **Henry Brothers**, a construction and civil engineering company based in Northern Ireland, developed a combined test and interview process of RPL to support the recruitment of workers from abroad. This combined method was considered to be more reliable than interview alone. The RPL approach involves a skilled assessor examining a product made by the applicant. Once it is assessed by the expert, the results are given to the candidate at the interview and this determines whether or not the applicant is successful and can be employed. The test measures their practical skills and the interview is used to focus on their past experience looking at, for example, whether they have transferable skills and what their potential might be to the company.

- The **Institute of Conservation (ICON)** has introduced a process called the Professional Accreditation of Conservator-Restorers (PACR), which allows for the recognition of professional competence of people responsible for conserving and restoring cultural heritage artefacts. It is an interesting example of the use of validation for higher-level skills. The accreditation system is based on a set of professional standards[34] that applicants have to meet at a high level against criteria relating to knowledge, standard of work, autonomy, coping with complexity and perception of context. Potential applicants are encouraged to work with a mentor, who will generally provide support is typically by e-mail and/or telephone. The assessment process is made up of two stages. First, the applicant is required to submit an application form with information about examples of their work to the Accreditation Committee. If this first stage is successful, the applicant is then required to undergo an assessment by two assessors (one from the applicant's discipline and one from another area). The assessment takes the form of "*a dialogue*" and *"a peer review process"* rather than a test or interview. It takes place over a full working day, during which the applicant is encouraged to talk about each of their projects. The assessors relate the evidence to the standards and then make a recommendation to the Committee. More than 40 practitioners receive accreditation each year through the PACR process.

- The **Poultry Passport Scheme** is another sector skills passport, similar to those described in Section 2.2. Through a web portal that specifies the requirements for various jobs at different levels, it enables workers to have their competencies assessed and recorded as they progress through different job roles. Importantly, the workers can take the Passport to another employer in the industry. The scheme has benefits for both the employees and the employers: employees can develop a sense of pride in their achievements, particularly if they have never achieved a qualification before and they can map out a career path and identify their skills gaps; employers can better plan and run training courses, thereby reducing the administration burden and saving costs because training does not need to be repeated, and they can show that they are complying with standards, legislation and insurance requirements, as well as keeping up with good practice. Over 4,000 poultry farmers/workers are now registered on the poultry passport web portal.

Third sector organisations

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

---

[34] See http://www.icon.org.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=741

youth or voluntary work. In terms of the four stages of validation, the focus in this sector tends to be on initial guidance, reflection and recognising and identifying skills, and gathering evidence.

For example, the Soft Outcomes Universal Learning (SOUL) Record[35] 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. Updated versions were published in 2011 (Version 2) and 2012 (Version 3). To date, over 600 users from across the UK have been trained. As of October 2013, the SOUL Record is in the process of being converted into an online subscription programme, which will provide users with news updates and annual adaptations, offering online training and evaluation/feedback opportunities. The SOUL Record is planned to be re-launched early in 2014.

A new project identified for this latest update is the Informal Learning in Communities (ILIC) project, described in the box below.

Informal Learning in Communities (ILIC) project

Merseyside Expanding Horizons – a third sector regional specialist agency in England with skills in the direct delivery and commissioning of services for people facing social exclusion - is working with partners from six European countries (Lithuania, Bulgaria, Italy, Germany and Ireland) to investigate the use and validation of various informal and non-formal learning strategies[36]. The **Informal Learning in Communities (ILiC) project** is investigating the use of various informal learning pedagogical strategies within different 'communities' - e.g. a defined local area of deprivation; or a thematic community e.g. people with mental health issues. Each partner organisation is working with a different community to investigate the use of 3-4 pedagogical strategies (such as learning via peer mentoring, community networking, role models, intergenerational learning and community participation) in order to share best practice.

Key outputs from the project will be curriculum and learning materials to reflect the situation within different communities and countries, and ultimately, innovative training modules for practitioners in the field of adult education wanting to develop and validate informal and non-formal learning within different communities[37]. The final ILIC product will consist of a workbook and accompanying DVD. The material will be translated into the languages of the partner countries (English, Lithuanian, Bulgarian, Italian and German). The project started in Autumn 2012 and will run for 2 years - during which it is anticipated 250 adult learners will be involved in informal learning and 50 practitioners will contribute to the project.

Another third sector example is identified in the final report of the project 'Recognising Non-Formal Certificated Learning within and outside frameworks in the UK, Netherlands and Finland'[38]. Advice Northern Ireland (NI) is a charitable company, providing support to 69 member organisations within the independent advice sector, including the provision of training. Learners who have taken part in some of Advice NI's OCN certificated programmes can use the evidence from the programmes towards the achievement requirements for some of the learning outcomes in the QCF Framework – e.g. the Level 3 Certificate and Level 4 Diploma in Advice and Guidance, Level 4 Certificate in Providing Specialist Legal Advice, Level 4 Diploma in Providing Specialist Legal Advice and Casework and the Level 5 Award in Providing Legal Advice to Older People. Thus, although they are not in the formal qualifications framework, these qualifications can be compared to qualifications which are in the regulated system for the purposes of recruitment, selection, learning, development and progression.

---

[35] http://soulrecord.org/home

[36] Please see: http://ilic-project.eu/#

[37] Please see: http://www.expandinghorizons.co.uk/latest-news/calling-for-participants-for-ilic-european-training-course.html

[38] Recognising Non-Formal Certificated Learning within and outside frameworks in the UK, Germany and Finland, Draft final project report, 2014 (unpublished)

2.4.3   Coordination between stakeholders

The approach taken in the UK is to provide 'frameworks' for RPL at national level (relating to different learning sectors) but to leave the actual implementation of RPL to the individual learning providers. This arrangement has its advantages, as it means that each validation process and even each individual procedure can be tailored to the learner(s) in question. However, there are also disadvantages, as without a greater drive at national level to encourage the wider implementation of RPL, it is quite possible that the numbers of people actually benefiting from validation opportunities will remain low. Moreover, without opportunities for peer learning or more detailed guidance or training on implementation, practitioners who are actually tasked with delivering RPL may lack the confidence or knowledge to implement RPL opportunities on a wider scale. At a time where public funding is relatively limited, 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.

2.5   Examples of national regional, local or EU funded initiatives

1. Examples of national, regional, local or EU funded initiatives in relation to validation that have taken place within the past three years, which you consider to be good practice or innovative.

- Skills Passports (see Section 2.2) seem to be a successful example of formative validation in the private sector.
- The newly-developed CPD qualifications for practitioners delivering RPL (see Section 6.2) have the potential to be a successful practice, given the lack of existing standardised training for RPL practitioners.

2. Initiatives focused on specific target groups, such as the low-qualified/early school leavers, migrants, those seeking a higher education qualification etc.

- 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 2010 Inventory Update.

- Newcastle College offers a service called 'Recognise Me'[39] which offers discounts on the tuition fees of part-time foundation degrees by allowing prior experience to be used to count towards a new qualification. Credits can be used to gain exemptions from certain modules and a discount is applied to the tuition fee for every module which is exempted, up to a maximum of 40 % of the tuition fees for the first year of a Foundation Degree[40].

- Westminster Exchange, an academic department of the University of Westminster, offers recognition of prior learning - both APEL and APCL (Accreditation of Prior Certified Learning) – for all of its programmes. The application form for admission into any of Westminster Exchange's programmes includes a question on whether candidates would like to be considered for the accreditation of prior learning and there are dedicated staff members within the Department to deal with these applications.
  Students applying for APEL are required to fill out a 'module learning outcomes' form and explain how their experiential learning matches each of the learning outcomes of the module in question. They must demonstrate they have met all the learning outcomes to be awarded credit for the module. In addition to the form, students have to provide relevant evidence to support their claim (e.g. CVs, letters from employers written on

---

[39] http://recogniseme.ncl-coll.ac.uk/ouroffer.aspx
[40] Two-year programmes tailored to meet the needs of industry, bringing together experience in the workplace and academic learning.

company-headed paper, documentation generated in their employment or evidence of attendance at training or staff development events).

There are a range of support materials available to candidates and it is also possible for them to receive tutorials on providing the evidence required. Candidates are guided through the portfolio assessment process by the course leader or nominee, assessment is carried out by a member of academic staff with relevant subject expertise, then the approval process is undertaken by the University's AP(E)L Board, through a process equivalent to that used for taught modules. APEL credits awarded are not given a mark and are not included in the calculation of the classification of the final award. A fee is charged for the process of AP(E)L guidance and assessment[41].

■ The University of Hertfordshire offers a 'CATS programme' which gives learners the chance to design and develop a university programme to suit their particular needs. Students on the programme can study modules from different courses and combine these with APL (up to 75 % of credits can be awarded through APL). A student applying for credit for APEL usually pays 50% of the normal costs of the module.

3. Use of European Europass and Youthpass tools to document non-formal and informal learning.

In 2013, the UK was the ninth country in the list of the top 20 countries which visited the Europass portal. In terms of downloads of Europass CV/ Language Passport documents, English was the sixth highest language (however it is worth bearing in mind these figures will include users from other countries, including of course Ireland)[42].

The number of organisations that have issued Youthpass certificates in the UK has ranged from 104 in 2010 to 147 in 2012 (dropping slightly to 131 in 2013). Youthpass certificates had been issued for 246 projects in 2013, again a slight drop from 257 in 2012 but an overall increase since 2010 (from 201). There was a significant increase in the total number of Youthpass certificates issued in the UK between 2010 and 2013, from 1740 to 3406 in 2013[43].

2.6 Inputs, outputs and outcomes

2.6.1 Funding

The SFA provides funding for RPL in England relating to QCF qualifications. The SFA funding rules for 2013/14 state that:

1.10 You must make sure that a learner does not repeat learning that they have already carried out to achieve a qualification, unless they need to do so within an Apprenticeship framework.

1.11 For any learning aim outside of an Apprenticeship framework, if a learner achieves more than 50% of assessment through Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), you must discount by 50% the funding for the percentage of the qualification assessed as being delivered through RPL or, in the case of provision funded by a Loan, reduce the fee to the learner. However, if the learner has achieved 50% or less of assessment for the learning aim through RPL, you do not need to reduce the funding for the percentage of assessment achieved through RPL or, in the case of provision funded by a Loan, reduce the fee to the learner.

---

[41] Souto-Otero, M. (2013*). Review of credit accumulation and transfer policy and practice in UK higher education*. York: Higher Education Academy.
http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/flexiblelearning/Flexiblepedagogies/Review_of_Transfer_of_Credit_Report.pdf; *Westminster Exchange Prospectus*
(http://www.westminster.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/150958/5367_WEx-brochure-2012.pdf)
[42] Cedefop (2013). *Europass website 2013 activity report*.
http://europass.cedefop.europa.eu/Statistics/3._Annual_activity/2013/Europass_Statistic_Reports_Year_Visits_Downloads_2013.PDF

[43] Data supplied by SALTO Training and Cooperation Resource Centre, extracted 10 September 2013

1.12 If RPL is used for a qualification within an Apprenticeship framework, funding for the qualification must be discounted by the percentage which is assessed through RPL. In the case of a Loan, the fee charged to the learner must be reduced by the same percentage.

...

1.14 You must not claim funding for provision, or require a learner to take out a Loan where no learning takes place (this would be where only an assessment is needed or a learner re-sits a learning aim assessment or examination)[44].

The current policy is therefore that providers receive funding for learners who enter a course via a process of RPL, either the same amount as for learners who have not undergone an RPL process, or a reduced amount if the RPL assessment has accounted for more than 50 % of the learning outcomes of the course. Yet in the case of learners who can meet all of the learning outcomes for a unit or qualification via RPL, and therefore do not need to undertake any further learning, providers do not receive any funding at all (however interviewees suggested that it is rare for an individual to be able to acquire a full qualification via RPL).

According to the NIACE study on RPL within the QCF, there is a lack of awareness of, and also confusion over the SFA rules regarding funding for RPL. A majority of NIACE's survey respondents said they did not know what the current funding rules were in relation to RPL and where providers were aware of the rules, confusion over the definition of RPL (in contrast to credit transfer/exemption) led to a misunderstanding about how RPL could be supported. NIACE recommended that the SFA clarify the funding rule in relation to RPL. In particular, NIACE called for a careful explanation of the '50%' rule, since "*within the rule itself it is still necessary to identify how '50%' is to be measured, especially in relation to the new Funding Rates Matrix*".

Providers and AOs interviewed for the NIACE study considered RPL, due to its individualised nature, to be a costly procedure – this has also been reiterated in interviews carried out for this country update. Nevertheless, the NIACE report also recognises that RPL can be cost-effective – for example it is seen as an efficient means of recognising achievement in the construction sector.

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 higher education, 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.

2.6.2   Distribution of costs

As noted above, the SFA funding rules 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[45].

In the HE sector, institutions have the autonomy to decide 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.

---

[44] Skills Funding Agency (2013). *Funding Rules 2013/2014.*
http://readingroom.skillsfundingagency.bis.gov.uk/sfa/funding_rules_2013_2014_version_2_1.pdf

[45] NIACE (2013). *Using the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) within the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF)*. A report to the Skills Funding Agency. http://www.niace.org.uk/current-work/using-the-recognition-of-prior-learning-rpl-within-the-qualifications-and-credit-framew

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 AP(E)L 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.

According to the SEEC AP(E)L network, charges for guidance to support individuals wishing to undertake an APEL process vary considerably, even within organisations. It seems that APEL has been used by some institutions as a 'loss leader' (i.e. no charges for guidance or assessment) for students seeking access to specific programmes, usually at postgraduate level. However, in some member organisations this was being reviewed, and it was anticipated in a number of organisations that charges would be introduced for some, or all, programmes in the future. Some of those member institutions which were reviewing their current arrangements for charges were looking at the different stages involved in an APEL process, for example advising on potential, advising on putting together a portfolio, and assessing a portfolio[46].

SEEC provides examples of charges for different types of guidance provision relating to the RPL process. The examples demonstrate how much costs vary across institutions, for example whilst one institution did not charge at all for tutorial time associated with the RPL process (which is implemented as a 'loss leader'), another charged GBP 640 (EUR 750) regardless of the number of academic credits claimed/awarded.

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).

2.6.3   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 (where it is collected) and where data is collected by providers, it does not appear to be used strategically. With regard to the QCF, national data collected relates to qualification achievement rather than validation method. Anecdotal evidence suggests that RPL in relation to the QCF 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.

A recent study into RPL within the QCF, prepared by NIACE, suggests 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

---

[46] SEEC APL Network Group (2012). *Overview of strategies relating to provision of guidance for Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) and charges which may be made.* http://www.seec.org.uk/news/overview-guidance-strategies-and-charges-apel (accessed 2 September 2013)

achievements were attained via RPL or through a taught programme. This means that data on RPL is not systematically collected.

2.6.4 Evidence of benefits to individuals

Some benefits are suggested in the small study of the use of RPL in private sector[47], 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.

3 Information, advice and guidance

3.1 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, the aforementioned case study report of RPL in the private sector 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[48].

3.2 Role of information, advice and guidance networks/institutions

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. In HE, the SEEC AP(E)L network has produced an overview of the strategies of its members relating to the provision of guidance for APEL[49].

---

[47] *Recognition of Prior Learning and how sectors are using it in the UK and Europe.* (Unpublished)

[48] Recognition of Prior Learning and how sectors are using it in the UK and Europe. (Unpublished)

[49] SEEC APL Network Group (2012*). Overview of strategies relating to provision of guidance for Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL), and charges which may be made.* http://www.seec.org.uk/news/overview-guidance-strategies-and-charges-apel (accessed 2 September 2013)

The note explains that within individual organisations there tended to be more than one guidance strategy in place for learners undergoing an APEL process. These strategies included both non-accredited guidance (e.g. on-line, workshop, tutorial, detailed guidance booklet) and accredited modules (e.g. on-line, face-to-face, blended delivery).

3.3 Measures to enhance the awareness of validation initiatives and practices amongst guidance practitioners

The NIACE study found that there is some confusion over terminology, which affects the provision of guidance/support by the AOs - documentation on RPL provided by two AOs confuses RPL with the recognition of prior formal (certificated) learning. Where the guidance from the AO around RPL is unclear, this *"means that assessors are not confident about using this method of assessment"*.

For guidance practitioners working outside of the actual RPL delivery process, one interviewee 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.

4 Quality assurance and evaluation

4.1 Quality Assurance Framework

There are no separate quality assurance processes for validation. In relation to RPL within the QCF, an RPL process should be subject to the same quality criteria as other assessment methods. This means that assessors and QA staff must ensure that any evidence to support an RPL claim is valid and authentic.

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. According to the Regulatory Arrangements for the QCF, it is up to the AOs to recognise, and monitor on an ongoing basis, the centres offering assessment leading to awards within the QCF.

As mentioned above, in HE the QAA oversees how well individual universities and colleges meet their responsibilities. The introduction of the new 'expectations' in the QAA Quality Code marks 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 (from August 2014, when the Quality Code will become a reference point for the purposes of reviews carried out by QAA) 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. This could potentially raise the profile of RPL. Nevertheless, the actual implementation of RPL remains very much within the hands of the individual HEI.

As mentioned above, 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 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"[50].

---

[50] 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.* http://www.loncett.org.uk/uploads/documents/doc_221.pdf

From September 2006, the LSC 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.

4.2 Quality assurance systems/procedures

According to the NIACE report on RPL within the QCF, AOs monitor RPL processes offered by learning providers during visits to the centres and quality assurance interviews. However, as mentioned above, it is not possible to identify which credits have been achieved through a process of RPL and which through other assessment processes.

The QAA conducts regular (at least every six years) reviews of higher education providers in the UK. As noted above, from August 2014, these audits will be based on the Quality Code, which includes a specific expectation in relation to assessment and RPL. Within HEIs, standards and quality apply to RPL in the same way as formal learning. Within individual HEIs, 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 RPL and/or larger volumes of applications, may have specific RPL examining boards and external examiners.

4.3 Evaluation framework

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

5 Validation methods

5.1 Methods used and the validation process

According to Ofqual, RPL is *"the process undertaken on behalf of the Learner to identify and recognise relevant learning, experience, knowledge or competences he or she may have already and which contribute to the qualification or unit they plan to undertake. It involves giving Learners information, advice and guidance about whether the RPL route is the right one at the initial stage"*[51].

The actual assessment methods to be used are not prescribed at national level, and in practice may vary considerably, even from one application to another. City and Guilds 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:*

- *examination of documents;;*
- *witness testimony;;*
- *reflective accounts; and,*
- *professional discussion"*[52].

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:

---

[51] Ofqual (2012). *Frequently Asked Questions on the General Conditions of Recognition and Recognition Criteria.* http://www.readonpublications.co.uk/pdf/Course%20Resources/Ofqual%20FAQs,%20January%202012.pdf

[52] City and Guilds (2012). *RPL Assessment Policy and Guidance* http://www.cityandguilds.com/~/media/Documents/About-us/Qualification-Consultants/CityGuildsRPLPolicyandGuidancepdf.ashx

■ 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.

The aforementioned small project looking at RPL in the private sector[53] 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:

■ UsingU tests and interviews to confirm practical skills already held by the indvidual
■ 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, paper-based assessment methods tend to be used for the summative assessments, including for example tutor reviews of individual learning plans (ILPs), end of course celebrations with certificates being given out, and reviews of practical tasks captured via video/photo[54].

The table below has been completed on the basis of the information above – it is therefore not considered to be a representative overview of the assessment methods used in validation across England/Northern Ireland - a survey of providers would be required to determine this.

Table 5.1   What are the most commonly used methods[55] at the different stages of the validation process?

	Identification	Documentation	Assessment
Debate			
Declarative methods			
Interview	X		X
Observation			X
Portfolio method	X	X	

---

[53] Recognition of Prior Learning and how sectors are using it in the UK and Europe (unpublished)

[54] Information provided by a RARPA trainer working for NIACE

[55] Please see the Thematic Report on Assessment Methods produced for the 2010 Update to the Inventory for definitions of the different types of assessment: http://libserver.cedefop.europa.eu/vetelib/2011/77646.pdf

	Identification	Documentation	Assessment
Presentation			
Simulation and evidence extracted from work			X
Tests and examinations			X
Other (e.g. e-learning methods) – please specify			Reviews of practical tasks captured via video/photo

6   Validation practitioners

6.1   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, individual Awarding Organisations or learning providers may set their own requirements. For instance, City and Guilds 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'[56]. Pearson 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, 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 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"*[57]. 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, t*o *receive information and track entry, progression and retention of APEL students".*

6.2   Provision of training and support to validation practitioners

There is no national-level requirement for validation practitioners to undergo specific training. Indeed, in the NIACE report on RPL within the QCF, it is noted that several providers saw the costs associated with staff development or specialist training as a barrier to the

---

[56] City and Guilds (2012). *RPL Assessment Policy and Guidance*
http://www.cityandguilds.com/~/media/Documents/About-us/Qualification-Consultants/CityGuildsRPLPolicyandGuidancepdf.ashx

[57] Northern Ireland Colleges and Universities APEL Good Practice Guidelines

development of a widespread RPL offer. NIACE found that providers expected Awarding Organisations 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, NIACE suggested that providers still need more information and guidance about RPL and recommended that the SFA should take forward the commissioning of such guidance.

There are also a number of guidance notes, either developed by organisations such as 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[58]' 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 work-related achievements and/or qualifications.

NIACE continues to provide training to practitioners in the application of RARPA (see http://www.niace.org.uk/campaigns-events/events/demonstrating-impact-for-quality-using-the-five-stage-process-rarpa). The focus of these events is on the use of RARPA as a quality improvement tool and the programme focuses on processes and systems demonstrating how the five-stage process contributes to learner progress and achievement. In particular, the training looks at how RARPA can be used to help practitioners to identify how the five-stage RARPA process can be used to evidence the (CIF) Aspect: Outcomes for Learners.

6.3 Qualifications requirements

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

7 References

Organisations consulted:

■ Department for Employment and Learning, Northern Ireland

■ CCEA

■ NIACE

■ Independent expert

■ Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

■ HEFCE

Literature/Documentation:

City and guilds (2012). *RPL assessment policy and guidance.*
http://www.cityandguilds.com/~/media/Documents/About-us/Qualification-Consultants/CityGuildsRPLPolicyandGuidancepdf.ashx.

Cedefop (2013). *Europass Activity report 2013.*
http://europass.cedefop.europa.eu/Statistics/3._Annual_activity/2013/Europass_Statistic_Reports_Year_Visits_Downloads_2013.PDF.

---

[58] City and Guilds (2012). *RPL Assessment Policy and Guidance*
http://www.cityandguilds.com/~/media/Documents/About-us/Qualification-Consultants/CityGuildsRPLPolicyandGuidancepdf.ashx

LSC (2005). Recognising and recording progress and achievement (RARPA). Coventry: Learning and Skills Council. In: McKenzie, S. (2009). *Recognising and recording learner progress and achievement (RARPA) in non-accredited learning in adult and community learning.* http://www.loncett.org.uk/uploads/documents/doc_221.pdf.

NIACE (2013). *Using the recognition of prior learning (RPL) within the qualifications and credit framework (QCF): a report to the Skills Funding Agency.* http://www.niace.org.uk/current-work/using-the-recognition-of-prior-learning-rpl-within-the-qualifications-and-credit-framew.

Northern Ireland Colleges and Universities APEL. *Good practice guidelines.*

Ofqual (2012). *Frequently asked questions on the general conditions of recognition and recognition criteria.* http://www.readonpublications.co.uk/pdf/Course%20Resources/Ofqual%20FAQs,%20January%202012.pdf.

Pearson (2012). *Recognition of prior learning policy and process.* http://www.edexcel.com/Policies/Documents/Recognition%20of%20Prior%20Learning%20Policy%20v2.0.pdf.

QAA for Higher Education (2008). *Higher education credit framework for England: guidance on academic credit arrangements in higher education in England.* http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Documents/creditframework.pdf.

Recognising non-formal certificated learning within and outside frameworks in the UK, Netherlands and Finland. Draft final project report, 2014 [unpublished].

Recognition of prior learning and how sectors are using it in the UK and Europe [unpublished].

SEEC APL Network Group (2012). *Overview of strategies relating to provision of guidance for accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) and charges which may be made.* http://www.seec.org.uk/news/overview-guidance-strategies-and-charges-apel [accessed 2 September 2013].

Skills Funding Agency (2013). *Funding Rules 2013/14.* http://readingroom.skillsfundingagency.bis.gov.uk/sfa/funding_rules_2013_2014_version_2_1.pdf.

Souto-Otero, M. (2013). *Review of credit accumulation and transfer policy and practice in UK higher education.* York: Higher Education Academy. https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Review_of_Transfer_of_Credit_Report.pdf.

UK Quality Code for Higher Education. *Part B: assuring and enhancing academic quality, Chapter B6: assessment of students and the recognition of prior learning.*

University of Westminster (2012). *Westminster exchange prospectus.* http://www.westminster.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/150958/5367_WEx-brochure-2012.pdf.

Youthpass data supplied by SALTO Training and Cooperation Resource Centre, extracted 10 September 2013.

Web links:

http://agored.org.uk/default.aspx?id=497&qualid=126841

http://agored.org.uk/default.aspx?id=497&qualid=126842

http://ilic-project.eu/#

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

http://www.careerswales.com/en/

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

http://www.expandinghorizons.co.uk/en/latest-news/calling-for-participants-for-ilic-european-training-course.html

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/225753/dwp-commissioning-strategy-2013.pdf

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/49884/the-work-programme.pdf

http://www.icon.org.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=741

https://nationalcareersservice.direct.gov.uk/Pages/Home.aspx

http://www.niace.org.uk/sites/default/files/dwp_commissioning_strategy_consultation_sept_2013.pdf

http://www.nidirect.gov.uk/index/information-and-services/education-and-learning/careers.htm

http://www.nuclearskillspassport.co.uk

http://www.readonpublications.co.uk/pdf/Course%20Resources/Ofqual%20FAQs,%20January%202012.pdf

http://www.rewardinglearning.org.uk/docs/regulation/employer_engagement/report_on_the_recognition_of_training_in_employment_programme.pdf

http://www.skillsforhealth.org.uk/developing-your-organisations-talent/skills-passport

http://soulrecord.org/home

http://www.sscalliance.org/

http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20090506150202/qca.org.uk/qca_14937.aspx