

Recognition of Prior Learning

Framework for Scotland



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Foreword

The development of the RPL National Framework for Scottish Higher Education in 2014 was heralded as being at the forefront of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) development within Europe. This acknowledgment reflected the significant work that had been undertaken across the Scottish higher education (HE) sector to develop RPL as a means of supporting widening participation and workforce development.

Eight years on, a review of the framework is timely in light of changes to the sector. The Scottish Funding Council's (SFC) Review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability identifies the need for 'an integrated, connected tertiary education and skills eco-system for learners and employers and in building long-term relationships with employers and industry'. HE providers will need to further enhance their RPL processes to ensure that they can meet the aims of this tertiary sector and continue to widen access for learners from more diverse backgrounds and communities, and further build on the bridges and pathways for learners between qualifications, different forms of learning and institutions. RPL can also be a powerful means of facilitating stronger links between institutions and employers in terms of flexible curriculum design and delivery, reskilling and upskilling of the workforce and knowledge exchange.

I am delighted to chair the review of the document developed in 2014 as written by the RPL Higher Education Institution Network. This review represents a continued focus on supporting the further growth of RPL across the Scottish sector. The Framework firmly locates RPL within broader developments linked to a more flexible, accessible curriculum, enabling greater participation in HE by learners from a wide range of backgrounds.

We very much hope that this resource will assist the tertiary sector in continuing to drive RPL forward, enhancing policy and practice through critical reflection, development and collaboration. I would like to thank the Expert Review Group for their expertise and insight into this review of the Framework.

Professor Ruth Whittaker

Chair of the QAA Scotland, National RPL Framework Expert Review Group
Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education and Students), University of Brighton

Definition of RPL

Recognition of Prior Learning or RPL is the process for recognising learning that has come from experience and/or previous formal, non-formal and informal learning contexts. This includes knowledge and skills gained outside school, college and university, and outside formal learning situations, such as through life and work experiences.

[Source: Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework](#)



1 Introduction to the RPL Framework for Scotland

1.1 What do we mean by Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)?

RPL is a process that involves a learner reflecting on experiences; identifying learning associated with the experiences and providing evidence of that learning to enable an institution to reach a decision on awarding credit or mapping to the level of the [Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework](#) (SCQF). There are two main forms of recognition:

- RPL for personal/career development or formative recognition
- RPL for credit.

RPL for personal/career development, or formative recognition is a process of recognising learning achieved outside or within formal education or training systems, in the context of further learning and development. This form of RPL may take place as part of a guidance process. This process can be linked to confidence-building, identifying individual learning pathways, a notional mapping of learning within the context of the SCQF, supporting the transition between informal, non-formal and formal learning, and preparation for the process of RPL for credit.

RPL for credit is a process of assessing learning achieved outside or within formal education or training systems which is recognised, if appropriate, for academic purposes. RPL can enable a learner to gain entry to a programme if the outcomes of their prior learning are judged as comparable to the entry requirements of the programme; and to gain credit within a programme if the outcomes of the prior learning are judged as comparable to the relevant outcomes of the programme for which credit is sought.

A learner may also make an RPL claim based on a *combination* of learning gained from informal, non-formal and formal (credit-rated) learning.

Unfortunately, a range of different terms for RPL are still in use within the tertiary sector, including accreditation of (experiential) prior learning (APL/APEL). This can lead to confusion and missed opportunities, including for learners and institutions. This RPL Framework consistently uses the term RPL and all stakeholders are urged to also use RPL in order to enhance awareness, knowledge and opportunities for learners, institutions, employers, employees and professional bodies as well as throughout the Scottish tertiary sector. This Framework is fully aligned with [SCQF definitions and terminology of RPL](#).

This RPL Framework places particular emphasis on the recognition of prior, non-formal and informal learning as this presents greater challenges to education providers, employers and professional bodies than the recognition of prior formal learning, which is also described as credit transfer by education providers.

What do these terms mean?

Formal learning takes place within the context of programmes delivered by learning and training providers.

It is assessed, credit-rated and certificated and leads to recognised qualifications.

Non-formal learning takes place alongside the mainstream systems of education and training. It may be assessed but does not typically lead to formal certification, for example, learning and training activities or programmes undertaken in the workplace, voluntary sector or trade union and through community-based learning.

Informal learning can be defined as experiential learning and takes place through life and work experiences. It is often unintentional learning.

The learner may not recognise at the time of the experience that it contributed to the development of their skills and knowledge. This recognition may only happen retrospectively through the RPL process unless the experiences take place as part of a planned experiential or work-based learning programme (SCQF).

1.2 What are the benefits of RPL?

There are multiple benefits of RPL for learners, institutions, employers and professional bodies, and the Scottish tertiary sector overall.

Benefits of RPL for the Scottish tertiary sector:

- addressing the needs of all types of learners
- supporting economic growth and the workforce development agenda
- supporting social inclusion, lifelong learning and widening participation
- developing flexible, efficient learning pathways supported by the use of the SCQF
- promotion of learning, and personal and professional development as an inherent part of the business activity of employers
- enhanced collaboration within the sector.

Chapters 2-4 of this document list further benefits of RPL for each of the relevant stakeholders.

1.2.1 Barriers to RPL

Despite multiple benefits of RPL, a number of barriers to the more widespread use of RPL persist within the Scottish tertiary sector. To understand these barriers, a number of information gathering exercises were undertaken with stakeholders including surveys, as part of this review of the Framework. While barriers may vary from the perspective and operation of differing stakeholders, the following provide a flavour of those that have been expressed:

- lack of learner and staff awareness of the potential for RPL opportunities
- inconsistent policies and practices between and within institutions which make it difficult for key stakeholders to engage with RPL, particularly learners, staff and professional bodies
- the need for more streamlined approaches to RPL support and assessment
- pockets of good practice developed but not shared
- lack of staff development opportunities to build capacity in RPL practice
- perceptions that informal learning or learning outside traditional contexts (non-formal learning) is worth less than formal learning by some stakeholders.

It is hoped that the updating of the RPL Framework and sharing of a range of RPL resources will help to address these issues.

1.3 The purpose of the RPL Framework for Scotland

The purpose of the RPL Framework for Scotland is to:

- expand and embed RPL in the tertiary education sector within the context of flexible learning pathways
- address the barriers to 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, learners, employers and professional bodies
- reduce inconsistencies in RPL processes between and within institutions
- support tertiary education providers and other organisations to develop RPL practice in a consistent and sustainable manner
- enhance and streamline support and assessment processes to ensure that these act as enablers rather than barriers to further learning
- support upskilling, reskilling and other workforce development through recognition of existing skills and those developed within the workplace.

1.4 Reviewing the RPL Framework

QAA Scotland (QAAS) commissioned a review and updating of the 2014 RPL Framework for Scottish Higher Education with funding from the [Resilient Learning Communities Enhancement Theme](#). Reflecting an increased focus in Scotland on a tertiary education system, the Framework has been renamed as the Recognition of Prior Learning Framework for Scotland, referred to as the Framework throughout this document.

To establish current thinking and practice of RPL, QAAS commissioned a [scan of international practice](#) to review approaches to implementation of RPL internationally. This scan identified a wide range of practice, as well as a variety of terms used to describe RPL.

To advise and draft the review of the Framework, QAAS convened an [Expert Review Group](#) comprising experts from across the tertiary sector, some of whom had been involved in the creation of the Framework in 2014. Professor Ruth Whittaker of the University of Brighton, formerly Glasgow Caledonian University and Chair of the 2014 RPL National Framework group, agreed to chair the Expert Review Group and oversee the review process. Professor Whittaker and QAAS wish to extend their thanks to the Expert Review Group for their advice on the Framework review and for promoting RPL across Scotland. The Group met four times during academic session 2021–22. QAAS commissioned a number of ‘lead writers’ to update individual sections of the Framework.

To support the review of the Framework, Scottish university and college practitioners were surveyed to determine current use of RPL, language/terms to describe RPL, their views of staff and learner understanding of RPL within their institutions, and their views of the Framework and its currency in the sector. The distribution of the survey to colleges was supported by the College Development Network (CDN). Learner views were sought from discussion with student representatives and Student Engagement Officers at the National Education Officers Network (NEON) meeting held in December 2021, facilitated by sparqs (Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland).

QAAS also undertook a survey of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) to determine their use of RPL and their association with or recognition of the term ‘PSRB’. This survey was supported by a scan of PSRB websites to determine the ease of accessibility of RPL. A summary of the findings of this desk-based research is provided in Chapter 4.

Following discussions, the Expert Review Group agreed that the Framework would retain the chapters focused on learners, institutions and professional bodies as key stakeholders, as originally provided in the 2014 edition, with an increased scope for two chapters: RPL for institutions to include non-traditional qualifications such as micro-credentials and the PSRB chapter to be expanded to include apprenticeships and employers. This latter chapter has been retitled ‘Employers and professional bodies’.

The Framework is intended to be relevant and beneficial to a range of stakeholders including colleges and universities (institutions). However, it is also recognised that some stakeholders, such as employers or learners, are likely to refer only to the chapter considered most relevant to them. For this reason, some content is duplicated within multiple chapters such as the definition of RPL and key advice especially relating to the consideration of evidence by individuals seeking RPL and institutional and organisational policies for RPL.

The significant RPL work undertaken by the SCQF Partnership is frequently referenced throughout the Framework, recognising the Partnership works with awarding bodies, professional bodies and other programme owners and is overseen by a board of directors comprising members from QAA, CDN, Universities Scotland and the Scottish Qualifications Authority. In particular, the Framework uses the definition of RPL cited in [SCQF Guide to RPL](#).

1.5 Sector-level principles for RPL

To inform the original RPL National Framework for Scottish Higher Education, a scoping exercise of national and international policy documentation and resources was undertaken. This exercise supported the development of sector-level principles for RPL and associated guidance. The sector-level principles were designed to raise awareness among sector-level organisations, and staff in strategic and policy roles in higher education institutions (HEIs), of the value of RPL as a method of widening participation, developing more flexible, learner-centred curricula and supporting meaningful engagement with employers and the community. They provided a threshold standard for RPL in Scottish HEIs and were supported by QAA Scotland, Universities Scotland and Scottish HEIs.

In reviewing the Framework in 2022 (see Section 1.4 above), it is acknowledged that the principles remain valid, appropriate and fit-for-purpose. However, with the move towards a tertiary sector and the increased emphasis within this Framework on employers and professional bodies, the first two principles have had minor adaptations to extend their applicability to all stakeholders across the sector. The revised sector-level principles for RPL are provided in Figure 1.

- 1 Embed RPL within the context of lifelong learning, widening participation and flexible curriculum and workforce development strategies
- 2 Develop and implement an RPL policy, including learners or employees in its development
- 3 Develop and implement an RPL process
- 4 Develop and implement a communication and promotion strategy for RPL

Figure 1: Sector-level principles for RPL

Specific guidance for learners, institutions, employers and professional bodies in implementing the RPL principles is provided in the following chapters with detailed guidance for institutions provided in Chapter 3.

2 RPL for learners

2.1 Introduction

It is recognised that well-considered RPL processes help learners (see Morag's Story - [My Learning Journey](#)). It is also recognised that learners entering and transitioning through colleges and universities (institutions) using RPL processes may have unique learning experiences as do employees navigating career journeys.

This chapter is written with a focus on the learner experience of RPL - it may be given to learners as guidance or used to inform RPL institutional policies and processes with an understanding of learner needs and experiences.

It is recognised that learning can take place in many contexts, formats and settings, including formal education settings - via structured programmes and qualifications, and non-formal learning environments, as well as through activities during work, leisure or volunteering opportunities outwith a classroom environment.

Benefits of RPL for learners:

- increased self-confidence and motivation for learning, especially for learners transitioning from the workplace where RPL of non-formal and informal learning can introduce learners to academic skills and higher education
- identification and recognition of existing skills and knowledge and areas for further development
- contribution to a learning or training pathway and/or career planning and development
- entry to a study programme without holding the formal qualification entry requirements
- credit within a study programme or qualification enabling entry with advanced standing and reduced period of study, and an opportunity to save time and money
- support for progression within employment or career, or support a career change
- access to some postgraduate taught programmes for individuals with relevant professional experience, but without undergraduate qualifications.

2.1.1 RPL for personal/career development or formative recognition

RPL for personal/career development or formative recognition is a process of recognising learning achieved outside formal education or training systems within the context of further learning and development. Learners who wish to have their existing skills recognised to boost confidence and/or support employment efforts are likely to find RPL support from community learning teams or Job Centres. Links to resources to help with this type of RPL can be found on the [Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework \(SCQF\) website](#).

2.1.2 RPL for credit

RPL for credit is a process of assessing learning achieved outside of formal education or training systems which is recognised, if appropriate, for academic purposes. Recognising and/or awarding credit for prior learning is now embedded in many institutions and is supported by the SCQF.

The focus of this chapter is RPL for credit – to gain entry to a programme at the start of a programme or at an advanced stage, or gain recognition for parts of a programme. The three main stages of RPL are outlined from a learner perspective and that of their RPL adviser. The questions most asked by learners about this process are answered to help ensure a learner is fully informed before making a decision or progressing with an application for RPL, also known as an ‘RPL claim’. This chapter will also signpost examples of RPL claims which recognise learning outwith structured formal or classroom environments (from work experience, for example). This highlights the diversity and creativity of how learning can be recognised and assessed for entry to a wide range of disciplines across the sector.

Learners undertaking RPL should be supported to work in partnership with the institution and/or their employer to improve their learning experience, working collaboratively to collect and analyse feedback, identify issues and solutions, and work together with staff in decision-making and development of strategy related to RPL.



2.2 Three main stages in an RPL for credit claim

A learner may want to use prior learning to evidence they have the necessary entry requirements to enter a programme either at the start of the programme or at an advanced stage, such as Year 2 of a degree programme, for example. Alternatively, a learner may feel they have already met the learning outcomes of a discrete part of a qualification or a programme, such as a module or unit.

Learning outcome

A learning outcome is what a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate after completing a process of learning and assessment.

The determination of the purpose of RPL may be a learner-led decision or a collaborative exercise initiated by either the learner, their employer or the supporting institution. This chapter may be helpful to the learner and to a staff member supporting the learner with their RPL application or RPL claim (based on the idea of claiming credit). Some institutions refer to learners making an RPL claim as an applicant or candidate.

Learners are advised to obtain the relevant institution's RPL policy and/or procedures early in the RPL process. Most institutions make their RPL policies and procedures easily accessible on their websites. If a learner is unable to find an RPL policy by using 'RPL' as a search term, it may be helpful to search for 'prior learning'. Alternatively, a learner should ask for the information from the institution - usually from a tutor or the Student Support or Student Services department.

This Framework proposes that there are three main stages in making an RPL claim:

1. Identifying and reflecting on the learning that has taken place
2. Providing the evidence of the learning, such as qualifications or experience
3. Assessment of the evidence and, where appropriate, supporting the transition to the programme of study.

Stage 1: Identifying and reflecting on the learning that has taken place

The initial stage of the RPL process is to discuss the claim and learning in terms of the potential level and volume of credit. RPL credit can be awarded at any SCQF level; there are exceptions at SCQF Level 10 - see section 2.4. Learners may be supported with their claim by several staff from various departments dependent on the institution and type of learning, such as an admissions officer, a lecturer or tutor in the subject area, or a dedicated RPL adviser or supervisor. Where institutions are recognising non-formal or informal learning outwith formal or classroom environments, such as through work experience, learners should be supported to identify their prior learning by reflecting on learning experiences. It may be useful to think of this in terms of examples that demonstrate evidence of learning. Some learners find it helpful to write a CV or personal log set out chronologically to help with the process. The learning should be compared and mapped to the learning outcomes for the programme they are hoping to join.

Stage 2: Providing evidence of the learning

The type of prior learning that is being recognised will determine the evidence required. For example, if learning is being recognised from formal or classroom learning, the evidence will likely be qualification certificates or transcripts (also known as certificated learning). If non-formal or informal learning is being recognised from experience, work, leisure or volunteering opportunities (also known as experiential learning), evidence may be in a variety of forms. Often institutions encourage RPL evidence to be presented in ways that match the range of assessment methods used in the programme for which the learner is hoping to join or gain RPL credit. For example, some institutions or departments request evidence of learning which comprises portfolio of achievements or outcomes such as reports or other documents produced by the learner during employment supported by a written account. Or learners may provide a portfolio of creative content such as videos, photographs and records of performances, sometimes supported by a presentation.

Two distinct types of evidence have been identified – direct and indirect:

Direct

- something the learner has produced themselves or for which they were mainly responsible.

Indirect

- information gathered from others; it is about the learner but not produced by them alone.

Some examples of direct and indirect evidence are provided in Table 1. These are examples only to help guide learners and support staff and are not intended to be exhaustive nor limit imagination in other examples that can be provided. The material submitted to evidence learning should be aligned to the learning outcomes identified in stage 1.

Direct (produced by the learner)	Indirect (information gathered from others)
Procedures, policies or guidelines – such as for a workplace or volunteering activity	Employer statements
Project or research reports	Certificates/syllabus details from non-credit bearing courses
Articles – printed or online – such as blogs, editorials or other magazine, website or journal contributions	Letters of support from line managers
Training plan – such as for a workplace or volunteering group or activity	Joint reports or articles – clearly annotated to identify which areas were developed by the learner and which aspects were developed by others
Budgets/financial forecasts – these may be for a commercial or charitable organisation, business or local association or club, for example	Procedures, policies or guidelines that have been co-created with others – noting the learner's role in the creation and the contribution of others
Professional certification – such as achievement of continuing professional development (CPD) or other learning that is not credit-rated	Website links – clearly identifying the learner's contribution to the site content and/or development
Wall displays or posters – such as created for schools, playgroups, clubs, etc	Training resources – noting the learner's role in developing the resources and the contribution of others
Creative outputs – such as design projects, art-work, or musical, dance or acting performances	Scholarly or research articles – indicating the contribution of the learner, such as main author, main researcher or supporting role in the scholarly activity

Table 1: Examples of direct and indirect RPL evidence

Remember: Credit is awarded for learner's prior learning not their experience alone. The evidence submitted for assessment should show what has been *learned* and not just what has been done. This may be a new and unique way of reflection and writing for many individuals.

Learners often worry they will not be able to provide enough evidence but there should be an emphasis on quality rather than quantity. Learners should be critical and selective in choosing evidence which best supports their RPL claim in line with the learning outcomes, as well as critically reflecting on their learning and experience. It should be noted that this is an academic piece of work and, particularly for higher education (HE), evidence should follow referencing guidelines as per the institution's policy. This is standard academic practice and will be useful to learn before joining an HE programme.

Stage 3: Assessment of the evidence

If formal learning is being recognised for entry to a programme, from certificated qualifications or other learning in a classroom environment, it is usually admissions or subject-specific staff who will review the evidence to reach a decision on an application to the programme. Where formal learning is being recognised to demonstrate achievement of the learning outcomes of a discrete part of a qualification or a programme - such as a module or unit, it is usually subject-specific staff who will review the evidence to reach a decision.

When non-formal or informal (experiential) learning is being assessed for an RPL claim for credit, academic staff will normally assess the claim to decide whether the claim has been successful and determine the credit to be awarded.

Where a learner is successful in gaining recognition of prior learning for entry to a programme, the learner should then be supported into the academic programme through formal induction or, in some cases, participation in transitional modules or units such as summer school programmes.

Learners who are successful in RPL claims for discrete parts of a qualification or a programme, such as a module or unit, should discuss their individual learning plan with the institution - this may be their course leader (for existing registered learners) or an RPL adviser. The learner may have fewer modules or units to study which may impact on the total length of study for their chosen programme. It is also important to ensure they are not disadvantaged in any way, such as through funding for full-time learners (see also the frequently asked questions in section 2.4 below).

Institutions should guide all RPL learners on next steps including, where appropriate, credit being added to their transcript, admission to the programme, agreeing a learning plan and supporting transition arrangements.

2.3 Case studies

There are numerous examples and case studies from learners who have benefitted from the RPL process. Below is a written case study from a full-time data analyst who used RPL to enter a BA (Hons) Management degree without holding the formal entry qualifications (Louise's story) and the link to a recorded testimonial from an early years practitioner on the benefits attained from an RPL claim to join a BA Early Learning and Childcare degree with advanced standing (Sumpurna's story).

Louise's story

BA (Hons) Management student, NHS Data Analyst



I have a full-time job as a data analyst at NHS and as part of my personal development plan, decided I would like to get a university degree. I found out about the RPL process during my application to study at university from the information I provided about my role and responsibilities. It was deemed I was eligible to take part in the process and would result in beginning my studies at a higher level, if successful. The process was very well explained, and I had a great deal of support from my course supervisor and guidance adviser.

I felt a real sense of achievement taking part in the RPL process and was delighted to learn my work responsibilities were sufficient to evidence an academic grading. I have since been able to pinpoint areas in my role that link to my academic work and have found working in tandem with my studies to be greatly beneficial to both my university and career goals as I am quite literally putting into practice what I am learning. Working full time and studying part-time was a real challenge at times, particularly when my personal life was becoming stressful. However, the support from the university has been second to none and I would highly recommend this process to anyone thinking about future studies.



Sumpurna's story

BA (Hons) Childhood Studies, Early Years Practitioner

Listen to [Sumpurna's story](#).

During 2022-23, further case studies of learner RPL experiences and other useful resources will become available on the [QAA Scotland website](#).

2.4 Frequently asked questions

We know learners and some staff may have questions about RPL; here are answers to some of the most frequently asked questions.

Can I gain an award through RPL alone?

Learners are unlikely to be able to gain an award through RPL alone. This is because most institutions have a maximum amount of RPL credit that can be counted towards an award, as detailed in their academic regulations. The maximum amount of RPL should be clearly stated in the institution's RPL policy. Learners will be expected to build on any prior learning they may have through study on their chosen course or programme of study.

Can I claim RPL credit from a combination of formal, non-formal and/or informal learning?

Yes! This is not a problem as long as appropriate evidence can be provided to support the claim and this meets the learning outcomes and programme requirements. It may be helpful to match learning outcomes to any relevant formal (also known as certificated) learning first and then demonstrate how the non-formal and/or informal (also known as experiential) learning can fill any gaps.

How recent does my learning need to be?

There is no specific length of time that can be applied to every individual learner journey, their individual circumstances and subject area. The 'currency' of learning will be assessed when applying for RPL. For some institutions, learning from up to 10 years ago will be considered valid but for others or for some subjects, this may be considered 'out of date'. For formal learning that is not recent, the learner may need to provide evidence that they have kept their knowledge up-to-date through non-formal and/or informal learning, such as experience or continuing professional development (CPD). For example, health and safety laws are regularly updated so health and safety experience that is 10 years old may not meet current learning outcomes without recent updating such as through CPD. Learners are advised to contact the relevant institution and ask to speak to the appropriate RPL adviser.

Will I get the same credit at all colleges or universities?

It is unlikely a learner would get the same credit at all institutions because institutions have autonomy over their policies and agreements. It is also dependent on the chosen programme of study and how well your prior learning relates to the specific course or programme you wish to study.

Can I get credit at any SCQF level?

In theory, yes; however, each institution will have its own policy on this. Institutions or credit-rating bodies can only give credit at levels for which they are authorised to do so. Normally, universities will not give any credit for the Honours year (SCQF Level 10) of a degree programme as the degree classification is usually based on 120 credits achieved at the awarding institution.

Can I get credit for partially-completed credit-rated qualifications?

Learners may be able to gain credit for partially-completed qualifications providing they are at an appropriate level, that they map to the learning outcomes and that their learning has been kept up-to-date.

How do I make a claim for RPL?

This varies between institutions so it is important that learners look at the RPL and admissions policies and guidelines at the institution where they plan to study.

How do I find my institution's RPL policy?

Most institutions make their RPL policies and procedures easily accessible on their websites. If a learner is unable to find an RPL policy by using 'RPL' as a search term, it may be helpful to search for 'prior learning'. Alternatively, a learner should ask for the information from the relevant institution - usually from a course contact, tutor, Admissions or Student Support, or Student Services department.

How much does it cost?

This will differ across institutions and learners should contact the institution directly for this information.

Will my full-time funding be affected?

It may be, especially if you are currently or planning to study full-time and the RPL claim is for less than 120 credits (equivalent to one year of full-time study). Full-time learners may consider making an RPL claim and 'topping up' to 120 credits through part-time study - this may involve studying just some of the modules or units on the programme. Learners should discuss the impact of RPL on funding - an RPL adviser at an institution should be able to provide further advice and guidance.



3 RPL for institutions

3.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to provide support for colleges and universities (institutions) on the implementation and use of the sector-level principles for the recognition of prior learning (RPL) – see Figure 1. The guidance in the chapter primarily draws on college and university higher education experience and this Framework meets the expectations of the [UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#) and its Common and Core practices for standards and quality.

Additionally, this chapter poses questions or prompts for institutions (see section 3.3) from planning and setting up an RPL system to the monitoring and evaluation of RPL processes; summarised in an RPL engagement chart (section 3.4). Institutions are also encouraged to refer to signposted resources (see Chapter 5).

Benefits of RPL for institutions:

- widen access to a broader range of learners
- support transitions and inform student choice
- support meaningful partnerships with employers and the community
- help to develop more flexible entry routes into education, particularly at undergraduate and postgraduate levels
- support career development planning and the development of employability skills and graduate attributes
- contribute to curriculum/programme development and delivery, particularly in relation to work-based, part-time and distance learning.

3.2 Guidance for implementing sector-level principles

Learners entering and transitioning through institutions using RPL processes may have unique learning experiences as do employees navigating career journeys. Institutions and organisations should consider how best to ensure that the perspective of these individuals is taken into account when implementing sector-level principles.

Principle 1: Embed RPL within the context of lifelong learning, widening participation and flexible curriculum and career development initiatives

- In order to assist stakeholder engagement (including learners, employers and professional bodies) with RPL, it is recommended that the term ‘Recognition of Prior Learning’ or ‘RPL’ should be used exclusively and that the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) [definition of RPL](#) is used.
- Institutions are encouraged to view RPL as being part of flexible curricula, lifelong learning and widening access strategies, and to situate RPL into institutional policies, accordingly.

Principle 2: Develop and implement an RPL policy, including learners or employees in its development

- Institutions can either develop a standalone RPL policy or an RPL policy that is embedded into other institutional strategies, such as Admissions or Learning, Teaching and Assessment. Learners should be involved collaboratively in the development of the policy.
- Experience has shown that institution policy statements which are transparent and accessible to staff, learners, applicants and external organisations - such as employers or professional bodies - are particularly effective. This is helped by linking to RPL policy and learner information on institution websites, particularly in the areas of admissions.

Principle 3: Develop and implement an RPL process

Section 3.3 gives extended guidance on how to achieve this including a range of information that might also be helpful to institutions.

Principle 4: Develop and implement a communication and promotion strategy for RPL

- Developing a communication and promotion strategy helps make the institution's stance, policy and process for RPL clear for internal and external stakeholders.
- It can also help to make clear the various approaches and models of RPL which recognise the different needs and interests of each stakeholder.



3.3 Getting started and making it happen

3.3.1 Planning and setting up an RPL system

The following prompts may be useful for staff to consider when setting up RPL systems within their institution.

Are institutions clear about their rationale for implementing RPL - is it explicit within their current institutional strategies?

Institutions should agree a policy and strategy that supports the planning, development and integration of RPL in their institution, and these and related guidelines should reflect their commitment to recognising all forms of learning and the embedding of RPL in their quality assurance system.

Institutions should also anticipate and seek to overcome any hindrances or barriers to implementing RPL within their institution - for example, (lack of) staff buy-in, resources required for developing expertise, current employer or educational partnerships.

What are the drivers for an institution setting up an RPL system?

For example, does the institution engage with widening participation agendas locally and nationally, have an understanding of the economic drivers within the graduate work environment, and the reality of supply and demand in workforce planning? How will setting up an RPL system affect this agenda and achievement of aims?

Does the institution have an agreed definition of RPL that will be used in all processes, documentation and marketing materials?

There should be a common definition of RPL across the institution - consider using the [SCQF definition of RPL](#).



Two institutional models for RPL are identified: centralised and devolved; these models are described in Table 2. If institutions choose to implement a devolved model, it may be beneficial to have a centralised point of contact for learners seeking guidance, such as Admissions, and it is important to make sure that language and terminology related to RPL are used consistently by all members of staff involved. However, very often institutions employ a mix of both centralised and devolved approaches.

Centralised model	Devolved model
A centralised model involves a central RPL coordinator or unit, or faculty RPL coordinator working in partnership with subject experts, but acting as a central point of contact, providing support and guidance for staff and learners, and monitoring the process and the outcomes.	A devolved system of RPL is one in which institution-wide policy and procedures are operated at a faculty/school/department level, with limited or no central coordination or support. However, institutions are strongly encouraged to consider some central coordination to ensure consistency across the organisation.
<p>The advantage of the centralised model is that the institution is explicitly investing in RPL activity and ensuring a coordinated, transparent and consistent approach across the organisation.</p> <p>It also facilitates effective monitoring, tracking and evaluation of RPL activity - for example, through the use of institutional quality assurance processes.</p>	<p>The principle underpinning the devolved model is that it enables the mainstreaming of RPL processes within the admissions process and programme delivery, and recognises that RPL claimants largely require subject expert support in terms of understanding and meeting the requirements for entry and the award of credit.</p>

Table 2: Centralised and devolved models for RPL

Which model of RPL is the institution planning to support - a centralised or devolved model, or a combination of the two?

Institutions are advised to consider their current institutional structures when developing an RPL model. While coordination and integration of RPL processes at an institutional level does not necessitate a centralised model for RPL, it does require the following to be considered:

- RPL policy and process should fully integrate with institutional strategies and quality assurance mechanisms and be:
 - learner focused
 - accessible
 - flexible
 - reliable, transparent and consistent
 - quality assured.
- Coordinated working between and across academic departments, faculties and central services, such as admissions and student support services - any team established to implement RPL processes should be cohesive, knowledgeable and include members of staff from across the institution.
- There should be adherence with the SCQF for recognition and award of credit.
- An explicit recognition of RPL activity in staff workload.

3.3.2 Developing the institution's policy and guidelines

Having identified a rationale, definition and generic model for RPL, institutions should consider the following points when developing its RPL policy and guidelines:

- An institution's policy and guidelines should make explicit the range and scope of programmes for which RPL applies, for example:
 - admission to a programme of study, as an alternative to traditional entry requirements
 - RPL for parts of a programme or award, such as modules or units, or entire levels enabling entry with advanced standing
 - RPL as a formative process to help learners gain confidence and develop academic skills.
- Policies, guidelines and academic regulations should detail limits to credit achievable by RPL and impact, if any, on grading or classification. They should also explicitly detail which SCQF levels credit can be awarded for RPL.
- The roles and responsibilities of the learner, the academic staff acting as adviser, mentor or assessor and other relevant roles/units/committees in the RPL process should be clarified in the guidelines.
- The key phases and elements of the support and assessment process should be outlined, allowing for a flexibility of approaches in order to meet the needs of the learner and the demands of the programme. An effective RPL system should look beyond the qualification to the learning within and the level and volume of this learning.
- Credit gained through non-formal and informal (experiential) learning should have equal value to that gained through formal learning.
- RPL guidelines should take account of the need to monitor, review and revise RPL guidance and processes periodically to keep pace with sector activity, considering the basic principles of RPL against new developments and ensuring they are fit-for-purpose. Such new developments include the growth in apprenticeships, short courses and micro-credentials, for example.



In order to ensure continuity and consistency of RPL practice, institutions may also wish to consider the following points when developing RPL guidance and materials:

- Are there clear points of contact for RPL for prospective and existing learners and staff, on external websites and internal intranets, for example? Advertising, marketing materials and external websites should be accurate, integrate information and identify the correct contacts for those seeking information/guidance both centrally and at faculty/department levels.
- Local faculty/department RPL policies and guidance should align with the institution's overarching policy and guidance and take account of any widening access and/or articulation agreements.
- Admissions and RPL staff/advisers should have awareness of the external environment relating to overseas students including relevant student visa arrangements and European Credit Transfer System (ECTS).
- There should be recognition that there may be other admission processes that are more appropriate for the efficient admission of learners instead of asking them to complete RPL processes, such as articulation agreements.
- There should be integration of RPL processes with related institutional strategies and developments, such as for employability and employer engagement, work-based learning, distance learning and widening participation, as well as college-university articulation agreements.
- The use of technology, such as virtual learning environments (VLEs) and e-portfolios, to support the RPL process should be considered as part of a blended approach to supporting and assessing learner submissions and to monitor and evaluate RPL practice. This technology should be regularly reviewed to take account of developments.
- Institutions should consider if they wish to charge learners for administrative and assessment costs relating to RPL and whether this may have any unintended consequences, such as on widening participation. In 2022, RPL charges within the sector are variable with the majority of fees being levied for assessment of RPL based on non-formal and informal learning, as these can have the most significant impact on staff workload.

3.3.3 Designing a flexible curriculum

Often a barrier to RPL is a rigid curriculum. In order to maximise opportunities for prior learning to be recognised and reduce unnecessary duplication of learning and effort, institutions should design flexibility into curricula wherever possible. RPL should be (as noted by the SCQF): 'a gateway rather than a barrier to learning'. It should promote the positive aspects of an individual's learning experience, not its deficiency.

Institutions should consider the following points when developing guidance and when a programme is being developed and formally approved (see also Chapter 4: RPL for employers and professional bodies).

- Institutions should consider how curriculum design explicitly addresses flexible modes of entry, progression and delivery, and how it will/does link to a wider understanding and recognition of RPL across the institution. This should also be discussed and addressed at the point of programme approval.
- Flexible entry routes and alternative routes to credit, whether through RPL, credit transfer, articulation or work-based learning, should be addressed at the point of programme design rather than programme delivery. This requires learning outcomes that facilitate a range of methods for their achievement and link to delivery and assessment methods.
- Programme design should enable learners to build on the range of competencies and knowledge gained through work-based and other experience as well as previous formal learning.
- RPL should be integrated within work-based learning programmes, forming an intrinsic part of the planning and evidence-gathering process, rather than viewed as a discrete activity before the programme commences.

- To support workforce development, there is significant potential for institutions to explore opportunities to strengthen the use of RPL with employees in the workplace and to support flexible, part-time provision.
- Institutions should explore opportunities to make the links between RPL, educational, personal and professional development planning and the development of employability skills and graduate attributes more explicit.
- Institutions may consider reviewing the maximum credit from RPL that can be applied to programmes/qualifications - there is considerable variance across institutions. This may be a significant factor in an applicant's decision to apply to an institution as it can impact both the cost and length of time it takes to achieve the qualification.

3.3.4 Developing assessment systems and processes for RPL

Assessment of RPL requires careful consideration and planning. With respect to assessment and how learning will be measured, institutions may need to consider the questions: 'Who?' 'Where?' 'When?' and 'How?' One of the aims of the RPL Framework has been to support a broadening range of methods to evidence prior learning, reflecting advances in educational technology. Podcasts, vlogs and video presentations, for example, can replace or complement traditional written portfolios. Institutions are encouraged to access the [SCQF Tool](#) for guidance and signposting on learning as well as referring to Chapter 2: RPL for learners, which provides examples of RPL evidence.

While the predominant form of assessment for RPL has traditionally been via a portfolio, the need to develop more effective, simplified assessment mechanisms is recognised. This is linked to the need to enhance the understanding of the nature and process of non-formal and informal learning in order to develop appropriate forms of assessment.

Module or unit 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 non-formal or informal learning is demanded. Alternative approaches include:

- mapping prior learning against programme-level outcomes or level descriptors for large amounts of credit rather than against module or unit outcomes
- greater use of level descriptors to enable the articulation of prior non-formal or informal learning in learning outcomes that are more relevant to this type of learning
- greater use of e-portfolios to enable a more structured, iterative approach to building evidence
- use of structured interviewing or professional discussion, including video-conferencing, as a single evidence source
- greater use of workplace-derived artefacts or learning practices in evaluation and assessment particularly as part of work-based learning programmes.

There is increasing use of mapping learner-defined statements of learning or workplace-derived skills and knowledge against SCQF level descriptors to demonstrate the transferable competencies and capacities required for successful progression within or into a programme of study. This enables an increased understanding of the nature of non-formal and informal learning as well as a greater parity of esteem between different types of learning.

While templates and exemplars can be provided to support the evidence gathering and assessment process, the adviser or mentor plays a crucial role as an 'interpreter' of academic language and requirements and in supporting the learners' transition from non-formal and informal learning contexts.

In terms of the quality assurance of the RPL assessment process, in most cases this mirrors the normal quality assurance processes for programme assessment, indicative of the principle of establishing RPL as a 'normal' route to entry and credit.

3.3.5 Preparation of resources and support of staff

What help and support will institutions put in place to ensure colleagues/staff are able to successfully implement RPL?

- Institutions should have adequate resources to ensure there is capacity for academic and professional services staff to provide effective support for RPL activity.
- Institutions should encourage and support academic and professional services to develop and update their skillsets to enable continuing effective support for RPL activity, including flexible curriculum design and assessment system and processes – this may include staff development programmes or encouraging access to external resources such as SCQF [RPL workshops](#).
- The impact RPL activity on staff workload should be considered when designing and implementing RPL and staff development policy and guidelines.

Institutions should recognise that any RPL adviser role requires investment for staff development. Continuing professional development (CPD) for RPL advisers can include workshops, seminars and/or reflective RPL practitioner modules. Additional approaches can include communities of practice which can help form cross and inter-institutional peer support networks for staff engaged in RPL support and assessment to build capacity and confidence in the process.

In addition, the need to design assessment mechanisms appropriate to non-formal and informal learning – including the workplace, and to design curricula that facilitate flexible entry and delivery, requires greater staff awareness, understanding and professional development.

- RPL guidance, support and assessment activity should be built into staff workload models.
- Staff involved in RPL should be given sufficient time and resource to familiarise themselves with, and maintain an up-to-date knowledge of, RPL policy and practice across the sector.

3.3.6 Monitoring and evaluation of RPL processes

Increasingly, accessible data relating to RPL forms part of institutions' dataset for annual review and is an integral part of quality assurance and enhancement processes, and the monitoring of learner and admissions statistics. Systems that provide accessible local faculty/department and programme/subject RPL data for comparison with an institution's overarching statistics will become increasingly important for effective monitoring and evaluation of RPL processes and enhancement of practice and the learner experience.

RPL monitoring can include:

- recording the number of learners undertaking RPL
- the success rate of RPL claims
- tracking the progression of learners who have undertaken RPL
- feedback from RPL learners on the RPL process and their learner experience.

Institutions should address the issue of improved data capture and analysis within the context of integrated learner management information systems and as part of the normal quality assurance processes for programmes. This may also form part of wider institutional agendas to improve the evidence base, in terms of recruitment, progression, retention and completion, for example, and to inform planning and evaluation. VLEs and e-portfolios can also support the tracking of RPL learners and monitoring of their progress throughout RPL claims.

Institutions should consider how monitoring outcomes for RPL learners will enable them to make adjustments, as necessary – for example, to induction processes – to support attainment and ensure equity of experience for RPL learners. They should also consider how best this is undertaken, whether in a centralised or devolved model, ensuring consistency of student experience across the institution.

All institutions are encouraged to review their RPL policy and ensure it is reviewed and refreshed every five years. RPL policies should be easily accessible to staff, learners and other interested stakeholders such as employers and professional bodies, so policies should be easily found from an ‘RPL’ search from the home page of an institution’s website.

3.4 RPL engagement chart

The following chart is provided to aid institutions in developing a route map for engaging with RPL. The reflective questions and prompts are to provide indicators and consideration points for institutions new to RPL and serve to highlight core and discipline specific principles in RPL. Neither the questions nor the prompts are exhaustive nor representative of all tertiary education institutions in Scotland.



Why is RPL being introduced or revised within the institution?

Staff involved in developing RPL policy should ensure knowledge of local, national and international practices informs any new RPL activity.



Which model for RPL is to be utilised, centralised or devolved?

Institutions may employ a mix of both centralised and devolved approaches, but whichever model is agreed, the process must be transparent, consistent and reliable.



Is there an agreed and clearly identifiable definition of RPL in your institution?

There should be integration of the RPL policy with related institutional policies and strategies as well as consideration of external reference points.



How will RPL be used and what is the maximum credit limit?

Institutions should agree and promote how RPL may be used, such as to access programmes, to gain credit for parts of a programme or award, or formatively to gain confidence and academic skills. There should be a clearly defined maximum credit limit for RPL in a given award/qualification



Does the institution utilise flexible curriculum design strategies to maximise opportunities for learners’ prior learning to be recognised?



Are RPL assessment strategies appropriate, using up-to-date technology and inclusive of a wide variety of assessment methods?



Are all admissions, marketing and advertising materials consistent with the institution’s and/or devolved faculty/department’s RPL policies?



Are all relevant RPL staff appropriately trained and supported to enable effective implementation of RPL across the institution?



Does the institution routinely record, monitor and evaluate RPL to ensure effective implementation and enhance the experience for learners?

4 RPL for employers and professional bodies

4.1 Introduction

In 2014, this section of the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) National Framework was primarily aimed at professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs). It was intended to encourage PSRBs to commit to and engage with the Framework, thereby raising awareness of RPL, promoting consistency in their approach to RPL and also developing RPL practice as a specific and integral part of PSRB activity. RPL was advocated in 2014 as a good example of collaboration between PSRBs, employers and universities.

There is movement within Scotland towards a tertiary education sector – encompassing all post-16 education across colleges and universities (institutions). Nevertheless, the principles of RPL, set out in Chapter 1, remain valid and the message remains essentially the same – reinforcing the value of RPL and its benefits as shown above. Accordingly, the relationships between employers, professional bodies and institutions continue to be important and should explicitly seek to explore RPL opportunities, making them clear and easily accessible.

This chapter has been revised and refreshed, reflecting the ongoing significant value of RPL. While some progress with RPL has been made, there are still opportunities to augment its visibility and advantages. The increased diversity of approaches to education, learning and upskilling, including the growth in the apprenticeship route to gaining a degree and recognising employees' wealth of skills and experience, especially those who have worked and developed in their chosen area for many years, signalled the importance of extending this chapter beyond PSRBs to place equal focus on the RPL needs of employers and their employees.

In 2022, the Recognition of Prior Learning Framework for Scotland (the Framework) recognises 'professional bodies' as a term more likely to be understood or more commonly used by staff within organisations referred to as PSRBs by QAA and higher education personnel. Reflecting a renewed emphasis on RPL for employers, this chapter has been updated to focus on RPL for employers and professional bodies.

Benefits of RPL for employers and professional bodies:

- support for workforce development planning and targeting of training and continuing professional development (CPD)
- increased motivation of employees and enhance workplace/professional practice
- reduction of recruitment and training costs
- assistance for employee recruitment and career advancement decisions
- support for legislative requirements for a qualified workforce
- increased employee retention.

4.2 Defining RPL

The Framework uses this definition of RPL:

RPL is the process for recognising learning that has come from experience and/or previous formal, non-formal and informal learning contexts. This includes knowledge and skills gained outside school, college and university, and outside formal learning situations, such as through life and work experiences.

RPL is a process that involves a learner reflecting on experiences, identifying learning associated with the experiences and providing evidence of that learning. This can enable an institution or other credit-awarding body to award credit or recognise learning benchmarked to a level of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF).

Employers and professional bodies can support career advancement through making their RPL policies easily accessible to current and prospective employees/members. It can be helpful to link RPL policy and information with relevant links to education partners.

Organisations can either develop a standalone RPL policy or an RPL policy that is embedded into other institutional strategies such as Human Resources, Continuing Professional Development (CPD), People Development and Career Advancement, for example. Employees should be involved collaboratively in its development.

4.3 Employers

In 2022, many employers are experiencing significant skills gaps. In order to find, recruit and retain the right workforce, employers are increasingly reviewing the support and staff development available to employees. Working in partnership, employers are able to use RPL to acknowledge their employees' experience, their good work and/or the progress, knowledge and skills that they have developed.

This approach to people development can serve to improve motivation, wellbeing and staff retention and promote the employer as an extremely attractive option in terms of the employees' careers.

Through the use of RPL, employers may be able to confirm the efficacy of internal courses or training that is delivered and encourage employees to develop their skills to aid the business, while enhancing their own qualifications. In doing so, employers create a loyal, well-educated workforce who feel valued and motivated which will result in better outcomes overall for the business or organisation.



The following employer's testimony serves as a good example of the value of RPL:

6

Glasgow-based Arnold Clark Automobiles has a long-standing relationship with Modern Apprenticeships and uses a variety of these programmes to support the training and development of a range of support and technician roles across its business. We were also keen to support the development of staff through professionally accredited pathways including in Accountancy. After learning about the Master's degree in Accountancy (MAcc) Graduate Apprenticeship programme delivered in partnership with the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA), we were very keen to use this programme as a way to attract new finance staff into Arnold Clark and also support our excellent existing finance workforce to develop their skills and accountancy-based knowledge while working towards a Master's degree and certified Chartered Accountant status.

Many of the existing Finance teams across the business have developed within their roles and not studied since leaving school or college. A lot of them thought that they wouldn't have the education background to enter onto a Master's programme at university. Working with a local university and supported by university staff to understand the opportunity to use 'Recognition of Prior Learning' (RPL) for existing staff was a great pull and encouraged us to bring the MAcc opportunity to life. University staff facilitated structured discussions between our employees, their line managers and university programme leaders to further discuss the breadth of existing experience our staff had gained to date. Staff were able to use RPL as an alternative to having formal prerequisite qualifications to gain entry to the MAcc. This RPL process has enabled our staff to feel valued, develop professionally and to further contribute to the business.

,

It is recommended that businesses and organisations work collaboratively with institutions and professional bodies, as well as their own employees, to develop RPL policies and procedures to realise the benefits of RPL stated at the start of this chapter.

4.4 Professional bodies

In the context of this Framework, 'professional bodies' are organisations that set the standards for, and regulate entry into, particular profession(s) and are authorised to accredit, approve or recognise specific programmes leading to the relevant professional qualification(s) for which they may have a statutory or regulatory responsibility. Professional bodies may provide membership services and promote the interests of people working in professions; accredit or endorse courses that meet professional standards; provide routes into and through professions; and are recognised by employers.

As gatekeepers for entry into certain professions and/or respected providers of advice and guidance on professions, professional bodies are an essential link in the chain of RPL to recognise learning that may be less formal than traditional qualifications such as Highers, undergraduate degrees or postgraduate diplomas, for example.

It is recommended that professional bodies work collaboratively with institutions, employers, employees and their own members to develop RPL policies and procedures to realise the benefits of RPL listed at the start of this chapter.

4.4.1 A current snapshot

To inform this chapter, QAA Scotland (QAAS) obtained a snapshot of professional body awareness of RPL and the ease of access to RPL information on their websites. The findings from a brief [survey](#) of members of the [QAA PSRB Forum](#) indicate a lack of standardisation of terms and definitions of RPL. Most respondents agreed that non-traditional learning such as continuing professional development (CPD) or on-the-job training should be recognised as an RPL route to membership of professional bodies. Approximately two-thirds of respondents confirmed that their organisations provided guidance information to members or prospective members on the value of RPL but less than half knew where to specifically direct a member or prospective member for RPL information.

All respondents were familiar with the term PSRB but just over half agreed that they were more likely to use the term ‘professional body’ in general communication – this finding helped to inform the language used in this updated Framework.

A scan of 30 professional body websites was undertaken to determine the ease by which RPL information can be found by members, prospective members or other interested parties. The [results of this scan](#) serve to demonstrate the potential difficulty faced by some individuals trying to find out about RPL opportunities related to professional body membership, as less than half of organisations’ websites returned any links from a search for ‘RPL’, ‘prior learning’ or ‘APL’.

4.5 Employees

Many employees are keen to embrace upskilling and reskilling opportunities to remain current and effective in developing employment environments. This may be learning new skills and knowledge or retraining – through their employer/workplace or independently. RPL for employees means that they do not have to repeat learning they have already achieved. RPL offers opportunities to demonstrate that learning from experience can be recognised, enabling: entry to courses/qualifications without formal pre-requisite qualifications; entry with advanced standing, such as jumping directly to the second year of a course; recognition for (or ‘exemption’ from) parts of a course such as a module or unit. ‘Exemption’ is a term used by some organisations and education providers but can suggest that some course outcomes can be skipped or missed out, while RPL rightly acknowledges that these areas of learning have already been achieved and credit awarded, where appropriate. Similarly, RPL can be used to gain professional body membership, acknowledging learning employees have already undertaken or gained through experience.



4.6 Summary and recommendations

The QAAS survey results indicate that RPL is valued by professional bodies. However, for individuals looking for RPL information, professional body websites are often unhelpful and may result in wasted opportunities to have skills recognised, missing out on professional recognition or individuals having to repeat learning that has already been achieved.

There is inconsistent use of language around RPL. Various RPL terms are used including accreditation of prior learning (APL) and variations including for experiential (APEL) and certificated (APCL) learning. Some professional bodies use 'exemption' to describe those parts or a programme or membership requirements that have already been achieved and recognised by prior learning. As noted in 4.5 above, 'exemption' may suggest or give the impression that some aspects can be skipped or missed out, while RPL acknowledges that these areas of learning have already been achieved.

It is acknowledged that variation in language has, in some cases, its origin in countries or authorities outwith Scotland.

4.6.1 Recommendations

The following provides a set of actions that employers and professional bodies can take to simplify RPL for employees, professional body members and prospective members as well staff within the organisations.

- Create an organisational policy or strategy for RPL identifying the key benefits for the organisation, its staff and (prospective) members, as appropriate.
- Wherever possible, use RPL as the preferred term, spelling out 'Recognition of Prior Learning' to ensure understanding.
- Promote the opportunities of RPL on organisation websites, with clear signposting of how to get more information, if needed.
- Add 'RPL' and 'prior learning' to website metadata to help interested persons to navigate to the relevant pages, even if an alternative term is used (such as to meet with international requirements).
- Identify a person or department as RPL champion(s). For example, RPL champions may be located within Human Resources (HR) departments and professional body membership or education/training teams (or both). Provide RPL training for these champions and for wider staff in HR, membership and/or education/training teams.
- Explore partnership opportunities with relevant institutions to identify RPL opportunities such as through staff development and apprenticeships.

5 Useful resources

This chapter provides some resources that may be useful to learners, institutions, employers, employees and/or professional bodies. During 2022-23, further case studies and other useful resources will become available on the [QAA Scotland website](#).

General RPL tools and guidance

Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF): Guide to RPL:
<https://scqf.org.uk/guide-to-rpl/>

SCQF: The RPL Tool:
[RPL Tool | Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework \(scqf.org.uk\)](#)

SCQF: Guidance for Employers:
[Know your Level - Job Roles | Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework \(scqf.org.uk\)](#)

SCQF: Support for existing credit rating bodies:
[Support for Existing Credit Rating Bodies | Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework \(scqf.org.uk\)](#)

SCQF: My Skills, My Future - resources suitable for staff working within Careers, Information Advice and Guidance as well as Community Learning and Development:
<https://scqf.org.uk/resources/full-list-of-workshops-with-videos/>

Institutional resources

QAA: [The UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#)

Examples of institutions' policies are not provided here as institutions are encouraged to review and refresh their RPL policies every five years. RPL policies should be easily accessible to staff, learners and other interested stakeholders, such as employers and professional bodies, and should be easily accessible from an 'RPL' search from the home page of an institution's website.

The broad principles of RPL are not unique to the UK and may be found throughout the world. Many useful resources and examples of good practice are available nationally and internationally.

Policy and guidance

QAA: *Recognition of Prior Learning: An International Scan* (2021)
A review of RPL practice in 39 institutions in a selection of countries.
www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/docs/ethemes/resilient-learning-communities/recognition-of-prior-learning-an-international-scan.pdf

QAA: *Qualifications can Cross Boundaries: A guide to comparing qualifications in the UK and Ireland* (2019)
www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/quality-code/qualifications-can-cross-boundaries.pdf

Examples of good practice internationally

Queensland Government, Australia (2020): RPL in education, training and higher education, including experiential learning.
www.qld.gov.au/education/career/rpl

The New Zealand Qualifications Authority: *Recognising learning for credit: Guidelines for the recognition and award of credit for learning* (2017)
www.nzqa.govt.nz/assets/qualifications-and-standards/CRT-RPL-guidelines-Oct-20.pdf

Institutions are encouraged to access the [SCQF Tool](#) for guidance and signposting on learning as well as referring to Chapter 3: RPL for learners which provides examples of RPL evidence.

Examples of professional body practice

Chartered Banker Institute:

www.charteredbanker.com/our-qualifications/recognition-of-prior-learning.html

Chartered Management Institute (CMI):

www.managers.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Recognition-of-Prior-Learning-Guidance.pdf

Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC):

www.sssc.uk.com/knowledgebase/article/KA-01646/en-us

The Institution of Engineering and Technology:

www.theiet.org/media/8826/guidance-notes-on-uku-for-applicants-september-2021.pdf

The Institute of Mechanical Engineers:

[Guidance on how experience can count in lieu of qualifications](#)

6 Glossary

APL and APEL	Accreditation of prior (experiential) learning is equivalent to RPL but has become outdated. RPL is the preferred term and is recommended.
Certificated learning	Learning that is evidenced such as by a qualification certificate or a transcript.
Communities of practice	These are groups of individuals who share a common interest or area of expertise, who share experience and good practice, and support each other in the field of interest.
Credit	Credit is awarded to a learner on achievement of credit-rated (or credit-bearing) qualification/programme learning outcomes. The amount of credit awarded reflects the time required for a typical learner to achieve the qualification/learning programme.
Credit transfer	Credit transfer is the transfer of credit from one qualification/learning programme to another in order to minimise duplication of learning. In many cases, this may also involve the transfer of credit between providers.
European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)	ECTS is a tool of the European Higher Education Area for making studies and courses more transparent. It helps higher education students to move between countries and to have their academic qualifications and periods of overseas study recognised.
Exemption	This is a term used by some organisations and education providers to refer to parts of a programme or course, pre-requisites or skills/qualifications that do not need to be achieved as a result of an RPL process. 'Exemption' is a term that is not recommended as it can suggest that particular requirements can be skipped or missed out, while RPL rightly acknowledges that these areas of learning have already been achieved.
Experiential learning	Learning that has come from experience, such as the workplace or leisure or volunteering opportunities.
Formal learning	Learning that takes place within the context of programmes delivered by learning and training providers. It is assessed and credit-rated and leads to recognised qualifications.
Informal learning	Experiential learning that takes place through life and work experiences. It is often unintentional learning.
Micro-credential	A micro-credential is the record of assessed knowledge, skills and/or achievements within a focused area of outcome-based learning. It is normally the outcome of a small, discrete credit-bearing course. In Scotland, credit-rated micro-credentials are awarded by a body authorised to award SCQF credit. While designed as standalone qualifications, micro-credentials may be combined into larger credentials or provide entry into a larger award.
Learning outcome	A learning outcome is what a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate after completing a process of learning and assessment.

Non-formal learning	Learning that takes place alongside the mainstream systems of education and training. It may be assessed but does not typically lead to formal certification - for example, learning and training activities or programmes undertaken in the workplace, voluntary sector or trade union, and through community-based learning.
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning or RPL is the process for recognising learning that has come from experience and/or previous formal, non-formal and informal learning contexts. This includes knowledge and skills gained outside school, college and university, and outside formal learning situations, such as through life and work experiences.
RPL claim	The process by which a learner seeks to gain recognition of prior learning by an institution, credit-rating body or other organisation for non-credit-rated RPL.
SCQF	Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework

7 RPL Expert Group

QAAS extends its thanks to members of the RPL Expert Group for their authorship and contributions to the production of this Framework.

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