

Streamlining RPL Processes: facilitating the award of credit for prior *informal* learning

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1. Executive Summary

Purpose

The purpose of the QAA-funded project is to support the Scottish HEI RPL Network in the development of guidelines for the streamlining of RPL support and assessment for the HE sector. The Quality Assurance Agency, Scotland, commissioned the Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning to undertake the project between April and July 2011. The outcomes of the project will be discussed and considered by the Scottish HEI RPL Network at a workshop in October 2011 at which the scope and nature of the guidelines to be developed will be agreed.

Approach

The project was undertaken in 3 phases:

Phase 1: on-line scoping study, which identified key features of RPL processes within the Scottish and UK sectors and beyond. This includes 56 examples of practice;

Phase 2: web-based survey of Scottish RPL HEI Network and other UK and international Networks in terms of scope and nature of RPL processes and ways in which practice could be streamlined/enhanced. The survey had a response rate of 33%, with 55 responses from Scottish, UK, and international HEIs and other organisations; and

Phase 3: follow up telephone interviews to explore particular examples of practice in more detail.

Each phase explored the RPL process within a common framework: initial guidance; support processes/systems; assessment processes/systems and monitoring, evaluation and quality assurance. Analysis of the outcomes of each phase enabled the identification of recommendations for the key elements of the guidelines and a proposed typology.

Outcomes

The report considers the findings and outcomes of each of these three phases. The outcomes of the full scoping study (Phase 1) will be made available as a separate resource.

In developing effective, streamlined systems of RPL, institutions need to address the following key issues:

- Operating a centralised or devolved model;
- Developing policy and guidelines;
- Designing a flexible curriculum;
- Developing initial information and guidance processes;
- Developing support systems/processes;
- Developing assessment systems/processes;
- Support and CPD of staff; and
- Developing monitoring and evaluation processes.

Current or proposed approaches to address each of these issues based on the project findings are outlined in the final section of the report.

A typology proposing the key elements of the guidelines to support the streamlining or RPL support and assessment has been produced for consideration by the Scottish HEI RPL Network.

Conclusions

Streamlining and enhancing RPL support and assessment processes to ensure more effective and accessible approaches require a set of institutional enablers related to:

- policy and process that mainstreams and integrates RPL within admissions, learning, teaching and assessment strategies and quality assurance mechanisms;
- Curriculum design that explicitly addresses flexible modes of entry, progression and delivery;
- Clear points of contact for RPL for potential applicants, existing students and staff;
- Building staff capacity and capability in terms of providing effective forms of RPL support and appropriate forms of assessment, which is linked to initial and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) opportunities and the increased visibility of RPL across the institution and in staff workload;
- Greater use of technology-enhanced RPL provision through VLEs and e-portfolios as part of a blended learning approach to support and assessment;
- Integration of RPL processes within related developments such as PDP, employability, WBL and distance learning; and
- Data gathering and analysis to ensure effective monitoring, tracking and evaluation as part of a process of reviewing and enhancing practice.

While many of these enablers are already in place, or recognised, within Scottish HEIs, these represent key areas for further development within the Scottish HEI sector, particularly in relation to the use of technology; staff CPD and support; and monitoring and evaluation.

2. Introduction

The purpose of the QAA-funded project is to support the Scottish HEI RPL Network in the development of guidelines for the streamlining of RPL support and assessment for the HE sector. These guidelines will be supported by examples of practice. The Quality Assurance Agency, Scotland, commissioned the Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning to undertake the project between April and July 2011.

The specific aims of the project were to:

- take account of existing supporting materials/representations by an on-line scoping exercise and identification of key trends and features;
- undertake a web-based survey of HEI RPL support and assessment mechanisms via the HEI RPL Network and other UK and European networks; and
- produce an analysis of the survey and a typology to support the development of the guidelines: i.e. identification of key elements of the guidelines.

The outcomes of the project will be discussed and considered by the Scottish HEI RPL Network at a workshop in October 2011 at which the scope and nature of the guidelines to be developed will be agreed.

The project was undertaken in **3** phases:

Phase 1: online scoping study of Scottish, UK and international practice;

Phase 2: web-based survey of Scottish HEI RPL Network and via other UK and international networks; and

Phase 3: follow up telephone interviews to explore particular examples of practice in more detail.

Each phase explored the RPL process within a common framework: initial guidance; support processes/systems; assessment processes/systems and monitoring, evaluation, quality assurance. Analysis of the outcomes of each phase enabled the identification of recommendations for the key elements of the guidelines and a proposed typology.

3. Methodology

In order to meet the research objectives a mixed method approach was agreed to gather both quantitative and qualitative data to provide a rich picture of RPL support and assessment processes both nationally and internationally. The research was undertaken in three phases which are noted below.

Phase One: Scoping Study

It was decided to engage in a scoping study to ensure that a wide range of publically available information regarding RPL processes was covered by the research. The aim of the scoping study was to provide an overview of examples of RPL processes and practice at national and European level, in particular to address the ways in which institutions manage each part of the RPL process. The starting point for the scoping exercise was to develop a framework which would identify differing models of RPL within the context of:

- Initial guidance;
- Support processes;
- Assessment processes; and
- Monitoring, evaluation, quality assurance processes.

The initial phase of the scoping study used searches for specific key words. These included RPL/APEL/APL/Accreditation/HEIs/Prior learning. This data was collated in a table against each of the four areas above. Links were further explored and information collated, and where applicable contact names were also recorded to support phase two of the project.

56 examples of practice (40 of which are HEIs) were collected, which will be of use as an RPL resource and will be made available as a separate document with accessible links to examples of practice and further information. Analysis was then undertaken to identify key trends/features which are summarised in the table provided in Section 4.1 of the report.

Phase Two: Web based Survey

A web based survey was developed in order gain more in depth information and provide an enhanced overview of RPL processes and issues at European and National levels. While providing an overview, the main aim was to focus on learner support and assessment mechanisms currently in use as well as ideas and plans to enhance these processes.

This was an iterative process commencing in May and following a pilot and subsequent alterations, was issued to contacts, by email, on the HEI RPL Network and other UK and European/international RPL networks, on the 6th June 2011. Subsequently those who responded to the section in the survey relating to 'other' contacts within their institution were also sent the survey link. Several email reminders were issued prior to the closing date of the 20th June 2011.

All data regarding respondents was stored on an excel spreadsheet and records of communication noted also. Of the 184 participants sent the survey by email, there was a 33% response rate. Further respondent profile information is available in the phase two analysis section (see section 4.2).

Phase Three: In depth interviews

To gain more detailed information about RPL processes and to enhance the research beyond the limitations of the survey a decision was made to undertake follow-up semi-structured interviews using a sample of respondents who completed the survey and who identified that they were willing to be contacted by the research team. Following interim analysis of the scoping study and survey, it was agreed that a closer look at how new technology is used in relation to RPL should provide a particular focus for the interviews. Additionally, it was decided that more in-depth information should be gathered in relation to RPL claims made against learner defined outcomes and SCQF level descriptors as well as examining whether the use and impact of RPL is monitored, how it is monitored and, where there is no monitoring, why this is the case.

The criteria for the selection were:-

- Those who agreed to be contacted again for further information;
- Only Higher Education Institutions;
- Those who use online technology for guidance and support, such as Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs), e-portfolios;
- Those who use online technology as part of their assessment mechanisms, such as e-portfolio, video, audio;
- Those who allow RPL claims to be made against learner identified outcomes, SCQF/QAA level descriptors; and
- Those who monitor the use and impact of RPL impact, those who do not monitor the use and impact of RPL impact and those who are not sure whether their institution monitors the use and impact of RPL impact.

The semi-structured interviews focused on three main areas: the use of online technology for RPL support, guidance and assessment, processes regarding RPL claims made against learner-defined learning outcomes/SCQF level descriptors as well as the monitoring of RPL claims. The aim was to find creative approaches to support, guidance and assessment that make full use of technological advances whilst making the RPL process smoother and less burdensome for RPL claimants. In relation to learner-defined learning outcomes/SCQF level descriptors the research team hoped to explore examples of practice that could encourage other institutions to move away from solely relying on learning/module outcomes in order to allow more flexibility in relation to RPL claims. The fact that 40% of respondents reported that there is no monitoring and 17% were unsure about whether or not there was monitoring of the use and impact of RPL prompted the inclusion of this aspect in the semi-structured interviews. By interviewing respondents where there is monitoring, the research team aimed to find examples of practice that could be of interest to the wider community, whilst exploring reasons for the absence of monitoring by interviewing respondents where there is no monitoring of the use and impact of RPL.

Out of all respondents from HEIs 30 agreed to be contacted. Following the selection criteria for the interviews, 22 respondents were contacted by email, asking whether or not they would be willing to be interviewed by phone. There were three 'out-of-office' messages and five respondents agreed to be interviewed. Six interviews have been undertaken.

Interviewees were asked to describe systems and processes with regards to the three main areas described above in more detail and offer examples of how these are applied (see appendix no. 2). In preparation for the interviews, the respondents' survey answers were matched to the three questions/areas, to enable the interviewer to refer to their answers and ask for further details where appropriate.

4. Analysis Phases

Each of the three phases explored the RPL process within a common framework:

- initial guidance;
- support processes/systems;
- assessment processes/systems; and
- Monitoring, evaluation, quality assurance.

Analysis of the outcomes of each phase enabled the identification of recommendations for the key elements of the guidelines and a proposed typology.

4.1 Phase 1 – Scoping Exercise

The aim of the scoping study was to provide an overview of examples of RPL processes and practice at national and European level, in particular to address the ways in which institutions manage each part of the RPL process.

The analysis of examples included the name of the organisation (HEI or otherwise), web links and if possible, contact details. The QAA RPL European Case Studies developed in 2010 provided a useful starting point and were reviewed in terms of the identified headings. This was further enhanced by a web based scoping study of all Scottish HEIs, some UK based HEIs and other RPL related organisations (including the QAA and HEA).

The exercise generated a large amount of data, including 56 examples of practice (40 of which are HEIs) which will be of use as an RPL resource and will be made available as a separate document with accessible links to examples of practice and further information.

The subsequent phase of the scoping exercise was to narrow the resource to focus on the analysis framework above, looking specifically at RPL in terms of initial guidance, supporting students in claims (by whom and with what mechanisms), assessment (by whom, when and through what mechanisms and the basis of assessment) and monitoring/evaluation and quality assurance procedures (fees, quality assurance, monitoring and evaluation). This was then streamlined to provide an overview of key features and examples of practice in the areas identified. The table below in figure 1 highlight these areas and identifies the percentages of incidences of examples of practice (and also quantities in brackets) and where there are only 1 or 2 incidences of an approach the institution(s) has been identified.

Figure 1: Scoping Exercise: Key Features & Examples of Practice

Initial Guidance	Support processes	Assessment processes	Monitoring/Evaluation/QA etc
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Web based & Electronic Resources 68% (27) • Information sessions 5% (2) (UWS) • Paper based guidance (Prospectus/Flyers/procedures booklet) 13% (5) • Online application form 3% (1) (University of Applied Sciences, Amsterdam) 	<p>Who supports the Learners?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RPL/PLAR Advisor (coordinator/facilitator) 16 • Centre for credit rating 3% (1) (Napier) • Academic Dept (& course leaders) 20% (8) • Mentors 3% (1) Athabasca University • Admissions team/ member 40% (5) • Supervisor with academic/subject expertise 3% (1) (UWS) • Online tutor 3% (1) (UWS) • Student progression lead practitioner (UHI)1 • Personal tutor 8% (3) • RPL unit 3% (1) (University of Applied Sciences – Amsterdam) • Academic registry 3% (1) (Abertay) 	<p>Who assesses the claim?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subject specialist/advisor 10% (4) • School/Faculty (officer/committee/course leader) 23% (9) • Programme (lead/committee) 20% (8) • External (examiner/referee) 40% (5) • RPL committees/panel 3% (1) (QMU) • Admission (Tutor/Staff) 5% (2) (QMU/UHI) • RPL assessor/officer 5% (2) • Examination committee 3% (1) (info fed for assessing by committee – OU Netherlands) 	<p>Fees</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dependent upon credit sought 3% (1) • Admin fee 3% (1) • E1309 incl vat 3% (1) • 50\$ application fee 3% (1) • \$750 3% (1) • £110 for every 15 credit points or part thereof – fees charged for processing of successful claims 3% (1) • 50% of the normal module/course fee 3% (1)
	<p>What type of support for learners?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RPL procedures 3% (1) (Napier) • Resource Pack (for mentors) 3% (1) (GCU) • Flexible entry claim form 20% (8) • Guidelines for staff/students 28% (11) • Flowcharts for guidance 3% (1) (GCU) • Workshops/training sessions 10% (4) • Educational Guidance 3% (1) (UWS) • Information flyers 5% (2) • Meeting/phone discussion 3% (1) (UHI) • Introductory guide to RPL 3% (1) (UHI) • RPL section on Application form 3% (1) – check OSLO • RPL module 3% (1) (OU Scotland) • Interviews 5% (2) (Univ of Fraser Valley) 	<p>When is the claim assessed?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prior to entry 5 • Point of entry 3 • During Study 3% (1) (Primorska, Slovenia) • Panel meets 4 times per year 3% (1) • Any stage prior to conferment of an award 3% (1) • 3- 6months 5% (2) • End of term 3% (1) (Univ of Fraser Valley) 	<p>Quality Assurance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Should mirror normal assessment and general QA procedures for particular programme 3% (1) • QA procedures 3% (1)(GCU) • Credit recorded on students’ academic history 3% (1) (UWS) • Special rules to regulate the procedure for examining/validating/recognizing non-formally and informally obtained knowledge 3% (1) (Primorska) • At end of each academic session, APL officers report to faculty numbers of applications received, numbers granted/refused, amount of credit awarded. Recorded separately for each award. Data discussed at faculty

	<p>and Dublin Ins of Technology)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online quick scan (RPL) – 3% (1) University of Applied Sciences – Amsterdam (good example) 		<p>committees. Faculty must ensure criteria for APEL remains objective 3% (1) (Glasgow)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • With right to appeal decisions about RPL, second interviews where appeals were made 3% (1) (Dublin Institute of Technology) • Registered with external QA Agency 3% (1) (Univ of Applied Sciences – Amsterdam) • RPL Exams are governed by University Assessment regulations 3% (1) • Assessment can be appealed 3% (1) (Athabasca) • Applications must conform to Univ guidelines and be approved by relevant programme director 3% (1) • Procedures for RPL in QA handbook 3% (1) (RSAMD) • No right of appeal against the judgement of the portfolio assessors however will receive feedback on application 3% (1) (Univ of Bradford)
		<p>Basis of Assessment (module/prog etc)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sufficiency, Relevance, Reliability and Currency 20% (8) • Skills, Knowledge and understanding required for successful progression 8% (3) • Authenticity/equivalency 8% (3) • Comparability of outcomes of informal learning – module/prog level 3% (1) (GCU) <p>Levels of credit considered</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • U/G 22 credits at L7 3% (1) (Stirling) • P/G 15 credits at L11 3% (1) (Stirling) 	<p>Monitoring/evaluation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recorded on students’ record system 5% (2) (1) (Abertay) • Statement of the exam board (about exemptions) on the base of an RPL report 3% (1) • All tools used in the RPL process are available online. For advisors and assessors this means they have an online calendar as well as online versions of the various forms and reports they have to complete during the procedure. By implementing ‘RPL Online’ statistic information on the

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not match learning against module outcomes – too rigid and constrictive 3% (1) (UWS) • Against learning outcomes of relevant programme 5% (2) • 30pt online module 3% (1)(OU) • key principle of the applicant's capacity to succeed on such a specific programme and to benefit from it in their working lives later; qualifier activities where it was not clear that prior learning and work-related experiences indicated the capacity to succeed 3% (1) (Dublin Institute of Technology) • Portfolio must demonstrate that all learning outcomes of relevant module have been met 3% (1) (Letterkenny) • RPL set within framework of the prog requirements defined in terms of learning outcomes 3% (1) (Univ of Luxembourg) • Scoring rubric (OU Netherlands) • Weight between 0 -10 points – maximum credit dependent upon course/prog 3% (1) • Similarity in content to the courses (to be exempt from) 3% (1) • Same SCQF academic level as the course 3% (1) 	<p>candidates, like their motivation for enrolling the procedure or ending it prematurely, has also become available 3% (1) (Univ of Applied Sciences – Amsterdam)</p>
	<p>Other</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RPL Framework 5% (2) • RPL Policy 8% (3) Employer led LL framework 3% (1) (QAA Napier/NHS Lothian) 	<p>Assessment mechanisms</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Portfolio (incl. 2 E portfolios???)55% (22) • Presentation 15% (6) • Interviews 20% (8) • References/testimonial 3% (1) 	<p>Evaluation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluation and feedback from learners 3% (1)(OU in Scotland) • Electronic applications are normally submitted via the Norwegian UCAS. Documentation is sent to each

		<p>(Stirling)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflective Account/Diary 5% (2) • Project/written assignment 20% (8) • Examination/formal Assessment (oral or written and challenge exams) 38% (15) • Statement of Learning 10% (4) • Viva voce (UWS) 3% (1) • Video/audio tapes (Dundee) 3% (1) • Analytical evaluations of practice/analysis of issues underlying practice 3% (1) • Computer programmes 3% (1) (Dundee) • Assessors observation of practice 5% (2) • Simulation or role play 3% (1)(Abertay) • CV (1 online) 5 • Reference 3% (1) • U122 making your experience count module 3% (1) (OU) • Online CV Application 3% (1) • Assessment Tools (Letterkenny) 3% (1) • Person skill demonstration 3% (1) • Auditions (RSAMD) 3% (1) 	<p>institution applied to, which treats the application in accordance with the locally defined criteria. Offer of admission/denial of admission to the individual study programmes applied to are sent by UCAS. Appeals are handled by the individual institutions. 3% (1)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PLAR exit survey 3% (1) (Athabasca) • CLA feedback form 3% (1) (Athabasca)
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4.2 Phase 2 – Web based Survey

This section of the report considers the key outcomes of the online survey to HEIs, and other organisations in Scotland, the rest of the UK and internationally. Overall there was a 33% response rate to the online survey (55 responses); a profile of the respondents is provided below.

General RPL Profile

- **Profile of participants**

- 36% of survey respondents were from Scotland (80% from Scottish HEIs, including some multiple responses per institution and 20% from other Scottish Organisations);
- 22% of survey respondents were from other UK HEIs (including some multiple responses per institution); and
- 42% of survey respondents were from other International HEIs and organisations, including Canada, Latvia, France, the Netherlands, Estonia, Lithuania, South Africa, Sweden, Spain, Prague, Portugal and the USA (including some multiple responses per institution/organisation).

- **Institutional Key Contacts**

47% of survey respondents indicated that there were no other key contacts in their institution in relation to RPL, 37% of respondents said there were and 17% were unsure. This could highlight either a lack of coordination or centralisation of RPL processes and contact points. Clearly identified contact points for RPL for applicants, existing students and staff is an important aspect of a transparent and accessible RPL system.

- **Limits on Credit and RPL charges**

62% of respondents advised that there were limits on the amount of credit which could be claimed through RPL whereas 24% said there were no limits and 14% were unsure.

48% of respondents' institutions charge fees for RPL claims, 38% did not and 14% are unsure.

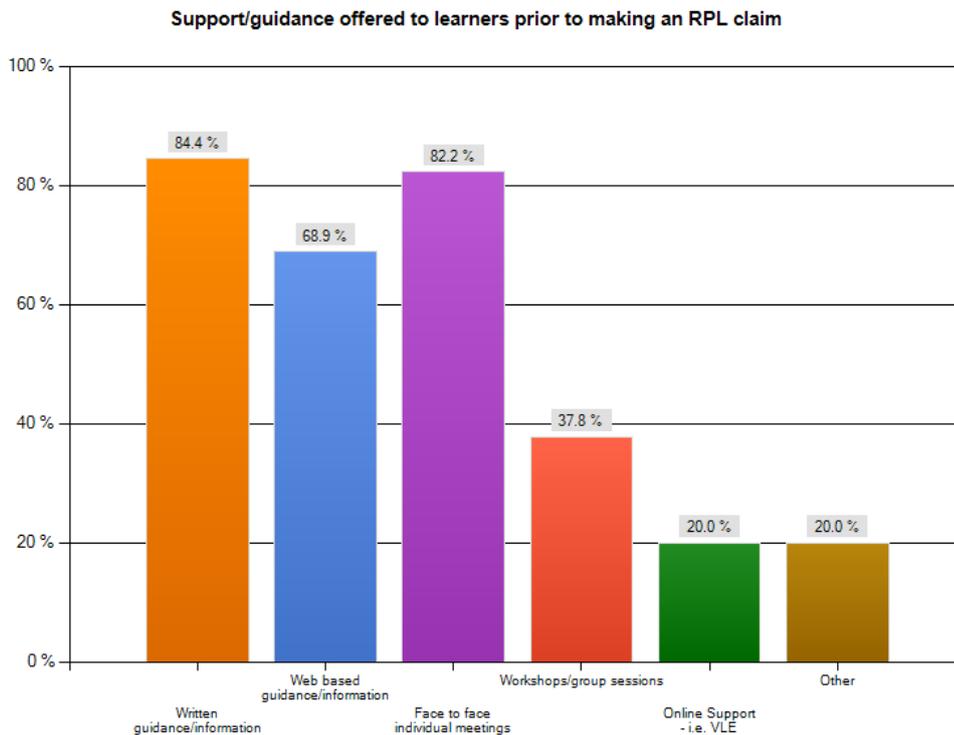
Initial RPL Guidance for Learners

Initial information about RPL

The responses indicated that initial guidance for learners should ideally be one of the main foci of institutions in terms of RPL. An open ended question in the survey asked respondents to highlight how initial guidance is provided for learners. The vast majority indicated that websites/on-line support were the source of initial guidance and information. This was closely followed by both written guidance (i.e. prospectus/marketing materials) and some form of human interaction/guidance i.e. seminars, workshops, individual meetings, events, Institutional contacts, mentors and so on. A few identified that they had RPL guidelines/written regulations that they issued to prospective applicants. Only one respondent identified the use of an RPL Toolkit (SCQF). Multiple points of access to initial RPL guidance, as well as modes of information, advice and guidance were recommended *as a means of enhancing information, advice and guidance processes*.

Prior to making a claim, the two most common forms of support/guidance provided for learners seeking RPL are written guidance/information and face to face individual meetings, closely followed by web based information, (as shown in figure 2). However, 20% used online support mechanisms and 20% noted they used other forms of support guidance. Of those who selected other, their responses included: organised workshops, distance mentoring, co-ordinators, telephone discussions, e-tools, RPL liaison person and web based self assessment questionnaire (*e.g. Open University Scotland*).

Figure 2



Support for students during the RPL claims process

Who provides the support?

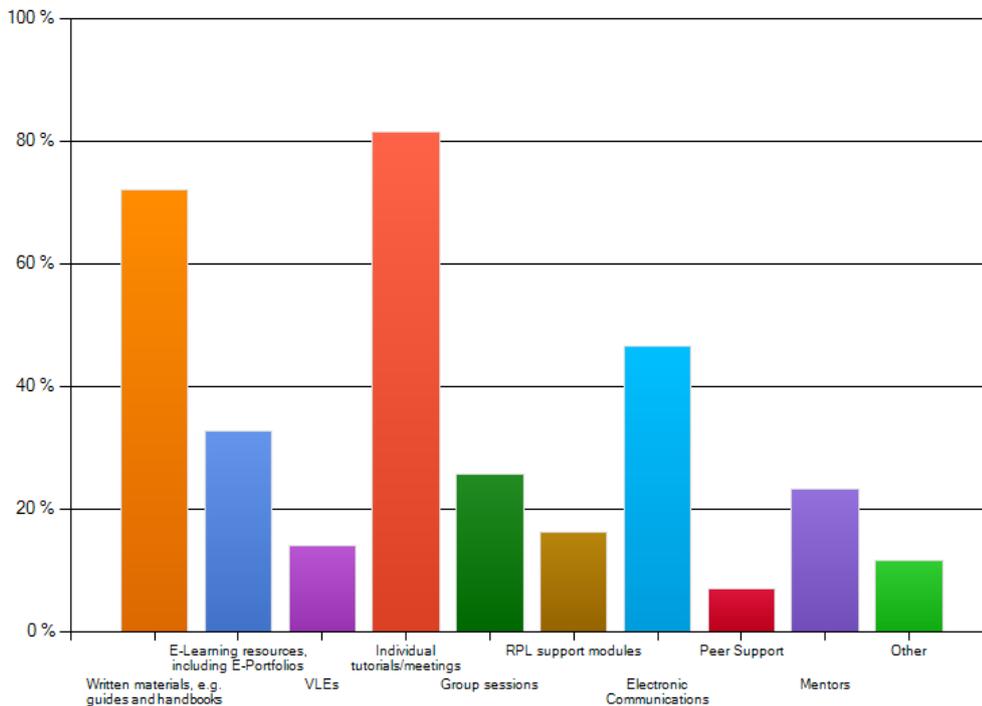
The highest response to who supports and guides learners at each phase of the RPL process is School/Department/Faculty RPL Coordinator/Advisor (78%), followed by Institution/Central RPL Coordinator and Programme/Module Leaders (38 % & 42% respectively), with 16% advising it was other. 'Other' responses included educational advisors, RPL (or equivalent) Co-ordinators and President of Jury (Portugal). Mentors/Advisors were deemed to be highly important in this process (Canada & the USA).

What types of support are provided?

Individual tutorials/meetings were the highest response to types of support/guidance materials provided (81%), closely followed by (72%) providing written materials e.g. guides and handbooks, as identified in figure 3. Other responses include: RPL online forums supported by study advisors, learning agreements set up by Educational Advisors; e-portfolios; Making Experience Count type modules; formative feedback, advisors; designing of RPL process into the module framework supported by open learning materials and facilitated by study advisors. Variations between and across institutions reflect the fact that in the majority of cases RPL processes are devolved to faculty/departmental level and approaches meet locally-determined requirements.

Figure 3

Types of support materials/guidance provided for learners during the RPL claims process



What are the most effective support processes?

There were 41 responses to the open ended questions about respondents' opinions on the most effective support processes. VLEs and electronic resources and some form of human contact (i.e. face to face meetings and/or group meetings with staff/mentors/advisors etc) rated as the highest responses to this question. It was highlighted by one respondent that *'VLE and other forms of technology enhanced learning resources are beneficial but the learners have to be able to have the skills to engage with these for them to be effective (many are digital immigrants)'*. The value of a blended learning approach which combines enhanced use of technology and online support alongside individual mentor/advisor support and clearly written guidance, templates and exemplars or case studies was reinforced in the responses.

How could support mechanisms at respondents' institutions be enhanced?

38 respondents provided feedback on how the support mechanisms within their institutions could be enhanced. The most significant response focused on the benefit of having a more centralised/integrated/transparent/streamlined/coordinated system. Improved Integration of RPL was mentioned in relation to advisory services, Personal Development Planning and work-based learning. A respondent from Canada highlighted an institutional development that will offer *'more courses (both credit and non-credit) to support people to develop a personal or foundation portfolio. That is an excellent tool for educational planning (course and program selection), career planning and PLAR (RPL) preparation as it organises learning and has people collecting evidence of their skills and knowledge.'* In addition the use of more electronic resources (technology) and VLEs designed into the modular/programme framework were regarded as highly important. This could include linking a VLE/e-portfolio approach supplemented with group approaches to enable peer support to a credit-bearing module. Appointing mentors/peer supporters to support applicants alongside the key or central advisor was also suggested. Raising the RPL profile in general and with staff in particular and developing mechanisms for supporting and training staff were also viewed to be important. This included the promotion of CPD opportunities for staff such as *'Building a peer support network for staff supporting and advising RPL claims to share experience and best practice e.g., a Virtual*

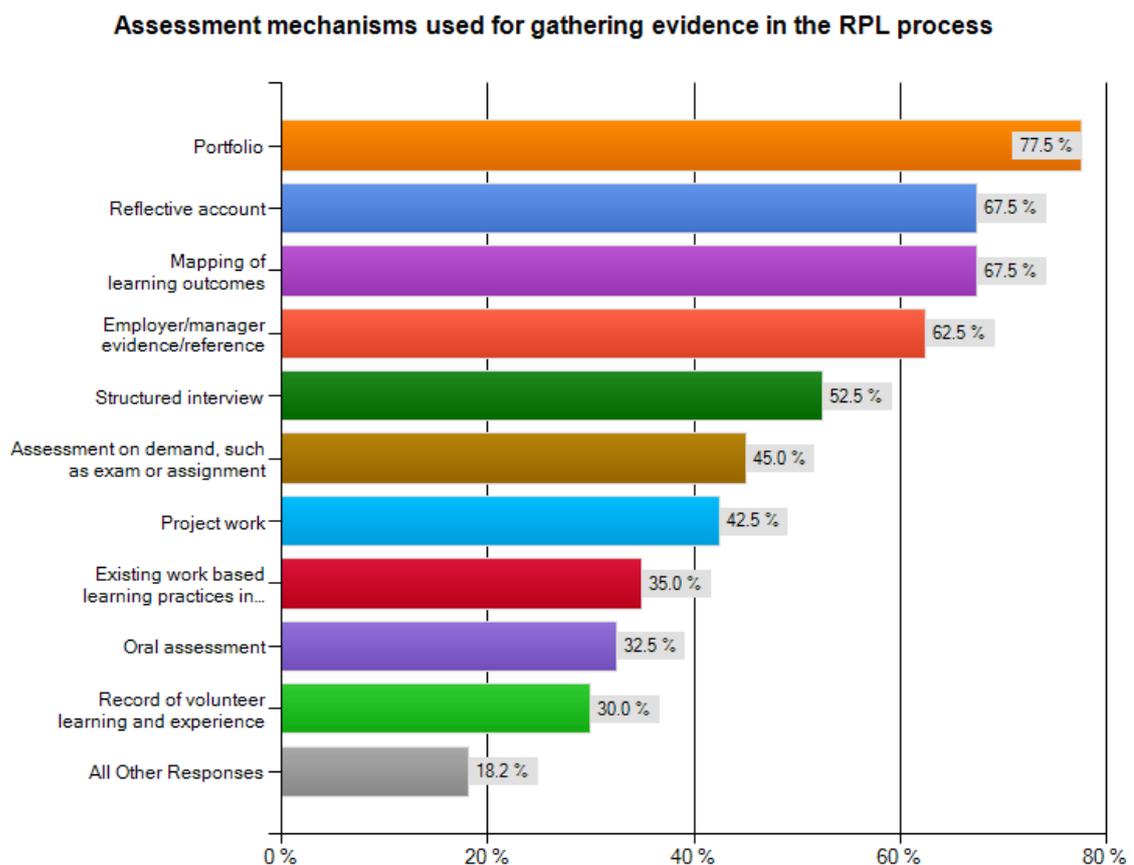
Community of Practice. The importance of allocating timetabled hours for staff involved in RPL support was also highlighted by many.

Assessment Mechanisms for RPL process

What assessment mechanisms are used?

The chart below (see figure 4) indicates that there are a wide variety of mechanisms used in gathering evidence for RPL. The most cited mechanism is the portfolio, closely followed by reflective accounts and mapping techniques. 18% of respondents selected the ‘other’ option and of these responses included: unstructured interviews and case specific assessment – i.e. determined by each individual claim. One response indicated that *‘learning outcomes or statements of learning may be developed on an individual basis relating to the student’s learning experiences and the SCQF level descriptors. A written piece of work linking theory to practice forms part of the portfolio of evidence (as well as) a presentation and question and answer session for claims over 60 credit points.’* Another approach cited was *‘the demonstration of equivalency of academic level based upon role and responsibilities within employment mapped against SCQF level descriptors and verified by evidence as part of the admissions process e.g. interview, supporting statement, group discussion, essay’.*

Figure 4



What are the most effective assessment mechanisms?

39 respondents indicated which RPL assessment mechanisms they considered would be most effective. Several respondents highlighted that this is dependent on the individual cases/different departments/assessment mechanisms used and will therefore vary accordingly. However Portfolios (e or otherwise) and structured interviews are still highly significant. Mapping against learning outcomes is suggested on several occasions. One respondent suggested that vivas are an appropriate mechanism and should involve less written work. One respondent (from Canada) commented that *'we don't consider the portfolio 'artifacts' (to be) assessment mechanisms, rather we think of them as learning activities. We construe the whole exercise as an exercise in learning. The fact that an assessment is performed is after the fact and it occurs as a latter part of the learning cycle, as does most (summative) assessment in the learning cycle. We also engage in substantive formative assessment via the mentors' review of learners' work as it is in process'*. The assessment of evidence needs to be appropriate to the nature and size of the claim being made and 'fit for purpose', as determined by academic subject experts. One respondent highlighted the fact that *'it is essential that any RPL assessment mechanism gains the trust and confidence of the academic community involved'*.

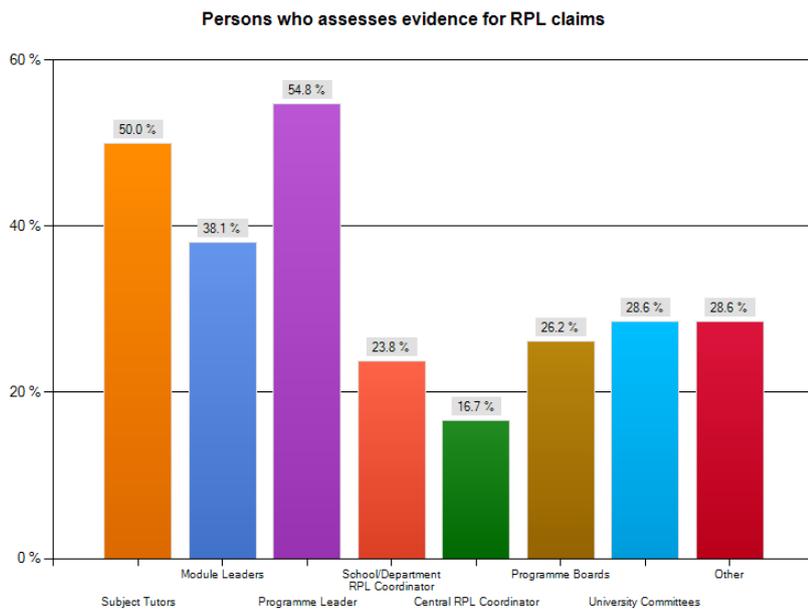
How could assessment mechanisms in respondents' institutions be enhanced?

There was a mixed response to the question about how the assessment mechanisms at the respondents' institution could be enhanced. As above, several respondents considered that a better understanding and awareness/recognition/coordination of training in RPL and assessment mechanisms would be beneficial. This includes a better understanding of the nature and process of informal learning and therefore evidence which demonstrates capacity and competence at the appropriate level, depth and breadth without demanding an exact match to programme specific outcomes, predicated on a formal learning process, which is very difficult to achieve. Some respondents had other suggestions which included: video conferencing, use of a tool book. One respondent suggested that *'raising the profile of RPL and recognition of the time taken to assess would encourage staff to become more involved, widening the pool of expertise'*. Greater uses of e-portfolios are highlighted on several occasions also.

Who assesses RPL claims?

In general the responses, as shown in figure 5 indicate that either programme leaders or subject tutors assess RPL claims (50% and 54% respectively). 29% of respondents highlighted that they have 'other' persons who assess RPL claims. These include: departmental committees (rather than a specified Institutional committee) and external examiners. RPL claims are ratified or approved either by Programme Assessment Boards or by 'RPL Committees'. RPL assessment processes tend to mirror the normal assessment processes as part of the institutional quality assurance system.

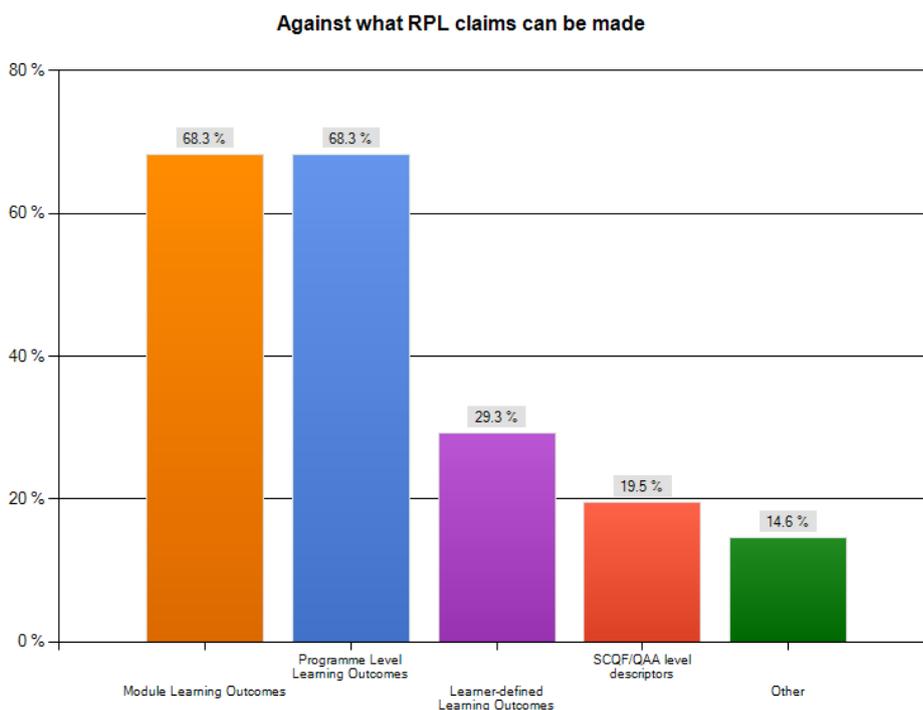
Figure 5



Against what can RPL claims be made?

In terms of the basis of the RPL claim, or the framework within which a claim can be made, module learning and programme level learning outcomes were by far the highest response. Interestingly, growing use of learner-defined outcomes (29.3%) and use of SCQF/QAA level descriptors (19.5%) was indicated. Other responses included professional standards and competencies and an open evaluation system through which the ‘students’ learning is assessed for what the student knows, not a set of pre determined standards’ (USA). See Figure 6.

Figure 6

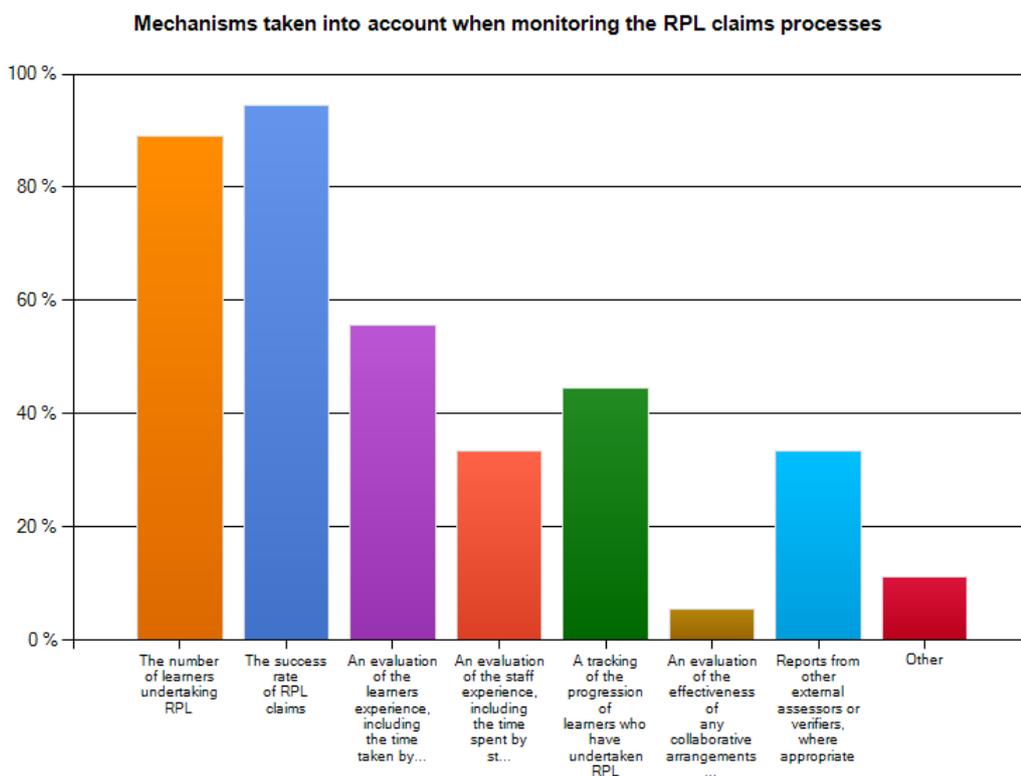


Institutional Systems for Quality Assurance systems for Monitoring and Evaluation of RPL

73% of participants responded to the open ended question about Quality Assurance procedures to monitor RPL processes. While 43% of respondents noted that their institutions had processes in place to monitor the use and impact of the RPL process, 40% of respondents reported that there were no processes in place, while 17% were unsure. Several respondents refer to departmental procedures which are in place, including monitoring by programme/assessment boards. In these cases RPL claims are subject to the mainstream module/programme Quality Assurance processes. A tagging system has been developed by one institution, whereby the progress of RPL students is monitored over time and an RPL framework, which outlines the RPL process (South Africa).

Of those institutions that monitor the use and impact of RPL, mechanisms are used to monitor the success rate of RPL claims (94%) and to record the numbers of learners undertaking RPL (89%), as shown in figure 7. However, only 44% of these track the progression of learners who have undertaken RPL and 56% which monitor the actual student experience of this group. 11% of respondents selected 'other' and these included those institutions which are in the process of establishing/enhancing their monitoring systems or identified that they did not know what their monitoring mechanisms were. One respondent highlighted that the '*lack of formal evaluation of staff and learners is a gap in practice- informal feedback is used*'.

Figure 7



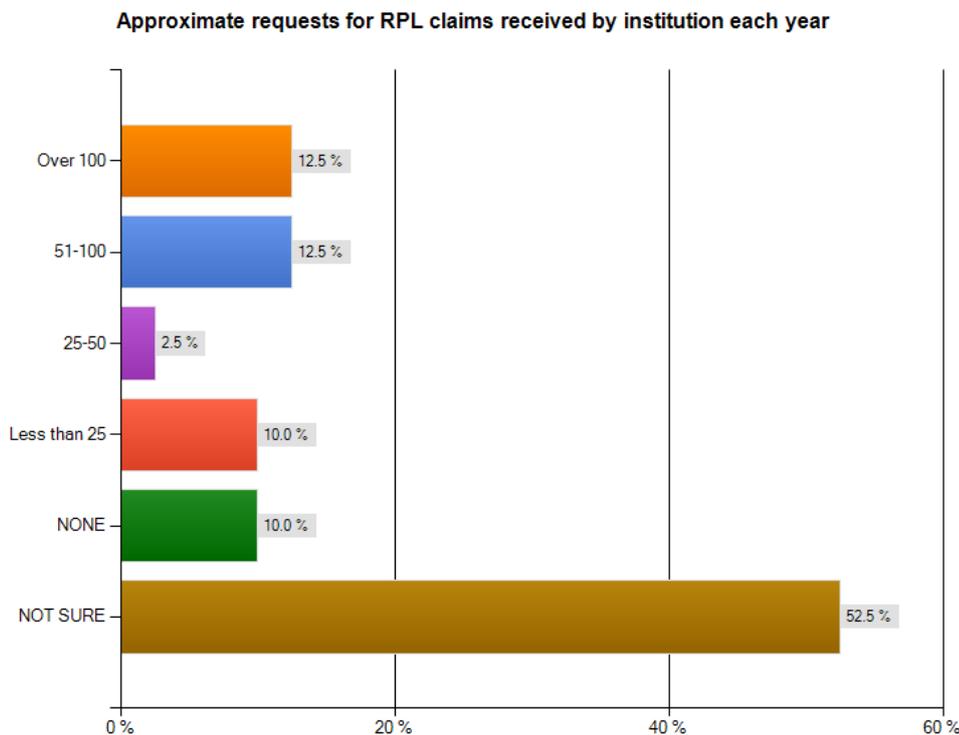
In terms of how the RPL process is evaluated, feedback forms from both students and staff are the most common mechanism. However, it is positive to note that while only 23% use focus groups and 27% personal interviews, this indicates these institutions are concerned with the actual student experience. 31% of respondents noted that they used another method of evaluation. However, often they chose this section to highlight again that they were either not evaluating RPL or did not know if they were evaluating it. The need

to improve mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation of RPL, in order to ensure enhanced practice and a positive student experience emerged as a key issue.

How many claims do institutions receive each year?

53% of respondents were unsure how many RPL claims their institution received each year, while 13% indicated that they received more than 100, as shown in figure 8. The majority of respondents who did not know how many claims their institution receives again indicates the need to enhance data capture processes to enable effective monitoring, tracking and evaluation of the RPL process and outcomes.

Figure 8



To what extent are RPL processes streamlined within respondents’ institutions and provide a positive experience for learners?

43% of respondents were unsure as to whether RPL support/assessment mechanisms used by their institution ensured the process was successfully streamlined and provided a positive experience for learners (38% responded that it did and 20% that it did not). This suggests that more streamlined processes across the sector would be beneficial in terms of the student, and indeed staff, experience of RPL.

In what ways could RPL processes be streamlined/enhanced?

The survey sought the respondents’ opinions on the ways in which RPL support and assessment mechanisms could be streamlined and/or enhanced. There were only 28 responses to this question and these include the need to simplify the process; to develop enhanced information on RPL and more training/awareness/recognition and CPD opportunities for staff; and the design of programmes and learning outcomes to facilitate the recognition/assessment of prior informal learning. Other recommendations include a central institutional database for RPL, greater levels of institutional coordination of the process and a

centralised evaluation process for staff and learners. The more extensive use of VLEs and e-portfolios to supplement (rather than replace) individual or group support was also recommended. While generic online support can be used it is necessarily limited by the need for subject specific support for RPL for programmes/modules. Some respondents considered that students would benefit from being able to interact with students who have previously gone through the RPL experience; currently there are few formal mechanisms in place which would enable this. One respondent suggested that 'enhancement' might be a more appropriate term to use than 'streamlined' as the latter term could imply efficiency rather than effectiveness. The respondent considered that *'RPL works best when staff using it 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.'*

89% of respondents indicated that they would be happy for the research team to contact them. Some of these have been communicated with in telephone interviews, which are discussed in more detail within the next section.

4.3 Phase 3 – In depth Interviews

This section considers the key outcomes of the in-depth semi-structured interviews held with survey respondents from HEIs whose responses indicated a creative use of technology in relation to RPL support and assessment, the use of learner-defined learning outcomes, and/or whether or not the institution is monitoring the use and impact of RPL.

Profile of interviewees

Six interviews were undertaken. Of the interviewees, two represented Scottish HEIs, two English HEIs, one a Canadian HEI and one a US American HEI, the two latter institutions consisting of a large proportion of distance-learning students. Five out of six interviewees had stated in the survey that their institution offers learner-defined learning outcomes, four institutions offer VLEs and/or e-portfolios as part of the RPL process and three monitor the use and impact of RPL.

The use of Technology in RPL support and Assessment

Of the two institutions that use technology for RPL support and Assessment, the US American one stands out as an example of effective practice. The institution has its own *'home-grown'* VLE system that underpins the RPL (referred to as PLAR in the American context) process from start to finish. It encompasses all levels (systems and processes) and is currently being developed further to support an active learning process for the claimant. As such, it functions as a one-stop-shop for all those involved, claimants and members of staff alike. It saves resources, since it stores all documents and forms a permanent record that can be referred to throughout the process. Additionally, there is a new system that holds every academic document and will be able to extract credit automatically from those documents and, thereby, create a *'credit available document'*. This means that everything is stored in one place, the individual prior learning (incl. non-formal PL) and credited PL, based on the student's overall degree plan.

All written work is submitted via the VLE to the local Learning Centre Office. The evaluator is also matched to the claim via the VLE. In addition to submitted work, there is also a face-to-face interview. The evaluator then recommends how much credit should be given via the VLE which ensures that a permanent record is created. Although the system works well, what is lacking is an actual learning environment that supports a learning process. At the moment the VLE functions as a tool for communication, submission and tracking, but not for actual learning. The VLE, therefore, has yet to be designed to foster learning, too. Embedding the pedagogical processes is, according to the interviewee, still a challenge, but plans to acquire a new e-portfolio system will aim to meet these challenges.

The interviewee pointed out that there will be a move towards a commercial e-portfolio system next year that is aimed at promoting learning processes. It will form an integrated part of the VLE and will track how students gather and present their work/portfolio and how they then relate their prior (informal) learning to their studies. In addition to the VLE, claimants are also given the option of a '*learning description*', in which the student describes their experiences, prior learning etc. that will then be assessed. In order to allow flexibility, this option offers students a choice of format, i.e. they can submit their '*learning description*' in alternative formats such as videos, audio files and/or concept mapping. However, students do not tend to choose the option of using the learning description for their RPL claim. In the interviewee's experience, only students who are already pushing boundaries choose alternative formats like the learning description. The most difficult part of the process is the inflexibility of the review (assessment) process, which has not yet caught up with the technological advances. There is a perceived need to enhance the review process and adapt it to the technology that is now available. Especially, since there has already been one instance where the evaluator submitted the assessment in video format, which highlighted the fact the process, as it stands, is not coping with advanced technologies.

The Canadian HEI hosts a hugely informative, publically available, website on RPL (PLAR in the American context) that offers a wide range of information and guidance material, including details on the RPL process. The latest addition to the website is a series of videos that address the most difficult aspects of RPL claims and demonstrate how learners can bring together their work. The institution has been moving towards an e-based system and has recently acquired a new e-portfolio system (Mahara), which is currently being tailored to the university's needs, respecting anonymity and confidentiality, and further developed to enhance the existing processes. It has been piloted recently, but there has not been any feedback from users yet. Previously, claimants could use discs, hyperlinks to websites and email attachments to present their work.

The current system sees claimants prepare an extensive document(s) together with their mentors. Mentors engage with claimants/students alongside (not through) the e-portfolio via mentoring, email and other forms of communication. The document(s) go back and forth between the claimant and their mentors several times. Once the document(s) is complete, it is uploaded onto the e-portfolio system. In addition to text-based evidence, students/claimants can use audio/video clips as part of their portfolio. The new system is open to different formats, so that the students/claimants can choose the format that best suits their claim. The institution aims to make it easier for the claimants and thus encourages them to use alternative formats.

The example of the Scottish HEIs shows that in relation to the use of technology in RPL support and assessment, the focus is still very much on using advanced learning technologies to produce accessible guidance material and to support the assessment process. At one of the Scottish HEIs, the use of video for case studies in the guidance material is being explored. Within subjects that cover the creative and cultural industries videos and DVDs may form part of the assessment providing evidence of learning outcomes. Additionally, question and answer sessions may be captured on video and where appropriate, these are used as evidence for the assessment. An electronic resource for RPL is in the early stages of development. At the other Scottish HEI the interviewee pointed out that there is only a limited way of using the VLE (mainly as a resource), due to that fact that RPL claimants cannot be attached to the VLE due to the institutions' way of gathering progression and retention data. The interviewee also stated that statistics on the use of the VLE in RPL claims shows that it may only be accessed once, mainly at the start of the process for finding out about the RPL process. It depends very much on how familiar RPL claimants are with VLE/IT whether or not it will be used more often. The main use of the VLE lies in the administrative part of the process.

One of the English HEIs has undertaken a review of the APEL/APL processes that has highlighted some of the weaknesses in the system, for instance there are APEL/APL processes in narrow and selected areas (e. g. nursing, social work) whilst in other areas these may not be as clear or efficient. The interviewee noted that there are no university structures that look favourably onto APEL/APL outside the 120/140 credit limit. The institution currently does not support flexible amounts of credits, that is to say that claimants who only gain 40/50 credits through APEL/APL are forced to study part time. Unless claimants can succeed in gaining the full

120/140 credits, they will not be admitted into a full-time programme. In relation to using a VLE, the interviewee stated that at the moment the processes are very much text-based, but that there is evidence of an increasingly online approach to capturing and supporting the APEL/APL process. While there is some online support, the process is mainly supported by mentors who work closely with claimants. Following on from the review there are plans to make VLE online support available to claimants alongside face-to-face mentoring, ensuring that APEL is a learning process. The interviewee pointed out that there was some evidence that an e-portfolio system can support the compilation against learning outcomes (PebblePad), but that a structured e-portfolio for the accreditation of prior learning still needs to be developed.

Learner-defined learning outcomes as the basis of RPL claims

Four of the six interviewees represent institutions where learner-defined learning outcomes form the basis for RPL claims. Two of the four interviewees pointed out that their institution has strong links to industry and employers and that the main basis for learner-defined learning outcomes is to ensure that workforce development needs are being met and that all students benefit from a flexible, specifically designed course of study relating to their day-to-day work.

The US institution is distinct in as far as it is built on an open curriculum system which means that students design their own degree programme by reviewing their prior learning, including pre-evaluated (non-formal) learning and by developing a prior learning assessment together with their individual mentor, who are all faculty trained. Students have to research their subject area in advance which results in students being better prepared for their studies. In contrast to a fixed curriculum system, the flexible curriculum can shift more easily to fit industry needs and requirements. The interviewee stated that those students who are successful with their RPL claims are more prepared and happier to engage. This also echoes the feedback from industry. However, students who are less self-regulated or less reflective do struggle with the process. There is some resistance as many expect instant results due to what the interviewee referred to as an '*instant gratification culture*'.

There are two kinds of portfolio claims that student/claimants can make at the Canadian HEI: one programme based (more complex) and one course based (modules). Which one is chosen very much depends on the programme and the students' abilities. For the course-based claim, for instance, the learner may have part of the knowledge required, but it does not fit easily into the modules. The interviewee highlighted that this is a challenge not only for the claimant, but also for some faculty members who find it difficult to match learners' skills to the modules/programmes. However, if the learners cannot find a course that fits their prior learning, the institution allows them to describe their own course, or in other words, imagine their 'ideal' course, give it a title and come up with learning outcomes as a synopsis of their prior learning. In some cases the learners/claimants are advised to go and have a look at courses/programmes at other institutions and use those descriptors as a model for their claim. Throughout the process the learners are supported by the RPL coordinator and by their mentors. Once this part of the process is completed, the outcomes are presented to the expert(s) who then decides whether or not it is a viable option: a) whether it demonstrates that the claimant has the required knowledge and b) it can be reasonably assessed. The interviewee described one example where a claimant was successful: the claimant came from the Mormon communities and used her experience as a Mormon wife to create courses to describe her life as part of a Mormon sect. She chose sociology and was granted two senior level Masters courses for her work.

At one Scottish HEI, staff work closely with the RPL claimants to assist them in constructing statements of learning that reflect their prior learning. This process takes time. There is a need to explain learning outcomes and how statements of learning demonstrate a close 'fit' with the students proposed programme of study linked to SCQF level descriptors, Since '*life is not modular*', statements of learning are based on programme rather than module outcomes

At the other Scottish institution SCQF/QAA level descriptors based on professional standards such as NMC

(Nursing & Midwifery Council) and HEA (Higher Education Academy) are being used for RPL claims. The example concerns the field of health and social care, where the main number of claimants are post-qualifying, non-traditional school leavers who are seeking SCQF Level 9, 10, 11 entry to a specific qualification. For instance, some students do not have an honours degree (due to the nature of their profession), and are seeking entry to a Masters programme without an honours degree or entry into honours level study without a standard degree. The SCQF descriptors allow an assessment of claims on the nature of equivalency between the competences developed through their professional experience and those required at SCQF level 10, for example. A recent development has been the mapping of SCQF domains/outcomes against different types of evidence, such as interviews, group interviews etc. The RPL assessor then completes the claim form afterwards. The process is quite challenging for both students and staff, although the SCQF descriptors are used in the programme approval process. The language of the SCQF level descriptors can be ambiguous (e. g. determining meaningful differentiation between levels 9 and 10) and depends very much on interpretation by the assessors.

So far this method appears to be working well, but there is no data on the performance of successful RPL claimants afterwards. There is a need to examine how accurate the RPL process is in determining the claimants' performance during their course of studies to find out whether there are any specific difficulties for students adjusting to the Masters level studies.

Overall, the process is complex but worthwhile. Feedback indicates that that it is viewed as a positive experience, and that by constructing statements of learning, claimants are supported in becoming reflective practitioners. The interviewee pointed out that members of staff are often surprised about the breadth and depth of knowledge that claimants, especially those from non-traditional backgrounds, have. Some members of staff have become champions for the process since they have become involved and are planning to develop it further.

One of the two English HEIs provides another example of an institution focusing on work-based learning and workforce development using learner-defined learning outcomes to meet the students' and the employers' needs. Developing learner-defined outcomes and an agreement on assignments form the basis for a learning contract. This process allows the students to determine for which level they wish to aim and as such it ensures that they study what they really want to study. However, the process is difficult. Claimants know what they want to achieve, but they need support from the APL coordinator/academic to help translate their experiences into the language of learning outcomes. The interviewee described the work of an APL coordinator as a '*spin doctor*', translating prior learning into the appropriate language. A review undertaken two years ago highlighted that the process was complex and difficult, but positive as it responded to students' needs and ensured that they were positively engaged with their studies.

The examples where learner-defined learning outcomes form the basis for RPL claims not only signify a more progressive, flexible approach to student learning, but also underline close links to industry, which is essential if HEIs are to respond effectively to a workforce development agenda. All five interviewees highlight the challenges that accompany the process of developing learner-defined learning outcomes: whilst it is challenging for students, requiring them to reflect on their learning, it also proves difficult for assessors who may or may not expect the depth and breadth of experiences that have to be translated into the appropriate language of outcomes and credits. However, all interviewees stated that it is a worthwhile process that provides an excellent preparation for students, allowing them to benefit from the process.

Monitoring/Evaluation of the use and impact of RPL

Of the six institutions represented by the interviewees, the Scottish HEIs monitor the use and impact of RPL through the existing academic structures, where programme and subject panels/boards function as monitors of the process. To the knowledge of one of the interviewees representing an English HEI there is no particular process of monitoring the use and impact of RPL. There are the existing academic structures that monitor

credits and credit transfers for quality assurance purposes, but there is no dedicated monitoring and/or tracking of RPL claims. At the other English institution there are plans of monitoring the progress of APEL/APL students in comparison to other groups of students. This plan is a result of the APEL/APL review that took place and that had identified weaknesses, failures and potential deficiencies of the process. Currently, it is difficult to identify APEL/APL students in the records system, since they are often mixed with other groups of students (international students, articulating students, etc.). However, for the next academic year there is a plan to unpack the data to monitor student attainment against a broader set of entry qualifications, including APEL/APL on a programme/course level to see whether those students perform better or worse and, in the latter case, whether the APEL/APL process prepares them properly for their studies or not.

The Canadian HEI has an IT management system in place, which allows the tracking of students throughout their programme. The students sign a learning contract agreeing to be tracked. This allows the institution to track how many learners there are per mentor and at what stage within the RPL process they are, how many projects are nearly complete and how many have 'gone missing' (dropped out). The latter group are contacted to find out why they have 'gone missing'. The tracking mainly focuses on the success rates for RPL claims and not so much on the performance of students following on from a successful RPL claim. The latter is possible, but the interviewee voiced concern about the legitimacy of that type of research, pointing out that there is a need for sensitivity towards the motives underlying such calls for research: who is interested in obtaining such information? For whom is it useful? Is it senior management looking for justification of the RPL process? Or is there a genuine desire to enhance the student experience and improve higher education institutions' flexibility in relation to admissions in order to truly 'widen participation'?

The US institution offers a detailed example of the monitoring of the use and impact of RPL, albeit – similar to the Canadian HEI – with a focus on numbers and success rates, rather than performance of students who have undergone the RPL process.

The monitoring works on various different levels within the institution:

- the review process in itself helps to monitor the use and impact of RPL;
- the institution has nine undergraduate learning centres who are responsible for both, the RPL and the degree design. All staff members are experts in both and work with students on a wide level;
- The Office for Academic Review has a staff of six but they work college-wide with about 25 professional members of staff. This institutional RPL group undertakes institutional research with the aim to enhance practice. For instance, there are currently a couple of major projects on evaluating the training process for staff;
- the tracking data is focussed on the number of students undergoing the RPL process and on progression and retention. There is no focus on actual performance of students who claimed RPL, only on the pass/fail rates. The emphasis is more on numbers, how many use the RPL process and how many of those succeed. The institution has five years of data that is currently being analysed and it is showing an increase in the practice of RPL; and
- Since RPL is part of the degree planning it is also monitored by the institutional review process on degree planning, the analysis of which is being done across all degree plans.

This model for monitoring the use and impact of RPL demonstrates an example of good practice in which various aspects of the RPL process are monitored, evaluated and researched with the aim to enhance institutional practice. Although one may argue that such a comprehensive system is essential for an institution that is built on a flexible curriculum system, it nevertheless accentuates the possibilities and opportunities that arise from a thorough approach to monitoring the use and impact of RPL. Monitoring forms an invaluable

part of streamlining RPL processes and should therefore be supported and enhanced rather than merely being seen as part of an institution's compliance with quality assurance regulations.

5. Streamlining and Enhancing RPL: Conclusions and Recommendations

The outcomes of the scoping exercise, web survey and telephone interviews confirm that a variety of different approaches to RPL support and assessment are used by HEIs to meet the needs of different learner groups and different programmes. However, the need to address the following key issues in order to develop an effective system of RPL is reflected in the findings:

- Operating a centralised or devolved model;
- Developing policy and guidelines;
- Designing a flexible curriculum;
- Developing initial information and guidance processes;
- Developing enhanced support systems/processes;
- Developing enhanced assessment systems/processes;
- Enhancing the support and CPD of staff; and
- Developing enhanced monitoring and evaluation processes.

Managed centrally or devolved?

The majority of HEIs in Scotland operate a devolved system whereby university procedures are operated and translated at a faculty/school/department level, with no or little central coordination or support. 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 students, and monitoring the process and the outcomes. The advantage of the latter model is that the HEI is explicitly investing in RPL activity and ensuring a coordinated, transparent and consistent approach across the institution. It also facilitates effective monitoring, tracking and evaluation of RPL activity. 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. The majority of respondents to the survey highlighted the need for greater coordination and integration of RPL processes at an institutional level, as well as support and training for staff. This does not necessitate a centralised model for RPL but does require more joined-up working between and across academic schools and faculties and central services, such as Admissions and Student Support services; a more explicit recognition of RPL activity in staff workload; provision of CPD opportunities for staff engaged in RPL support and assessment and more effective institutional data capture and analysis to enable monitoring and evaluation in order to enhance practice and the student experience.

Developing Policy and guidelines

Institutional Policy and guidelines for RPL should reflect the university commitment to recognising all forms of learning and the embedding of RPL in the university's Quality Assurance system. The policy and guidelines should make explicit the range and scope of programmes for which RPL applies and details of credit limits and any impact on grading or classification. The roles and responsibilities of the learner; advisor/mentor; assessor and other relevant roles/units/committees in the RPL process should be clarified. The key phases and elements of the support and assessment process should be outlined, allowing for a flexibility of approaches to support and evidence gathering in order to meet the needs of the learner and the demands of the programme. The need for support and professional development for staff involved in support and assessment should be addressed. The processes and mechanisms for monitoring, reviewing and revising RPL processes as appropriate should also be made explicit.

Designing a flexible curriculum

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 which facilitate a range of different routes for their achievement which link into delivery and assessment methods. Programme design should enable students to build on the range of competencies and knowledge gained through work-based and other experience which learners bring to the curriculum. RPL should also be integrated within work-based Learning programmes, forming an intrinsic part of the planning and evidence gathering process, rather than viewed as discrete activity before the programme commences. As part of regional and national workforce development agendas, there is clearly potential for HEIs to explore opportunities to strengthen the use of RPL with employees in the workplace and to support more flexible, part-time provision. There is also scope to make the links between RPL and educational or personal and professional development planning and the development of employability skills and graduate attributes more explicit.

Initial information and guidance

The need for multiple points of access for initial information and guidance on RPL as well as modes of information, advice and guidance was reinforced in the project findings. The use of websites; e-tools; prospectuses; programme and university marketing material as well as interaction with university staff in individual meetings or workshops, by email or telephone was highlighted in the survey findings. A range of examples of approaches are provided in the scoping study. Clearly identified contact points for RPL for potential applicants, existing students and staff is an important aspect of a transparent and accessible RPL system. 47% of survey respondents indicated that there were no other key contacts in their institutions and 17% were unsure. A lack of clearly defined contact points within an institution presents an immediate barrier which needs to be overcome if accessibility to RPL is to be enhanced.

Developing enhanced support system/processes

In terms of streamlining or enhancing support processes, the findings point to the value of exploiting the use of VLEs and technology-enhanced learning as part of a blended learning approach. Many HEIs are investigating or beginning to use e-portfolios and other e-learning tools, online forums or centralised resources to support the RPL process. The benefits of the e-portfolio model in supporting a learning process, rather than simply as an evidence gathering mechanism, were emphasised. The use of technology-enhanced learning was not recommended as a means of entirely replacing human interaction or subject expert support, however, and the point was made in the survey that learners need to have the skills to engage with technology enhanced learning resources for them to be effective. The use of technology-enhanced learning and VLES was viewed by many survey respondents as a means of supporting the integration of RPL into the mainstream curriculum as part of institutional blended learning strategies and linking it more explicitly to PDP and employability as well as WBL and distance learning. The professional development needs of staff in terms of the pedagogic use and application of new learning technologies was acknowledged as a challenge. The use of RPL credit-bearing modules as a vehicle for providing RPL support to which an explicit resource can be attached is also being explored or provided by some HEIs. The use of exemplars and case studies in support processes was also highlighted as well as developing mechanisms for peer support which would enable RPL claimants to benefit from the experience of students whom had already successfully gone through the process. The use of learning agreements between the learner and advisor, clarifying the agreed phases and timescales of the process and the responsibilities of each party was also proposed.

Developing enhanced assessment system/processes

The scoping study and survey findings indicate the wide variety of mechanisms used in gathering evidence for RPL. While the predominant form of assessment for RPL is via a portfolio, the need to develop more effective, simplified assessment mechanisms was highlighted by many. This is linked to the recognised need to enhance the understanding of the nature and process of informal learning in order to develop appropriate forms of assessment. 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. Mapping against programme level outcomes or level descriptors for large amounts of credit rather than against programme 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; greater use of e-portfolios to enable a more structured, iterative approach to building evidence; more use of structured interviewing as a single evidence source; greater use of video-conferencing; workplace-derived artefacts and existing workplace learning practices in evaluation and assessment particularly as part of WBL programmes were all proposed. The 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 a programme indicates this growing understanding of the nature of 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 Advisor or Mentor plays a crucial role as ‘interpreter’ of academic language and requirements and in supporting the learners’ transition from informal and non-formal 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, again indicative of the principle of establishing RPL as a ‘normal’ route to entry and credit, even if in practice uptake of RPL is still relatively low across the sector.

Enhancing support and CPD of staff

The development of assessment mechanisms appropriate to informal learning and the workplace and the design of a curriculum that facilitates flexible entry and delivery is linked to the need for greater staff awareness, understanding and professional development in relation to RPL across institutions. This issue was echoed throughout the survey responses. As well as training and opportunities for staff such as institutional and sector workshops and seminars and reflective/RPL practitioner modules as part of CPD programmes, ideas such as a Virtual Community of Practice and cross and inter institutional peer support networks for staff engaged in RPL support and assessment to build capacity and confidence in the process were proposed.

Developing enhanced monitoring and evaluation systems

The need to enhance monitoring mechanisms and data capture in relation to RPL was highlighted throughout the survey. The lack of formal evaluation of RPL, both qualitative and quantitative was identified as a gap in practice. Only 43% of respondents to the survey question about monitoring mechanisms note that their institution has processes in place to monitor the use and impact of the RPL process. The focus of this is monitoring the success rate of RPL claims and recording the number of learners undertaking RPL. Only 44% of these institutions track the progression of learners who have undertaken RPL and 56% who monitor the actual student experience of this group. Many institutions are currently addressing the issue of improved data capture and analysis within the context of integrated student management information systems. This may form part of wider institutional agendas to improve the evidence base in terms of recruitment; progression; retention and completion to inform planning and evaluation. The facility of VLEs and e-portfolios to support the tracking of RPL claimants and monitoring of their progress throughout their claim was cited. Feedback on

the student experience where this takes place is undertaken through feedback forms, focus groups and personal interviews.

In sum, streamlining and enhancing RPL support and assessment processes to ensure more effective and accessible approaches require a set of institutional enablers related to:

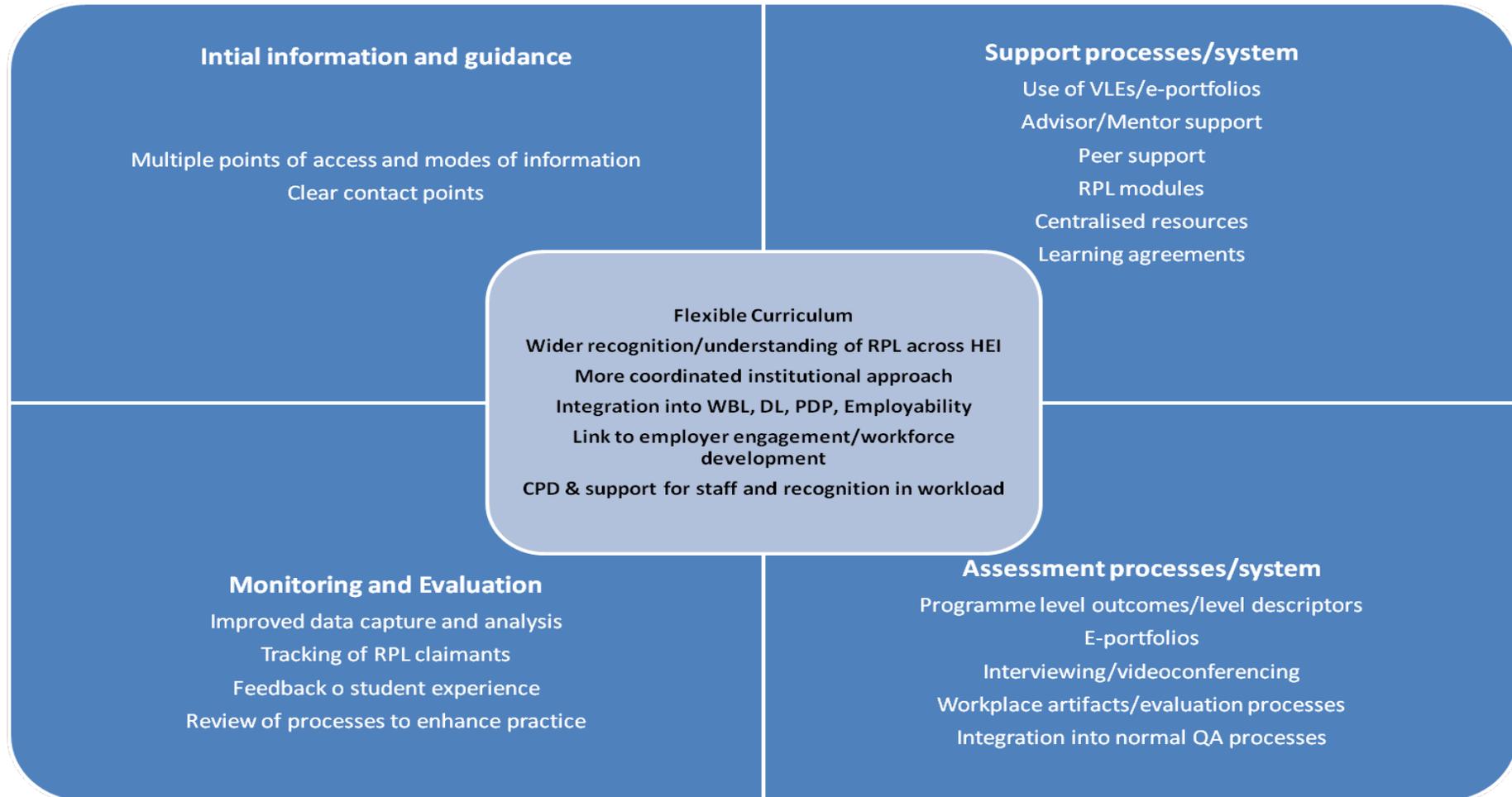
- policy and practice that mainstreams and integrates RPL within admissions, learning, teaching and assessment strategies and quality assurance mechanisms;
- Curriculum design that explicitly addresses flexible modes of entry, progression and delivery;
- Clear points of contact for RPL for potential applicants, existing students and staff;
- Building staff capacity in terms of providing effective forms of RPL support and appropriate forms of assessment, which is linked to the need for CPD opportunities and the increased visibility of RPL across the institution and in staff workload;
- Greater use of technology-enhanced RPL provision through VLEs and e-portfolios as part of a blended learning approach to support and assessment;
- Integration of RPL processes within related developments such as PDP, WBL and distance learning; and
- Data gathering and analysis to ensure effective monitoring, tracking and evaluation as part of a process of reviewing and enhancing practice.

While many of these enablers are already in place, or recognised, within Scottish HEIs, these represent key areas for further development within the Scottish HEI sector, particularly in relation to the use of technology; staff CPD and support; and monitoring and evaluation.

The typology below proposes the key elements of the guidelines to be developed by the Scottish HEI RPL Network in order to support the Scottish sector in developing enhanced, streamlined RPL processes.

6. Streamlined/Enhanced RPL processes: proposed typology/ key elements of guidelines

Figure 9



Streamlining RPL Processes

1. QAA Research Streamlining processes for RPL Support and Assessment

Streamlining RPL Processes: facilitating the award of credit for prior informal learning

The Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning at Glasgow Caledonian University has been commissioned by Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Scotland on behalf of the Scottish Universities RPL Network to support the development of guidelines for the streamlining of RPL processes to facilitate the award of credit for prior informal learning in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). This has been identified as a priority action for the Scottish Universities RPL Network. In order to achieve this objective we are conducting this web based survey of HEI RPL support and assessment mechanisms as well as a scoping study of RPL processes and practice at national and European level.

The Recognition of Prior Informal Learning is the process of recognising and, if appropriate, assessing and then accrediting learning that has its source in some experience which occurred prior to the point of a student entering his/her current programme, but where that experience was not formally assessed and accredited at higher educational level previously. Informal learning is defined as knowledge and skills gained through life and work experiences as well as through non-formal (non-certificated) learning, development and training activities or programmes. We use the term Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) throughout because that is the recognised term in the Scottish sector, although we acknowledge that institutions' own policies and systems may refer to the recognition of prior informal learning (RPiL) or recognition/ accreditation of prior experiential Learning (R/APEL).

We would be greatly obliged if you could take the time to complete this short survey as your input is of great value.

2. General RPL Information

1. Please provide the following details

Name of Institution	<input type="text"/>
Department:	<input type="text"/>
Your Name	<input type="text"/>
Job Title:	<input type="text"/>
Contact Address:	<input type="text"/>
Post Code:	<input type="text"/>
Email Address:	<input type="text"/>
Phone Number:	<input type="text"/>

2. Are there any other key contacts within your institution that we should be consulting?

YES NO NOT SURE

If YES, please can you provide details

Streamlining RPL Processes

3. Please provide the name and contact details of the person who manages your organisation's RPL procedures and processes (if different from above)?

4. Are there limits on the amount of credit that can be claimed through RPL?

- YES
- NO
- NOT SURE

If yes, please specify

5. Do you charge fees for RPL?

- YES
- NO
- NOT SURE

If yes, please specify how much

3. Initial RPL Guidance for Learners

6. In the first instance, how do learners find out about RPL in your organisation?

Streamlining RPL Processes

7. Prior to making an RPL claim, what forms of support/guidance does your organisation provide for learners seeking RPL? (Please select all that apply)

- Written guidance/information
- Web based guidance/information
- Face to face individual meetings
- Workshops/group sessions
- Online Support - i.e. VLE
- Other

If other (please specify)

4. Support for students during the RPL claims process

8. Who supports and guides learners through each stage of the RPL process? (Please select all that apply)

- Institution/Central RPL Coordinator
- School/Department/Faculty RPL Coordinator/Advisor
- Programme/Module Leaders
- Other

If Other, please provide details:

Streamlining RPL Processes

9. What type of support materials/guidance are provided for learners during the RPL claims process? (Please select all that apply)

- Written materials, e.g. guides and handbooks
- E-Learning resources, including E-Portfolios
- VLEs
- Individual tutorials/meetings
- Group sessions
- RPL support modules
- Electronic Communications
- Peer Support
- Mentors
- Other

If other (please specify)

10. In your opinion, which support materials/guidance would be most effective?

11. How could the support mechanism(s) for RPL at your institution be enhanced?

5. Assessment Mechanisms for RPL process

Streamlining RPL Processes

12. What assessment mechanisms do you use for gathering evidence in the RPL process? (Please select all that apply)

- Reflective account
- Project work
- Structured interview
- Oral assessment
- Assessment on demand, such as exam or assignment
- Simulation/observation of practice
- Mapping of learning outcomes
- Existing work based learning practices in evaluation and assessment
- Profiling
- Record of volunteer learning and experience
- Euro-pass Curriculum Vitae (CV) and Euro-pass Language passport
- Portfolio
- Electronic portfolio
- Video
- Audio
- Employer/manager evidence/reference
- Other

If other (please specify)

13. In your opinion, which RPL assessment mechanism(s) would be most effective?

14. How could the assessment mechanism(s) for RPL at your institution be enhanced?

Streamlining RPL Processes

15. Who assesses evidence for RPL claims? (Please select all that apply)

- Subject Tutors
- Module Leaders
- Programme Leader
- School/Department RPL Coordinator
- Central RPL Coordinator
- Programme Boards
- University Committees
- Other

If other (please specify)

16. Against what can RPL claims be made? (Please select all that apply)

- Module Learning Outcomes
- Programme Level Learning Outcomes
- Learner-defined Learning Outcomes
- SCQF/QAA level descriptors
- Other

If other (please specify)

17. What are your quality assurance procedures for assessing RPL claims?

6. Successful RPL Claims

18. Do you monitor the use and impact of the RPL process?

- YES
- NO
- NOT SURE

Streamlining RPL Processes

19. If you answered yes to question 18, what mechanisms do you take into account when monitoring the RPL claims processes? (Please select all that apply)

- The number of learners undertaking RPL
- The success rate of RPL claims
- An evaluation of the learners experience, including the time taken by learners to undertake the RPL process
- An evaluation of the staff experience, including the time spent by staff in supporting the RPL process and managing the process of recognition
- A tracking of the progression of learners who have undertaken RPL
- An evaluation of the effectiveness of any collaborative arrangements with other learning providers/learning partnerships/receiving institutions
- Reports from other external assessors or verifiers, where appropriate
- Other

If other (please specify)

20. How do you evaluate the RPL process? (Please select all that apply)

- Feedback forms for Staff involved in RPL processes
- Feedback forms for Students involved in RPL processes
- Focus Groups
- Surveys
- Personal Interview
- Other

If other (please specify)

Streamlining RPL Processes

21. Approximately how many requests for RPL claims do you personally receive each year?

- Over 100
- 51-100
- 25-50
- Less than 25
- NONE
- NOT SURE

22. Approximately how many requests for RPL claims does your institution receive each year?

- Over 100
- 51-100
- 25-50
- Less than 25
- NONE
- NOT SURE

23. In your opinion, do the RPL support and assessment mechanisms you use, ensure the process is successfully streamlined and provides a positive experience for the learners?

- YES
- NO
- NOT SURE

24. In your opinion, in what ways could your RPL support and assessment mechanisms be streamlined and/or enhanced?

7. Thank you and Further information

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire. Your responses are of great value for our research project.

Streamlining RPL Processes

25. Would you be happy for the research team to contact you for further information?

- YES
- NO

Appendix 2: Interview Template

Name:

Date/time:

Questions to be structured for follow up interviews based on the respondents' survey answers. These will be focussing on the following themes:

1. Support and assessment – especially technological advances etc (explore further/elaborate)

Survey answer

Notes:

2. Q16 from survey –learning outcomes/ descriptors/claims/credit awards/ for those who have selected something different – how do they do the alternative?

Survey answer

Notes:

3. Monitoring/evaluation use of processes and/or absence of

Survey answer

Notes: