

Challenging Practices: Streamlining Recognition of Prior Informal Learning in Scottish Higher Education

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1. Introduction

In recognizing the outcomes of informal learning for entry to, or credit within, higher education programs, what is it that we are seeking to determine? The purpose of the RPL process is to enable a learner to demonstrate, through evidence, that he or she has the capacity and competence to progress successfully within a university program. Approaches to support and assessment that enables learners to provide this evidence in a more “streamlined” way, and that act as an enabler of further learning, are therefore required and as such are the focus of this paper. RPL processes in the U.K. have traditionally sought to achieve this demonstration of capacity and competence through an assessment process that requires learners to provide evidence that demonstrates a match to either the traditional formal entry requirements for a university program (for entry) or to the learning outcomes of the module(s) or component elements of the program for which they are seeking credit. This has resulted in support and assessment practices that require learners to “convert” their informal learning into a form and language that can be recognized within the formal curriculum of a university program. These practices can be time consuming and complex as a result and, as such, can effectively act as a barrier to further learning. The development of national qualifications frameworks (NQFs), underpinned by level descriptors, opens up new possibilities for recognizing prior informal learning in a way that facilitates greater parity between the outcomes of informal and formal learning through a higher-level articulation of competence and capacity, which can be developed and demonstrated in a variety of different learning contexts. The need to challenge RPL assessment practices, as part of developing a more flexible curriculum, is one of the key issues that emerged through a recently undertaken research project, commissioned by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Scotland.

The research discussed in this paper forms part of a broader agenda to develop more flexible and efficient learning pathways within higher education (HE) linked to widening participation and workforce development. “Flexibility” is linked to entry, pace, place and mode of learning and progression pathways. “Efficiency” is focused on ensuring that learners are receiving full recognition for previously gained learning, both formal and informal, to avoid duplication of Scottish Credit and Qualification Framework (SCQF) levels and to reduce, where possible, the amount of time needed to complete a qualification. RPL is viewed as a potential means of supporting both increased flexibility and efficiency in the Scottish HE system. The main aim of the research was to investigate the scope and nature of RPL processes and ways in which RPL practice could be streamlined and enhanced in Scotland in terms of RPL initial guidance, support and assessment mechanisms. The research had a primary focus on practice in Scotland, but extended to examples of practice in the rest of the U.K., Europe, Canada and the USA. This investigation was undertaken as part of a wider project for the Scottish University RPL Network to support the development of more streamlined, effective approaches to RPL support and assessment within the Scottish HE sector through the development of guidelines, funded by QAA Scotland (Whittaker & Brown, 2012). As well as being linked to the wider post-16 education reform proposed in the Government’s white paper *Putting Learners at the Centre* (Scottish Government, 2011), this work is also linked to the new Quality Enhancement Theme in Scotland, *Developing and Supporting the Curriculum* (Quality Assurance Agency, 2012b).

The principal outcomes of this research have highlighted the key areas of development required by universities in Scotland if RPL systems are genuinely to become more accessible to both learners and academic staff, and if policy rhetoric is to become reflected in practice in relation to flexible pathways to, and within, higher education. This centers on a greater understanding of the nature and outcomes of informal learning, which in turn is reflected in more responsive assessment processes.

In this paper, an overview of changes within the HE landscape in Scotland is provided to set the context for the consideration of more effective RPL processes. This overview highlights the endeavor to move toward a more flexible, efficient learning journey and the challenges that are faced. This is followed by an indication of recent key RPL developments within Scottish HE led by the Quality Assurance Agency/Universities Scotland HEI RPL Network, and the connection with the Scottish Credit Qualifications Framework (SCQF) RPL Network and European RPL Network. The penultimate section will discuss the approach and outcomes of the recently completed research prior to the concluding discussion and summary, which identifies current and potential areas for subsequent development in order to enhance RPL practices.

2. RPL in Scotland – A Changing Higher Education (HE) Landscape

The consideration of more effective processes of recognizing prior informal learning in HE needs to be located within the broader context of HE developments in Scotland that represents a rapidly changing landscape.

The role of HE in supporting Scotland's economic growth has been highlighted within government policy (Scottish Government, 2007a, 2007b, 2011). More recently, a key focus of the Scottish Government, and the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), is that of "regional coherence" with a continuing, central focus on widening participation. The government's expectations of regional coherence are as follows:

- improved articulation and progression routes for students, including those already in work, which who use the SCQF creatively to respond to the needs of the region;
- increased work-based learning;
- improved and sometimes collaborative employer engagement to improve the relevance and supply of courses; and
- fewer gaps in local and regional higher education provision. (Scottish Funding Council, 2011, p. 6)

The role of universities in delivering this agenda includes:

- working more closely in partnership with other higher education institutions (HEIs) and colleges to meet regional economic needs and provide more seamless progression pathways between college-delivered Higher National (HN) qualifications and advanced levels of university degrees (articulation);²
- developing more flexible provision to meet workforce development needs; and
- widening participation by increasing recruitment and retention of non-traditional learners (Scottish Funding Council, 2011).

A set of funding drivers supports Scottish HE, particularly the newer "post-1992" universities, in taking forward this agenda with explicit funding streams for widening access, retention and articulation, regional coherence and workforce development. This funding is now attached to outcomes agreements between universities and the SFC, reflecting the shift of role of the SFC toward that of an "agent of change" within the HE sector. However, these drivers for widening participation are offset to some extent by a series of funding challenges facing universities in terms of reduced resources, a cap on university places coupled with an increased demand for these places. University restructuring within institutions across the sector to reduce resource costs has increased the pressure to "do more with less." Institutions are being required to balance their widening participation objectives with priorities linked to developing alternative, non-SFC income streams through, for example, international and postgraduate student recruitment and knowledge transfer. Keeping widening participation agendas to the forefront of institutional policy and practices has become increasingly challenging in this context. The move to SFC "outcomes agreements" is an endeavor to ensure that post-1992 institutions, in

particular, continue to place priority on meeting the needs of *regional* learners and the *regional* economy (Scottish Funding Council, 2011).

The paper, *Putting Learners at the Centre*, proposed reform of the post-16 education system in Scotland. This, too, was driven by the role of further and higher education in supporting sustainable economic growth and “improving peoples’ life chances” (Scottish Government, 2011). Proposals for legislation included:

- widening access outcomes agreement and financial penalties for institutions if outcomes are not met;
- the use of “contextualized admissions” to increase student intake from low-achieving schools and a derogation of cap on numbers for students from the most deprived areas;
- a review of the number and pattern of colleges and universities within the context of “regional coherence”;
- increased articulation; flexible delivery, part-time study; advanced entry (which includes the use of RPL); and
- changes to college and university governance (Scottish Government, 2011).

Within the context of this drive to more efficient, flexible learner journeys, RPL is becoming an increasingly significant policy area within the HE sector in Scotland. The white paper notes that:

There is some excellent practice in recognizing prior learning. We want to ensure such practice is adopted as a minimum benchmark across the sector, ensuring that entry to courses happens at Scottish Credit and Qualification Framework (SCQF) levels which properly reflect people’s academic and wider experience. (Scottish Government, 2011, p. 20)

The link between RPL and a more flexible, accessible curriculum is advocated by Whittaker (2011) who noted “the profile of RPL has dramatically increased as a result of the SCQF, which has generated renewed enthusiasm and momentum for RPL since 2005” (p. 172). This has extended beyond the formal education sector, to learning and development activities in the workplace, the community and careers guidance in which creative approaches to the use of RPL within the context of the SCQF are being explored and developed (Whittaker, 2011). The link between RPL and other agendas within HE is also becoming increasingly prevalent in terms of more flexible curricula to attract greater postgraduate recruitment, income-generating Continued Professional Development (CPD) programs developed in partnership with employers, and the development and articulation of employability skills and graduate attributes through a reflective process.

National policy drivers relating to RPL, as well as the growing focus on RPL in the European HE area driven by the Bologna Process¹ and the development of national qualifications frameworks, have also generated an interest in reviewing and refreshing RPL practice within the Scottish HE sector. As part of this, “it remains necessary to challenge assumptions of what RPL is, or could be, in order to facilitate the type of innovative curriculum development which embraces and integrates prior informal learning” (Whittaker, 2011, p. 194). QAA Scotland established the Scottish RPL HEI Network in 2008 to support the university sector in this process. Network members are drawn from across the Scottish HEI sector and largely include members of staff who work in RPL-related fields such as senior academic managers, program and course leaders, student support staff and registry and quality assurance staff. The network also has members from “NHS Education for Scotland and the Scottish Social Services Council” (Quality Assurance Agency, 2012a).

The network enhances knowledge transfer and the sharing of practice in the area of RPL, and has been further enhanced by the development of a European RPL Network in 2010 by the Bologna Follow Up Group largely in response to the Leuven Communique (Bologna, 2009). The scope and interest in a European Network was discussed and agreed at a QAA Scotland, Scottish Government – hosted event in Brussels in 2010 (Quality Assurance Agency, 2010). The role of this network is to:

- help promote and inform the effective use and practice of RPL across participating countries;
- provide a means for member countries to share and learn from policies and practice across Europe in relation to RPL development; and
- build links between European countries at various stages in RPL development. (Bologna, 2012, p. 1)

European network members have provided a number of RPL case studies and in addition, a European RPL discussion group also has been established to support collaboration (Quality Assurance Agency, 2012a).

Since 2010, the Scottish RPL HEI Network has established an annual program of work. This has included the development of guidelines to support the streamlining and enhancement of RPL processes within Scottish HEIs. Other key areas of work include researching the effectiveness of RPL from the learner perspective, raising the visibility of the network and collaborative sector-wide activities as part of the new quality enhancement theme in Scotland (Quality Assurance Agency, 2012b). This will include much closer alignment with work-based learning developments supported through greater partnership working between the RPL Network and QAA's Work-based Learning Forum. Perennial barriers to RPL, such as resource-intensive and often cumbersome processes that act as barriers to many learners seeking to return to education, are at the core of this RPL development work. The RPL Network, however, has been keen to celebrate and evidence success, too, as part of building confidence and capacity in the university sector in RPL processes. Addressing a key evidence gap in terms of the impact of RPL on the learner, as part of both understanding and enhancing the process has also been a key priority.

The first stage of this work was to develop a greater understanding of current RPL practices within Scotland and further afield, and to identify the key areas of development required to enable more streamlined, accessible processes within universities. The next section will discuss the research project undertaken on behalf of QAA Scotland to achieve this goal.

3. The Quality Assurance Agency Scotland Research Project

The Scottish Credit Qualifications Framework Partnership has a cross-sectorial role in supporting RPL developments, and established an RPL Network in 2009. National guidelines and resources for RPL have been developed through this partnership and network (Scottish Credit Qualifications Framework, 2009; 2012). The Scottish HEI RPL Network identified a need to supplement these generic resources through guidelines that would support universities in reviewing, enhancing, and developing their RPL policies and practice to develop more streamlined, enhanced processes of RPL support and assessment. In order to ensure that the development of such guidelines was evidence-based, drawing upon effective practice in Scotland and internationally, and addressing the key issues identified by the sector, QAA Scotland commissioned a scoping and research project in 2011. This research has led to the identification of "institutional enablers" of RPL and has reinforced the need to challenge current assessment practices, in particular. The overview of the research below is drawn from the findings and subsequent reporting of the project.

Overview of research

Whittaker, Brown, Benske and Hawthorne (2011) undertook research as part of a two stage QAA project aiming to "streamline RPL support and assessment" within the HE sector. The first part of the research looked specifically at the mechanisms used by staff (both nationally and internationally) in supporting and assessing learners through the RPL process. Upon completion of the research, a set of "institutional enablers for RPL" and a typology was developed in the form of a report to the QAA, in addition to a separate scoping study resource being made available. This research and outputs have informed the recently completed Guidelines on Streamlining and Enhancing RPL Support and Assessment, which formed the second part of the QAA project (Whittaker & Brown, 2012). The following paragraphs present some of the findings from this research.

Methodology

In order to develop an overview of the RPL support and assessment mechanisms both nationally and internationally, a mixed method approach using both qualitative and quantitative methods was adopted. This included the use of a scoping study; Web-based survey and in depth telephone interviews (Whittaker et al., 2011), enabling the provision of both the RPL situation as it was and offered the opportunity to identify specific characteristics associated with RPL assessment. It also enabled a more detailed exploration of some of these

characteristics (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). As Leedy and Ormrod emphasized, “we must dig deep to get a complete understanding of the phenomenon we are studying” (p. 135).

Employing a clearly defined framework for data gathering and analysis influenced each stage of the research. This framework incorporated; initial guidance, support systems and processes, assessment systems and processes and monitoring, evaluation and quality assurance (Whittaker et al., 2011). Analysis was undertaken in order to categorize key trends/features and to facilitate the production of a manageable and meaningful sets of data for reporting (Boeije, 2010; Neuman, 2004).

Research commenced with a scoping study that provided an overview of examples of RPL processes and practice at national and international levels, in particular, it addressed ways in which institutions manage each phase of the RPL process. This first stage enabled the collection of 56 examples of practice, of which 40 were from HEIs. Thereafter, the second stage, a Web-based survey, was issued, following a pilot study and subsequent iterations to 184 participants (Whittaker et al., 2011). Survey participants were identified through the Scottish HEI RPL Network, the European RPL Network and from the previously noted scoping exercise.

Results from the survey provided a more comprehensive overview of RPL systems and processes, and underlying issues/challenges at a national and international level. A specific focus of the survey was on existing learner support and assessment mechanisms, and in particular, at mechanisms put in place, or being considered, to enhance these. There was an overall response rate of 33 percent, of which 36 percent were from Scotland, 22 percent other U.K. HEIs; 42 percent other international HEIs and organizations (Whittaker et al., 2011).

The third and final stage of the research involved six in depth (semi structured) interviews that enabled a more detailed collation of information pertaining to specific outcomes of the earlier two stages. The countries that participated in this phase of the research were Scotland, England, Canada and the U.S. The interviews included the exploration of the use of technology in the RPL process and the use of learner-defined outcomes/National Qualifications Framework level descriptors, in addition to monitoring and evaluation procedures for RPL (Whittaker et al., 2011).

Research findings

A number of key issues and features were identified upon completion of the three stages of the research. In particular, several significant strands of development flowed from the research findings that have the potential, if applied, to streamline and enhance RPL practice in HE. A number of these findings and subsequent recommendations are discussed in more detail hereafter.

Enhancing CPD for staff

Survey responses indicated that support and CPD of staff are key features of enhanced institutional processes. As Whittaker et al. (2011) emphasized, the “development of assessment mechanisms appropriate to informal learning and the workplace and the design of curriculum that facilitates flexible entry and delivery is linked to the need for greater staff awareness, understanding and professional development” (p. 28). This concurs with Osman (2004) who has previously highlighted that “RPL in higher education has shown that it presents formidable challenges for staff” (p. 56). Osman advised the need for a “strategy for staff development, which in turn should be part of the overall teaching and learning plan of the institution” (p. 56).

The research proposes a number of ways in which the RPL support and assessment processes could potentially be streamlined and/or enhanced, through building such capacity and confidence building in and among staff at an institutional level. This includes developing and enhancing the information on RPL that HEIs provide staff in order to increase staff awareness and understanding of RPL. More guidance and CPD opportunities, including awareness raising and recognition of RPL in the form of workshops, seminars, virtual communities of

practice, cross-institutional peer support networks and reflective/RPL practitioner programs as part of mainstream CPD systems, are recommended (Whittaker et al., 2011).

One particular survey respondent noted:

RPL works best when staff are well informed and supportive of the purpose of the process. We try to regard RPL as 'normal' practice and not something set aside for a central service to deal with.

In addition to improving CPD for staff in terms of RPL, these suggestions also have the potential to help ensure increased visibility of RPL across institutions and in staff workloads (Whittaker et al., 2011).

Enhanced use of technology

As well as enhancing knowledge and understanding of staff in relation to informal learning, the greater use of technology and e-resources in RPL support and assessment processes were highlighted in the surveys as key areas for further development in Scotland. This is also an area that requires staff to be fully trained and supported. Stage three of the research, the telephone interviews, enabled a deeper exploration of this area.

The research team concluded from the findings that the application of technology to RPL should be considered as part of wider developments to enhance blended learning approaches within the learning and teaching experience in HE. The use of e-portfolios, e-learning tools and online forums are a few of the mechanisms that have already been adopted in some HEIs (Whittaker et al., 2011), and as such, were viewed by numerous survey respondents as “a means of supporting the integration of RPL into the mainstream curriculum as part of institutional blended learning strategies” (p. 29).

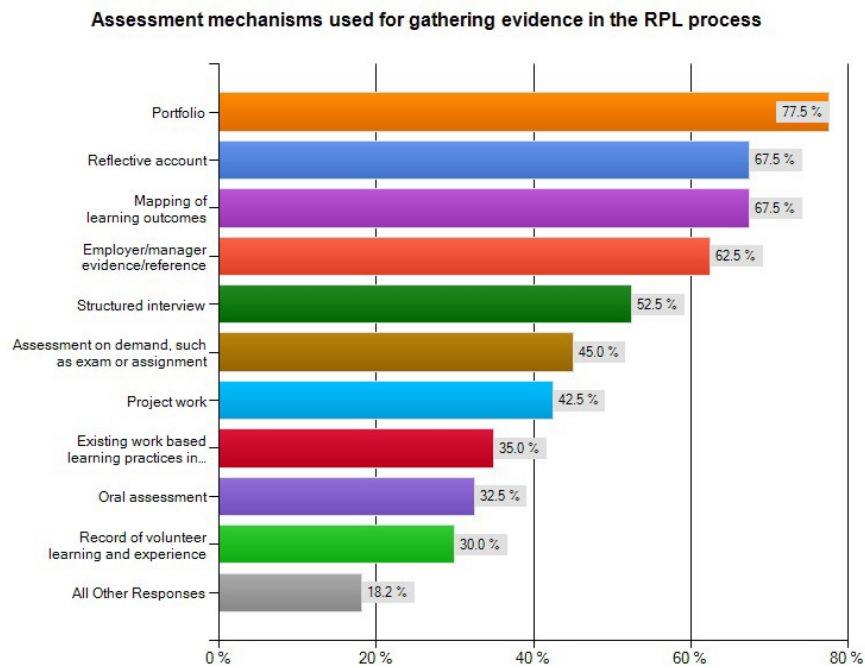
Such technological advances hold with research undertaken by Cameron (2011) on the use of electronic technologies in/for RPL in which she highlights a number of mechanisms worthy of further investigation and/or consideration. This includes e-portfolios as investigated by both Perry and Boyle, and the use of “online voice technologies” in order to enhance the “transfer of knowledge through oral processes” explored by Eagles, Woodward and Pope (as cited in Cameron, 2011, p. 29).

The value of the use of e-portfolios in supporting a learning process, as well as an assessment process, was highlighted through the interviews. The aptitude required by academic staff to engage in the particular pedagogical use and application of new learning technologies was emphasized as another professional development challenge. In addition the need for human, as well as virtual, interaction and the key role of the advisor or mentor as facilitator, interpreter and advocate was emphasized. As one participant noted ‘the advisor or mentor plays a crucial role as “interpreter” of academic language and requirements [in whatever form] and in supporting the learners’ transition from informal and non-formal learning contexts’ (Whittaker et al., 2011, p. 30).

Enhancing assessment practices

As previously indicated, the need to challenge RPL assessment practices is one of the key issues that emerged from this research project, particularly during the first two phases of the research. The findings from stages one and two established that a wide variety of assessment mechanisms were used in gathering evidence for RPL. These included employer references, reflective accounts, oral assessment and project work, as highlighted in Figure 1, below. In general, however, the portfolio tended to be the principal method of assessment selected (Whittaker et al., 2011) and is consistent with Pokorny's (2006) assertion that this is still the predominant RPL assessment mechanism used in the U.K. (Pokorny, 2006; 2012).

Figure 1: Assessment mechanisms used for gathering evidence in the RPL process



Source: Whittaker et al., 2011, p. 18

Shalem and Steinberg (2006) argued that portfolios are used in particular for their ability to enhance the learners' abilities to "show a rich picture of their development over time and engage reflexively with what they have learnt" (p. 97). However, they also advocate that for the portfolio mechanism to achieve its full potential (in terms of helping to enhance the confidence and knowledge of the learner) it requires to be fully supported by an academic/support advisor, who will work with the learner to support the development of their portfolios. This once again endorses the research findings in terms of the need for enhanced processes of CPD for staff, as well as the key role of the advisor or mentor. Similarly, Whittaker, Whittaker and Cleary (2006) argued that the role of others is significant in the RPL process, and in particular during the learners' reflective and assessment phases in terms of developing learner identity and confidence.

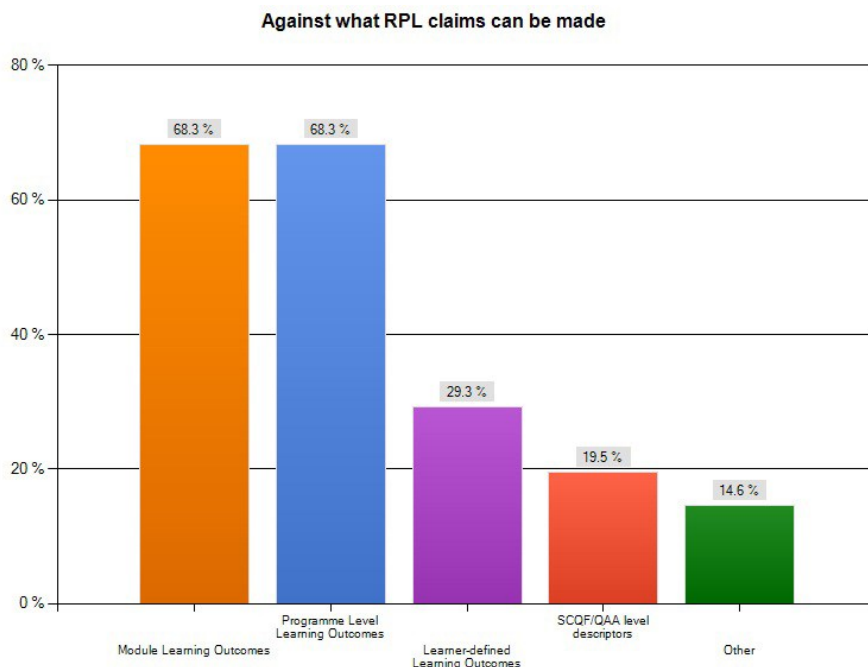
Assessment plays a key role in the RPL process and it is acknowledged that this is a complex area. A number of components can influence the experience of the assessment of RPL and its outcomes – not only the tools used. For example, clarification about the purpose and expectations of the assessment mechanism, the involvement of the learners in selecting the appropriate assessment mechanism, assuring appropriate forms of evidence, the tools used in the assessment process and understandings of how the overall decisions are/were made are all vital (South African Qualification Authority, 2004).

Of particular significance to the research was the identification, through the survey, that there is a need to develop more effective, simplified assessment mechanisms, and that this is related to the need to enhance understanding and knowledge of the nature and processes of informal learning in order to utilize more suitable forms of assessment (Whittaker et al., 2011). In addition, the research findings suggest that whatever form of assessment is adopted, it must be tailored to the individual and be "appropriate and fit for purpose" (p. 19). Similarly, several survey participants recommended a move away from a reliance on written assessment (electronic or otherwise), with the suggestion that oral assessments such as vivas "are better."³ Oral assessment can, and could, enable an in-depth exploration of the learning gained through experience and the transferrable competencies and capacities developed in a potentially more facilitative and less resource-intensive way (Whittaker et al., 2011).

As well as the assessment vehicle, further consideration needs to be given to the *framework* within which RPL

claims are made. This is a key component of challenging assessment practices. The survey indicated that the majority of RPL claims are made against module and program-level learning outcomes, as shown in Figure 2, below.

Figure 2: Against what can RPL claims be made



Source: Whittaker et al., 2011, p. 20

Learning outcomes are undoubtedly key enablers of RPL. However, module learning outcomes, predicated on a formal learning process, can be a barrier rather than an enabler of RPL if an exact comparison with the outcomes of informal learning is demanded (Whittaker et al., 2011). Learning through experience tends to be unstructured, highly contextualized and non-sequential. Using the module-level learning outcomes of formal programs as the measure against which such learning is assessed can be problematic. It can also result in an assessment process that place greater demands on RPL claimants than the students undertaking the program through the formal route. Work underway in the Scottish sector indicates that SCQF level descriptors could have the potential to be used to challenge assessment practices that demand comparisons between the outcomes of informal learning and those of formal programs, as opposed to comparisons between the capacities that the curriculum seeks to achieve and those demonstrated through personal and professional experiences (Whittaker, 2011; Whittaker et al., 2011; Whittaker & Brown, 2012). The increasing use of mapping learner-defined statements of learning or workplace-derived skills and knowledge against the SCQF level descriptors to demonstrate the transferrable competencies and capacities required for successful progression within a program was identified during the research process. This can include the use of the SCQF level descriptors to support RPL applicants in the writing of learning statements, which, in turn, can relate broadly to program (as opposed to module) level outcomes (University of West of Scotland as cited in Whittaker et al., 2011; Whittaker & Brown, 2012) and RPL mapping tools that contextualize these “characteristics” in professional areas at the appropriate SCQF level to enable learners without an honors degree to demonstrate comparability with the knowledge, skills and understanding at this level that is required for entry into master’s-level study (Glasgow Caledonian University as cited in Whittaker et al., 2011; Whittaker & Brown, 2012). As suggested below, this approach is of potential relevance to RPL developments within Europe and beyond, within the context of developing a more flexible curriculum that can more successfully embrace and recognize learning achieved outside formal contexts.

A key focus of the transformation of HE throughout Europe as part of the Bologna Process, the European Qualifications Framework and the development of NQFs underpinned by the notion of learning outcomes, is to develop mechanisms for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. NQFs defined by level descriptors based on “competence” to which all national qualifications relate are designed to support different progression pathways across sector and, indeed, national boundaries through the potential transferability of credit from one type of qualification to another, as well as the recognition of “competence” regardless of when and where achieved (Bohlinger, 2012). The use of level descriptors, rather than the component elements of formal programs, may be a more learner-centered way of recognizing learning gained outside the formal learning environment.

In summary, in considering both the assessment mechanisms, and the framework within which the assessment is carried out, the following strategies were proposed through the research. These proposed strategies can provide more streamlined approaches to RPL assessment, thus increasing the accessibility of the process for both learners and academic staff: mapping against program-level outcomes or level descriptors for large amounts of credit rather than against program modules; greater use of level descriptors to enable the articulation of prior informal learning in learning outcomes that are more relevant to this type of learning than the use of learning outcomes in programs/modules; greater use of e-portfolios to enable a more structured approach to building evidence; more use of structured interviewing as a single-evidence source; greater use of videoconferencing; and, workplace-derived artifacts and existing workplace learning practices in evaluation and assessment particularly as part of WBL programs (Whittaker et al., 2011, p. 30). As the original research report acknowledged, in addition to a greater parity of esteem between different learning types:

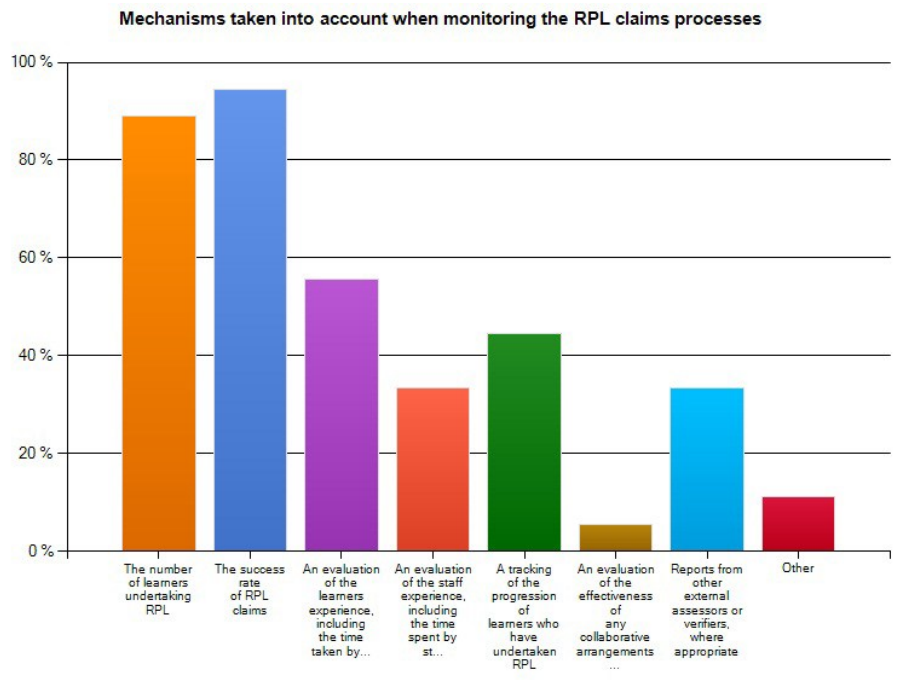
The increasing use of mapping learner-defined statements of learning or workplace-derived competences against SCQF level descriptors to demonstrate the capacities and the level and transferability of knowledge, skills and understanding required for successful progression within a programme indicates this growing understanding of the nature of informal learning. (Whittaker et al., 2011, p. 30)

In terms of challenging assessment practices, as voiced by one survey respondent, that any RPL assessment mechanism is essential to gain “the trust and confidence of the academic community involved” (Whittaker et al., 2011, p. 19).

Enhanced monitoring, evaluation and tracking

While assessment mechanisms and frameworks are vital, the survey results in the research also emphasized the importance of improving the overall quality assurance mechanisms of RPL, including monitoring and evaluation. Many of the institutions that participated in the survey noted that their RPL quality assurance mechanisms did not specifically address the monitoring and evaluation of RPL processes and outcomes. Only 43 percent of survey respondents noted their institution had monitoring processes in place for the use and impact of RPL. Quality assurance processes for RPL generally extended only to assessment and mirrored the normal institutional program assessment quality assurance processes. This corresponds with the two Scottish interviewees who indicated that their monitoring and evaluation processes of RPL mirrored those of existing academic practice. In addition, as Figure 3 suggests, just 44 percent of survey participants with a monitoring mechanism in place noted that their institution tracked the progression of RPL learners, while 56 percent of these respondents monitored the actual learner experience of this group (Whittaker et al., 2011). Feedback forms for both staff and students involved in RPL were the most cited mechanism for evaluation of the RPL process within institutions.

Figure 3: Mechanisms taken into account when monitoring the RPL claims processes



Source: Whittaker et al., 2011, p. 21

Survey respondents themselves noted that quality assurance procedures could be improved with comments such as “we don't really do this very well” and “needs to be sharpened up to a more robust system,” highlighting the need for an improved system.

While many of the institutions identified that they are currently endeavoring to improve their quality assurance and evaluation procedures for RPL, we propose that there is a **need** for institutions to *rigorously* develop their institutional monitoring and evaluations systems for RPL. There are several ways in which this could be undertaken. Suggestions in the research included the development of an institutional database for RPL, thus enabling higher levels of coordination of the RPL process and a centralized evaluation process for staff and learners, as well as a central institutional evaluation/monitoring strategy of RPL. The research also posits that there is the potential for enhanced technology such as, “[Virtual Learning Environments] VLEs and e-portfolios to support the tracking of RPL claimants and monitoring of their progress throughout their claim” (Whittaker et al., 2011, p. 31). More competent data gathering and analysis would help to ensure effective monitoring, tracking and evaluation of RPL and thus enhance RPL practice within institutions (Whittaker et al., 2011).

The completion of this research and subsequent reporting has enabled the development of an evidence base for RPL that can be drawn upon by HEIs. However, these findings, recommendations and consequent guidelines could have wider applications in different national contexts. This work has fed into broader RPL development work in Scotland and includes the development of the QAA RPL Streamlining Guidelines, further research in the area of the learner experiences of RPL, the planned development of a National RPL Framework for HE, and is informing the latest Quality Enhancement Theme, *Developing and Supporting the Curriculum* (Quality Assurance Agency, 2012b).

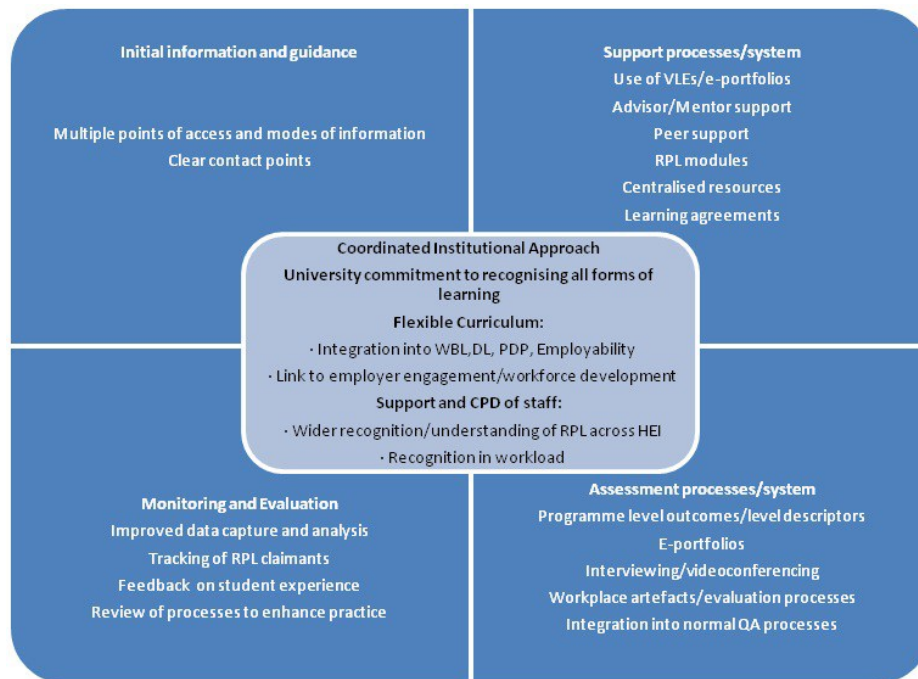
4. Subsequent Developments

This section provides an overview of the ways in which the research (both national and international) has informed and currently continues to inform broader development in RPL in the Scottish HE sector.

Development of QAA Streamlining RPL Guidelines

The research has greatly influenced the recently completed national guidelines that QAA Scotland commissioned Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU) to develop. The aim of the guidelines was to “support the university sector in Scotland to develop and implement more streamlined, enhanced approaches” (Whittaker & Brown, 2012, p. 4) to RPL support and assessment. The guidelines are structured in relation to the typology developed through the research project and also incorporate examples of practice that illustrate the key issues outlined (Whittaker & Brown, 2012). The typology is outlined in Figure 4, below, with its main purpose being to introduce the main elements of the RPL Guidelines that would enhance streamlining RPL support and assessment within Scottish HEIs.

Figure 4: Typology



Source: Whittaker et al., 2011; Whittaker & Brown, 2012

Student Experience Research

The Streamlining RPL research project did not directly explore learners' perspectives of support and assessment (Whittaker et al., 2011) and as a result identified potential areas for further research. The QAA, in conjunction with Glasgow Caledonian University and in collaboration with other Scottish HEIs, have recently undertaken research into the learner experience of RPL within Scottish HEIs. The project entitled “Exploring the Learner Experience of the Recognition of Prior informal Learning Process” ran from May - July 2012. This project has recently been completed and the final project report will be made available by QAA Scotland in the near future (Harris, Brown & Proudfoot, 2012). These outcomes are anticipated to add value to the research base of RPL in Scotland and also help to inform the future development of the National RPL Framework, discussed below.

Interim key findings from the report included the inconsistencies in assessment practices and a lack of coherence between amounts of credit claimed and levels of evidence that are required in RPL. The research also highlights the importance of the role of the advisor in the RPL process, in supporting and guiding learners through the RPL claim process. This is also further emphasized in the suggestion that professional development and training of RPL advisors is an area, suggested by the learners, that requires improvement (Harris et al., 2012). There is correlation between the perceptions of academic staff, explored in the first research project, and those of learners, investigated in the second project, that point to the need to untangle the complexities and

variances between and within institutions in terms of RPL assessment practices. The sheer resilience required of many learners, as suggested by this small-scale research study, in persisting in their RPL claim, reinforces the need for more simplified, transparent and consistent practice across the sector.

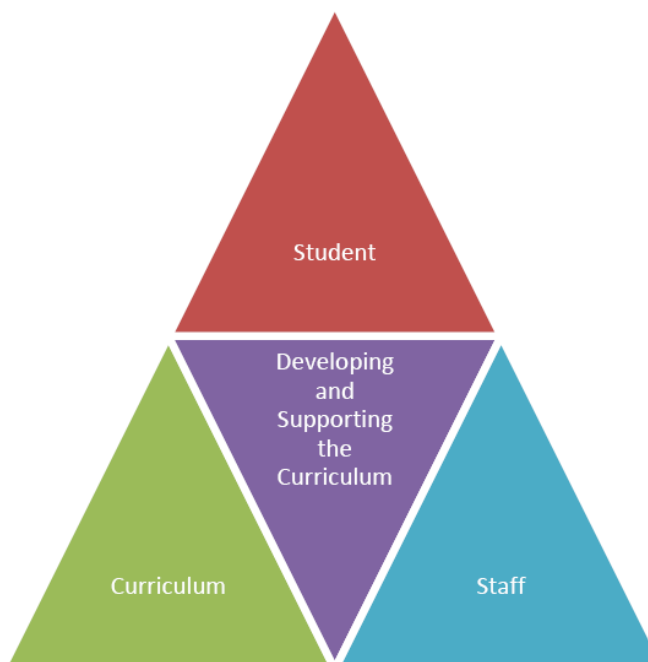
Development of a National Framework

The inconsistency of policies and practices between HEIs and the continuing variance in awareness and understanding of RPL among students and staff have led to the next stage of development work for QAA Scotland and the Scottish HEI RPL Network: the development of a National RPL Framework for Higher Education. This initiative has been planned by QAA Scotland in partnership with Universities Scotland and the Scottish Government for 2012/2013. The Framework will endeavor to address the barriers to RPL that make it difficult for the students, professional bodies, employers and university staff to engage with RPL including the resource-intensive nature of the process, or the perception that is resource intensive. The Framework will be developmental rather than prescriptive and will build on the typology developed through the Streamlining RPL Guidelines project, noted above. The HE sector, building on existing resources and expertise through the Scottish RPL HEI Network, will develop the Framework. While it will be a national framework, it will be flexible enough to reflect different institutional contexts (Whittaker & Gibson, 2012).

New Quality Enhancement Themes

The work of the Scottish RPL HEI Network and the development of the National Framework will directly link to the new Quality Enhancement Theme in Scotland, *Developing and Supporting the Curriculum*, shown in Figure 5 below (Quality Assurance Agency, 2012b). Quality Enhancement Themes form part of the Quality Enhancement Framework for HE in Scotland and focus on priority areas for collaborative development in Scotland, as defined by the HE sector. The themes are coordinated by QAA Scotland.

Figure 5: Developing and Supporting the Curriculum Quality Enhancement Theme



Source: Quality Assurance Agency, 2012b

“Developing and Supporting the Curriculum” will provide vehicle for universities to consider:

- How is the curriculum, in its broadest sense, shaped and delivered?
- Who is it for – how is the student body changing?
- What support is required for staff? (Quality Assurance Agency, 2012b, p. 1)

A specific strand of this work will be the development of flexible curricula that will address both RPL and work-based learning. Designing a more flexible curriculum, in terms of entry, mode, pace, place, progression and pathways is essential to the development of more streamlined RPL recognition/assessment processes.

5. Conclusion

RPL development in Scottish HE is increasingly prominent in a policy context, as well as in institutional strategies, perhaps driven more by its perceived contribution to the role of universities in supporting workforce development and economic growth, than its original agenda to enable the participation of nontraditional learners in lifelong learning. Both agendas are, of course, compatible. Assessment practices, however, do not necessarily support this drive for a more flexible, efficient learner journey. Nevertheless, there are examples throughout universities in Scotland, and globally, of more streamlined approaches that reflect both a growing confidence in assessing learning that is achieved outside the formal curriculum and a greater understanding of the nature this learning. National qualifications framework developments, such as the SCQF, provide opportunities to take a step back and to challenge the approaches to assessment that have dominated RPL practice since the late 1980s. There are growing examples of alternative approaches to assessment, though a continuing lack of consistency within and between institutions.

There are three key areas recommended for further development in the Scottish Sector in order to achieve more accessible processes for both students and staff, which would enable RPL to be a genuine gateway to further learning and development. First, increase exploitation of technology in RPL support and assessment processes. Second, develop a greater awareness and pedagogical understanding of informal learning through the professional development of academic staff. Third, enhance processes of monitoring and evaluation RPL processes and outcomes, including the learners' experience of RPL, to continually refine and improve practice (Whittaker et al., 2011).

The rigor of RPL processes in ensuring the integrity of the outcome from the perspective of both learner and faculty is essential. However, if the concept of "parity of esteem" between different forms of learning is to be advocated, learners seeking credit within programs through informal learning should not be subjected to more demanding levels of assessment than those seeking credit through the formal route. While the learning of students on programs at university is structured in terms of modules, the learning of individuals in the workplace, for example, is not. Recognition mechanisms that can accommodate this unstructured learning experience and can extract the transferrable knowledge, skills and understanding developed through highly contextualized experience – which is *comparable* to that achieved through formal learning – need to look beyond module-based approaches. Higher-level definitions of "competence" through program-level outcomes or level descriptors contextualized in different subject or professional areas may offer a viable solution. Such approaches can potentially be shared across different sector areas enabling learners, colleges, universities and employers to see the broad connections between different learning pathways. The development of RPL within HE in Scotland will continue to build on new and emerging practice centered on more streamlined, enhanced processes. However, in order to move the RPL agenda forward, we need to challenge the assumptions of how prior informal learning can be recognized and to be prepared to consider alternative assessment frameworks that enable learners to demonstrate they have the capacity and competence to progress successfully within higher education.

Notes

¹ The Bologna Process was launched in 1999 to create a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010 and has involved 46 countries. The aim of the Bologna Process was to improve transparency and mobility between different higher education systems. This focuses on facilitating recognition of degrees and academic qualifications, as well as the recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning, and has resulted in significant education reform across many countries in Europe. The development of National Qualifications Frameworks based on learning outcomes is a key component of the Bologna Process, linked to the development of an overarching European Qualifications Framework which acts

as a “translation device to make qualifications more readable and understandable across different countries and systems in Europe” (European Commission Education and Culture, 2008).

Higher National (HN) qualifications are vocational higher education qualifications that are achieved at college. In terms of SCQF levels and credit, Higher National Certificates (HNCs) equate to the first year of a university degree program, and Higher National Diplomas (HNDs) to the second year of a degree program.

A “viva” is a viva voce examination, or oral examination, usually associated with the defense of a thesis or dissertation for postgraduate qualifications.

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