

Working together to make a difference: A collaborative approach to enhancing Recognition of Prior Learning Policy and Practice in Scottish Higher Education

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The QAA Scotland, Universities Scotland RPL HEI Network was established in 2008. The network consists of members from across the Scottish HEI Sector, NHS Education for Scotland, QAA Scotland, Universities Scotland, the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Partnership and the Scottish Social Services Council. Key national and international policy drivers for RPL relate to widening participation, lifelong learning and workforce development. RPL development in Scotland supports post-16 reform in Scotland; the Quality Enhancement Themes; and the work of the SCQF Partnership in developing greater awareness and use of RPL across all sectors. This work informs, and is informed by, European RPL developments through the European RPL Network and post-Bologna developments (QAA, 2012 and Whittaker, 2011). The outputs of this activity support HEIs in the implementation of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, Chapter B6: Assessment of Students and the Recognition of Prior Learning and Scotland's response to the agreement by the EU Council of Ministers in December 2012 to adopt the recommendation that all member states should have comprehensive national RPL systems in place by 2018 (Whittaker, Brown and Gibson, 2013).

The principal objective of the Network was to work collaboratively, adopting a community of practice approach to enhance and implement higher education policy and practice in the field of RPL.

Adopting Wenger's community of practice approach (Wenger and Snyder, 2000) in which groups of people have the potential to actively create and develop strategy, the Scottish HEI RPL network established the need to work collaboratively to build an evidence base for RPL. A two-staged research approach has been undertaken in the period 2010 to present.

1. Whittaker, Brown, Benske and Hawthorne (2011) undertook a mixed method research project exploring the national and international practice in relation to RPL. Adopting both qualitative and quantitative methodology the research team undertook a scoping study, web-based survey and in depth telephone interviews (Whittaker et al, 2011). After completion of the three phased approach a set of key issues were acknowledged in order to enhance and streamline RPL processes. The research findings led to the development of a typology, set of institutional enablers and RPL Streamlining Guidelines (Whittaker and Brown, 2012a and b). However it was acknowledged, in the research findings, that the learners' perspectives of support and assessment were absent.
2. The second research phase focussed on the learner experience of RPL to identify ways in which the RPL process might be enhanced. Working collaboratively, members of the QAA RPL Network undertook research into the learner experience of RPL within Scottish HEIs. The project 'Exploring the Learner Experience of the Recognition of Prior informal Learning Process' ran from May - July 2012 (Harris, Brown and Proudfoot, 2012). This small scale exploratory study included a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews (face to face and/or telephone). The findings while acknowledging the potential of RPL, suggested that assessment processes were not consistent within and across HEIs and practices themselves could present real barriers to learners. In particular the research highlighted the importance of the RPL advisor role to the learner in relation to guidance and assessment processes, confirming the need for professional development for staff. (Harris, Brown and Proudfoot, 2012).

A collaborative consultation process ensured all research activity undertaken was considered by the RPL network. Research findings led to a series of developmental activities resulting in the RPL Streamlining Guidelines for QAA Scotland. (Whittaker and Brown, 2012b). Through this work the

group aimed to push the RPL agenda forward in Scotland and to address some of the residual barriers which have prevented its use as a widespread, mainstreamed practice in universities (Whittaker and Brown, 2014).

In the period 2013-14 these activities have culminated in the development of an RPL Framework for Scottish Higher Education. This is of strategic importance in supporting a key dimension of HE policy in Scotland - the development of more flexible, efficient learner journeys. This web-based resource aims to:

- ◆ Expand and embed RPL in the sector within the context of 'flexible learning pathways'
- ◆ Address the barriers to the more widespread use of RPL through the sharing of effective practice and signposting to resources and guidance
- ◆ Raise awareness, and increase transparency, of RPL processes for staff, students and professional, regulatory and statutory bodies
- ◆ Reduce inconsistencies in RPL processes between and within HEIs
- ◆ Enable the sharing and developing of practice in a sustainable manner
- ◆ Enhance and streamline support and assessment processes to ensure that these act as enablers rather than barriers to further learning
- ◆ Support the implementation of the SCQF core RPL principles in the University sector (Whittaker and Brown, 2013 and 2014).

One of the key achievements in the National Framework development is the agreement of a set of Sector Level Principles which define a minimum, benchmark standard for all Scottish HEIs. These were endorsed by Universities Scotland Learning and Teaching Committee in December 2013.

The Framework was launched by QAA Scotland in April 2014 at the Developing Flexible Learner Journeys in Higher Education event, as part of the Quality Enhancement Theme, Developing and Supporting the Curriculum. In addition to launching the National Framework for RPL as a resource, workshop participants explored ways in which RPL might be enhanced, through challenging current policy and practice. Workshop outcomes included themed areas for enhancement: professional development, strategic implementation, pedagogical and practitioner approaches, promotion of RPL and student engagement and awareness. These will underpin the Network's planned programme of work in 2014-15.

This paper has demonstrated the effectiveness of a collaborative sector approach to addressing a key policy challenge which has moved from discussion to action through a set of research and development activities. This work has been undertaken collaboratively by a group 'informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise' (Wenger and Snyder, 2000 p139). RPL work, and the evidence base, continues to grow. 2014/15 Network activities will include enhancing university data recording mechanisms for RPL, mapping the progress of implementation of the RPL sector level principles, CPD workshops on implementing the Framework and continuing to share and grow RPL resources.

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