Learners' Experiences of the Process of Recognition of Prior Informal Learning

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Principal Researcher: Dr Margaret Harris, New Era Learning, Learning Development and Risk Management Consultant and Senior Teaching Fellow at the University of Aberdeen

Researchers: Julie Brown and Linda Proudfoot, Glasgow Caledonian University

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Introduction

The aim of the project was to gather data on the learner experience of undertaking a claim for the recognition of prior informal learning (RPL) in higher education in Scotland. The research was funded by QAA Scotland and the research was instigated and developed through the QAA Scotland/Universities Scotland RPL Network. Seven universities were invited to participate. Three universities agreed, and nine students who had undertaken an RPL claim through one of these three universities formed the sample of participants. There were three from one university, four from another and two from the third. The research began on 11 May 2012 and finished on 31 July 2012.

The research was concerned only with the informal experiential learning that was assessed for credit. All of the participants had informal experiential learning assessed by one of the universities, although some may also have had prior accredited learning as part of their claim. The following report provides details of the methodology, results and analysis of the data gathered, conclusions and recommendations.

Methodology

The research is a small-scale exploratory pilot study and the data collected is largely of a qualitative nature. A questionnaire and semi-structured, face-to-face or telephone interview (digitally recorded) were the primary research methods used. The ethical approval was obtained from Glasgow Caledonian University and was accepted by all participating universities. One university that did not take part in the research, but which had been willing to take part, had to be excluded because the approval process, required by their own institution, was outside the time available for the research. Another university, also wishing to participate, could not do so due to restrictions at that university on the use of students in surveys. The questionnaires were piloted with members of the RPL network and through the ethical approval process. Alterations were made to the ethical approval application, the questionnaires and interview questions before finalising them. Alterations were in respect of clarity and focus.

Access to and recruitment of participants was initially undertaken on behalf of the principal researcher by a designated individual within each collaborating institution. Prior to participating in the research, participants had the opportunity to discuss the research with the principal researcher. Purposive sampling was used and nine participants took part. Potential participant details were forwarded to the lead researcher from the universities and the lead researcher made contact, asking for participation and at the same time providing an information sheet, a consent form, and the questionnaire (see appendices 1, 2 and 3 for the relevant documents). When the participants had agreed to participate and the consent form and completed questionnaire had been received via email by the lead researcher, a copy of the interview questions was sent to each participant in order that they could familiarise themselves with these prior to interview (see appendix 4 for schedule of interview questions).

Completed questionnaires were printed and will be kept by the principal researcher in a locked filing cabinet for the duration of the research, while the original questionnaires will be retained on a password-protected computer. The digitally recorded interviews were transferred to the principal researcher's password-protected computer and transcribed. Only the principal researcher has access to the data in its original form and anonymity and confidentiality is, as far as possible, maintained.

All data, whether digital or otherwise, will be kept for a period of one year, stored in accordance with the Data Protection Act (1998), and thereafter destroyed.

Participants had the choice of face-to-face or telephone interviews. One student chose to have a face-to-face interview while the others chose telephone interviews. Interviews lasted approximately 20 minutes each. This was solely due to convenience for all parties concerned. The lead researcher conducted seven of the interviews and each of the other researchers conducted one. Eight interviews were transcribed by the lead researcher and one was transcribed by one of the other researchers. The interviews were transcribed verbatim as far as possible but inappropriate chat was excluded from the final transcript for the sake of keeping the research focused on the research questions.

The questionnaires were analysed by the lead researcher using descriptive statistics and all researchers undertook the analysis of the transcribed interviews using a thematic approach to the data.

Questionnaire results

The universities involved are identified by a letter and the participants by a number. The participants are referred to as A1 to I9.

Table 1: Participants, year of credit and credit purpose

Student	Age range	Gender	Year	Before or after beginning the course or programme	Credit for
A1	41-50	F	2011-12	After	Entry Partial credit for programme
B2	51-60	F	2011-12	After	Partial credit for programme
C3	51-60	F	2011-12	After	Partial credit for programme
D4	51-60	F	2003-05	After	Partial credit for programme
E5	41-50	M	2011-12	After	Entry
F6	41-40	M	20120	After	Partial credit for programme
G7	31-40	M	2011-12	After	Entry
H8	41-50	F	2011-12	After	Entry
I9	51-60	F	2011-12	After	Entry Partial credit for programme

From Table 1 it can be observed that four (44 per cent) students were in the age range 41-50, four (44 per cent) were in the age range 51-60 and one (11 per cent) was in the age range 31-40. There was no one under 31 or over 60. Seven (78 per cent) had completed their claim in 2011-12. Only two claims were older; one in 2010 and one in 2003-05. All claims took place after entry to the programme and during periods ranging from 12 months to two years.

There were three males and six females. Analysis was not undertaken on the potential differences between age groups or gender. The claims were in respect of entry to a course or programme, credit for part of a programme, or in two cases (22 per cent) for a combination of both.

Previous qualifications of participants varied considerably. Some were academic qualifications and some work-based. Table 2 shows the exact qualifications stated by participants. Levels ranged from around SCQF level 3/4 to level 11 (master's). Most claims were for informal unaccredited learning only, although three (33 per cent) were doing joint claims for informal learning and previous accredited learning credit transfer. Eight (88 per cent) of the nine were undertaking the claim to get a degree level qualification (not honours).

Table 2: Participants' qualifications

Student	Existing qualifications	Credit for informal learning
A1	PDA D32, ECDL, PDA ITALL	Yes
B2	NNEB, Assessors Units D31 and D32, Evaluation and Teaching, TQFE	Partially
C3	SNNEB, D32/33 Assessor Award, Certificate in Training Practice Intro to Teaching in FE, V Units Internal Verifier Award, TQFE	Partially
D4	General Nurse Training, Midwifery Training	Yes
E5	All SCOTVEC modules years 1 and 2, Electrical Engineering, City and Guilds 'C' Course, Electrical Engineering, ONC and HNC Electrical /Electronic Engineering	Yes
F6	Diploma Art and Design	Yes
G7	FPC 1, 2 and 3, CEMAP Bridge - Financial Services	Yes
H8	Various secretarial qualifications, ECDL, ILM Award in First Line Management, six Level 3 (SCQF level 9) modules	Yes
I9	BSc Specialist Practitioner PgC Teaching and Learning in Higher Education	Partially

As can be observed in Table 3, four (44 per cent) participants were claiming 240 credits, equivalent to the first two years of a Scottish ordinary degree (BA). Three (33 per cent) were claiming 120 credits at level 8, equivalent to the second year of a Scottish BA. One (11 per cent) was claiming 30 credits of a third year of a BA, and one person (11 per cent) was claiming 300 credits towards a BA (leaving only 60 credits to be done by taught modules/courses to get an undergraduate ordinary BA).

The distinction about credit for entry and credit for part of a programme appears to be confused where credit on entry was to make up the missing credit at the earlier levels of a programme. Participants appeared to be unsure as to whether these were entry requirements or part of a programme. Table 3 only shows the credit claimed for informal learning, although participants may also have had previous accredited learning forming part of the RPL claim. Only one participant (11 per cent) was claiming for postgraduate credit. All participants achieved the credit for which they applied, indicating a 100 per cent pass rate for this particular group of individuals.

Table 3 Credit type and amount of informal learning credit

Student	Credit type	Informal Learning Credit Amount	Credit gained
A1	Credit for Entry & Partial Credit for a programme	120 at level 7 120 at level 8	All
B2	Partial credit for a programme	120 at level 8	All
C3	Partial credit for a programme	120 at level 8	All
D4	Credit for two modules on a programme.	30 at level 9	All
E5	Credit for entry to a course or programme	120 at level 8	All
F6	Partial credit for a programme	120 at level 7 120 at level 8 60 at level 9	All
G7	Both credit for entry to a course or programme	120 at level 7 120 at level 8	All
H8	Credit for entry to a course or programme	120 at level 7 120 at level 8	All
I9	Credit for entry to a course or programme	30 credits at level 11	All

The format of the claim was not consistent for the credit amount being claimed. As can be observed in Table 4, participant B2 had a reflective account of 1,200 words and a CV to do for 240 credits, while participant G7 had a 5,000 word essay, supporting evidence and a presentation to do for a similar amount of credit. For a lesser amount of credit, it would appear that participant E5 had a considerably greater amount to do than either of these two. These three claims arose from different institutions, and without further details it is difficult to state categorically if this was inequitable but it does raise an issue for consideration.

Table 4 Format of claim

Student	Format of Claim
A1	A portfolio of work
B2	A portfolio containing a reflective account (1,200 words) and a CV
C3	A portfolio containing a reflective account and a CV
D4	A portfolio including statement of learning, methodology, written account of prior experiential learning and supplementary evidence
E5	Before starting, a 5,000-word experience statement based on my management experience over the last 10 years. A formal, 6,000-word academic report. A presentation to a panel with questions on content and my feelings on whole process.
F6	Essay, presentation of folio materials, interview with panel
G7	5,000 word essay, supporting evidence of acting experience, a presentation
H8	An extended CV, an essay and an interview
I9	A 4-5,000-word critical reflection

The time period of the experience used within the claims cannot be established accurately, but there are indications from the information in Table 5 that different time periods may have been allowed. It is interesting to note however that all experience used was from a work perspective and none was from a purely personal or everyday experience basis.

Table 5 Experience used for claim

Student	Experience used
A1	Current work role as a Support and Development Worker and previous work role as a Technical Instructor over the last 6 years
B2	Based on a current professional challenge - large class sizes - in current role
C3	Based on a practical learning experience - a professional challenge - identification of strategies and recommendations for future improvements to the department
D4	Published work in the field of neonatal skincare
E5	Based on work role over 10 years
F6	Songwriting, record production, radio broadcasting
G7	Previous professional acting experience
H8	Based on work in the field of health improvement since 2004
I9	The experience of the development of a module within a BSc programme in nursing

It is also interesting to note the background of the participants:

- One is in the care sector
- Two are lecturers in further education
- Two are university lecturers (creative industry and nursing)
- Two are self-employed (care/creative industries)
- One is in management (local authority)
- One is in community care (local authority).

No analysis was done to compare RPL credit requirements between universities or between disciplines as this was not the remit of this small research project.

As can be observed in Table 6, only three (33 per cent) participants were completely happy with the RPL process that they had experienced. It is interesting that although three (33 per cent) participants answered 'No' to the question on whether the RPL process could be improved, all gave some improvement suggestions during the interviews, although at least one said that this would be for the benefit of others, not herself.

Table 6 Contentment with process

Student	Other benefits	Happy	Could process be improved? Improvement suggestions
A1	Yes	Partially	Yes - Documentation at the beginning was partially misleading Arrangements for evidence were unworkable Requirements for the claim appeared beyond the remit of level 8 students, e.g. supervising staff
B2	Yes	Yes	No
C3	Yes	Partially	Yes - Considerations should be given to providing a tutorial focused on the structure requirements and explanations of RPL. The latitude extended for RPL was beneficial in my experience and allowed focus to remain on the core course work
D4	Yes	Partially	Yes - It was easy to feel an outsider when you only attend for

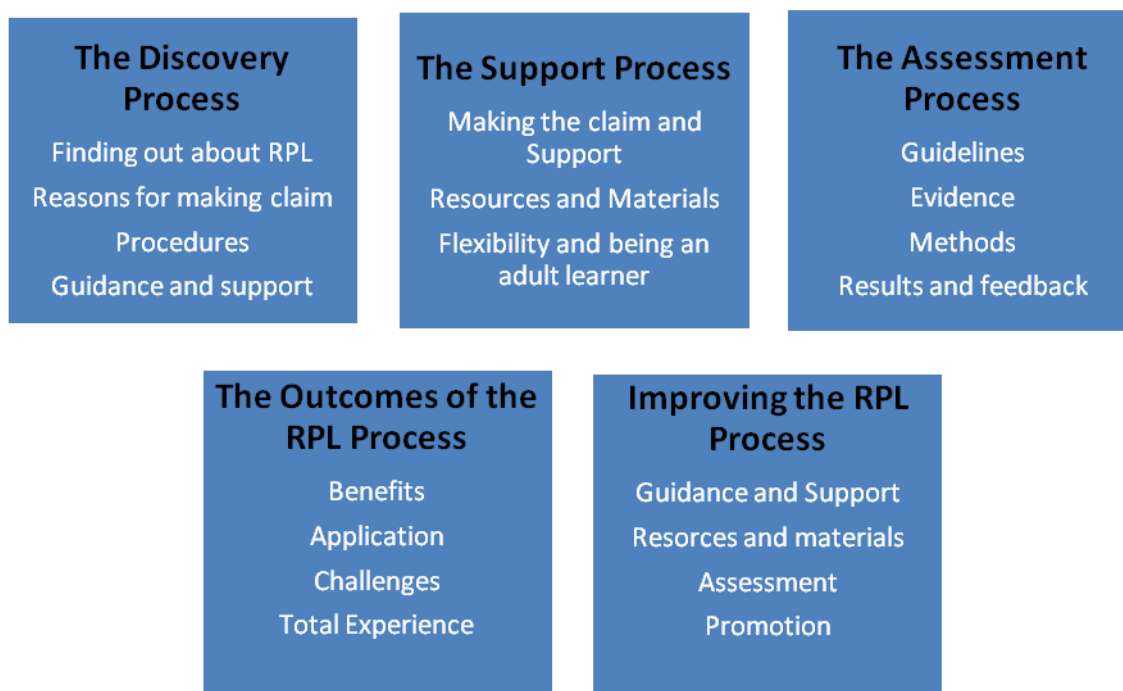|			short periods and come into contact with few students. Maybe a network of part-time students? The process of APEL was very convoluted. Only sheer determination prevented me from giving up in the early stages. Students should be made aware of how lengthy it could be. A short course, maybe just a few hours, at the beginning of the academic year could be set up to guide.	
E5	Yes	Yes	No	
F6	Yes	Partially	Yes - More clarity of how RPL might fit into an overall programme. There was confusion over what modules remained to be taken to graduate - this proved greatly to my disadvantage. There needs to be a change in regulation that allows for actual marks to be given to the RPL. I should have graduated with distinction (the RPL was marked higher than 80 per cent but processed as a simple pass). This is a clear disadvantage to a student.	
G7	Yes	No data	No data	No data
H8	Yes	Yes	No	
I9	Yes	Partially	Yes - Reduction of written word assignment and include questionnaire/interview.	

Thematic analysis and interview findings

Analysis

Two researchers undertook a thematic analysis of the data from the interviews. Each took the transcripts and read them all to gain a perspective of the data set as a whole. They then individually and independently coded them with the research questions in mind and placed the coded items into distinct groupings/themes based upon the connection between the associated codes and interpretation that they belonged together, to arrive at a set of themes and subthemes. These were then compared and a final set of themes and subthemes were agreed. The data was then allocated to sections dealing chronologically with the processes of RPL: The Discovery Process, The Support Process, The Assessment Process, The Outcomes of the RPL Process, and Improving the RPL Process.

The research aim was 'to better understand the learners' experience of RPL in order to identify ways of enhancing RPL processes'. Figure 1 depicts a summary of the themes and subthemes that emerged from the analysis process. The findings are presented within five sections, showing themes relevant to the learners' experiences of RPL.

Figure 1 Learners' experiences of RPL: Themes and subthemes

The Discovery Process	The Support Process	The Assessment Process
Finding out about RPL	Making the claim and Support	Guidelines
Reasons for making claim	Resources and Materials	Evidence
Procedures	Flexibility and being an adult learner	Methods
Guidance and support		Results and feedback

The Outcomes of the RPL Process	Improving the RPL Process
Benefits	Guidance and Support
Application	Resorces and materials
Challenges	Assessment
Total Experience	Promotion

The discovery process

This first section offers an understanding of: how participants found out about RPL, their reasons for making a claim, procedures involved, and guidance and support.

For the majority, information on RPL was provided either on application to a programme of study or on completion of a course which articulated with a degree programme. In addition, one participant was required to undertake RPL as part of a degree programme as a requirement of the job. This would suggest that RPL was already embedded within curricula and was offered as a means for non-traditional entry to degree and postgraduate level study. Only two of the participants had prior knowledge of RPL, while two participants learned of the process by chance through discussion with a colleague.

The reasons for making a claim varied among the participants and ranged from gaining credit to enter or complete a programme of study, to gaining recognition for learning from experience, shortening the programme of study, and as a learning experience in itself. This would suggest that RPL is an attractive option for those who do not have sufficient academic credit to access degree or postgraduate study, and in particular enables learners who are in employment to fast-track study within a shorter time frame. For at least two participants, this latter aspect was the most important, although others expressed the value in this 'speed' aspect indirectly.

'…For me it ticked all the boxes. It gave me that quick access to those level 9 modules so from an absolutely selfish perspective it was the quickest way I could do it and I would promote that for students in my position…' (Participant E5)

'…if I am being 100 per cent honest I wanted to get my MSc as quickly as possible…' (Participant I9)

'… I was absolutely delighted because I had a concern that to go back and restudy at the lower levels, first and second year levels would have been a huge amount of work and I probably would not have gone back to do it or go for the degree when I had already done the work at the higher level…' (Participant H8)

It was apparent that there was no one format or template by which learners made a claim for RPL. Rather, the process was varied but tended to include; identifying how much credit was required, how the credit would be attained, and completion of relevant paperwork. Six of the nine participants indicated that the procedures for RPL were vague, particularly at the start of the process which hindered their experience. This initial lack of structure was viewed as problematic, particularly as participants initially tried to 'get their head round' RPL and the expectation of the claim.

'… I was given all of the forms - it was very confusing. I needed help…so I continued to ask for help because I knew that I had done enough but I did not know how to explain it…' (Participant D4)

'…to be honest with you now, I feel it was a bit vague but that could have been my understanding and not being directly informed, involved in RPL claims before. It took me quite a long time to get my head around it. I found it a wee bit confusing.' (Participant I9)

Some students suggested that at the beginning there was discussion or 'chat' about the RPL claim and that written guidelines were available but that this was insufficient to enable them to fully understand what was expected of them, and that there needed to be more 'clarity' and explanation before they start, or during the initial induction period. This lack of clarity affected some understanding of the requirements and impacted negatively on some students who felt that they had to do more work than was absolutely necessary to get the credit, or felt a little aggrieved because what they thought was the case turned out not to be.

However this was not consistent with another student, who said:

'The guidelines were clear if you followed them.' (Participant B2)

There was also comments from one student that assumptions had been made about prior learning and that this may have contributed to the university tutor thinking that less guidance was needed than actually was.

'…but perhaps they had assumed prior knowledge of - because most of the other candidates came from an education background so perhaps that was something they assumed.' (Participant A1)

One student also commented that there was no guidance whatsoever and that only her own recognition that she had the experience spurred her to continue with the RPL claim.

'… if I had been a younger person and I wasn't sure what I'd done I would have given up... It was my own experience and determination…' (Participant D4)

All of this may suggest the need for clarity in procedures with considerable additional input and support at the start of a claim from the university tutor. This ties in with the theme on support for RPL next.

The support process

Support for those claiming RPL emerged as a prominent area within the data and was linked closely with 'Improving the RPL processes'. Generally, support for RPL was provided by allocated members of academic staff within the institution, with the exception of one participant who indicated that she had no support at all. Programme leaders, lecturers and senior lecturers from the programmes within which the participants were studying and designated staff from departments with direct responsibility for RPL were cited as key support. Only three participants had the support of two members of staff, and only one of these seemed to be an ongoing structured tripartite relationship, where one member had expertise in RPL and the second had programme expertise, which appeared to enable a particularly supportive relationship.

In other cases, there was outside support given from a line manager/head of section and one from a partner who had some experience in putting a report together, without whom the participant felt she would not have understood the requirements of the claim as well as she eventually did.

> 'At the beginning my husband helped me and this was very useful as he took a more analytical approach…' (Participant A1)

> '…I spoke to my line manager who supported me through the degree programme…' (Participant B2)

> '…had the support of the Head of Section who was very supportive.' (Participant C3)

Four participants highlighted the support of peers and extolled the virtues of having a peer support network with whom to share ideas or get help. One suggested that collaborative work with peers would be a good idea, and another suggested that providing examples of previous work would be useful.

> 'I had three colleagues doing it and although we worked at it individually, we discussed what we were doing and helped one another through it…' (Participant C3)

The role undertaken by academic staff in supporting RPL was less clear. Providing guidance and formative feedback on academic writing appeared to be most common, with support generally offered on a one-to-one or electronic basis. One participant highlighted a potential conflict in this support role when the member of academic staff was also assessing the claim. There was little indication of the frequency or length of contact with academic staff for support, although an initial meeting or discussion appeared common. Interestingly, additional resources for RPL were limited and participants were in the main self-directed, and drawing upon existing resources and the internet to support their claims. However, this did not appear to limit their experience of support.

A number of participants did however highlight a lack of clarity in guidance, delay in allocating a supervisor, and five participants indicated a lack of supervisor knowledge of RPL as impacting on their experience of support during the process.

> '… no disrespect because the person was very good, ehm, I don't think she had 100 per cent handle on it…' (Participant I9)

'The tutor had not done one. I was the first. It was a learning experience for us all and he was mentoring me through it…' (Participant G7)

One participant expressed great concern over this and suggested that only her own determination and patience had kept her going. One suggested explicitly that the skills and qualities of the supervisor are very important for the success of the student, although at least three other participants commented on this indirectly.

'…she is very approachable and very understanding of any difficulties and that is very important so that I could ask her any questions…without feeling that I was going to fail or that I was not going to achieve…' (Participant A1)

Interestingly, two participants indicated that although their understanding of RPL was not a problem, it was how to present the work or what should or could be used that was problematic.

'I was not sure how it should be presented or if what I had done was adequate.' (Participant A1)

'I knew that I could prove at the beginning but didn't know how to prove it…' (Participant D4)

Much of this could point to a lack of confidence in students at the beginning that may not be understood or acknowledged by the universities or appreciated by the tutors. Becoming a student again and being judged appears to be a significant factor.

Interestingly, several participants commented specifically on the flexible rather than structured nature of RPL in putting their claim together and recognised the necessity of this due to the individuality of the learner experience; however, some considered that greater structure was required.

This view of flexibility also emerged in the subtheme of being an adult learner. Throughout there is a sense that while students were guided and supported to an extent, participants were required to be independent and self-directed in their learning while completing the claim for RPL. This may account for the desire for structure by some participants and a lack of discussion at the outset of the expectations of learning through RPL.

Understanding of academic terminology and writing was raised on a number of occasions. This links back to assumptions that the universities perhaps make on the prior knowledge of students.

'The language can be a bit confusing. They can be very - there is a lot of terminology that they used at university that seems a bit 'highbrow' and when I worked it out, how I used to laugh as when you put it into plain English…it was quite easy to understand…' (Participant D4)

This theme suggests that support for RPL is an important aspect of the learner experience. The findings suggest that support is provided by academic staff, and while variable, it is most positive when the member of staff has an understanding of RPL and the programme of study, and can effectively guide the content of the claim itself with regular contact with the claimant. Feedback on written work during the process is valued, and speedy allocation of a supervisor is important. A perceived lack of knowledge of the allocated supervisor in relation to RPL was considered detrimental to student success.

The need for resources to support RPL did not emerge as significant for these participants, and this perhaps reflects the nature of the flexibility and diversity of claims and the type of resource which would be universally beneficial. However, there were indications from some that perhaps some online materials, other than guidance materials, should have been provided, and that perhaps a workshop or tutorials would have been preferred methods of support.

The assessment process

A third area to emerge from the data reflected the assessment process. Unsurprisingly, a wide range of assessment methods was used to determine learning from RPL, ranging from CVs and essays to portfolios, vivas and presentations. All the claims appeared to involve a level of academic writing and the application of theory and practice. There was a sense that these methods were predetermined by the institutions, and it appeared that there was very little choice in what could be done to demonstrate the learning from the RPL claim.

This is perhaps unsurprising in that it might be too vague to leave a participant to decide independently what has to be done for the RPL claim; some guidance and structure is absolutely necessary. One participant was of the view that an interview or viva should be a part of the assessment process as it allowed for a greater understanding between the assessor and claimant of the actual knowledge, skill and learning that the claimant had. She commented that this would provide a better indication of learning than a completely written piece for assessment where fabricated evidence could be put forward.

The range of evidence used to support claims was less explicit, although statements of learning were commonly used as evidence was from current job roles and the workplace. Once again this seemed to an extent to be predetermined, and provided learners with some structure while giving flexibility as to the type of evidence they could use to support this. However, one participant would have valued more choice in the amount of evidence that was used where a limitation had been placed on this.

There was variation in the perception of sufficiency of the claims, with one participant commenting on how little was required for the number of credits gained, while two participants highlighted that they had had to do more than was necessary for the claim.

> '…we were shocked to discover we were getting 120 credits for the work we submitted…but then again it's not all just to do with your written pieces of work…' (Participant C3)

> '… I was under the impression that my experience statement and the formal academic part of it was one and the same thing. It turned out that it wasn't. I completed a draft report 12000 words…then to be told I only needed…6000 and to cut bits out. It was a bit of a pain.' (Participant E5)

Feedback was provided for seven of the nine participants for their final submissions, and two expressed a desire for feedback on the submission so that they could use this to assess for themselves where they have been successful. While the criteria for assessment did not appear explicit, notification of results were, in the main, timely via e-mail.

> 'I know it was a pass or fail. It would have been good to get a wee bit of feedback, even a summary sheet just explaining how your written submission was scored and also about your presentation. I am not asking for much but perhaps a summary - something would have been good. (Participant E5)

Outcomes of the RPL process

All participants expressed that they felt RPL was a generally positive and worthwhile experience, indicating that their knowledge and skills had developed as a consequence of engaging in RPL. Specifically this reflected being able to revisit and consolidate existing knowledge and experience; developing academic writing; the ability to recognise, acknowledge and gain credit from experience; and developing an academic mind-set which was advantageous to their future academic study.

> 'Oh, it helped me develop further skills, particularly from an academic perspective… so from my perspective doing the RPL/APEL thing was very, very useful for that in terms of teaching' (Participant F6)

> 'Everything that I went through has been advantageous to what I am doing now.' (Participant G7)

> 'I think what it did do was actually consolidate the amount of learning that I have gained… when I was doing the reflective account I was amazed at how much stuff I had covered…there was real additional learning going on.' (Participant C3)

In addition, participants expressed that they found RPL beneficial on a personal level as it provided a general sense of achievement, raised confidence, developed reflection and thinking styles, and enabled manageable engagement with formal learning by shortening the time to gain their degree. The realisation by them that the learning they had from life experience was useful and valuable appeared to provide them with a certain sense of fulfilment.

> 'It's a great opportunity for someone who has not had the opportunity to study at an earlier stage to take their skill without feeling that they have to do - well…take 5 years out of my life and go to college, that I can do this in short bursts and it has allowed me to make it very manageable…' (Participant H8)

> '…probably increased my determination and patience' (Participant D4)

Importantly, six participants highlighted that they were applying learning from RPL within their workplace. This involved supporting others, using evidence they had gathered for RPL to enhance aspects of their job and to help with promotion.

> 'The benefits were personal benefits in as much as you again had to put something together. You worked for something. Work based? I am using the plan and have put into practice to help particularly with a class. So, probably quite beneficial.' (Participant B2)

> '…the main issue for me was around, well two issues - the whole of the understanding of the academic writing part… and what that means in the workplace.' (Participant E5)

> 'It raised my confidence levels. I felt that I would be more confident in a peer setting…it would also…help me apply for promotion or other jobs as it verified that what I do equates to an HND…' (Participant A1)

While the sense overall was positive, the participants did note challenges associated with RPL, expressing the experience as daunting, time consuming, convoluted, and at times

frustrating. In general, the interpretation of this was that these challenges largely related to the poor, contradictory or lack of guidance and supervision. Interestingly for those students who worked in education, there was an unexpected challenge as they assumed the student role and a perception that they would have an assumed prior knowledge of RPL and academic expectations would differ due to their work role.

> '…I think you adopt the student role. You revert, because although you have the knowledge I think you also look for as much advice as you possibly can…you don't want to expose yourself' (Participant I9)

Improving the RPL process

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this final theme elicited a considerable response from the participants and offered valuable insight into ways in which RPL might be enhanced. Key to this theme was guidance and strategies to support learning.

Clearer articulation of the use and fit of RPL within specified programmes was considered necessary to enable all learners the opportunity of RPL, to prevent learners doing more than they had to, and to ensure appropriate module choices were made. Improving the guidance at the initial stages of the process and on the content of a claim was noted by six participants. This reflected a spectrum of issues including clarity of the process at the start including expectations of the learner; timing of RPL during a programme of study; clearer and more user-friendly language in RPL guidance; flexibility of choice of evidence for RPL; and a more structured process.

Participants expressed the value of a number of different strategies to support RPL, from one-to-one sessions and tutorials to group work, workshops and additional resources. The need for an explicit tutor who knew what they were doing was recognised as essential, as was real, ongoing discussion rather than a one-off or paper instruction. The importance of peer support and collaborative learning was notable and reflected the prominence of peers as a significant support for RPL. Examples of RPL claims would also have been beneficial as indicated by participants.

While not representative of all participants, the place of RPL in university assessment regulations was raised and is worth reporting. While the credit associated with RPL was recognised by the institution and formed credit for the award itself, the lack of an awarding mark for the RPL submission and volume of credit claimed impacted on the ability of one student to gain a distinction.

> 'One of the things that would have really helped would have been if there had been a mechanism to actually award a mark to the RPL...I believe that my supervisor had marked it, the paper at 85 per cent...which of course I am happy about and/but when it went through the panel it just went through as a pass…the consequence…is that…I wasn't able to graduate with a distinction…that left a bit of a sour taste for me…'
> (Participant F6)

If these 'conditions' prevail, such criteria should be made explicit at the outset and in guidance to ensure applicants are clear of the impact of RPL on their award. The type of assessment method or format of the claim was also mentioned as an area for improvement with an interview being considered by one participant as an essential part of the assessment methods that should be used.

The final issue within this theme related to the promotion of RPL, with two participants highlighting the need to advertise RPL much more explicitly within universities and externally as a mechanism for gaining credit for prior learning and experience.

> 'Perhaps more people need to know about it. Perhaps it needs to be advertised more.' (Participant A1)

> 'From a university perspective, perhaps by promoting it to others? To let someone come in and do it more quickly. This is something worth pursuing.' (Participant E5)

Conclusions

Conclusion that can be made from this small study will have to be considered tentative in view of the size of the study itself, however the study does raise some interesting issues. The researchers on this project consider this to have been a useful pilot or exploratory project which has raised significant issues and has provided good, substantiated information for further research in this area. Although the results cannot be generalised to all university RPL processes, what has been highlighted will be useful for those running RPL processes to ensure their systems do not have the problems identified.

Conclusions from this research are:

- RPL is a worthwhile process for participants for a number of reasons, including saving time in getting a qualification, recognising the value of learning from experience, increasing qualities, skills and knowledge bases, and using the RPL process itself as useful and practical learning experience;
- All processes involved in RPL need some review to improve them from the learner's perspective, particularly those in respect of the guidance and support that is provided to participants;
- RPL processes are not consistent, nor necessarily equitable between or within universities; and
- Staff supervising an RPL claimant needs to fully understand the RPL processes and where they fit into the curriculum to enable them to guide and work with students in producing an acceptable RPL claim.

Limitations

Limitations in this project related to the following:

- A longer period in which to carry out a study of this nature to provide rigorous outcomes would be necessary and a longitudinal study on RPL participant might be useful.
- The study was limited to the number of participants that it could process in the short time period and at the time of year it was conducted. A much larger and wider sample and range of students would make this a much more beneficial study.
- The involvement of a larger and wider range of academic institutions would have been beneficial. Time for ethical approval and a limited opportunity to contact universities hampered this research. This would also have provided a greater information base as to how different universities employ RPL centrally and within a range of disciplines.

Recommendations

Overall, RPL is viewed positively and seems to particularly develop knowledge and skills in those undertaking the process. Some recommendations for future research are suggested below. These are not to be considered exhaustive, but perhaps should be considered essential for the progress of RPL process.

- Our research had a wide focus. Research projects which delve into specific areas, for example the assessment process itself, might enable a greater depth of answers to be obtained providing more specific and detailed information.
- Guidance and support appeared to be fundamental to the RPL experience. Research into how this is currently enabled and the opportunity for improvement strategies should be carried out. Further exploration of the specific nature of support offered including content and timing might extend understanding of the value for learners and the impact on academic staff.
- Some attention should be given to the impact of assessment regulations on the use of RPL and ways in which marks could be allocated to allow students the possibility of gaining distinction. If RPL is to be encouraged and promoted, engagement should perhaps not limit the potential to achieve distinction.
- A perceived lack of knowledge of the allocated supervisor in relation to RPL was considered detrimental and this suggests consideration should be given to some research into the support and education of academic staff involved in this process. Furthermore, the implications for staff and learners when dual roles of supervisor and assessor of RPL are assumed would be worthy of further exploration.
- The issue of fairness of expectations for students in terms of what they have to do for credit is an area that is worth exploring, and this might include issues such as assessment criteria. The feedback issues might also be worth exploring to identify the need for, and best practice in, feedback throughout and at the end of RPL claims.
- Research on the impact of undergoing an RPL claim on the development of the participant and from the perspective of the academic institution or workplace would be useful for assessing the benefits of RPL generally and to increase participation in it from the university perspective.
- Assessment is an area of research worthy of attention as it highlights areas around flexibility and structure of RPL; involvement of learners in determining evidence and assessment methods; criteria for assessment; and academic decision making regarding nature of evidence and assessment methods for RPL.
- Training/CPD for staff on RPL would be beneficial to enable staff to effectively support students through the processes, from discovery to final submission and results.

Appendices

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Appendix 1

The Quality Assurance Agency in conjunction with Glasgow Caledonian University and in collaboration with other Scottish HEIs

Exploring Learner Experience of the Recognition of Prior informal Learning Process
(May - July 2012)

You are invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why the study is being conducted and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask questions if there is anything that is unclear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

Why is this study being carried out?
The aim is to explore learners' experiences of engaging in Recognition of Prior Informal Learning (RPL) within the Scottish higher education sector. The Quality Assurance Agency Scotland who oversees the quality assurance and standards of higher education funds this research. The outcomes of the research will be used to improve the process of RPL.

Why have you been chosen?
You have been invited to take part in the study because you have been involved in using your prior experience and/or informal learning to gain academic credit in relation to your current or previous programme of study at university. Ethical approval to undertake the study has been granted by Glasgow Caledonian University and permission to interview you has come from the university from which you gained the credit.

Do you have to take part?
Participation in this study is voluntary and participants are free to leave the research at any time up until the beginning of the data analysis. Agreeing or declining to participate or withdrawing from the research will in no way affect current or future academic study at university.

What will happen if you take part?
Your involvement in this research will include completing a questionnaire and taking part in an interview that will take place either face to face or by telephone. If you decide to take part, the principal researcher will contact you by e-mail and attached will be a short paper questionnaire that you will be asked to complete and return to the principal researcher by e-mail. In addition, you will be asked to decide whether you wish to be interviewed face to face or by telephone and a mutually convenient date, time and where appropriate, venue for the interview will be arranged. The face-to-face and telephone interviews will be digitally recorded.

How long will it take?
The short paper questionnaire will take approximately 10 minutes to complete. The face-to-face or telephone interview will last approximately 20 minutes.

What will happen to the information that you give?
A questionnaire and semi-structured face to face or telephone interview, which will be digitally recorded, are the primary research methods for this study.

Access and recruitment of participants will be undertaken on behalf of the principal researcher by a designated individual within each collaborating institution. An e-mail containing the participant information sheet and consent form will be sent to participants inviting involvement in the study. Before agreeing to become involved participants will have an opportunity to discuss this with the principal researcher.

Participants will return completed consent forms to the principal researcher either by e-mail or by post. On receipt of consent, the principal researcher will contact participants by e-mail and attached will be a short paper questionnaire that should be completed and returned to the principal researcher by either e-mail or post. In addition, participants will be asked to decide whether they wish to be interviewed face to face or by telephone and a mutually convenient date, time and where appropriate, venue for the interview will be arranged.

Completed questionnaires will be printed and kept by the principal researcher in a locked filing cabinet while the original questionnaires will be retained on a password-protected computer. The digitally recorded interviews will be transferred to the principal researcher's password protected computer and transcribed. Participants will only be identified by a code number. Only the principal researcher will know which code applies to which participant. Confidentiality can therefore be assured. Only the principal researcher will have access to the data in its original form, however where a member of the research team interviews a participant they will be aware, at that point, with whom they are speaking. Limited anonymity can be assured within the first stages of the research and completely during the analysis stage. An identifier will be used for each participant. This identifier will be used for each participant. This identifier will be used to identify data associated with the particular participant, i.e. the questionnaire and interview recording. Confidentiality will be maintained within the research team. No identifying features or personal details will be reported in the final report for the funding body or in any wider dissemination. There is a time implication for participants but all research activities, involving participants will be done for their convenience.

The questionnaire and digitally recorded interview will be held on the computer of the principal researcher which is password protected. All data used will be anonymised for the purposes of analysis so that no person or institution will be identified during the analysis, evaluation or final product. Only the principal researcher will have access to all data in its original form. Upon giving your consent at the start of the study, you will be assigned a code that will be used as an identifier, known to the principal researcher and with limited knowledge for the research team. This identifier will latterly be used to identify data associated with the particular participant, i.e. your questionnaire and interview recording.

Original data will be deleted from the principal researcher's computer, including emptying from the recycle bin, after the appropriate period, which in this case is one year. The recording will be transcribed verbatim and data will be anonymised. Any data held on the principal researcher's computer will be password protected, and all other data will be kept in a locked filing cabinet accessible only to the research team. On completion of the study the digitally recorded interview and questionnaire will be kept for a period of one year, stored in accordance with the Data Protection Act (1998), thereafter it will be destroyed. No identifying features or personal details will be reported in the final report for the funding body or in any wider dissemination.

Will you benefit directly from this research study?
You will not benefit directly from the study. However, it is anticipated that future RPL learners will benefit from enhancement of the RPL processes because of this study.

Will participation cause any problems?
Participants will be at no risk before, during or after the research process. Interviews will be conducted at the most appropriate time/venue for the interviewee and can be either face-to-face or telephone interviews (to suit the participant).

What to do now
If you would like more information before you decide about taking part, please contact the principal researcher, Dr Margaret Harris at the e-mail address shown below. If you would like to take part, please read and complete the consent form, which accompanies this participant information sheet to indicate you have agreed to participate in the study, complete the questionnaire and be interviewed. The completed consent form should then be sent to the principal researcher at the email address below or posted to the address noted below.

Once your consent form is received, the principal researcher will get in touch with you to arrange for completion of the questionnaire and interview.

<u>Principal Researcher</u>

Dr Margaret Harris   email: m.harris@abdn.ac.uk
Room 504
MacRobert Building,
School of Education,
Kings College,
University of Aberdeen.
AB4 5UA

CONSENT FORM

Appendix 2

The Quality Assurance Agency in conjunction with Glasgow Caledonian University and in collaboration with other Scottish HEIs

Name of Principal Researcher: Dr Margaret Harris
Project Team: Julie Brown & Linda Proudfoot
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Exploring Learner Experience of the Recognition of Prior informal Learning Process (May - July 2012)

Please tick the boxes to indicate consent

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for ☐
   the above study.

2. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ☐
   ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.

3. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to ☐
   withdraw at any time prior to the data analysis, without giving any reason,
   without current or future study at university being affected.

4. I consent to complete a short questionnaire ☐

5. I consent to participate in a digitally recorded, face-to-face or telephone ☐
   individual interview   and understand the use of anonymous quotes will be
   included in the research report, which may be disseminated widely.

6. I consent to take part in the above study. ☐

7. I am over 18 ☐

Name of participant   Date   Signature of participant

Please keep a copy of this form for yourself, and return a signed copy to:
Dr Margaret Harris at m.harris@abdn.ac.uk or if unable to e mail, please send to: Dr
Margaret Harris, Room 504 MacRobert Building, School of Education, Kings College,
University of Aberdeen, AB4 5UA

QUESTIONNAIRE

Appendix 3

Participant name:	Participant ID:

Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to take part in the research on the Learners' Experiences of the RPL Process. By undertaking this research, we hope to gain insight into how we can improve the process for learners, and be able to make recommendation to that effect.

This questionnaire should take no more than 10 minute to complete. It can be completed prior to the interview and sent back to the lead researcher by e-mail or it can be completed on the day of the interview and handed to the interviewer just before the interview commences.

We do appreciate the time you are giving in order for us to carry out this research and we are happy to provide you with a copy of the completed report, if you require this. Please indicate your preference to the interviewer.

Please complete all questions if possible, and tick answers where indicated.
All information will be kept confidential.

A. Your Details

1. Age: 20-30 ☐   31-40 ☐   41-50 ☐   51-60 ☐   61+ ☐

2. Male ☐   Female ☐

3. Institution(s) where RPL took place?

> [ ]

4. Please state all of your post school qualifications.

> [ ]

B. Your RPL claim

5. Was your RPL claim for previously unaccredited learning, e.g. skills and knowledge that you have gained through life and work experiences?
Yes ☐   No ☐   Partially ☐

6. In which year(s) did you make your RPL claim (s)? If there were more than two concentrate on the two most recent.

☐ ☐

7. Did you go through the RPL process before or after entry to your programme?

Before	☐	**After**	☐	**First Claim** ☐
Before	☐	**After**	☐	**Second Claim** ☐

8. Was your RPL claim for (tick all that apply): Claim 1   Claim 2

- Credit for a full module? ☐ ☐

- Credit for entry to a course or programme? ☐ ☐

- Partial credit for a module? ☐ ☐

- Partial credit for a programme? ☐ ☐
- Discipline-based credit? ☐ ☐

- General Credit? ☐ ☐

- Other- please specify:

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9. What amount of credit were you claiming and at what level (s)?

Claim 1

Credits	at	Level
Credits	at	Level
Credits	at	Level

Claim 2

Credits	at	Level
Credits	at	Level
Credits	at	Level

10. How much credit did you get?
Claim 1

Credits	at	Level
Credits	at	Level
Credits	at	Level
Other		

Claim 2

Credits	at	Level
Credits	at	Level
Credits	at	Level
Other		

11. What did you have to produce or do for your RPL claim (s) e.g. portfolio, essay?
Claim 1

12. What learning or experience(s) did you base your claim (s) on?
Claim 1

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C. Reflection on the process

13. **Irrespective of credit gained (or otherwise), do you feel that you benefitted from the RPL process?**
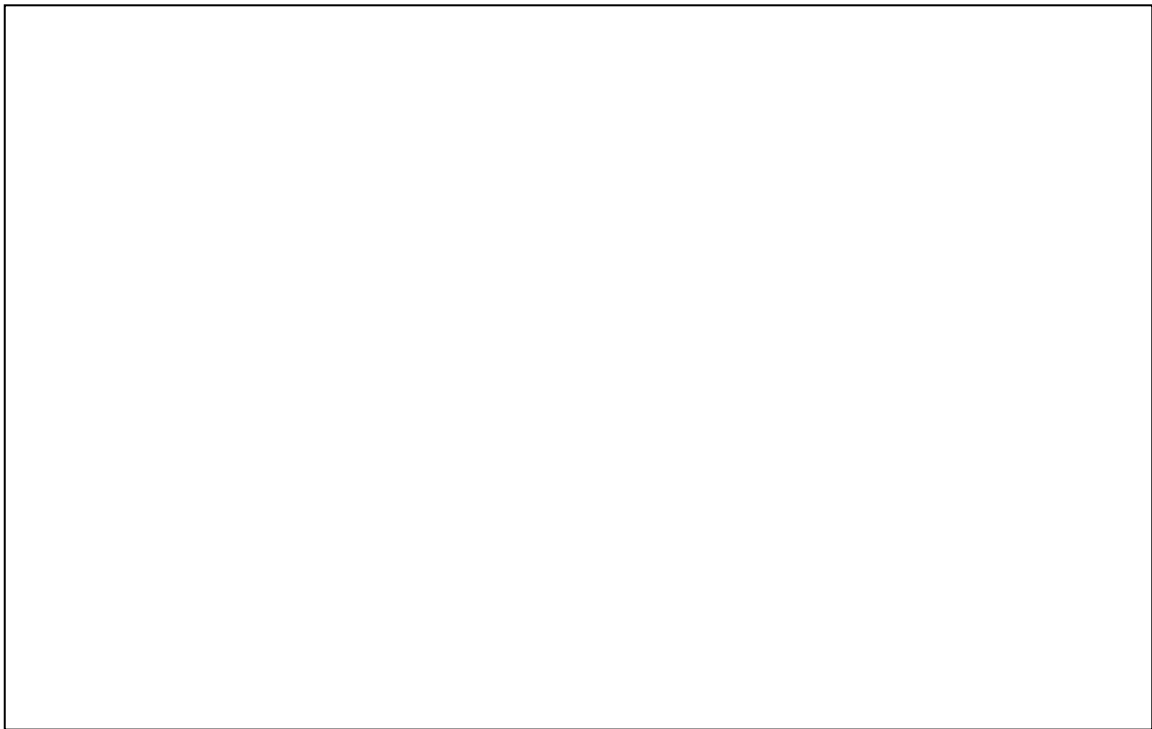**Yes** ☐ **No** ☐

14. **Were you happy with the process you went through for your RPL claim(s)?**
Yes ☐ **No** ☐ **Partially** ☐

15. **Do you believe that the process could be improved from the learner's perspective?**
Yes ☐ **No** ☐

16. **If yes to question 15, please list your suggested improvements below.**
Suggested improvements

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Thank you for your participation.
It is greatly appreciated.
We now look forward to the interview.
Please return the form by e-mail to m.harris@abdn.ac.uk

PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Appendix 4

Interview Questions on Learners' experiences of the RPL process

This research aims to gain a better understanding of the learners' experience in order to identity ways of enhancing RPL processes. The project will develop an evidence base to inform practice and future research

These interview questions intend to gather this information in conjunction with the questionnaire that will already have been completed. This form should be read in conjunction with the information sheet that will already have been provided.

A. What is your experience of the RPL Process?

1. How did you become aware of RPL?
2. What made you decide to complete an application for RPL?
3. What steps did you go through to make your RPL claim?
4. Who supported you through the RPL process at the university and what was their role in the university, e.g. administrator, lecturer?
5. What additional resources did you draw on in going through the process?
6. Tell me about how your results were communicated to you.
7. How would you describe the experience?

B. What have been the benefits to you of undertaking the RPL process?

8. Reflecting on your experience(s), what benefits were there to you, other than gaining credit, of going through the RPL process?

C. How could the RPL process have been better for you?

9. Reflecting on your experience (s), what would you suggest might be done to improve the RPL process for the learner?
10. Is there anything else you wish to add? If so, what?