



## **BFUG Network “Recognition of Prior Learning”**

### **REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR 2012 MINISTERIAL CONFERENCE**

## **MEETINGS AND OPERATION OF THE NETWORK**

### **Background**

The need for a European wide Network for RPL was identified after a meeting of RPL practitioners and policy makers was held in Brussels in February 2010. The note of this meeting can be found at: <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/events/RPL/RPL.asp>.

The Network’s Terms of Reference (the full terms appear at Annex A) are to:

- Promote and inform the effective use and practice of RPL across participating countries
- Provide a means for member countries to share and learn from policies and practice across Europe in relation to RPL development
- Build links between European countries at various stages in RPL development.

The Terms of Reference were revised following the setting up of a Steering Group to oversee the operation of the network.

### **Operation and meetings**

Meetings of a Steering Group constitute the formal mechanism for planning the activities of the network, whereas meetings that involve the whole Network focus on sharing practice. The Network is also actively seeking links to other projects and initiatives of interest pan-Europe and within member countries to maximise benefit/information exchange for members and beyond.

### **First meeting – 5 November 2010**

The **BFUG Network “Recognition of Prior Learning”** met for the first time in Glasgow, Scotland on 5 November 2010 and debated on its working activity for the coming two years, including the election of a Chair, in line with the terms of reference as they were approved by the BFUG at its meeting in Alden Biesen.

Ms. Heather Gibson, representing UK Scotland, took over the chairing responsibilities for the first year, on account of the elected chair, Ms. Frances Morton leaving QAA Scotland, along with the RPL network chairing responsibilities.

One main conclusion arising from the discussions was that the network would build trust between countries and institutions involved through sharing information on RPL and that this work should be overseen by a small coordinating group.

### **Workshop meeting of the network – 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2011**

The network met in a workshop on 23<sup>rd</sup> June in Glasgow with the following outcomes:

- Sharing practice was reconfirmed as the primary purposes of the Network. The Steering Group would be responsible for bringing together the updates on RPL activity and matching members with similar interests and issues

- The Network should help stimulate RPL national networks by expanding membership to include all those who wish to join and not just those nominated by BFUG representatives
- Given that case studies had already been collected and the idea for sifting through these to come up with models of RPL mooted, it was suggested that a document could be produced that could record all this activity and that then could be used to promote the Network (and RPL) with other countries not participating at present. Care would have to be taken to ensure that the document did not overlap with existing CEDEFOP work
- It was agreed that a Linked-In Group or similar should be set-up to facilitate discussion in between physical meetings.

### **The Network Steering Group meeting – 27<sup>th</sup> July 2011**

The Steering Group agreed to the production of a document which aims to ‘match-up’ network members who have expertise in areas with those who wish to do more work in those areas and facilitate the sharing of practice. A summary table has also been produced to identify which countries have expertise in particular areas. It identifies the areas that countries might wish to do further work in. Once further developed, the summary table could form the basis of future reports to the BFUG and potentially to Ministerial conferences

### **Sharing practice via the Internet**

Case studies provided by network members can be found here <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Scotland/DevelopmentAndEnhancement/Pages/RPL-Network-project.aspx> .

The Steering Group also decided that a dedicated web-space for the Network to talk to each other, ask each other questions and have discussions will also be valuable to support collaboration. Therefore, we have set up a European RPL Discussion Group on Linked-In. You can find the group at:

[http://www.linkedin.com/groups?home=&gid=4020999&trk=anet\\_ug\\_hm&goback=%2Egmp\\_4020999](http://www.linkedin.com/groups?home=&gid=4020999&trk=anet_ug_hm&goback=%2Egmp_4020999).

### **Membership**

The Steering Group are keen to expand the membership of the Network as far as possible, so if you know of anyone who would be interested in joining then contact Heather Gibson ([h.gibson@qaa.ac.uk](mailto:h.gibson@qaa.ac.uk)) or Alex Pop ([alex.pop@ehea.info](mailto:alex.pop@ehea.info)).

### **The Future of the Network**

UK-Scotland is currently chairing the ERPL Network through QAA Scotland. The Steering Group have agreed that this term of office will end with Ministerial conference in April 2012 and is therefore seeking expressions of interest in chairing in future.

## **SHARING PRACTICE**

### **Summary table of expertise at 5 December 2011**

The Steering Group agreed that a summary table be set up in order that countries could explore opportunities to share and learn from best practice through bilateral discussions. This is proposed to be a working document and be made available online. The group has begun to explore options for funding of study visits to support this work.

Area	Offers of help	Would like to find out more
National context and policy	Estonia France Scotland Norway	Switzerland
Lifelong learning, widening participation, wider access	Scotland	Switzerland
Flexible learning paths	Sweden France	Estonia Norway
Engagement with employers and workforce development	France	Estonia Switzerland Scotland
RPL processes and procedures – designing RPL programmes and innovative developments	Estonia Scotland France	Poland Switzerland Norway
Student experiences of RPL across Bologna countries	Estonia	Switzerland Scotland France
Building assessment capacity and capability for RPL	Estonia Scotland France	Switzerland Norway

### Related developments

As part of its work the network has identified some other key developments and networks with which cooperation should be explored. These include a likely Commission recommendation on the validation of informal and non formal learning, as well as:

#### ***Cedefop – European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training***

<http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/about-cedefop/projects/validation-of-non-formal-and-informal-learning/european-inventory-scope.aspx>

Cedefop developed a European Inventory regarding validation of non-formal and informal learning in Europe in 2010, presenting it in a [synthesis report](#). An [executive summary](#) of this report is also available. It covers 32 countries and aims to look at validation from different angles and a common thematic structure is used throughout the 34 reports. This structure mirrors the focus of the [European Guidelines on validation](#) – produced by Cedefop in 2009.

The Inventory includes ten case studies which aim to go more in depth on particular solutions chosen in countries, sectors or enterprises; and four thematic studies which have been developed to address issues considered of particular importance, notably validation in higher education, validation methodologies, the costs and benefits of validation and validation and its target groups.

In addition to this, Cedefop is currently carrying out an extensive study on validation in enterprises. Material from this study will be made available during 2011 and added to the Inventory.

**ENIC/NARIC network project on RPL** <http://www.rpl.naric.org.uk/index.aspx>

The aim of the ENIC/NARIC project 'Study on Formal Recognition of Non-formal and informal learning' was to begin to explore the possibilities of international recognition of certificates of non-formal and informal learning assessment in higher education.

The objectives of this study were to:

- Conduct a study of the formal recognition of non-formal and informal learning through certification in several European countries
- Analyse a number of sample certificates and reports and formulate recommendations for credential evaluators on how to deal with these foreign certificates/reports and formulate recommendations for the issuing institutions/bodies on how to make these certificates/reports more transparent for transferability purposes.

This project ran from December 2007 – November 2008. The final report has been completed and is available here: [Final report](#).

As a follow-up to this work a second project – REFNILLO - was undertaken to elaborate on the findings and look to extend the recommendations to the whole NARIC network. The project involved the same project team (Dutch, UK, French and Swedish NARIC) and was finished in the autumn of 2009. The follow-up project extended the results to the whole network, by

- Investigating what information each NARIC would require for such certificates to be taken into consideration in their evaluations
- Collecting more examples of existing (good) practice (both certificates and possibly evaluations of such certificates)
- Seeking agreement and formulating recommendations on how the certificates should be improved and how they should be evaluated.

The final report for REFNILLO can be found here: [Final report](#).

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE**

The network is very much in its infancy and is being to develop as both a source of information and a vehicle by which to share this information and associated practices between countries and organisations. Although some important sources have been established, more sustained work will be required over the coming years.

Moreover there must be consideration given to both the operation of the network itself and also its fit within the wider Bologna Process.

### **Specific recommendations**

- The network should continue in order that interested practitioners, government representatives and others can share knowledge and practice on RPL
- It should not be responsible to or report directly to EHEA Ministers but should feed in developments through all relevant Working Groups
- The network should have membership of any Working Group into which it feeds information

- Member countries should be more active in encouraging practitioners to join the network and share information
- The network should as a priority look to obtain information from a wider range of countries, populate the table of expertise and explore greater cooperation with the related developments above
- The network should establish a formal link with the ENIC-NARIC network
- The network should explore the possibility of involvement in the EURASHE RPL event in September 2012 and of organising further events to promote information sharing and membership
- The network should elect a new Chair before June 2012.

### **Recommendation for the 2012 Ministerial Communiqué**

Given the continued and renewed interest in this area, as evidenced by the establishment and growth of the network, the Ministerial Communiqué should be supportive of continued efforts to promote RPL. As such it could usefully build on the reference in the 2009 Communiqué to successful policies for lifelong learning including “basic principles and procedures for the recognition of prior learning”. It could therefore reflect the benefits to be obtained by sharing these principles and procedures, as well as good practice, across the EHEA.

Terms of reference (updated 15.08.11)

### Recognition of Prior Learning European Network

#### Contact persons (Chairs)

Heather GIBSON - UK/Scotland (h.gibson@qaa.ac.uk)

#### Composition

The network is coordinated by a small steering group currently comprising representatives from UK/Scotland, Estonia, Ireland and EUA. Meetings of this group constitute the formal mechanism for planning the activities of the network. Wider workshops are held to exchange good practice and share learning about RPL across the network.

The network is keen to involve in particular practitioner representatives who can discuss their work on RPL or who are interested to develop its use.

#### Purpose and/or outcome

- To help promote and inform the effective use and practice of RPL across participating countries
- To provide a means for member countries to share and learn from policies and practice across Europe in relation to RPL development
- To build links between European countries at various stages in RPL development.

#### References to the Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué

Paragraphs 9, 10, 11, 13.

#### Specific tasks

- To work within this definition of RPL: ***RPL is the process for recognising previous learning that has taken place in informal, formal or non-formal contexts: for example, in the workplace and through life experiences. Once recognised through this process, prior learning can be used to gain credit or exemption for qualifications, and/or for personal and career development***
- To build upon the existing evidence base provided by CEDEFOP and OBSERVAL through the collation of evidence on the use and impact of RPL in Bologna countries, and through considering how cross-border RPL might be fostered
- To allow educators, practitioners and policy-makers working in RPL to share practice and inform progress
- To hold workshops in which practitioners can share and explore ways in which RPL can:
  - best support student-centred learning, flexible learning paths, lifelong learning, and widening participation agendas across the Bologna process
  - help support issues such as employer engagement and workforce development in Bologna

- To facilitate bilateral or multilateral engagement between countries and organisations on RPL areas of mutual interest
- To link with other countries developing RPL
- To consider the conclusions and recommendations from the 2010 RPL seminar (see below) and how these might best be taken forward. The full seminar report is available on the Bologna website
- To liaise with other relevant networks and working groups, in particular the BFUG Working Groups on Recognition and National Qualifications.

## **Reporting**

To BFUG by minutes of working group meetings being made available through the Bologna Secretariat.

## **Meeting schedule**

### ***Formal meetings of the Steering Group:***

5 November 2010 (RPL network initiation meeting)

28 July 2011

### ***Workshops of the RPL Network:***

5 November 2010 (RPL network initiation meeting)

23 June 2011

## **Background information: conclusions and recommendations from the 2010 RPL seminar**

### ***General***

- While there is a good deal of RPL practice, it remains too concentrated in a small number of systems and HEIs and even where it is most established, it is not developed across the whole sector
- There is no uniform approach or single model of RPL which fits all qualifications or situations. There are however some generic tools which can help and which can be adapted for different contexts
- RPL can help with and should be considered in the context of, skills, employability and equality/widening participation agendas
- The national context seems to be crucial in providing a policy drive or impetus for the development of RPL. This is clear from the Irish and Scottish contexts in particular, but also in the context of the Netherlands. Although the French situation was not represented, it is the case that in France, it is possible to award degrees entirely on the basis of RPL, a development which was driven by national policy concerns and context
- It is important to achieve a good balance, between regulations/guidelines and institutional autonomy, between generic and discipline-specific practices and between national and European infrastructure and contexts

- RPL fits with and needs the other elements of the EHEA infrastructure and recognition 'tools'
- The learning outcomes approach and the use of national qualifications frameworks are helpful to institutions both in driving and enabling efficient and effective approaches to RPL – indeed ESU argued that they are pre-requisites

#### ***Lifelong learning, widening participation, wider access***

- RPL can break down barriers and expand horizons of learners and institutions alike

#### ***Flexible learning paths***

- RPL is a useful tool in helping to develop more flexible and varied learning paths, as evidenced by several projects presented at the seminar.

#### ***Engagement with employers and workforce development***

- RPL can lead to greater efficiency (workers spend less time out of workforce) and greater effectiveness (c.f. Scottish Police College initiative)
- Dialogue with stakeholders, including learners and employer/professional bodies can play a crucial role in the development of and the acceptance of RPL

#### ***RPL processes and procedures – designing RPL programmes and innovative developments***

- It is important for higher education institutions to have RPL policies and procedures which are transparent and consistent
- Streamlined and more diverse procedures for RPL are helpful both for widening its application and can be beneficial in terms of improving professional practice of teachers and knowledge and learning strategies of learners.
- If RPL is to become more widely practiced and to be more widely accepted, it will be important to emphasise and demonstrate that the same standards and equally robust quality assurance arrangements exist for RPL as exist for traditional undergraduate and graduate provision
- Dialogue with stakeholders, including learners and employer/professional bodies can play a crucial role in the development of and the acceptance of RPL.

#### ***Student experiences of RPL across Bologna countries***

- Concerns expressed at the lack of penetration of RPL within the EHEA in plenary were reinforced by student representatives, who reported that the perceptions of students indicated that the practice of RPL was limited to a small number of countries, In this context, the importance of engaging students in dialogue regarding the development and use of RPL at all levels, was endorsed.

#### ***Building assessment capacity and capability for RPL***

- Given the current mismatch between policy and practice, between lofty ambitions and the current reality, it might be helpful for the next two years to concentrate on 'big wins' to ramp up capacity and thereby awareness and demand.

#### ***Proposed RPL Network***

- It would be helpful to have an agreed definition of what is meant by RPL in the context of the proposed network, and for that definition to be inclusive

- It would be helpful if the scope and purposes of RPL could be articulated in such a way as to bring together skills, employability, lifelong learning and quality agendas
- There was broad support from participants for the proposed European RPL network and that it should, at least initially, be led by Scotland, Ireland and the Netherlands.
- It was agreed that there was a need to share and disseminate more widely existing experience of RPL processes and practice, but also further to undertake research into the use and impact of RPL.
- It was agreed that there should be some scoping of the role of the network, particularly including learners, but also considering whether or not the network would focus on HE only, or would also cover other aspects of RPL developments, such as the EQF for lifelong learning. Areas of activity which could be tested in the scoping exercise might include:
  - Capacity building; the role of NQFs in supporting RPL in different contexts; collaborative partnerships; impact of RPL on learner; impact on HEIs/pedagogy/assessment; impact on workplace; role of RPL in supporting mobility/transitions between different learning contexts.

#### **Recommendation to the Bologna Follow Up Group**

That BFUG agrees the establishment of a European RPL network for sharing and developing practice in RPL and to advise the BFUG as required and that the network should, at least initially, be led by Scotland, Ireland and the Netherlands.

#### **Recommendation to higher education institutions and national rectors conferences**

That HEIs and NRCs incorporate RPL within the development of their approaches to lifelong learning and specifically within their implementation of the European Universities' Charter on Lifelong Learning.

That HEIs and NRCs involve student representatives in the development of their RPL processes and procedures.

#### **Recommendation to quality agencies**

That national and European quality agencies incorporate appropriate reference to RPL procedures and processes within their own guidelines, procedures and regulations.