

Recognition of Prior Learning in Scotland - Practitioner Perspective Survey

Introduction

As part of the [Resilient Learning Communities Enhancement Theme](#), QAA Scotland (QAAS) is leading on two complementary projects in 2021-22: [Valuing and recognising prior learning and experience](#) and [Understanding micro-credentials and small qualifications in Scotland](#). To help inform these projects, QAAS undertook a survey of college and university practitioners to get their perspectives on recognition of prior learning (RPL) and the provision of micro-credentials.

In terms of recognition of prior learning (RPL), the aim of the survey was to determine awareness and currency of the [RPL National Framework for Scottish Higher Education](#) (the RPL Framework) which was developed in 2014, as well current use of RPL across institutions.

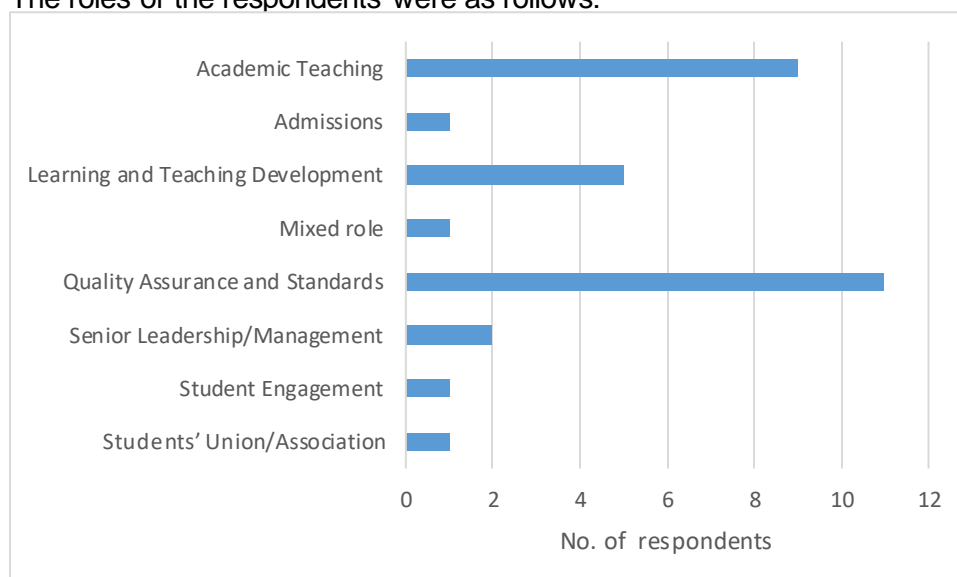
The survey was shared with university staff by QAAS and college practitioners by the College Development Network (CDN) between November and December 2021.

This report provides a summary of the responses to the RPL questions.

Respondents

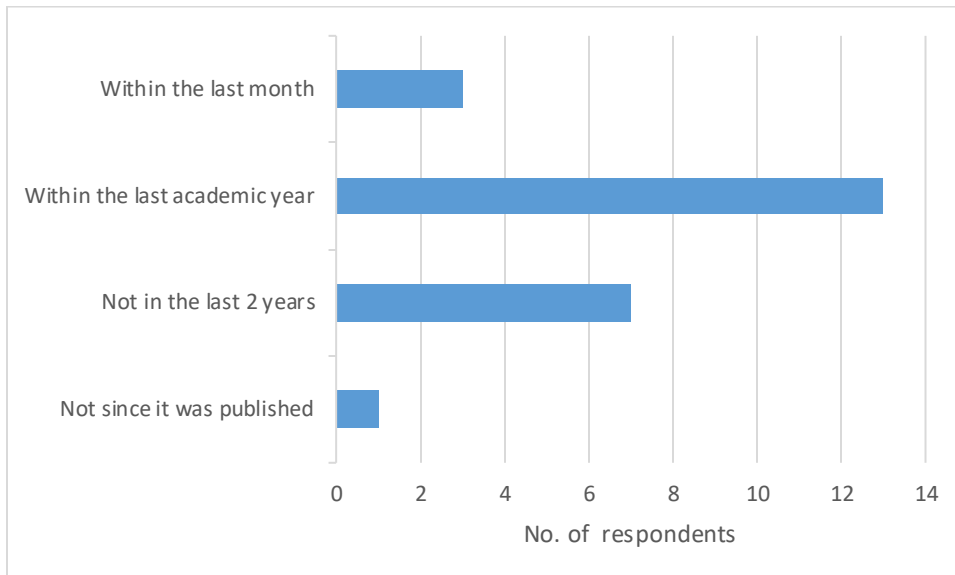
In total, there were 31 responses, representing staff from 16 different Scottish universities and seven colleges. Responses were provided by individuals in a variety of academic and professional support roles across the institutions.

The roles of the respondents were as follows:



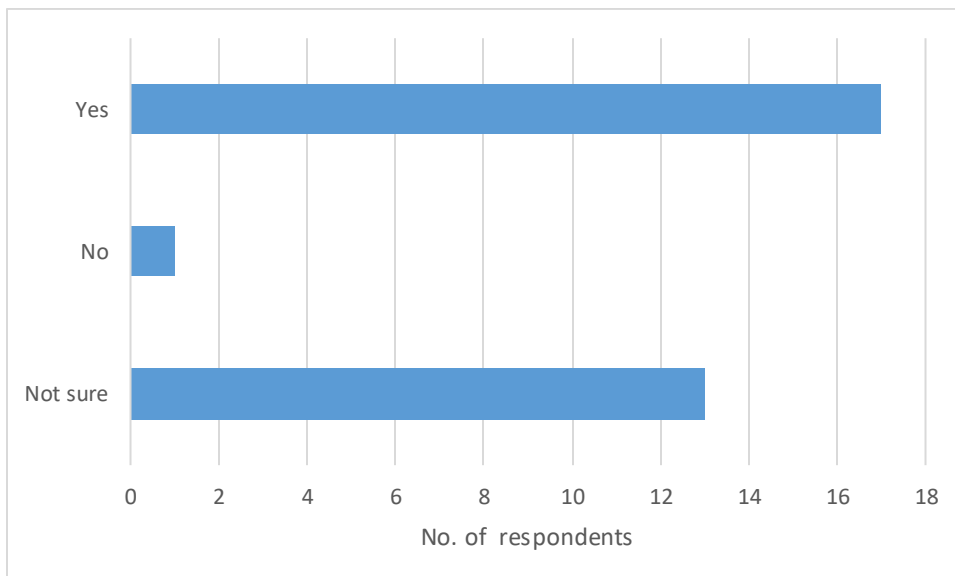
Awareness and use of the RPL Framework

Of the 31 respondents, 24 were aware of the RPL Framework for Scotland and seven were not. More than half of the respondents indicated that they had used the RPL Framework within the past year. The chart below indicates respondents' frequency of use of the RPL Framework.



Relevance and currency of the RPL Framework

Are the principles in the RPL Framework still relevant and reflective of the current higher education landscape?



While most respondents (17 out of 31) felt the principles within the RPL Framework are still relevant and reflective of the current higher education landscape, a significant number (13) were 'not sure' and one respondent stated that the framework is no longer relevant.

Most respondents offered further explanation of their perceptions. Comments from those who feel the RPL framework is still relevant include:

- The framework still defines the objectives of RPL well.
- The broad principles still apply.
- There is still a need for a basic minimum standard for RPL.
- The framework contributes to consistency of practice.
- Progress has been made but there is still scope for RPL to be further embedded.

The link between the RPL Framework and current interest in skills development and widening access and participation in higher education, was made by several respondents.

For example:

'I think these (principles) have become more relevant as we are seeing a great deal of interest (in) career change pathways with people who have had years of workplace learning and now look to take these skills in a new direction.'

(Job role: learning and teaching development)

'Yes, the underlying principles of RPL are still current. RPL is becoming more prominent and important in allowing a wider range of students to engage with HE.'

(Job role: academic teaching)

'RPL motivates potential students, and one hopes helps a wide range of students access university.'

(Job role: academic teaching)

Six respondents commented on the need to update the framework in the light of changes to the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code) and developments in the sector:

'The framework does not cover the re-skilling agenda and non-standard qualifications well.'

(Job role: quality assurance and standards)

'Embedding the principal of RPL within the context of widening participation is vital to support efficient and flexible learner journeys. Articulation has a key role to play, and while some progress has been made by the sector since the framework was published, there is still considerable scope for RPL to be further embedded in initiatives and mainstream practice. The development, implementation, and communication of RPL policy and processes at institutional level is key to further progress being made.'

(Job role: senior leadership/management)

'It is noted that the Framework continues to refer to the various chapters of the Quality Code which have since been updated, it would therefore be helpful if the Framework was aligned to the updated version of the Code.'

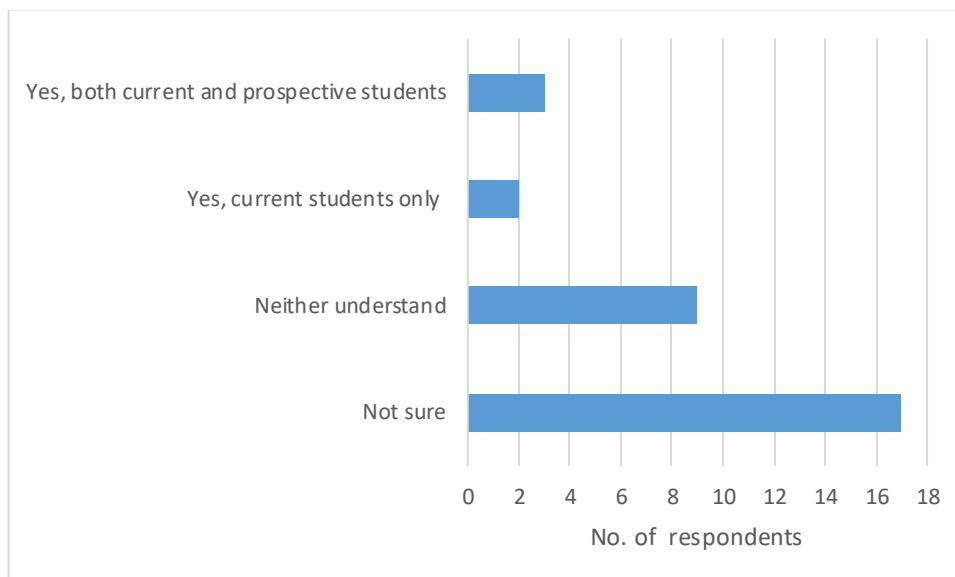
(Job role: quality assurance and standards)

Student understanding of RPL

Is RPL well understood by prospective and current students?

84% of respondents did not think/were not sure current or prospective students understood RPL. The comments provided to explain respondents' perceptions included the following observations:

- Understanding is patchy.
- There are differences between student groups, subject areas and disciplines.
- There is better understanding of articulation arrangements and credit transfer from other courses and institutions than the experiential route.
- There is better understanding of making claims on postgraduate programmes based on professional experience than among undergraduates.



The importance of engagement with academic and admissions staff to support students and make them aware of opportunities was noted in several comments:

'I'm not sure how aware prospective students will be of the recognition of prior learning. Current students will, however, be spoken to about this during their first semester. This will hopefully give them a better understanding of what it means and how it might affect/fit in with their studies.'

(Job role: quality assurance and standards)

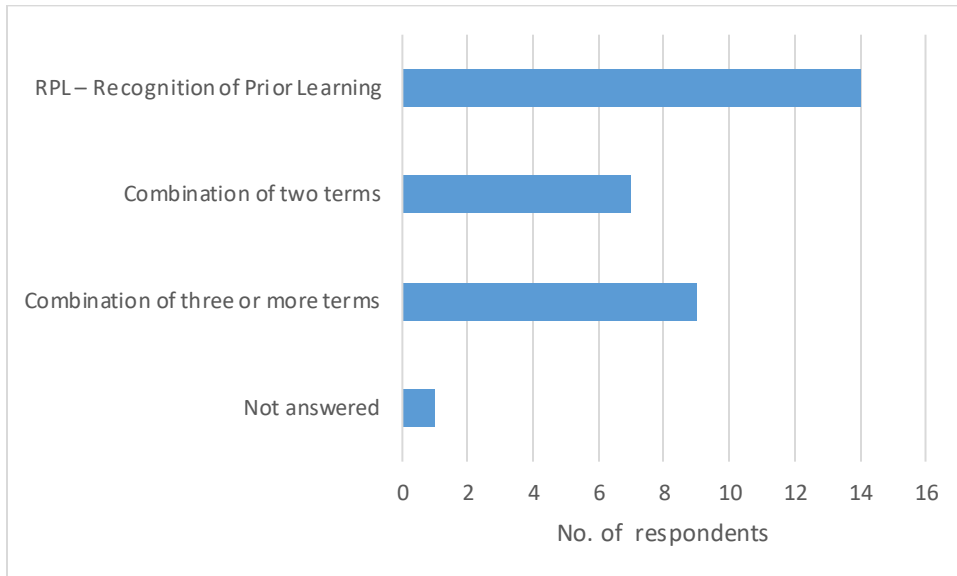
These findings echo the commentary from student representatives and student engagement officers at the [National Education Officers' Network](#) (NEON) meeting held in December 2021. NEON is a network for student officers in universities and colleges across Scotland supported by [Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland](#) (sparqs) and provides an opportunity to discuss and work on key sector issues (see also page 9).

RPL policies

71% of respondents stated that they were aware of an RPL policy - of those, 91% confirmed this policy covered their whole institution.

Terminology

A range of prior learning terminology is used in institutions:



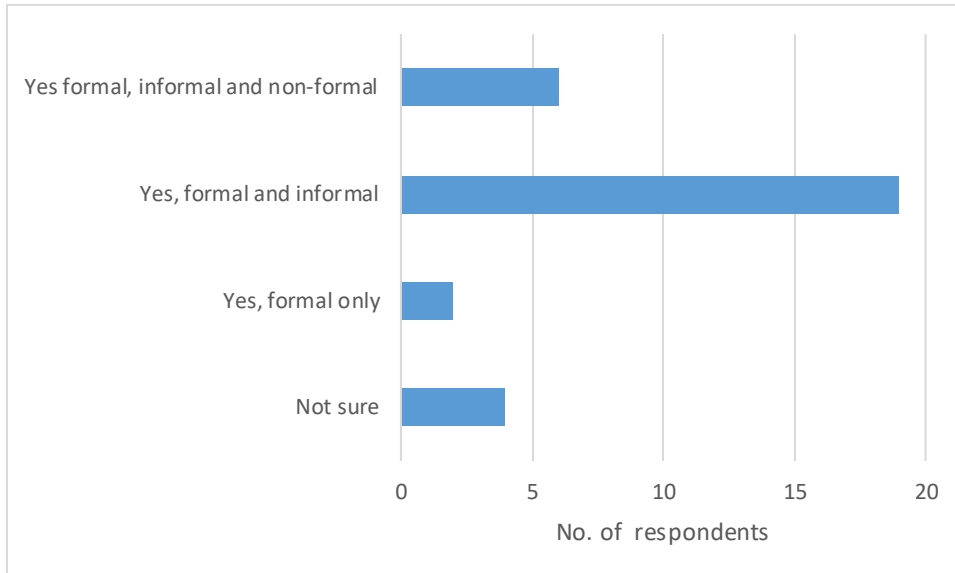
Where multiple or combinations of terms are used, the following were reported:

- RPEL: Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning
- RPCL: Recognition of Prior Certified/Certificated Learning
- RPIL: Accreditation of Prior Informal Learning
- APL: Accredited Prior Learning
- APCL: Accreditation of Prior Certified/Certificated Learning
- APEL: Accredited Prior Experiential Learning
- IPL: Informal Prior Learning.

One respondent noted that they make a clear distinction between RPL and credit transfer.

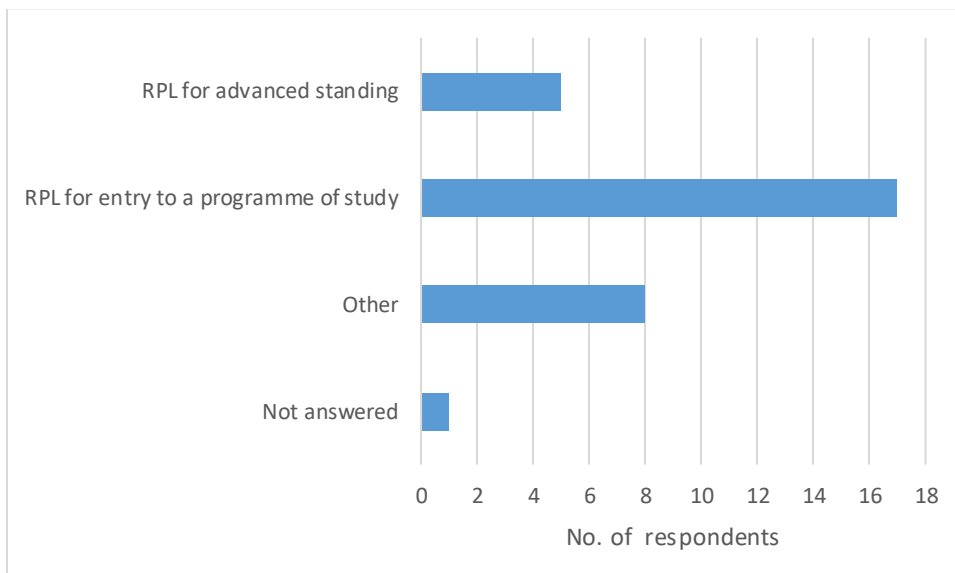
The types of learning covered in RPL policies

The responses indicate that the majority of institutions' RPL policies cover or acknowledge formal and informal learning. Non-formal learning is covered in only 19% of respondents' policies.



How RPL is used in institutions

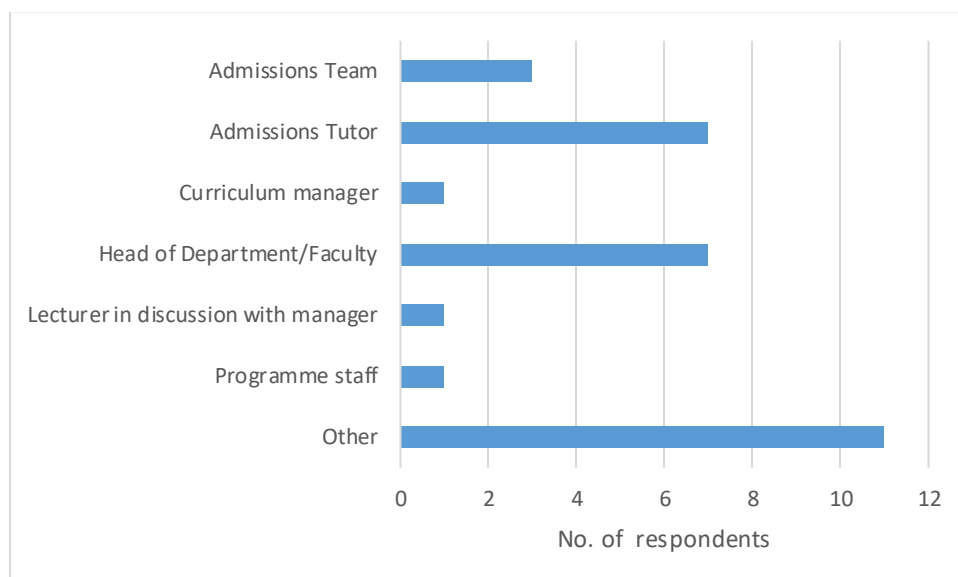
The survey asked about the purposes for which RPL is used in institutions



Of those that chose 'other', all noted they used it both for entry to a programme of study and for advanced standing.

RPL decisions about entry to programmes and advanced standing through

The survey asked whom in institutions made decisions relating to RPL. The majority of respondents indicated that RPL application decisions are mainly made by academic staff such as the admissions tutor or the head of department/faculty. Three respondents identified the admissions team as making RPL application decisions.



Respondents who selected 'other' included the following:

- the RPL panel
- the programme leader in liaison with RPL coordinator
- an accredited specialist in the academic team (for health sciences courses)
- the Credit Transfer Office makes decisions for agreed articulation arrangements and liaises with academic departments in other cases.

Barriers to using RPL

Respondents provided a variety of views on the barriers to successful implementation of RPL within institutions. The barriers most often identified were related to staff and student understanding of policy and process, resource implications, and the complexity of the RPL process:

- limited staff and student awareness/understanding/confidence/experience
- the financial costs of assessment for the student
- time and effort required to make an RPL claim
- the time and effort required to assess an RPL claim
- ability of students to navigate the policy and process
- ability of students to articulate informal learning
- complexity of matching claims to programme structure and learning outcomes
- risks around integrity - such as being confident of the authenticity of prior learning/experience and maintaining consistency in assessment of experiential learning
- perceptions of additional work, lack of support within the institution and being too complex to navigate.

A few respondents pointed to systemic issues within the sector, including differing curriculum and learning outcomes across qualifications in similar subject areas across higher education institutions and inconsistent use of Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework levels within qualifications (for example, in HNC/D qualifications). In addition, a respondent commented on the perception of some stakeholders that 'informal learning' is worth less than 'formal learning'. One respondent pointed out that if RPL results in reducing a student's time on a programme, this may affect their funding, visa status and so on.

One respondent suggested the main barriers were 'institutional cultures' and 'political will', as well as lack of student awareness/understanding (job role: academic teaching).

The benefits of RPL for Scottish higher education

All respondents recognised a range of benefits of RPL for the higher education (HE) sector. The most often mentioned benefits were:

- widening opportunities to access HE for non-standard entrants, adults, returners
- supporting progression through HE
- enabling lifelong learning and 'agile' learning
- bringing diversity to student cohorts; improving the student experience and enriching teaching and learning
- promoting upskilling and reskilling without duplication of learning
- enabling and supporting student movement between institutions
- promoting efficiency of the learner journey and meeting students' needs
- meeting sector and national policy objectives on fair access, social mobility, lifelong learning and skills development
- connecting professional programmes and practice experience
- attracting more students.

The contribution of RPL to social inclusion in HE and the wider goals of social mobility and prosperity, was noted by one respondent as follows:

'Wider representation of the full society in HE. Better claims to and ability to support social mobility in society. Greater contribution to improved standard of living across all sections of society.'

(Job role: academic teaching)

Several respondents identified the potential for RPL to enable the development of collaborative partnership working, in addition to the benefits identified above. For example:

'RPL can be an enabler in partnership working within the sector.'

'Widespread improvements in RPL and embedding RPL in the mainstream curriculum offer can improve the extent to which the Scottish higher education system works as a whole.'

'RPL supports the achievement of sector ambitions on Fair Access.'

(Job role: external engagement and partnerships)

The benefits of RPL for students

The benefits of RPL for students fell into the following main categories, many of which were also identified as beneficial to the sector as a whole:

- enabling progression into and through higher education
- creating more appropriate points of entry to courses
- creating opportunities for lifelong learning
- reducing duplication/repetition of learning
- shortening the length of learning; progress more quickly
- reducing financial costs
- building student confidence through acknowledgement of learning
- increasing retention; improve motivation; incentivise further study
- building connections for students between work and study
- enhancing career prospects.

The potential of RPL to build connections between university and the real world, with benefit for prospective students, was highlighted by one respondent:

'[RPL] communicates the message that university is not just about learning 'academic skills' which have no relevance to the real world, but that there is a close link between the real world and what you learn at university.'
(Job role: learning and teaching development)

Not all respondents agreed that RPL was beneficial to students (or staff). For example:

'Quite often the effort required to make an RPL claim is more than completing the course. It may put students at a disadvantage not to be acclimatised to higher education and not to have a cohort group. Staff spend more time addressing the deficiencies of people who join a programme at an advanced level who did not have the benefit of learning in the earlier parts of the programme.'
(Job role: learning and teaching development).

The benefits of RPL for institutions

Some of the benefits of RPL identified by respondents for institutions were also identified as beneficial to the sector and individual students. The most often mentioned benefits for institutions related to the potential of RPL to widen access and create more diverse student populations, as well as a range of business, quality and reputational gains:

- widening access to the institution
- creating diverse student populations
- attracting more students
- enabling curriculum efficiency
- improving student engagement, satisfaction, achievement
- providing a fair and high-quality applicant and student experience
- enabling partnership working with other institutions
- increasing positive reputation
- facilitating better links with industry
- creating efficiencies in the student journey which can support more efficient and targeted use of funding.

The beneficial consequences of creating a more diverse student population through RPL were noted by several respondents. Diversity was seen as a good thing in itself to improve social inclusion, as well as a way to enhance the experience of other students and enrich teaching and learning.

For example:

'[RPL] widens opportunities to access HE, acknowledge(s) the skills that students bring from their own life - which can bring diversity to a cohort and enhance the experience of others studying alongside.'

(Job role: academic teaching)

'[RPL] connects professional programmes to practice experience, students bring a wide range of experience to programmes.'

(Job role: academic teaching)

Innovations and good practice

Two respondents provided examples of good practice in their own institutions. This included Edinburgh Napier University's BA Business and Enterprise programme which offers a flexible learning programme and has a range of different entry qualifications including the recognition of prior experiential learning. The University of Dundee's School of Health Sciences was also identified as an example of good practice. The School provides three options for the recognition of learning from previous educational and life-work experience, including prior certificated learning, prior informal learning and recognition of professional learning.

A student perspective

sparqs facilitated a discussion on RPL at a NEON meeting in December 2021. The key points from that discussion are collected here:

- The students involved in the discussion had heard about RPL but were not sure of RPL processes at their individual institutions.
- Several of the students were familiar with the concept of RPL through phrases such as 'or through equivalent experience' in course descriptions. Since this is often not clearly defined, students may not understand what this means in practice.
- It was noted that 'APEL' tended to be used for transition from undergraduate to postgraduate studies and the students had little awareness of it being used in recruitment to undergraduate courses.
- It was agreed that it would be useful to have better awareness of RPL and of the needs of students who might make use of it to gain entry to higher education.
- Terminology is not consistent across institutions: for example, RPEL, RPL, APEL.
- It was thought that students from a widening participation background may have a better understanding of RPL than those who have come through traditional routes.
- It was suggested that a guide to RPL for student representatives and student engagement officers would be welcome.
- One student noted that, despite sitting on several institutional committees, they had never heard RPL discussed.

Conclusion

Respondents from a range of institutions and roles feel that the principles contained in the RPL Framework are still relevant to the development and enhancement of RPL; however, the document needs to be reviewed and refreshed.

A number of barriers to the effective implementation of RPL were identified, including staff and student understanding of policy and process, resource implications and the complexities of RPL assessment. Many of these barriers were also identified in 2014 when the RPL Framework was originally published. Respondents agreed on the benefits of RPL to the sector, institutions and students which include:

- widening access into and progression through HE to increase opportunity and the diversity of student populations
- reputational, quality and business gains
- meeting institutional and national policy objectives on fair access, social mobility, skills development, and prosperity.

Published - July 2022

© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2022

Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

www.qaa.ac.uk

