Using the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) within the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF)

A report to the Skills Funding Agency

April 2013

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Foreword

Learning new things brings many benefits for learners, not least the simple satisfaction of achievement, a sense of pride as well as confidence and self esteem. Having existing skills and knowledge recognised has similar outcomes as well. With that in mind, it is perhaps surprising that the Recognition of Prior Learning is not more widespread in practice, particularly given the funding support available through the Skills Funding Agency.

This report sets out clearly some of the barriers to that happening as well as providing some simple steps which the Skills Funding Agency might make to help spread the practice more widely. I am sure that adoption of good practice in RPL across the sector would result in better learning, more satisfied learners and a system which better met the needs of employers. As the report suggests, for higher level learners aged 24 and over, the introduction of a loan to pay for their learning must surely herald more demand for RPL to reduce the costs of the whole course? Likewise, there will be many employers who would happily support RPL with their staff in return for access to state funding of the some of the gaps in their skills and knowledge.

There are big challenges for colleges and learning providers, though. The structure of courses and the institutions delivering learning do not lend themselves well to a highly personalised approach. Carrying out RPL with a group of learners will almost always result in some people needing less teaching and support than others and that is not easy to arrange nor easy to make financially viable within the funding system. Creative thinking and flexibilities will need to be built into the systems within the institutions and that is never easy.

The rewards if RPL can become an intrinsic part of the system are enormous - people entering into learning immediately given recognition of their skills will become more confident learners and when they only have to 'enter the classroom' for new learning they will be more motivated. For Government, a good system of RPL will result in lower overall costs and make learning more efficient and for employers there will be less time taken away from the job to achieve the same learning outcomes. All around, RPL makes sense and this report should help ensure that more learners are supported to have their prior learning recognised.

 I hope that the recommendations are taken up. I am encouraged by the findings in the report and optimistic that RPL can become more widespread.

 David Hughes
Chief Executive
NIACE

Executive Summary

1. Purpose

The purpose of this report is to present to the Skills Funding Agency (the Agency) a snapshot picture of how providers are making use of the facility to offer the recognition of prior learning (RPL) within the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF).

2. Background

The Recognition of Prior Learning is the term adopted within the QCF to describe:

A method of assessment that considers whether a learner can demonstrate that they can meet the assessment requirements for a unit through knowledge, understanding or skills they already possess and do not need to develop through a course of learning.

Other similar terms (e.g. the accreditation of prior learning – APL) have been used previously in English further education and continue to be used in other contexts – in UK Higher Education, in Scotland and in Europe RPL, APL or similar terms are used differently. One of the issues for RPL in the QCF is the misunderstanding or the misuse of the term as defined above.

3. Terminology

The operation of the credit-based qualifications system supported by the QCF embodies an important principle, which is that a learner should not be compelled to study again something that he or she has already learned. Within the QCF three mechanisms exist to translate this principle into practice within the qualifications system. These three mechanisms are:

- Credit Transfer
- Exemption
- RPL

Each of these terms describes a distinct and separate process within the QCF, and it is important to distinguish between them. Both *credit transfer* and *exemption* relate to previously *certificated* achievement, respectively achievements inside or outside the QCF. Within the QCF *RPL* relates to previously *uncertificated* learning (one reason why RPL refers to 'learning' rather than 'achievement'). The NIACE research team found a number of instances where these distinctions were not understood, sometimes with clearly negative consequences for learners who may have benefited from an offer of RPL.

4. RPL and Agency funding arrangements

The distinctions between credit transfer, exemption and RPL are important for providers in relation to the Agency's funding arrangements. Importantly, the Agency will fund an RPL offer (within constraints) to learners within the QCF. However, previously certificated achievements that may count towards a qualification, either through credit transfer or through exemption, will not be funded by the Agency. Providers that confuse RPL with credit transfer or exemption may therefore misunderstand Agency funding rules and may not appreciate that an RPL offer could be supported through Agency funding.

Having noted this, it must also be said that current Agency funding rules on RPL are expressed in a complex and potentially confusing way and could be improved. The NIACE team came across several cases where providers were aware of RPL funding rules, but still misinterpreted them.

5. Context

When the QCF was established it included regulatory requirements on AOs to establish explicit procedures for RPL and on AO centres to make an RPL offer to learners where appropriate. No such obligations existed within the NQF. The QCF also offers more freedom to AOs and providers in the design and conduct of assessment. In particular the previously over-bureaucratic approaches to RPL within the old NVQ system have been eliminated from the

QCF regulations. In this context, and with the support of Agency funding, it might have been expected that RPL would grow considerably within the QCF.

It would appear that such significant growth in RPL has not taken place. The report aims to identify some reasons for this, as well as some of the barriers to providers and AOs in making a substantial RPL offer. Some examples of good and innovative practice in RPL by providers and AOs are also identified. The report suggest ways in which the Agency itself might stimulate wider take up of an RPL offer in the future.

6. Methodology

The research methodology was based around an on-line survey and a small number of interviews. The on-line survey was targeted exclusively at providers and 126 responses were received. The interviews involved three providers and three AOs. The outcomes of both the survey and the interviews form the evidence base for this report.

7. A methodological problem

All those interviewed agreed that best practice in the RPL process involves a seamless integration of RPL with the wider offer of assessment to learners. Where such an offer was taken up there was not necessarily any documented evidence to demonstrate this. Within the QCF credits awarded through RPL are recorded in exactly the same way as any other credits. Similarly, claims for Agency funding make no distinction between achievements through RPL or through a taught programme. In this context the effectiveness of an RPL offer cannot be measured through learner achievement data.

8. Key issues for providers and awarding organisations

The NIACE research team identified four key issues for providers and AOs in making an effective RPL offer:

a. A confusion about terminology related to RPL

The research team were surprised by the apparently high levels of misunderstanding about the definition of the term RPL within the QCF. In some cases providers were clearly using RPL as a 'catch-all' term to include both certificated and uncertificated learning. Indeed two of the three AOs interviewed also used the term in this way. Even in cases where the QCF definition of the term was used in provider or AO documents, its application in practice was inconsistent with this definition.

b. Lack of awareness of funding rules related to RPL

Closely linked to this misunderstanding about the definition of RPL were misunderstandings or misinterpretations of Agency funding rules related to RPL. Indeed, in the case of many respondents to the on-line survey it was not possible to separate out these two different sources of confusion. In a small number of cases however, it was clear that, although the definition of RPL was understood by a provider, the Agency's funding rules were still being misinterpreted. These funding rules need to be set out more clearly in future, but it will also be necessary to produce further clarification for providers on how they might support an RPL offer to learners within the funding rules. Given these levels of confusion it is not possible to recommend to the Agency any explicit changes to the RPL funding rules going forward.

c. The costs of supporting RPL

It would seem that, even with the increased flexibility in assessment offered by the QCF, there will continue to be significant real costs to providers in making a widespread RPL offer. Several providers identified these costs as a significant barrier, though again misunderstandings about Agency funding arrangements for RPL may distort this evidence. Some providers were more positive about the cost benefits of RPL to employers, and others thought that RPL may become more important to people supporting themselves through 24+ loans. Having noted these cases, it is reasonable to assume that RPL will continue to be an offer made to a small minority of learners in the QCF. However it is also reasonable to assume that the scope of the RPL offer might be extended if both its

definition and the funding rules related to it were fully understood by all providers.

d. Guidance and support for the RPL process

Providers looked in the main to AOs to provide guidance and support for their RPL offer. Providers offered both positive and negative views about different AOs in relation to guidance and support. All three AOs interviewed offered briefing notes, training and supporting documentation for centres making an RPL offer. One AO – City & Guilds has a substantial RPL training programme in place as well as thorough and accessible documentation for centres. Its positive role in supporting RPL was referred to consistently by providers and its expertise and reach in this area will clearly be important in growing a future RPL offer.

9. Some positive messages about RPL within the QCF

Although the report includes a number of issues of concern about the development of RPL within the QCF and the continuing barriers to its wider use, there were also a number of other positive points about RPL that arose from the NIACE research work:

- There is a high degree of commitment from providers to making an RPL offer to learners, and a clear understanding of the benefits that such an offer has for many different kinds of learner. Notwithstanding the misunderstandings that might exist about the detail of RPL among providers there is clear commitment to the principle that learners should not have to learn the same thing more than once.

- Some providers make an RPL offer either because they see it as an integral part of the QCF offer, or because it is an AO requirement that they do so. It would seem that the initial intention of creating a regulatory obligation on AOs and centres to make an RPL offer is beginning to bear fruit in practice.

- An additional stimulus to the use of RPL also lies within Agency funding rules. It is not just the regulatory requirements of the QCF that are stimulating the development of an RPL offer. A number of providers are making an RPL offer because they believe that Agency funding rules require them to do so. It seems that in some cases misunderstanding of Agency funding rules might have positive consequences for learners.

- Some AOs are making a concerted effort to promote RPL through their centres. If the Agency wishes to encourage the wider use of RPL across the FE system then some AOs offer a positive mechanism for provider engagement that could be usefully built on in future.

- Where the funding rule is understood, RPL is seen as valuable by providers in establishing a fair and equitable offer for learners. It must be emphasised that some providers have a clear understanding of both the definition of RPL and Agency funding rules related to it. Such providers are enthusiastic about RPL and keen to offer it as widely as possible to learners as part of their commitment to equity and accessibility.

- Other providers noted the potential of RPL to meet employer needs and to respond quickly to changing skill needs in the workforce. It would seem that in some industries or sectors (the construction industry is clearly a case in point) the RPL process fits well with established training and assessment approaches and is well supported by employers. Such instances need to be further extended.

10. Conclusion

Despite the problems identified through the report about the operation of Agency funding to support RPL, and the indication that it remains an under-utilised part of the QCF, relevant to a minority of learners, there is clearly sufficient commitment and enthusiasm from some providers about the RPL concept to justify continuing support from the Agency for providers to make an RPL offer. Indeed, if funding arrangements can be clarified, and a clear definition of RPL can take root in both providers and AOs, there is every opportunity to expand the RPL offer in the future.

11. Recommendations

There is clearly a need to clarify the funding rule in relation to RPL. In particular the '50%' rule needs careful explanation. The current rule as it appears in the Funding Rules 2013-14 is far from clear. Within the rule itself it is still necessary to identify how '50%' is to be measured, especially in relation to the new Funding Rates Matrix.

- **We recommend that the Agency publishes an explicit clarification of the relevant funding rule on RPL as soon as possible, and encourages providers to extend their current use of RPL, within the proposed funding rule, during 2013-14.**

It is clearly anomalous to reverse the funding rule on RPL for qualifications offered through apprenticeships. This anomaly will become particularly apparent when all Apprenticeships move to a component-based funding model on 2014-15.

- **We recommend that the current funding rule on RPL for adult skills is applied to all new Apprenticeship Frameworks from 2013-14, and to all Apprenticeship Frameworks from 2014-15.**

In the current context it is clearly not possible to recommend a change to the current funding rule relating to RPL. However, it may be possible to assess the potential constraints of the current funding rule by identifying a particular area where this rule is relaxed during 2013-14, and monitoring the impact of this change

- **We recommend that the Agency, in collaboration with Construction Skills, should establish a project during 2013-14 in the construction industry through which providers are invited to develop an RPL offer without funding restrictions (i.e. without the 50% discount for over 50% of the qualification in the 2013-14 funding rules).**

There is clearly a need for more information and guidance for providers about RPL. Given the important role of funding in current practice, it seems appropriate for the Agency to take the lead in commissioning the production of such guidance

- **We recommend that the Agency should commission the development of a Good Practice guide on RPL within the QCF, to be published in Spring 2014 to encourage providers to make more active use of RPL during 2014-15**

This guidance needs to be informed by current best practice on RPL within QCF AOs. It is suggested that the work of one AO clearly sets an industry standard benchmark at present.

- **We recommend that the above Good Practice guide should be developed in collaboration with a small number of AOs, including City & Guilds**

Purpose

1. The purpose of this report is to present to the Skills Funding Agency (the Agency) a snapshot picture of how providers are making use of the facility to offer the recognition of prior learning (RPL) within the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF). The Agency's current funding model supports providers to deliver RPL and the Agency is concerned that its new streamlined funding system for Adult Skills should continue to support an offer of RPL to learners from 2013-14 in as wide a range of provision as possible.

2. Although the primary focus of this report is the use of RPL by providers, the Agency recognises that formal accountability for the conduct of RPL within the QCF rests with awarding organisations (AOs). This report therefore includes a perspective on RPL from a small sample of AOs within the QCF.

Background

3. The Recognition of Prior Learning is the term adopted within the QCF to describe

   a method of assessment that considers whether a learner can demonstrate that they can meet the assessment requirements for a unit through knowledge, understanding or skills they already possess and do not need to develop through a course of learning

4. The concept of RPL has a history that pre-dates the QCF and has existed under several different titles. Developed in North America during the 1960s, the term first came into use in the UK in the early 1980s, usually termed either 'the Assessment of Prior Learning' or 'the Accreditation of Prior Learning' (APL). Initially, the term APL was used almost exclusively within UK Higher Education systems. By the mid-1980s it began to appear within Access to HE programmes (clearly influenced by Higher Education) and in the work of Open College Networks (OCNs), still referred to as APL or the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL)

5. The advent of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) in the late 1980s saw the term APL begin to be used within vocational qualifications for the first time, and from 1989-92 considerable resources were devoted to developing APL procedures within the NVQ framework. It is during this period that some of the defining characteristics and perceptions of APL were established, and these still inform some perceptions of the use of RPL in 2013, despite a conscious attempt to distance the QCF from some of the negative perceptions of APL within the NVQ framework.

6. The term RPL was adopted within the Regulatory Arrangements for the QCF in 2008 after a two-year programme of consultation and development involving not only representatives of AOs and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (then the regulator of the QCF) but also representatives from Higher Education, from Scotland and from Europe. Indeed it was the use of the term RPL both in Scotland and in Europe, as well as an expressed aim to distance the QCF from the previous concept of APL within NVQs, that led in no small part to the adoption of the term RPL within the QCF. Other terms (e.g. the Accreditation or Recognition of Prior Achievement) were considered and rejected in favour of RPL.

Terminology

7. The operation of the credit-based qualifications system supported by the QCF embodies an important principle, which is that a learner should not be compelled to study again something that he or she has already learned. This appears to be a widely accepted and uncontroversial design feature of the QCF which offers clear benefits to adult learners.

8. Within the QCF three mechanisms exist to translate this principle into practice within the qualifications system. These three mechanisms are:

   - Credit Transfer
   - Exemption
   - RPL

9. Each of these terms describes a distinct and separate process within the QCF, and it is important to distinguish between them. Not only do these different terms manifest themselves in different operational procedures within the QCF, but they also relate in very different ways to Agency funding arrangements. As this report goes on to show, the clear separation of these processes is important not just in ensuring that learners are not required to

repeat previous learning, but also to ensure that Agency funds are used appropriately to support this principle.

10. The terms 'credit transfer' and 'exemption' both refer to learning that has previously been certificated. If a previous achievement is recognised *within* the QCF, then the credit transfer mechanism can be applied to ensure learning is not repeated. If a previous achievement is certificated *outside* the QCF, then the exemption mechanism can be applied to the same end. Exemption might be granted on the basis of a qualification gained in the old NQF, in other UK frameworks, or through an overseas qualification.

11. An examination of the operation of credit transfer and exemption mechanisms lies outside the scope of this report. However it is important to note that both credit transfer and exemption relate to the rules of combination of a qualification and that no credits are awarded to learners claiming credit transfer or exemption within a qualification, as the previous achievements on which these processes are based have, by definition, already been formally recognised and *certificated.*

12. The RPL process, unlike credit transfer or exemption, is explicitly based on previously *uncertificated* learning. Learners claiming credit through RPL will, by definition, have no previous formal recognition of this learning. The process through which previous learning is demonstrated and certificated is therefore an integral part of the assessment arrangements offered by an AO centre. RPL therefore has no impact on the rules of combination for a qualification, and learners completing an RPL process will be awarded credit(s) towards a qualification in exactly the same way that any other credits will be awarded.

13. There is therefore no such thing as 'RPL credit' within the QCF. Credits awarded through the RPL process are recorded in exactly the same way as any other credits. Assessment based on RPL is simply one way in which the offer of assessment leading to the award of credit is made to a learner. Indeed, it is this integration of the RPL offer into a centre's overall arrangements for assessment leading to the award of credit that forms the basis of the important distinction between RPL, credit transfer and exemption within the Agency's funding arrangements for adult skills.

RPL and Agency funding arrangements

14. The distinctions between credit transfer, exemption and RPL are important for providers in relation to the Agency's funding arrangements. Indeed, within the

new streamlined funding arrangements for 2013-14 the funding rules for RPL remain basically the same as they have been for the past two years. Importantly, the Agency will fund an RPL offer (within constraints) to learners within the QCF. However, previously certificated achievements that may count towards a qualification, either through credit transfer or through exemption, will not be funded by the Agency.

15. In this context the distinction between previously certificated achievement and previously uncertificated learning is extremely important for providers. (It also supports the rationale for using the term RPL rather than the Recognition of Prior Achievement). If credit transfer or exemption processes are used then no funding may be claimed for these previously certificated units – effectively a provider would be claiming funding twice for the same achievement if this was possible. Indeed it is another reason why no credits are awarded for credit transfer or exemption (as they are in other qualification frameworks).

16. Providers may however claim funding to support an RPL offer within the Agency's funding arrangements for adult skills. The relevant section of the Funding Rules for 2013-14 (which has been edited below for the sake of clarity) states that:

If the learner has achieved 50% or less of assessment for the learning aim through RPL, you [i.e. the provider] *do not need to reduce the funding for the percentage of assessment achieved through RPL…if a learner achieves more than 50% of assessment through RPL you must discount by 50% the funding for the percentage of the qualification assessed as being delivered through RPL (Para 11)*

17. This report considers in a later section whether or not this constraint on the offer of RPL (i.e. that up to 50% of the credit value of a qualification can be funded through RPL in the same way as funding for the delivery of a programme leading to that same qualification) is a barrier to the implementation of RPL across the QCF. The report also considers whether or not providers (and AOs) are aware of this funding rule and indeed whether these important distinctions between credit transfer, exemption and RPL are understood and implemented within the QCF.

Context

18. When the QCF was established it included two explicit requirements related to RPL. Previously the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) had included no references at all to RPL. These new requirements in the Regulatory Arrangements for the QCF were:

Awarding organisations must have in place the necessary systems and procedures and resources to ensure.. achievement is recognised through the recognition of prior learning (RPL) where this is appropriate (5.6h)

and that:

these procedures must ensure that each centre…where appropriate, has in place arrangements that allow for the recognition of prior learning (RPL) (5.11g)

19. So for the first time AOs had an obligation to establish systems and procedures to support RPL (even if this was not offered to every learner) and centres had a similar obligation to make an RPL offer. As these requirements were written into the Regulatory Arrangements for the QCF they were enforceable through Ofqual. In practice, some AOs and some centres took this responsibility more seriously than others, and there is little evidence of enforcement of these requirements through Ofqual in individual cases.

20. The support of the Agency for RPL through the funding arrangements is based on this explicit requirement within the QCF regulations. The requirement may be met in different ways, and there is no prescriptive process for RPL in the QCF (unlike the RPL procedure in NVQs). This is intended to make the RPL offer less bureaucratic and more accessible to learners than it had been within the NVQ context. Nevertheless, anecdotal evidence from both providers and AOs suggests that the offer of RPL within the QCF is made to a small minority of learners through a minority of centres supported more actively by some AOs rather than others.

21. In this context the Agency wishes both to ascertain whether or not this impression of very low take-up of the RPL offer is correct; to identify elements of good practice in the RPL process where these exist, and to ascertain whether or not the Agency can do anything more through its funding and performance measures to stimulate the further take-up of RPL within the QCF in future. This report aims to help the Agency in these objectives.

Methodology

22. The research methodology was based around an on-line survey and a small number of interviews. The on-line survey was administered by NIACE and was targeted exclusively at providers. The interviews involved both providers and AOs.

23. A total of 126 responses were received to the on-line survey from a variety of different types of provider. Interviews were conducted with three providers (a fourth was unable to provide information) and three AOs. The outcomes of both the survey and the interviews form the evidence base for this report. A copy of the on-line survey questionnaire is included as Annex A. The interview questions for providers and AOs are included as Annex B and Annex C.

24. The main body of the report includes selected responses taken from both the on-line survey and interview sources. A summary of the survey returns is included as Annex D. The providers and AOs interviewed through the project are listed in Annex E

A Methodological problem

25. Although the survey results indicate a variety of different approaches to the offer of RPL through providers, interviews with both providers and (in particular) with AOs revealed a methodological problem that is worthy of noting here.

26. All those interviewed agreed that best practice in the RPL process involves a seamless integration of RPL with the wider offer of assessment to learners. Both AOs and providers had procedures in place to ensure that an RPL offer was made to learners in appropriate circumstances (as the QCF regulations require) but where such an offer was taken up there was not necessarily any documented evidence to demonstrate this.

27. So, for example, a provider's records would show that a group of learners were successful on a particular unit or qualification; that assessment had been conducted to required standards; and that credits or a qualification had been achieved. However there was nothing in the data record to distinguish

between a learner achieving credits via RPL and another learner achieving credits through assessment on a taught programme. Some qualitative evaluation of delivery did record RPL processes, but such information existed at course or programme level – it was not lodged in institutional records on learner achievement.

28. This was also the case with AOs. Although AOs did monitor RPL processes through centre visits and quality assurance interviews, there is no data available to an AO that would enable it to identify which credits were achieved through RPL and which through other assessment processes.

29. Although this may cause problems from the point of view of a researcher, it should be noted that this is exactly how it is intended that RPL should be delivered. Those centres making an active RPL offer do so as an integral part of their assessment processes. Those AOs that support RPL to best effect do so without any separate identification of RPL data in either learner registrations or the award of credits. In summary, RPL works best when it is hidden from view as a separate assessment process.

Key issues for providers and awarding organisations

30. We may identify four key issues for providers arising from the project. Each of these issues is considered in turn below. The four key issues are:

- A confusion about terminology related to RPL
- Lack of awareness of funding rules related to RPL
- The costs of supporting RPL
- Guidance and support for the RPL process

A confusion about terminology related to RPL

31. Both in survey returns and through interviews, providers demonstrated a significant level of misunderstanding about the precise definition of RPL within the QCF. In most instances where such confusion was evident, the term 'RPL' was used as a generic term to cover RPL, exemption and credit transfer. In a small number of cases the misused term 'RPL' covered both RPL and exemption, while separately identifying credit transfer as a different process linked explicitly to credit accumulation.

32. It is difficult to quantify the extent of this misunderstanding from the sources of evidence available to the project. Many responses to the survey fail to clarify the scope of use of the term 'RPL'. Others clearly refer to an assessment process based on previously uncertificated learning. However a significant number of survey returns illustrate an incorrect understanding of RPL. The following comments are selected to illustrate this, from providers responding to a question about why they used RPL.

> - *To recognise a learner's prior qualifications*
> - *Students have often completed part of a qualification at another institution*
> - *Learners have a variety of experience and qualifications that can lead to RPL*
> - *We APA units that a learner has done in the past 3 years*
> - *Learners are pleased to gain recognition for their previous qualifications*

33. In each of the above it is clear that RPL is conceived to be either about previously certificated learning, or a combination of certificated and uncertificated learning. As respondents to the survey self-selected as having positive views about RPL we may assume that such misunderstandings are widespread across many different types of provider.

34. The interviews with providers substantiated such a view. Two of the three providers interviewed referred to RPL in relation to the recognition of prior qualifications. Although both were enthusiastic about the benefits of RPL, no distinctions in practice were made between RPL, exemption and credit transfer.

35. A similar picture emerges from the interviews with AOs. Two of the three AOs interviewed failed to make a distinction between RPL, credit transfer and exemption. This confusion informs both AO policy documents and AO processes. So, for example, one AO includes advice on 'equivalencies and exemptions' as part of its 'RPL Principles and Guidelines' Another includes the following question in its 'Candidate Induction checklist':

Recognition of Prior Learning explained, is it applicable to this qualification?:- (Certificates and Evidence Required)	

36. It should be emphasised once again that both these AOs were enthusiastic about RPL and were keen to promote its use through their centres. However, as one respondent to the survey noted

> *The description of RPL by [AO] is unclear…Guidance can be non-specific which means assessors are not confident about using this method of assessment*

37. So a lack of clarity about the definition and scope of RPL by an AO can not only undermine assessor confidence in using RPL, it can also prevent an effective RPL offer being made because the provider is not clear about the distinctions between RPL, credit transfer and exemption within Agency funding rules, and may therefore not appreciate that RPL itself (unlike credit transfer and exemption) can be effectively funded as an integral part of an offer to a learner. A number of survey returns and interview responses confirmed this was indeed the case.

Lack of awareness of funding rules related to RPL

38. It would appear that there is a significant level of ignorance about the current (and future) Agency funding rules related to RPL, or misunderstanding about what these rules actually support. A majority of survey respondents said they did not know what the current funding rules were in relation to RPL. Two of the three providers interviewed, and two of the three AOs were also unaware of the current Agency funding rules.

39. Where providers did profess to know about Agency funding rules, it appears that a lack of understanding about the distinctions between RPL, credit transfer and exemption led to a misunderstanding about how RPL could be supported. It would seem that some providers fail to appreciate that funding is available to support RPL because they confuse RPL with credit transfer or exemption.

> - *There is no method of showing success rate [for RPL] as they will not have completed the whole qualification if one unit is accredited through RPL*
> - *We have arguments with the financial auditors regarding the level of abatement if RPL is used*
> - *We're wary about making an RPL offer because of course we lose funding if units are counted from previous qualifications*

40. Having noted this, it must also be said that the guidance on RPL in the current Funding Rules, as well as the Rules for 2013-14, is far from clear. Although there is a separate section on RPL within the Funding Rules on Apprenticeships, there is no such section in the Adult Skills Rules for 2013-14. Searching 'RPL' through the Agency's web site leads directly to the section of the Rules on Apprenticeship Funding, where the funding rule about RPL is directly at odds with the RPL Rule related to Adult Skills.

> If RPL is used for a qualification within an Apprenticeship framework, funding for the qualification must be discounted by the percentage which is assessed through RPL *(Para 12)*

41. In this context it is perhaps not surprising that some providers are confused about Agency support for RPL. If a qualification is offered through an Apprenticeship then no funding for RPL is available. If the same qualification is offered outside an Apprenticeship then up to 50% of the same qualification can be fully funded through an RPL process. This is hardly a recipe for clarity.

42. It also seems that some providers are aware of the Funding Rules for adult skills related to RPL, but still apparently misunderstand its application

> - *RPL should attract double the funding, not half*
> - *[The Agency] should not reduce funding for RPL*
> - *[The Agency] should pay the full amount of funding [for RPL]*

43. Perhaps the most telling misunderstanding arose in an interview with a senior college manager who had the relevant section of the Funding Rules open on the table in front of her

> *I had hoped the rule might change [i.e. for 2013-14] but I'm still only going to get half the funding for a learner if I offer them RPL. It's just not*

> *worth doing in those circumstances I'm afraid*

44. One possible source of this confusion is the language in which the relevant funding rule is couched. The rule itself is reproduced below

> If a learner achieves more than 50% of assessment through Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) you must discount by 50% the funding for the percentage of the qualification assessed as being delivered through RPL…However if the learner has achieved 50% or less of assessment for the learning aim through RPL, you do not need to reduce the funding for the percentage of assessment achieved through RPL.

45. Not only does the structure of the rule reverse the RPL process (referring first to the case of people claiming more than 50% of a qualification through RPL) it also presents the Agency's support for RPL for the first 50% of a qualification as a double negative (you do not need to reduce..) As a representative of an AO noted in relation to this rule 'it seems to be deliberately constructed to dissuade people from using RPL'. This would seem to be one area of the Funding Rules where the Agency's Crystal Mark is far from being evidenced.

46. In these circumstances it is difficult to make an informed assessment of whether or not the Funding Rules are a constraint on the offer of RPL. In so far as the funding rules are misunderstood, they clearly *do* constitute a constraint on the RPL offer. The outcomes of the interviews are inconclusive in this respect. The outcomes of the survey, in which a number of respondents claimed that the funding rules were a barrier to making an RPL offer, cannot be taken at face value.

The costs of supporting RPL

47. Despite the positive response to the survey and equally positive statements from those interviewed, the costs of the RPL process still present a significant barrier to making an RPL offer to large numbers of learners. Although both providers and AOs interviewed recognised that the flexibility of the QCF made an RPL offer less bureaucratic than the previous NVQ system, the individualised nature of the RPL process meant that RPL was still seen as a costly option for many learners.

48. How far this issue of costs is a real barrier to making an RPL offer, and how far it is an inherited perception from the old NVQ framework is impossible to determine. Those interviewed reminded NIACE about the continuing squeeze on resources to support adult learners, which made it difficult to make a meaningful RPL offer in many cases

> *To be honest it's just not worth doing for one or two learners in a group. We'd need a small group of learners all working through the same units to make it feasible, and that just doesn't happen.*

49. Once again it is clear from the survey responses that the issue of costs is again bound up with misunderstandings about the definition of RPL and its funding. Indeed, the survey question itself was clearly misunderstood by many respondents. Several respondents assumed (wrongly) that claiming credit through RPL would result in funding penalties from the Agency

> - *It takes time to review what a learner has done previously and gather the evidence. Then you lose a proportion of the funding dependent on how much you claim.*
> - *You get less funding because you are of course not drawing down the full amount as you are using RPL.*
> - *Reduced claim amounts in respect of shorter length of qualifications*
> - *Units where RPL are used attract a proportion of the funding… The lack of recognition in funding is a clear disinsentive.[sic]*

50. There were many more similar responses to the question about costs in the survey. An accurate consideration of the costs of supporting an RPL offer is difficult to ascertain in a context where a significant proportion of providers either confuse RPL with exemptions and credit transfer an/or misunderstand the current funding rules related to RPL.

51. Having identified this widespread, if perhaps unjustified, concern about costs, it should be noted that RPL can be cost-effective in some sectors. One provider working in the construction industry not only had a very clear understanding of the distinction between RPL and exemption or credit transfer, but also made a strong argument for RPL as an efficient way of recognising achievement in this sector

> *In construction 90% of the training is done on site. If someone learns a new skill on one site they want to have it recognised so they can move to another site with credit for it. For most people it makes no sense to run classroom-based training. Employers don't want to release people anyway. It's much better to observe and question them on-site about what they are doing and can do. RPL is ideally suited to the way the industry operates.*

52. It must be assumed that other industries operate under similar conditions, though it seems the construction industry is a sector where the strongest case for RPL as a cost-effective process of recognising achievement can be made.

53. The potential impact of 24+ loans on RPL was also raised as an issue through the survey and at interview. Most people either offered no opinion on the potential impact of 24+ loans, or thought it would make no difference to their RPL offer. However, some providers thought that the introduction of loans might make RPL more attractive to some learners. As the survey results indicate that it is older learners at higher levels who currently make most use of RPL, it may well be that the introduction of 24+ loans does have an impact in this area.

> - *Learners applying for a loan will want to take out a loan for as little as possible, so I can see the use of RPL increasing*
> - *This could offer immense encouragement to learners to embark on qualifications which they may well have otherwise discounted.*
> - *This could in some circumstances provide a more attractive option for learners*

54. It should be emphasised that these positive comments about the potential impact of loans are balanced by an equal number of negative views about the overall impact of 24+ loans in the survey. Indeed even these positive views need to be seen in a context where changes to learner costs based on RPL are not yet being considered. None of the providers interviewed had any plans to reduce costs to learners making use of 24+ loans who achieved credits through RPL. Nor can we expect AO charges to alter in this context

> *Don't forget the costs to us [AO] are the same whether or not RPL is*

*used by a provider. We still have to quality assure the assessment
process, and registration and certification costs won't change either. I can
see that a provider might save money on delivery through RPL, but [AO]
costs will remain the same.*

55. In summary, it would seem that, even with the increased flexibility in
assessment offered by the QCF, there will continue to be significant real costs
to providers in making a widespread RPL offer. Having said this, it also seems
clear that the current scope of RPL is being constrained by
misunderstandings about Agency funding rules and/or misunderstandings
about the definition of RPL itself. It is reasonable to assume that RPL will
continue to be an offer made to a small minority of learners in the QCF.
However it is also reasonable to assume that the scope of the RPL offer might
be extended if both its definition and the funding rules related to it were fully
understood by all providers.

Guidance and support for the RPL process

56. Several providers referred to the potential costs of staff development or
specialist training as an impediment to the development of a widespread RPL
offer

- *Ensuring a standardised approach and ensuring ALL staff understand
  and use RPL wherever possible. it is a big change to some assessors*
- *Developing skilled personnel to manage and facilitate the process.*
- *Overcoming prejudice of those who don't see it as 'real' knowledge
  and learning. Ensuring quality processes are in place and are robust
  needs dedicated individuals to make it happen*

57. It is in this area that providers expect significant guidance and support from
AOs. In some cases this is forthcoming, and the survey responses include
several positive references to AOs in this respect. However, other comments
about support from AOs for the RPL process were not so positive

- *Different rules for different awarding bodies.*
- *It is time consuming and [AO] seem really slack on RPL you have to
  send off lots of information and their processes for RPL are not
  simple.*
- *Cumbersome costly systems. Unclear guidelines*

58. All three AOs interviewed through the project offered training and staff development to centre staff that included RPL. One of the three was about to begin a series of 12 workshops in different parts of the country aimed at stimulating the further take up of RPL through centres. This same AO produced substantial and detailed information and guidance to centres on supporting an RPL offer to learners. Neither of the other two AOs produced such detailed information.

59. One interesting issue that arose through the project, and on which both AO procedures and provider opinion seems divided, is the relationship between the RPL process and units within the QCF. It seems that some AOs require RPL to be linked to the completion of whole units, and responses from providers refer to this, sometimes as an unnecessary restriction and at other times as an accepted part of the RPL process.

60. One respondent (who clearly *does* understand the distinction between RPL and exemption) identifies the need for flexibility in assessment arrangements when making an RPL offer

> *RPL is NOT 'exemption' and requires a highly structured assessment process to be planned and applied with integrity just like any other assessment strategy. The problem quite frequently is that [say] 80% of the evidence required for RPL is readily available but the remaining 20% can be missing or obsolete.*

61. Another provider made a similar point at interview. RPL, she thought, was 'always messy'. Learners brought bits and pieces of relevant evidence that could be used to support RPL 'but these rarely match the outcomes of any one unit'. This view was shared by two of the three AOs interviewed, though the third does expect (according to its guidance) RPL evidence to be applied to units 'as it is not possible to award credit for only part of a unit'. Although this last statement is correct, does this mean that an RPL offer can only be made if a learner can produce evidence against all the outcomes of a unit?

62. As noted above, RPL is most effective when it is seamlessly integrated into a wider assessment offer. In the example quoted above, if 80% of the evidence for a unit was presented through RPL, then the remaining 20% could still be presented through more traditional means. There is no reason why RPL cannot be used to fulfill the evidence requirements for some of a unit, though

of course the rest of the unit would also have to be evidenced in order for credit to be awarded.

63. This has interesting implications for Agency funding rules, especially in relation to the new Funding Rates Matrix. A distinction needs to be made between 50% of evidence towards a qualification being presented through an RPL process, and the relevant funding rule being based on an assumption that 50% is equivalent to half the credit value of the qualification. Some further clarification is needed here, especially once the distinctions between RPL, credit transfer and exemption are clarified.

Some positive messages about RPL within the QCF

64. The previous sections of this report have focused on some of the key issues that need to be addressed if RPL is to be offered more widely and more systematically to learners in the QCF. In so doing they have inevitably focused on areas where improvements can be made and have perhaps given an overly negative impression of how RPL is currently being used by providers and supported by AOs in the QCF.

65. In order to reflect an appropriate balance from the feedback received from providers and AOs through the project, it is also necessary to note that, in some areas and for some providers, RPL appears to be functioning effectively and is well supported by AOs. It is also worth noting that, notwithstanding the comments from some providers that appear to misunderstand current Agency funding rules, other providers *do* understand these rules and view them positively. The following paragraphs aim to summarise some of these positive points made through both survey responses and interviews.

66. The first point to make in this regard is that there is **a high degree of commitment from providers** to making an RPL offer to learners, and **a clear understanding of the benefits** that such an offer has for many different kinds of learner. Even when acknowledging some of the practical difficulties in the RPL process, providers maintain a clear commitment to RPL as an important part of their responsiveness to learner needs. Here are some of the reasons given for making an RPL offer

> - *To stop duplication of effort and evidence, keep learners motivated*
> - *To ensure all forms of lifelong learning are valued and students are not made to repeat learning*
> - *We have chosen to use RPL, because we want to give proper*

> - *recognition to what people have already achieved*
> - *To optimise the learner's potential in achieving learning aims*
> - *It signifies open access for learners. Why should a learner pay a centre for tuition they do not need, or have to sit an exam when they can demonstrate by alternative means their competence?*

67. Notwithstanding this commitment from individual providers, it is also apparent that **some providers make an RPL offer either because they see it as an integral part of the QCF offer, or because it is an AO requirement** that they do so. This is interesting, in that it appears to show that the original intention of including RPL within the regulatory requirements of AOs and the responsibilities of recognised AO centres in order to spread RPL practice across the QCF is actually working in a number of cases.

> - *It is an AO requirement.*
> - *Awarding Organisations required the policy to be present and it is appropriate to be used*
> - *We work within City & Guilds policies/procedures.*
> - *Because it is a requirement within the relevant awarding bodies that where this applicable and meets their evidential requirements it should be used.*
> - *Our understanding is that we have to ascertain whether all candidates are able to make use of RPL*

68. **An additional stimulus to the use of RPL also lies within Agency funding rules**. As we note above, it appears that there is significant misunderstanding of these funding rules in relation to RPL. However, not only do some providers understand the rules well, but even misunderstanding might have positive consequences in some cases. Here are some of the responses to the survey question about why a provider makes an offer of RPL

> - *Because of the funding rules*
> - *Mainly due to funding rules*
> - *Because the funding rules stipulate this as a requirement.*
> - *To comply with funding guidelines.*

69. **Some AOs are making a concerted effort to promote RPL through their centres**. Although this report has so far anonymised responses from AOs, it is necessary here to single out City & Guilds by name. Not only were City & Guilds named far more often than any other AO in the survey of providers, they were the only AO about which providers made positive comments. The

information and guidance produced by City & Guilds on RPL is clear and comprehensive. Their staff development and training programme on RPL is far more comprehensive and substantial than any other identified through the project

> - *City & Guilds are very keen on the use of RPL and have recently released new guidance*
> - *With C & G it's quite good*
> - *I recently attended C&G training on the use of RPL and received their updated policy document which I and my centre find to be very clearly set out and identifies policy and practice*
> - *City & Guilds have actually been very supportive*

70. Where the funding rule is understood, **RPL is seen as valuable by providers in establishing a fair and equitable offer for learners**. This concern to treat learners fairly was the single most often identified motivation for making an RPL offer by providers. The principle that people should not have to learn again what they already know or can do appears to be a sound basis for taking forward an RPL offer. Indeed, some people who clearly misunderstood the funding rule criticised the Agency for undervaluing RPL in relation to more traditional forms of learning.

71. Other providers noted the potential of RPL **to meet employer needs and to respond quickly to changing skill needs in the workforce**. The example of the construction industry is particularly of interest here. One of the most clear-sighted and forward-looking responses from a provider about the potential value of RPL was based explicitly on industry experience. Indeed, this was one comment from someone who clearly did understand the funding rules, but still thought they were restrictive.

> *RPL fits the needs of our industry. Employers like it because they don't lose people off site for long periods. It builds on work-place mentoring, which is a key part of training in the industry... It helps to professionalise assessment in the industry and it makes cost-effective use of everyone's time. The SSC like it and want to encourage it. The QCF credit system helps to make assessment manageable… I can't see why [the Agency] would want to place any restrictions on its use as widely as possible.*

Conclusion

72. Despite the problems identified through the report about the operation of Agency funding to support RPL, and the indication that it remains an under-utilised part of the QCF, relevant to a minority of learners, there is clearly sufficient commitment and enthusiasm from some providers about the RPL concept to justify continuing support from the Agency for providers to make an RPL offer. Indeed, if funding arrangements can be clarified, and a clear definition of RPL can take root in both providers and AOs, there is every opportunity to expand the RPL offer in the future.

Recommendations

73. There is clearly a need to clarify the funding rule in relation to RPL. In particular the '50%' rule needs careful explanation. The current rule as it appears in the Funding Rules 2013-14 is far from clear. Within the rule itself it is still necessary to identify how '50%' is to be measured, especially in relation to the new Funding Rates Matrix.

    We recommend that the Agency publishes an explicit clarification of the relevant funding rule on RPL as soon as possible, and encourages providers to extend their current use of RPL, within the proposed funding rule, during 2013-14.

74. It is clearly anomalous to reverse the funding rule on RPL for qualifications offered through apprenticeships. This anomaly will become particularly apparent when all Apprenticeships move to a component-based funding model on 2014-15.

    We recommend that the current funding rule on RPL for adult skills is applied to all new Apprenticeship Frameworks from 2013-14, and to all Apprenticeship Frameworks from 2014-15.

75. In the current context it is clearly not possible to recommend a change to the current funding rule relating to RPL. However, it may be possible to assess the potential constraints of the current funding rule by identifying a particular

area where this rule is relaxed during 2013-14, and monitoring the impact of this change

We recommend that the Agency, in collaboration with Construction Skills, should establish a project during 2013-14 in the construction industry through which providers are invited to develop an RPL offer without funding restrictions (i.e. without the 50% discount for over 50% of the qualification in the 2013-14 funding rules).

76. There is clearly a need for more information and guidance for providers about RPL. Given the important role of funding in current practice, it seems appropriate for the Agency to take the lead in commissioning the production of such guidance

We recommend that the Agency should commission the development of a Good Practice guide on RPL within the QCF, to be published in Spring 2014 to encourage providers to make more active use of RPL during 2014-15

77. This guidance needs to be informed by current best practice on RPL within QCF AOs. It is suggested that the work of one AO clearly sets an industry standard benchmark at present.

We recommend that the above Good Practice guide should be developed in collaboration with a small number of AOs, including City & Guilds

Annex A: Copy of the on-line questionnaire

RPL and your organisation

*1. Were you personally aware of 'Recognition of Prior Learning' (RPL) before you read the explanation we gave in the introduction?(*Required)

Select one.

○	Yes	(Answer question number 1.1.)
○	No	

*1.1 Were you aware that Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) can be used for QCF qualifications?(*Required)

Select one.

○	Yes
○	No

Within the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF), RPL is defined as:

A method of assessment that considers whether a learner can demonstrate that they can meet the assessment requirements of a unit through knowledge, understanding or skills they already possess and do not need to develop through a course of learning.

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*2. Has your organisation ever used or does it plan to use RPL as a means of assessment towards QCF units or qualifications in the manner described above?(*Required)	
Select one.	
○	Yes	(Go to question number 3.)
○	No	(Go to question number 0.)

*3. Does your organisation have a policy or policies on the use of RPL for QCF qualifications?(*Required)	
Select one.	
○	Yes	(Answer question number 3.1.)
○	No	
○	Don't know	

*3.1 Do you have a single standard policy for RPL across your organisation?(*Required)	
Select one.	
○	Yes
○	No
○	Don't know

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*4. Do staff in your organisation have access to training in using RPL for QCF qualifications?(*Required)

Select one.	
○	Yes
○	No
○	Don't know

5. Why has your organisation chosen to make use of RPL?

Awarding organisations and RPL

*6. With which awarding organisation(s) do you currently make use of RPL for QCF qualifications?(*Required)

*7. Does your organisation have a single approach to RPL or does it have different approaches depending on the awarding organisation?(*Required)

Select one.

○	The same approach for all awarding organisations
○	Different approaches depending on the awarding organisation
○	Don't know

For the next two questions, we'd like you to only consider the awarding organisation for whose QCF qualifications you make most use of RPL.

*8. Are you aware of this awarding organisation's rules regarding the use of RPL?(*Required)

Select one.

○	Yes
○	No

*9. Does this awarding organisation promote the use of RPL?(*Required)

Select one.

○	Yes
○	No
○	Don't know

10. Please describe any aspects of any awarding organisations' policy that you feel limits the use of RPL.

RPL in practice

*11. In which subject areas do you offer RPL?(*Required)

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*12. At which levels do you offer RPL? Please select all that apply.(*Required)

Select all that apply.

☐	At all Levels
☐	Entry Level 1
☐	Entry Level 2
☐	Entry Level 3
☐	Level 1
☐	Level 2
☐	Level 3 and above

13. If you only use RPL in certain circumstances or for certain groups of learners, what are these circumstances or groups?

*14. At what point in a learner's programme do you offer RPL? Please select all that apply.(*Required)

Select all that apply.

☐	Prior to enrolment
☐	At enrolment
☐	Some way into the learning programme
☐	Don't know
☐	Other, please specify::

*15. Which members of staff tend to be involved in RPL e.g. exam officers, curriculum planners, tutors, assessors etc?(*Required)

16. What do you feel are the benefits of making use of RPL?

17. What would encourage you to offer RPL to a wider group of learners or towards a wider range of qualifications?

18. What are the implications of offering RPL in terms of organisational resources/costs?

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19. What are the challenges of offering RPL?

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The Skills Funding Agency policy on RPL

*20. Are you aware of the Skills Funding Agency's policy on RPL?(*Required)
Select one.

○	Yes
○	No

21. Currently, providers may claim up to 50% of the available funding for a qualification through an RPL offer. What is your opinion of this?

22. Please describe any aspects of the Skills Funding Agency policy that you feel limit the use of RPL.

23. In your opinion, what could the Skills Funding Agency do to encourage the wider use of RPL?

*24. In your opinion, could the introduction of 24+ Advanced Learning Loans impact on your organisation's approach to RPL?(*Required)

Select one.

○	Yes	(Answer question number 24.1.)
○	No	
○	Don't know	

24.1 Please describe what this impact might be.

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About you

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*25. Which of the following best describes your organisation?(*Required)
Select one.
○	College
○	Independent Training Provider (ITP)
○	Local authority
○	SDI
○	Other, please specify::

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*26. What type(s) of provision does your organisation deliver? Please select all that apply.(*Required)
Select all that apply.
☐	Apprenticeship/Pre-Apprenticeship
☐	Other workplace based vocational skills provision
☐	Learning provider based vocational skills provision
☐	Skills for Life
☐	Progression Entitlement (formerly termed Foundation Learning)

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*27. Approximately how many learners does your organisation work with each year? Only numbers can be entered into this field.(*Required)

Enter a number.

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*28. In which region is your organisation based?(*Required)

Select one.

○	North East
○	North West
○	Yorkshire and Humber
○	West Midlands
○	East Midlands
○	East of England
○	London
○	South East
○	South West

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*29. We may follow up a sample of survey responses for further information. Would you be willing to be contacted?(*Required)

Select one.

○	Yes	(Answer question number 29.1.)
○	No	

29.1 Please provide the following details.	
*Your name:	
*Your organisation name:	
*Your job role:	
*Email address:	
Telephone number:	

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Annex B: Interview questions for providers

1. RPL policy

Does CTC have an RPL policy? If so how is this used? If not, are there any plans to develop one? Are AO policies used by CTC?

2. Promotion and marketing of RPL

Does CTC promote RPL to learners? Or to employers? If so, what materials are used? What marketing channels are used? Are any AO materials used?

3. Support for staff

Does CTC offer training for its teaching staff on RPL? Does it offer any training for assessors on RPL, or do AOs do this? Does it produce any guidance documents for administrative or support staff on RPL?

4. Learners

What kind of learners make use of RPL within CTC? Is RPL used in particular curriculum areas? Or at particular levels? Does CTC have systems for monitoring the RPL offer across different areas of provision?

5. SFA funding arrangements

Is CTC aware of current SFA funding arrangements? Could these be changed to encourage wider take-up of RPL? How might co-funding and the introduction of 24+ loans have an impact on the offer of RPL?

6. Performance measures and quality assurance

Are there any implications for provider performance measures in RPL? Does CTC make reference to RPL in its self-assessment process?

7. Future development

Does CTC envisage a wider take-up of RPL opportunities in the future? If so, by whom and for what reasons?

Annex C: Interview questions for awarding organisations

1. **RPL policy**

   Does Ascentis have an RPL policy? If so how is this used? If not, are there any plans to develop one?

2. **Promotion and marketing of RPL**

   Does Ascentis promote RPL to centres? Or to learners? Or to employers? If so, what materials are used? What marketing channels are used?

3. **Centre recognition and monitoring**

   Does Ascentis build capacity to support RPL into centre recognition and monitoring arrangements? If so, how are centres monitored? Does Ascentis collect any information or statistics from centres about RPL?

4. **Support for staff**

   Does Ascentis offer training to its own staff (e.g. External Verifiers) on RPL? Does it offer any training or support to assessors on RPL? Does it produce any guidance documents for staff on the RPL process?

5. **Learners**

   What kind of learners make use of RPL within Ascentis qualifications? Is RPL used in particular curriculum areas? Or at particular levels?

6. SFA funding arrangements

Is Ascentis aware of current SFA funding arrangements? Could these be changed to encourage wider take-up of RPL? How might co-funding and the introduction of 24+ loans have an impact on the offer of RPL?

7. Future development

Does Ascentis envisage a wider take-up of RPL opportunities in the future? If so, by whom and for what reasons?

Recognition of Prior Learning Survey Analysis

Introduction

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) involves using evidence of a learner's previous non-certificated learning to show that the learner already meets some or all of the assessment requirements of a unit or qualification.

In February 2013, the Skills Funding Agency commissioned NIACE to undertake an online survey with providers and awarding organisations (AOs). The aim of the survey was to explore how these organisations are making use of RPL within the Qualifications and Credit Framework.

Methodology

An online survey was designed in consultation with the Skills Funding Agency. An email with a link to the survey was sent out to XX contacts. Recipients were given three weeks to respond to the survey. In total, 129 responses were received.

Throughout this report percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number. Owing to this, some of the figures in the tables may total slightly more or less than 100 per cent.

About respondents

As Table 1 below shows, respondents were most likely to work for an independent training provider (34%) or a college (28%). 'Other' types of organisation included awarding organisations (four respondents), adult and community learning providers (three respondents) and NHS Trusts (two respondents).

Table 1: Type of organisation	
	%
Independent training provider (ITP)	34
College	28
Local authority	11
VCS organisation	10
Other	17

Base: all respondents = 129

Respondents were asked to specify the types of provision their organisation offered. Table 2 below shows their responses. The most commonly offered provision was other workplace based vocational skills provision (63% of respondents). Respondents were least likely to offer Progression Entitlement (26% of respondents).

Table 2: Types of provision offered	
	%
Other workplace based vocational skills provision	63
Skills for Life	59
Apprenticeship/Pre-Apprenticeship	57
Learning provider based vocational skills provision	56
Progression Entitlement	26

Base: all respondents = 129
Note: respondents could select more than one answer

Respondents' organisations tended to be fairly small, with 51% (66) having 500 or fewer learners on an annual basis (see Table 3 below). Only 17% of respondents had over 5000 learners.

Table 3: Number of learners organisation works with annually	
	%
Up to 100	26
101-500	25
501-1000	14
1001-5000	18
Over 5000	17

Base: all respondents = 129

As Table 4 below shows, respondents' organisations were most likely to be located in the North West (18%) or London (16%). Only four per cent of respondents were located in the North East.

Table 4: Region of organisation	
	%
North West	18
London	16
East Midlands	12
South East	12
Yorkshire and Humber	12
South West	10
East of England	9
West Midlands	8
North East	4

Base: all respondents = 129

Eighty-six per cent of respondents (111) were aware of RPL before they read the definition at the beginning of the survey. Of these respondents, 91% (101) were aware that RPL can be used for QCF qualifications.

Respondents were asked whether their organisation had ever used or planned to use RPL as a means of assessment towards QCF units or qualifications. Ninety-three respondents (72%) confirmed that this was the case for their organisation. Respondents who answered 'no' to this question were directed to the end of the survey. The rest of this report therefore only relates to the 93 respondents whose organisations had used or planned to use RPL as a means of assessment.[1]

RPL and organisations

Sixty-one per cent of respondents (57) indicated that their organisation had a policy on the use of RPL for QCF qualifications. Of these, just over two-thirds (40) had a single standard policy for RPL across their organisation.

Only 60% of respondents (56) indicated that staff in their organisation had access to training in using RPL for QCF qualifications.

Awarding organisations and RPL

Respondents were asked to identify the awarding organisations with which they currently make use of RPL for QCF qualifications. A large range of awarding organisations were specified; Table 5 below shows the 10 most commonly cited. Respondents were far more likely to make use of RPL with City and Guilds than any other awarding organisation.

Table 5: Awarding organisations with which respondents make use of RPL	
	%
City and Guilds	38
Edexcel	14
OCR	13
EDI	6
Various	5
BCS	4
CACHE	4
EAL	4
ILM	4
NCFE	4

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[1] Figures are still reported in percentages for the rest of the report but should be treated with caution as the total number of responses was less than 100.

Base: all respondents whose organisation has used or intends to use RPL as a means of assessment = 93
Note: respondents could select more than one answer

Respondents were asked whether their organisation had a single approach to RPL or whether they had different approaches depending on the awarding organisation. The majority of respondents (53%) indicated that their organisation had the same approach for all awarding organisations; 17% had different approaches depending on the awarding organisation and the remaining 30% did not know either way.

When considering the awarding organisation for whose QCF qualifications they made most use of RPL, 72% of respondents (67) were aware of this organisation's rules regarding the use of RPL. However, only 60% of respondents (56) indicated that this awarding organisation promoted the use of RPL.

RPL in practice

Respondents were asked to specify the subject areas in which they offered RPL. Twenty-four per cent of respondents (22) indicated that they offered RPL in all or the majority of their subject areas. The remaining 78% identified a wide range of subjects, the most common of which are shown in Table 6 below.

Table 6: Subject areas in which RPL is offered	
	%
Business and administration	12
Team leadership and management	12
Customer service	11
ICT	11
Supporting teaching and learning	8
Health and social care	7
Hospitality and catering	7
Childcare	6

Base: all respondents whose organisation has used or intends to use RPL as a means of assessment = 93
Note: respondents could select more than one answer

Respondents were less likely to offer RPL at Entry Levels 1 to 3 than at Levels 1 to 3 and above (see Table 7 below). Forty-one per cent of respondents offered RPL at all qualification levels.

Table 7: Levels at which RPL is offered	
	%
At all levels	41
Entry Level 1	7
Entry Level 2	7

Entry Level 3	9
Level 1	18
Level 2	42
Level 3 and above	41

Base: all respondents whose organisation has used or intends to use RPL as a means of assessment = 93

Note: respondents could select more than one answer

As Table 8 below shows, respondents were more likely to offer RPL prior to enrolment (40%) or at enrolment (51%) than at any other point in a learner's programme. 'Other' points at which RPL was offered included during initial assessment, at their induction, or at any point in a learner's programme.

Table 8: Points in a learner's programme at which RPL is offered	
	%
Prior to enrolment	40
At enrolment	51
Some way into programme	27
Don't know	7
Other	13

Base: all respondents whose organisation has used or intends to use RPL as a means of assessment = 93

Note: respondents could select more than one answer

Assessors (67%) and tutors/trainers (55%) were the members of staff most likely to be involved in RPL (see Table 9 below). Only 5% of respondents indicated that all of their staff were involved in RPL. 'Other' members of staff included enrolment officers, programme managers and members of the recruitment team.

Table 9: Members of staff who tend to be involved in RPL	
	%
Assessors	67 (62)
Tutors/trainers	55 (51)
Quality assurance managers/staff	26 (24)
Curriculum planner	12 (11)
Administration team	11 (10)
Exam officers	8 (7)
All staff	5 (5)
Other	20 (19)

Base: all respondents whose organisation has used or intends to use RPL as a means of assessment = 93

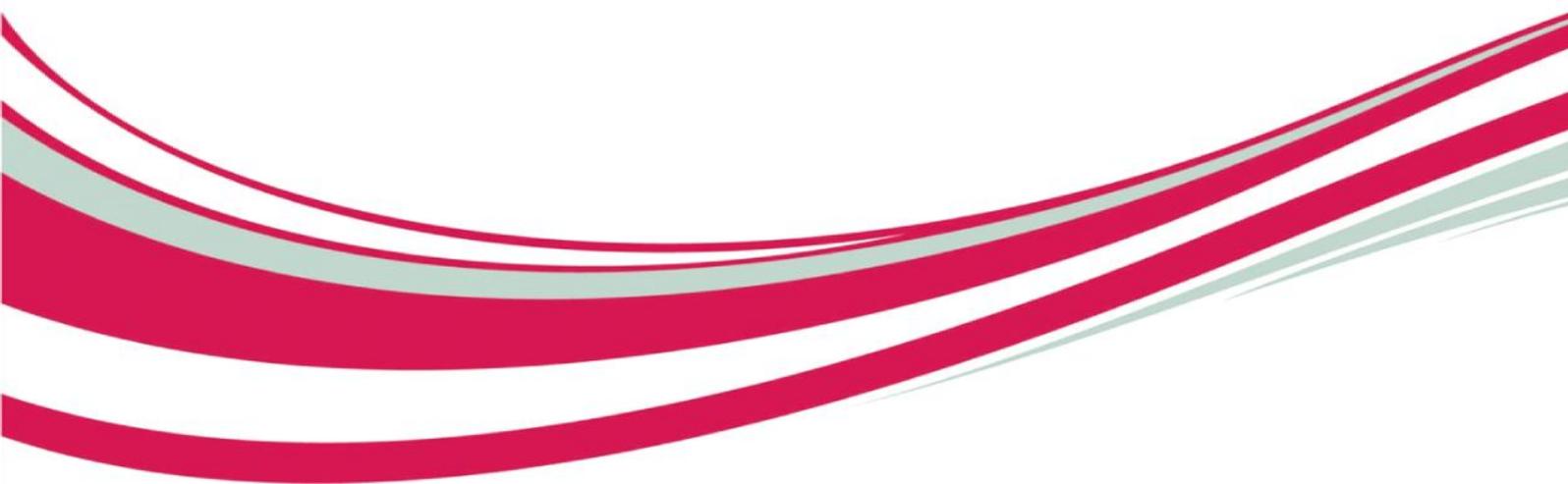Note: respondents could select more than one answer

The Skills Funding Agency policy on RPL

Forty-five per cent of respondents were aware of the Skills Funding Agency's policy on RPL. However, only 24% felt that the introduction of 24+ Advanced Learning Loans might impact on their organisation's approach to RPL; 15% did not think this would be the case but the majority (61%) were unsure.

Annex E: Provider and awarding organisation interviews

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