



Flexible entry staff development pack

Recognising prior informal learning and credit transfer within the context of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework

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1 Purpose of the *Flexible entry staff development pack*

This pack has been produced through a development project funded by the Enhancement Theme for Flexible Delivery. Its purpose is to support staff within higher education institutions (HEIs) in the development and operation of flexible entry processes within the context of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF).

Flexible entry is defined as both the **recognition of prior informal learning** (RPL), which can also be described as the accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL), and **credit transfer**, which is also known as the accreditation of prior certificated learning (APCL).

The SCQF brings together all Scottish qualifications into a single unified framework, and gives each qualification a level and credit value. It also has the capacity to recognise all forms of learning. The development of national guidelines for RPL and credit transfer was therefore an integral part of the SCQF implementation plan. Further information and guidance on the SCQF is provided on its website (www.scqf.org.uk). Institutions recognise the need to develop effective processes of flexible entry to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population and to attract new student groups.

The SCQF *Guidelines for the recognition of prior informal learning* (SCQF RPL *Guidelines*) and *Guidelines on credit transfer* form the basis of this pack,¹ with extracts included throughout it. Illustrations of some of the key features of RPL and credit transfer are drawn from examples of practice within Scottish HEIs. These examples have been provided by members of the Higher Education Coordination Group for Flexible Entry, which was set up to support this development work. The group will continue to function as a network for HEI practitioners to support collaboration and the sharing of experience and expertise in the area of flexible entry. Details of how to participate in the Group are provided on the Enhancement Themes website (www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk).

This pack also provides a reflective staff development exercise and sources of further information.

The pack is designed to be used flexibly by HEIs to underpin staff development for new and experienced staff, the production of staff guides to flexible entry, and paper-based or on-line resources that can act as a source of reference for staff.

The pack can also be shared with partners in colleges, in the community and in the workplace to ensure mutual understanding of the process of flexible entry.

2 Who is the pack for?

The pack will be of use to academic and administrative staff involved in:

- curriculum development and programme design
- student recruitment and marketing
- admissions and selection
- programme and module leadership
- academic standards, quality assurance and quality enhancement

¹ The SCQF RPL *Guidelines* and SCQF *Guidelines* on credit transfer can be downloaded from the SCQF website (www.scqf.org.uk).

- school and faculty management
- lifelong learning
- widening access and participation.

3 What is meant by RPL and credit transfer?

3.1 RPL

RPL is a process that acknowledges and values publicly learning that has been achieved outside formal education or training systems.² The SCQF RPL *Guidelines* make a distinction between two forms of recognition:

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

3.2 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 as part of a guidance process. This RPL process can be linked to:

- confidence-building
- identifying individual learning pathways
- a notional levelling of learning within the context of the SCQF
- supporting the transition between informal, non-formal and formal learning
- preparation for the process of RPL for credit.

3.3 RPL for credit or summative recognition

RPL for credit or summative recognition is a process of assessing learning achieved outside formal education or training systems that is recognised, if appropriate, for academic or vocational purposes. This process is also known as APEL. RPL can enable learners to gain:

- entry to a programme of formal learning if the outcomes of their prior informal learning are judged to be equivalent to the entry requirements for the programme
- credit within a programme of formal learning if the outcomes of their prior informal learning are judged to be equivalent to the programme outcomes for which they are seeking credit.

3.4 Credit transfer

Credit transfer is a process through which previously assessed and certificated learning is considered and recognised for academic or vocational purposes, as appropriate. This process may also be known as APCL. It can enable learners to transfer credit gained within one programme of study to another programme

² For more information on the way in which RPL has developed in Scotland, see section 8.3 of this pack: 'Context setting: RPL in Scotland'. This has been extracted from a review of current and potential RPL activity in Scotland prior to the national debate on RPL and the development of the SCQF RPL *Guidelines*.

of study at the same or a different institution. Credit can be used from a previously uncompleted or completed award. Credit transferred can be used, where appropriate, as a foundation on which to build towards an award at a higher level or stage, thus enabling entry to a new course or programme.

3.5 *Credit transfer and RPL*

Learners may combine an RPL claim with a credit transfer claim in seeking entry to, or credit within, a formal programme of study.

Credit can be awarded for elements of a programme – units or modules, or parts of a level, or an entire level. Most programmes have limits on the amount of credit that can be awarded through RPL and credit transfer.

4 **Why should flexible entry processes be used?**

- **To increase access and widen participation for non-traditional learners**

Flexible entry can address the needs of mature learners and part-time students by providing alternative entry routes and shortening the period of study.

By using a consistent, recorded approach to RPL and credit transfer for entry to or credit within a programme, decisions regarding entry and credit are more transparent.

- **To support learners' progression**

Flexible entry processes enable learners to build on their existing attainments, whether gained through prior informal or certificated learning, in order to progress to the next level as a means of achieving their educational and career goals. This progression may take place through parallel learning by a transfer from one institution to another.

- **To link with personal development planning (PDP)**

RPL can be embedded within PDP processes and help to make explicit the links between life, work and learning.

- **To support developments in the area of learning and teaching**

The development of credit transfer and RPL processes can contribute to curriculum development in relation to the nature of learning, knowledge and assessment.

RPL is also integral to the development and operation of work-based learning (WBL) programmes.

RPL claims for credit are usually based on recent or current workplace practice, which can provide a useful source of discussion material for learners within the context of a formal learning programme. It can also enhance their understanding of the connection between theory and practice.

5 **What types of students can benefit from flexible entry?**

The processes of RPL and credit transfer can be used by a wide range of learners to help them to enter at an appropriate stage within a new programme of study. Potential beneficiaries include:

- students at colleges and HEIs

- adults returning to education
- people wanting to improve on their existing qualifications
- people wanting to retrain or change careers
- people who have completed part of a formal programme but have not achieved the complete award
- people who wish to move from one programme of study to another at the same or a different institution
- unemployed people seeking recognition for skills gained through informal learning
- people who have undertaken non-formal learning or training in the workplace or through community-based learning
- people who have gained a range of skills and knowledge through volunteering, activities or projects within their community
- people who have been out of the education system for a long time and may lack formal qualifications and self-confidence as learners
- people who have disabilities
- minority ethnic groups, travellers, refugees and asylum seekers.

NB: this list is not exhaustive.

5.1 *Gaining credit within a programme through RPL and credit transfer*

Example

'I had been working for several years in a management capacity. Through my company's PDP initiative I was able to combine a credit transfer claim for previously completed certificated learning with a successful RPL claim. Along with colleagues, I attended an RPL workshop run by university staff in the workplace. I was allocated a supervisor with specialist knowledge of my subject area. Together we negotiated statements of learning drawn from my work experience. My RPL claim involved drawing together evidence from courses attended, work initiatives and projects. I then had an interview to complete the assessment and was awarded credit towards my degree.'

A successful claim was made for 120 points at level 1 in a languages subject area. This was a combination of certificated learning and learning derived from time spent living and teaching in France and Spain. Certificated learning resulted in the award of 50 points at level 1. The remaining points were acquired through evidence of having developed language skills in French and Spanish and having gained in-depth awareness of the day-to-day culture and customs of both countries.

The claim consisted of:

- a series of statements of learning
- a written piece of work of 5,000 words, with sections in English, French and Spanish to test competence in written language skills
- a portfolio of supporting evidence, including details of a website developed by the student

- a presentation and viva voce, which was audio-taped; the presentation and viva was in three sections and was delivered in English, French and Spanish.

The above claim was supervised and assessed by academic staff within the languages section, including a native speaker for both French and Spanish. The applicant was awarded 120 points at level 1 and gained entry to year two as a full-time student. The student has now completed year two and achieved A-grade passes in seven of the eight modules studied.

For further examples of learners who have benefited from RPL, see section 6.9.

6 RPL: guidance

This section focuses on the development and operation of RPL procedures within HEIs. The SCQF RPL *Guidelines* are the core source of guidance, supplemented by examples of practice from HEIs in Scotland. These examples have been provided through the Flexible Entry Coordination Group.

6.1 Clarification of terms used

6.1.1 What do we mean by formal, non-formal and informal learning?

The SCQF RPL *Guidelines* use the European Union (EU) definition of different types of learning, referred to in its *Memorandum on Lifelong Learning*.³ This can be summarised as follows.

- **Formal learning** takes place within the context of programmes delivered by learning and training providers. It is assessed and credit rated 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 undertaken in the workplace, voluntary sector or a trade union and through community-based learning.
- **Informal learning** can be defined as experiential learning which takes place through life and work experiences. It is often unintentional learning. Learners may not recognise at the time of the experience that it has contributed to developing 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 WBL programme.

While it is useful to differentiate between these different types of learning for the purposes of the SCQF guidelines, an individual's learning experience is likely to comprise a combination of formal, non-formal and informal aspects.

6.1.2 What is prior informal learning?

The term **prior informal learning** can also be described as **prior experiential learning**. It covers all prior learning that has not previously been assessed or credit rated. This includes prior learning achieved through life and work experiences (paid and voluntary), as well as prior learning gained in non-formal

³ Commission of European Communities (2000) *Memorandum on Lifelong Learning*, Commission Staff Working Paper, Brussels.

contexts through community-based learning, workplace learning and training, continuing professional development and independent learning.

The types of experiences through which prior informal learning can be gained include:

- a particular piece of work, task or project undertaken at work, or through community or voluntary work, or through independent learning
- the experience of doing a particular job (paid or voluntary) or performing a particular role over a period of time
- 'on-the -job' training, or being mentored
- a non-credit-rated education or training course, undertaken in a community or workplace setting
- the experience of training, teaching or mentoring others, either formally or informally.

6.1.3 What do we mean by RPL?

RPL is a process undertaken by learners, including adults considering returning to learning, that involves:

- describing experiences
- reflecting on those experiences
- identifying the learning associated with the experiences
- defining this learning in terms of statements of skills, knowledge and understanding
- providing evidence of this learning.

The role of the learning provider is to give effective support to the learner in this process and to manage the recognition process in a clear, consistent manner.

RPL can form part of various activities associated with personal/career development, educational/career guidance and confidence-building, as well as assessment and credit rating. RPL is valuable in terms of its potential prospective and diagnostic function, as well as its retrospective focus.

The term 'recognition' therefore has a broader scope than the term 'accreditation'. APEL is one form of recognition.

HEIs may decide to use terms such as RUL/RUPL (recognition of (prior) uncertificated learning), recognition of informal prior learning and recognition of prior experiential learning to indicate more clearly the type of prior learning with which the process is concerned.

6.2 *Different forms of RPL within the SCQF*

A learner can undertake RPL for personal and career development, or to support the transition between informal and formal learning, or for gaining credit (for entry to and/or credit within formal programmes of study).

RPL for personal/career development focuses on **formative** recognition – supporting a continuing learning process through identifying a learning pathway. Formative recognition may result in a 'notional levelling' of an individual's learning within the context of the SCQF as part of an educational guidance or PDP process.

RPL for credit focuses on **summative** recognition – to gain entry to, or credit within, a formal programme of study. RPL for credit is the formal recognition of any non-assessed, non-credit-rated learning achieved by a learner prior to the point of undertaking a particular programme of formal learning. Summative recognition involves an assessment of prior informal or experiential learning as part of the credit-rating process.

The provision of both forms of RPL should take place within the context of clearly defined quality assurance mechanisms.

It is important to ensure that learners clearly understand the process and possible outcomes of both RPL routes before they make the decision to proceed.

6.3 *How is RPL used in HEIs?*

A survey carried out as part of the development project that produced this pack indicated that HEIs use RPL for the following purposes:

- confidence-building, return to study and educational guidance
- to award general SCQF credit (rather than specific credit within a programme)
- entry to programmes as an alternative to normal entry qualifications
- entry with credit/advanced standing
- for modules
- for programme levels
- credit within programmes, post-entry – for modules and for programme levels
- for entry to, or credit within, **all** programmes (undergraduate and postgraduate)
- for entry to, or credit within, **specific** programmes
- as part of PDP.

HEIs may adopt a two-stage approach to RPL for learners, based on the distinction between formative and summative recognition.

For some learners, the process of formative recognition may be a preparatory stage to summative recognition. Some learners may not feel sufficiently confident or prepared to undertake an RPL process for credit directly. For others, the decision to undertake RPL for credit may only emerge after they have engaged in the process of formative recognition and identified a learning pathway.

6.3.1 **Two-stage approach to RPL**

This two-stage approach to RPL is being developed by two HEIs in Scotland through the use of RPL modules. The modules provide generic group support to students undertaking RPL. The first module provides the basis of the first stage of RPL, formative recognition; the second module supports the second stage, summative recognition.

Example

One of the HEIs describes the function of these modules as follows:

‘Module 1 focuses on enabling learners to recognise the knowledge and skills gained through their prior informal or experiential learning in order to:

- increase their self-confidence as learners
- enable them to make an explicit connection between informal learning situations and formal learning opportunities in order to support their transition into formal learning
- identify educational/career opportunities in a wider sense.

Module 2 can be a vehicle for achieving credit for prior informal or experiential learning within the university. The module will:

- support learners in the process of making an RPL claim for credit
- recognise the learning that is undertaken in the process of compiling an RPL claim for credit
- increase opportunities for learners to gain access to HE at the appropriate level’.

6.3.2 Gaining entry to a programme through RPL

Learners can undertake RPL **to seek entry to a programme** at an HEI if they do not have the normal entry requirements but can demonstrate that they have achieved the prerequisite skills and knowledge through their experience or informal learning.

Example

Volunteer Development Scotland (VDS), in partnership with a university, offers a pathway on Volunteer Management within the BA in Professional Development.

Students require a minimum of HNC for access. However, where an experienced volunteers manager cannot meet this requirement, VDS works with the student to build a portfolio of prior learning that the university can recognise as an entry to the pathway at level 8. Level 8 represents the entry point to this pathway.

VDS provides support for the student to build a portfolio for RPL and submit this to the university. In the initial stages, the university supported VDS staff in training them to consider methods of gathering suitable evidence.

6.3.3 Gaining credit within a programme

Learners can also use RPL **to gain credit within a programme** at an HEI. Credit can be gained for a unit(s) or module(s) within a programme of study/qualification, or for an entire level(s) of a qualification, to enable learners to enter a programme with ‘advanced standing’ – that is, entering a programme later or at a higher level than the normal start point. Credit may also be gained within a programme after the start of the programme.

Example

Accreditation of experience-derived learning (AEDL) is part of the conversion programme currently offered to second-level nurses (enrolled nurses) at one university, and is a prime example of RPL in action.

The process was specifically developed to give second-level nurses the opportunity to have their experience attained since qualifying accredited within the practice component of a conversion programme leading to a professional qualification as a first-level registered nurse.

The majority of enrolled nurses have been qualified for more than 20 years and are experienced practitioners. However, most are employed at the level of a newly qualified staff nurse, and remain at this grade (D grade) for the duration of their career. Many find that they are not eligible for promotion and are often denied opportunities for personal and professional development. This leaves enrolled nurses feeling frustrated and demoralised, especially as they are overtaken by younger, less experienced staff nurses who quickly progress to E grade and beyond. An RPL mechanism such as AEDL, which acknowledges experience and promotes positive self-esteem, has potential benefits for this group of students.

6.3.4 RPL as an integral part of work-based learning programmes

Example

As part of the undergraduate and postgraduate Learning Contract Framework at one university, students are required to undertake the Reflective Practice and Planning Goal. They reflect on their development to date and identify their learning and development goals and how they will achieve them. In this process, students are encouraged to reflect on the skills and knowledge they have developed through prior experiential learning in relation to their learning goals, and to seek credit for this learning as part of the process of negotiating their planned experiential programme.

6.3.5 RPL as a part of negotiated programmes

Example

At Glasgow Caledonian University, students using RPL for entry with credit would be interviewed and the claim discussed. Appropriate evidence criteria would then be agreed in order to submit a claim, or students could embark on two 10-credit modules. Valuing Learning through Experience (VaLEx), a 12-stage model, can be used to put the claim together.

To gain credit within a programme, students could again embark on either of the above two routes, or take a 20-credit assisted Lifeplace Learning module to put the claim together in the form of learning outcomes. Full support is given on an individualised basis for this. For the second two routes, (the 10 or 20-credit modules), module descriptors are provided; in the latter case, students would also complete a personal module descriptor, dictating their own learning outcomes.

All three routes are fully supported by tutors assisting students on an individualised basis. The credit gained would be general credit for the Caledonian degree, a programme specifically designed for flexible learning. If students wanted specific credit on another programme, the transfer of credit gained would need to be specifically negotiated with the admitting department.

VaLEx assesses the work against benchmarks, using QAA materials for abilities, knowledge and so forth at various levels.

6.4 What does RPL involve?

RPL involves the learner in:

- reflecting on experiences
- identifying the learning within these experiences
- providing evidence of the learning claimed.

The key premise of RPL is that:

- **recognition is given for learning**, not for experience alone
- **the learning recognised should be transferable** and not just context-specific
- **credit awarded as a result of RPL is of the same value** as credit gained through formal learning.

6.5 Core principles of RPL

All RPL processes, whether for personal/career development or for entry and credit, should be quality assured to ensure consistency, transparency and accessibility.

HEIs can develop and use a variety of different approaches to RPL to meet the needs and goals of different learner groups and reflect the diverse nature of programmes across institutions.

All RPL provision should be underpinned by the core principles set out below. The aim of these core principles is to ensure effective, quality-assured practice that will enable learners, learning providers and employers to have confidence in the outcomes of RPL. By identifying core principles as the parameters under which all RPL provision within the context of the SCQF should operate, consistency will be more feasibly achieved.

The **core principles** contained within the SCQF RPL *Guidelines* are as follows:

1 Learner-focused

RPL should be a gateway and not a barrier to learning. RPL should promote the positive aspects of an individual's learning experience (as opposed to deficiencies). RPL should be a voluntary activity on the part of the learner. The learner's needs and reasons for recognition should be paramount.

2 Accessibility

RPL should be an accessible and inclusive process, applicable to all learners at all levels. Accessibility can be facilitated through:

- initial information and advice (awareness-raising)
- manageable systems in terms of time and money from the perspective of both learner and learning provider
- processes that are easy to understand and easy to implement
- embedding of RPL in the programme design stage so that it becomes an integral part of HEI provision, rather than an 'add-on', marginal activity.

3 Flexibility

A range of different approaches to RPL in terms of both support and assessment should be encouraged in order to address the diversity of learners' needs, goals and experiences across the different sectors.

4 Reliability, transparency and consistency

In managing RPL, processes are necessary to ensure confidence in the outcomes.

5 Clarity of role definition

The roles and responsibilities of the learner, learning provider and receiving institution should be clearly defined. Staff involved in managing and supporting the RPL process should be provided with appropriate training and support.

6 Quality

RPL should be underpinned by quality assurance mechanisms. Moderation of RPL for personal and career development should focus on ensuring that the standards of notional levelling are consistently applied. Moderation of RPL for credit should be integrated within existing quality assurance processes, and should be available for scrutiny for appropriate external quality assurance, for example by an external auditing body.

7 Collaboration

Collaboration among sectors should be encouraged in order to meet the needs of learners more effectively. Links should be encouraged between learning providers and receiving institutions, and between these bodies and organisations such as Careers Scotland, in supporting learners and potential learners to gain recognition for their prior informal learning within the context of the SCQF. Collaboration should extend to sharing case studies, examples of good practice and approaches to support and assessment.

6.6 Operational models for RPL

6.6.1 Devolved model

Current practice at many HEIs involves the operation of APEL/RPL procedures at faculty, school, departmental and programme level with no central coordination or central support for staff and students. Staff such as course or programme leaders, module leaders, admissions officers and advisers of study act as RPL advisers.

In one institution, the associate deans (quality) in each school are responsible for ensuring the quality of the RPL process and providing support to programme and module leaders in developing and operating support and assessment mechanisms for RPL. In another, each school has an RPL coordinator who convenes the school RPL committee and oversees RPL processes in the school. The RPL coordinator can identify an RPL adviser (for example, a module leader) who is a subject expert in the area where a student wishes to make a claim.

In some HEIs, designated staff act as advisers and/or assessors for RPL enquiries and claims respectively. In others, the leader of the programme or module for which RPL is being claimed takes on the role of adviser for the duration of a particular claim.

Institutions' RPL procedures or guidelines provide the basis for ensuring the quality of RPL provision, which is monitored through faculty/school quality assurance processes such as academic standards committees and programme review.

6.6.2 Partnership/centralised model

Some institutions operate RPL procedures through a central APL/RPL coordinator who works in partnership with academic staff within schools and faculties in supporting, assessing and monitoring RPL claims.

The role of the central APL/RPL coordinator can be to:

- provide the central point of contact for all RPL/credit transfer enquiries
- ensure that the registrar, or equivalent central department, is kept informed of any credits awarded through RPL/credit transfer
- maintain administrative systems for RPL/credit transfer
- provide a support mechanism for staff and students throughout the period of the RPL/credit transfer claim
- convene meetings of advisers to consider the operation of the RPL/credit transfer process, to help in ensuring a consistent approach across the institution.

6.7 Key features of the RPL process⁴

'You may need to consider the following key features when developing and operating processes of RPL:

- 1 **initial guidance** on the RPL process
- 2 **supporting learners** in reflective process, identifying learning through experience (skills, knowledge and understanding), selecting and presenting evidence of that learning, identifying areas for further learning)
- 3 **mechanisms for gathering and presenting evidence of learning**
- 4 **recognition process for RPL claims:**
 - a. notional levelling/mapping – individual learning plan; bridging (*RPL for personal/career development*)
 - b. assessment, credit limits, fee process (*RPL for credit*)
- 5 **monitoring process** for RPL procedures
- 6 **support for staff** engaged in support and assessment of RPL
- 7 integration of provision within **quality assurance** systems'.

6.8 Summary guidance notes on key features

The following summary guidance notes may be helpful to learning providers in considering the key features of the RPL process. More detailed guidance on these key features is contained in the SCQF RPL *Guidelines*.

Some examples of the way in which Scottish HEIs are addressing particular aspects of RPL provision are included in this section. These examples are drawn from the *Flexible Entry resource pack* produced as part of this development project, and a survey of practice that was carried out as part of the project.

6.8.1 Initial guidance on the RPL process

Learners, or adults considering returning to learning, should be given preliminary information and guidance on RPL in terms of the principles, policy, procedures and any cost involved. Learning providers should ensure that

⁴ This section is extracted from the SCQF RPL *Guidelines* (www.scqf.org.uk).

learners clearly understand each stage of the process and have realistic expectations regarding the possible outcomes of RPL before they make the decision to undertake RPL. Such information should be provided in written or electronic form as well as through discussion. This information should be clear, accurate and accessible.

If a learner decides to proceed with RPL, the learning provider should organise appropriate support for the RPL process.

Example

One university offers workshops to groups of students considering APEL claims. These are facilitated by the APL coordinator, and their purpose is to explain and discuss the procedure for making a claim. Admissions officers or programme leaders in schools which have developed expertise in APEL may also carry out this function.

Students are provided with the student guidelines for RPL, and complete and submit an APL/APEL proposal pro forma to the APL coordinator.

APEL proposals are initially approved by the admissions officer and the programme leader. Claimants are allocated a supervisor with expertise in the subject area. Supervisors offer guidance in preparing the claim for credit, and are involved in assessing the claim.

6.8.2 Supporting learners

Each stage of the RPL process should be clearly defined, and appropriate support should be provided for each stage.

Learners making a claim for RPL for credit need support for the RPL process itself, as well as support in the subject, vocational or professional area in which they are making the RPL claim.⁵ This support can be provided through a variety of means, such as:

- **written or e-learning materials** such as student handbooks or self-assessment packs
- **individual meetings or tutorials**, where advisers or tutors can provide focused guidance to learners about their RPL claim
- **group sessions**, which can be informal opportunities for peer-group support, or highly structured, task based and tutor led, possibly as part of a wider programme of learning
- **RPL modules** that enable credit to be gained for the learning and skills attained in the process of making an RPL claim
- **electronic communication** such as email, on-line discussion fora, telephone and video-conferencing. Such communication can be between learners and tutors or among learners.

Staff involved in guiding people through the RPL process need to be trained and supported. The institution needs to be able to provide adequate resources to enable staff to carry out this role effectively.

If appropriate, collaborative arrangements for support can be agreed between learning providers, employers and voluntary organisations, and other organisations such as Careers Scotland.

⁵ For further details on support, see the SCQF RPL *Guidelines*, which can be downloaded from the SCQF website (www.scqf.org.uk).

Example of collaboration

VDS provides support for students to build a portfolio for RPL for entry to a programme in the area of volunteer management and submit it to the partner university. In the initial stages, the university supported VDS staff in training them to consider methods of gathering suitable evidence.

Support must be provided by staff who are appropriately trained, supported and resourced to carry out this role.

Example

In one university, the school RPL coordinator can identify an RPL adviser (for example, a module leader) who is a subject expert in the area where a student wishes to make a claim. A seven-step system for assisting students to make an RPL for credit claim is detailed in the staff guide to RPL.

Example

In another institution, the university's APL coordinator provides advice and guidance on RPL to staff and students across the university. The coordinator also ensures that there is consistency within the approach, supervision and assessment of RPL claiming, which is carried out at school level. The university has written guidelines on RPL for students and staff.

The use of RPL modules in HEIs

RPL processes can take the form of a module undertaken as part of a formal programme of study or as an access route to the HEI. Learners engage in structured sessions to support them in the process of reflecting on their experiences, identifying their learning, identifying evidence of that learning, and selecting and compiling evidence. Credit can be gained for the process of RPL itself, as well as for the subject-specific learning demonstrated as a result. This evidence is then assessed by the institution either to gain access to a formal programme of study, or to gain credit within a programme of study.

Other modules used to support RPL processes employ a professional biography approach. These are usually optional modules within a formal programme of study. Learners draw up a personal and professional history or biography and identify and discuss significant markers in that experience. Again, the defining feature of this process is the reflection and analysis undertaken to extract and make explicit the main learning outcomes. Learners not only write about their reflections on their professional experiences, but also accumulate letters and other forms of documentation to demonstrate achievement and participation in those experiences.

Example

In two universities, providing RPL guidance within the context of credit-bearing modules can enable the staff resources required for this process to be provided. The modules also enable learners who are not already registered on a university programme to register as associate students, thus increasing their familiarity with the university. Students registered on the modules also have access to fee waivers on the same basis as part-time students, thereby increasing access for low-income groups. The modules are underpinned by a 12-stage model, VaLEx which is supported by a learner's guide, tutor's guide and support materials.

Linking RPL to personal development planning

The PDP process could be linked to RPL activities related to personal development and educational guidance. It could also facilitate the recognition of prior informal learning within programmes of study at HEIs after students have started their programme. Moreover, it would enable students to reflect on the contribution that their current and planned experiential learning, gained for example through part-time work, could make to their overall learning experience.

PDP and the Effective Learning Framework

The Effective Learning Framework (ELF) embeds the principle of personal development planning within the overall teaching and learning strategy of HEIs. In 2002, QAA Scotland and Universities Scotland constituted a joint working group to take forward the implementation of PDP. This working group recommends ELF as an approach for developing and implementing PDP in HEIs (*Consultation on the Effective Learning Framework – an implementation model for Personal Development Planning in Scottish higher education*, QAA and Universities Scotland, 2004). Its underlying principles are that students' learning experiences are holistic – that is, not restricted to the learning undertaken in a formal programme of study – and that PDP should be integrated within academic programmes.

ELF has implications for the Enhancement Themes of Employability and Meeting Student Needs. It centres on the concept of a self-audit process which endeavours to interlink the three 'circles' of students' personal, academic and career experiences. Students will be supported in the self-audit through a framework of questions called Focused Learners Questions (FLQs). These FLQs aim to support students in their reflection, planning and development. Through the reflective process, students will be encouraged to evaluate their skills and knowledge gained through both informal and formal learning, identify gaps in their skills and knowledge and plan how to address these gaps.

6.8.3 Gathering and presenting evidence of learning

Clear mechanisms for making RPL claims must be in place. Evidence of learning can be gathered through a variety of different means. Where possible, more streamlined, less resource-intensive approaches should be used to make the process more manageable for both learner and provider. The following mechanisms provide an indication of the range of approaches being used, but do not represent an exhaustive list. They can include:

- a reflective account
- project work
- structured interview/oral assessment
- 'assessment on demand', such as an exam or assignment
- simulation/observation of practice
- mapping of learning outcomes
- existing WBL practices in evaluation and assessment
- profiling
- Record of Volunteer Learning and Experience

- Europass Curriculum Vitae (CV) and Europass Language Passport⁶
- a portfolio.

Learners should be given guidance on the method(s) to be used, and should be supported in gathering or producing this evidence.

The approach(es) used will be determined by the purpose for which RPL is being undertaken. If a learner is undertaking RPL for personal/career development (formative recognition) to identify an individual learning pathway (rather than seeking the award of credit), the process does not require a formal assessment of learning to take place. However, if a learner is undertaking formative recognition in preparation for undertaking RPL for credit (summative recognition), the evidence gathered may be submitted for formal assessment at some future point. If an RPL claim for credit is being made, the learner must make clear statements about what was actually learned and provide supportive evidence that the learning claimed has been achieved.

The key point is that the evidence should be appropriate – in terms of type, level and breadth – to the RPL process being undertaken, and should also be as streamlined as possible. Many institutions in Scotland are moving away from resource-intensive portfolio approaches and are using more streamlined methods for providing evidence, such as structured interviews, reflective accounts and project work. These can be used as sole or primary forms of evidence to claim credit within programmes.

Descriptions of mechanisms

1 A **reflective account** can be produced by learners, with appropriate support, to demonstrate the process and outcomes of reflection on their experience. This approach enables learners to make clear connections between their experiences and the learning that has resulted.

2 **Project work** can demonstrate learners' prior informal learning if they have undertaken a particular work-related or community-based activity, or a project through independent study.

3 In a **structured interview/oral assessment**, learners can provide oral evidence of their prior informal learning through a structured interview. This gives learners a good opportunity to provide further clarification of the nature and outcomes of their prior informal learning and to discuss their goals in terms of further learning and development. The interviewer should record the key points discussed in the interview, so that the process is transparent. Learning providers should develop and use an interview schedule or pro forma to ensure consistency. This pro forma can be made available to learners in advance to enable them to prepare for the interview.

4 **Assessment on demand** enables learners to undertake traditional forms of assessment where appropriate. Learners can undertake the existing assessment for a particular unit or module, or they can undertake one that has been specially devised.

⁶ Though not yet widely in use, the Europass CV and Europass Language Passport are tools that could be used following the launch of Europass and within the context of the development of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). For more information on Europass, visit the Europass website (www.europass.cedefop.eu.int).

5 Simulation/observation of practice involves direct observation of learners' skills, knowledge and understanding, and can take place in a particular context such as the workplace. If learners do not have the opportunity through their workplace practice to demonstrate particular skills and knowledge, a simulation or role play may be used.

6 Mapping of learning outcomes involves written statements of learning achieved within an informal or non-formal context, which are defined by the learner and mapped onto the outcomes of a programme, or of a programme level, as a means of demonstrating their achievement. The reflective process is implicit, rather than explicit, in this form of evidence. This more streamlined approach is useful when a learner is claiming a substantial amount of credit within a programme against particular levels, rather than against particular modules or units.

7 Existing WBL practices in evaluation and assessment, such as workplace appraisal or professional development processes, can be drawn on as sources of evidence for RPL claims. This includes assessment methods used for Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs).

8 Profiling is a paper-based or on-line tool used within workplace learning and training to enable workers to identify their existing skills and knowledge against National Occupational Standards and existing qualifications or units, such as SVQs. This process generates an action plan to fill any gaps in skills and knowledge. Profiling can be an effective RPL mechanism within the workplace

9 The Record of Volunteer Learning and Experience is used within workplace learning and training in the voluntary sector. It encourages individuals to collect and maintain a record of informal learning to identify how and where they are learning through volunteering. Learning providers can use the record to identify where learning has occurred, and it could be used as transferable evidence for an RPL claim.

10 The Europass CV⁷ is the backbone of the Europass framework. In its electronic form, it can be linked to other Europass documents, such as the Europass Language Passport, and to the Diploma or Certificate Supplement for higher education or vocational education respectively. The Europass CV includes categories for presenting information on language proficiency, work experience and education and training achievements as well as additional competences held by learners in relation to technical, organisational, artistic and social skills. The Europass CV and other extended CV formats can be used as evidence of prior informal learning as part of a portfolio or to underpin a structured interview/oral assessment.

11 Portfolio refers to a collection of materials compiled by learners to demonstrate what they have learnt. The portfolio route for an RPL claim enables learners to decide which learning experiences to draw on, and the particular pieces of evidence they will compile to demonstrate the learning outcomes or competences. Portfolio evidence can include: direct evidence, which is material produced by learners at the time of the experience; reflective

⁷ The development of Europass – a single framework for transparency of qualifications – will 'link separate documents aimed at the transparency of qualifications and competences into a single framework in the form of a structured portfolio of documents known as 'Europass' (Commission of European Communities, December 2003, *Proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council on a single framework for the transparency of qualifications and competences (Europass)*). Details of the Europass CV and Europass Language Passport can be found on the Europass website (www.europass.cedefop.eu.int).

evidence, such as reflective accounts; and 'third party' evidence, such as references or testimonials from employers, tutors, colleagues and/or peers.

The process of compiling a portfolio can be highly rewarding, but is often resource-intensive. Learners need detailed guidance on how to put together a portfolio, and in particular on the nature, range and volume of evidence required to demonstrate the learning.

Learners should be encouraged to reduce the volume of evidence by being selective in their choice of evidence and cross-referencing evidence to more than one learning outcome or competence, so that the process of compiling a portfolio becomes a more manageable exercise.

In sum, the appropriate mechanism for gathering evidence should be determined by the needs and goals of the learner and the context in which RPL is taking place.

6.8.4 Recognition process for RPL claims

Learners must be advised of the recognition process as part of the guidance and support provided in preparing their RPL claim.

The recognition process for **RPL for personal/career development** may involve:

- mapping the outcomes of learning within the SCQF, or a 'notional levelling' of learning, in order to identify possible progression routes to build on that learning. This mapping or notional levelling may be undertaken by comparing the outcomes of learning to SCQF level descriptors, core skills or National Occupational Standards, and/or
- identifying and further developing core skills gained through prior informal learning as part of bridging activities to ease the transition between informal and formal learning.⁸

The recognition process for **RPL for credit** involves a formal assessment of learning to determine:

- the **comparability of the learning** to the:
 - particular requirements for entry to a programme in terms of knowledge, skills and understanding (for RPL for entry)
 - existing or negotiated individual programme units or modules (for RPL for credit against particular units/module)
 - outcomes or competences for part of a level of a programme or qualification in a particular subject or vocational area (for RPL for general or specific credit)
 - outcomes for an entire level of a programme or qualification (for RPL for general or specific credit).
- the **level of credit**
- the **volume of credit**.⁹

⁸ For further details on the recognition process for RPL for personal/career development, see the SCQF RPL *Guidelines*, which can be downloaded from the SCQF website (www.scqf.org.uk)

Staff can use the following widely applied **assessment criteria** to assist them in determining whether the evidence presented is satisfactory and appropriate:

- **Acceptability** – is there an appropriate match between the evidence presented and the learning outcomes being demonstrated? Is the evidence reliable and valid?
- **Sufficiency** – is there sufficient breadth and depth of evidence, including evidence of reflection, to demonstrate achievement of the learning outcomes or competences claimed?
- **Authenticity** – is the evidence clearly the outcome of the learner’s own effort?
- **Currency** – is what is being assessed current learning? Does the learner need to provide evidence of having kept the learning up to date if the learning experience occurred some time ago?

RPL claims must be assessed by appropriate subject experts, whose recommendations are considered and approved by the appropriate assessment board. The assessment procedures for RPL, including arrangements for external assessment, should be consistent with the normal assessment and general quality assurance procedures of an institution or organisation. This includes the provision of an appeals process in order to protect the rights of the learner.

Prior informal or experiential learning that has been successfully credit rated should be clearly indicated on a learner’s transcript. Management information systems need to incorporate information on credit gained through RPL, and can be used to facilitate tracking of the progression of successful RPL claimants.

Credit limits for RPL within formal programmes of study

Programme limits, if any, on the credit that can be awarded for RPL within a programme of study or towards a qualification should be clearly stated, as should any implications for progression, grading or classification. Institutional policy on credit limits should be consistently applied.

Double counting of credit should be avoided. RPL claims for credit may be based on learning that has already been credit rated through prior certificated learning, for example learning resulting from work-based experience on a formal programme of study such as an HND. The risk of double counting of credit can also occur when RPL for a particular set of learning outcomes or competences is used to gain entry to a programme, and the same learning outcomes are then used as the basis of a claim for credit within the new programme. Policies in relation to avoiding double counting of credit should reflect an institution’s quality assurance procedures.

Examples: credit limits for RPL claims in Scottish HEIs

The following credit limits are in use in institutions in Scotland:

- no more than 50 per cent of the total credit value of an award, or
- up to 50 per cent of the stage at which a student enters a course, or
- up to 50 per cent of the exiting level of an award.

⁹ For further guidance on determining the level and volume of credit as part of the recognition process for RPL for credit, see the SCQF RPL *Guidelines*, which can be downloaded from the SCQF website (www.scqf.org.uk).

Some institutions are exploring the possibility of granting full awards through RPL, following this development in other European countries such as France and Ireland.

Time limits applied to the currency of learning vary, but at most HEIs in Scotland a five-year rule normally applies. Learners need to demonstrate that learning gained more than five years previously has been kept up to date or is not out of date.

Fee process for RPL for credit

If providers and receiving institutions decide to charge for the RPL process, the fee structure (that is, the methodology for calculating fees) must be clearly stated and consistently applied. The costing mechanism for RPL procedures should be determined by providers and receiving institutions.

Fees charged in Scottish HEIs

Some institutions do not charge for RPL: the RPL process, whether for entry or for credit, is regarded as part of the admissions process. It is also seen as part of widening participation strategies by providing an entry route into the institution for non-traditional learners.

At others, fees are not normally charged for RPL for entry into a programme, as this is regarded as part of the admissions process. However, fees are charged for claims for RPL for credit. These fees vary across institutions, but include the following:

- up to £60 for RPL or RPL and credit transfer claims
- 50 per cent of the module cost
- £100 for a 15-credit module
- full module cost.

Providers should consider RPL modules or units as a means of attracting funding and enabling part-time learners, for example, to access fee waivers.

At one university, an RPL module (for access) is offered, with the fee for that module covering the RPL process. Anyone not wishing to take the module will be charged a similar amount to cover costs, but prospective students are encouraged to consider the module.

6.8.5 Monitoring process for RPL procedures

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

Mechanisms used in Scottish HEIs to monitor and review RPL procedures take into account some or all of the following factors:

- the number of learners undertaking RPL
- the success rate of RPL claims
- evaluation of the learners' experience, including the time taken by learners to undertake the RPL process
- evaluation of the staff experience, including the time spent by staff in supporting the RPL process and managing the process of recognition

- tracking of the progression of learners who have undertaken RPL
- evaluation of the effectiveness of any collaborative arrangements with other learning providers, learning partnerships and/or receiving institutions
- reports from external assessors or verifiers.

6.8.6 Support for staff engaged in supporting and in assessing RPL

Staff involved in planning, developing and operating RPL procedures need to receive training and continuing support for this role. This requires adequate resources.

The roles and responsibilities of both staff and learners in the RPL process need to be clearly defined.

The role played by staff in supporting and in assessing RPL claims for credit should be clearly separated.

Examples

A number of HEIs in Scotland have produced recognition of prior learning staff guidelines to assist staff in supervising and assessing claims for credit.

In some institutions, staff development for coordinators, advisers and assessors is arranged by central staff development or academic practice units.

To help in ensuring a consistent institution-wide approach, the RPL coordinator in HEIs operating a centralised/partnership operational model convenes an annual meeting of advisers to consider the operation of the RPL process.

In institutions operating a devolved model, with RPL procedures operated at course/programme level, guidance and support can be provided centrally on matters of policy, procedure and implementation to ensure compliance with regulations and standards.

6.8.7 Integration of RPL provision within quality assurance systems

To ensure transparency, consistency and reliability, RPL processes need to be fully integrated within organisations' quality assurance systems. RPL processes should be available for scrutiny by appropriate external quality assurance, for example by an external auditing body.

Example

At one university, school RPL committees have devolved authority from faculty boards to approve school RPL procedures and agree students' claims for RPL for credit. School RPL committees report regularly to their faculty quality committee, with the latter being responsible for the quality management and enhancement of school RPL processes. The procedures and outcomes of the RPL process across the university are auditable.

RPL both as an entry route and as a means of gaining credit within formal programmes of study should become more embedded within curriculum design and addressed explicitly at the programme approval stage. Where possible, learning outcomes should be expressed in a way that enables a variety of different routes for their achievement as well as the use of flexible modes of assessment.

Examples

Some Scottish HEIs encourage programme design to facilitate entry and credit through RPL. In others, the programmes are modular and can be flexible in terms of enabling credit transfer, but are not really designed with RPL for experiential informal learning. However, many vocational or professional programmes have elements that involve the evaluation of experiential learning in a work situation.

6.9 Case studies: learners' experiences of RPL

6.9.1 Gaining entry to a programme through RPL

Case study 1

In August 2004, I was presented with the opportunity to work towards achieving a Volunteer Development Scotland award in Volunteer Management. Having worked in the voluntary sector for over six years, I had a wealth of practical experience but no written qualifications to back it up. So I jumped at the chance to gain this qualification.

The qualification itself is completed through the local university, and therefore there was a basic qualification entry level, which I did not have. To overcome this, VDS considered my application on the merits of the experience I had gained working in the voluntary sector and felt that I should collate a portfolio of my prior learning to make my case for entry to the course.

The thought of creating a portfolio filled me with terror – all I could think was, 'There's no way I'll be accepted'. However, when I actually began putting on paper the work I had done over the years, my confidence began to grow. I approached previous and current managers for supporting references, which they duly gave. My supporting statement allowed me to detail various pieces of work I had completed, and by the end of the process my train of thought had changed completely. I had more confidence in my own abilities and finally thought, 'Yes, I can do this!'

With support from VDS I completed my record of prior learning, and on submission it was accepted by the university. This was a great step forward for me and gave me the opportunity to join the BA in Professional Development degree programme. I am delighted to say that to date I have successfully completed several modules.

Case study 2

After leaving school I did a number of jobs before getting married and starting a family. When my children were older I wanted to go back to work, but realised that I needed to develop new skills in order to get a job. I decided to return to study for a degree. I didn't have the three Highers usually required for entry to the course (social sciences), but I was able to put together an APEL portfolio to show that I had the necessary skills and knowledge to start the course.

I attended a 'Make Experience Count' (MEC) course, which involved regular group sessions with a tutor. The MEC course enabled me to build up a portfolio to show that I already possessed the core skills required for entry, including communication, problem-solving and information-gathering skills. At the end of the course I submitted a portfolio of my skills and knowledge, which demonstrated my suitability to enter the social sciences degree course.

6.9.2 Gaining credit within a programme through RPL

Case study 3

I had been working for several years in a management capacity. Through my company's personal professional development initiative I was able to combine a credit transfer claim for previously completed certificated learning with a successful RPL claim. Along with colleagues I attended an RPL workshop run by university staff in the workplace. I was allocated a supervisor with specialist knowledge of my subject area. Together we negotiated statements of learning drawn from my work experience. My RPL claim involved drawing together evidence from courses attended, work initiatives and projects. I then had an interview to complete the assessment and was awarded credit towards my degree.

Case study 4

I had worked for many years in the insurance industry before leaving my job through ill-health. I then decided to return to study at university as a part-time student. I realised that I had learnt a lot from my experience at work, and that I might have the basis for an APEL claim. I discussed this possibility with the APEL adviser and she agreed that it would be possible for me to try to claim credit against a particular finance module (which is normally taught in the final year of the degree). Together we considered how I might provide evidence of my learning. Since I couldn't produce evidence from my previous employment, it was agreed that the Risk and Financial Services Department would decide on an appropriate assessment for me. I was set a project assignment which enabled me to demonstrate my learning. Staff within the department advised me on the structure of the project. The project was assessed by subject experts within the university and was judged to be highly satisfactory. I was therefore awarded the credit for that module, all without having to attend lectures.

Case study 5

I started my professional career with an electric company. Eventually, working within the information technology (IT) department, I obtained an HND in computing. However, positions within the company were becoming much more competitive. For job security, it became obvious that I needed to obtain a degree in computing, as quickly as possible. At this point, I found out about a course in applied computing which provides IT professionals who already have an HND with an opportunity to obtain a degree in one year. This is made possible by using APEL in conjunction with a taught module and a work-based project.

I submitted two APEL portfolios: one in software development, gaining 30 (SCQF level 9) credit points, and one in advanced operations management, gaining another 30 (SCQF level 9) points. I then completed the taught module and a project to gain the remaining 60 points I needed.

As a result, I gained a BSc in Applied Computing. At that point in time, my company was going through a massive streamlining process, reducing their IT complement by 30 to 50 per cent. However, I retained my job, which I mainly attribute to the BSc and the APEL mechanism. Without this mechanism, I believe it would have taken me at least another two years to complete a BSc, and I probably would have lost my job in the restructuring process.

Case study 6

I had been working as a staff nurse for a number of years and wished to claim credit for the learning gained from managing a theatre against a health studies degree. I attended an APEL workshop run by the university. With the help of a tutor, I put together a claim matching my learning against the learning outcomes for a specific part of the course. After this I had an oral assessment. I was successful and gained the 20 credit points (at SCQF level 8).

I then asked my tutor if I could also claim credit for my certificate in Scottish history. I was told that it wouldn't be possible to award specific credit in this case, because the learning I'd gained through the course wasn't relevant to the health studies degree.

7 Credit transfer

7.1 Guidance

7.1.1 Introduction

The SCQF¹⁰ brings together into a single framework all mainstream qualifications throughout Scottish schools, colleges, HEIs, training providers, employers and professional bodies. The SCQF enables learners, employers and educational providers to understand the interrelationship between various qualifications. The framework consists of 12 levels, each of which is defined by a level descriptor.

The SCQF *Guidelines on Credit Transfer* provide a core set of principles to enable all users of the framework to have confidence that a consistent approach to determining level and volume of credit has been adopted. These guidelines will bare the core source of guidance, supplemented by information gathered in the credit transfer survey carried out as part of the development project, together with short case studies from the SCQF website and examples of practice provided by members of the Flexible Entry Coordination Group.

Establishment of the SCQF has greatly encouraged and facilitated credit transfer within and among Scottish educational institutions. Whereas RPL (see section 6) does not impact on large numbers of students, credit transfer is widely used and involves huge volumes of students moving among different learning providers.

7.1.2 The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework

The architecture of the SCQF is similar in structure and concept to that of other UK and European credit frameworks. It bears closest similarity to the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales, though in scope and coverage it is more comprehensive and embraces a greater number of levels.

All Scottish colleges and HEIs are partners in the SCQF. It is recognised as the framework for placing qualifications in relation to one another. How it is used varies among sectors, institutions and subject areas. An evaluation of its impact has been carried out.¹¹

7.2 Clarification of terms used

7.2.1 Level and volume of credit

¹⁰ Full text available at: www.scqf.org.uk

¹¹ Findings available at: www.scqf.org.uk/downloads/SCQF%20-%20research%20-%20Evaluation%20Report.pdf

Two fundamental measures are used to place learning, qualifications and programmes within the SCQF:

- the level of outcomes, described in terms of SCQF levels
- the volume of outcomes, described in terms of SCQF credit points.

‘Outcomes are expressed in terms of a statement of competences, including knowledge, skills and values capable of being demonstrated at the end of a process of learning...the concept of notional time of learner effort is used as a proxy to measure the volume of outcomes.

Credit rating is a process of professional judgement leading to a statement on the level and volume of outcomes of learning...the focus of the credit-rating process is on outcomes and on the arrangements for assessing learner achievement of these’. (*SCQF Handbook, Section 1 – SCQF Guidelines on Credit Rating, 2003, p2*)

7.2.2 SCQF level descriptors

The SCQF level descriptors (*SCQF Guidelines on Credit Rating, 2003, pp22-33*) are designed to allow broad comparisons between the outcomes of learning in different situations and, broadly, reflect the inherent complexity in a given set of learning outcomes.

‘Each level is described in terms of a range of general outcomes characteristic of that particular level. These outcomes are set out in the SCQF level descriptors and are listed under five broad headings:

- knowledge and understanding
- practice (applied knowledge and understanding)
- generic cognitive skills such as evaluation and critical analysis
- communication, numeracy and IT skills
- autonomy, accountability and working with others.

Increases in level of demand relate to factors such as:

- complexity and depth of knowledge and understanding
- links to academic, vocational or professional practice
- the degree of integration, independence and creativity required
- the range and knowledge and understanding
- the roles taken in relation to other learners/workers in carrying out tasks’.

(SCQF, 2003, p9)

7.2.3 General and specific credit

Credit points reflect the level and volume of credit attached to a particular qualification. General credit confirms the educational achievements of an individual, but does not necessarily indicate a progression route to a higher award. Decisions on the transfer of credit points from one programme of study into another are made by the institution providing the new programme. They are a matter of judgement based on comparing the outcomes of the prior learning with the requirements of the new programme. Specific credit is that amount of prior credit which is recognised as contributing to a new programme of study.

The SCQF helps to promote greater transparency in this decision-making process.

‘All credit points are general in that they define a volume and a level of outcome within the SCQF. They become specific when related to transfer to a particular programme or to an individual’s claim for credit towards a particular programme...[that is] general credit relates to the agreed determination of levels and volumes within the SCQF as a whole. Specific credit is that which is recognised as being relevant to entry to a particular programme... How much specific credit can be accepted...is a matter of judgement based on comparing the outcomes of the learning with the requirements of the new programme’. (SCQF Guidelines on Credit Rating, 2003, p8)

It is important to stress that the SCQF is a *framework*. It does not indicate an entitlement to transferable credit, nor does it impose a straightjacket on the transfer of credit. As indicated above, the decisions on credit transfer remain with the institution admitting a student to a new programme of study.

Examples

A student holding a RGN (Registered General Nurse) qualification can enter a BSc Health/Nursing Studies programme with 120 credits at level 7 and 80 credits at level 8. An Ordinary degree award can be achieved by successfully completing modules from the BSc Health/Nursing Studies programme leading to a further 40 credits at level 8 and 120 at level 9. However, a student holding the same nursing qualification who wished to gain entry to a degree in Business Administration would be unlikely to be awarded credit towards this award.

A student holding an HND in social science can enter level 9 of a BA (Hons) Social Science programme (that is, 240 credits are transferred). However, the same qualification will only permit entry to level 8 of a BSc (Hons) Behavioural Science programme (that is, only 120 credits can be transferred).

7.3 Credit transfer

The development of credit transfer arrangements requires collaboration among and within educational institutions and agencies. Credit transfer is a means of making learning opportunities more accessible to larger and more diverse groups of learners. Hence credit transfer facilitates a more learner-centred approach to the development of curricula, teaching and assessment strategies and the provision of student support. By recognising the diversity of students’ prior learning experiences, credit transfer leads to more student choice and autonomy as well as greater transparency in learning delivered, assessments made and awards confirmed. Thus, credit transfer requires staff development not only for those involved in making admissions decisions, but also for staff throughout the institution to ensure that curricula are appropriate and learners’ needs met.

Credit transfer enables institutions to be responsive to students’ needs by acknowledging the mutual benefits to institutions and students of diversity within the student population. Major benefits of credit transfer to students include being able to:

- build on knowledge, skills and qualifications already gained
- bring prior learning experiences into a new environment, for the mutual benefit of all students

- under appropriate circumstances, build on incomplete qualifications and gain an award at a time and under conditions which their personal lifestyle commitments permit.

The development of the SCQF greatly facilitates credit transfer, particularly within and across institutions in Scotland. Currently, only Scottish higher education institutions and the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) can give SCQF credit ratings. The results of a consultation on extending the facility to credit rate within the SCQF to other agencies are available at: www.scqf.org.uk/downloads/Extendingthefacilitytocreditrate.pdf (SCQF, 2004).

7.4 Credit rating

All mainstream qualifications awarded under the auspices of SQA, HEIs in Scotland and a range of statutory and professional bodies are embraced within the SCQF. In addition, learning provided by a wide range of private and public sector education and training agencies can be credit rated by Scottish HEIs and by SQA. Guidelines on the procedures to follow are available (*SCQF Handbook, Section 1 – SCQF Guidelines on Credit Rating*, 2003, pp12-20).

Examples of awards and associated general credit

HND	120 credits level 7 + 120 credits level 8
Ordinary degree	120 credits level 7 + 120 credits level 8 + 120 credits level 9
RGN (modular training)	120 credits level 7 + 80 credits level 8
Diploma of Higher Education (Adult Nursing)	120 credits level 7 + 120 credits level 8 + 60 credits level 9
Diploma in Social Work	120 credits level 7 + 120 credits level 8

7.5 Credit sources and usage

The findings of the credit transfer survey carried out among Scottish HEIs for the development project indicate that the language of credit and transfer is embedded. Institutional provision, award structures and programme specifications are largely written in terms of the framework guidelines and are designed to promote and facilitate credit transfer. Modularisation, semesterisation and the provision of part-time study routes have all provided opportunities for flexible access to further and higher education, and are important in promoting credit transfer from one source of learning to another.

All Scottish HEIs recognise the transferability of SCQF credit gained within Scottish universities and colleges. Most institutions also acknowledge credit gained within any Scottish SQA-approved centre. An area which is more open to debate is the recognition of credit gained through SVQs, with only some HEIs accepting SVQ credits.

All Scottish HEIs also accept credit gained at UK and EU higher education institutions, and many acknowledge credit gained at a variety of overseas universities and colleges. The National Recognition International Centre for the United Kingdom (UK NARIC) is widely used to establish credit equivalencies for worldwide qualifications.

One Scottish HEI is in the process of developing its own prior credit database. This will capture general credit values for credit claims presented by students on application. Developing such a database presents complex challenges in terms of capturing information and establishing links between such information and the institution's information management system. The intended outcome is that the database will be a tool for establishing general credit, and hence will prove invaluable to staff providing educational guidance and making admissions decisions throughout the institution. This in turn raises the issue of how credit is recorded for institutional quality assurance purposes and for providing information to students on transcripts. Since the SCQF is not a regulatory framework, institutions make their own decisions on whether and, if so, how credit is recorded.

Credit can be used to secure admission or can be transferred into a new programme of study, thus giving a student advanced standing within that programme. The decision on point of entry on the basis of credit transfer rests solely with the admitting institution.

In support of any claim for credit, students must provide evidence of the award gained or professional/training programme successfully completed. All Scottish HEIs provide pre-entry guidance for students making an application for entry on the basis of credit gained elsewhere, and many provide opportunities to access post-entry targeted support courses and/or post-entry guidance. The provision of guidance is essential to ensure that – particularly where credit transfer takes place – students are admitted to an appropriate programme of study and at an appropriate level.

Many Scottish HEIs accept credit into the majority of their programmes of study, provided there is a curricular match between the prior learning outcomes and those required within the new programme of study. Some programmes, however, impose strict limits on the amount of credit that can be transferred. This applies particularly to those which lead to an award approved by a professional body, where the programme leads to a professional qualification and licence to practice.

Examples

The BSc (Hons) Nursing programme is approved by the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC), and any import of credit needs to be approved by NMC. Hence, for example, an applicant with HNC Social Science could use this qualification to gain entry to a BSc (Hons) Nursing, but there would be no credit transfer and the full nursing programme would have to be completed.

BSc (Hons) Psychology is approved by the British Psychological Society (BPS), and the full programme of study followed by any student seeking BPS accreditation would need to be approved by BPS. However, if the student does not require BPS accreditation, the HEI would be willing to allow credit transfer where it is appropriate.

Similarly, LLB programmes are accredited by the Law Society for Scotland (LSS), and any prior credit would need to be approved by LSS.

In some HEIs, credit transfer is more prevalent if students apply for entry with advanced standing into a generic degree rather than a named award. In others, credit transfer is only allowed for optional elements, not for the core elements of the programme. Institutions retain autonomy over admissions regulations and the decisions they make.

All Scottish HEIs have particular credit transfer agreements with other named education providers. Most commonly, articulation agreements with further education colleges allow Higher National Qualifications to be brought into bespoke programmes of study leading to 'top-up' degrees. Many degrees are designed to build on credit gained from professional awards, for example degrees in Health or Nursing Studies, which build on nursing qualifications such as RGN.

Examples

Many BSc Health/Nursing Studies programmes are designed to build on nursing and health-related qualifications. Students holding a relevant qualification can enter the programme and, where appropriate, can transfer all their credit into the new programme of study.

Many degree programmes are specifically designed to allow maximum credit transfer from an HND in a related subject area to a degree programme. For example, a wide range of HND qualifications, including Software Development, Computing, Technical Support and Computer Network Support, all provide the opportunity for maximum credit transfer into the BSc Computer Networking programme at one 'new', post-1992 Scottish university.

At another post-1992 university, holding an HND allows level 9 entry into a wide range of 'top-up' degrees, including BA (Hons) Economics, BA (Hons) European Economy and Management, BSc (Hons) Mechatronics, BA (Hons) Tourism, BA (Hons) Business Administration, and BA (Hons) Multimedia Development.

Most HEIs have credit transfer agreements with a range of EU institutions, and many have arrangements with other HEIs worldwide.

Examples

HEIs receive many applications from continental Europe for advanced entry to undergraduate programmes from students wishing to top up diploma-level qualifications to Bachelor and Honours degree awards in an English-speaking country. Students apply as normal through the UCAS system, and conditional offers are made in terms of European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) credits and 'first cycle' awards, as defined in the Bologna developments.

Students holding a nursing qualification from abroad and who have successfully completed an adaptation programme leading to their registration with the UK's NMC may be awarded credit towards a BSc Health/Nursing Studies programme. The credit awarded is in line with that awarded for registration on the same part of the register achieved within the UK.

Many HEIs permit simultaneous study for credit within and outwith the institution.

Example

A student registered on a BSc Nursing Studies programme requiring more than 60 points for the award of a degree may simultaneously study at another institution and transfer all credit gained there into their degree programme, providing there is no overlap of material studied and the student is not registered as studying towards an award of the other institution.

For instance, student X joined Scottish university Y from school and made progress through the first two years of a BA programme. In his third year, he enquired whether he could complete his degree by studying at another university (Z) closer to home. University Z did not have the facility to transfer

credit into its programme, but allowed X to study there as a full-time associate student for one semester. On completion of these studies, the credits were transferred back into university Y, thus allowing X to complete his degree.

Credit can also be awarded for incomplete qualifications. A careful process of curricular matching is necessary to establish precisely which learning outcomes have been met and which can therefore be awarded credit.

Example

Psychology students who have studied at a BPS-accredited university but decide to transfer to another BPS-accredited university before completion of their degree can change institutions with full credit transfer. When they have completed the new programme, they exit with an Honours degree and BPS accreditation.

Credit transfer takes place at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels for taught programmes of study. No Scottish HEI makes a charge for processing an application for credit transfer.

7.6 *Currency of credit and credit limits*

All Scottish HEIs impose limits on the volume of credit that can be transferred into a new programme of study. These limits vary from one institution to another. Credit limits specified in the credit transfer survey include:

- no more than 50 per cent of the total credit value of the award
- up to 50 per cent credits at the stage at which a student enters
- up to 50 per cent at the exiting level of an award for Certificate of HE, Diploma of HE or Ordinary degree + no more than 360 credits for an Honours degree
- up to 75 per cent credits for an undergraduate award; up to 50 per cent credits for a postgraduate award
- normally, a minimum 120 credits must be studied at the institution.

Usually, the currency of credit is determined by a maximum five-year time limit, although practice varies within different programmes and across different institutions. Professional judgement is exercised in determining whether the skills and knowledge demonstrated by the credit gained have been kept up to date in experiential learning, thus permitting an extension of the five-year limit. For some professional awards, it is important to ensure that the knowledge and skills demonstrated by prior credit comply with legislation and/or statutory requirements in terms of content and currency.

Example

A student who completed a course of study leading to the award of RGN in 1990 may be awarded the maximum general credit towards a BSc Health/Nursing Studies degree – providing she has kept her registration up to date or, alternatively, can show that she has been working in a related area and has therefore kept her knowledge up to date.

7.7 *Double counting*

The potential for credit to be 'double counted' arises where a student uses the same credit base towards more than one award. This can occur where a particular set of learning outcomes or competences forms the basis of a

qualification that is used to gain entry to a programme with the same learning outcomes or competences. This situation highlights the necessity for close curricular matching prior to confirmation of the specific credit that counts in a new programme of study.

Policies in relation to avoiding double counting of credit reflect institutions' quality assurance procedures. However, it also behoves applicants to inform institutions of their individual credit situation. Some resolution of the potential for double counting may be achieved via the proposed issue of Europass Diploma Supplements to all graduating students. In some specific situations, however, double counting is built into credit transfer agreements, for example for study undertaken under the auspices of the EU Socrates–Erasmus study abroad programmes.

7.8 *Transfer of graded credit*

In general, while transfer of credit is common, the transfer of grades from one programme to another varies within and among institutions across the sector.

Example

Each year, 50 students from Scottish university Z study abroad as exchange students in Europe, the USA and Canada. A suite of Overseas Study modules are used to transfer the credits and grades for their programmes of study back to their home university.

Each student completes a programme of study which is approved by their home institution, following the model developed in the European Credit Transfer System. Tables of grade equivalences have been developed, based on the Socrates ECTS handbook and comparative tables produced by partner and other universities. As different universities have modules of different sizes, an exact transfer of grade and credit is not always feasible. In many cases, the raw marks and credit values from abroad have to be merged to fit the home institution's modular credit system. Thus students may be required to take more, smaller modules and therefore more assessments than they would at their home institution. The proposed mark to be recorded for modules is produced in consultation with the student's exchange coordinator in the context of the student's programme.

Every effort is made to ensure that good work abroad is reflected in the mark awarded by the home university. There is also an opportunity in combining marks to compensate for variations in performance across the mark profile.

If a student transfers from one programme to another within the same institution, for example from BSc Behavioural Science to BA Social Science, the grades for shared modules transfer into the new programme. The Programme Assessment Board takes these grades into account in making a decision on whether to award a degree with Distinction.

7.9 *Illustrative case studies: credit transfer*

The SCQF website (www.scqf.org.uk/case_studies.asp) provides many case studies illustrating how credit transfer has been used by a variety of students possessing a wide range of qualifications. For each student, a brief biography of learning progress is documented.

7.10 *Operational models for credit transfer*

7.10.1 Devolved model

The findings from the credit transfer survey indicate that current practice in the majority of HEIs involves a devolved structure for handling credit transfer claims. Procedures are fully handled at the level of individual faculties, schools, departments and programmes. The decision-makers are therefore faculty, school and departmental admissions officers or advisers of study; course or programme leaders; or academic staff. Frequently, designated staff act as credit transfer advisers. In some instances, the staff member with responsibility for coordinating widening access activities acts as a general source of advice and guidance.

Under these arrangements, credit transfer procedures are usually monitored through institution-wide quality assurance procedures and in some cases bound by institution-wide regulations.

7.10.2 Centralised model

A small number of HEIs operate credit transfer procedures centrally. They have institution-wide procedures for handling credit transfer claims through designated core staff. The core staff work in liaison with academic staff and admissions officers in faculties, schools, departments and programmes, and advise on the feasibility of credit transfer in particular instances. These advisers are often linked to the HEI's widening access team or equivalent. Staff expertise therefore rests with a small team of staff (in some cases a single individual). Credit transfer procedures tend to be embedded in institution-wide quality assurance monitoring.

7.11 *Monitoring processes*

Processes should be put in place to monitor and review the operation of credit transfer procedures. These processes should be clearly defined and integrated into existing institutional quality assurance and enhancement mechanisms.

Monitoring and review processes at Scottish HEIs take into account some or all of the following factors:

- the number of learners making credit transfer claims
- feedback from applicants who have made a claim for credit
- tracking of the progression of learners who have made a claim for credit
- evaluation of the effectiveness of any collaborative/articulation arrangements with other learning providers
- feedback from assessors and external assessors.

7.12 *Support for staff*

Staff involved in planning, developing and operating credit transfer procedures need to be provided with training and continuing support. Their roles and responsibilities should be clearly defined, and appropriate staff development programmes should be put in place to ensure that their skills and knowledge are kept up to date.

Their knowledge needs to encompass:

- complete and comprehensive understanding of the SCQF
- familiarity with equivalencies of credit, volume and levels for worldwide qualifications

- awareness of how to handle incomplete qualifications
- awareness of the evidence that students provide
- a thorough grasp of their institutional/faculty/school/departmental programme specifications
- a thorough grasp of institutional regulations governing admissions and exit awards
- access to information.

8 Staff development exercise

Aim

To support staff in the development and implementation of RPL procedures for their programmes, including mechanisms for support, assessment and accreditation.

Objectives

The goals of this exercise are to enable you to:

- gain a better insight into the process of flexible entry
- value the reflective process as a tool for learning and development
- gain confidence in the process and outcomes of flexible entry.

Content

The focus of the exercise is a **case study** derived from your actual experience. This case study will take the form of a critical, reflective account of a particular experience of operating RPL and/or credit transfer procedures with your students. The purpose of the case study is to enable you to develop and demonstrate your knowledge and understanding of the RPL/credit transfer process. Guidance is provided at each stage of the case study. You can base your case study on a prior or planned experience of RPL and/or credit transfer.

To prepare you to undertake the exercise, look at the following guidance:

- **case study guidance** (section 8.1)
- **reflective exercise** (section 8.2)
- **context-setting: RPL in Scotland** – based on a review of current and potential RPL activity as part of the SCQF RPL project to develop national guidelines (section 8.3)
- **how to do it** – look at the guidance provided in the SCQF guidelines for RPL and credit transfer (available on the SCQF website at www.scqf.org.uk) as well as the guidance section (sections 6 and 7) of the *Flexible Entry staff development pack*.
- **examples of practice** – look at the examples of practice in the *Flexible Entry resource pack*. Reflect on how these compare with your own experiences of RPL or credit transfer, or the potential of RPL or credit transfer within your programme(s). Do they give you any ideas on how to implement, extend or improve your own flexible entry provision?

- **Theoretical background and other guidance** – see **Further reading** (section 9).

8.1 *Case study guidance*

Summary

Produce a reflective, critical account of the procedures for RPL/credit transfer for a particular programme, with a focus on their operation with particular group(s) of students. Analyse the contribution of yourself and others in planning, structuring, supporting and assessing the prior experiential learning of your students. The guidelines are intended to help you to draw up your account, but are not intended to be prescriptive.

Decide first of all whether you are going to base your case study account on a prior experience or on a planned piece of work.

Case study structure

The reflective account should cover the three key stages of your experience of implementing the RPL/credit transfer procedures, that is, planning, implementation and evaluation.

Context

Provide a brief note on the context of your reflective account, for example:

- function of flexible entry within programme structure, that is, credit transfer; RPL for entry and/or credit or part of PDP to diagnose existing learning and new learning needs, and/or to provide a route into other flexible forms of provision, such as WBL; open and distance learning; part-time study
- support and assessment mechanisms used
- quality assurance mechanisms
- identification of related institutional policies, for example widening participation, flexible delivery, employability, accessibility.

Planning

You should first consider the way in which you selected your strategy for operating the procedures with your group of students. Include within this account an analysis of how your knowledge of theory, policy or other frameworks influenced your approach. This should include references to appropriate published sources where possible. Try to identify any assumptions you might have brought to the situation. Issues should include the identification and rationale for:

- flexible entry guidance system used
- type of flexible entry claims used
- support mechanisms used
- assessment mechanisms used.

Implementation

Reflect on the experience of implementing the procedures, for example by considering:

- problems that arose and how you dealt with them
- your use of relevant materials and resources.

You should try to place this particular experience of working with a group of students within a wider body of knowledge and experience of flexible entry, or working with groups such as adult learners.

Evaluation

Evaluate your approach to operating the flexible entry procedures, identifying the elements of success or otherwise. Consider how you might have changed your approach. Identify what you have learned from this situation and examine how the learning you have gained relates to existing theory and practice. Finally, consider to what extent this learning might be applied to future use and/or development of flexible entry provision within your programme.

This evaluation could also be used internally as part of your programme's quality assurance procedures for development and provision of flexible entry.

8.2 *Reflective exercise*

Reflect on:

A general experience that enabled you to learn something about the place where you live or the institution in which you work. The experiences which are best remembered are usually those that went particularly well or particularly badly. Try reflecting back over the past year to see which events stand out with particular vividness.

Reflection

Experience: Describe the experience – what happened?

Perceptions: Try to recall what you saw and felt (emotions and physical sensations).

Actions: Try to recall what you did in reaction to the experience.

Reflections: Try to recall what you thought about your experience.

Knowledge: What do you know now that you did not know before you had the experience?

8.3 Context-setting: RPL in Scotland

The following information on RPL in Scotland is extracted from the *SCQF RPL Project Interim Report* (SCQF, 2004). The report summarises a review of current and potential RPL activity in Scotland which was carried out to identify the key issues to be explored in the national debate on RPL. The outcomes of the national debate informed the production of the *SCQF RPL Guidelines*. The project summary can be downloaded from the SCQF website (www.scqf.org.uk).

8.3.1 Overview

Since its introduction in the late 1980s with the development of the Scottish Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme and its integration within SQA (then SCOTVEC) provision, RPL (or APEL) has remained a marginal institutional activity within further and higher education. Prior to the development of the SCQF RPL *Guidelines* there were no overall nationally

agreed principles for recognising and credit rating non-formal and informal learning in a consistent manner. RPL developments take place within the context of institutions, some of which are supported through nationally or European-funded development projects.

8.3.2 RPL within HEIs

RPL activity, while not a widespread activity, tends to take place in the 'new', or post-1992 universities, which continue to place a greater emphasis on widening access to higher education, especially among adult returners. Little RPL activity takes place within the older universities. Within most of the new universities, RPL provision is not mainstream but is undertaken in particular vocationally specific areas such as nursing and social work. This limited use of RPL continues despite the development of university-wide policies and procedures for RPL/APEL within several HEIs, which are intended to relate to all or most undergraduate and postgraduate provision.

8.3.3 RPL within colleges

Despite the development by SQA (formerly SCOTVEC) of APEL support and assessment mechanisms, most RPL activity that takes place within colleges is an informal, non-recorded process for the purposes of access to a programme of study. The formal programmes of study that are undertaken within further education colleges, such as National Courses from Access 1 to Advanced Higher, Higher National Qualifications (Higher National Certificates and Higher National Diplomas), Professional Development Awards and professional qualifications are designed for college-based delivery. RPL claims for credit are usually regarded as overly complicated and more time-consuming than undertaking the learning through the conventional route.

8.3.4 RPL within community learning and development

'RPL-type' activity takes place within community learning and development and voluntary sector learning providers, focusing largely on the development of core skills, adult literacy and numeracy, 'return to learn' and confidence building, but much of this is not formally assessed or credit rated.

8.3.5 RPL within the workplace

Equally, there are few mechanisms to recognise formally, or externally, the wide range of informal learning that takes place within the workplace, unless linked to SVQ provision. SVQs are competence-based qualifications based on National Occupational Standards and evidenced largely through work-based performance. A number of employers or training providers who are approved centres regard RPL as an integral part of their SVQ provision. Within these companies RPL approaches have been developed that enable employees to provide evidence of their achievement of the competences as a fast-track route to completing the qualification. Several of these employers have reported that the recognition of experience and competence has led to increased self-esteem among the workforce – individuals feel empowered to accept new responsibility and have the confidence that the external recognition of their skills has a currency within their industry or sector as a whole.

8.3.6 RPL within the voluntary sector

Much of the workplace training and informal learning that takes place in the voluntary sector for volunteers is non-accredited unless linked to SVQ

provision or to pre-qualifying work-based degree programmes. In order to facilitate the personal development of volunteers, both personal development planning and the compilation of portfolios is encouraged in many voluntary organisations. This enables volunteers to gather evidence of the learning gained through training as well as through the experience of volunteering. Portfolios can be used to support a request for enhanced responsibility or a change in role or participation in further learning and development, whether non-formal or formal.

8.3.7 RPL for personal/career development

A wide range of informal learning is undertaken by individuals through community learning and development activities provided by local authorities, college outreach centres, or centres recognised by Learndirect, within the voluntary sector and within the workplace. This learning is highly valuable to the learner as well as to the community or employer, but is usually non-assessed and therefore not credit rated. Informal learning activities in these sectors can focus on core skills, such as communication and ICT (information and communications technology) skills, literacy and numeracy; context-specific skills, such as committee skills or vocational skills; as well as confidence-raising, 'return to learn' type provision. Many of the learner groups engaged in these activities are often described as 'hard to reach' learners. External recognition of this learning within the context of the SCQF would enhance the self-confidence of these individuals as 'learners' and could facilitate the identification of further learning pathways as part of an educational and career guidance process.

A more developmental, rather than instrumentalist, approach to RPL needs to be developed in order to better meet the needs of learners. The awarding of specific credit within the context of formal programmes is an important function of RPL. Equally valuable, however, is the formative role RPL can play in terms of personal growth and development.

8.3.8 RPL for credit (APEL)

In the early 1990s, SQA (then SCOTVEC) and many HEIs developed APEL mechanisms based on the portfolio approach. This tended to be a flexible, open-ended approach to evidence gathering, highly learner-centred and therefore requiring highly individualised learner support. The process of compiling a portfolio is a demanding one for learners, particularly for those learner groups, such as adult returners, who have been out of the educational system for some time, and for whom APEL was developed as a more flexible means of enabling access to, and credit within, programmes of study. The assessment of portfolios, particularly those that have been compiled without structured guidance to limit the quantity of evidence, is a lengthier process than other forms of assessment.

As a result, within college/SQA provision, if RPL for credit takes place it is normally managed through 'assessment on demand', that is, undertaking the normal unit/programme assessment. RPL for entry onto programmes of study takes place during the admissions process, normally through an interview. It is not described or recorded as an RPL process. However, the prior informal learning of applicants over the age of 21 is taken into account if they do not have the normal entry requirements. RPL-type activity is also embedded in many Access and 'return to learn' programmes provided by colleges.

Within HEIs, most RPL activity has as its focus the gaining of credit within programmes rather than as a means of gaining initial access or entry to a

programme as an alternative to traditional entry qualifications. Moreover, most RPL claims within Scottish universities are made at the postgraduate level. This is because institutions find it easier to accredit experiential learning that equates to the specialised, professional learning that is undertaken at postgraduate or post-experience level. Attempts to match the outcomes of experiential learning to the outcomes of subject areas at undergraduate levels are often unsuccessful. The outcomes of most undergraduate programmes are designed to be achieved through conventional delivery, not experiential learning. Even if a match can be made, the perception of the outcomes of experiential learning as lower status knowledge may be reinforced by an accreditation process that requires that it be translated into the form of knowledge recognised in academia.

In sum, current RPL activity in Scotland is limited and marginal, largely due to the complexity and time-consuming nature of RPL processes. This issue requires to be addressed through the development of more manageable approaches to RPL support and assessment if wider RPL activity within the HEI and college/SQA sectors is to be encouraged. This is encouraged in the SCQF RPL *Guidelines*. The current lack of resources to support increased RPL provision will continue to act as a barrier to further RPL activity. The joint corporate plan of the merged funding councils highlights their commitment to social inclusion and lifelong learning. RPL has the potential to tackle some of the barriers to participation in further and higher education. A funding mechanism which encourages more flexible approaches to learning and assessment would be a major factor in enabling increased RPL activity.

8.3.9 What are the challenges facing RPL for credit within HEIs?

Mainstreaming RPL

Despite the existence of RPL procedures and institutional commitment to RPL as part of strategies of widening access and more flexible provision, RPL is not a mainstream activity within universities for the reasons indicated earlier. There are areas of well-established practice in RPL such as nursing, social work, engineering and management. Most of this activity takes place at the post-experience or postgraduate level where RPL is easier to manage and meets a particular student demand.

Resources

The resources available to provide staff with either the time or training and support needed to carry out an effective or widespread RPL function are inadequate.

Confidence in the process

There is still a perception among many academic staff that the RPL process is insufficiently robust as an indicator of student achievement and future performance.

Consistency and transparency

Despite the existence of institutional procedures for RPL, there is a lack of consistency in the interpretation of them within HEIs regarding such issues as the awarding of specific credit within programmes; the level and type of support and guidance provided to RPL applicants; assessment and quality assurance procedures for RPL; the fees charged for the process and monitoring of the process at school/faculty, departmental and programme

levels. These issues are particularly pertinent within HEIs that have a devolved structure for RPL, rather than a central coordinating unit.

While institutional autonomy should be maintained, the core principles as the parameters within which RPL provision will operate should provide a more transparent and equitable process and facilitate mutual trust and confidence between receiving institutions. As the SCQF RPL *Guidelines* are used by institutions as a source of reference and guidance, greater consistency and transparency should be attained.

Parity of esteem between informal and formal learning

The inherent conflict in RPL processes for credit purposes within the context of higher education is that individuals are required to translate their knowledge into forms that are deemed appropriate for assessment and credit rating. This results in a move away from experiential learning to something that is more readily understood by the 'academy'.

The distinction between Mode 1 knowledge and Mode 2 knowledge, or 'Savoir théorique' and 'Savoir faire' is noted in the Transfine National Report for Scotland.¹² Mode 1 knowledge is academic, and is based on research and scholarship ('knowing that'), while Mode 2 knowledge is produced through action ('knowing how'). Prior informal learning is based on Mode 2 knowledge and is being assessed into a Mode 1 system (Thompson, Transfine, 2003). This will remain an issue until some parity of esteem can be achieved between these two modes.

The issue of parity of esteem between different modes of learning requires to be addressed in the curriculum design stage of programmes. Learning outcomes need to be defined in a way that enables a variety of different means of achieving them and greater flexibility in the mode of assessment, without detracting from the quality of the provision. As part of the new quality framework for higher education, the Scottish Funding Council has produced guidelines for internal subject review. This will involve a consideration of how institutions are engaging with the SCQF, including through RPL.

8.3.10 Developments in RPL for credit within the HEI sector

Personal development planning: the Effective Learning Framework

This embeds the principle of personal development planning within the overall teaching and learning strategy of HEIs. The QAA Scotland/Universities Scotland joint working group to take forward the implementation of PDP recommends ELF as an approach for developing and implementing PDP in HEIs (*Consultation on the Effective Learning Framework – an implementation model for Personal Development Planning in Scottish higher education*, QAA and Universities Scotland, 2004). Its underlying principles are that a student's learning experience is holistic, that is, not restricted to the learning undertaken in a formal programme of study, and that PDP should be integrated within academic programmes. ELF has implications for the quality Enhancement Themes of both Employability and Meeting Student Needs. It centres on the concept of a self-audit process that endeavours to interlink the three 'circles' of a student's personal, academic and career experiences. This process could be linked to RPL activities related to personal development and educational guidance. It could also facilitate the recognition of prior informal

¹² R Thompson (2003) *Scotland Report*, in J Storan *Transfine Project UK Country Study* (www.transfine.net).

learning within programmes of study at HEIs after the student has commenced the programme. It would also enable students to reflect on the contribution their current and planned experiential learning, gained for example through part-time work, can make to their overall learning experience.

For more information on ELF, visit the Enhancement Themes website (www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk).

QAA's *Guidelines on the accreditation of prior learning* (2004) define the accreditation of prior learning as one of the 'central functions of HE'. The purpose of the guidelines is to explore a range of issues that can emerge when developing and refining approaches to the accreditation of prior learning. The focus is the maintenance and enhancement of quality of standards. For a copy of the guidelines visit QAA's website www.qaa.ac.uk).

The SCQF RPL *Guidelines* are consistent with the SCQF credit-rating guidelines, the QAA APL guidelines and the Common European Principles for the Identification and Validation of Informal and Non-formal Learning. The purpose of the guidelines is to:

- provide guidance to learning providers across all post-16 education and training sectors in Scotland on managing the process of recognising the prior informal learning of learners within the context of the SCQF
- provide a set of core principles and key features that will enable users of the SCQF to have confidence that there is consistency in approaches to recognising prior informal learning
- support the practice of recognising prior learning as part of the lifelong learning agenda in Scotland.

Work is underway to support the implementation of the guidelines across training and education sectors in Scotland.

For more information about RPL within the context of the SCQF, and to obtain the SCQF RPL *Guidelines*, visit the SCQF website (www.scqf.org.uk).

9 Further reading

9.1 Theoretical underpinning of RPL process and practical guidance

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9.2 Other useful references

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10 Glossary of terms¹³

Accreditation of prior certificated learning: a process through which previously assessed and certificated learning is considered and, as appropriate, recognised for academic or vocational purposes. This can also be known as **credit transfer**. A learner may combine an RPL claim with an APCL claim in seeking entry to, or credit within, a formal programme of study.

Accreditation of prior experiential learning: a process through which learning achieved outside formal education or training systems is assessed and, as appropriate, recognised for academic or vocational purposes. In these guidelines [SCQF RPL Guidelines] this process is described as **RPL for credit**, or **summative recognition**.

Colleges: Scotland's 45 colleges (of further and higher education) offer a range of programmes to meet the needs of individuals, communities and employers. Provision includes SQA qualifications, other vocational and academic qualifications, and non-formal learning and training.

Core skills: a variety of broad, transferable skills and abilities relevant to the workplace, learning and life generally. The SQA core skills framework enables core skills units to be assessed in the workplace and within the context of SQA National Qualifications. The core skills are communication, numeracy, information technology, problem solving and working with others. Core skills can be achieved at four levels. These are at levels 3-6 within the SCQF.

Credit rating: a process of professional judgement leading to a statement on the level and volume of outcomes of learning.

European Credit Transfer System: facilitates student mobility in Europe by recognising credit gained at different regional, national and European institutions.

Higher education institutions: organisations providing education above Higher and Advanced Higher grade. In Scotland there are 14 universities and seven colleges of higher education.

Learner: any individual who is engaged in any form of learning or training, whether non-formal or formal, or who is considering returning to learning.

Learning providers: all organisations across all education and training sectors that provide formal or non-formal learning and training.

Notional levelling: this process is linked to RPL for personal/career development or formative recognition and involves mapping an individual's learning onto the SCQF in order to identify possible progression routes or an individual learning pathway. The determination of a notional level for a learner's defined outcomes, achieved through prior informal learning, is undertaken by reference to outcomes within existing levelled or credit-rated provision, or in relation to SCQF level descriptors. Unlike credit, the outcome of notional levelling is not necessarily transferable between learning providers. However, it is a useful form of guidance for the learner and can also be a useful source of information to other learning providers, or to employers, about a learner's knowledge, skills and abilities.

Outcomes: a statement of competences, including knowledge, skills and values, capable of being demonstrated at the end of a process of learning.

Personal/professional development planning: a process of planning further learning and development within the context of a formal or non-formal programme of learning or training; or within the workplace; or as part of continuing professional

¹³ This glossary is largely contained in the SCQF RPL *Guidelines* (SCQF, 2005)

development. The process normally involves reflection on prior and current learning and development in order to facilitate the planning process.

Professional judgement: a decision reached by those best qualified through experience and knowledge of the discipline, field of study, profession, trade or area of skill.

SCQF credit-rating organisations: currently only SQA, HEIs and now colleges can award SCQF credit. These organisations can award both **general** and **specific credit** for learning. SQA awards SCQF credit to learning through the delivery and assessment of its qualifications by SQA-approved centres. General credit relates to the agreed determination of level and volume of learning within the SCQF. Specific credit is that which is recognised as being relevant for entry to, or credit within, a particular programme.

SCQF level descriptors: these define the characteristic generic outcomes for each of the 12 levels of the SCQF. They are intended to be indicative rather than prescriptive, and any defined SCQF credit is not required to encompass all five areas of competence. The five broad headings under which the generic outcomes at each level are defined are: knowledge and understanding; practice (applied knowledge and understanding); generic cognitive skills, such as evaluation and critical analysis; communication, numeracy and IT skills; and autonomy, accountability and working with others.

Scottish Qualifications Authority: the national body for Scotland with responsibility for the development, accreditation, assessment and certification of qualifications other than degrees. SQA approves centres to deliver and assess qualifications.

SQA approved centres: organisations approved as SQA centres to offer specific qualifications. Centres can be: private training providers whose sole purpose is the delivery of training and the assessment of candidates; private and public sector companies who offer training to their employees; and schools and colleges.

Scottish Vocational Qualifications: SVQs are based on **National Occupational Standards** (standards of performance developed by representatives from industry, commerce and education). They are usually achieved in the workplace, and combine work-based competences and the knowledge needed to acquire those skills. Some SVQs or SVQ units are incorporated into other awards or programmes, including Higher National Certificates and Modern Apprenticeships. There are SVQs for nearly all occupations in Scotland. SVQs help people to progress throughout their working life. They are available at five levels, making them suitable both for people starting out on a career and for people with many years of experience.

Receiving institution or organisation: the college, other SQA-approved centre or HEI that provides the programme to which the learner is seeking entry to, and/or credit within, through RPL. The receiving institution determines how much specific credit can be recognised within a particular programme.

Recognition of prior informal learning: a process that acknowledges, and values publicly, learning which has been achieved outside formal education or training systems.

RPL for personal/career development or formative recognition: a process of recognising learning achieved outside formal education or training systems within the context of further learning and development. This process can be linked to: confidence building; identifying individual learning pathways; a notional levelling 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, or summative recognition: a process of assessing learning achieved outside of formal education or training systems which is recognised, if appropriate, for academic or vocational purposes. This process is also known as APEL. It can enable learners to gain entry to a programme of formal learning if the outcomes of their prior informal learning are judged as equivalent to the entry requirements for the programme, or to gain credit within a programme of formal learning if the outcomes of their prior informal learning are judged as equivalent to the outcomes of the programme for which they are seeking credit. Credit can be awarded for elements of a programme (units or modules), or parts of a level, or for an entire level. Most programmes have limits for the amount of credit that can be awarded through RPL.

Universities and Colleges Admissions Service: the central organisation that processes applications for full-time undergraduate courses at UK universities and colleges.