

Units of Learning and Assessment of the knowledge, skills and competencies involved in the operation of the roles and responsibilities of RPLO professionals

Definitions	2
1. Qualification and Credit Framework	2
2. European Guidelines on Validation	2
General Issues	2
1. What methodologies are currently used for achieving Certification through RPLO (Route 2)?	2
2. The European Guidelines for the validation of non-formal and informal learning describe a broader approach,	3
Phases of the process of RPLO	3
1. Orientation Phase	3
2. Assessment Phase	4
Marketing Recognition of Prior Learning in the QCF	6
Common Quality Criteria for Certification	8
1. The evidence required for Certification is based on the relevant curriculum and Qualification requirements	8
2. The procedures followed should conform to the regulatory framework that covers the Certification process	8
3. Specific provisions for RPL	9
Specific Issues	10
1. Stages of the RPLO process	10
2. Assessment Strategies	10
3. Provision of Information, Advice and Guidance [IAG]	10
4. Requirements for RPLO professional roles and responsibilities	11

Definitions

1. Qualification and Credit Framework

Recognition of Prior Learning [RPL] is a method of assessment that considers whether a learner can demonstrate that they can meet the assessment requirements for a unit through knowledge, understanding or skills they already possess and do not need to develop through a course of learning. This concept is developed in this project by a specific focus on Learning Outcomes that will enhance the process of RPL and make it more accessible across EU member states.

2. European Guidelines on Validation

Formal recognition involves the process of granting official status to skills and competencies through the award of qualifications (certificates, diploma or titles); the granting of equivalence, credit units or waivers, validation of gained skills and/or competencies; and/or *Social recognition* involves the acknowledgement of the value of skills and/or competencies by economic and social stakeholders.

General Issues

1. What methodologies are currently used for achieving Certification through RPLO (Route 2)?

- *Portfolio preparation*, though highly rewarding when successfully supported, may be difficult, tedious, time-consuming and frequently resource-intensive.
- *Portfolios involve a validated record* of existing knowledge, skills and competencies, supported by a development strategy including, where relevant, a learning pathway. Learners should be encouraged to reduce volume by being selective in their choice of evidence and to cross-reference evidence to more than one learning outcome or competence so that the process of compiling a portfolio becomes a more manageable exercise.

All evidence presented for Certification must be reliable, valid, authentic and sufficient in order to ensure that the predefined standard has been achieved.



2. The European Guidelines for the validation of non-formal and informal learning describe a broader approach,

The use of the experience of other European countries would make RPLO more attractive to potential clients and should broaden existing UK practice.

Phases of the process of RPLO¹

1. Orientation Phase

- a) A Formative process** that will encourage potential clients to consider the potential of RPLO in their potential learning pathways, and enable assessment centres to plan their activities in order to ensure that the subsequent Assessment Phase is likely to maximise clients' success. This will involve the provision of relevant and accurate Information, Advice and Guidance [IAG]
- b) Engaging individuals** through outreach and credit-based access programmes (such as "Make Your Experience Count") that will provide an impartial, effective and efficient induction to RPLO.²
- c) Mentoring** to support clients' personal and professional reflection on the realistic possibilities of successful assessment.
- d) Clients' decision to seek RPLO** will involve the choice of a target for Certification and a consideration of the alternative routes to Certification (including a decision not to proceed to the Assessment Phase).
- e) Full information on the process should be provided to potential clients** using language and concepts that are intelligible, usable, and structured from the viewpoint of the learner. There should be no surprises arising from poor or incomplete information.
- f) An ethics-based process that respects personal reflections and opinions of the client** protecting him/her from breach of confidence or trust. Those

¹ This section is derived from the European Guidelines for Validating non-formal and informal learning, CEDEFOP, 2009, Annex 2 Table 5, pages 79 -81.

² For example, see the Guide produced by the project "Socrates - Grundtvig Project Social Inclusion through APEL: The Learners' Perspective" (2002)
<http://crll.gcal.ac.uk/SOCRATESite/Making%20Experience%20Count.2.pdf>



involved in the process of orientation must not intrude into the personal reflections of the individual by making him/her vulnerable or uncomfortable.

- g) An appeals procedure** that provides individuals with effective opportunities for challenging decisions made during this phase. An informal process of questioning decisions should also be available.
- h) A flexible process** that responds to changes in the personal and professional situation of the client and therefore has a minimum of fixed procedures. The procedures involved in RPLO should be as flexible as possible.
- i) The stakeholders involved should understand the role of others** so that the individual is clear about the roles and responsibilities involved.

Overall, the Orientation phase should generate trust:

- In the process itself, and those managing it;
- In those managing the process;
- In the process by those using the outcomes of the process of Recognition.

2. Assessment Phase

- a) Provides an encouraging and positive experience** through a clear and accessible explanation of the requirements of the assessment process. This experience should sustain the client's motivation with the participation of all actors and stakeholders.
- b) This assessment phase will have a formative effect on the individual** and care should be taken to ensure that the process of RPLO have a positive effect on the individual, especially through continuing engagement and participation in Lifelong Learning.
- c) Supporting each client in a process of structured self-assessment** that will enable to identify the extent to which their existing knowledge, skills and competencies meet the requirements of the chosen target Qualification and Level and identifies any supplementary learning (including practical experience).
- d) The choice of assessment procedures should maximise access** by ensuring that the procedures are appropriate to the context and the capabilities of the individual.



- e) **Use assessors who are qualified to assess the chosen qualification** in terms of Sector and Level and maintain their competence through Continuing Professional Development [CPD].
- f) **The outcomes of assessment should remain confidential to the individual** and therefore this should be respected by those involved in the process.
- g) **Quality Assurance of assessment through RPLO is equally rigorous to that provided in Formal Learning** and specifically providing clear and constructive feedback to the client. This QA process is defined by the Regulatory framework. This aspect is discussed more fully

The methodology of this broader approach includes:

- a) *Debate* offers an individual the opportunity to demonstrate depth and breadth of knowledge as well as communicative competencies. This debate will be recorded to enable the claims to be verified.
- b) *Declarative* statements that enable an individual make full use of use of the potential of self-assessment; to share experiences, take perspectives, provide reflections and record their competencies. These statements should normally witnessed by a competent third party (whose role and competencies should be stated) who would verify or confirm this self-assessment.
- c) *E-portfolios and Personalised Learning Systems* represent considerable possibilities as well as potentially limiting access to RPLO for some clients. The development of web-based Social Networking as a tool for collaborative constructivist learning and the enhancement of communities of Practice has significant potential. This aspect should be voluntary and carefully monitored and evaluated.
- d) *Interviews* that can be used by advisors, mentors or assessors in order to support an individual by enabling clarification of the issues raised in oral, video or documentary evidence; interviews may also help to clarify the breadth and depth of learning.
- e) *Observation* can be used to demonstrate an individual's competence whilst they are carrying out everyday tasks in the real situation of the workplace.
- f) *Presentation* of information to a panel of experts in order to demonstrate appropriate levels communicative and



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analytical skills, and the ability to structure complex information.

- g) *Simulation or exercise* may be a useful although limited source of evidence where real performance is not feasible.
- h) *Tests and examinations* may well be a useful source of evidence, especially where knowledge of theory is an importance requirement for certification involving a Licence to Practice.

Marketing Recognition of Prior Learning in the QCF

Lifelong Learning UK [LLUK] as the Sector Skills Council is responsible for identifying market needs and workforce targets. Awarding Organisations can help to improve the take-up of RPL by providing support packs and training staff in their use for Continuing Professional Development involving:

- Providing guidance for providers on assessment processes and RPL;
- Developing rules for awarding credit based on learning achieved;
- Developing assessment methods and tools to support RPL processes, including moderation cycles;
- Developing administrative policies that will support RPL;
- Identifying the Units which are most appropriate for RPL;
- Identifying the knowledge, skills and competencies that advisers and assessors are expected to have and ensuring that these are achieved and, as necessary updated. (See Claiming Credit pages 13 and 14)

In the diagram representing RPL Routes, Route 1 (Assessment of Formal Learning) appears to be simpler than Route 2 (RPL), although Route 1 is a complex process. One important development would be for Awarding Organisations to raise confidence in RPL by publicising the mutual recognition of the results of RPL.³

1. **A support strategy for Route 2** will need to be adequately resourced by Awarding Organisations and supported by learner-based funding in a comparable manner. This will require earmarked funding to establish the required Providers' infrastructure, followed by demand-based funding that will

³ The project gratefully acknowledges the support in developing these criteria from colleagues at Edexcel.



encourage potential applicants for Certification through Route 2. This would ensure that Providers are given clear incentives to use guidance and support resources efficiently and effectively.

2. **Learning Outcomes are the crucial starting point for both Routes to Certification.** In both Routes, Awarding Organisations need to ensure that Learning Outcomes set clear and meaningful goals for individuals (i.e. by describing clearly the standard to be achieved through the assessment criteria). Thus the language used in the Units needs to be clear and explicit. Where it is not possible to revise the Units outside the normal approval cycle, Providers should be advised and supported by the Awarding Organisation.
3. **Level Descriptors** need to meet the requirements of National Qualification Frameworks (such as the QCF) and other National Systems; at Level 4 and above, Descriptors need to be fully compatible with National and European Higher Education Frameworks⁴ and, where appropriate, subject benchmark statements; the European Qualification Framework [EQF] and the provides an important meta-framework for facilitating the identification of equivalences between qualifications and units in different national systems. Where relevant Higher Education Subject Benchmarks exist, they should inform the level of knowledge required and the ways that this is applied to skills and competencies.

⁴ In the UK, National Higher Education Framework (2008) is available at: <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/EWNI08/FHEQ08.pdf> ; the Education Subject Benchmark Statement (2007) is available at <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark/honours/Education07.pdf>



Common Quality Criteria for Certification

1. The evidence required for Certification is based on the relevant curriculum and Qualification requirements.

“From the perspective of an awarding organisation there is no fundamental difference between RPL and the assessment of learning achievements through a formal route. The candidate being assessed for credits through RPL must still comply with all the requirements as stated in unit standards and qualifications. The only real difference lies in the route taken to achieve the learning, skills or competencies.

RPL is an alternative route to recognition and not a shortcut. RPL must therefore be an integrated part of a quality-assured assessment process. Assessors in awarding organisations that offer competence-based qualifications routinely assess prior learning. However, sector bodies, awarding organisations, learning providers, employers and learners can use the introduction of the QCF to assure that opportunities for RPL are fully used.”⁵

“The confirmation by a competent body that learning outcomes (knowledge, skills and/or competencies) acquired by an individual in a formal, non-formal or informal setting have been assessed against predefined criteria and are compliant with the requirements of a validation standard. Validation typically leads to certification.”⁶

2. The procedures followed should conform to the regulatory framework that covers the Certification process

In England, Wales and Northern Ireland this regulatory framework is a set of principles, procedures and rules governing the Certification of Credit and Qualifications recognised by the QCF as the National Qualification Framework [NQF] in each of these three devolved administrations of the UK. These arrangements do not apply to Universities that have their own qualification awarding powers and are regulated in ways that are appropriate to their autonomy.

⁵ Qualification and Curriculum Agency (2008), *Claiming Credit: Guidance on the recognition of prior learning within the Qualification and Credit Framework*, London, page 3.

⁶ CEDEFOP (2009), *European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning*, Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, page 15.



“This document sets out the regulatory arrangements that will apply to the organisations that operate within, and the qualifications that are accredited into, the QCF. The arrangements set the standard that all organisations and qualifications must meet in order to be recognised as part of the QCF. The qualifications regulators will therefore use these arrangements in protecting the interests of learners and promoting public confidence in the national qualifications system.

The regulatory arrangements are designed to reflect the qualifications regulators’ policy commitment to a strategic, risk-based approach to safeguarding the interests of learners. To this end, the arrangements are deliberately focused to a much greater extent than previous regulations on the ability of the organisations that operate in the QCF to develop and assess units and qualifications, and to award credits and qualifications, to the appropriate standards. As a result, they set out a reduction in the general level of the scrutiny of individual units and qualifications required to ensure that quality and standards are maintained. That said, the qualifications regulators will still consider all aspects of the development and delivery of individual units and qualifications wherever they feel the need arises.”⁷

This statement emphasises the Quality Assurance principle that the needs and interests of learners, maintaining standards and comparability, and promoting public confidence, are best protected by emphasising the consistency of a self-assessment approach that is already present in the Inspection approach used in English VET. This reflects the principle of the QCF as a qualification system that is inclusive, responsive and non-bureaucratic – “based on mutual trust and confidence, supported by a robust and proportionate approach to regulation and quality assurance.”⁸

3. Specific provisions for RPLO

As part of the regulations for the delivery of valid, reliable and consistent assessment, achievement is recognised through the recognition of prior learning (RPL) where this is appropriate

⁷ OfQual [The Office of the Qualifications and Examinations Regulator] (2008), Regulatory Arrangements for the QCF, London, Cardiff & Belfast, page 3.

⁸ OfQual (2008), Op. Cit., page 5.



and where appropriate, arrangements exist in each assessment centre.⁹

Specific Issues

1. Stages of the RPLO process

The process should be described as simply as possible by identifying the following three distinct stages:

- (i) **Preparation for claiming credit** starting from an individual's awareness of the advantages and added value of RPLO; their self-assessment of knowledge, skills and competencies in relation to relevant QCF Units, Learning Outcomes and Assessment Criteria leading to a decision to claim credit.
- (ii) **Assessment of an individual's learning** by understanding the requirements of Units, gathering evidence against these requirements, using a range of methods and identifying any supplementary learning required to fill gaps in evidence; organising evidence of learning outcomes for assessment following quality assured assessment and verification procedures that encourage individuals to claim the award of Unit credit.
- (iii) **Quality Assurance of the RPLO process** to ensure that the above stages are based on effective preparation and reliable and valid assessment.

2. Assessment Strategies

The assessment strategies specified by Awarding Organisations need to emphasise how RPLO can be facilitated. In the case of the LLUK Teacher and Trainer Standards, the SVUK General Professional Recognition Scheme may need to be developed, in order to provide the basis for RPLO.

3. Provision of Information, Advice and Guidance [IAG]

IAG is essential if an individual is to make a realistic and effective decision to claim Unit credit. This involves such aspects as:

- *Typical timelines for RPLO;*
- *Costs of RPLO;*
- *Overview of procedures;*
- *Approaches to collection and presentation of evidence;*

⁹ OfQual (2008), Op. Cit., 5.6h page 27 and 5.11g page 28.



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- *Criteria for evidence to secure assessment;*
- *Interpreting feedback from assessment and advising on future learning.*

4. Requirements for RPLO professional roles and responsibilities

(A basis for consultation and further development and related to the Learning and Development National Occupational Standards [NOS])

Units of Learning and Assessment should take account of the following Levels of responsibility:

- **Management of RPLO** involving the use and improvement of knowledge, skills and competencies for RPL; taking responsibility for planning implementing and evaluating changes to make RPLO an attractive Route to Certification of Unit Credits or a whole Qualification; providing a critical and reflective perspective on the process of RPLO that takes account of Awarding Organisation requirements and advice; Sector, National and European developments. Accountable to the Head of Organisation and to the Awarding Body. [Level 6]
- **Quality Assurance of RPLO** involves a process of Total Quality Management based on organisational self-assessment, peer review, and external evaluation. Accountabilities of staff involved, who will normally be Qualified Teachers, include the design, maintenance and continuous improvement of the local RPLO systems of Information Advice and Guidance, Assessment and Moderation, and Continuing Professional Development of staff within the system. This includes professionals in Awarding Bodies and Providers. This role is accountable to the RPLO Manager. [Level 5]
- **Delivery of RPLO** involves providing excellent support by Associate Teachers to individuals considering claiming Credit through RPLO within the local TQM procedures. Other frontline staff such as student advisers and learning mentors may also contribute to this support. This will involve working in an integrated team of professionals and ensuring that the team has the necessary knowledge, skills and competencies to deliver a service that meets the needs of individual learners. This role is accountable to the RPLO Quality Manager. [Level 4]

5. Potential Target Groups



Leonardo da Vinci RPLO Project Piloting National and European Guidelines designed to encourage the Take-up of the Recognition of Prior Learning Outcomes [RPLO] (2008-2010)

- Teaching and assessment staff (Level 5, possibly Level 6);
- Staff in Quality Assurance units and those with QA responsibilities (Level 4 / 5);
- Management – especially those responsible for Quality Assurance or the design of RPL systems (Level 6 / 7 as part of a Leadership and Management learning pathway);
- Information Advice and Guidance specialists – possible linkage to existing qualifications (Level 4 / 5);
- Those staff involved in mentoring learners (Level 4 / 5);
- Assessors and moderators (Level 5, possibly Level 6);
- External Verifiers and other Awarding Body staff (Level 6);
- Other roles and responsibilities – Ofsted Inspectors (Level 6 / 7 as part of a Leadership and Management learning pathway).

