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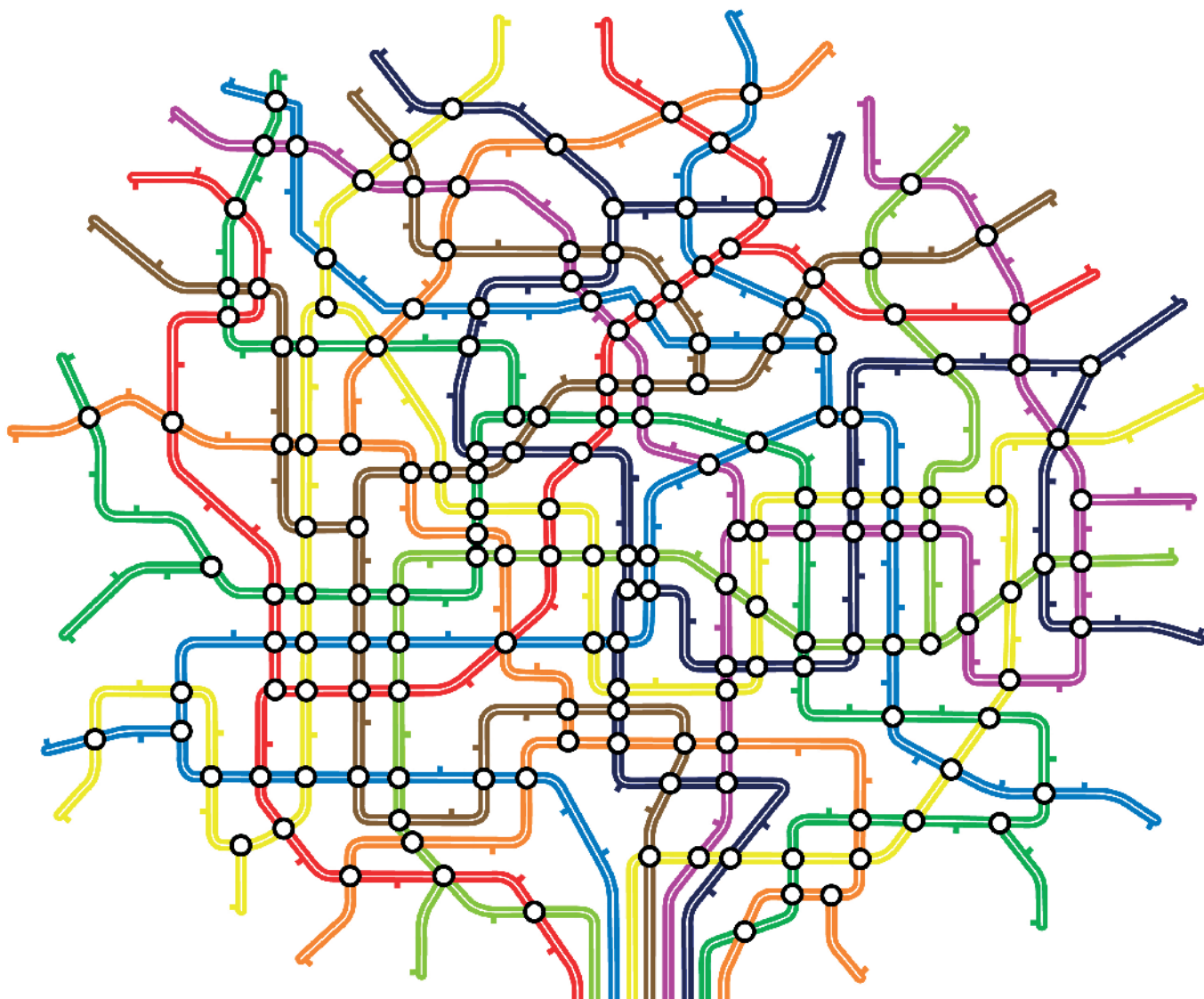
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Recognition of Prior Learning in Higher Education – Challenges of Designing the System

Lifelong
Learning
Programme

Recognition of Prior Learning in Higher Education – Challenges of Designing the System

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Contents

URPL
towards
recognition
of prior learning

Foreword

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) allows the identification, documentation, assessment and validation of learning outcomes that a person has achieved, despite the lack of formal education in a given field: for example, through work experience or development of interests. In terms of the individuals, RPL supports personal and professional development of a person. In the perspective of public governance - it supports the development of human capital and improvement of the situation in the labor market. Implementation and development of the Recognition of Prior Learning is now a priority in education policy of regions, states and the European Union as well as many other countries all over the World. Although RPL is not accepted with equal popularity in all countries, it seems that at present the questions about its legitimacy are no longer, or more rarely, posed. Instead, discussions are mainly focused on issues related to the way of its implementation and operation: how such a system should look to be efficient, available and of sound quality. After the introduction of RPL assumptions on vocational education level, the need for new developments in this matter at the level of higher education is increasingly being raised. Individual countries are continuously taking further actions on RPL development. However, as fast the reality changes, just so quickly is RPL itself evolving.

In this publication RPL solutions in higher education in various European countries have been presented, including the analysis of two of the countries currently implementing these systems: Poland and Croatia. Organizations from both mentioned countries - Jagiellonian University and Institut za razvoj obrazovanja (IDE) - together with Edinburgh Napier University (ENU) and Université Paris-Est Créteil Val de Marne (UPEC) have implemented project "University Recognition of Prior Learning Centres – Bridging Higher Education with Vocational Education and Training". Within the framework of this project transfer of innovation (RPL procedures and solutions) from ENU to the Jagiellonian University and IDE, under the supervision of experts from UPEC was conducted. This book is one of the outcomes of the project and together with prepared and tested RPL procedures and solutions is intended to support development of RPL.

The project contributed to the development of Recognition of Prior Learning, by sharing expertise and experience and providing insights into the procedural, formal, legal and cultural foundations needed for successful implementation of RPL in the context of higher education. The European added value of the project is the universality of the developed solutions, providing the possibility to adapt prepared tools by different types of higher education institutions planning or already implementing RPL procedures.

Chapter 1: Recognition of Prior Learning – its Role and Significance for the Higher Education System

Grażyna Prawelska-Skrzypek, Beata Jałocha

The high dynamics inherent in the changes of today's world has been widely acknowledged and established as a fact. It not only pertains to technological and economic developments but also – and, perhaps, above all - to the changes occurring within society. Before our very eyes, the knowledge society is evolving in the direction of the learning society. The first one of the two sees educational institutions, as playing a crucial role in the processes of knowledge generation, development and dissemination. A particularly valued standing among these institutions was enjoyed by higher education. Both scientific literature, as well as various OECD and UNESCO studies, used to consider tertiary education to be a focal point of the changes causing transformations within social, economic and cultural life of different states, regarding it also as a basic tool for fostering the competitiveness between the individual regions and countries (Altbach, Reisberg, Rumbley, 2009; Marginson, van der Wende, 2009). Acting as an indicator of this unique role was a hitherto unprecedented increase in the number of students. Scholarly indicators with reference to higher education exceeded the rate of 70% in some countries over the turn of the century (Altbach, Reisberg, Rumbley, 2009; OECD, 2012). Throughout 2006, over 61% of women and more than 57% of men (OECD, 2012) between the ages of 15 and 24 received tertiary education in various European Union (EU-27) countries. During the last decades of the 20th century and at the turn of the century, higher education, which was still viewed as the main vehicle for innovation, underwent a transformation towards an increased responsiveness to the needs of the business environment. The 21st century has witnessed a recurrent appearance of the building up of skills of future employees; this very outlook challenges the possibility - and

even the legitimacy – of directing the focus of the tertiary education system onto meeting the current needs of the economy. The ever more fluid economic environment leads to the dissemination of the belief that lifelong learning is a genuine necessity among the diverse attitudes towards education. One factor serving to support their development is the higher knowledge level of societies and their increased mobility (both in spatial and professional terms). This new situation poses a significant challenge for higher education institutions, since their instructional function begins to be perceived as that of creating the favourable conditions for the process of knowledge acquisition of lifelong learners, as well as providing them with the necessary assistance throughout its duration. It is no longer enough to adapt curricula to the needs of the current economic and social environment – a mere adjustment of didactic forms simply will not prove sufficient. What has become unequivocally essential is an elaboration of tools for an effective support of the growth of the individual by means of paving flexible paths for their personal development. A particularly important qualitative change is the definitive abandonment of the notion that obtaining a higher education is an automatic guarantee of high qualifications, which will then provide their holder with a lifelong high professional standing. The soaring rate of technological developments, together with the changes in working methods and the sheer speed of knowledge multiplication, makes it necessary for the individual to continue learning throughout their lives, in different places and various life contexts. This poses a significant challenge for universities, causing them either to remain an important stage of education in the development of learners' aptitudes, or to become integrated in their lifelong updating process, thereby confirming their own competence and maintaining the role of the most highly regarded institutions within the education sector.

The understanding of the need to involve universities in the processes of lifelong knowledge acquisition was evidenced by the European Universities' Charter on Lifelong Learning, presented in 2008 by the European University Association. This paper defines one of the basic ways to actively involve universities in the support of lifelong learning – namely, by means of introducing prior learning recognition: *To ensure that all with the potential to benefit from higher education provision are enabled to do so, it is essential for universities to develop systems to assess and recognise all forms of prior learning. This is particularly important in the context of lifelong learning in a global era where knowledge is acquired in many different forms and places.* (European University Association, p. 6).

Lifelong Learning (LLL) and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

According to the UNESCO definition, learning is a process of individual acquisition or modification of information, knowledge, understanding, attitudes, values, skills, competencies and behaviours effectuated through experience, practice, study or instruction. The result of learning is tantamount to the learner's acquired aptitudes: to what he or she knows, understands and is able to do as a consequence of learning (UNESCO, 2012). We differentiate three basic types of learning: formal, non-formal and informal.

Formal education or formal learning is defined as any institutional form of education, including any trainings or qualification courses required by law, which are indispensable for the proper exercise of a given profession (Prawelska-Skrzypek, 2011). Both university studies and completed courses are an integral part of formal education. The completion of such tuition is confirmed by a receipt of a formal document stating that its holder has successfully acquired certain qualifications. Formal learning, which takes place within education and training institutions, is recognised by the national authorities and leads to the obtainment of diplomas and qualifications. The framework of formal learning is arranged in accordance with the regulations on education, which cover such subjects as qualification and teaching requirements, or education curricula (UNESCO, 2012).

The definition of **non-formal learning** encompasses all institutional forms of learning organised beyond the scope of the education and training curricula that lead to the obtainment of qualifications. These include both pre-school learning and postgraduate studies (as is the case in Poland) which allow for a knowledge update within a specific field of education. An example of this type of learning is proffered by trainings, such as those paid for by the employer who wishes their employees to master the operation of new computer software used in the company, and tuition offers targeting the unemployed who might wish to acquire / update their knowledge and skills in a given field, which, in turn, will allow them to improve their standing on the labour market. As a result of these trainings, learners do not receive any specific qualifications or professional licences, but they do gain new information, deepen their comprehension of certain phenomena and shape their attitude towards them, while significantly developing their other aptitudes and capacities (Prawelska-Skrzypek, 2011). A sum of completed trainings may result in the acquisition of new competences. Thus, the recognition and validation thereof should be properly formalised. Non-formal learning is a type of learning that occurs additionally or alternatively to formal learning. In some cases, it is also tailored to meet the official regulations on tuition and training, but it

remains much more flexible. It usually takes place in the context of a community, through employment or actions taken within civil society organisations (UNESCO, 2012). Although non-formal learning does not lead directly to the obtainment of a qualification, its effects may be confirmed, accumulated and transferred in accordance with established procedures, and, consequently, they may be also accredited - as a component of a set of proven attainments (learning-related) required for specific qualifications (be it full or partial ones) (*Instytut Badań Edukacyjnych* - Institute for Educational Research, 2013).

The term **informal learning** refers to forms of non-institutionalised learning, effectuated purposely or indeterminately. In the era of the information society, considerable information and knowledge resources are openly available. This allows the interested learners to make use of them in order to broaden their expertise. Professional capacities and skills, in particular, can be also developed through experience and occupational practice. A good mastery of professional skills, should - upon complementing the necessary knowledge – allow for the obtainment of a formal confirmation of the qualifications acquired (Prawelska-Skrzypek, 2011). Informal learning is accomplished through daily activities, whether among family members, in the workplace, as part of the community, or through the interests and private activities of individuals. It entails acquiring new competencies without the use of curricula run by educating / training entities (without the help of a teacher / instructor / trainer) and through an independent endeavour undertaken in order to achieve specific learning results, and/or by means of unintended (inadvertent) learning (*Instytut Badań Edukacyjnych* - Institute for Educational Research, 2013). Through the process of recognition, validation and accreditation / certification, the skills acquired through informal learning can be acknowledged and may contribute to obtaining a qualification. In some cases, the term *experiential learning* (which can be understood as practical, empirical learning) is applied in reference to informal learning, as it focuses on acquiring knowledge by means of experience (UNESCO, 2012; Doherty, 2012).

Lifelong Learning (LLL) denotes 'any on-going, voluntary, and self-motivated learning endeavours undertaken for either personal, social or professional reasons over a lifespan of an individual, in order to broaden one´s knowledge, improve the skills /competences and /or enhance the qualifications' (Valid Prediction Project, 2013). According to the OECD definition, lifelong learning encompasses 'personal growth and the development of social skills in all their forms and contexts – both in a formal setting, that is, at schools, vocational training centres, tertiary education facilities and adult education centres, as well as within informal tuition systems, such as at home, at work and as part of the community' (Eurydyce,

URPL

towards
recognition
of prior learning

2002, p. 10). Lifelong learning has both a professional and a personal dimension. Among its effects there may be an increase in professional activity and employability, a development of the adaptive potential of employees of various enterprises, a rise of the society´s education level and a reduction of the social exclusion areas (Drogosz-Zabłocka, 2008). Acting as a consequence of comprehending the value and significance of learning throughout life for the personal growth of an individual has been the pursuit of creating the possibilities of recognition and validation of the qualifications obtained in various places, at different stages of life and by means of different forms of learning. Recognition, validation and accreditation (confirmation) of competences is the key element of the lifelong learning concept, which fuses its diverse elements (formal, non-formal and informal learning, career counselling, gaining work and life experience and professional mobility). P. Werquin (2011) believes that the recognition of informal and non-formal learning is a potential promotion mechanism for LLL, since it acknowledges its value as a process that enables individuals to gain access to formal education, while better exposing their competences and communicating them to the outside world more widely, with the possible employers at the receiving end.

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is the recognition of learning outcomes acquired outside the framework of formal education. It should be noted, however, that the terminology relating to this notion is not univocal. The UNESCO definition emphasises the fact that recognition, validation and accreditation (RVA) of all the forms of learning outcomes is a practice which allows for a clearer exposure and appreciation of the full range of competencies (knowledge, skills and attitudes) that have been acquired in diverse contexts, in various ways and at different life stages (UNESCO, 2012). The term 'RPL', applied for the purpose of this document, is most commonly used in Europe in reference to the recognition of all forms of prior learning. Its definition, as adopted by us, points out that this very acknowledgement is directly related to the recognition of specific learning outcomes acquired outside the framework of the formal system (i.e. as part of the informal or non-formal learning processes). At the same time, it should be also noted that only in the European area itself, are there differences in the official nomenclature: France adopted the use of the term *Validation of non-formal and informal learning: VAE,* whereas in the UK *Accrediting Prior Experiential Learning: APEL* has entered the general circulation. OECD has been promoting the term *Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning* (RNFIL). Separate denominations have also emerged Outside Europe - for example, in Canada, the most common term is *PLAR - Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition*, whereas in Korea, we are dealing with *Acquisition of Academic Degrees through Self-Education*, while the Mexican term in general use is that of *Accreditation and Certification of Previous Competences and Knowledge* (Yang, 2012; Werquin,

2010). Despite the clear differences in terminology, all of these concepts are characterised by the fact that they define a similar range of activities (Ranne, 2012). They relate to the identification of learning outcomes acquired through informal and non-formal learning, as well as to their proper documentation, assessment and to a certification of the results of such an evaluation. RPL can, therefore, be defined as the recognition of learning outcomes acquired outside the formal education framework. RPL does not entail an acknowledgement of a course of learning itself, focusing only on its specific effects. Therefore, the context in which the learning took place is of no relevance here - what is important, however, is what the individual in question has learned as a result of the process.

UNESCO assumes that the course of RPL can be divided into three distinct phases, during which recognition, validation and accreditation subsequently occur (UNESCO, 2012). The UNESCO-applied term of accreditation, is often replaced in literature and practical parlance with the notion of certification (Werquin, 2010). **Recognition** is a process of granting official status to the learning outcomes and / or competencies that can lead to the acknowledgement of their value in society. **Validation** is the confirmation of the fact that the learning outcomes or competences acquired by an individual have been assessed by a designated authority in relation to the specific standards through pre-defined evaluation methods. **Accreditation / Certification**, or the last part of the process of recognition of prior learning, is a course of action undertaken by a designated authority, on the basis of an assessment of learning outcomes and / or competencies, as a result of which this particular body recognises and confirms the qualifications acquired (by means of issuing a certificate, diploma, or awarding a title) by an individual in question or issues a document similar to a competence portfolio. The UNESCO study notes that in some cases the term ´accreditation´ is also used in reference to the evaluation of the service quality of a given institution or curriculum, perceived as a whole (UNESCO, 2012). Therefore, in order to avoid confusion, this phase of the validation activities relating to the previously acquired learning outcomes is often referred to as certification. Moreover, P. Werquin (2010) further specifies the details of the RPL process, dividing it into five stages: identification, evaluation (measurement), validation, certification, and social recognition. The fifth stage of the RPL process - **social recognition** of the confirmed informal and/or non-formal learning - is a general acceptance of what an individual knows or can do. This is a crucial phase in the RPL process, as the main objective of the recognition of prior learning is the visualisation - achieved through the prism of the formal system – of knowledge, competences and social skills acquired through informal and non-formal learning.

URPL
towards
recognition
of prior learning

RPL Development

RPL is considered to be a critical factor in the development of the lifelong learning concept, as it allows for ascribing a formal value (one which would be commonly recognised in the labour market) to the outcomes of learning acquired through informal or non-formal channels (Werquin, 2010, p. 8). Furthermore, RPL is regarded as a counter-measure /an appeasing tool for the fragmentation of knowledge, which also enables the customisation of career paths.

In various countries, the issue of recognising learning outcomes acquired outside the framework of formal education is differently regulated. According to P. Werquin (2011), some states operate in this respect under unambiguous and precise regulations, while others do not. Consequently, some countries subordinate the RPL process to the needs of the labour market, whereas other focus on the comparison of the qualifications with the outcomes of formal education, including tertiary systems. RPL implementation is much less complicated in the states which have an official National Qualifications Framework. Its introduction allows for an attribution of the recognised and accepted learning outcomes to a particular level of the qualification framework and for a determination of the qualification scope (e.g. full or partial). P. Werquin (2011) points out the fact that different countries follow different rationales for the RPL development. One element is by far the most frequently emphasised, namely, the conviction that recognition of prior learning is a second chance for the obtainment of education and certification, which grants access to higher education, while relieving the need to undergo certain parts of the formal tuition curriculum, allowing an individual to certify their skills acquired in the course of professional employment and enabling a general redesign of the vocational learning system. The justification applied in this respect is a derivative of the key problems of the given country. To proffer an example, developed countries, which see a large proportion of adolescents dropping out of the education system already at the high-school level, tend to promote most often the possibility of returning to the system - an opportunity of being granted a second chance created by the RPL (Canada). On the other hand, in countries suffering from a shortage of qualified and certified personnel, the governments are trying to make up for these deficiencies by means of a formal recognition of learning outcomes acquired over the course of professional employment; this helps shorten the path of formal education and speeds up the obtainment of a qualifications certificate (South Africa). However, it ought to be emphasised that RPL is different from the certification of competence issued by an employer. It leads to being awarded a diploma, a title or a certificate that ensures professional and educational mobility, while securing the further course of the professional career of the learner in question (Competences, 2007).

Currently, the subject of RPL and its development is triggering a heated debate among the EU countries and in particular the new member states. In numerous countries, these systems have been in existence for many years (e.g. in France since the 1930s) and they are being continuously improved. On the one hand, this discussion is stimulated by the growing awareness of the importance of learning throughout life, and on the other hand, by the demands placed on an EU level, which oblige the member states to intensify the efforts aimed at RPL development. Since 2001, RPL has been an integral part of the European policy on lifelong learning. A significant step towards confirming the learning outcomes acquired outside the formal education system was the approval by the European Parliament and the Council of Europe of the recommendations with regard to the European Qualifications Framework, which took place in 2008. This substantially contributed to the construction and development of the National Qualifications Framework in the member states (European Commission, 2012). Owing to that, qualifications became more comparable and easier to understand for employers, employees and learning EU citizens. The year 2009 saw the publication of the „*European Guidelines for Validating Non-Formal and Informal Learning*" by the European Commission and Cedefop (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, 2009). This guide provides consulting support for practitioners and policy makers in the field of validation, by focusing on the variety of the applicable perspectives, such as the individual, the organisational, the national and the European one. It serves as a practical tool, whose implementation is optional. It should be noted that the EU recognises the fact that at a time of a serious economic crisis which has caused a surge in unemployment, and in the context of an ageing population, the validation of the results of informal and non-formal learning has the potential to support Europe in its fight against unemployment, by means of enhancing competitiveness and economic growth and promoting mobility by providing the citizens who remain outside the labour market with new opportunities for learning and work (European Commission, 2012). The member states have been obliged to implement solutions enabling the validation of learning effects acquired informally and non-formally by the end of 2018. According to the EU Council´s recommendation of December 20, 2012, 'the member states should offer individuals the opportunity to demonstrate what they have learned outside formal education and training — including through mobility experiences, and to make use of that learning for their careers and further learning' (Official Journal of the European Union, 2012). RPL is also a crucial part of the Europe 2020 strategy, which supports employee mobility and is aimed at a better tailoring of skills to meet the needs of the labour market in the context of an ageing population.

URPL towards recognition of prior learning

Next to the reasons of a formal nature, such as the above-listed expectations at the EU level, there are several other rationales behind why RPL, understood as an integral concept of lifelong learning, should be further developed. Firstly, there is a strong need to pave more flexible paths of education, especially for the underprivileged groups. In adding a flexible approach to learning contexts, RPL allows for the fulfilment of these expectations. Moreover, it serves to support mobility and lifelong learning processes. It also coincides with an increase in efficiency within the education and training system by supporting individuals in accessing learning opportunities which are tailored to their needs. Furthermore, it promotes equal opportunities for individuals to have their skills and competencies validated. According to R. Ranne, it also serves as a tool to endorse social inclusion, along with poverty reduction and strengthening of the socially marginalised (Ranne, 2012).

These days, universities should be preparing students for the implementation of highly differentiated and individualised pathways of development (both sequential and competitive), as well as for the realisation of a professional career. Undoubtedly, RPL is a challenge for the education system, and especially for the tertiary tuition centres. It forces the academic milieu to change the approach to education, since it equalises the value of knowledge and other learning outcomes acquired in a variety of circumstances with the effects obtained by means of an academic schooling. This, in turn, allows for the optimal use of the potential of different paths of knowledge and skills acquisition (Competences). However, this does not happen of its own accord, requiring instead a deliberate action and a preparation of the system, and above all, fuelling confidence in the accuracy and reliability of the performed validations and certifications.

The Benefits of Recognition of Prior Learning

As evidenced by the examples of countries with mature RPL systems, such as the United Kingdom and Ireland, recognition of prior learning carries with it numerous advantages, both at the level of individuals and the society as a whole. It supports the representatives of underprivileged groups and facilitates the comeback of mature learners to the academic framework, while boosting their motivation to engage in further education (National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, 2006). There are some direct benefits to be drawn from RPL - for individuals, organisations and the entire society. With regard to individuals, these benefits are of an economic, educational and social nature (Werquin, 2010). Financial advantages result mainly from the reduction of

expenses related to formal education. This is a particularly valid argument with regard to the countries where formal tuition is very costly. By means of shortening the path of qualification recognition for people who have acquired their competencies outside the formal system (e.g. through employment), RPL allows for a faster and far less expensive way of accreditation of learning outcomes. Although RPL procedures are usually subject to fees, they give a chance to those who, for various reasons – be it financial or personal - would not be able to otherwise afford to enter onto the path of formal tertiary education. The benefits of an educational character proffered by RPL to individuals are associated with motivating them to continue their pursuit of knowledge. Often those who have had their qualifications validated as a part of the formal tertiary curriculum decide to further pursue their education in order to obtain a professional title. Individuals who for various reasons could not carry their education forward in a traditional way are granted a "second chance" owing to RPL (Werquin, 2010). According to P. Werquin (2010), its social benefits include the positive impact on building social cohesion, with equal access to qualifications being one of its principal elements.

RPL also carries with it advantages for the university and the academic staff. Firstly, students who begin their studies following an RPL procedure usually have extensive knowledge and skills resulting from practical experience and professional activity, which may positively affect the quality of the teaching sessions (VET-HE Project, 2013). Moreover, recognition of prior learning grants teachers the unique opportunity to transfer their expertise and the results of their own research directly into the environment of practitioners. Benefits are also noted for the formal education institutions themselves. RPL can serve them as a tool to recruit larger numbers of students, which is invaluable in times of demographic decline. The RPL procedures can also considerably develop the cooperation with potential employers. At a time when the demand for particular skills changes rapidly, it would be a good idea to consider a form of "inter-sectorial outsourcing", within the framework of which, universities will focus on what they know best - that is, the advancement of the competences which are essential at a higher level, whereas specialist professional skills will be developed in the workplace.

The employers, who are most interested in a formal acknowledgment of their employees´ qualifications, gain through RPL the essential information about the competency level of their staff. They may also choose to apply recognition of prior learning as a motivational factor.

Significantly, RPL can directly contribute to meeting the objectives defined centrally at a global level for each country. Most EU governments consider the development of a knowledge-

based society - a society of competitiveness and economic growth - among its main strategies. This invariably goes hand in hand with the advancement of human capital, and thus, with an implementation of an effective lifelong learning system, encompassing a recognition framework for the assessment of individuals´ qualifications (Werquin, 2010, p. 59).

Barriers and Success Factors for Effective RPL Implementation

There are a number of barriers that often prevent the effective implementation of RPL. First of all, it should be noted that in many EU countries, such as Poland or Croatia, RPL in the higher education sector is practically unknown. Divergent understandings of what RPL actually is raise a number of misconceptions and distortions. The „traditional" way of thinking remains prevalent; it is exemplified by the strong belief in tradition and culture of formal education, an d a clear distrust of non-formal and informal learning (Ranne, 2012). In many states, especially those commencing the use of RPL, an impediment may be constituted by the cost of the procedures, and a lack of access to information on the recognition, especially in case of disadvantaged groups. Moreover, what undoubtedly impedes RPL is the perception of its procedures as complex and time-consuming, often bearing uncertain outcomes (Ranne, 2012). A critical factor, which is often a major barrier for the proper functioning of RPL, is the lack of inclusion of the involved parties, the lack of interest in the procedures on the part of employers, often due to their concerns regarding the potential demand of the workers to raise remuneration (Ranne, 2012).

The experience of countries that have managed to successfully implement RPL points to a number of elements which support the effective development of the recognition of prior learning. First and foremost, what is of crucial importance is the understanding that learning can take place anywhere, not only within the framework of formal education. Since the proper functioning of RPL requires certain resources, both financial and human, it is important to clearly specify the rules for its financing. Employees which are to perform a variety of roles in the RPL process should be granted an opportunity to take advantage of a training preparing them for the tasks they are about to face. Another important factor is a properly designed system which can ensure a high quality of recognition services. A well-functioning quality assurance system is the first and most important step in the direction of building confidence in RPL. Networking, cooperation and exchange of experiences between different domestic and international organisations can significantly contribute to the success of this mission.

As evidenced by experience, cooperation and consultation between the involved parties, the application of clear standards and qualifications frameworks, as well as well-developed methods of evaluation, which are competence-based, are critical factors for the success of recognition of prior learning (Ranne, 2012).

A Step towards the Future: Factors Beneficial to a Long-Term RPL Development

In order for recognition of prior learning to be able to enjoy a long-term development, a few elements are essential. Firstly, a very important factor in the advancement of RPL within the higher education framework, especially in countries with rather immature (or non-existent) RPL systems, is a well-designed, large-scale information policy targeting the involved parties. These may include individuals and employers, as well as associations related to higher education and decision-makers. P. Werquin (2010, p. 10) states that RPL can definitely develop through clear communication and unambiguous information on the benefits resulting from this process and its very nature. Another element that could affect the future advancement of RPL is the creation of explicit and unequivocal procedures. It seems that recognition of prior learning will only be in the position to constitute a true alternative to formal learning if the recognition procedures avoid the fate of becoming overly bureaucratised. It can be argued that RPL may permanently enter the education system, provided that its rank is equivalent to the formal education. This may be influenced by well-thought-through, reliable quality assurance systems, both at the level of the educational facility in question and that of the entire nation.

In conclusion, it should be emphasised that, with every day passing by, recognition of prior learning is gaining more importance in the tertiary education system and - despite the fears of the academic community – it does not pose any threat to formal learning. What is more, thanks to RPL, the number of adults returning to the formal higher education system may significantly increase. With the recognition and certification of learning outcomes acquired in informal and non-formal ways, they can feel motivated to start learning within the tertiary education framework (Werquin, 2010). Thus, owing to recognition of prior learning, the concept of lifelong learning ceases to be a mere fair idea and becomes an effective tool for the development of a learning society.

URPL
towards
recognition
of prior learning

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Chapter 2: Recognition of Prior Learning in the European space: a compared perspective

Pascal Lafont, Marcel Pariat

The RPL is founded on an enhancement of the value of the knowledge, know-how and skills acquired in non-formal and informal learning contexts (Schwartz, 2004) in everyday life. For that matter, the political, economic and social decision-makers of many countries are well aware of the fact, since they go as far as promoting the institutionalization and internationalization of the RPL processes (Lafont, 2013a), in order 'to encourage the traceability of acquired knowledge and skills and the clarification of the required skills in companies… finally, to encourage each individual to move on and go on learning all along their lives' (Merle, 2008, p. 43). However, while the skills thus acquired constitute a rich source of human capital, not all individuals are aware of its potential value, and they do not always benefit from their acquisitions, especially when they find it difficult to prove their skills, or even to see ways to go about writing down those practices or having them written down (Cifali, André, 2007). The recognition of acquired non formal and informal learning does not, in itself, create human capital. However, it makes the stock of human capital more visible, while it increases its value for the whole of society. In fact, it also plays an important part in a certain number of countries by validating people's skills and by making it possible for them to (re)register to the formal system of learning. Yet can it regulate the dysfunctions of an inegalitarian educational system (Maillard, 2007).

Setting up the measures of the Recognition of Prior Learning can, for instance, exempt the candidates from certain classes or parts of a curriculum and allow them to complete their formal education more quickly, more efficiently and with less fees, since they do not have to attend classes whose contents they already master. Even if 'everywhere around the world, there is a systematization of measures and processes enabling adults to identify their skills'

(Boutinet, Belisle, 2009, p. 3), the interest of this article is to be able to question the conditions of implementation and the privileged approaches at the hands of market initiative, of public authorities, of the State and of social partners. Do these approaches condition particular practices and processes of legitimization? How do these devices carry postural changes and proceed from difficulties coming both from an assimilation to neoliberal strategies of participative management and from the recognition of acquired experience gained in struggles to give new thought to social justice in matters of the equality of the positions occupied in society (Dubet, 2010)? Is there a common strategy between the European countries concerning lifelong learning (Colardyn, Bjornavold, 2004) ? Do divergences still remain because of cultural factors determining the possibilities of implementing those devices? All these questions come to higher education individual actors, to institutions and to organizations who, in many such present-day situations, are transforming and propose multiple outlooks on the same object (Géhin, Auras, 2011).

Our hypothesis is based on the fact that numerous social transactions are at work in the European countries as a whole, so that the possibilities of implementing the instruments of the Recognition of Prior Learning and of developing them vary in time and space according to individual and collective strategies, as well as to cultural contexts which today are particularly characterized by an organizational intention to set the subjects' reflexive thoughts going (Wittorski, 2009).

On a methodological level, our approach falls into a compared perspective which makes it possible to question the dimensions and criteria determining the conditions of experimentation and institutionalization of the RPL devices from a first documentary corpus (scientific papers, individual and collective works, a European listing of non-formal and informal learning). A double posture of practitioners-researchers : as members of an acquired learning validation jury as candidates' advisors, as educational staff in charge of the targeted diplomas, as advisors' training staff within the conventional framework linking our university to some labour organizations; and as researchers within international comparisons whose objects pertain to the recognition of the value of experience. This posture has made it possible for us to apprehend the evolutions which have marked our advising, our assessing and our transferring in matters of Recognition of Prior Learning during the past decade.

The evolution in the ranking of the European countries' development level concerning the Recognition of Prior Learning

If public authorities are more and more interested in international comparisons in the field of education and training, it is because they are convinced that these comparisons make it possible to build and implement efficient policies asserting their capacity to contribute to the improvement of economic and social perspectives, to the promotion of an efficient management of the educational systems and to the mobilization of extra resources in order to meet increasing demands. Therefore, while all the rankings relative to the European countries in matters of RPL prove that today there is a shared interest among all the members of the European Union (Annen, 2013), other countries' mobilization on an international scale outside the EU cannot be ignored with regard to a reflection on, and an implementation of, recognition of prior learning devices. The challenges and opportunities relative to the implementation of the RPL have induced research in South Africa (Hendricks, Volbrecht, 2003; Sutherland, 2006), and numerous experimentations and institutionalizations in Morocco, Tunisia, Corea (Choi, 2007), Canada (Balleux, 2005; Goyer, Landry & Leclerc, 2006, Héon, Goyer & Blanchet, 2011), Chile, Colombia, Mexico (Anda & Ascencio, 2006), Haiti (Bleriot & Pirot, 2007).

However, the ranking of such a great number of countries makes it possible to apprehend a globalized assessment and to make a complex world more understandable, without ignoring the limits of the graphic classifying mode. While it goes without saying that 'any research in social sciences involves resorting to abstraction, generalization and formalization' (Goody, 1979, p. 109), it is also absolutely necessary to consider with relativism the effects of giving an order to knowledge produced from classifying schemes, symbolical systems and ways of thinking.

Indeed, while human thought is, without doubt, most often and implicitly, founded between the elements of a same category or of a different category[1], it must nevertheless be submitted to a reasonable construction (Lévi-Strauss, 1962) in order to avoid the risk of an inappropriate classification or of an incorrect typology, the inexorably unachieved conception of an impossible inventory.

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[1] One of Lévi-Strauss's theses shows how primitive thought *la pensée sauvage* is based on a coherent vision of the world, contrary to the reductive presentations that were formulated during the first halting steps of anthropology.

Maurice's distinction (1989) informs us on three comparative strategies : the functionalist or cross national approach, particularly prosperous in the 1950s and 1960s, especially on Anglo-Saxon territory, the culturalist or cross cultural approach and the societal or international approach which attempt to identify « national coherences ». It therefore enables us to distinguish resemblances as much as differences in the implementation of the RPL device, so as to give an account of universal trends as well as persisting specificities. In the functionalist research, 'the countries or nations are but local contexts in which the analyzed phenomena are inserted. The national context remains therefore quite heterogeneous in relationship with those phenomena; consequently, the relationship between the micro and the macro levels is not really being constructed and problematized' (Maurice, 1989, p. 178).

The universalist and culturalist approaches, on the other hand, grant little importance to the noted differences; they respectively have the same drawback 'applying a pre-established model, in the first case; postulating the existence of national specificities of an institutional, cultural or historical nature, in the second case' (Maurice, Sellier and Silvestre, 1982, p. 55). Thus, our societal approach aims at avoiding these two pitfalls and has directed our expertise within the framework of the University Recognition of Prior Learning Centers – Bridging Higher Education and Vocational Education and Training European project, by looking into universalisms as much as into particularisms. Furthermore, we have referred to 'the issues of representations, meaning and values rooted in the personal histories' (d'Iribarne, 1989, p. 600) of the individuals getting involved into an identification and RPL process, as well as those of the institutions involved in the implementation of those devices. In that sense, it makes it easier to understand why and how the interaction between collective and individual action is not only present in the process of formalization undertaken by the RPL candidates, but also how it is situated at the core of the assessment and validation process (Prot, 2009).

The object of many debates and reforms in Europe, the RPL still remains a fundamental strategic issue in matters of skill assessment, both in the theoretical and pragmatic sense of the word, in so far as 'a mere reform or modification of education and training – as we know them now – would not be enough; it would be absolutely necessary to go much further, by integrating formal, non-formal and informal contexts and by establishing links between those contexts' (Chakroun, 2006, p. 161). However different are the titles[2] given by one country or another, the approaches and practices are beginning to emerge on national, regional, sectorial and local levels (Bjornavold, 2001). This author introduces a first typology which makes it

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[2] Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) or Assessment of Prior Experential Learning (APL).

URPL towards recognition of prior learning

possible to gather less than twenty European countries into five groups (see Table 1) in the light of the activities undertaken in the field of the identification, the assessment and the recognition of non-formal learning.

Table 1: Contextual approach as regards Recognition of Prior Learning in European countries (2001)

Dual approach	Mediterranean approach	Scandinavian approach	Anglo-Saxon approach	Continental approach
Germany, Austria	Greece, Spain, Italy, Portugal	Finland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark	Great-Britain, / Ireland, the Netherlands	France, Belgium

Reference: Bjornavold, 2001.

The contextualist approach would be, at least partly, determined to prefigure the unspoken required skills. However, it is important to meet the challenges of the transparency of skills by leaning as much on assessment methodologies in the making as on institutional and political decisions guaranteeing acceptance and legitimacy.

A notable evolution as regards classification by a laying-out into three categories between the countries where the devices appear as too innovating and generate radical oppositions; those in which they are inserted in evolutions in the educational system carried by political projects and allowing experimentations and practice generalization; finally, those at an advanced stage of institutionalization which thus allows the setting-up of a legally constituted right (Bjornavold, 2007). However, in order to measure the level of introduction and durability of these devices, a more thorough study would be necessary at national, local and sectorial levels. Thus, according to criteria associated to the level of the development of the statutory or legislative framework, of the intentions, of the projects and the recommendations, Feutrie (2008) proposes a new typology of the development stages (see Table 2) targeting the level of higher education, in particular, as the field of study.

Table 2: Stage of development as regards the Recognition of Prior Learning in the European countries (2008)

Intentions / Statutory or legal framework	First experiments	Emergence of RPL devices
Greece, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Slovakia, Latvia	Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary, Malta	Romania, Lithuania, Italy, Spain, Luxembourg, Austria, Germany
Institutionalization of RPL devices		
«Bottom-up» practices	Global systems and low or partial results	Global systems and significant results
The Netherlands, Great-Britain, Ireland, Sweden	Slovenia, Estonia, Belgium	Portugal, Finland, Denmark, France

Reference: Feutrie, 2008.

Many contrasts remain. Evolutions seem conditioned by the impulses given by the lifelong education and training European policy. It must be said that the sectors of vocational training have always provided and still provide more implementation opportunities that those pertaining to higher education.

Finally, the latest inventory of the European countries as regards the recognition of prior learning, in 2010, with 32 European countries, presents four categories distinguishing the level of development of the RPL processes (see Table 3). The countries with a high level of development have practices for all sectors of activity, and this materializes an interest shared by the actors of society. The development policies can thus lean on a national legislative framework – but they do not meet with a very significant interest – or on an accreditation system particularly well established for a precise sector of activities. The countries with a medium to low degree of development are likely to have established accreditation systems in one or more sectors of activity, but they do not consider applying the devices in a more global framework. Finally, those with a low level of development have very few initiatives in terms of policies or practices really encouraging the implementation of accreditation devices. However, this last category can now include countries which may be undertaking a process of elaboration and reflection with a view to developing statutory frameworks, even a legislation, some kind of policy or tools which could support the emergence and the institutionalization of the devices.

Table 3: Stage of development as regards the Recognition of Prior Learning devices in the European countries (2010)

High development	Medium high development	Medium low development	Low development
Finland, France, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal	Denmark, Germany, Romania, Spain, Sweden, Great-Britain, (England, Wales, Ireland, Scotland)	Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Estonia, Iceland, Italy, Ireland, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Slovakia, Slovenia	Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Malta, Poland, Turkey

Reference: 2010 update of the European Inventory on Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning Executive summary of Final Report

The complexity of all these classifications echoes the multiplicity of the aspects or criteria determining the circumstances of the implementation and development of the RPL devices. Local initiatives and results may seem either underestimated when a national assessment is concerned, or overestimated in the case of a regional or micro-territorial comparison. This variability may also be due, on the one hand, to the various sectors linked with academic training, vocational training and labour environments, while, on the other hand, to the nature of the contextual, conjunctural and transactional relationship between them. That is why this charting remains a global assessment in a dynamic consideration. In fact, in certain countries, a national acknowledged juridical or political framework is available, but without kindling sufficient enthusiasm to generate initiatives on the part of local actors, so that the use of an institutionally organized system is not systematically put into practice and does not give its full measure concerning individual and collective benefits. Thus, the efficiency of the implemented systems and their impact on people are decisive and lead to a necessary estimation of all the dimensions, both on a qualitative and on a quantitative mode.

It is however important to stress the temporary and uncertain nature of this type of classification, in order to consider the effects of the joint work that has been launched, for example, within the framework of the European programs of technological transfer, between and on the partner countries, who do not necessarily all belong to the same category. Indeed, the initiatives and experiments ensuing from these programs may induce changes in educational and social practices in relationship with the evolution of the social and economic contexts, the social and institutional partners' involvement, the modification of the formal or juridical institutional frameworks, the effects on education and training policies and the

expected individual and collective benefits. They are thus likely to influence the conditions of emergence and the development modes of the RPL devices.

The various chartings have evolved in accordance with the evolution of each country's configurations. Consequently, the geographical distinctions (2001) have been replaced by an increasing number of indicators making it possible to define the levels of development of the RPL devices (2010). Thus, in the first group, with a high level of development, there are the same countries, except for Denmark, whose significant results in 2008 are not enough to account for the same level of development in 2010. But also Norway's, who, though it did not appear in the 2008 classification, is now at the level of the most performing group. And the Netherlands, whose investment seems to have been the most beneficial. Concerning the second group of countries whose development is medium high, it appears that the countries who had contributed to the emergence of the devices or who had institutionalized the « bottom-up » practices in 2008 benefit from a return on investments, allowing them to appear, two years later, in the second group, with the exception of Luxembourg, Lithuania, Italy and Austria. However, the latter countries are now at level three, except for the first one who has disappeared from the classification. The first experiments of the RPL devices in 2008 have not enabled Poland, Hungary and Malta to go further than a low stage of development. Finally, for the countries in the last group (Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus and Greece), there seems to be an evolution between the intentions leading to a statutory or juridical framework and a low level of development in 2010. As a conclusion, everything points to the fact that it is necessary to go through various stages of development in order, progressively and lastingly, to build the conditions of perpetuation of the systems and devices the countries rely on. Yet, one must not ignore the risks associated to phases of regression, as such has been the case in Portugal since 2012. Indeed, in a period of economic crisis, budgetary restriction and austerity on the part of public finance policies, the "New Opportunities Initiative" program could be in need of financial resources. This program aims at increasing the educational and vocational qualification of the Portuguese population thanks to the actions led by the centers in charge of recognition, validation and the homologation of skills.

France, an example of a highly developed country as regards RPL

In France, the Validation of Prior Learning has been established as a right for every citizen. The current system (Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience, VAE), which was established in January 2002 (Social Modernization Act), is used to deliver whole or partial qualifications.

URPL
towards
recognition
of prior learning

Each body awarding qualifications has developed its own rules for the context-specific implementation of the principles outlined in the legislation. The VAE system stems from legislation introduced in 1992 for qualifications awarded by the Ministries of Education and Agriculture, extended to qualifications delivered by the Ministry of Youth and Sports in 1999, and to all main types of qualification in 2002. The most recent change in 2009 aimed at increasing the number of individuals accessing the VAE process, in particular private sector workers, and to develop guidance for VAE. Since 2002 a significant investment has been made in the higher education sector in particular to produce standards (fr. *référentiels*) described in terms of learning outcomes in order to facilitate VAE (all vocational training diplomas included in the national qualifications directory must be described in terms of learning outcomes). In addition, in higher education, recognition of professional experience has also been used for a long time (in fact it dates back to 1934) to allow access to individuals who do not meet formal requirement criteria and, in some cases, acquisition of a diploma.

A new practice emerged in the 1970s, when a new pedagogical approach moved towards the modularization of training, to recognize the learning outcomes of workers (obtained through work experience or short in-company training courses) as an entry route to Higher Education (HE). Through an evaluation of professional skills and competences, it is possible to grant exemption from a pre-requisite to enter a formal training curriculum for a formal qualification from an HE institution, or a part of this training. In 1985 a decree was adopted to allow professional experience to be taken into consideration in determining access to HE (concerning only universities and other types of HE institutions, such as schools for engineers). The process, termed *Validation des Acquis Professionnels 85* enables anybody aged 20 or over who ended their initial studies at least two years before to apply for a place on a HE course through exemption of the qualification normally required. On the other hand, the main system of validation in France is used to delivering a whole or components of a qualification (certification)[3] on the basis of the knowledge and skills of the applicant acquired through experience, the qualification awarded having the same value as those awarded through the formal system of education and training. The number of VAE candidates per year is high in comparison to most other European countries. Since 2002, which is the date the device was implemented, the number of certified candidates has risen to practically 200 000 in which a quarter relates to higher education superior.

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[3] The French word used to translate the English "qualification" is "*certification*". A large range of qualifications are officially recognized by the State and the social partners. These are diplomas, HE degrees, titles and sectoral certificates delivered by social partners. They are listed and described in a National Qualifications Directory called the '*Répertoire National des Certifications Professionnelles*' (*RNCP*).

Spain, an example of a country with medium high development as regards RPL

In Spain, there are some opportunities for validation in relation to Higher Education (HE) and also professional competences (up to a certain level). Some Autonomous Communities (Comunidades Autónomas – CCAAs) have also established procedures for validation. In Higher Education, since the 1970s individuals aged over 25 without upper secondary education have been entitled to access Higher Education upon satisfactory performance in 'over-25s' Higher Education access exams – although without receiving a secondary school qualification through this process. Later, from the early 2000s new measures have been set up at national level in order to further recognize competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning. A new decree to regulate validation procedures in Higher Education has been drafted and finalized by the end of 2010. In 2009, the Royal Decree on the recognition of professional competences acquired through work experience established the procedures and requirements for the validation of professional competences acquired through work experience and non-formal learning processes. The Decree opened up a structure for validation of professional competences, for modules of formal VET or full qualifications at levels 1 to 5, according to the criteria specified in the National Catalogue of Professional Qualifications. The decree is restricted to only some levels of competence and the calls for examination will only apply to certain economic sectors each year. The first joint call for validation of professional competences was carried out in 2011 and covered only certain competences. It is planned that other competences will be included in the calls launched in the following years. The first round of validation of professional competences under the new regulatory framework at national level was carried out in 2011, covering modules included within the Catalogue on children's education and medical care sectors[4]. Data on validation is limited. However, take-up of some of the validation initiatives currently available is relatively high. For example, between 2004 and 2005 the number of people who made use of the registered university entrance examinations for over 25s was 19,853 and the number of students who accessed VET via entrance examinations at intermediate level was 12,267, while at higher level the number was 7,796.

At Higher Education level the Ministry of Education is currently working on a new regulation on validation. The new regulation will establish the procedures to validate non-formal and informal learning up to 15% of an undergraduate degree[5] or master's degree.

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[4] The legal framework states that the CCAAs must introduce the process on validation on their territory by August 25th 2010.

[5] The degrees that will be able to implement the future regulation are those adapted through the Bologna process.

URPL towards recognition of prior learning

However, again there are universities that had already set up validation initiatives and decided on their own standards.

The Czech Republic, an example of a country with a medium low development as regards RPL

The Czech Republic Recognition of non-formal and informal learning is now well defined since September 2007 by law 179/2006, which defines the conditions and the process for recognition to achieve full and partial qualifications (at all levels except higher education). As the recognition process started in 2009, take up remains modest and validation has only taken place for a limited number of qualifications. The validation procedure is tightly related to the (ongoing) development of the National Qualification Framework (NQF): a recognition procedure can only be carried out if the qualifications and assessment standards are defined in the qualifications register (defined by law 179/2006 and still incomplete when the law was enforced). Assessment standards (e.g. oral explanation, practical demonstration, etc.) are used both for recognition of prior learning and examination/certification in formal education and training. They are being progressively developed by the sectoral councils and approved by the Ministry of Education. Validation based on the standards can be carried out by schools for full qualifications or by authorized institutions (schools, private institutions, companies as well as individuals) for partial qualifications. In the Czech Republic, it is important to highlight the fact that the overall qualification attainment of the population is relatively high: The number of early school leavers are among the lowest in the EU (in 2008 only 5.6% of young people – 18-24 – who were not in education had only a lower secondary level education attainment[6]) ; over 90% of the economically active adult population (aged 25-64) have achieved at least upper-secondary qualifications[7] that give access to higher education.

Consequently, the main emphasis on validation and recognition of non-formal and informal learning in the Czech Republic is not so much on upgrading one's qualifications (one level up) or on getting access to higher education, but more on requalification and gaining additional qualifications (mainly vocationally oriented ones). This is the area where most developments are taking place and where the political emphasis is given. Having said this, the system of recognition of non-formal and informal learning that is currently

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[6] Eurostat data 2009

[7] Eurostat data 2009

being implemented does give those people who have no or only very low qualifications the opportunity to upgrade their qualifications (second chance). Recognition and permeability are among the seven strategic goals of the Czech Lifelong Learning Strategy[8], together with equal access, functional literacy, social partnership, stimulation of demand, quality and counseling. When it comes to formal (i.e. certified) recognition of learning outcomes achieved in non-formal and informal settings this is mainly motivated by the political will to support employability[9]. However, attention is also being paid to the contribution non-formal learning activities are having on the development of key competences and personal and social development of individuals – with specific emphasis on non-formal learning of children and young people as well as volunteers and people working in Non Government Organizations (NGO) that organize non-formal learning[10].

Bulgaria, an example of a country with a low development as regards RPL

In Bulgaria, plans to introduce validation of prior learning only began in the context of fulfilling EU accession requirements and are still developing. Strategic documents such as the National Strategy for Lifelong Learning 2008-2013, Action Plan 2009, the National Strategy for Further Vocational Education and Training 2005 – 2010, the Renewed Employment Strategy 2008-2015 and the 2010 National Action Plan on Employment highlight the setting-up of a system of validation of non-formal and informal learning as a priority. Currently the only legislative regulation of validation is laid down in the 1999 Vocational Education and Training (VET) Act, however it has limited practical application. The 2008 Law for amending and expanding the Employment Promotion Act stipulates that the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and the Ministry of Education, Youth and Science should create conditions for the assessment and recognition of the knowledge and skills of adults acquired through non-formal and informal learning. In 2009 a working group on validation within the Ministry of Education, Youth and Science elaborated several proposals on amending the current legal

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[8] Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (2007): *The Strategy of Lifelong Learning in the Czech Republic* available online: http://www.msmt.cz/uploads/Zalezitosti_EU/strategie_2007_EN_web_jednostrany.pdf

[9] See: National Institute of Technical and Vocational Education (2007): *OECD activity on recognition of non-formal and informal learning; country report: Czech Republic*; p.18

[10] See the implementation plan for the Lifelong learning strategy and more specifically the activities planned under the objective on development of extracurricular and leisure activities of pupils. Ministerstvo školství, mládeže a tělovýchovy (2008): *Implementační plán Strategie celoživotního učení*. Available online: http://www.msmt.cz/mezinarodni-vztahy/publikacestrategie- celozivotniho-uceni-cr

URPL
towards
recognition
of prior learning

framework in the field. Bulgaria is trying to build on good practice from other countries. A model system for validation was designed in 2009 as part of the project "Promoting adults' vocational training and employability in Bulgaria" and tested in three professions: carpenter, tailor, and social worker. Amendments to the VET Act are being designed on the basis of the above model.

All these examples call for a more thorough study of the types of approach or of the systems and devices concerning acquired experience.

Types of approach of recognition of prior learning system

Although categorizations contain more and more countries and thus reveal an increasing interest for RPL, we can distinguish two main categories: on the one hand, the countries with a centrally conceived and controlled system and on the other, the countries with a system that is mostly defined by initiatives associated with local projects, on the other hand. In the countries whose approach is centralized, recognition is governed by a national right, a policy or a strategy, a national framework with institutionally marked responsibilities, taking into account nationally recognized qualifications, on the basis of a recognition granted by the institutions guaranteeing the quality of the procedure. And in the countries where local or project-based initiatives are important, in that case, the emergence of the devices can appear as an answer to an identified need, as if what was at stake was, for instance, supporting specific target groups, or answering the requirements of employers in a given sector. It seems that those countries which have a local approach tend to fall within the lower level of development categories and although there is a mix in terms of the level of development among those countries with a centralized approach (e.g. from Turkey, which is at a low level of development, to Norway, which is at a high level of development), it is interesting to note that all of the countries in the high level of development category have a relatively centralized approach in one or more sectors of learning. However, in those approaches, there are overlapping zones, in so far as a centralized approach can also admit local or regional initiatives and vice versa. The following examples show those distinctions between centralized or decentralized systems, with degrees of decentralization or centralization which can show a change of nature in the *welfare State* in Western societies (Esping-Andersen, 1990).

For example, in France the main changes are generally made to integrate the outcomes of social partners' negotiations in the field of lifelong learning (LLL). The last change was

made in 2009 and concerns the process to increase the number of individuals accessing the VAE process, in particular private sector workers. Laws from 1984, 1992, 2002 and 2009 are collected in the Labour Code and the Education Code[11]: Labour code, art. L. 900-1 and following, L. 900-4-2, L. 935-1, L. 951-1, R. 950-3, R. 950-13-3 and following, R. 950-19 and following, Art. L. 6411-1 and following; Education code, art. L. 214-12, L. 214-13, L. 335-5 and following, R. 335-5 et R. 361-2 and for HE: art. L. 331-1, L. 613-3 and 613-4 and following, L. 641-2 Decree n° 2002 -590 of 24 April dedicated to HE.

The above-mentioned legal texts concern all qualifications registered in the RNCP[12] (*Registre National des Certifications Professionnelles*), the National Qualifications Directory (including all HE awards). Each awarding body corresponding to a ministry has published its own rules, outlining practical issues for the context-specific implementation of the principles outlined in the legislation. It is important to clarify that in the UK, there has been a devolved system of governance for education and training since 1997. Scotland has an education system with a particularly notable independence from other parts of the UK. Accreditation of prior learning (APL) or Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) is not a new concept in Scotland, although in the past it has been predominantly implemented in the Higher Education (HE) sector. An overarching methodology known as 'Recognition of Prior Learning' (RPL) has been linked to the implementation of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) and guidelines on RPL were developed by the SCQF Partnership in 2004, and then finalized in 2005. Today, the focus is on looking at RPL as a way to facilitate the recognition and transferability of skills. Building on the 'momentum' of experience gathered in specific sectors of education and training (namely the HE sector) and of the labour market (the social services sector in particular), work is ongoing to identify ways of using the SCQF to support RPL and to enable individuals to benchmark their attainments and achievements to the SCQF, thus facilitating participation in learning and the workforce. This work spans the different learning environments from higher education through to the workplace and the community. In Scotland, RPL can be used for the award of credits towards qualifications or in the admissions process (to assess applicants to education and training courses and also to grant exemptions from course units). It is also recognized as a method of supporting personal development planning, career development and to form bridges between

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[11] See : www.legifrance.gouv.fr

[12] The National Vocational Certifications Register aims at supplying people and companies with up-to-date information on qualifications. It classifies the qualifications of all the certifying ministries by level and discipline, along with the vocational qualifications certificates (to this day, about 20 CQPs – vocational qualification certificates – are listed in the catalogue out of around 300 delivered by professional branches).

non-formal / informal learning and formal education and training. Providing guidelines at national level, or setting out principles which learning providers should adhere to is a flexible way to regulate this area without being unduly prescriptive and enabling individual providers to deal with variable circumstances. However there is also a risk that there will be a considerable differentiation in the delivery of validation across providers and sectors.

In Italy, numerous local experiences have been implemented applying to various sectors/ levels of education. In recent years, some Italian regions have introduced tools for the validation of informal and non-formal learning, making it an individual right (e.g. Emilia Romagna and Toscana), linking it to the recognition of credits for access to formal training or education (Valle D'Aosta, Lombardy, Marche, Umbria) or using it to promote the employability of jobseekers (Veneto and Lombardy). In terms of Higher Education, the Ministerial Decree No. 270/2004 affirmed the possibility for the Universities to recognize "the knowledge and professional skills certified according to the existing legislation as well as the other knowledge and skills gained in training courses at a post-secondary level in which the university contributed in design and delivery". "The University for Lifelong Learning" guidelines developed by a working group, organized by the Ministry of Universities and Research in 2007[13] state that the university system must be an integrated and constantly monitored system in which the recognition of learning should be possible, regardless of how and where the learning took place. In the same document Universities are invited to visit the Centres for Lifelong Learning (CAP) which are academic centres operating at regional and national level also in partnerships with enterprises and public administrations. One of the main purposes of CAP is to help individuals to validate non-formal learning (as credits toward the university programmes the individual is interested in), and to personalize training pathways according to the previous experience acquired in other contexts and to facilitate the access of adult learners and / or employees to validation. Furthermore, numerous local *micro-experiences* have been implemented throughout Italy in different Regions and in a variety of sectors. These experiences were promoted and led by various stakeholders and aimed at several target groups. During 2009 national policy and institutions further encouraged the recognition of learning acquired outside the formal education and training context (non-formal and informal learning). This was partly due to the economic crisis and to the necessity of improving and updating the competences of individuals who faced the uncertainty of the labour market. The economic crisis sharpened the disparity between skills demand and supply and made the issue of updating competences a priority for policy makers. Examples of

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[13] http://www.programmallp.it/lkmw_file/LLP///erasmus/MIUR_Linee_Indirizzo.pdf

bottom-up projects focusing on specific target groups such as young people or older workers with experience from the workplace, which is not accredited or certificated, the unemployed and those at risk of losing their jobs, as well as migrants, and other groups.

Overview of benefits, outcomes and impact to the Recognition of Prior Learning

The potential benefits of validation to the individual, to the economy and to society are well understood, although less well quantified in the country updates. In basic terms, summative validation offers a means of acquiring a qualification, or accessing a formal learning opportunity, by recognizing an individual's existing, albeit unaccredited, competences. Formative validation can help an individual to understand what he / she is already able to do, and to formulate personal and professional pathways for the future on the basis of this – including, when applicable, summative evaluation as referred to above. It is also commonly reported that validation increases self-esteem, motivation and confidence. For instance validation beneficiaries may find it easier to apply for a job as they gain in professional credibility and know better how to present themselves to employers, or they begin to use more actively their informally acquired knowledge and competences within the working context.

In terms of impact, we can confirm that although awareness of the potential benefits of utilizing or developing systems of validation is increasing, the actual take-up of validation could be increased, at least in relation to public sector initiatives leading to a qualification. There are, nevertheless, countries in which this form of validation is already significant (Finland, France, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal). Other forms of validation, for instance validation in the private sector through the use of interviews and performance reviews are widespread, although strong variations continue to exist between different national traditions and sectors in this area too. It is nevertheless significant that for most countries and initiatives, there is no information on the wider impact of validation activities and the country updates show that in few countries are there plans to carry out evaluations in this area.

Validation can also bring benefits to the education and training sector in general. Fundamentally, validation is a key tool to support the achievement of Lifelong Learning Strategies. It can also be used to increase the 'permeability' within education and training systems and to create possibilities to transfer between different sectors of learning. The introduction of new certificates which can be awarded through validation (e.g. in Belgium

(Flanders) and Turkey) can also help to improve the links between the education and training sector and the labour market.

Sample data on flows of RPL beneficiaries

In France, nearly 75 000 files have been considered admissible by the whole of the ministries delivering certifications through the VAE, and about 53 000 candidates have been heard by a jury, in 2010. These numbers have varied very little since 2007, after a big increase between 2005 and 2007. In 2010, about 30 000 candidates were awarded a certification by the VAE, i.e. 7 % less than in 2009. The yearly number of certified students had largely increased between 2003 and 2005, before they became stable at about 30 000.. In 2010, the number of candidates who were considered admissible for the awarding of Ministry of National Education titles was reduced by 4%. However, after that number had greatly increased in 2007 (+ 83%) due to an updated treatment of the files, the number of candidates who were considered admissible for the titles of the Ministries in charge of Health and Social Affairs have decreased since 2008 : - 9% in 2010, after - 11% in 2009 and - 26% in 2008.

Despite the fact that the predominance of the Ministry of National Education has been greatly reduced with the increasing accessibility to degrees in other ministries thanks to the VAE, it still remains the most important certifying ministry: 44 % of the VAE certified candidates were awarded a degree in the vocational and technological sector of the Ministry of National Education in 2010. They were 65% in 2004 and 55% in 2005. The number of candidates with degrees for the Ministries in charge of Culture, Defense and Equipment was still low in 2010, but is progressing: such is the case of candidates with a degree from the Ministry of Defense (from 266 in 2009 to 378 in 2010). Women are still a majority among the candidates, and higher education degrees appear as the most targeted ; however, VAE cannot ignore the lack of balance between universities and on the territory illustrating its implementation. Beyond the support provided to emerging professions corresponding to new local, as well as national needs, it offers the possibility of a qualification and stresses the will to identify and recognize the acquired experiences of unemployed people, so that they can benefit from a form of validation, thus constituting a vector of change of the practices and policy of vocational training. If the VAE process is too standardized and normative, there is a risk that it can generate major gaps between the local actors' expectancies and the certifying ministries' demands. A logic must therefore appear, causing the desire to create alternatives and complementarities.

In Spain, data on validation are limited. A device for the validation of professional skills has very recently been implemented at national level. The initial plans were anticipated for the application of 8,000 people at the first call in 2011, 25,000 at the second call and 50,000 at the third call. However, there was a delay in the setting-up of the process and the figures for the first year have now changed. In the future, in order to avoid financial problems, the device will include registration fees to finance the procedures leading up to the exam. Yet, there are certain longitudinal data on the use of recognition for the purpose of people's education.

While there are descriptive and analytical elements which explain the social phenomena associated with the development of the RPL (VAE), there are nevertheless still questions that cannot be ignored and that will weigh on the development of the devices and on a validation and recognition system ; indeed, on the level of their institutionalization, this may happen according to their territorial implantation.. There is thus a series of factors influencing the development, implementation and representation of the RPL, as well as quite a number of challenges yet to meet. In order to direct future developments, it seems necessary to strengthen the monitoring and assessment procedures, in particular, and to improve the conditions of estimation and information on the costs, the benefits and the impact of recognition in general, as much as those associated with the various types of initiatives and methodologies. The RPL can be regarded as a vector making it possible to build bridges between various forms of cultures - of an educational, economic or social nature - resulting from behaviors and representations of the historically rooted actors. Indeed, the "product" of the perceptions and the exchanges between actors seems to appear in a uniform and converging way within the framework of the RPL. However, although one can notice that very little - even no - countries explicitly object to the relevance of the validation of non-formal and informal learning, one cannot ignore the territorialized divergences which individual and institutional actors express about the RPL.

The source of convergences

The reasons why countries continue the validation of non-formal and formal learning can be accounted for by the wish to open up the systems and frameworks of learning qualification outside formal educational institutions; this is closely related to the efforts aiming at implementing lifelong learning, as well as to the economic, social, demographic, technological, and cultural factors. It is more and more obvious that the current evolution

of the national qualification frameworks in many European countries comes as an answer to the European Qualification Framework (EQF). The characteristics of the validation process and its relationship with the certification systems highlight its formative (certification) and summative (support for training and evaluation) functions. They are distinct, but closely linked functions, which also reveal how individuals and institutions can be led, respectively, to make decisions - sometimes but not systematically - with a view to obtaining a certification, a label. So, the factors pertaining to the educational system echo the need to improve access to the formal educational system and to its efficiency. Implementing direct paths in order to obtain formal qualifications or providing "facilitating measures" for an access to various trainings, and thus, avoiding the repetitions and failings of the educational system, are an essential reason for the validation of the RPL. Several countries have introduced validation in order to make mobility easier and to offer any individuals a "second opportunity" to carry out their learning potentials fully.

The economic factors pertaining to the needs of the knowledge economy are also reflected in the companies. The labour markets have had to become more flexible, and place the emphasis on innovation, which generates a whole series of challenges in terms of the development of human capital. Validation can prove useful in meeting the needs for the various economic sectors, such as the shortages of qualifications or the observance of the regulations relating to professional qualifications. More and more actors of the private sector (social partners and private companies) acknowledge the advantages of validation (Dyson, Keating, 2005).

The social factors are defined in the light of the opportunities given to underprivileged or excluded people. Validation can help socially excluded people to reintegrate the job market and the company. Validation is acknowledged in certain countries as a supporting tool for such disadvantaged groups as refugees, unemployed people, and elderly workers (Kok, 2003). In certain countries, groups as priority targets have been identified and, in certain cases, the validation initiatives have been limited to those groups. Validation can thus also support the promotion of equal opportunities for disadvantaged groups, since it helps to establish equality within the educational and training system, as well as on the labour market.

Finally the demographic factors pertaining to an ageing population and growing immigration are obvious and increase the number of people jeopardized by exclusion and potentially interested in RPL. Moreover, the development of new technologies lays a stress on the appreciation of technical qualifications acquired by informal and non-formal means. In

that context, validation is being developed as an alternative making it possible for individuals to be guaranteed the possibility of seeing their technical skills recognized and of identifying the lack of qualifications and the training needs in the work place.

The source of divergences

The complexity of validation is illustrated by an overview of the plurality of the parties involved on the various levels of the RPL process. In this respect, the relationship with the formulation of experience is quite significant in the constitution of a written document - a portfolio, a booklet of competences, a skills folder or a validation file etc. Progress in terms of policy and practice varies according to the will to take part in the 2020 Education and Training process, at least in the European countries. The observation of European RPL policies and practices shows tangible progress in the past years. More and more countries are implementing methods and systems allowing individuals to have their non-formal or informal skills identified and/or validated. However, these elements of analysis also illustrate the fact that validation is a multi-speed process, within which countries, areas and territories have reached very different stages of development, and that progress cannot be taken for granted, which imposes the identification of the main elements of a validation strategy beyond 2020 to answer the two major challenges:

1.) towards the candidates: they must be placed at the center of the validation process in order to lessen the effects of the unbalanced relationship between the tutor and the candidate, between the institution and the candidate ; so it is advisable to actively involve the candidates into the various stages of the validation process. The tutoring methods and systems must be implemented and designed to take into account the complex and non-standardized nature of non-formal and informal learning.

2.) The link between certifications and formal teaching and training must be analyzed so that validation can be "integrated" and standardized and that, therefore, there is no longer an unequal value attributed to the same degrees according to the various routes of access. The stress must be laid on the candidate's knowledge: on what he/she understands or is able to accomplish at the end of the training process, and not on the contribution or duration of the teaching process. Whereas the results of formal, non-formal and informal training can be "equivalent", the processes leading to this acquired knowledge will necessarily be different.

Validation implies a reference to a standard, as recognition and validation form a process "aiming at identifying, formalizing and socially recognizing the knowledge and skills acquired in action; in other words, they concern the clarification of the conditions of knowledge production and the process allowing awareness and formalization with the purpose of social validation" (Delory-Monberger, 2003, p. 69). The nature of those standards is crucial and will largely determine whether the results of validation are reliable or not. If a standard is too local, it can have a negative impact on transferability.

If it is too general and lacks flexibility, it can prevent validation from precisely defining the essence of individual learning experience. In order to encourage validation, standards must, first and foremost, be (re)defined and described as acquired learning or skills; and even if, to a certain extent, such is already the case, substantial work must still be accomplished, especially on the level of mainstream and higher education. It can sometimes be noticed that validation measures meet with skepticism, which reflects a representation pervaded with the fear of seeing the global level of validation quality decrease in the case of an opening to non-formal and informal learning.

Conclusion

While validation is meant to make the transfer of the results of training easier from one environment to another, it will be impossible for approaches considered too local and limited. Although local experiments can be useful to formative ends, for example, in order to identify the skills acquired in a company, in a particular sector, their broader relevance will likely be subject to much questioning. While the assertion of the individual as a full-fledged subject is shared and supported by all the actors interviewed on the conditions of change, self-fulfillment, development and evolution, it echoes as an answer to the uncertainties of professional and social careers (Rincquesen, Rossin, & Boisson, 2010). Within the framework of the RPL, a liberal conception of the right to training is opposed to another centered on the collective guarantees offered in training and career management. A validation career or training career through the RPL is a method of the construction of a professional and social career. It nevertheless remains a "course of recognition" (Ricoeur, 2004). People are expected to be able to get prepared to anticipate and take charge of social risks and therefore, to adapt. However uncertain their routes, with changing outlines depending on professional, social and personal life-stories, and the institutional contexts of their environment, the

candidates navigate between adaptation careers, "individual responsibility", and political and institutional injunctions (Lafont, 2012) in a society that "tries to disengage itself from collective responsibilities" (Liétard, 1993, p.6), contrary to the law-maker's ethics. RPL allows for its actors a career of adaptation to political and institutional injunctions; it is because the State asserts the will to secure professional careers by developing devices aiming at better protecting the employees and helping them to be more mobile when confronted by the risks of professional and social life. The RPL falls under this strategy which tends to reactivate the concepts of the activation, the quest for autonomy and the granting of more responsibility of people's careers Thus the candidates' request for activation appears at the beginning of their validation career, when, accompanied or not, they try to define a "strategy" in order to achieve the certification of their experience. However, all this raises, on the part of social partners, questionings echoed by the difficulties the candidates face when asked to implement a worded reflection, underpinned by "biographical stories", which constitute "a currently requested counterpart from those who ask for assistance, a status or social protection" (Astier, 2007). If the goal of validation is to answer the challenges of change and of a greater mobility, then intercultural approaches will have to concentrate on the conditions of the transferability of recognized and certified acquisitions, and base themselves on a broader implication and commitment of institutional and individual actors. Such was one of the challenges the Leonardo programme intends to answer.

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Chapter 3: **Recognition of Prior Learning in Scotland**

Marina Shapira, Jamie Brogan

Introduction

Learning is acquiring new, or modifying existing knowledge, behaviour, skills, values, or preferences. A crucial part of learning is an ability to relate a new knowledge to the previous knowledge and experience, i.e. an ability to use the *prior learning* as an intrinsic part of any further learning process (e.g. Ramsden 1992). In addition to skills and knowledge gained in a formal learning environment, *prior learning* can include any knowledge, skills, or wider competences gained as a direct or indirect result of a range of life- and work-based experiences and activities.

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) links between an informal learning process in which individuals are already engaged and the formal education system, through enabling the learners to make clear connections between the learning they have achieved and future learning opportunities. Recognition of prior learning identifies the *outcomes* of informal learning gained through life and work experience, work-place related training programmes, various courses provided by private employers, professional bodies, voluntary and public organisations, and benchmarks these outcomes to the formal qualifications framework. Thus, RPL identifies learning skills, which are transferrable between different learning and working contexts and environments and ultimately offers accreditation of non-formal learning gained outside the formal education system.

The idea and practices of RPL have been formed and shaped by the interrelation of different historical, cultural, economic and political factors. Education has been influenced by the changing socio-economic and cultural conditions of late modernity referred to as globalisation. A new closer relationship was established between economy and education, while

practice and theory moved into closer proximity (Harris and Anderson 2006). Technological advances make learning less confined to the educational institution environment and to a particular life-stage, but demand continuous professional developments through life-long learning. At the same time, the character of employment has changed– it is less and less common to spend the whole working life within the same profession, let alone with the same employer. Working careers are becoming more individualised and fragmentised, with people moving between education and employment multiple times throughout their adult lives. If previously transition from education to work largely coincided with the transition from youth into adult life, today these transitions became blurred and fragmented. Societal changes as well as changes in the nature of employment, lead to individualisation and fragmentation of working careers, and attracted many a-typical adult learners back into education.

This changing societal context of work and learning creates a need for a tight and constantly monitored connection between the education system and the labour market, with the education system responding in real time to the changing context of learning and skill development, and becoming more flexible and inclusive, through incorporating people from different life stages and from a variety of learning backgrounds, whose skills and knowledge were gained under different life circumstances and in a variety of learning environments. Such incorporation requires valid and reliable procedures that allow validating and recognising the learning gained outside the formal education institution. The current developments in the area of RPL in Scotland are being aimed at achieving this task.

In this paper we are considering crucial factors that shaped the development and implementation of the Scottish model of RPL, as well as highlighting main problems that recognition of prior learning encounters in Scotland. Through the discussion of RPL policies and practices across a number of sectors and in particular in Higher Education, we attempt to answer our main research question:

How successful is RPL in Scotland in engaging atypical learners with formal education and training, and through this, in meeting its promise to bring a greater social justice and inclusion through widening participation in formal post-compulsory education?

URPL towards
recognition
of prior learning

Crucial factors for RPL success in Scotland

Specific national models of RPL are to a very large extent, functions of the historical development and institutional characteristics of national education systems and labour markets, and are shaped by a number of processes, such as ideological, political, policy, institutional, economic ones. Therefore, a successful implementation of a national model of RPL requires a clear understanding of the whole complex of factors that influence its development.

During the past fifteen years RPL developments in Scotland are being backed with constant policy interest towards skills development. RPL in Scotland is being developed in the context of Lifelong Learning policy, which established important ideological, political, institutional and organisational frameworks for the implementation of RPL.

There are many features of the Scottish education system that provide a good basis for life-long learning and hence for developing successful RPL processes and strategies. Among such features are

- the learning outcomes based approach, i.e. a possibility to disconnect learning from its context and to identify the outcomes in terms of skills, knowledge and competences gained through learning;

- the modular and flexible nature of Scottish qualifications;

- the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework, which is considered to be one of the most successful national qualification frameworks (Young, 2010);

- the credit transfer arrangements in education and training in Scotland.

Scottish education and training system

In the UK, there has been a devolved system of governance for education and training since 1999. Scotland has its own distinctive education and training systems with a particularly notable independence from other parts of the UK (e.g. Raffe and Byrne 2005), which started to develop separately from those of England, Walsh and Northern Ireland long before political devolution, and diverged further from that in the rest of the UK, since the establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1999 (Gallacher 2011). The Scottish system of education and training has some features that facilitate the implementation of lifelong learning and RPL.

These features were developed gradually over the last two decades and were driven to a large extent by a notable commitment of Scottish Governments to the strategy of lifelong learning in Scotland (ibid).

> *Permeable education system.* The education system in Scotland has many elements of a permeable education system, which facilitates the process of life-long learning and the recognition of prior learning (Raffe and Howieson, 2012). Permeable (or seamless) education systems are characterised with an absence of clear boundaries between academic and vocational education, and with more or less equal value which is given to general and vocational educations. Important features of a permeable education system include an absence of educational dead ends, multiple entry points into the learning process, without a necessity to repeat the stages of learning, as well as an opportunity of not only 'vertical movement' (i.e. from lower to higher level of learning) but also of 'horizontal movement' through switching between different types and modes of learning.

> *Outcome based modular qualifications.* The permeability of Scottish education is facilitated further by the nature of *Scottish qualifications.* Scottish qualifications are *outcome based* and only weakly linked to particular occupational or education destinations or to the mode or the length of study or to a particular institution, and could be used for different purposes. Most of Scottish qualifications are modular and flexible and allow several pathways from that qualification into studies towards more advanced qualifications, as well as towards employment/professional development. Because of the modularity of Scottish qualifications, different modules could be studies at different times and in different contexts, both formal and informal, and then all contribute to the credit requirements for a particular qualification (e.g. Raffe and Howieson 2012, Raffe et al 2010).

A single body, Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), is responsible for developing, validation and awarding of all but university qualifications in Scotland, with all qualifications delivered by any institution or organisation needing to meet the relevant requirements of the SQA.

> *A system of credit arrangements.* The permeability of the education system in Scotland is further facilitated through the system of credit *arrangements* that allows the possibility of credit accumulation for each type and stage of learning and its transfer between learning modes and programmes and from lower to

higher level learning program or into professional development. There are three main types of credit transfer in Scotland (e.g. Howieson et al, 2012):

- from general and pre-vocational learning into mainstream vocational education and training (VET), such as most transitions into mainstream VET from school, from training programmes, and from other types of non-formal and informal learning;

- between different types of mainstream vocational education and training, for example, between college-based and work-based provision, between different colleges or training providers or between different qualifications (and especially those awarded by different bodies);

- between VET and Higher Education, in particular between colleges' sub-degree provision (Higher National Certificates, HNCs, and Higher National Diplomas, HNDs) and universities' degree-level provision.

SQA maintains a cumulative record of the achievements of individual learners. This means that credit accumulation and transfer are built into the SQA system, so that an individual achieving one or more SQA units in one or more institutions can automatically count them towards any full SQA qualification of which these units are components in another institution.

> *RPL in the credit transfer context.* The credit arrangements facilitate the RPL implementation because they allow separating teaching process from learning process, and therefore enabling flexibility in terms of when, how and where learning takes place. Furthermore, credit arrangements allow describing learning through its outcomes, which make skills and knowledge transferable. Credit arrangements also allow describing learning in retrospective terms (what was achieved already) as well as in prospective terms (what learner is expected to achieve) and enable easy comparison between different qualifications and different types of learning experiences (e.g. Raffe 2011d), which is crucial for RPL.

> *Challenges of credit transfer system in the context of RPL.* Credit arrangements enable comparisons and connections between the outcomes of different learning experiences and between experiential/non-formal learning to outcomes of formal programmes. However, some comparisons and connections are more straightforward than others. Credit transfer claims are supposed to be assessed on the basis of a direct match, between the outcomes of prior, formal or non-formal

learning, and the formal learning outcomes. However, a direct match is not always possible for the assessment of outcomes of informal or experiential learning. Broader comparisons are being used instead, which results in a less standardised procedure of the assessment. Some non-formal learning experiences, such as work-based learning, are easier to accredit than other types of informal learning, e.g. experiential learning.

Furthermore, credit transfer arrangements compare between the learning outcomes, but do not take into account differences between learning environments. Yet, a transition from one learning environment to another might be difficult for learners. For example, a transfer of a credit accumulated in a College to a University degree programme might be problematic. Although learning outcomes between colleges and universities are comparable, there are important difference in curricular content, learning practices, teaching approaches and assessment practices. As a result, college students who gained a partial credit and were able to enter a degree programme in University from the second or the third year, sometimes find it challenging to adjust to a new learning environment and experience difficulties in terms of transition and progression, and hence they require additional RPL support (Howieson and Croxford 2011).

Scottish credit and qualifications framework

Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework and RPL

There are two dimensions of the recognition of prior learning. The first dimension, a *formative* one, relates to the understanding by learners themselves of their own achievements, and to the subsequent confidence building and realisation of the possibilities for further formal learning and/or for professional development. The second dimension is known as *summative recognition* and refers to the recognition by others (SCQF Handbook 2009). To make learning gained outside the formal education system transferable, measurable and once validated formally, as valuable as learning gained through formal education, there should be a possibility to compare the informal/non-formal learning outcomes against commonly acceptable and recognisable formal qualifications or outcomes achieved through a formal programme of studies. Such comparison is possible through a *formal qualification framework* that allows benchmarking knowledge experience and skills acquired outside formal education to the context of the qualification framework (SCQF Handbook 2009).

URPL
towards
recognition
of prior learning

Characteristics of National Qualifications Frameworks (NQF) vary across different countries. This variation is mostly due to differences in reasons that prompted RPL developments in different countries. In some countries the NQF development was triggered by processes of Europeanization and globalisation and influenced by the European Qualification Framework (EQF) and the Bologna Framework for Higher Education. Therefore, the NQFs in these countries were introduced to allow referencing the national qualifications to the overarching meta-frameworks such as EQF (Raffe 2011c). In other countries NQFs were introduced, not primarily to address European and international agendas, but as an important instruments of national reform of the system of education and training, and as a vehicle for promoting lifelong learning strategy (Bjornavold 2010).

The Scottish Credits and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) assigns credits to qualifications and their component units and is considered to be one of the most successful national qualifications frameworks (Young 2010). One of the main reasons of the SCQF success is the incremental and consistent process of reforms that led to its development. Early start[14] of the process of the SCQF development in Scotland, which is a small country with a relatively homogenous and cohesive education system, undoubtedly facilitated its development.

The SCQF is *a communication* framework (Raffe 2011a) which means that rather than being introduced with a direct intention of providing educational or training reform or policy change, it was developed to facilitate the lifelong learning policy, to promote trust to qualifications, to enhance cooperation between learning providers (organizations, professional bodies, colleges and universities) and to enable transferability of skill, knowledge and competences between different learning environments (SCQF 2009).

The SCQF supports both formative and summative recognition of learning. The SCQF is a *descriptive framework* which means that it provides a language to make existing qualifications more transparent and coherent. The SCQF provides a tool for seamless progression through qualifications, between different components of qualifications and from lower to higher level qualifications (Raffe 2011c).

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[14] The SCQF was launched it 2001. It has 12 levels and the level of a qualification shows how difficult the learning is. Credit points for each qualification a way of describing the amount of learning, knowledge, skills or competence needed to achieve the qualification. Each level on the Framework also has a set of 'descriptors' or competencies to help employers understand the range of skills an employee might demonstrate at that particular level.

The SCQF is a *voluntary framework in* the sense that that no one has to recognise or use the SCQF, however, the Scottish government through its Skills Strategy for Scotland Network (Skills for Scotland 2007) encourages all employers, learning providers, and awarding bodies to use the SCQF.

The methodology for RPL is based on the SCQF, which supports learners in identification of their level of competences and skills against the framework and in planning further their learning and career development (e.g. SCQF 2006) and fully supports RPL. Frist of all, the SCQF is a single unified framework for all Scottish academic and vocational qualifications based on credit transfer, with credit points identifying the volume of learning undertaken.[15] Its levels reflect complexity of learning, through the SCQF level descriptors which are setting vertical and horizontal progression routes. Last but not least, the SCQF is an outcomes-based framework, which means that it concentrates on skills, knowledge and understanding, regardless of the specific context where they were gained. A considerable volume of work has been also undertaken to include the RPL system within the Framework and to ensure that people were credited for prior learning, that the lifelong learning process was not repetitive but additive and that there was a mechanism in place that enabled people to move between formal education and lifelong learning (Gallacher 2011, SCQF 2007, SCQF RPL Guidelines 2005).

Policy of Lifelong Learning and the institutional framework for RPL in Scotland

The lifelong learning strategy became one the main features of the policy agenda for the consecutive Scottish Governments since 1999. Their programmes of governance were committed to provide 'training for skills', to widen access to Further and Higher education, to create a culture of lifelong learning and to increase adult participation in education and training (Hadgson et al 2011). RPL was always seen as an important tool which enables the implementation of the life-long learning culture in Scotland. Life-long learning policy and development of PRL in Scotland were further enabled through the establishing of such important institutions as The Scottish Qualification Authority[16] (SQA), the Scottish Funding

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[15] average/notional learning time: i.e. 10 hours = 1credit point

[16] *The SQA a single body responsible for developing, validation and awarding of all qualifications, both academic and vocational, which were outside the realm of universities It was established in 1998 through a merger of Scottish Examinations Board (school based qualifications), Scottish Vocational Education Council (college-based and work-based qualifications) and Scottish Vocation Qualifications (SVQs)*

URPL towards recognition of prior learning

Council for Further and Higher Education (SFC), Skills Development Scotland (SDS)[17] , Her Majesty Inspectorate for Education (HMIE)[18], and the Quality Assurance Agency Scotland (QAA)[19] (Gallacher 2011).

Main RPL barriers and challenges in Scotland

RPL goes beyond institutional setting and sectorial boundaries and is based on the principle of bringing skills and competences acquired in one setting into another setting, through a formal validation of learning experiences. In Scotland, many successful activities and RPL good practices exist through co-operation between different stakeholders – universities, workplace, qualification-award authorities, credit-rating bodies, employers and professional bodies. However, there are many areas which need to be addressed to enable a development of streamlined and enhanced RPL processes in Scotland for providing individuals with better opportunities to access learning and qualifications, for getting credit for learning they have already achieved, and for moving smoothly through different learning environments (e.g. QAA 2012).

A better understanding of the Scottish context of RPL is not possible without an understanding of the main challenges, which Scotland meets on its way towards developments of a flexible system of qualifications and institutions which are consistent with facilitating and widening people involvement in the process of life-long learning. These challenges are identified and discussed in this section.

The provision of RPL in Scotland is still patchy and not consistently accessible across all education/training providers, industry sectors, or across the country. RPL practice varies across different organizations and more activities should be carried out to share the RPL practice across sectors and to ensure that the RPL provision is more uniform across colleges and universities, and is supported with clear regulations, guidance and advice.

The main barriers to RPL in Scotland are:
- a lack of flexibility in providing recognition of prior learning

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[17] *SDS is responsible for work-training programmes, information, advice and guidance, literacy and numeracy campaign and financial support for part-time learners*

[18] HMIE is providing a quality assurance system in schools and colleges sectors

[19] QAA) is responsible for the quality assurance in the higher education sector

- access to and credit towards other more formal learning

- a lack of affordability and sometimes poor managerial practices of RPL services

- processes which need to become more transparent, reliable and sustainable

- societal, attitudinal and institutional barriers.

Societal level challenges

One of the main challenges is the socio-economic profile of the Scottish population, especially of its young segment. There is a wide achievement gap on the upper-primary and especially the secondary levels, among 12-18 years old, which is closely associated with socio-economic status and socio-economic inequalities and appears to widen beyond the end of compulsory school (e.g. Croxford 2000, 2009). Furthermore, Scotland has one of the highest proportions in the OECD of young people who are not in education, employment or training (Scottish Executive 2007). One of the main challenges facing Scottish education is to provide a full range of opportunities with progression into employment and further/higher education, for the full cohort of young people completing compulsory education. Therefore, there is clear need for 'socially broader and more successful participation in upper secondary education and greater equity in higher education' (OECD 2008, p.15). The way to face these challenges is to ensure that young people beyond compulsory education have clearly defined learning and training opportunities and accessible pathways into learning and training (Raffe et al. 2010). A current policy "16-plus Learning Choices[20]" aims to meet this need through enhancing learning opportunities, providing equal access to skills and learning for everyone and widening participation of the most disadvantaged or disengaged young people through local partnerships of education providers, voluntary organisations and employers, with a particular emphasis on non-formal and informal learning and RPL.

Social acceptance

Societal attitudes to validation of informal or non-formal learning are extremely important for successful RPL processes. Learners, formal learning providers and employers must have a trust in qualifications gained through RPL. These attitudes are subject to change through

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[20] http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2010/03/30180354/0

policy efforts. Such efforts should be directed towards promoting the ideas of life-long learning and equal access to skills and learning for everyone, ensuring that qualifications gained through RPL are subject to a robust quality assurance process and have the same high quality standards as traditional qualifications. Individuals should be reassured that RPL is a socially acceptable, highly commendable and institutionally supported, additional as well as alternative way to gain formal qualifications. This could be achieved through the coordinated activities of the main RPL stakeholders aiming to promote RPL and to make it widely used and socially accepted, through ensuring its transparency, availability, affordability, and high quality (SCQF 2007, Inspire Scotland 2008).

RPL legal framework

One of the important impediments to RPL in Scotland is a lack of statutory regulations in relation to RPL. Individuals do not have a legal entitlement for recognition of their prior learning. Learning providers do not have an obligation to assess and recognise prior learning. Similarly, employers do not have an obligation to grant their employees with time and recourses for RPL. As a result, RPL very often becomes a private and very laborious errand for individuals who are seeking the recognition of their learning. Therefore, along developing institutional capacities of learning providers, and providing learning with an access to better information and support, it is crucial to develop a legal framework for RPL. Such frameworks exist in several European countries with highly developed mechanisms for validation of learning gained outside the formal educational environment (e.g. France, Portugal, Denmark, and Netherlands), where individuals have a statutory right to RPL and employees are entitled for (paid) time for preparation for RPL, as a part of their professional learning and development processes (CEDEFOP 2011).

Institutional level challenges

Developing institutional capacities for RPL provision are crucial for the success of RPL. In Scotland such institutional capacities are being developed unevenly, and are seen as one of the important institutional challenges to RPL (Inspire Scotland 2008).

These institutional capacities should be developed through embedding(?) of the RPL processes in the institutional policies, systems, processes and everyday working practices: rather than bringing their prior learning and experience through the backdoors of the formal educational institutions learners should have access to well-developed institutional RPL mechanisms. Information about the PRL processes should be transparent and readily available. This could be achieved through increasing a flexibility of learning programmes, diversification of modes of teaching, skill development and training, making the RPL processes more transparent, robust and reliable, developing clear institutional procedures for the RPL processes through raising the staff awareness about RPL and through providing the staff with adequate RPL support, in terms of resources, skill development and training (KSLLL 2010).

In the next section we will discuss in greater detail the RPL challenges that meet Higher Education Institutions in Scotland.

RPL practices in Scottish universities

In this section we explore RPL processes in several Scottish universities, through assessing the accessibility and transparency of the RPL information, identifying the types of RPL that are being offered as well as the types of learners that these RPL programmes cater for. In particular, we attempt to find out if RPL options are available both for learners without formal qualifications but with some life or work-based learning experience, as well as for learners who already have post-compulsory education experience and want to enter degree programme with professional qualifications or college sub-degree level qualifications, such as Higher National Diploma (HND) or Higher National Certificate (HNC). We gathered the data about the RPL processes in Scottish Universities through studying webpages of five Scottish Universities, Edinburgh Napier University, University of Edinburgh, University of Stirling, Glasgow Caledonian University, and the University of Glasgow. We attempted to find the RPL information on the universities' web pages first by following links for "students with alternative qualifications", "adult students", "flexible studies" and/or "a-typical students". These links in many cases brought us to the information about the RPL options in universities. We also made a search within Universities' search engines for any documents regarding the RPL (or alternatively regarding the "accreditation of experiential learning", APEL) formal procedures, regulations and mechanisms. Finally we visited selected at random programme pages in different subject areas in Universities to find out about the RPL options offered at the level of programmes. We completed this work

with the desktop research of the exciting RPL practices in Scotland and in particular, used information about RPL case studies made available through the Quality Assurance Agency Scotland (QAA 2011. 2012) and Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF 2007, 2009) who are the main institutions behind the RPL developments in Scotland.

Edinburgh Napier University (ENU)

The main webpage of ENU[21] provides a link to information about RPL under "Study" and "Courses" where all entry requirements are specified. Entry requirements for courses are explained in terms of formal Scottish and English upper secondary level qualifications such as Highers and A- levels, as well as in terms of sub-degree level qualifications awarded by colleges, such as HND and HNC as well as in terms of relevant international qualifications. However there was nothing about the RPL possibilities there, except for a link to the assessment(?) courses run by Scottish colleges for those who do not meet the formal requirements.

We have been able to access the RPL information through a search for '*recognition of prior leanings*' in the University search-engine. This search immediately gives all the relevant information, including the names of the contract people for all RPL procedures. There is practical information for learners who are seeking a partial credit for their prior certified or uncertified learning (e.g. a link to forms for a request for the credit). There is also information for those who are coming from college with HND and HNC and looking for articulation or advanced entry into the second or third year of a degree programme. There are also clear RPL options for the holders of professional qualifications[22]. Furthermore, some programmes in ENU are explicitly designed as top up to professional qualification to a BSc degree award (for example in Nursing Studies).

Overall, the ENU offers RPL for different types of learners including the learners without formal qualifications/experience of post compulsory education. The information about the RPL processes was readily accessible if one knows exactly what one is looking for. However, the visibility of RPL on the webpages of ENU information could be improved and made more transparent. Some examples of RPL in ENU are given in Table 1.

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[21] http://www.napier.ac.uk/study/Pages/study.aspx

[22] For example for degrees in civil engineering, transportation, electronic and electrical engineering, accountancy, banking and financial Regulation, Property development

Table 1: RPL case studies-organisations in Scotland *(summary of the data from the RPL data from the QAA Scotland/European RPL Network, stage I*)*

Purpose of project	Name of institution	Name of degree/ award/learning programme	Target group(s) of learners:	Nature of RPL:	Number/range of ECTS credits awarded:	Learning recognition
Credit rating of study programme as ‚standalone' credit and as part of a new programme of study for an award.	Edinburgh Napier University, Scotland. Ross International private training provider.	Certificate in Leading Rapid Improvement, with pathways towards MSc.	Employees of local authorities and the National Health Service		30 ECTS credits at SCQF level 11	formal
To provide a degree specifically for BAE Systems	Edinburgh Napier University, BAE Systems & Machine Tool Technology	BSc in CNC Machine Tool Engineering	BAE Maintenance Engineers	Learning, PLR, and work-based experience. Direct entry to year 2 or 3	30 ECTS credits at SCQF level 11	formal, work based
Awarding credit for short cycle programmes at Hong Kong University, enabling direct entry into year 3 of degree programmes	Edinburgh Napier University, Scotland, Hong Kong University	Higher Diploma in Engineering and Certificate in Engineering, leading to Honours Degree in Engineering.	Hong Kong based Engineering students	full award, direct entry into year 3 of degree programmes at Edinburgh Napier University.	65 ECTS at level 11	formal

* Source data are available at http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Scotland/DevelopmentAndEnhancement/Pages/RPL-Network-project.aspx)

URPL
towards
recognition
of prior learning

University of Stirling (UoS)

A search on the UoS webpages shown that the University is offering modular degree programmes allowing significant flexibility and choice. Most importantly, from the beginning, the University is making a clear RPL statement, which is directed towards a-typical learners, who do not satisfy the formal entry requirements but have '*appropriate experience*' and encourages them to apply for a part-time access course which does not require formal qualification but instead '*takes account of other work and life experiences that demonstrate potential for academic study*', and clearly explains the admission process and how credit could be awarded on admission for certain qualifications, or 'a prior certified learning' gained before coming to Stirling (for example college qualifications). Individual courses, selected at random, also have a link to requirements which are alternative to the standard entry requirements and as well as having a link to SCQF to enable the learners to benchmark their qualifications to SCQF.

The detailed description of the RPL mechanisms in UoS could be obtained from a document 'Credit rating and recognition of prior learning[23]' , which could be accessed through a search with words 'Recognition of prior learning' in the University search engine. This document explains all RPL procedures in the UoS in the context of SCQF and the European Credit and Transfer system, and has detailed guidelines and procedures for the RPL in Stirling, including information about the procedure of **submission of evidence of RPL.**

For a summary, we found that the University of Stirling has a very clear, transparent and well managed RPL policy that targets a variety of learners including a-typical learners and those who do not have formal qualifications.

RPL in Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU)

The RPL options in GCU are visible from the University main website where RPL information could be found under the option 'for flexible studies', as well as information about the advanced entry options for college students with HNC/HND qualifications. In addition, there is a wide range of learning options for those who do not have formal qualifications but want to combine study towards degree level qualifications with work. Glasgow Caledonian

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[23] www.stir.ac.uk/media/autoimport/data/assets/pdffile/0012/331

University RPL policy and guidelines are outlined in their 'PRL Policy Handbook[24]' which is easily accessible from the university front page. The RPL options in GCU include:

- an alternative to normal entry into the first years of a degree programme;
- *credits within programmes of study at* undergraduate and postgraduate levels;
- a*rticulation* from HN qualifications or equivalent to degree programmes.

Important feature of RPL in GCU is that it is embedded within curriculum design and explicitly addressed at all stages of the programme towards a degree. The learning outcomes are expressed in a way that enables a variety of different routes for their achievement, which further facilitates the RPL process. Unlike the University of Stirling the Glasgow Caledonian University does not set formal assessment criteria for the RPL claims. Instead it focuses on assessing the *comparability* of the outcomes of informal learning to those of the module or programme level, rather than seeking an exact match.

In summary, the GCU has highly developed RPL mechanisms which are visible and the RPL information is easily accessible for those who are interested in the RPL. RPL in GCU caters for both types of our hypothetical learners and a-typical learner without formal qualifications and/or without any experience of tertiary education would find clear pathways for engaging with studies through RPL.

University of Edinburgh (UoE)

Within some degree programmes (mostly in Science and Engineering) there is a referral to the access courses for those who do not answer the formal entry requirements[25]. But there are no RPL opportunities for those without any formal/accredited qualifications. Credits from the Open University modules are also acceptable as alternative entry requirements in some schools. Additionally the holders of HNC and HND sub-degree level qualifications may enter as a rule the first year of some undergraduate programmes. However, very few possibilities of articulation exist (i.e. possibilities for entry with advance standings (articulation) for the Year 2 of the programme), and those that do are mostly in such subjects as Science, Engineering and Computing.

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[24] http://www.gcu.ac.uk/quality/handbook/Documents/GCU_RPL_Policy_May2011.pdf

[25] however to enter the access courses the applicants are required to demonstrate that they have undertaken recent accredited study within two years prior to entry to their chosen degree programme

Overall, we could not find any RPL mechanisms in the UoE that make possible for those without formal educational qualifications or a recent experience of accredited studies to enter a degree programme at the University.

University of Glasgow (UoG)

Similarly to the University of Edinburgh we did not find any RPL opportunities at the UoG for those lacking formal qualifications. All Schools at the University clearly state alternative qualifications for entry. These qualifications include access course qualifications, vocational qualifications, college qualifications, studies at other universities, and Open University credits, all allowing as a rule entry into the first year of some degree programmes.

> *RPL examples in other Universities in Scotland.* In table 2 we give some further examples of well-developed RPL practices in other Scottish Universities such in the University of the West of Scotland where there is a possibility for the Scotland's Police College to have an advanced entry *(e.g. a direct entry into year 3 of degree programmes)* to the BA in the Police Studies programme. Queen Margaret University offers many RPL options for health professionals on both undergraduate and post-graduate levels, such as advance entry, and an exemption from a part of programmes.

For a summary, we found that there are a number of universities in Scotland that have RPL procedures and practices which target a-typical learners without previous experience of post-compulsory education and even without formal qualifications that meet the 'normal' university entry requirements. However, RPL processes and practices are very unevenly distributed across different universities. The universities with more inclusive RPL practices are the Edinburgh Napier University, Glasgow Caledonian University, University of Stirling, as well as Herriot-Watt University, Queen Margaret University and the University of the West of Scotland. Almost everywhere however, RPL is used more commonly for articulation or advanced entry for those who already have post-compulsory tertiary or professional qualifications, and offer much less to those who do not have formal qualifications but seek recognition of prior informal or experiential learning. The Universities of Edinburgh and Glasgow do not offer any RPL for a-typical learners, and have very few RPL options for those with alternative qualifications (e.g. for those with sub-degree level qualifications such as Higher National Diploma awarded by

Table 2: RPL options in Scotland's Universities (*summary of the data from the RPL data from the QAA Scotland/European RPL Network, stage I**)

Purpose of project	name of institution	name of degree/ award/learning programme	Target group(s) of learners:	Approx. number of learners	Nature of RPL:	Number/range of ECTS credits awarded:
To provide an employer-led Life Long Learning framework	NHS Lothian/ Edinburgh Napier University	All levels of Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework		13000	entry/access; exemption/credit; Direct entry to year 2 or 3; Full award	variable
To help prepare learners for the transition from vocational study to university	Open University, Scotland	Any degree at open university	Anyone who wants an access to university degree studies from vocational tr, employment, voluntary sector	50	entry/access; exemption/credit;	15 SCQF point
Accreditation/Credit- rating of Scottish Police College courses	University of the West of Scotland and Scottish Police College	BA Police studies and other CPDs	Police and ancillary workers	n/a	entry/access; Exemption/credit; Direct entry to year 2 or 3; Full award	10-180
Accreditation for a range of undergrad. programme available within Nursing and School of Health Studies	Queen Margaret University	BSc, BSc(Hons), MSc and Professional Doctorate programmes	undergraduate post registration/ postgraduate and professional doctorate learners	n/a	entry/access; Exemption/credit; Direct entry to year 2 or 3	credits are awarded up to 50% of programme
Credit for entry to degree programme at SCQF level 9	University of West of Scotland (UWS)	BA management	Applicants for BA management	14	full award, direct entry into year 3 of degree programmes at UWS	120

URPL
towards
recognition
of prior learning

colleges). Formal explanation of general RPL policy procedures in university is also poor at the University of Edinburgh and Glasgow University, but good or very good in Stirling University, Edinburgh Napier University and Glasgow Caledonian University. Similarly, RPL advice, support and guidance options, even if they exist, are not clarified at the websites in Glasgow University and the University of Edinburgh. Yet the Edinburgh Napier University and Glasgow Caledonian University provide clear and accessible information about RPL support and advice, specify how they conduct RPL assessments and provide information about the RPL related fees.

Summary and Conclusions

Factors that enabled the success of RPL in Scotland

Consistent and incremental nature of reforms and basis for RPL development. The RPL processes in Scotland were backed with a consistent policy interest in skill development and RPL was developed within the context of lifelong learning policy and the Scottish Credits and Qualification Framework (SCQF). In Scotland RPL become an intrinsic part of a strategy for developing a learning society. Life-long learning policies included establishing and developing important ideological, political, institutional and organisational frameworks for their implementation, which paved the way for the subsequent RPL development.

RPL in the context of the Scottish system of education. The features of the Scottish education system provide a good basis for the recognition of prior learning and life-long learning. These features include its permeability, an absence of dead-end pathways to progression and a possibility of seamless progression between different types and modes of learning, and through lower to higher levels of learning. They also include outcome-based, unitised and modular types of Scottish qualifications, a highly centralised system of qualifications award, credit arrangements in education and training, and a very successful national qualifications framework, the SCQF.

RPL in the context of Learning Outcomes based approach and the system of Scottish Qualifications. The RPL process is being facilitated by the nature of Scottish qualifications which are outcomes based, modular and flexible and allow

Table 3: Comparative assessment of the visibility of RPL processes in five Scottish Universities.

	University of Edinburgh	University of Glasgow	University of Stirling	Edinburgh Napier University	Glasgow Caledonian University
Year when the university was established	1582	1451	1967	1992	1993
Types of RPL available	As a rule HND allows entering the first year of a degree programme. Although articulation is mentioned as an option on general pages, individual programme pages state that RPL is not available.	Articulation with HND Entry with advanced standing into academic programme However, individual courses often state that no RPL is available	Articulation with HND Entry with advanced standing into academic programme	Alternative to normal entry requirement Articulation with HND Entry with advanced standing into academic programme RPL for professional qualifications	Alternative to normal entry requirement Articulation with HND Entry with advanced standing into academic programme
Formal explanation of general RPL policy procedures in the university	poor	poor	good	good	Very good
RPL advice support and guidance	n.a	n.a	Not developed; responsibility for RPL lays with an applicant	good	good
RPL agreement	n.a	n.a	Exists. Specifies subject, credit transfer arrangements and progression routes	n.a	no
Assessment	n.a	n.a	Formal assessment criteria	mixed	General statement that stresses on assessing the comparability of the outcomes of informal learning to those of the module or programme level, rather than seeking an exact match.
Fees	n.a	n.a	n.a	mixed	Min £50
Availability of RPL information through search on the university website	poor	poor	Very good	Available, but RPL regulations available through a separate search good	good
Visibility of RPL options through individual courses/ degree programs	Poor/n.a	Poor/n.a	Very good	good	good
Visibility of RPL possibilities on the main page for undergraduate/prospective undergraduates	poor	poor	Very good	good	good

several pathways from that qualification into further educational or professional development.

RPL and Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework. One of the most important critical factors for a successful implementation of RPL is the presence of a developed National Qualification Framework. A National Qualifications Framework such as SCQF

- allows benchmarking learning outcomes to a formal system of qualifications;
- improves the understanding of qualifications;
- explains how qualifications relate to each other;
- shows how national qualification are related to wider regional meta-frameworks of qualification

RPL and Credit transfer arrangements. Credit transfer arrangements are crucial for RPL. They allow the separation of the teaching process from the learning process and enable flexibility in terms of when, how and where learning takes place. The credit arrangements for education and training enable an accumulative approach to learning, make skills achieved through learning transparent and the learning itself transferable and provide a seamless transition between different stages and modes of learning.

Institutional framework for RPL and co-operation between different stakeholders. RPL goes beyond institutional setting and sectorial boundaries and is based on the principle of bringing skills and competences acquired in one setting into another setting through a formal validation of learning experiences. Therefore, co-operation between different stakeholders is crucial for the success of RPL. In Scotland there is a national level RPL network, the QAA /Universities Scotland HEI RPL Network which support the use of RPL within formal education and training, in the workplace, in the community and in relation to careers guidance.

RPL Challenges and barriers in Scotland

The main barriers to RPL in Scotland include a lack of flexibility in RPL, a lack of affordability and sometimes poor managerial practices of RPL services and processes, which need to

become more transparent, reliable and sustainable. There are institutional, societal, structural, and attitudinal barriers to RPL. The provision of RPL in Scotland is still patchy and not consistently accessible across all education/training providers, industry sectors, or across the country. The practices vary across different organizations and across different sectors.

Enabling a-typical learners to engage in higher education requires making the RPL processes and mechanisms visible, accessible and understandable and institutionally supported. From our research we found that not all universities in Scotland have a good visibility of RPL mechanisms. Formal explanation of general RPL policy procedures is also poor in some universities, but good or very good in others. Similarly, information about the RPL advice, support and guidance, and the RPL related fees is differently presented at the University websites and reflects the differences in the level of development of recognition of prior learning processes in different Universities.

Our research shows that although in Scotland almost all universities use RPL, it still mostly applies to those who already have post-compulsory, tertiary or professional qualifications, and universities offer less RPL options to those who do not have formal qualifications but seek RPL for informal or experiential learning. Examples of good practices are distributed unevenly and include so called 'new' universities, i.e. the universities established since the early 1990s from former Polytechnics, such as the Edinburgh Napier University and Glasgow Caledonian University, or so called 'plate-glass' universities established in the 1960s, such as the University of Stirling or Heriot-Watt University. These universities have a transparent and well managed RPL policy and are inclusive in the sense that they target a variety of learners including those who do not have formal qualifications.

The most prestigious 'ancient' universities such as the University of Edinburgh and Glasgow University do not offer any RPL for a-typical learners, and have very few RPL options for those with alternative qualifications and still seem to be safeguarding their borders from atypical learners.

Overall the finding from this study indicate, that although in Scotland there are some examples of good RPL practices that aimed at disengaged learners, however these examples are very unevenly distributed across different universities and therefore there is still not sufficient evidence that RPL in Scotland promotes social inclusion and increases participation in Higher Education of atypical learners.

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URPL
towards
recognition
of prior learning

Chapter 4: Critical factors of RPL implementation in higher education in the new EU member countries – Croatian and Polish examples

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Context of RPL implementation in higher education in Croatia and Poland

Introducing Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in Croatia and Poland

Many national and European policies and strategies for education and training emphasize the importance of lifelong access to education as a basis for development of high quality and accessible educational systems. Focus on lifelong acquisition of knowledge and skills which enable individual citizens to be more competitive in a global labour market and society in general has become a priority for many countries. As one of the main tools for making lifelong learning possible, recognition of prior learning (RPL) is promoted across numerous policies and strategies produced at European level, including the Europe 2020 Strategy.

In fact, education policy thinking in post-communist countries is still dominated by equating it to the activities connected with formal education and linearly defined processes of acquisition and development of competences. This policy does not recognize many of the phenomena characteristic for contemporary society, which constitutes major challenges for modern systems of education and force decision makers to take different approaches while developing and implementing educational policies, which allow more flexibility to the shape of the career path. Among these phenomena, Piotr Piasecki (2011, p.22-25) distinguishes: the phenomenon of work life balance (addressing the different dimensions in life), delaying decisions related to career, taking over by employers roles of promoters and sponsors of employee competence development, the growing demand for training courses for active

seniors who want to develop their skills, reaching for knowledge when it is needed unlike the traditional attitude which promoted the most comprehensive collection of knowledge, and the availability and co-creation of knowledge in the net. Opening up to this new phenomenon requires thinking about educational policy in terms of Lifewide Learning, which enables personalized and flexible development processes. A boundary condition for building a coherent system of Lifelong Learning (LLL) is to create the opportunity for recognition of qualifications acquired outside the formal education system (RPL).

Conditions and factors of change in approaches to education in higher education institutions

Poland belongs to a group of EU countries, which are intensively rebuilding their education policy, towards a "learning throughout lives" policy. Poland for several years has been modernizing the higher educational system trying to better connect it with the labour market needs and reach specific educational effects. At the same time quality assurance systems are being improved and flexibility of pupils and staff's skills development pathways is increasing. We are also witnessing the opening of the Polish education system to international contacts and the increase of students, pupils and interns mobility. At present, the degree of fulfillment of these objectives is affected by several important developmental conditions (European and national):

- The existence of large European projects, in which Poland is actively involved, for the reconstruction of the education system, especially the construction of the European Education Space and Lifelong Learning system development.

- The availability of EU funds, which can be utilized for the development of human resources - expertise and programs preparation, as well as direct support for various forms of learning which enable to develop, update and acquire new professional skills.

- The large potential of Polish youth, who have had experience of studying in other European countries (more than ten thousand people per year) and work abroad. A significant proportion of young migrants are people with high qualifications. Many of these people come back and Poland lost a large capital without the possibility of formal recognition of qualifications acquired by them.

- The Polish labor market to a large extent consists of young people, the baby boomers of the 70-80 (50% of them have higher education diploma, 80% of which are Master's degrees). There are about 4.5 million well-educated young people who graduated in the years 1999 to 2011 (over 400 thousands graduates yearly). It is the largest Polish social capital at the beginning of the XXI century. Providing opportunities to maintain professional attractiveness of this generation will determine the success of the development of Poland - which is why the development of the LLL system, including the system of RPL, is so important.

In Poland there is no system for the recognition of qualifications obtained in non-formal and informal mode. There is no support for the realization of flexible competence development paths. The degree of personalization of learning processes is very low. The greatest resistance concerns the recognition of informally developed competences - through self-education and professional experience.

Recognition of prior learning in Croatia has been developed primarily as a response to the requirements of the European integration process and specifically the requirements for participation in EU funding programmes (Dolenec, 2007). The initial step in bringing the recognition of prior learning onto the governmental policy agenda was the adoption of the Strategy on Adult Education introduced in 2004. Following the adoption of the Strategy, the Adult Education Act was passed in 2007. It was within this Act that for the first time the concepts of non-formal and informal education were formally introduced to the education system in Croatia. Since the Strategy was adopted, a number of legal documents were produced which contain explicit provisions regarding the process of RPL. However, it is important to note that the Scientific Activity and Higher Education Act does not contain specific provisions on RPL. Instead the Adult Education Act in its Article 11 states that 'adults shall have the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge, skills and abilities, regardless of the means by which these were acquired, by taking an examination'. Based on this provision the higher education institutions can autonomously organize the process and set the criteria for recognition of informal and non-formal learning. However, as stated in the 2012 National Report regarding the Bologna Process implementation this rule only sees application in practice in cases of enrolment into study programmes for those students who enrol mid-programme. Furthermore, the National Report states that while the legislation neither expressly permits nor prohibits higher education institutions to implement procedures for validation of non-formal and informal education, the practice of RPL is a 'very unusual practice'.

Legislative and Policy Framework for RPL in Croatia and Poland

Legislative and Policy Framework for RPL in Croatia

A crucial policy and legislative framework that opens the way for the development and implementation of RPL in Croatia is the Croatian Qualifications Framework (CROQF), which has been passed by the Croatian Parliament in February 2013 and came into force on 2 March 2013 (Official Gazette 22/13). Although the idea had been conceived much earlier, the development of the CROQF officially started in March 2006 when the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports (MSES) formed a relevant Committee chaired by the Minister and the work on CROQF will continue through the provisions set by the Law. One of the specific aims of the CROQF is setting up a system for validation of non-formal and informal learning. This is justified primarily by the need for adapting and referencing Croatian qualifications to the ones in the EU countries, as well as by the demands of the labour market in Croatia and the EU. The Law on CROQF recognizes that acquisition of learning outcomes is not achieved exclusively through formal pathways, but through all other non-formal and informal paths, which should be validated. In order to ensure the quality and transparency of the CROQF implementation, the CROQF Registry is currently being developed with the aim to ensure better links between education and labour market needs. The CROQF Registry will list all occupations with the accompanying competences, and the competences or learning outcomes will be linked to particular qualifications. According to the Law on CROQF, a Rule Book on CROQF Registry should be published till the end of 2013 and within a year after the Law is passed (in 2014) the Rule Book on validation of non-formal and informal learning should also be published, thus ensuring a legal framework for RPL in Croatia.

Coinciding with the final phase of its accession to the European Union (EU), with the Law on CROQF, Croatia joined many EU countries which have recognized that all pathways to achieving learning outcomes, rather than only the formal one, are equally important in the process of establishing a society of knowledge and social inclusion. Since RPL in Croatia is in an early stage, in terms of implementation, it's crucial that the complexity of the context in which the policy, as well as procedures, on RPL is to be formulated is brought to the forefront. As discussed by Lafont and Pariat, when addressing RPL it is important to take into consideration a wider framework of lifelong learning policies in a complex environment of intersecting economic, social and cultural aims (Lafont & Pariat, 2012, p. 5).

URPL towards recognition of prior learning

Legislative and Policy Framework for RPL in Poland

In recent years, Poland has changed the legal basis for the functioning of the formal education system at all levels. The common axis of these changes was the legal empowerment of the National Qualifications Framework. Significant progress in the sphere of institutionalization was made through the articulation of principles and rules of the new system and the establishment of institutions that coordinate and support the development and implementation of the NQF. You may notice several stages in the construction of the foundations of recognition system in Poland:

- First stage - the deep transformation of the legal system for education, vocational education, higher education and science. It was launched at the turn of the century. It introduced greater flexibility in the education process and external examinations evaluating student performance. A strong external quality assurance system of higher education was also established at this stage.

- Second stage - was initiated in 2008, when more attention to learning outcomes was paid. Primary and secondary schools were required to develop pupils' key competencies in the process of education. In vocational schools, training was directed at the development of clearly defined skills. Higher education organizations were obliged, by the new law of 2011, to determine - through September 2012, the effects of education according to the National Qualifications Framework and defined in accordance with the needs of employers. Higher education providers are also compelled to monitor the fate of graduates and implement internal quality assurance systems, including criterion of usefulness of education programs (Ustawa z 18 marca 2011).

- Third stage – when necessity of RPL development in Poland was noticed**.** In February 2011 the government adopted a revised document setting out the strategic framework for the development of Lifelong Learning in Poland (Międzyresortowy zespół, 2011, 50-51), whose provisions were included in the key strategic documents of the State. Among expected strategic lines of intervention for achieving the "clear and coherent system of qualifications" goal, provisions relating directly to the validation and recognition of qualifications obtained outside the formal education system were included. Inter alia, creation of a system of recognition of qualifications acquired outside the formal learning was foreseen, and also "Creating a system of assessment and recognition of learning outcomes other than formal (validation system), as a basis for a modern model of adult

education" (Międzyresortowy zespół, 2011, 62). A special role was given to the emerging National Qualifications Framework.

- Fourth stage - Building the institutional basis for the National Qualifications System, including validation and recognition of qualifications. The system project, which aims to develop substantive and institutional principles of implementation of the national qualifications framework and a national register of skills for learning throughout life, is being implemented (2011-2013) by the Institute for Educational Research. According to assumptions prepared by the team: "National Qualifications System is defined as all state activities related to the confirmation of the learning outcomes for the labor market, civil society and the individual development of learners, based on the national qualifications frame. It includes in particular recognition of qualifications and quality assurance of qualifications' (IBE, 2011, p. 13-16). The Polish Qualification System consists of: Polish Qualifications Frame, National Register of Qualifications, Validation, Accumulation and transfer of accredited achievements, Quality assurance of qualifications.

After the entry into force of the revised Law on Higher Education (1 X 2011), the process of developing the National Qualifications Framework in formal education in Poland has been significantly advanced. Unfortunately, this law has no provisions governing the possibility of recognition of qualifications acquired outside the formal education system. This problem has been recognized and has become the subject of subsequent amendments to the Law on higher education. In December 2012 a public consultation concerning changes to the law was held, and currently works on amendment are in the final stage. This change introduces into the Polish legal system the possibility to recognize in higher education learning outcomes acquired outside the formal education. In countries dominated by formal education, such as Poland, the effects of non-formal and informal learning are not adequately diagnosed and recognized.

Overview of the Croatian Higher Education System in the context of RPL implementation

Main Characteristics and current Challenges of the Higher Education System in Croatia

In order to make recognition of prior learning an integral part of the Croatian higher education (HE) system, it is necessary to take into consideration its main characteristics

and current challenges. Croatia's HE system is regulated at the national level, and has been under intensive reforms since 2003, driven by the Bologna Process, which Croatia joined in 2001. The system is primarily regulated by the 2003 Act on Scientific Activity and HE which established a binary system. Professional studies are offered in polytechnics, schools of professional HE and, exceptionally, universities. Academic studies are offered exclusively at universities. Teaching and research is carried out by one of the following constituent university units: faculties, university departments, art academies or university institutes. Faculties and academies are parts of universities, but legally recognized as separate and independent legal entities (Šćukanec, 2013).

Table 1: Size of Croatian higher education system (January 2013)

	Public	Private	Total
Number of non-university/ vocational/professional HE institutions:			
Polytechnics	12	3	15
Schools of professional higher education	3	25	28
Total	**15**	**28**	**43**
Number of universities:			
Universities	7	3	10
Faculties	61	0	61
Art academies	6	0	6

Source: Agency for Science and Higher Education and Šćukanec (2013)

The Bologna driven reform of study programs effectively began in 2005, introducing undergraduate and graduate programs (first and second cycle). The majority of HE institutions transformed the previous four-year programs into the 3+2 Bologna model. Postgraduate programs were also restructured (EACEA, 2010). According to the 2003 Act on Science and HE, the HE institutions are autonomous in determining contents and teaching methods of their study programs. Admissions to HE are regulated in the same Act and are set individually

by each HE institution. They can, for example, individually decide on admission quota or on weights placed on secondary school grades, grades of the recently introduced state level graduation exam at the end of secondary schooling or on RPL in the admissions procedure (Šćukanec, 2013). Since the academic year 2010/11, the technical aspects of admission to HE institutions are managed by the Central Application Office through a web portal, which is a part of the Agency for Science and Higher Education (ASHE) (EACEA, 2010).

In 2003 Croatia had six universities, seven polytechnics and 15 schools of professional HE. The number of HE institutions doubled in the past ten years (see Table 1.). Croatian HE used to be concentrated at the major traditional universities Zagreb, Split, Osijek, and Rijeka, but in the past 10 years new public universities have been established: Zadar 2002, Dubrovnik 2003 and Pula 2006. The traditional universities are not functionally integrated, but the recently founded ones are. Despite the polycentric development of HE, study opportunities are primarily located around the capital Zagreb. Even though institutions are now distributed across the whole country, the University of Zagreb offers the most diverse study programs, enrolling about 50% of the overall student population (Šćukanec, 2013). The majority of Croatian students are enrolled at public HE institutions (93%). Only 7% study at private HE institutions (data for 2010; Cvitan et al., 2011). In 2011/12, 78% studied at universities, and 22% at professional HE institutions. Out of a total of 152.857 students, 74% (112,848) were enrolled as full-time and 26% (40,009) part-time students (CBS, 2012a). Of all first and second cycle students in 2010/11, 38% students were enrolled in undergraduate university studies, 13% in graduate university studies, 16% in integrated undergraduate and graduate university studies, 30% in undergraduate professional studies and 3% in specialist professional graduate studies (CBS, 2012b).

The size of the education-relevant age groups in Croatia will decrease in 2020 by 15% in comparison to 2010 or by 30% in comparison to 2000 (CBS, 2008-2012). Given the number of births in 2000, it is likely that by 2020, the overall size of the generation that will enrol in HE will reach a maximum of 40,000, which will then correspond to 90% of the generation aged 18 years old (Matković, 2009). The conclusion, according to Matković, is that the maximum number of potential newly enrolled students (which is limited by the number of pupils who complete secondary school tracks which allow for matriculation and entry to tertiary education) has already been reached. This is confirmed by the relatively stable enrolment trends from 2005 onwards (between 38,000 and 39,000 first-time enrolments per year). However, despite the demographics, the HE system demonstrated a remarkable expansion of 110% in the decades 1990-2010, as measured by student enrolment (Babić et

al., 2006), with a very high progression rate from secondary education to HE. Expressed as a proportion of the cohort enrolling in HE, the proportion of 18-year olds enrolling in HE increased from 42.1% to 79% in the period from 1994/1995 to 2009/2010. The increase in enrolments has resulted in a corresponding increase in graduation rates in Croatia. In the long run, as explained above, the negative demographic trends will curb further expansion of the HE system since the cohort of 18-year-olds is expected to decrease to 39,656 in 2023 (Šćukanec, 2013). Most students enter HE at the age of 18 or 19 (86%); the share of students entering HE for the first time after the age of 20 is much higher in professional studies (18%) than in university studies (2%). Additionally, more part-time than full-time students enrol in their study programs after the age of 20, and women make up the majority of the student body (56%) (Cvitan, et al., 2011). Finally, in 2010 the share of Croatian population aged 30-34 with tertiary education was 22.6%, while the EU average was 33.6% (Erawatch, 2013). Assuming that the above mentioned enrolment and graduation trends continue, the HE attainment of the 30-34 age group in Croatia will reach 40% in 2020, which will be in line with the benchmark set in the European Union's EU 2020 Strategy.

When it comes to flexibility of learning paths and possibilities of transfer for students between professional and academic education the HE system in Croatia has so far been rather inflexible and posed numerous limitations to horizontal and vertical mobility of students. The horizontal mobility from professional to academic education and access of graduates in professional education to academic master programmes is limited with numerous requirements for students. These normally include additional course work and have little possibilities for recognition of previous work in professional education programmes. The criteria and acceptance to academic programmes either as vertical or as horizontal mobility of students is dependent on the decisions of individual faculties and individual study programmes.

Quality assurance of the Croatian HE system is regulated by the 2009 Act on Quality Assurance in HE and Science. Internal quality assurance is provided by the institutions' internal quality assurance systems in the form of internal checks. Study programs delivered at public universities are self-accredited by university senates, while programs delivered by all other public and private HE institutions are accredited by ASHE, which is an independent public body responsible for external quality assurance in HE and research in Croatia. ASHE is responsible for the initial accreditation of new HE institutions and new study programs and new research activity; re-accreditation of existing HE institutions and of existing research organizations every 5 years; audit (review of internal quality assurance systems) of existing

HE institutions and of existing research organizations and thematic evaluation of the whole institution, part of an institution, or study program at a HE or research institution. The ASHE applies the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) to its procedures. According to the Act and corresponding directives, HE institutions are required to develop internal quality assurance systems. In its external quality procedures of HE institutions ASHE also performs external quality assessments of teaching indirectly (Šćukanec, 2013).

Similar to other countries, the position of individuals with higher education qualification at the labour market in Croatia is significantly better than of those with lower qualifications. However, a more detailed analysis shows that within the highly educated population there are disparities with regards to labour market participation. The labour market demand for a number of "high skilled occupations", mostly those from humanities and social sciences, continues to be low over a longer period of time. On the other hand a number of occupations, primarily engineers, continue to be in demand. Therefore, the enrolment policies do not respond to the labour market indicators. Unmatched to the labour market needs, the increased enrolment of certain educational profiles has resulted in surpluses of highly qualified professionals who continuously face unemployment issues (Babić et al., 2006). The overall dramatic increase of the higher education enrolments was extremely uneven across the disciplines and largely driven by the humanities and social sciences (Babić et al., 2006). The produced mismatch of the highly qualified labour force supply and demand has been observed in the difficulty of the labour market to absorb the professionals in political science, journalism, philosophy, social work, kinesiology and criminology. On the contrary, professionals in pharmacy, construction, architecture and ICT on average had much higher employment rates, especially up to 2008 (Babić et al., 2006). A study of the European Training Foundation 'Transition from School to Work: Internships and First Entry to the Labour Market in Croatia' strongly advocates a more active incorporation of the professional training and internship component in study programs as a means of higher signalization and better definition of learning outcomes in the labour market, which would facilitate employment of the labour market entrants (Crnković-Pozaić, 2009). The Joint Assessment of the Employment Policy Priorities of the Republic of Croatia (JAP), signed between the European Commission and the Government of Croatia in 2008, identified the following educational priorities of particular relevance to the labour market: increased number of providers in vocational higher education in less developed regions, higher number of college graduates and increased enrolment in study programmes in the field of technology.

Future of RPL in Croatia

Major challenges facing the Croatian higher education (HE) system in the near to mid-term future are the structural reform of universities, the reform of the HE financing system for assurance of equitable access to HE and the continuation of curricular reforms alongside the implementation of the Croatian Qualifications Framework (EACEA, 2010). Given the ambitious Europe 2020 target for HE participation, Croatian HE institutions have to find effective solutions to increase HE participation and completion rates, as well as, widen access to HE for non-traditional and underrepresented students. Another major task is the HE curriculum reform, including the implementation and linking of the learning outcomes with student workload and allocation of ECTS credits (EACEA, 2010). This task overlaps with the implementation of the Croatian Qualifications Framework, which provides a regulated and sound basis for the development of RPL.

RPL in higher education in Croatia has thus far been dependent on initiatives of very few individual higher education institutions, or even faculties or study programmes. Having in mind this early stage of development of RPL in higher education in Croatia it is of utmost importance that critical factors in the economic and social context, stakeholder and institutional framework and the education and training policy are taken into account, which would in turn ensure a strategic approach to the development of RPL policy and procedures. Development of the system of RPL provides an opportunity to address the issue of interaction between society and higher education on one hand and structural issues within the higher education system on the other. Therefore, the attitudes of higher education stakeholders towards RPL and the introduction of a more flexible system for students will be crucial to the success of implementation of RPL.

Despite an overall negative set of socioeconomic and demographic circumstances, the fact remains that the improvement of the educational structure of Croatia's population is not a question of choice, but of necessity if the country wishes to be a competitive knowledge-based society in a global context. Increasing the proportion of the working-age population with tertiary education will be a high priority, and the increase of enrolments will have to be even larger due to the shrinking population. Furthermore, to ensure stable development of all the regions the regional disparities will need to be addressed by the economic and educational policies. It may further be expected that the existing mismatch of skills in the labour market will put additional pressure on the higher education sector to develop opportunities for bridging the existing labour market gaps. In the context of these major challenges and based on the new

framework for RPL provided by the Law on Croatian Qualifications Framework, RPL should be developed as a tool which could enable wider access to Croatian HE and increase the number of students, as well as diversify the student body by opening access to non-traditional students.

Main critical factors in the process of RPL implementation in higher education in Poland

Social acceptance and academics' attitudes towards the RPL

In Poland there is a large formalization, rigidity and, unique on a European scale, dominance of formal education, particularly school education. Respect for formal education and the desire for education, especially of a general nature, including at university level, exists. After the changes initiated in 1990, massification of education started and dramatically increased the number of private universities. Concerns about the quality of higher education increased at the same time.

Several years ago Poland has entered a phase of the demographic cycle characterized by a sudden drop in the number of population aged 19-25 years, which will continue for about the next 13 years. This raises concern about maintaining a quality education, the struggle for students and mistrust with regard to actions that could reduce their number (for example, through the recognition of the results obtained before college education). In this context, it is extremely important to show the robustness and reliability of the procedures used in RPL proceedings.

Key academic environment resistance towards the RPL is associated with fear about the quality of education associated with the partial recognition of learning outcomes. In the social consciousness some stereotypes of a bygone era still remain, in which qualifications could be obtained thanks to political merit and a person could even get in that way a degree. Concerns about depreciating the diploma of higher education in Poland increased after the changes initiated in 1990, when suddenly non-public higher education institutions began to develop, and some of them weakened the requirements of a quality education.

In the last 20 years we observed a very dynamic development of the training sector. High availability of funds for this purpose, mainly within the framework of EU programs, means that next to organizations with a high level of professionalism in training services, there are

a lot of companies interested mainly in consumption of funds, not in providing services of a high quality.

All these considerations produce in academia a large ambivalence towards the issue of recognition of qualifications acquired outside the formal education. Undoubtedly, there is a consciousness of wasting and the under-use of the potential of people's skills. However, it is accompanied by the fear that the possibility of recognizing learning outcomes obtained outside formal education opens the door for circumventing formal training in the skills development process.

Also employers often do not positively evaluate the employee's readiness to professional mobility (Znaczenie inicjatyw, 2012). They treat it as an indicator of the level of disloyalty. At the same time, although they complain about poor professional preparation of graduates, they are afraid that the RPL system may even weaken present professional preparation of graduates.

Financial resources

The acceleration of the process of building the National Qualifications Framework and qualifications recognition is strongly correlated with the availability of European funds for this purpose, under the operational program Human Capital. The money is used in two ways: to finance a large part of the expert work, as well as to conduct an extensive promotional campaign (mainly in relation to NQF) and training.

In Poland, most of the formal education services are free of charge, but since the early 90s at all levels of education, formal education is also provided by various private (commercial sector) and social (non-governmental sector) schools. In these types of institutions, formal education is partly or fully paid. At present, Poland does not have any rules on the financing of services related to the recognition of qualifications. The cost of the procedure (e.g., recognition of diploma) is paid by the applicant (who is applying for the recognition of qualifications) or by the employer who wants to hire him.

Large companies, mostly branches of multinational corporations, often take care of their employees and organize opportunities to improve their skills and incur the associated costs. Small companies usually pass education costs to employees or cover the costs of their development in exchange for a commitment to continue working in their company for a

period of several years. Most companies for the training of employees use funds from the EU. In the first period of the introduction of RPL in Poland interested parties, both individuals and employers, will expect that the services associated with the validation and recognition of qualifications will be at least partially reimbursed. Certainly there will not be money in the country to budget for this task, so it is necessary to give interested parties the possibility of applying for EU funds.

It should also be noted that the expansion of such services may constitute an additional source of revenue for the organizations authorized for carrying out the procedures for recognition. In particular, in case of universities, this could be the income from individual accreditation processes, carrying out the procedures for the accreditation of training programs in companies, their evaluation and issuing of documents certifying compliance with standards, and also the admission of students who would pay for additional modules necessary to issue the certificate.

Stakeholders involvement

A serious problem of the Polish education system is the weak link of education with labor market needs. It is very difficult to solve this problem, despite many efforts, mainly due to the high dynamics of the needs of the labour market and the limited possibility of prediction changes. Universities have found themselves in a difficult situation. More and more they are required to increase the indicators of graduate employability, while the main measure of formal education is still meeting the formal criteria of education. Linking education with labor market needs is also difficult because of the very low level of involvement of stakeholders, including entrepreneurs and employers. Integration of stakeholders is mostly managed by public administration: driven by public offices or by public agencies and is strongly associated with the public sector.

A specific group of stakeholders are the experts, who play a special role in the modernization of the Polish system of education and training play, especially the Bologna Experts mentioned above. They enjoy respect in the academic environment and are principally engaged in the promotion of the National Qualifications System, including the National Qualifications Framework. Their opinion will be of great importance for environmental attitudes to the recognition of prior learning.

An important environment for the development and recognition of qualifications is the sector of training organizations (both commercial companies and NGOs). Training companies play an important role in the transformation of the education sector in Poland. Thanks to them there is a transfer of innovative teaching methods and techniques. Training companies also support development of soft skills, which, as noted by Zbieranek (2011), differ from the traditional, school-based ways of understanding education and refer to such competencies as creativity and innovative problem solving, and critical analysis of information or team working.

General lack of cooperation between important stakeholders (experts, representatives of the formal education and higher education, non-formal education and employers and public administration) seems to be the biggest weakness of the process of RPL implementation in Poland. Partnership in Poland is understood in a very narrow way, as the inclusion of experts and relying on their studies, and also consulting already prepared solutions with the different stakeholders in the process of formal consultation (required by law). There are no platforms of cooperation, allowing the working out of joint solutions satisfactory for all stakeholders. This understanding of the partnership results in the development of a number of undesirable attitudes:

- Very strong employers' distance from works on RPL development. However, without understanding the idea of change and strong support from employers and their involvement in the implementation, the process seems to have no chance of success.

- Increase of demanding attitudes of learners who want to be taught, to get specific learning outcomes, while minimizing responsibility for their own learning.

- A large reserve of schools and universities due to lack of support system for teachers and academics, which is necessary in case of the changes in ways of learning

Particular emphasis shall require actions undertaken in higher education for better match between education and labor market needs. Schools were given greater autonomy in education. Increase of the autonomy of educational institutions must be associated with increased social responsibility. Curriculum self-defining through precise definition of learning outcomes was therefore connected with the obligation of internal quality assurance systems, assessment of the declared effects and monitoring of the graduates careers' implementation. Flexible shaping of the educational profile is possible now. Also, the process of differentiation of schools by type of shaped skills has begun.

De facto cooperation of stakeholders in education does not exist. It is declared in recent years and legally enforced in the formal education institutions. Lack of experience of positive cooperation will be an additional difficulty in the work on the design and implementation of a recognition system. Without the creation of mechanisms which stimulate cooperation focused around a widely shared vision of a learning, open society, constantly raising its qualifications, flexibly shaping the path of personal and professional development for the benefit of personal goals, society and the economy, there is no chance of developing a reliable system of recognition.

Quality assurance

Ensuring the quality of learning outcomes is a critical element in LLL policy. Especially important are: the internal systems of quality assurance and support for teachers, trainers and a system of external evaluation of learning outcomes achieved. In higher education in 2011 the system of accreditation of schools and departments of education has been partially changed, by stronger connection between rates and the level of achieved outcomes and the existence within higher education institutions of internal quality assurance systems. The evaluation system of higher education institutions concerns the process of education, in the framework of regular studies, as well as offers of a non-formal education. Procedures for assessing the quality of validation and recognition in higher education learning outcomes achieved outside formal education have not yet been developed, because so far there was no legal ability to provide this type of service in higher education. This is one of the boundary conditions and critical factors for RPL development both in Croatia and Poland.

With regard to RPL procedures, the rules quality of services assurance would have to be comparable to those used for formal learning services. Employers, though they complain about poor vocational training of graduates, are afraid that the system of recognition of qualifications may cause even weaker professional preparation.

Information availability and promotion

The public debate over the modernization of education and training does not include the issue of recognition of qualifications acquired outside the formal system. Pilot surveys

carried out by the authors of this study show that, except for the Bologna Experts, none of the Polish stakeholders have knowledge of existing systems for the recognition of qualifications obtained outside formal education. Since information on the RPL appears in different contexts, it raises big emotions, and it's often misunderstood and immediately discredited.

Lack of information about the essence of RPL, the benefits for individuals, employers, schools and training organizations, the boundary conditions of these services, and the systems of RPL quality assurance, are the most important critical factors for implementing this system in Poland.

Another problem is the complete lack of knowledge - both among students, workers and employers - on RPL and the opportunities that it provides for flexible shaping of individual development paths. The introduction of this type of service in the National Qualifications Framework requires promotional campaigns on RPL for higher education - addressing both the academic staff as well as those interested in the validation and recognition of learning outcomes - RPL candidates and potential employers. Promotion of RPL is a necessary condition for the success of RPL implementation in Poland. These activities should be directed both to the environment of higher education, especially teachers, senate members, university management, students as well as to employers, workers and training companies. At this stage it is primarily important to introduce clear rules of RPL to the National Qualifications System. It is also important to finish speculation and to provide information of what RPL really is and what kind of opportunities and possibilities it creates and what limitations it has.

Summary

Processes whose aim is to increase the adequacy of public policies to contemporary challenges (both at EU and national level) are progressing in the open European space. In the new Member States, the processes of social change, artificially blocked during the previous regime, have acquired a high pace nowadays. National public policies are trying to keep up with these changes, however, and the scale and the depth of the transformation generate tensions that are difficult to control.

An example of a policy that is critical to the development of society is education policy. Education and professional orientation systems in the new Member States are still to a large extent formalized, rigid and dominated by school education. This is particularly true

for higher education. It is generally poorly suited to the needs of the labor market and there is no possibility of flexible development of career paths.

As shown above, the new Member States for several years have been intensively remodeling their policies on higher education. Both Poland and Croatia in recent years adopted new regulations, which require HEIs to open to the needs of the changing labour market. Both countries have implemented the National Qualifications Framework, which greatly facilitates the introduction of RPL. The recent Law on CROQF opens way for significant changes and will provide the legal framework for implementation of RPL in Croatia. In Poland, in 2011, a number of significant changes have been introduced and the Amendment to the Law on Higher Education, which is currently being prepared, also introduces RPL to higher education.

The introduction of RPL in higher education in the new member states is a deep social innovation. It requires careful management of the process of its implementation. Particularly significant among the critical factors that may affect this process seems to be the lack of knowledge about the essence of RPL. Its effect is the lack of social acceptance and a large distrust of the introduction of this new service in the universities. It is also not clear what are the financial costs of such procedures and who will bear them. The successful implementation of RPL in higher education requires a broad information campaign about the existence of such opportunities, and the benefits that it provides to individuals, employers and higher education institutions

It is necessary to prepare accurate and transparent rules for validation and recognition of learning outcomes acquired outside formal education, as well as a system to ensure high quality of RPL service, both at the level of the country and each university conducting such procedures. RPL is to enable flexible development of career paths and to allow the validation of experience gained in a variety of situations, including through professional work.

Therefore, it is crucial to develop broad cooperation between the various environments in which people learn - acquire and develop learning outcomes. Particularly important is the partnership between universities and employers, experts, non-formal education training institutions and public administration, in order to develop and implement RPL in the form which is most adequate to the needs of each country. An important critical factor in the implementation of RPL in Poland and Croatia is the lack of such cooperation which will allow the development of common solutions satisfactory to all concerned parties.

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URPL

towards
recognition
of prior learning

Chapter 5: **The Challenges of Designing and Managing a University RPL Centre**

Beata Jałocha, Grażyna Prawelska-Skrzypek

In carrying out the so-called „third mission", which entails exerting an even more powerful impact on the social and economic development of their immediate environment, modern higher education institutions are increasingly expanding the range of their services related to Lifelong Learning (LLL), which hitherto had been a non-core form of business activities. They are tailoring their offer to better suit the needs of the graduates, granting them the opportunity to update and upgrade their knowledge and acquire new competencies. They are also actively trying to create the possibility of forming flexible advancement pathways and to support people interested in such – as of yet - unusual ways of development. New services related to lifelong learning, including Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) are becoming increasingly vital within the tertiary education system. The expectations regarding the quality and effects are clearer - both from the clients themselves and the regulatory bodies. To meet these challenges, universities and colleges must arrange administrative and substantive support for these services, as well as provide an overall quality of supervision.

Introduction

Safeguarding a proper and efficient practice of recognition of prior learning (RPL) at tertiary education institutions entails a crucial element of isolating from the structure of the university or college in question an organizational unit responsible for the RPL procedures. Higher education institutions implementing the RPL process designate special cells that coordinate the recognition of prior learning practices and ensure the quality and consistency of the procedures involved. These cells are referred to using various denominators, depending

on their functions and the very origins of their establishment within the university, but, nonetheless, they share the common goal of successfully implementing the RPL process. For the purposes of this study and in order to present the issues to which it pertains, the term of an „RPL centre" has been adopted.

This chapter lists a set of recommendations resulting from the work under the project entitled „University Recognition of Prior Learning Centres – bridging Higher Education with Vocational Education and Training". These relate to the construction of an RPL centre and the creation of procedures in accordance with which the recognition process can be implemented at universities and in colleges. This section has been further enhanced with two case studies - RPL centres operating within the Cork Institute of Technology (CIT) in Ireland and Marylhurst University (MU) in the USA. The information provided in this study may prove useful for tertiary education institutions which are commencing the process of establishing RPL centres.

Development of RPL Centres at Universities

Progressive changes in learning methods and practices that typify the modern society of knowledge, lead to a departure from the identification of the learning process with formal education per se. This poses a poignant challenge both for the various institutions of formal education and for the public education policies, as they need to be flexed to take into consideration the Lifelong Learning Policy. The vast majority of countries around the world are now introducing a qualifications framework which defines the processes of learning through learning outcomes acquired over the course of the training. Universities are also forced to adapt to the changes occurring in the realm of understanding the essence of the educational processes and policies. Once the effects of informal and non-formal learning have been recognised as potentially equivalent to the effects of formal learning, higher education institutions have gained themselves a new feature – by means of RPL, they are in the position to help learners in the formal confirmation/affirmation of learning outcomes acquired outside the formal education system.

This new feature entails providing educational services of a new kind. They are based on establishing, on the basis of clear evidence and following an implementation of unambiguous procedures, whether and to what extent an adult who has not completed a formal education process, has indeed mastered specific learning outcomes appertaining to the specific process of formal education. These effects may relate to different curricula, modules and educational disciplines fostered at the given university. For a competent coordination of

the implementation of these specific services related to lifelong learning (LLL), institutions usually establish separate organisational units which deal exclusively with RPL (RPL Centres) or the overall university activities pertaining to LLL (LLL centres). They are supervised at the highest level of university management by the relevant Vice Chancellor. The experience of other countries evinces the fact that RPL centres are established as a result of decisions taken by the university authorities, or any other LLL and RPL projects implemented at the given tertiary education institution. The main reason for the creation of RPL centres within higher education institutions is the fact that the assignment of the coordination task over the RPL to a singular unit facilitates the management of these processes across the university. It is also important to secure appropriate conditions for managing the process of RPL quality ensuring it is part of the inner university/college framework.

The Challenges Associated with the Dawning of Operation of Academic RPL Centres at Marylhurst University and the Cork Institute of Technology

In the case of Marylhurst University (MU) the creation of an RPL centre ('the Center for Experiential Learning and Assessment') dates back to the year 1974 which saw the establishment of the Lifelong Learning Centre. The first recognition of learning outcomes acquired over the course of a professional career took place in 1976. Since then, an RPL program has been implemented continuously at the MU. In the case of the Cork Institute of Technology (CIT), the formation of the unit was the result of a two-year European project, implemented under the ADAPT program over the period of 1996-1998. This project was aimed at tailoring RPL procedures and test-driving their operations.

What should be brought forth as one of the main factors favouring the development of RPL in colleges and universities is the support of academic staff for this process. Without the direct involvement of the staff and their profound conviction as to the viability of the idea of RPL, a construction of an RPL centre may fail spectacularly. In the case of CIT the academic staff were open to the idea of RPL right from the onset. In practice, the increasing acceptance of RPL within the institution was the result of an active information policy carried out by the centre's employees. The ongoing support on the part of the staff responsible for the assessment and recognition process, providing support and further information facilitated the implementation of the RPL procedure: *'I firmly believe this on the ground contact is a key enabler of RPL. The staff and students are not on their own with an RPL case, there is help and support to get the case prepared and assessed'* (Phil O'Leary, Cork Institute of Technology).

RPL received a warm welcome from the academic staff at CIT. In the early years the focus was placed on working with those who have been dubbed „the champions of RPL". This particular group included representatives of the academic staff who believed in RPL and were fully aware and appreciative of its importance. RPL was applicable to all programmes, at all levels in all disciplines however due to the student cohort seeking RPL it was more established in some departments over others: *'Over time, the full range of academic disciplines have come to use it; those that were hesitant or cautious about RPL overcame their initial misgivings when a particular case presented itself in front of them. So when the need arose, they contacted me and explained what they wanted and how I could help.'* (Phil O'Leary, Cork Institute of Technology). It seems like a reasonable course of action, in the infancy of an RPL centre's existence and the initial period of RPL procedures implementation within the university, to focus on training the RPL leaders, who are to be recruited from the academic staff – leaders who could promote the idea throughout the academic milieu, acting as its ambassadors or champions.

Over the years, the number of RPL applications submitted to CIT rose from about 50 per year at the beginning of the implementation process to more than 530 at present. However, despite a tenfold increase in the number of applications, the number of staff supporting this process has not increased. Dealing with this matter is still the sole responsibility of two full-time employees; nonetheless, to a much greater extent and in order to support the RPL process, workshops for candidates, guideline handbooks, staff training, application forms, a precedence database and a website are "up and running". In the case of Marylhurst University, the number of full-time employees devoted to the needs of the centre is not substantial either (altogether four employees are responsible for the administration of the RPL process, conducting RPL courses and the selection and training of assessors).

Structure of an RPL Centre and its Roles in the Process

An RPL process in a tertiary education institution can be broken down into several basic roles. Various colleges and universities may apply slightly different terminology. The roles in the RPL process can be divided into those of an administrative (RPL Coordinator, RPL Committee), advisory (RPL Advisor) and academic-didactic nature (Assessor). Depending on the rules applicable within the given institution, the procedure RPL may be more centralised – this is the case when the coordinators and advisors work at the RPL centre or decentralised – when the advisory capacity, as well as the evaluation itself, are performed at the particular

URPL
towards
recognition
of prior learning

departments or institutes. Depending on the singular needs of the institution, a decision must be taken with regard to locating within the organizational structure of the unit(s) to be held responsible for the RPL process. This unit can be located at the central level of the university or college and report directly (for instance) to the authorities responsible for the teaching process. An RPL centre may form a part of a larger structure, such as the one responsible for the Lifelong Learning processes implemented at the given university or college (LLL Centre). In the case of Cork Institute of Technology, their RPL centre is located within the remit of the "Extended Campus", which is a specially designated university unit responsible for the support of the engagement between Cork Institute of Technology and enterprises and other stakeholders of the university. The mission of this unit is 'to assist companies in meeting their business needs through the activities, facilities and resources on hand at CIT'. The RPL function has further expanded under this office due to funding received from the HEA funded EIE and REAP projects. It now encompasses RPL for companies through customised course development and work based learning (WBL). At Marylhurst University RPL is treated as an academic program, the director of which reports directly to the Rector and Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences.

Next to the decision with regard to the location of the RPL centre within the structure of the university, so as to assure an effective implementation of the RPL process, it is suggested to distinguish and assign the following roles:

- **RPL Coordinator** - an administration employee who coordinates the implementation of the RPL procedures. The Coordinator is the first point of contact for RPL candidates, and it is their duty to inform the candidate about the RPL possibilities and to refer them to the appropriate RPL Adviser.

- **RPL Adviser** - an expert in the area in which the candidate wishes to apply for the RPL. They may be a member of the academic staff, or simply an employee of the administration with an in-depth knowledge of the educational curricula and the requirements to be met for each subject. The RPL Adviser helps the Candidate prepare an application for the evaluation and refers the request to the appropriate Assessor.

- **RPL Assessor** – an expert in a given area and a member of the academic staff. This person is usually not involved in the preparation of the Candidate's RPL application. The RPL Assessor evaluates the Candidate's request, which is

submitted in the form of a written paper, a practical exam and an oral presentation or any other form which is adequate to prove the achievement of the specific outcome of learning.

- **RPL Committee** - a body functioning at the central level of the academic institution, appointed by the Rector. It comprises representatives of various Departments, where RPL procedures are implemented, as well as the RPL Coordinator and possibly other employees appointed by the university authorities. The RPL Committee formally confirms the RPL assessment results, ensures the correctness of the selection of assessors based on the factual knowledge and expertise together with the adaptation of existing procedures to the RPL quality system in operation at the university. The Faculty Councils bestow onto the RPL Committees the right to approve the RPL assessment processes. For this purpose, the RPL candidates' applications which have been favourably considered by the Assessor should be submitted to the RPL Committee through the RPL Coordinator. The RPL Committee is convened by the RPL Coordinator.

Employees involved in the RPL process should be well-acquainted with the curriculum, learning outcomes, qualifications frameworks, as well as the specifics of the diverse professional competencies (Coordinator, Adviser) – all of that on top of an expertise in a given field (Assessor). In addition, attention is drawn to the crucial nature of their skills in communication, teamwork and collaboration with various stakeholders. It is also essential for the RPL centre staff to have the necessary knowledge of quality assurance systems, both with regard to education processes and qualification recognition, as well as the support and service to the specific customer procuring RPL services. Those involved in the process of advising RPL candidates (coordinators, advisors) must also have the ability to prepare candidates for the procedure, which is also achieved through facilitating the understanding of how the informal and non-formal learning outcomes can be translated into formal learning results in the realm of tertiary education facilities. Both the Coordinator and Adviser should also have the knowledge of career counselling and guidance that will undoubtedly enable them to better recognise the range of learning outcomes possible to obtain in a specific workplace or by way of other life experiences and identify their correspondent modules and curricula at the university.
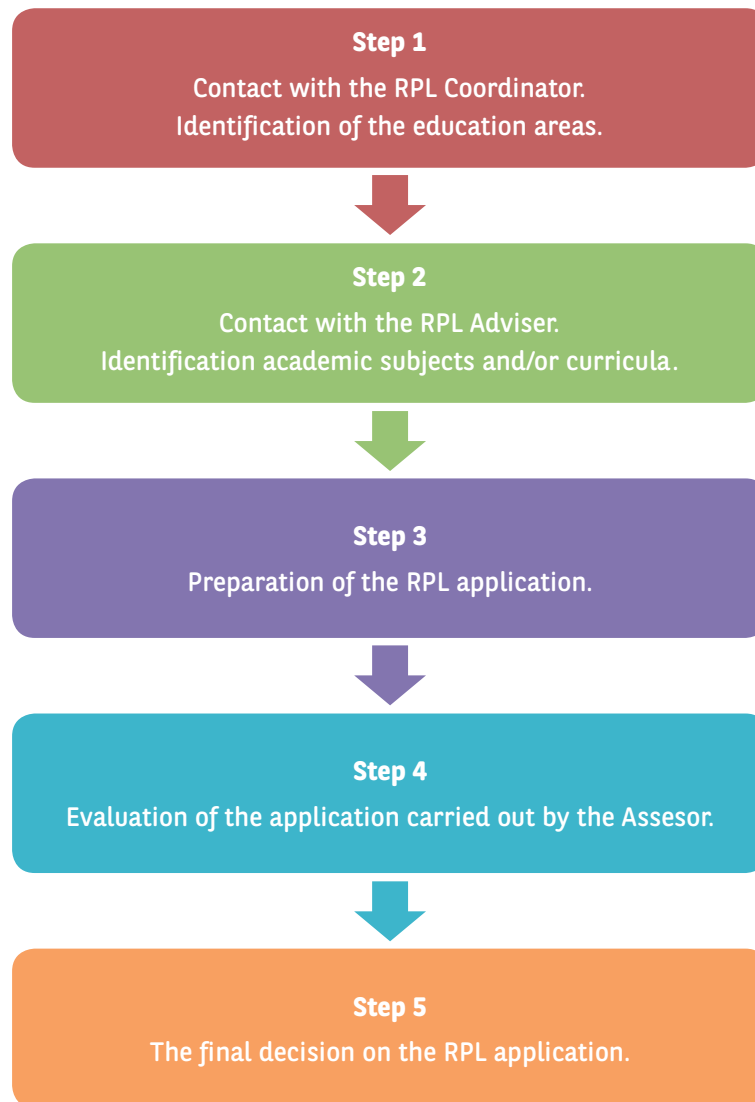
Drafting and Implementation of RPL Procedures

In addition to the organisational issues, the mightiest challenge posed by a construction of an RPL centre at a higher education institution is to create effective RPL procedures - tailored to the needs of both the institution in question and candidates. As shown by the numerous examples of universities and colleges with a long tradition of RPL, these procedures are constantly evolving; they are improved on a daily basis in order to adapt them to the ever-changing environmental conditions and regulations, especially regarding the quality of educational services within the tertiary education system. Both the Cork Institute of Technology and Marylhurst University reconcile their procedures with the broader guidelines in force in their respective countries and regions. In the case of Marylhurst University, these include the guidelines drawn up by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), which since 1974 has been the organisation responsible for creating RPL standards (known in the U.S. as PLA, Prior Learning Assessment). In Poland, it will be of great importance to adjust RPL procedures to the regulations of the individual colleges and universities (which differ due to the considerable autonomy of Polish higher education institutions) as well as to the parent provisions, governing the entire system of higher education in Poland.

It can be argued that the process of RPL, regardless of the national or regional regulations, always starts from the stage at which the candidate is able to obtain advice on the preparation of an application for the recognition of learning outcomes. This is followed by the application process and the evaluation phase of the application before the final decision is made (see figure 1).

Preparing Candidates for the Assessment of Learning Outcomes Acquired Outside the Formal System

Having established that they have indeed acquired valuable learning outcomes, which they wish to get formally recognised and certified, the candidate should be able to contact the RPL centre operating at the university in person, by email or by phone. An appropriate information policy with regard to the RPL is vital for the effective communication with candidates. A good web site containing a set of explanations or Q&As can be very helpful in the process of information distribution pertaining to forms and other accordant documentation and details of the procedures in operation at the university. An example of a website which is very

Figure 1: Flowchart of the five RPL steps at a higher education institution - based on the studies carried out as part of the URPL project.

Step 1

Contact with the RPL Coordinator.
Identification of the education areas.

Step 2

Contact with the RPL Adviser.
Identification academic subjects and/or curricula.

Step 3

Preparation of the RPL application.

Step 4

Evaluation of the application carried out by the Assesor.

Step 5

The final decision on the RPL application.

clearly worded and rich in relevant content on the RPL procedures is the web page of the Cork Institute of Technology (http://www.cit.ie/rpl). Owing to the interactive nature of the site, it is possible to make an appointment with an RPL Adviser electronically or to sign up for a workshop on application preparation. In addition, the page contains complete, cross-sectional information which is provided in a transparent manner, thus, explaining the process much better to the candidates. Another interesting way of conducting an information policy in the field of RPL is a less formal method, which entails running a blog or video blog. The Marylhurst University runs a video blog (https://blog.marylhurst.edu/pla/) which allows all

the interested parties to learn about the practical experiences of those who have undergone the RPL procedure. On this basis, those interested in RPL can familiarise themselves with the challenges ahead of them, thus standing a chance of being better prepared to participate in the procedure. When creating an RPL centre at a higher education institution, one should therefore pay special attention to the due preparation and information distribution by means of web pages.

Depending on the intrinsic needs or the number of candidates, each university or college may opt for a different approach to the organization of the process of candidate preparation for the RPL procedures. Bearing in mind that RPL should be of a formative nature, and such as would allow the candidate to learn also in the course of the procedure, candidates should be offered support throughout its duration. Prior to submitting an RPL application, a candidate may (depending on the rules applicable in the given institution) obtain personal counselling or take a course preparing for the procedure.

The first way is usually based on individual meetings with an RPL Adviser, which gives one the opportunity of face-to-face contact, thus facilitating the exclusive focus on the case of the given candidate. However, this method is very costly and time-consuming. Therefore, many universities and colleges urge their candidates to take part in special courses or workshops prior to the procedure; these preparatory courses are usually organised in the form of group classes, instructing the participants on how to apply for RPL. This approach helps reduce the cost of RPL procedures, while allowing for an interaction between the candidates and the RPL advisers (owing to a seminar-style of the workshop classes) who usually also run this process. The candidate may choose the form of the first stage of the procedure. However, they must be fully aware of its respective costs that they must cover.

The candidates should be granted the opportunity to consult a catalogue of courses offered by the higher education institution. They should be given support in the unambiguous identification of the educational curricula the expected learning outcomes of which are consistent (in the opinion of the candidate) with the effects achieved by them as a result of prior learning.

The candidate should assess their own expertise in the given field with the help of an RPL Adviser who will then determine the subjects / modules with regard to which the candidate should be applying for RPL. After the final identification of the specific subjects / didactic modules, the RPL Adviser has to choose an Assessor (Assessors) whose area of expertise allows for a proper evaluation of the RPL application to be submitted. It also lies

within the line of duty of an RPL Adviser to make contact with the Assessor and make sure what form of evidence and corroboration they expect to receive. In some cases, it may be only a portfolio containing a set of documents, whereas in other instances, an assessor may call for a presentation, a written assignment or an oral examination.

The candidate should independently adapt their identified learning outcomes acquired outside formal education to the most suitable curricula / subjects / modules offered by a given university or college. The number of subjects for the recognition of which the candidate will be able to apply, will depend on the scope of the prior learning resulting from experience, professional work, conducted trainings, etc. – bearing in mind any possible constraints resulting from the laws in force at the university and in the country.

Drafting Model Forms for the RPL Process. Preparation and Evaluation of RPL Applications.

Each higher education institution should tailor the RPL application forms to their internal needs; this also applies to a prospectus and a guide for applicants and guidelines and evaluation forms for assessors. These documents may be prepared independently by each of the universities and colleges, but they may also be unified for the whole country (as in the case of Estonia). The application should be prepared by the candidate in electronic form. The university should make the application forms available as open files that candidates can easily edit and thus show the achieved learning outcomes. The candidate then sends a filled-in application to the RPL Adviser. The form of application submission (print-out, electronic version) should be adjusted to the rules in force in the given institution.

The work on the preparation of the application and the gathering of all the necessary and relevant evidence may be quite time-consuming. Candidates should therefore be granted the opportunity to adjust the length of the process to their professional activity and family responsibilities. Consequently, there should be no rigid formal deadlines for the time the candidate needs to prepare their application and to collect the necessary corroborating material.

The principle behind the RPL process is that the initiative to prepare and submit an application is always on the side of the applicant. Their actions will also decide whether the process will be completed or not. The responsibility for the completion of the agreed RPL assessment process (e.g. the provision of the proof of prior learning, writing a paper

presenting the learner's self-reflection in relation to their learning outcomes acquired outside the formal education system, as well as the participation in an assessment interview / an oral exam) rests solely with the candidate. In different countries, due to the divergent rules in force with regard to RPL, the process may lay under certain rigidities involving deadlines at certain stages of the procedure or the fees. If the candidate is applying for recognition of a section of the studies they wish to commence, the RPL procedure must be completed before the start of the studies – in such a case the procedure and the schedule must be tailored to the existing requirements. In addition, there is a need to abide by the general terms in operation at a given university or college, such as the organization of the academic year or the schedule of studies.

There are different methods for evaluating RPL applications by Assessors. An RPL Assessor should not be involved in the preparation of the RPL application. There must also be no conflict of interest between the Candidate and the Assessor (e.g., the Assessor cannot be at the same time an employer, family member or a former supervisor or promoter of the candidate). An RPL Assessor should be a member of the teaching staff who is well-acquainted with the curriculum or the subject to which the application relates and they ought to perfectly comprehend the level of knowledge and understanding and the kind of skills that are required in a given module from the students assessed in the conventional manner. As a result, the candidates joining the RPL process can be assured that every ECTS point to be awarded will be given at the same level and will hold the same status within the curriculum framework as in the case of any other student.

To ensure objectivity of the process and compliance with the institutional requirements with regard to quality assurance, RPL Advisers and Assessors should not cooperate in the implementation of procedures for assessing RPL applications. Typically, the evaluation of one application is assigned to only one RPL Assessor, but if the candidate's request pertains to more than one main area of expertise, more than one RPL Assessor may be involved. As with other types of didactic practices carried out at the university or college and the entailed evaluation of the outcomes achieved by learners, an RPL Assessor ought to be autonomous in their assessment. They may additionally ask the candidate to identify further evidence in support of the application, for example, in requesting the applicant to sit a written paper or take an oral examination. Upon completing the evaluation of the candidate's RPL application, the Assessor forwards their decision to the RPL Coordinator who is responsible for the formal procedure of recognition of learning outcomes acquired outside the formal education system. Should the application be rejected on account of unsatisfactory or insufficient corroborating

material submitted the candidate must receive clear feedback from the Assessor stating why the evidence was discarded or what the candidate still needs to learn in order to obtain a confirmation of mastery of a given learning effect. Once the candidate's application has been evaluated, the RPL Assessor informs thereof the RPL Coordinator. The RPL Coordinator sends the RPL Committee the positively evaluated application for approval and ensures that the candidate has been notified in writing of the application's result.

Once approved by the RPL Committee, the recognised effects of prior learning relating to specific subjects / educational curricula can be included in the learner's process of obtaining a diploma. In the case of a positive assessment, the candidate should receive an official letter confirming the recognition of learning outcomes acquired outside formal education with regard to specific subjects / modules offered by the higher education institution, with information on the number of ECTS credits obtained and the NQF level to which they are assigned.

Conclusion

RPL enables tertiary education institutions to keep pace with the rapidly changing environment and respond to the ever-evolving needs of learners. In understanding that learning takes place in a variety of contexts, not only in the traditional and formal school set-up, universities open themselves to new groups of potential students. In the modern day and age with its dynamic social transformation, including demographic changes, this approach may constitute a part of a new flexible strategy for the university. With RPL, higher education institutions can also improve cooperation with employers, the general scarcity of which (especially in Poland) is negatively evaluated. RPL also allows for introducing more flexible, from the economic point of view, human resources onto the labour market. In the long run, RPL can also serve as a source of income diversification for the universities and colleges. Moreover, it grants the higher education institutions the opportunity to remain competitive and innovative in the international market for tertiary education. However, in order to be in a position to take advantage of the benefits offered by RPL practice, the universities and colleges will have to ensure a professional approach and running of the RPL processes within the organization. The RPL centres presented in this chapter are units which ensure an effective and efficient implementation of the procedures relating to the recognition of learning outcomes acquired outside formal education. When creating an RPL centre at a higher education institution,

one should carefully consider its organisation, including its location within the structure, the division of roles played in the process and the financing method. The RPL procedures should also be planned and drafted with due care, so as to ensure their unambiguity and transparency which are also key elements in the integrity of the entire process.

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