



**The Scottish Credit and
Qualifications Framework**

Recognition of Prior Informal Learning (RPL)

Core Principles and Key Features

June 2005

CONTENTS

	Page
1. Introduction	3
2. Purpose of Guidelines	3
3. Scope of Guidelines	3
4. Use of RPL within the context of the SCQF	4
5. Core Principles of RPL	5
6. Possible Outcomes of RPL process	7
7. Key Features of RPL process	8
8. Summary guidance notes on key features	8
9. RPL : The Learner's Journey	13
Diagram indicating possible RPL routes for learners	

1. Introduction

This document identifies the core principles and key features of the RPL process within the context of the Scottish Credit & Qualifications Framework (SCQF). Further guidance on the way in which RPL can be developed and used within the context of the SCQF is contained in the SCQF RPL Guidelines.¹

2. Purpose of guidelines

2.1 The purpose of the SCQF RPL Guidelines is to:

- provide guidance to learning providers across all post-16 education and training sectors in Scotland on managing the process of recognising the prior informal learning of learners within the context of the SCQF;
- provide a set of core principles and key features that will enable users of the SCQF to have confidence that there is consistency in approaches to recognising prior informal learning;
- Support the practice of recognising prior learning as part of the lifelong learning agenda in Scotland.

2.2 The term **prior informal learning** can also be described as **prior experiential learning**. It covers all prior learning which has not previously been assessed or credit-rated. This includes prior learning achieved through life and work experiences (paid and voluntary), as well as prior learning gained in non-formal contexts through community-based learning; workplace learning and training; continuing professional development and independent learning.

2.3 The guidelines are not prescriptive, but are intended to encourage a range of approaches to RPL across the sectors to take into account the needs and goals of different learner groups.

3. Scope of the Guidelines

3.1 The SCQF RPL guidelines centre on the **core principles** and **key features** of the RPL process within the context of the SCQF. The guidelines are learner-centred and recognise the continuum of learner needs. This continuum ranges from those learners not involved in a formal learning process who need support in developing their confidence before entering formal programmes or seeking SCQF credit, to those individuals who are confident as learners and who are actively seeking a means of recognition of their learning.

¹ The SCQF RPL Guidelines can be downloaded from the SCQF website : www.scqf.org.uk
Additional guidance on Definitions; the Scope of the Guidelines; the Use of RPL within the context of the SCQF; Who can undertake RPL?; the Benefits of RPL ; and a Glossary of Terms is contained in the full guidelines document.

4. Use of RPL within the context of the SCQF

Different forms of recognition

4.1 Recognition of prior informal learning can be undertaken by a learner for **personal and career development**, or to support the transition between informal and formal learning; or for **gaining credit** (for entry to and/or credit within formal programmes of study).

4.2 **RPL for personal/career development** focuses on **formative** recognition (supporting a continuing learning process through identifying a learning pathway) . Formative recognition may result in a mapping or a notional levelling of an individual's learning within the context of the SCQF as part of an educational guidance or personal development planning process.

4.3 **RPL for credit**, focuses on **summative** recognition (to gain entry to, or credit within, a formal programme of study). Summative recognition will involve a formal assessment of prior informal, or experiential, learning as part of the credit-rating process.

4.4 The provision of both forms of RPL should take place within the context of clearly defined quality assurance mechanisms.

4.5 It is important to ensure that a learner clearly understands the process and possible outcomes of both RPL routes before he or she makes the decision to proceed.

Link between the two forms of recognition

4.6 For some learners, the process of formative recognition may be a preparatory stage to summative recognition. The process of identifying learning through reflection and considering how evidence of this learning can be provided is common to both forms of recognition.

Recognising comparability between the outcomes of informal and formal learning

4.7 All RPL processes contain an element of reflection and identification of the learning gained through experiential or informal learning which can be related to:

- a set of core or subject-specific skills or national occupational standards within a community-based learning or workplace training context (for **recognition for personal/career development**) or;
- the core learning skills required to successfully undertake a programme of formal learning (for **bridging to support the transition between informal and formal learning**) or ;
- the entry requirements to a formal programme of study (for **recognition for entry**) or;

- the outcomes of a formal learning programme or qualification (for **recognition for credit** within a programme or towards a qualification).

4.8 The key premise of RPL is that :

- **recognition is given for learning**, not for experience alone;
- **the learning that is recognised should be transferable** and not just context-specific;
- **credit awarded as a result of RPL is of the same value** as credit gained through formal learning.

This should be clearly understood by learners; learning providers; employers; and receiving institutions.

5. Core principles of RPL

5.1 A variety of different approaches to RPL can be developed and used by learning providers to meet the needs and goals of learner groups across the different sectors.

5.2 All RPL provision, however, whether for personal/career development or for credit, should be underpinned by the following core principles. The aim of the core principles is to ensure effective, quality-assured practice that will enable all users of the SCQF to have confidence in the outcomes of RPL. By identifying core principles as the parameters within which all RPL provision within the context of the SCQF should operate consistency will be more feasibly achieved.

5.3 Learner-focussed

RPL should be a gateway, and not a barrier, to learning. RPL should promote the positive aspects of an individual's learning experience (as opposed to its deficiency). RPL should be a voluntary activity on the part of the learner. The learner's needs and reasons for recognition should be paramount.

5.4 Accessibility

RPL should be an accessible and inclusive process, applicable to all learners at all levels. Accessibility can be facilitated through:

- Initial information and advice (awareness raising);
- Manageable systems in terms of time and money from the perspective of both learner and learning provider;
- Easy to understand and easy to implement processes;
- Embedding of RPL in the programme design stage in order to become an integral part of the provision of colleges, SQA-approved centres and HEIs, rather than an 'add-on', marginal activity.

5.5 Flexibility

A range of different approaches to RPL in terms of both support and assessment should be encouraged to address the diversity of learner needs, goals and experiences across the different sectors.

5.6 Reliability, transparency & consistency

In managing RPL processes are necessary to ensure confidence in the outcomes.

5.7. Clarity of role definition

The roles and responsibilities of learner; learning provider; and receiving institution should be clearly defined. Staff involved in managing and supporting the RPL process should be provided with appropriate training and support.

5.8 Quality

RPL should be underpinned by Quality Assurance mechanisms. Moderation of RPL for personal and career development should focus on ensuring that the standards of notional levelling are consistently applied. Moderation of RPL for credit should be integrated within existing quality assurance processes and should be available for scrutiny for appropriate external quality assurance, for example by an external auditing body.

5.9 Collaboration between sectors should be encouraged in order to meet the needs of the learner more effectively. Links should be encouraged between learning providers and receiving institutions, and between these and organisations such as Careers Scotland, in supporting learners and potential learners to gain recognition for their prior informal learning within the context of the SCQF. Collaboration should extend to the sharing of case studies; examples of good practice; and approaches to support and assessment.

6. Possible Outcomes of the RPL Process

6.1 RPL for Personal/Career Development (formative recognition)²

This can result in the :

- **Recognition by self, and by others** (peers; colleagues; employer; community) of the value of strengths and skills gained through prior informal learning to increase learner self-confidence and motivation ;
- A more supported **transition from an informal to a formal learning context** in a college; SQA-approved centre or university as part of a 'bridging' process;
- A **mapping or notional levelling** of an individual's learning within the context of the SCQF in order to help identify possible progression routes;
- **Planning of individual learning pathway**; personal/career development plan; or personal learning plan which will build on this learning in order to achieve goals;
- **Preparation of RPL claims for either general credit or for specific credit** to gain entry to, or credit within, a formal programme of study or qualification.

6.2 RPL for Credit (Summative Recognition)³

This can result in the :

- **Gaining of entry to the first level of a programme at a college or HEI** (as an alternative to normal entry requirements if the learner can demonstrate appropriate knowledge and skills equivalent to the admissions requirements);
- **Gaining of general SCQF credit** (this could be an intermediate stage between RPL for personal and career development (formative recognition) and RPL for specific credit (summative recognition), or could be an outcome in its own right);
- **Gaining of specific credit within a programme of study at a college, HEI, or other learning and training provider** (credit can either be for particular units/modules; or for entire levels of a programme or qualification).

² For details on where RPL for Personal/Development can take place please see SCQF RPL Guidelines which can be downloaded from SCQF website: www.scqf.org.uk

³ For details on where RPL for Credit can take place please see SCQF RPL Guidelines which can be downloaded from SCQF website: www.scqf.org.uk

7. Key Features of the RPL process

Learning providers may need to consider the following key features when developing and operating processes of RPL

1. **initial guidance** on the RPL process
2. **supporting learners** in reflective process, identifying learning through experience (skills, knowledge and understanding), selecting and presenting evidence of that learning, identifying areas for further learning)
3. **mechanisms for gathering and presenting evidence** of learning
4. **recognition process** for RPL claims
 - a. notional levelling/mapping –individual learning plan; bridging (*RPL for Personal/Career Development*)
 - b. assessment, credit limits, fee process (*RPL for Credit*)
5. **monitoring process** for RPL procedures
6. **support for staff** engaged in support and assessment of RPL
7. integration of provision within **quality assurance** systems

8. Summary Guidance Notes on Key Features

These summary guidance notes may be helpful to learning providers in considering the key features of the RPL process. More detailed guidance on the key features of the RPL process is contained in the full SCQF RPL Guidelines.

8.1. Initial guidance on the RPL process

Learners, or adults considering returning to learn, should be given preliminary information and guidance on RPL in terms of the principles, policy, procedures and any cost involved. The learning provider should ensure a learner clearly understands each stage of the process and has realistic expectations regarding the possible outcomes of RPL before he or she makes the decision to undertake RPL. Such information should be provided in written or electronic form, as well as through discussion. This information should be clear, accurate and accessible.

If the learner decides to proceed with RPL, the learning provider should organise appropriate support for the RPL process.

8.2. Supporting learners

Each stage of the RPL process should be clearly defined and appropriate support provided for each stage.

Learners making a claim for RPL for credit will require support for the RPL process itself, as well as support in the subject, vocational or professional area in which they are making the RPL claim⁴.

Support can be provided through:

- **Written or e-learning materials**
- **Individual tutorials/meetings**
- **Group sessions,**
- **RPL modules**
- **Electronic communication**

If appropriate, collaborative arrangements for support can be agreed between learning providers; employers and voluntary organisations; and other organisations such as Careers Scotland.

Support must be provided by staff that are appropriately trained, supported and resourced to carry out this role.

8.3. Gathering and Presenting Evidence of Learning

Clear mechanisms for making RPL claims must be in place. Evidence of learning can be gathered through a variety of different mechanisms. Where possible, more streamlined, less resource intensive approaches should be used to make the process more manageable for both learner and provider. The following mechanisms provide an indication of the range of approaches being used, but do not represent an exhaustive list⁵. These can include:

- **Reflective Account;**
- **Project work;**
- **Structured Interview/oral assessment;**
- **'Assessment on demand', such as exam or assignment;**
- **Simulation/observation of practice**
- **Mapping of learning outcomes**
- **Existing work-based learning practices in evaluation and assessment**
- **Profiling**
- **Record of Volunteer Learning and Experience**
- **Europass Curriculum Vitae (CV) and Europass Language Passport**
- **Portfolio**

Learners should be provided with guidance on the mechanism(s) to be used and should be supported in the gathering or production of this evidence.

⁴ For further details on support please see SCQF RPL Guidelines which can be downloaded from SCQF website: www.scqf.org.uk

⁵ For descriptions of mechanisms for gathering and presenting evidence of learning please see the SCQF RPL Guidelines which can be downloaded from SCQF website: www.scqf.org.uk

The approach used will be determined by the purpose for which RPL is being undertaken.

If a learner is undertaking RPL for Personal/Career Development (formative recognition) in order to identify an individual learning pathway (rather than seeking the award of credit), the process does not require a formal assessment of learning to take place. However, if a learner is undertaking formative recognition in order to prepare them to undertake RPL for credit (summative recognition), the evidence gathered may be submitted for formal assessment at some future point. If an RPL claim for credit is being made, the learner must make clear statements about what was actually learned and provide supportive evidence that the learning claimed has been achieved.

In sum, the appropriate mechanism for the gathering of evidence should be determined by the needs and goals of the learner and the context in which RPL is taking place.

8. 4. Recognition process for RPL claims

The learner must be advised of the recognition process as part of the guidance and support provided in the preparation of the RPL claim.

The recognition process for **RPL for Personal/Career Development** may involve:

- mapping the outcomes of learning within the SCQF, or a notional levelling of learning, in order to identify possible progression routes to build on that learning. This mapping or 'notional levelling' may be undertaken by comparing the outcomes of learning to SCQF level descriptors; core skills or national occupational standards (NOS)
- and/or, identifying and further developing core skills gained through prior informal learning as part of bridging activities to ease the transition between informal and formal learning⁶.

The recognition process for **RPL for Credit** involves a formal assessment of learning which involves determining:

- the **comparability of the learning** to either the:
 - Particular requirements for entry to a programme in terms of knowledge, skills and understanding (*for RPL for entry*);
 - Existing or negotiated individual programme unit or modules (*for RPL for credit against particular units/module*);
 - The outcomes, or competences, for part of a level of a programme or qualification in a particular subject or vocational area (*for RPL for general or specific credit*);
 - The outcomes for an entire level of a programme or qualification (*for RPL for general or specific credit*).
- the **level of credit**
- the **volume of credit** ⁷

⁶ For further details on the recognition process for RPL for Personal/Career Development please see the SCQF RPL Guidelines which can be downloaded from SCQF website: www.scqf.org.uk

The following widely applied **assessment criteria** can be used by staff to assist them in determining whether the evidence presented is satisfactory and appropriate:

- **Acceptability:** is there an appropriate match between the evidence presented and the learning outcomes being demonstrated; is the evidence reliable and valid?
- **Sufficiency:** is there a sufficient breadth and depth of evidence, including evidence of reflection, to demonstrate the achievement of the learning outcomes or competences claimed?
- **Authenticity:** is the evidence clearly the outcome of the learner's own effort?
- **Currency:** is what is being assessed current learning? Does the learner need to provide evidence of having kept the learning up-to-date, if the learning experience occurred some time ago?

Credit limits for RPL within formal programmes of study

Programme limits, if any, on the credit that can be awarded for RPL within a programme of study or towards a qualification should be clearly stated, as should any implications for progression, grading or classification. Institutional policy on credit limits should be consistently applied. **Double counting of credit** should be avoided.⁸

Fee process for RPL for credit

If providers and receiving institutions decide to charge fees for the RPL process, the fee structure for RPL, i.e. the methodology for calculating fees, must be clearly stated and consistently applied. The costing mechanism for RPL procedures should be determined by providers and receiving institutions.

Any fees charged should reflect the amount of staff time spent in supporting and assessing RPL claims.

RPL modules or units should be considered by providers as a means of attracting funding and enabling part-time learners, for example, to access fee waivers.

8. 5. Monitoring process for RPL procedures

The process of monitoring and reviewing the operation of RPL procedures should be clearly defined and integrated within the existing quality assurance and enhancement mechanisms of the learning provider.

⁷ For further guidance on determining the level and volume of credit as part of the recognition process for RPL for Credit please see the SCQF RPL Guidelines which can be downloaded from SCQF website: www.scqf.org.uk

⁸ For further explanation of double counting of credit please see the SCQF RPL Guidelines which can be downloaded from SCQF website: www.scqf.org.uk

Mechanisms for monitoring and reviewing RPL procedures may take into account:

- the number of learners undertaking RPL;
- the success rate of RPL claims;
- an evaluation of the learner experience, including the time taken by learners to undertake the RPL process;
- an evaluation of the staff experience, including the time spent by staff in supporting the RPL process and managing the process of recognition;
- a tracking of the progression of learners who have undertaken RPL
- an evaluation of the effectiveness of any collaborative arrangements with other learning providers /learning partnerships/receiving institutions;
- reports from external assessors or verifiers, where appropriate.

8. 6. Support for staff engaged in support and assessment of RPL

Staff involved in the planning, development and operation of RPL procedures need to be provided with training, and continuing support for this role. This will require adequate resources.

The roles and responsibilities of both staff and learners in the RPL process need to be clearly defined.

The role played by staff in supporting and in assessing RPL claims for credit should be clearly separated.

8.7. Integration of RPL provision within quality assurance systems

RPL processes need to be fully integrated within organisational quality assurance systems to ensure transparency, consistency and reliability. RPL processes should be available for scrutiny by appropriate external quality assurance, for example by an external auditing body.

RPL as an entry route and a means of gaining credit within formal programmes of study should become more embedded within curriculum design and explicitly addressed at the programme approval stage. Where possible, learning outcomes should be expressed in a way that enables a variety of different routes for their achievement as well as the use of flexible modes of assessment.

9. RPL: The Learners Journey.

Diagram indicating possible RPL routes for learners

