How informal and non-formal learning is recognised in Europe

UK – country report

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How informal and non-formal learning is recognised in Europe

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This country report was composed as part of a larger study on validation of non-formal and informal learning in Europe. The country reports of Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, Norway, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom as well as the summary of the study both in English and German, and finally the complete publication (in German only) can be found at

www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/vnfil-in-europe.

1   Initial situation

The UK comprises three main jurisdictions with respect to education training: England and Northern Ireland; Wales; and Scotland. Scotland has always had a different education and training system to the rest of the UK, whilst it is only in comparatively recent times that Wales has begun to develop distinctive provision. Devolution of powers to the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales/Welsh Government since the late 1990s has meant that there has been increasing divergence in policy and practice between the main jurisdictions. The small margin in the recent "no" vote in the Scottish referendum is likely to lead to the devolution of further powers, such as in the employment field, and the trend of divergence is likely to continue[1]. This context has a bearing on recognition policy and practice, with Scotland having developed the more substantial body of policy and practice in the field. The bulk of the evidence in this report relates to Scotland and England/Northern Ireland.

It should be noted that there is no formal legal definition of persons with low levels of formal qualification or low-qualified people in the UK that is applied universally either in vocational training systems or consistently across policy fields. Defining low skills in relation to the qualification system is problematic. At the end of lower secondary education (currently the age of 16) students take a range of examinations in a range of subjects, predominantly academic but also vocational; in the upper secondary phase (typically between the ages of 16 and 19) students en route to university may take three or four academic subjects, whilst other students may take a mixture of academic and vocational subjects or simply one major vocational subject. Students may therefore exit the initial education and training system (before tertiary level) with any number of qualifications and grades, or none at all.

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[1] The situation in Northern Ireland is also one of devolution in certain policy areas and is complex and evolving, although this does not have a significant bearing on the topic of recognition.

2 Vocational training and informal learning in the UK: characteristics and concepts

Vocational education and training is provided by a mix of institutions. Further Education Colleges (FECs) and training providers (in the private sector but including not-for-profit and companies with charitable status) and Sixth Form Schools/Colleges are the major providers of vocational programmes and qualifications for students progressing without interruption from the preceding stage of their initial education. FECs and private providers are the chief providers of continuing vocational education and training, although of course universities also provide vocational courses. FECs provide a range of programmes from basic training to Foundation Degrees (short cycle Bachelor level). Private training providers provide courses for those in work and the unemployed and much is of short duration.

A significant feature of UK vocational education and training is the high degree of autonomy in the system for all providers. Colleges are autonomous institutions incorporated by an Act of Parliament with the freedom to innovate and respond flexibly to the needs of individuals, business and communities. Other important features of the UK landscape are the joint working between institutions, and partnerships with local employers.

On the employer side voluntarism is a key characteristic with major variations between sectors in the nature and extent of their involvement in vocational education and training. The regulation of occupations is minimal; even titles like "surgeon" remain unregulated. Employers are, however, involved in the development of national occupational standards which underpin vocational qualifications. Trades unions play a much smaller role to that of employers.

Vocational training displays many of the features of a market. Although the system is complex for all parties, whether (potential) learners, employers or providers, it is also highly flexible. This is key reason why routes back into education and training for adults, including those with low levels of formal qualification and via recognition of informal learning, are quite well developed compared to many other European countries.

3 Persons with low levels of formal qualification: Concept, employment situation, further education behaviour

3.1 Educational and economic policy background

The recognition of informal learning has not been a prominent feature of policy debates in recent years. Indeed, it appears that the embedding of recognition into qualifications frameworks, as described below, coupled with the generally accepted view that the development and implementation of recognition procedures should be a matter for training providers and employers, means that recognition tends to be taken for granted as being a feature of the system.

At the same time, the issue of low skills has always been a topic for political debate, with the relatively high proportion of jobs that require only very basic levels of skill being one of the dominant characteristics of the UK economy. Debates about low skills have become entangled with the issue of high levels of immigration into the UK, often by workers who themselves have only low levels of formal qualification.

A long-standing problem in the UK has been – and continues to be – the large numbers of individuals who leave the compulsory school phase without any formal qualifications and, related to this, the relatively high proportion of young people not in education, employment or training. Attempts to tackle this issue within the last decade included the introduction of vocational qualifications across the 14-19 age span, but a review of these qualifications undertaken by the current government questioned their value and the emphasis has since been placed upon removing such low value qualifications whilst trying to raise standards and performance in "traditional" academic qualifications.

There is also a strong emphasis in current policy on the continued growth of apprenticeships, which are seen as providing a solution to key problems in the vocational training system related to weak linkages between qualifications and occupations and the lack of employer engagement. Recent evaluations of apprenticeships found that they were often taken up by people already in employment as a means of having their skills recognised, rather than as a means of labour market entry. Current policies are trying to address this issue and also develop apprenticeships at higher skill levels.

3.2 Persons with low levels of formal qualification: Concept and typology

There is no single accepted definition of "persons with low levels of formal qualification" in the UK. Different definitions tend to be applied in different policy fields. This is partly because there is a lack of a strong connection between qualifications and labour market entry and subsequent career progression.

England has been characterised as having in the main a "flexible" labour market regime in which "choice" is a fundamental tenet. This means that education and the labour market are coordinated: "through individual judgements about the worth of particular kinds of credential in the labour market. Individual choice becomes central to the type of post-16 education people received. In turn, the educational market has responded by providing a myriad of routes and courses for students leaving secondary school. Consequently, there are few structured career pathways into the labour market…" (Brown, Green and Lauder 2001: 191-2).

However, "internal" labour markets also exist in some sectors and occupations and these tend to be populated in the main by university graduates who may benefit from structured company training which is more likely to lead to formal certification/qualifications; in the larger "flexible" labour market training tends to be highly firm-specific and less likely to lead to formal certification/qualifications.

3.3   Areas of employment of persons with low levels of formal qualification

Low skills are a key feature of the UK economy. The recent PIAAC report (OECD Skills Outlook 2013) found that 22 percent of jobs demand only primary school-level skills, compared to, e.g., 10 percent in the USA and 5 percent in Germany. The proportion of young people not in employment, education and training is above the EU figure at around 14 percent, which is higher than the Netherlands, Austria, Denmark, Germany, and Finland.

The UK has been characterised as a "high skills/low skills" model in which there is skills polarization: competitiveness in some sectors comes from skilled workers, but in many others stems primarily from capital productivity and flexible labour. This polarisation has been linked to high and rising rates of income inequality (Brown and Lauder 2001).

The origins of this prominence of low skills can be traced back to the industrial revolution and the prominence of primary production and basic industries that developed in the UK in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Since then, there has been a sharp decline in employment in manufacturing, offset to some degree by a rise in low skilled service jobs. Most recently, there has been a loss of employment opportunities for people with middle ranking skills, whilst the creation of low and high skilled jobs remains. The drive to increase numbers of people entering higher education has, however, tended to increase the tendency for people with few or no qualifications to be crowded out of low-level service jobs by graduates entering the labour market who are unable to get jobs appropriate to their level of education.

3.4   Further training behaviour of persons with low levels of formal qualification

The problem of low skills in the UK is not simply related to poor performance in the compulsory phase of education but also to weak performance in respect of lifelong learning. Although the UK is one of the 6 EU Member States that by 2011 had already exceeded the 15 percent participation target as agreed as part of the education and training strategic framework (ET 2020), other figures from the Adult Education Survey (which measures participation in a different way) suggests that the UK lags behind most of the EU, and also demonstrates the problem of participation by the persons with low levels of formal qualification[2].

The problem is not just that participation in the population in general is lower (35.8 percent in the UK compared to 40.3 percent in the EU 27) and that the number of instruction hours spent by participants on average tends to be low in the UK. In addition, those with low levels of formal qualification are less likely to participate with only 17.9 percent of people qualified up to lower secondary level participating compared to 21.8 percent in the EU 27. Further, the education and training is more likely to be formal (14.8 percent UK compared to 6.2 percent EU 27), a type of learning which the this target group is less likely to feel comfortable in. In short, problems of low educational attainment in childhood are unlikely to be offset during adulthood.

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[2] epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php/Lifelong_learning_statistics

These problems have long been recognised. Amongst practitioners and individual education and training providers, this has led to the development and implementation of outreach and access provision to the extent that, although its availability is variable it is nonetheless commonplace. It has been accompanied by the development of what are called "entry-level" qualifications, that have been designed to provide people with few or no qualifications with stepping stones towards qualifications that have value in the labour market. They are seen as providing a means of boosting self-confidence amongst individuals who perceive themselves as having failed in mainstream education. Such provision typically requires intensive support for learners, and is likely to have suffered in recent years as a result of constrained public resources.

4 Core elements of the validation of non-formal and informal learning: status quo

4.1 Legal basis

There is no direct legislation in relation to the recognition of informal and non-formal learning in the UK. However, recognition of prior learning (RPL) as it is now commonly termed in the UK, is an integral part of the qualifications and credit frameworks that have come to be developed, and which in some cases are still undergoing development.

The UK is unique in Europe in having a regulated competitive "market" for qualifications in which independent not-for-profit Awarding Organisations (also known as Awarding Bodies) design and, in effect, market and sell their qualifications throughout the education and training system. Awarding Organisations are regulated through recognition and monitoring by the regulatory bodies.

Each of the three main education and training jurisdictions has its own qualifications and credit framework and regulatory arrangements. However, there is coordination of activities across the UK, not least because Awarding Organisations and employer bodies, including Sector Skills Councils, operate across the UK (e.g. there is a UK EQF Coordinating Group).

In England and Northern Ireland, the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) is the authority that regulates all external qualifications[3]. It regulates by recognising and monitoring the Awarding Organisations that deliver qualifications and assessments as set out in 2 Acts of Parliament. The rules through which vocational qualifications are designed and administered are laid out in the regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) which are set by Ofqual.

The current Regulatory Arrangements define RPL as follows:

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. (Ofqual 2008: 42)

The Regulatory Arrangements also specify 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" (Ofqual 2008: 27).

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[3] In Northern Ireland Ofqual regulates vocational qualifications only; the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment regulates all other qualifications.

The Regulatory Arrangements also lay down rules regarding the relationship between Awarding Organisations and the assessment centres which are responsible for assessing candidates for Awarding Organisations' qualifications. Hence the Regulatory Arrangements specify that Awarding Organisations must have in place procedures to recognise and continually monitor centres to offer assessment and must also ensure that each centre "where appropriate, has in place arrangements that allow for recognition of prior learning" (Ofqual 2008: 28). Assessment centres are normally also the providers of the education and training leading to the qualifications, and Awarding Organisations are required to have in place centre recognition procedures to guarantee the quality and consistency of assessment processes in general.

The phraseology in the Regulatory Arrangements is somewhat ambiguous with regard to whether RPL is mandatory, and, indeed, this was clarified in the guidance on RPL in the QCF subsequently issued (QCA 2010: 6). This guidance states that all QCF Awarding Organisations must be able to offer assessment through RPL and all training institutions which are recognised by an Awarding Organisation as being able to offer their qualifications must be capable of operating an RPL process. To emphasise the point, it states: "'We don't offer RPL' is not an acceptable position for either an awarding organisation or centre [training institution] to adopt within the QCF".
At the same time, the regulatory framework does not mean that all individuals must be offered RPL in all cases. Rather the emphasis is placed upon the individual as someone who has responsibility for "claiming credit" under the QCF. This is described as an "individual-centred approach to recognising achievements. Where an individual wishes to "claim credit" for prior learning, awarding organisations must be able to respond positively to such a claim. Indeed, the guidance goes on to say that it may be useful in some instances for Awarding Organisations and training institutions to use the term "claiming credit" instead of recognition of prior learning in presenting such opportunities to individuals and inviting them to seek recognition under the QCF.

Wales has its own framework (the Credit and Qualification Framework for Wales) and the regulatory authority is the Department for Education and Skills of the Welsh Government. The Welsh framework is broadly equivalent to the one for England and Northern Ireland, with the exception that there is additional provision for the recognition of non-formal learning through what is known as the Quality Assured Lifelong Learning pillar of the framework. Through this approach specific QALL units are included on the framework. This has been designed to encompass learning beyond regulated and higher education qualifications to try to ensure recognition of the learning of, for example, hard-to-reach learners. Awarding organisations and providers need to become formally recognised in order to deliver the units. There are now more than 1000 units on the framework and a toolkit has been developed to provide support.

In Scotland, the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) performs a similar regulatory function to Ofqual, approving/regulating Awarding Organisations (which are termed Awarding Bodies) through SQA Accreditation to award SQA-accredited qualifications. In addition the SQA is responsible (through SQA Awarding Body) for both designing and accrediting qualifications. It has a largely dominant position in all sectors of qualifications in Scotland although none of its qualifications are protected by statute. Nonetheless, cooperation rather than competition is arguably a more dominant feature of the system than in the rest of the UK.

The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) started to be developed in 1991 (SQA 2014: 5). Unlike the QCF, it covers all phases of education and was developed and is managed by a partnership of relevant bodies (the SCQF Partnership) comprising the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, Colleges Scotland (representing the main providers of publicly funded vocational education and training and adult learning), the Scottish Qualifications Authority, and Universities Scotland. The Scottish Government has observer status on the Board.

This partnership basis and longer term stability provides a very different context to the rest of the UK and has influenced the approach taken to the development of recognition procedures. For example, there was a "National Debate" on RPL in 2004 and production of SCQF RPL Guidelines in 2005 and Resource Pack in 2006. Most significantly, RPL was given an important place in the SCQF when in March 2006 the SCQF Joint Advisory Committee identified RPL as "a huge challenge but arguably the biggest opportunity" and proposed that RPL could/should be promoted as a key selling point of the SCQF Framework (quoted in Sutherland and Martin 2008).

4.1.1 Evaluation and relevance for the target group

In England, creating a regulatory obligation on Awarding Organisations and assessment centres (training institutions) to make an RPL offer as part and parcel of being able to design and implement qualifications within the QCF represented an important step forward. Indeed, it has been reported that this development "is beginning to bear fruit in practice" (NIACE 2013:13). However, as we shall see below, the offering of RPL and its take-up has been patchy.

Whilst the guidance on RPL in the QCF states that "the opportunity to be awarded credit through RPL is a universal entitlement for all individuals in the QCF" (QCA 2010), there is no specific obligation in relation to people with low levels of formal qualification. In such circumstances, their ability to access validation processes (without support and guidance) is likely to remain limited.

In Scotland, although RPL is not mentioned in the regulatory framework as such it is more firmly anchored in the qualifications system and backed up by a range of support tools. Evidence is lacking as to whether this has made recognition of informal learning more common in Scotland than the rest of the UK but it is evident that RPL has a stronger profile in national policy. As in England, the question of "entitlement" is not strongly articulated, nor is there a particular emphasis on the people with low levels of formal qualification in most of the documentation.

4.2   Procedures and instruments

4.2.1   Binding procedures

4.2.1.1   Recognition in qualifications and credit frameworks

None of the elements which make up the national level frameworks for recognition of informal learning differentiate between learners. Recognition is treated as a process available to all.
Procedures and instruments to recognise informal learning began to develop in the UK in the early 1980s, first in higher education and then, in the late 1980s, as part of the development of National Vocational Qualifications (Scottish Vocational Qualifications in Scotland). Indeed, between 1989 and 1992 considerable resources were devoted to the development of what was then called Assessment or Accreditation of Prior Learning in National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs).
NVQs were developed as a means of certification for the great mass of workers at a time of major industrial change which had seen the collapse of apprenticeships and which had been preceded by an education and training system characterised by a school examination system that had been designed for only the top 40 percent of students by ability, and vocational qualifications that were numerous and of variable quality. NVQs were based on learning outcomes and enabled workers to have their competence assessed in the workplace. Whilst this provided a major stimulus to the recognition of informal learning, the approaches were criticised for being over-bureaucratic.

In England, the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) sought to eliminate these bureaucratic elements, and is one of the reasons why the term Recognition of Prior Learning was adopted to distance itself from the previous approaches. The QCF succeeded the National Qualifications Framework which carried no RPL obligations.
In England, the QCF was designed to be capable of recognising any kind of achievement at any level through any mode or process of learning. The framework is based on units of learning outcomes. Every qualification in the framework is built up from units and all units are based on a standard design format. Each unit specifies a set of learning outcomes and each learning outcome has an assessment criterion linked to it. Individuals are awarded credits for a unit when they can demonstrate through assessment that they are able to achieve the learning outcomes against the related assessment criteria. It is not possible for an individual to achieve part of a unit: they must achieve all the learning outcomes in a unit for credits to be awarded.

Credits gained through RPL can count towards any qualification, at any level and in any subject/sector area within the QCF unless excluded by the requirements for the award of a qualification. Awarding Organisations may place restrictions on the award of credits through RPL, but only in exceptional circumstances. These exceptions include: explicit requirements for a licence to practice; health and safety requirements; a condition of admission to a regulated profession; and where a unit requires that assessment takes place in a given setting and/or at a given time. Qualification specifications produced by Awarding Organisations indicate if RPL applies and any restrictions. Credits are recorded in an electronic personal learning record owned by the individual. This record does not specify whether the credits were obtained through RPL or not.

The QCF does not prescribe that any particular assessment method should be used, although some requirements for assessment may be set by a Sector Skills Council in certain cases. This gives Awarding Organisations flexibility in developing assessment methods which is particularly useful in the context of validation.

This approach reflects an overall characteristic of the education and training system in the UK which is to have minimal regulation combined with the development of national guidance. In 2010 the then Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (now abolished) published "Claiming credit: Guidance on the recognition of prior learning within the Qualifications and Credit Framework" which remains the only national level guidance in England/Northern Ireland with any authority on the subject (QCA 2010). A brief review of documents produced by Awarding Organisations and education and training providers, undertaken for this study, indicates that this document has been influential in shaping the overall policies of these organisations.

"Claiming credit" was designed to help Awarding Organisations and training institutions to develop or update their own policies and guidelines for RPL to meet QCF requirements. It has the aim to "contribute to simplifying the RPL processes, building mutual trust among practitioners and underwriting the reliability and validity of credit achievements made through RPL" (QCA 2010: 5). It sets out 5 principles "developed from existing examples of good practice… that have been developed in the UK and internationally" (QCF 2010: 7), as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Principles for the Recognition of Prior Learning under the Qualifications and Credit Framework (England and Northern Ireland) (source: QCA 2010: 7)

Principle 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.

Principle 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.

Principle 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.

Principle 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.

Principle 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.

"Claiming credit" also provides an example of one type of RPL process - for an individually tailored route - based on 6 stages which is adapted from the European guidelines on the validation of non-formal and informal learning (Table 2).

Table 2: Claiming credit within the QCF using an individually tailored route (source: QCA 2010: 13–14)

Stage 1: General awareness about claiming credit - information, advice and guidance

When an individual indicates an interest in registering for a qualification in the QCF, the possibility that they may be able to claim credit for some of their previous learning needs to be raised with them. If the offer of RPL interests the individual at this initial stage they will need to know about:
- the process of claiming credit through RPL
- the sources of professional support and guidance available to individuals and employers
- the administrative processes for RPL applications
- timelines, appeals processes and any fees and/or subsidies available to support the process.

Stage 2: Pre-assessment - gathering evidence and giving information

If an individual decides to claim credit for prior learning, it is important that all the implications of this decision are made known, prior to any decision to begin collecting evidence to support this claim.

This stage is vital to ensure that the candidate is:
- fully informed of the RPL process
- has sufficient support to make a viable claim
- able to make decisions about evidence collection and presentation for assessment.

During this stage the candidate will carry out the process of collecting evidence against the requirements of the unit or units through which credit is claimed. In some cases this may entail the development of an 'assessment plan' or similar tool to support the individual through this process. The evidence required for the award of credit will need to meet the assessment standard of the unit(s) expressed through the learning outcomes and assessment criteria, as well as any additional assessment requirements established for the unit(s).

Stage 3: Assessment/documentation of evidence

Assessment as part of RPL is a structured process for gathering and reviewing evidence and making judgements about an individual's prior learning and experience in relation to unit standards. 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.

Stage 4: Feedback

After the assessment the assessor will, where practically possible, need to give feedback to the candidate, discuss the results and give support and guidance on the options available to the candidate, which may include, for example further learning and development. It is assumed that the assessor will also confirm to the individual whether

or not a recommendation for the award of credits will be made. In all cases, once the assessment process is complete, the standard procedures for reporting results leading to the award of credit should be followed.

Stage 5: Awarding credit

Awarding organisations are responsible for awarding credit. The procedure is the same as for other forms of assessment and may vary between awarding organisations and between different centres. All credits achieved through RPL are recorded by the awarding organisation in the personal learning record in exactly the same way as all other credits.

Stage 6: Appeal

If claimants wish to appeal against a decision made about their claim for credit they would need to follow the standard appeals processes that exist within learning provider organisations and awarding organisations.

Mention must also be made of the Recognising and Recording Progress and Achievement (RARPA) system. This was introduced in 2004 as a means of measuring the progress and achievement of learners on non-accredited learning programmes. It is currently being promoted as a tool in relation to learners with learning difficulties or disabilities by the Employment and Training Foundation, and current Skills Funding Agency rules require it to be applied to any non-regulated provision funds.

In Scotland enhancing the supply of and demand for RPL using the SCQF has been identified as one of the key means of meeting the UK's and Scotland's labour market needs through engaging more "non-traditional" and workplace learners in a variety of settings and at various levels in returning to lifelong learning and supporting the adaptability and mobility of the workforce (Sutherland and Martin 2008: 6). As noted above, the approach, now going back several years, has been to embed RPL in the SCQF and to encourage and support the use of RPL through the provision of guidelines and resources.

RPL is not mentioned in the Scottish regulatory framework itself (the SQA Accreditation's Regulatory Principles 2014) but is embedded in the guidelines for SCQF credit rating. There are 47 guidelines clustered into five groups, one of which groups is dedicated to RPL (Table 3). In addition, the 10 guidelines devoted to credit transfer are also relevant to RPL processes. In short, therefore 10 out of 47 guidelines specifically refer to RPL whilst another 10 are closely related.

Table 3: SCQF Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning (source: SCQF Partnership 2009: 73)

38 RPL is about recognising learning that has its source in experience and/ or previous formal learning contexts. The following principles apply to recognising learning: Recognition is given for learning, not for experience alone; The learning that is recognised should be transferable; SCQF Credit Points awarded as a result of RPL are of the same value as credit gained through other formal learning.

39 A wide range of learners should be able to use RPL to assist them in re-entering learning or to gain recognition as a contribution towards a formal learning programme.

40 Credit limits for RPL within formal qualifications and learning programmes must be made explicit. Programme limits, if any, on the credit that can be awarded for RPL within a qualification or learning programme should be clearly stated, as should any implications for progression, grading or classification. Organisational policy on credit limits should be consistently applied.

41 Clear mechanisms for making RPL claims must be in place. Evidence of learning can be gathered through a variety of different mechanisms.

42 Effective links between learning providers, guidance services and Human Resource personnel, where appropriate, should be established to support individuals for RPL.

43 RPL should be: Learner-focused; Accessible; Flexible; Quality-assured.

44 Formative recognition of prior learning can be used for personal and career development.

45 RPL for the award of SCQF Credit Points (also called summative recognition) involves a formal assessment or acceptance of evidence of learning.

46 The assessment procedures for RPL, including arrangements for external assessment should be consistent with the normal assessment and general quality assurance of the organisation.

47 The process of monitoring and reviewing the operation of RPL procedures should be clearly defined and integrated within the existing quality assurance and enhancement mechanisms of the learning provider.

In addition to these guidelines, the Scottish approach has been to provide support which includes:

- The SCQF Handbook: User Guide which devotes two chapters out of nine to RPL.
- The 58-page publication "Facilitating the Recognition of Prior Learning: Toolkit" to assist stakeholders (learning and training providers, employers and human resource personnel) wishing to use RPL under the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework. This has a particular emphasis on the role of the "facilitator" (see section on Support Structures) and contains guidance for facilitators and handouts for learners and ideas for activities to be undertaken with people who want prior learning validated, based on materials developed through a Socrates-funded project[4]. It is indicative of the collaborative approach in Scotland that the toolkit was developed by a wider SCQF RPL Network in collaboration with other stakeholders.
- An area of the SCQF website devoted to RPL[5]. This includes an online guide, case studies and different areas providing assistance for learners, employers and providers. Support includes two different workshops on RPL for training institutions[6]. The first is specifically aimed at staff supporting learners in preparing to make a claim for RPL and the focus will be on the support learners need to present a successful claim to an organisation. The second is specifically for staff in colleges and universities who receive and assess RPL claims from learners and will focus on the setting up of internal systems to process claims for RPL and the support that may be needed for learners within that system.

The SCQF Handbook sets out Core Principles for RPL, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4: SCQF Core Principles for RPL (source: SCQF Partnership 2009: 60)

Learner-focused RPL should be a voluntary activity on the part of the learner. The learner's needs and reasons for recognition should be paramount. RPL should be a gateway to learning, not a barrier. RPL should promote the positive aspects of an individual's learning experience, not its deficiency. **Accessible** RPL should be an accessible and inclusive process, applicable to all learners at all levels. Accessibility can be facilitated through: Awareness raising; Initial information, advice and guidance; Manageable systems in terms of time and money from the perspective of both the learner and the receiving organisation; Processes that are easy to understand and easy to implement; Embedding RPL in the design stage of qualifications or learning programmes so that it becomes an integral part of the delivery of learning.

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[4] Valuing Learning through Experience Project, involving eight European countries, co-ordinated by Glasgow Caledonian University.

[5] www.scqf.org.uk/more/rpl (accessed 3.12.2014)

[6] www.scqf.org.uk/more/rpl/rpl-for-education-providers (accessed 8.10.2014)

Flexible

To address the diversity of learner needs, goals and experiences, a range of different approaches that support RPL for learners and for assessment should be available in the different lifelong learning sectors.

Reliable, Transparent & Consistent

In managing RPL processes, reliability, transparency and consistency are necessary to ensure confidence in the outcomes.

Quality Assured

RPL for credit should be integrated within existing quality assurance processes and should be available for scrutiny by appropriate external quality assurance arrangements.

The SCQF Handbook also identifies the key features which learning providers should ensure are in place when developing and operating processes for RPL (Table 5).

Table 5: Key features of RPL to be put in place by learning providers (source: SCQF Partnership 2009: 67)

Key features of RPL to be put in place by learning providers
- Initial information and guidance for learners on the RPL procedures that are in place in the organisation;
- The provision of clear details of the costs for RPL;
- Support for learners in the reflective process to: (a) identify learning through experience (skills, knowledge and understanding); (b) reflect on previous experience; (c) select and present evidence of that learning; (d) identify areas for further learning.
- Benchmarking learning within the context of the SCQF;
- Identification of learning pathways;
- Support for learners in the transition between informal learning contexts and formal
- learning;
- Support for staff engaged in supporting learners and assessment of RPL;
- Application of a monitoring process for RPL procedures;
- Integration of the RPL process within the overall quality assurance systems.

Assessment criteria are not proscribed within the SCQF but a set of 'widely applied' criteria are provided in the Handbook:

Acceptability
There is an appropriate match between the evidence presented and the learning outcomes. The evidence is reliable and valid.

Sufficiency
There is sufficient breadth and depth of evidence, including evidence of reflection, to demonstrate the achievement of the learning outcomes of competencies claimed.

Authenticity
It must be clear that the evidence is the outcome of the learner's own efforts.

Currency
The learning that is assessed should be current and not out-of-date. If the learning experience occurred some time ago, the learner is required to provide evidence that they have kept their learning up-to-date.

The Handbook specifies that the RPL claim must be assessed by appropriate subject experts whose recommendation is considered and, where appropriate, approved by the relevant assessment board. The assessment procedures for RPL, including arrangements for external assessment should be consistent with the normal assessment and general quality assurance of the organisation. This includes the provision of an appeals process in order to protect the rights of the learner. The SCQF Level and number of SCQF Credit Points awarded for prior informal or experiential learning that has been awarded SCQF Credit Points should be shown on the learner's transcript. In some cases, it is possible for an RPL claim to be made for SCQF Credit Points within a programme of study and simultaneously for vocational or professional recognition through a professional or statutory body or another awarding body.

There is no requirement placed on the nature of the evidence of learning that may be put forward for consideration. Evidence sources may include:
- Reflective accounts
- Project work
- Structured interview or oral assessment
- Assessment on demand
- Observation of practice or simulation
- Benchmarking
- Existing work-based learning practices in evaluation and assessment
- Profiling
- Record of volunteer learning and experience
- Europass Curriculum Vitae (ECV)
- Portfolio.

4.2.1.2   Recognition in Higher Education

The university sector has been an important player in the development of recognition procedures in the UK. British universities are autonomous and therefore there is much variation in practice. However, collectively they constitute one of the most important influences on the entire education and vocational training system and the provision of access routes on to university courses for those with low levels of formal qualification is well-established and continues to grow and develop. And the university sector has the advantage that it can develop binding procedures at the level of individual institutions (since each university has its own degree-awarding power) without the need for the development of complex national qualifications frameworks. Their practices are therefore worthy of attention.

Universities are guided in their practice by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) and specifically by a chapter in the QAA Quality Code published in October 2013 (QAA 2013). This chapter covers assessment in general but also shows how recognition of prior learning should fit within it. It expresses the "expectation" that higher education providers should 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.

Recognition of the need for further development of RPL in the university sector prompted research in Scotland and the publication in 2012 of guidelines for streamlining and enhancing approaches to RPL support and assessment (QAA Scotland 2012) which are now being implemented. This work highlighted the need for:

- greater coordination and integration of RPL at institutional level with greater collaboration between and across academic schools and faculties and central services, such as admissions and student support services
- a more explicit recognition of RPL activity in staff workloads and the provision of more support for and training of staff

The guidelines also identified the need for action in 4 key stages of RPL including:

- **Stage 1**–developing initial information and guidance processes: the development of multiple points of access and information types for initial information and guidance on RPL the identification of clear contact points for staff and students.
- **Stage 2**–developing support systems/processes: the better use of technology such as e-portfolios and wider use of learning agreements.
- **Stage 3**–developing assessment systems/processes: the need to develop more effective, simplified assessment mechanisms linked to the need to enhance understanding of the nature and process of informal learning, and clarification and support for the roles of RPL adviser/mentor and RPL assessor.
- **Stage 4**–developing monitoring and evaluation processes: embedding data recording and analysis in mainstream practice and as part of normal quality assurance in order to address the gap in formal monitoring and evaluation of RPL.

4.2.1.3 Role of employers

Employer organisations are also important players in the development and implementation of RPL in the UK but their engagement is variable. These organisations vary substantially in their sector coverage and in their roles within the labour market and education and training (although, as noted above, they mostly have a UK-wide geographical scope rather than there being different employer bodies in different constituent nations of the UK). In this context, it is not surprising that their engagement with RPL is very variable, and this makes it difficult to form a coherent picture. Their involvement leads to both binding recognition (dealt with in this section) and non-binding recognition (dealt with below).

A recent EU-funded study of RPL within sectors does, however, shed some helpful light on the situation (UK National Contact Points 2012). This study examined case studies in 5 sectors and found that most employers relied on the use of formal qualifications and only in a small number of cases was RPL being used either before or during the induction of new recruits or that there was an internal systematic process of enabling workers to identify their prior experiences as evidence towards a nationally recognised qualification or unit of a qualification.

Reasons for using RPL varied between each organisation depending on the sector, the nature of the organisation itself and its particular skill needs at a given point in time. Reasons included:

- helping a particular group of workers to identify skills they had that were relevant to new functions in their job role and provide the potential to further progression
- accelerating the process of gaining the required qualification for the job role
- testing if recruits had the right level of skills for different and changing activities of the organisation
- enabling a more inclusive approach to recruitment
- improving the confidence and status of individual staff
- supporting individual learning pathways
- providing recognition for highly contextualised experiential learning.

The study identified a continuum of PRL practice. At one end of the continuum RPL was highly focused towards specific outcomes to assess whether or not the individual had the requisite knowledge and understanding. At the other end of the continuum processes were more open-ended and involved a process of reflection and evidence gathering, where the focus was on the individual rather than the outcome.

Depending on the target group and rationale RPL could consist of:

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

Key challenges identified concerned the following:

- the particular way in which some qualifications were contextualised made it extremely difficult to give recognition to similar learning in a different but relevant context, thus hindering transferability
- while an RPL process could be robust and very successful in providing progression to more formal recognition in the specific workplace in which it was implemented, linkages to nationally recognised qualifications did not always exist
- while RPL was accepted in theory, individual trainers and assessors could be constrained and cautious about accepting prior experiential learning. This might have been due to a narrow interpretation of what was valid or to RPL processes being insufficiently developed. Part of the problem was a lack of confidence in being able to give formal recognition to learning that did not conform to the usual setting in which learning and assessment takes place contiguously.
- learners were not always aware of the opportunity to have learning from their previous experiences recognised.

The box below provides an example of an employer-based scheme that has become mandatory within an industry.

Table 6: The Poultry Passport Scheme

The Poultry Passport Scheme
The Poultry Passport was initiated by a working group known as the Poultry Meat Training Initiative made up of industry representatives, the National Farmers' Union, the agricultural Sector Skills Council (Lantra) and a training organisation. There was a need to improve training standards in the industry, an important driver being animal welfare, with the industry eager to demonstrate that it was proactive, taking action before legislation.
With high levels of unqualified workers in the sector there was a need to develop a tool that could (a) enable employees to have their competences mapped against key industry standards and (b) provide a means of carrying evidence of competence between employers and to support progression between job roles. Initially the passport was an optional standard for the industry but it is now a mandatory requirement for acquiring the "Red Tractor" kitemark, a national food quality assurance standard.
The passport was developed as an online tool to provide a way of monitoring and recording workers' competences against minimum standards for job roles, which would identify gaps and also training needs, helping to drive up training standards in the process. The passport provides an accessible, online record of worker's achievements, a virtual CV.

Using the passport RPL can be used by employers to assess a worker's current skill levels against 4 levels:
  ▪ Level 1 – Induction, basic health & safety, Biosecurity, Welfare and Manual Handling
  ▪ Level 2 – As above plus Level 2 Work Based Diploma Agriculture

> - Level 3 – Level 3 Work Based Diploma Agriculture, Biosecurity, Welfare, Manual Handling, Health & Safety, Environmental awareness and first aid
> - Level 4 – ILM Level 3 Certificate, Supervisory Health & Safety, Advanced Health & Welfare, Advanced Biosecurity and Environmental Awareness
>
> The online tool lists competences against which the worker has been assessed and confirmed by their manager. The scheme is administered by a training organisation, the employer has access to their workers' records, managers have oversight of workers in their sections and individuals can look at their own records. It enables workers to have their competences assessed and recorded as they progress through different job roles. It is also useful as a tool to review the skills of the large number of overseas workers who work in the industry.

4.2.2 Non-binding procedures

Non-binding procedures are widespread in the UK but at the same time scattered, forming a very patchy landscape. They have typically been developed for guidance and motivational purposes, sometimes targeted at particular groups in the population such as single parents. Their scattered nature makes it difficult to provide an overall assessment.

In Scotland, formative assessment not involving the award of credits towards a qualification is promoted and encouraged as an important component of RPL in the SCQF Handbook (SCQF 2009). Formative recognition is seen as supporting personal learning and career development through production of an individual learning plan or personal development plan. It can help to:

- Build learner confidence
- Recognise skills and knowledge gained through experience
- Identify ways in which these skills and knowledge can be developed through further learning opportunities
- Support career and/or professional development.

Formative recognition is also viewed as a potential pre-cursor to summative assessment leading to the award of credit under the SCQF. Indeed, the SCQF Handbook positions it as "involve(ing) using the SCQF to benchmark learning achievement without using a formal process of assessment and credit rating. Formative recognition can be achieved by comparing the outcomes of an individual's learning with the SCQF Level Descriptors". (SCQF 2009: 60).

4.2.2.1   Non-binding schemes amongst employers

As noted above, employer organisations are very diverse in the UK and many of the schemes that have been developed for recognition have a non-binding character. An example is shown in the box below.

Table 7: RPL to access employment in nursing in Belfast, Northern Ireland

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RPL to access employment in nursing in Belfast, Northern Ireland

This was a collaborative initiative carried out by a partnership of the local National Health Service (NHS) Trust, the relevant trade union, a local college and an education centre. It was designed to upskill and improve qualification levels of support workers in the NHS so that they could access the nursing profession. It would also allow the Trust to reduce reliance on professional nursing roles by increasing the number of support workers who could carry out basic clinical interventions safely.

The initiative was aimed at new support worker recruits in their first year of employment. Research had indicated that the proportion of staff with a level 2 or above qualification was likely to be low in this population of staff who were also likely to have literacy support needs. The aim was to improve their qualification level and to support the health and well-being of staff undertaking the qualification with anticipated knock-on benefits to the communities in which they lived.

Each support worker is assigned to a registered nurse who is trained in the professional role to mentor student nurses within a vocational framework. The nurses make the judgement about the worker's competence against the NHS Knowledge and Skills Framework and sign them off in the workplace. Workers either demonstrate their competence on site or describe what they had already done to show existing skills. All relevant experience is accepted and welcomed as a starting point at recruitment if it matches the criteria for the job.

Some qualifications have been gained by candidates during the programme:

- Key Skills/Essential Skills qualification at a level relevant to the candidate
- Level 2 QCF Certificate working in the Health Sector
- "Realising your Potential" OCN Level 1 Certificate.

However, the package of development is not linked to a regulated nationally recognised qualification. This is a key limitation of the initiative as it inhibits employee transferability to other NHS employers. For transferability to be addressed other employers would need confidence about the content and outcomes of the programme to recognise it within their own vocational learning strategies.

4.2.2.2 "Grassroots" developments

There has, for many years, been "grassroots" interest in the idea of recognition of informal learning and the development of localised approaches. By definition, these are more difficult to map but none-theless constitute an important part of the recognition landscape in the UK. There is a high degree of autonomy in the UK education and training system and in the last decades there have been many local schemes and also national initiatives by 3rd sector organisations to tackle problems of low skills, low literacy and numeracy etc. that have included development of recognition schemes. Time-limited funding, e.g. from EU programmes, has been used to develop some schemes. This pattern pertains across the UK irrespective of differences in constituent national education and training systems (so no differentiation is made in this section between England, Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland).

4.2.3 Evaluation and relevance for the target group

Recognition of informal learning is anchored firmly within qualification and credit frameworks. This means that Awarding Organisations and training institutions need to have in place the ability to carry out recognition procedures for anyone wishing to claim credit against a regulated qualification, which covers almost all qualifications that have any value in the labour market.

National guidance emphasises the importance of developing the "infrastructure" to support this. "Claiming Credit" recognises the importance of "building mutual trust and confidence in robust and accessible RPL arrangements across the QCF" and also of widening access and creating additional opportunities for recognition by "opening up a wider range of assessment instruments and methods that are more responsive to the needs of individuals" (QCA 2010, Abschnitt 1.2: 5section 1.2: 5).
However, despite such pronouncements, recognition procedures are not in widespread use. In a review article, Scott (2010) finds that "accreditation of prior experiential learning" (roughly equivalent to the recognition of informal learning) is greatest in higher education and is dominated by activity in health (especially nursing) and social care. NIACE (2013: 21) reports that "… anecdotal evidence from both providers and Awarding Organisations suggests that the offer of RPL within the QCF is made to a small minority of learners through a minority of centres supported more actively by some Awarding Organisations than others".

In Scotland, research drew the following conclusion in 2008 and there is no reason to suspect that this situation has significantly changed:
" […] there is some good practice in enabling learners with learning achieved in a range of contexts to gain flexible entry to further learning provision or credit transfer for their existing learning. This good practice includes learning providers having RPL Co-ordinators, RPL policies, effective staff development and engagement in the processes of RPL. However, RPL requires resources to be dedicated to it and RPL policies, systems and practices to be embedded in the day to day operation of the learning providers' business. The provision of RPL is not consistently accessible or delivered across geographic, industry sector or education or training sector boundaries." (Sutherland and Martin 2008: Executive Summary, un-numbered).

Significant barriers remain to the provision of and demand for recognition of informal learning, all of which are likely to be most acutely felt by people with low levels of formal qualification. These barriers include weak engagement resulting from the language used in connection with RPL; the need for flexibility in providing recognition of prior learning and access to and credit towards other more formal learning; the need to make RPL services affordable and manageable for learners and learning providers; institutional and attitudinal barriers on the part of learning provider staff, professional bodies and others; the need for reliability, respectability and sustainability of RPL services.

All of these key issues suggest the need for capacity building and infrastructure development on the supply side and a concerted marketing effort on the demand side to ensure employers, professional bodies and individual learners, whatever their situation, know about, understand and want to participate in RPL linked to qualifications and credit frameworks as a means of engaging or re-engaging in lifelong learning (Sutherland and Martin 2008).

Employers are a particularly important stakeholder group in this context since the evidence suggests that employer involvement in recognition tends to be focused on meeting their specific needs often through non-binding procedures rather than developing national approaches to recognition despite their involvement in national qualifications development.

In the higher education sector there is a particular need to address the following issues if people with low levels of formal qualification to be able to take advantage of recognition procedures: the need for multiple access points with provision; the academic "language" barrier and the accompanying structure of learning outcomes which can find it difficult to accommodate learning acquired informally; the need to support students in the transition from informal to formal learning contexts such as through the provision of mentors.

In England major reforms are currently taking place of vocational qualifications both for young people and adults. Recognition of prior learning is conspicuously absent from debates surrounding the reforms despite the fact that they may mean (a) the removal of many qualifications from the QCF deemed to be of low quality and (b) changes to the nature of units that make up qualifications stemming from concerns that their use can mean that students are not necessarily adequately assessed on whole areas of study.

The regulatory body has also expressed concerns that the assessment requirements of QCF lead to a "tick box" approach to assessment amongst Awarding Organisations rather than a focus on delivering what is best for standards. This may mean introducing measures to open up opportunities for Awarding Organisations and training institutions to use the full range of assessment methods which may be beneficial in terms of recognition.

Nonetheless some concerns have been expressed about current proposals from within the education training sector that are relevant to RPL. As one stakeholder put it:

"There might be qualifications that appear to be low quality but they are a vehicle to get people with learning difficulties, people who are unemployed and divorced from the system back into work. We throw those out at our peril." (John McNamara, Managing Director of Lifetime Awarding, an Awarding Organisation, quoted in FE Week, 14 March 2014)

However, it is still unclear what the consequences of current reforms may be for the recognition of informal learning.

4.3   Financial structures

4.3.1   Funding mechanisms

There are no funds specifically available at national levels for recognition of informal learning. However, in England provision is made for RPL through the main funding mechanism for vocational qualifications which is managed by the Skills Funding Agency.

With regard to general adult skills funding (which is a main category, Apprenticeships being another, see below) the Agency's funding regime specifies that if the learner has achieved 50 percent or less of their assessment through RPL, funding linked to their qualification does not need to be reduced. Above the 50 percent threshold, funding to the provider must be reduced by half; for example if RPL accounts for 60 percent of the assessment, then funding is reduced by 30 percent. This mechanism therefore provides quite a high level below which providers are not penalised through reductions in their funding even though learners may not have taken part in structured teaching. On the contrary, it may help to incentivise the use of RPL, especially since it is unlikely that most learners will have sufficient prior learning to account for most of a qualification (though it is not impossible).

These rules do not apply to Apprenticeships, where funding must be reduced by the percentage of assessment taking place through RPL, with no 50 percent threshold.

4.3.2   Costs

The cost of RPL has long been identified as an issue. For example, the need to make RPL services affordable and manageable for learners and learning providers has been identified as an important barrier (e.g. Sutherland and Martin 2008).

In England despite the allowances for RPL within the main vocational training funding mechanism, it has been reported that "… the costs of the RPL process still present a significant barrier to making an RPL offer to large numbers of learners" (NIACE 2013: 27). This is due to the individualised nature of recognition processes and the fact that providers need groups of learners working through the same units to make provision viable (although groups do not necessarily have to be large). In addition, staff in training institutions need training in recognition processes and this involves a cost which has to be covered by the training institution.

To offset these costs, providers may charge a fee for recognition services to learners. Evidently this is likely to impact on the learners with low levels of formal qualification and low wages proportionately more than on those with higher levels and higher incomes. No funding is available to learners to cover such costs.

At the same time, training institutions may choose to reduce students' fees based on units completed through RPL under the QCF. Knowsley Community College, for example, states that if a student has completed 3 units out of 9 unit qualification via RPL then the total fee will be reduced proportionately, i.e. the student will pay 66 percent of the original fee in this case (Knowsley Community College 2014: section 13).

In Scotland, the challenge posed by resources has been recognized in the SCQF Handbook which states:

"Clear mechanisms for making RPL claims must be in place. Where possible, these should be streamlined with an appropriate level of resource. *It is not expected that a resource intensive approach should be adopted.* The process should be manageable for both the learner and the learning provider." (SCQF 2009: 68, own emphasis)

Pressure on public finances brought in by economic downturn has added to the difficulty of finding resources for RPL. From the perspective of businesses it has been noted that:

"Employers are primarily concerned with having workers with the skills for the job; providing support for access, career progression and the achievement of qualifications is secondary. This is now relevant as much to the public as to the private sector" (UK National Contact Points 2012: 6)

Although technology, e.g. online systems, offer potential for cost savings, "… learners would still need support to know how to take maximum advantage of them. The issue of the level of resource to support RPL will continue to be a problem in the current context of economic recession and austerity" (ibid.)

4.3.3   Evaluation and relevance for the target group

Costs remain a significant barrier to the provision and take-up of RPL. On the provider side, the fact that RPL is still generally in the development phase means that set-up costs are an important element along with training for staff. In a time of constrained resources, these features make it vulnerable as development and training budgets are typically those which get cut first.

On the demand side, there is a lack of resources for individuals to support their engagement with RPL. Current government policy in England in education and training is to rebalance the financial burden so that individuals and employers make a larger contribution than hitherto. To this end, a system of loans for professional and career development has been developed which to date has covered people aged 24 or over studying at level 3 or 4. The government is currently considering extending the loans to 19 to 23 year olds studying at level 2 and 3. However, loans are unlikely to be of substantial benefit to people with low skills and on low incomes who, experience shows, are less likely to take up such financial tools.

4.4   Institutionalisation

4.4.1   Vocational training institutions

Throughout the UK implementation of recognition procedures lies very much with individual training institutions, leading to variation in policy and practice. The inclusion of recognition within qualification and credit frameworks appears to be leading to the adoption of recognition policies more consistently throughout the education and training system

In England recognition is becoming institutionalised through Awarding Organisations and, in turn, the requirements that they place upon training institutions that wish to become accredited assessment centres.

The requirement for RPL under the QCF has required capacity to be built within the education and training system. This was recognised in the guidance available, which identified a range of areas where action would be required as shown in Table 8 below.

Table 8: Capacity building requirements for validation of informal learning under the QCF (England and Northern Ireland) (source: QCA 2010: 15- 16)

Plans for the development of RPL will need to:
- identify political and organisational barriers within the wider organisation to making an effective RPL offer
- address and resolve any known or anticipated problems in making an RPL offer to individuals
- ensure that those responsible for RPL processes are well informed and have appropriate knowledge and skills
- ensure that good practice in the conduct of the RPL process is applied consistently across
- centres, qualifications and individuals
- ensure that sources of funding are available to support an effective RPL offer of good quality.

Awarding organisations and centres operating within the QCF may want to carry out preparatory work in the following areas:
- auditing current practice, policy and procedures, including a description of quality-assurance processes
- establishing the purposes and intended outcomes of RPL, taking into account the sector qualifications strategy (this may vary by sector)
- looking at any external regulations and statutory requirements relating to RPL (such as professional body or statutory requirements and workplace arrangements and rules) and seeing whether any of these regulations enable or inhibit progression using RPL
- setting up the support structures candidates and staff need to achieve the aims of the sector and institution.

Sector Skills Councils may want to identify:
- market needs/targets of the workforce and the sector
- which groups of employees are a priority for RPL and/or have the most pressing need for RPL
- strategies for building capacity for RPL within the awarding organisations and centres operating in a sector.

Awarding organisations are encouraged to develop:
- guidance for providers on appropriate assessment processes for RPL
- procedures governing the award of credit(s) that permit early recognition of achievement through RPL
- assessment methods and tools that can be used to support RPL
- guidance on moderation cycles/processes to support RPL
- administrative policies and procedures that support RPL
- a statement of the knowledge and skills RPL assessors are expected to have or be working towards
- training, guidance and support on all of the above processes to ensure RPL is fully understood and is part of standard assessment practice.

> **Providers may want to develop or address the following:**
> - how to implement RPL based on the guidance awarding organisations give
> - how to ensure staff are able to recognise, plan and manage the RPL process
> - ensuring that the resourcing of RPL is understood and implemented
> - tailoring careers advice and guidance to individuals to support RPL
> - encouraging staff to undertake training on RPL as part of their professional development.

Awarding Organisations now have clear policies in place for recognition. These tend to be short documents of around five to eight pages in length and typically define RPL, and set down the circumstances in which RPL can be used, the nature of evidence required, and an example of an RPL process. They allow considerable scope for training institutions, as accredited centres, to develop and implement their own recognition procedures. QCF guidance has stated that the general requirement for Awarding Organisations to support both training institutions delivering their qualifications and individuals with materials and services to ensure the effective conduct of assessment extends to the offer of RPL. Such materials and services should ensure that RPL processes are transparent and simple to implement (QCA 2010: 18). Some Awarding Organisations offer guidance, support or training for staff in accredited centres, but practice is variable (NIACE 2013).

Training institutions tend to have two general internal motives for making provision for recognition of informal learning: to treat learners fairly (so that they do not have to repeat learning) and to meet the needs of employers. At the same time, the fact that it is perceived to be a requirement placed upon them by Awarding Organisations is also a stimulus. Indeed, there is evidence of misunderstanding in this respect with some providers also mistakenly believing that RPL is mandatory under Skills Funding Agency rules (NIACE 2013). At the same time, it is important to note that training institutions often have recognition policies and practices that predate the recent development of the QCF and associated funding rules (part of the 'grassroots' development noted above), although there is a lack of reliable evidence to judge how common this is.

Formal RPL policies are increasingly common amongst training institutions, with one survey (NIACE 2013, annexes) showing that 61 percent of providers have a policy on the use of RPL for QCF qualifications (and two thirds of these including it within a single policy on standards). A quick review of these policies for this report shows that they are typically quite general. Indeed, it is difficult not to get the impression in some cases that training institutions have adopted a "tick box" approach to RPL in order to comply with regulatory requirements. The extent to which they highlight the availability of RPL to potential students is variable.

The general nature of training institution RPL policies allows scope for variation in practice within institutions, at the level of both departments and even individual subjects. In the same survey referred to above (NIACE 2013, annexes), only one quarter of respondents were using RPL in all or most subjects. Furthermore, and of great significance for the persons with low levels of formal qualification, training institutions are most likely to use RPL in relation to qualifications at Level 2 and above of the QCF (roughly equivalent to qualifications taken by 16-year-olds) rather than for qualifications at what is termed Entry-level.

Some training institutions, as evidenced by their recognition policies, are more deeply committed than others. For example, South Tyneside College states in its policy that all students are entitled to

apply for RPL and, furthermore, that they are entitled to timely and appropriate guidance and support. It also states that teaching staff have a responsibility to support and encourage all students wishing to claim credit for prior learning.

4.4.2   Quality assurance

As assessment centres accredited by Awarding Organisations in relation to the QCF, training institutions have to have in place robust quality assurance procedures. Recognition procedures are covered by this general requirement. Assessment for RPL is made against the learning outcomes and assessment criteria of a unit and is subject to exactly the same quality assurance requirements as any other kind of assessment within the QCF. There are no separate quality standards for RPL in the QCF; all types of assessment are covered by the same quality standards.

Awarding Organisations do not specify the nature of recognition procedures beyond the broad types of model set out in their policies. Hence there is potential for variation between training institutions in the nature of recognition procedures. The extent to which the persons with low levels of formal qualification are beneficiaries of these procedures will depend upon the individual training institution and their general approach to meeting the needs of their local communities and employers.

4.4.3   Higher education

In general, higher education institutions have been, and remain, significant stakeholders in relation to the recognition of informal learning. They are, nonetheless, autonomous private bodies and so there is enormous variation in practice. Some institutions have developed community-based programmes to tackle issues of low skills which include recognition procedures.

4.4.4   Institutionalisation within organisations

In the UK system, how organisations organise themselves institutionally (whichever sector they are in, vocational, adult or HE) appears to be left to local discretion, with little guidance on the matter. An exception to this are the QAA Scotland guidelines on streamlining RPL that highlight the need for institutions to decide on whether to operate a centralised or devolved model for RPL. In the devolved model, university procedures are "translated" and operated at faculty/school/department level with little or no central coordination or support. In the centralised model, there is a central RPL coordinator or unit (or faculty RPL coordinator, depending on the level of centralisation) who works with subject experts and provides a central point of contact for support and guidance for staff and students.

The guidelines note that the advantage of the centralised model is that a university can ensure a coordinated, transparent and consistent approach across the institution. The decentralised model has the benefit of ensuring RPL is well embedded in admissions procedures and programme delivery and recognises that RPL claimants mainly require support at subject level to understand requirements for entry. The report does not make the point that, evidently, an ideal model would manage to achieve a balance between the centralised and decentralised approaches. At the very least, this points to a need for greater coordination and integration to ensure consistency of approach across the institution.

4.4.5 Interlinking of stakeholders versus competition

As noted, collaboration is a prominent feature of the RPL landscape in Scotland. Governance arrangements are highly collaborative and cooperation is encouraged throughout the system. The role of AOs is less significant in Scotland than the rest of the UK, to the extent that their role is not mentioned in SCQF Handbook whereas they are central to the regulatory 'chain' in the rest of the UK.

The SCQF Handbook states that:

"The provision of RPL to learners across the different sectors may require the development of learning partnerships between colleges, HEIs, employers, professional and statutory bodies, community learning and voluntary sector learning providers, as well as organisations such as Skills Development Scotland […]. The community planning agenda will further increase this form of partnership, for example through local strategic partnerships." (SCQF 2009: 62)

It goes on:

"Collaboration should extend to the sharing of case studies, examples of good practice, and approaches to staff and learner support and assessment." (SCQF 2009: 62)

4.4.6 Staff competences

There are no national standards for training of staff who might wish to manage recognition procedures. Such training is a matter for Awarding Organisations.

Under previous teacher training arrangements, a unit was developed in the 2000s to be included as an optional unit within the Diploma to Teach in the Lifelong Learning Sector and was available to all awarding organisations and universities to use. It was developed through the European Recognition of Prior Learning Outcomes (RPLO) project (www.rplo.eu) and reflected international best practice in RPL. However, teacher training qualifications are going through a major reorganization and a brief review of current qualifications does not reveal RPL as being a prominent feature.

More recently, two continuing professional development qualifications in RPL have been introduced by a Welsh Awarding Organisation (Agored Cymru) which can be taken by practitioners across the UK. They cover both the theory of RPL and formative and summative methods.

4.4.7 Employer organisations

As noted above, employer bodies in the UK are extremely diverse and this is reflected in the approach they take to RPL. Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) had an institutionalised role in the development of national occupational standards to underpin vocational qualifications but under the current government that role has changed. Sector Skills Councils are in a key position to act in promotional roles in their sector with respect to RPL and to work with awarding organisations to enhance the provision of RPL aimed at employers. However, the extent to which they exercise those functions is variable and unclear.

4.4.8   Evaluation and relevance for the target group

The fact that recognition of prior learning has been embedded in qualifications and credit frameworks has meant that RPL has begun to be institutionalised in the UK education and training system. However, how deep this institutionalisation goes is debatable. It is difficult not to get the impression that training institutions, especially in England/Northern Ireland, may show formal compliance with the requirements of the qualification system, but beyond that practice is highly variable. In light of the views expressed in the current review process by the regulatory body that there tends to be a tick box approach to assessment (see above) and training institution RPL policies this is a credible perspective.

Evidently, formal compliance is not true of all training institutions. Some make access to recognition a virtual entitlement for students. However, this does not address the problem that people need to become students in the first place and this can be a particular problem for people with low levels of formal qualification.

The dominant characteristic of the education and training system in respect of recognition is the high degree of variation across training institutions and even within institutions between departments and even subject areas. This points to the need for capacity building to, in effect, institutionalise recognition of informal learning within individual training institutions to ensure consistency of approach. This has been highlighted within the higher education sector and is true in the vocational training sector as well. Capacity building amongst education and training institutions is particularly important in view of the low level of institutionalisation amongst employers.

A key aspect of capacity building is to develop the competence of individual professionals in the sector. The starting point here needs to be the explicit recognition of RPL as a distinct, and additional work task, not something that can be added on and/or integrated simply or easily.

Another aspect of capacity building is the need for collaboration amongst providers and other stakeholders. The implementation of RPL relies on trust amongst both "consumers" and "suppliers" and this points towards collaborative action. The benefits of and need for collaboration between stakeholders to support RPL has long been recognized in Scotland. As one study noted: "In order for more consistent access and quality of RPL service to be made available … significant collaborative development work and shared investment of resources is required" (Sutherland and Martin 2008: Executive Summary, un-numbered).

4.5   Support structures

Individuals accessing RPL stand to benefit from two types of support provision: specialist advice provided by professionals trained in RPL practice which is typically provided by training institutions/universities (variously termed advisers, mentors or facilitators whose job it is to guide learners and not necessarily to carry out assessment); and generic information, advice and guidance services (for adults) which are provided at various levels throughout the system. Neither of these types of role is strongly professionalized.

The availability of support and guidance to people seeking recognition of informal learning is highly dependent upon individual training institutions. However, this sits within a general context in training institutions in which community support and outreach is an accepted part of custom and practice, and also in a context of national and local careers advice services. However, these are areas that have been cut back, sometimes significantly, in the current period of spending restraint.

In Scotland, the need for support specifically related to RPL is well-articulated in the SCQF Handbook where it states that:

- appropriately trained, supported and resourced staff should assist learners to provide evidence of their learning
- appropriate support should be provided to the learner for each stage of their RPL.
- learners who make an RPL claim for credit will require support for the RPL process itself as well as support in the subject, vocational or professional area in which they are making the RPL claim.
- in addition to providing feedback on the presentation of any RPL claims, learners may require support to: Identify learning experiences; Develop the skills necessary for reflection on those experiences; Identify and express the learning achieved that relates to that within the units/modules or programmes; Identify the transferability of the skills, knowledge and understanding gained through prior informal learning; Identify and select evidence of learning; Present their evidence of learning; Identify areas for further learning and development.

The SCQF toolkit stresses the need for RPL to be supported by a "facilitator" and provides guidance on their functions, shown in the box below. No evidence is available regarding how common such facilitators may be, nor indeed how widespread is the provision of the wider support infrastructure mentioned above.

Table 9: The role of the RPL facilitator in Scotland (source: Extracts from SCQF 2010: 13)

The role of the RPL facilitator in Scotland

The facilitator is someone who supports the learner as s/he undertakes the RPL process. The facilitator's task is to make sure that learners have access to the relevant material and information about the qualification, or learning programme or job requirements concerned. Both the facilitator and the learner need to be aware of the requirements of the relevant qualification or learning programme, the awarding body and the learning outcomes. The facilitator should use this information to guide the learner and to help to keep their expectations realistic.

The facilitator could be a line manager, supervisor, mentor, experienced colleague, teacher or trainer. They could be a member of staff in the same organisation as the learner or might be an individual acting as a facilitator for a number of learners within different organisations. In all cases, the facilitator needs to have the knowledge and skills required to ensure that the learner knows how to generate the evidence of learning required.

When acting as a facilitator for the RPL process they will be:

- providing learners with information and guidance on the RPL process
- helping learners to understanding the ways in which they can learn through their experience and the RPL process
- helping learners to understand and use the SCQF Level Descriptors and the learning outcomes of their required qualification/learning programme or the specific job requirements as the benchmarks against which their learning will be measured
- supporting learners to identify learning gained through experience, selecting and producing evidence of that learning, and identifying areas for further learning
- providing guidance on gathering and presenting evidence of learning
- where RPL is being used to claim credit, working with the assessor in order to understand the requirements for assessment so that the learner can be guided appropriately.

4.5.1 Evaluation and relevance for the target group

While the "theory" relating to support structures for RPL is now quite well-developed, evidence about implementation is in short supply. The general context of constrained public resources is not a positive one. General guidance services have suffered cutbacks in recent years. Budget cuts amongst training institutions also make it unlikely that many of them have had the resources to develop a strong support infrastructure in recent years.

The general evidence relating to people with low skills is that they need much support and encouragement to access education and training. Therefore, without support structures they are likely to be affected disproportionately compared to other socio-economic groups in respect of accessing recognition of their informal learning.

5   Education policy positions on the validation of informally and non-formally acquired competences

With a lack of well-developed social dialogue mechanisms, the UK presents some difficulties in trying to identify "policy positions" for the different stakeholders involved in recognition of informal learning. With regard to educators, as already noted, there is a general acceptance of the value of recognition practices. NIACE (2013:32) recently reported there to be "a high degree of commitment from providers to making an RPL offer to learners".

Amongst the sectors of industry, acceptance and use of recognition practices is highly variable. The public sector appears to be most likely to make use of recognition practices (Scott 2010; Kerson Associates 2013). Within the private sector, an important factor affecting the use of recognition procedures is the extent to which they fit in with established training and assessment approaches. The construction industry has recently been identified as a sector where RPL is a particularly cost-effective technique, owing to the nature of learning, most of which takes place on the job (NIACE 2013: 13).

The role of trades unions in recognition is difficult to establish. A report by the ETUC found that "within the actual context of lack of resources, neither the Government nor the unions seem to give a central role to prior learning recognition" (ETUC 2012: 11). However, unusually in Europe the UK benefits from trade union involvement in learning through "unionlearn" organised by the Trades Union Congress, the unions' umbrella body. Unionlearn seeks to develop learning in the workplace through a network of union representatives and learning centres, with the assistance of government funding. Engaging with disadvantaged learners and learners with few or no qualifications is a core part of the work of unionlearn. Obtaining recognition for (prior) learning, particularly with a view to progression in the workplace, is an integral part of the activity of unionlearn.

6   Summary and prospects

In terms of transferability, the UK offers an approach to recognition that requires the development and implementation of procedures whilst also allowing local education and training providers considerable autonomy. The downside of this is that it leads to random variability in the availability of opportunities for recognition to learners.

At the same time, and especially in Scotland, this approach has been accompanied by the development of useful principles and guidance for organisations and practitioners, and the development of the role of RPL facilitator. The issue of costs is also recognized in the UK, with providers being able to reduce programme fees to learners in proportion to how much they achieve through RPL.

Although the system of awarding bodies and qualifications is unusual in Europe, the way in which recognition is articulated through the qualification and credit framework could provide a model for use elsewhere, especially in that it allows procedures to be tuned to the needs of particular groups of learners and sectors/occupations. The approach to recognition also means that units of qualifications that might have been acquired through recognition procedures are not identified separately. Whilst this makes monitoring of the prevalence of recognition difficult, this is probably a price worth paying for ensuring that a 'two tier' system of qualifications is not created: units obtained through recognition are unequivocally the same as those obtained through participation in a programme.

7   Case studies: Practical consequences of the core elements

KIRA

Kira (30) has 2 children (14 and 19 years old), all the qualifications she took at the end of secondary school when she was 16 years old were below grade C and therefore have little value in the labour market.

She has always done temporary work (as a temporary cleaner in different medical practices and as a care worker in a nursing home amongst others). She received workplace induction training for these jobs, but no recognised form of professional qualification.

Kira lives in a rural community in Northern Ireland. The nearest large town (280,000 inhabitants) is approximately an hour away on public transport and there is a lack of nearby education opportunities and resources.

Kira would have liked to train in the past. However, this would have been incompatible with childcare and difficult due to the long working hours and commuting time involved.

Legal basis

The possibilities for Kira to have her existing competences recognised are limited unless she enrols on a course that is included within the Qualifications and Curriculum Framework. Her domestic circumstances make this impossible either on a full-time or part-time basis and in any case she had negative experiences in school so she would be reluctant to approach a college herself.

Process

Kira talks to her friends about an advert she has seen in her local newspaper for support workers in the branch of the National Health Service in the nearest large town. This job would be quite a good match with some of her existing competences which she got from her job as a care worker in a nursing home and her friends are very encouraging that she should apply. She also notes that the job offers the possibility of progression into the nursing profession by recognising her existing knowledge and skills. Kira is successful in her application and starts working as a support worker. She is assigned to a registered nurse who has been trained as a mentor and who is able to make a judgement about her competences against a Knowledge and Skills Framework whilst she is at work. Whilst Kira obtains some certificates in key skills (recognising her competence in literacy and mathematics) the recognition scheme is unfortunately not linked to a regulated nationally recognised qualification. This makes it difficult for her to find alternative employment when she wishes to move jobs.

Financing

Kira was lucky because she lives in a rural community and the provision of local careers advice is very poor but this was offset by the direct advertising by the National Health Service of employment opportunities. She also lives a long way from any training providers which further limited her options in terms of seeking recognition for her competences by enrolling on a training course even if she had wished to. Although her job as a support worker in the National Health Service is some distance away, the fact that she can achieve recognition of prior learning whilst working makes the costs and benefits viable. However, "upgrading" the recognition she has achieved to a regulated national qualification would require additional time and expense on her part which she cannot afford. While she enjoys her job, she would like to move to another part of the health service in a town that is nearer to where she lives and where better promotion opportunities are available but her choices are very limited because the recognition she has received is not transferable.

Support

Kira received a lot of support at work whilst her prior learning was being recognised through the National Health Service Knowledge and Skills Framework. She would now like further guidance on her options not just in the NHS but in the health sector more generally, including the private sector, but she struggles to find what she needs through national online advice and guidance services. Ideally she would like to speak to somebody face-to-face but this is difficult given where she lives and existing childcare commitments, and guidance services locally are patchy in terms of their quality and availability.

BASTIAN

Bastian (29) lives in a small town in East Anglia**.** He completed secondary school at 16, obtaining fairly good grades in a number of subjects. He then began training to be a nurse, but dropped out after a year.

After breaking off his professional training, Bastian managed to break into IT. He has gained four years' professional experience in a large industry company where he was responsible for network management and coordination of IT services.

Following job cuts and outsourcing of IT services, Bastian initially worked under an external service provider with a 12 month fixed-term employment contract. After this contract expired, he received no further offer of employment and has now been unemployed for the past five months.

Bastian has acquired expertise and experience in managing a small team and in network management thanks to working in this field for nearly 5 years. However, he has no formal proof of these skills apart from his employer reference.

Legal basis

Bastian has no legal right to have his informally acquired competencies assessed. Under unemployment benefits regulations he must be available for work and therefore cannot be enrolled on a full-time training course through which he might get his skills recognised. However, he can enrol on a part-time course and still receive benefits.

Process

Bastian approaches his local further education college which has been advertising part-time vocational IT courses locally. Fortunately, his college has a well-developed recognition of prior learning provision and the course he is interested in is regulated under the Qualifications and Credit Framework. The college assigns a mentor to Bastian who introduces the principles behind their RPL procedures and advises Bastian how he can gather evidence to support his claim for credit. As a result, Bastian is able to put together evidence of his prior experience and get credit for several units within his chosen qualification. He is then able to study part-time for other units. Bastian is now en route to gaining a vocational qualification and if he decides to change course he can do this as the units are transferable to another qualification within the Qualifications and Credit Framework. The college will support him in this.

Financing

Life is difficult for Bastian as his only income is unemployment benefit (Jobseeker's Allowance) and he is using his savings to pay for his vocational training course. However, he sees this as a worthwhile investment as it will increase his chances of getting a job and of subsequent progression. Although he has to pay a fee to his college for recognition of prior learning, this is offset by the fact

that the college has a policy of reducing fees for courses in proportion to the number of units achieved through RPL.

Support

Bastian is lucky as his Jobcentre Plus adviser was able to give him good advice on future career options and stressed the need him to get a qualification in a competitive labour market. He was also lucky in that his local college had such well-developed guidance for their students.

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