



## **The REAL Project**

### **Investigation into a Credit Exchange Scheme**

#### **Background**

Co-producing a RPL Toolkit with adult educators and for adult educators across the European Union has been central to the REAL project. The key component of the REAL Project Toolkit is not just to enable adult educators to record their practice-based experiential and informal learning, but to make further use of it to move towards the accreditation of this learning through recognition of evidence against levels of learning within NQFs, which can then be equated to and exchanged within the EQF.

This work reports upon the outcomes of the Work Package focused on the undertaking of an investigation into the feasibility of a credit exchange scheme based on the use of the REAL Project Toolkit. The aim of the investigation was to see project partners working with national awarding agencies and institutions to ascertain the feasibility of using the REAL Project Toolkit to enable this learning to be levelled against National Qualification Frameworks (NQF) and, where this referencing has taken place, against the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). This would then be used as the basis for a credit exchange scheme. The concept of the scheme was to enable this learning to be exchanged for nationally recognised qualifications which are appropriate for this learning i.e. for full and part national awards without the need for the adult educator to undertake further coursework or assignments. The investigation looked at the feasibility and the transferability of such a scheme. The investigation focussed on the barriers to such a system being developed and looked to identify a way forward, which will enable the REAL Project Toolkit to be used in such a credit exchange scheme.

This report is in two sections. The first section provides country reports on the investigation by each of the partners. The second section identifies the factors influencing perspectives on the potential for a credit exchange scheme and the current barriers to progress. The report aims to act as a catalyst for future practice and developments in the area of RPL for adult educators across the EU.

#### **Investigation of REAL Credit Exchange Scheme**

##### ***Scotland***

In Scotland, there is no formal government policy or strategy in place for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), therefore the decision to award credit for informal and experiential learning lies with individual institutions. Although in theory, it is possible to gain full credit towards a formal qualification, there is no evidence of this ever having taken place. Generally, Higher Education institutions accept no more than 50% of credit towards a qualification through RPL. The Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) states in its policy that “in some instances, a full Group Award may be achieved through the recognition of prior learning. However, it is unlikely that a learner would have the appropriate prior learning and experience to meet all the requirements of a full Group Award”.

In 2008, a SCQF Partnership report, *Inspire Scotland*<sup>1</sup>, highlighted a number of barriers to the development of RPL in general, such as the fact that it is time intensive, the lack of human resources within institutions to support RPL, a lack of staff development and the cost of RPL both for the institution and the learner. Another key area of concern was *'the possibility, if not likelihood, of individuals not having the skills/confidence to undertake reflective practice and develop portfolios that enable them to demonstrate the learning achieved'*. A key recommendation of the report was that *'ways should be explored of securing/deploying RPL resources effectively at national, individual institution and regional levels in order to develop RPL provision that is cost effective, not overly bureaucratic or burdensome but robust enough to meet quality standards'* And finally, that *'consideration should be given to:*

- *The development of RPL systems and processes that are easily understood by learners and employers;*
- *How RPL can be made accessible consistently, equitably and inclusively across education/training provision whilst taking account of the different purposes of RPL;*
- *How alternative evidence of prior learning can be utilised and accepted across sectors.*

Following the report, The SCQF Partnership formed their RPL Network and from that a generic RPL toolkit was developed as well as an on-line guide that supports both learners and providers. The HE RPL Network was also formed and jointly managed by QAA Scotland and Universities Scotland and the 'Recognition of Prior Learning National Framework for Scottish Higher Education'<sup>2</sup> was developed in 2014. This document aimed to provide guidance and expand the use of RPL within higher education.

Given the historical position, it was to explore the extent that the situation had changed in general and, in particular, in relation to adult education qualifications that partners embarked upon their investigation of the feasibility of a credit exchange scheme. The prime source of data came from a focus group held in February 2015. Both Further and Higher Education institutions that offered programmes specifically for adult educators had been identified and representatives from these institutions were invited to participate. Invitations were also issued via the Higher Education RPL Network to those individuals who had an interest in RPL processes in general and also to a number of partners of the SCQF and Learning Link Scotland who represented the community learning and development and adult education sectors. Finally, two Adult Educators who had used the Toolkit attended. A total of 15 participants attended and further input was given via 2 telephone interviews.

The outcomes of the focus groups were:

- It was felt that documenting RPL for formal credit/advanced standing is quite challenging and most institutions ask a learner to map their previous learning to the learning outcomes of the specific programme. Due to the lack of national standards in Scotland, a mapping process in relation to the specific qualification would still need to take place.
- Institutions tend to have difficulty in getting adult educators to record what they have learned as opposed to what they have done, so the language and processes in this REAL Toolkit were perceived as helpful, in particular the mapping against SCQF levels.

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<sup>1</sup> A Review of the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), Inspire Scotland, April 2008

<sup>2</sup> Recognition of Prior Learning National Framework for Scottish Higher Education, QAA Scotland, April 2014

- A key barrier to credit exchange was variation of RPL policy and practice across and within institutions e.g. for entry or for advanced standing, for specific or general credit.
- These matters are further complicated by the range and levels of qualifications for adult educators within Scotland, which are not tied to specific roles in the workplace.

Given these points, it was felt that, while the REAL Toolkit could be used as a starting point for the summative RPL process, in particular given its focus on evidencing learning rather than describing experience, there remained many barriers to the possibilities for smooth credit exchange for adult educators through RPL. It was also more likely to be accepted for entry than for advance standing within a qualification. This was the case both for practitioners with Scotland and from elsewhere in the European Union.

### ***Estonia***

Estonia has had national qualification standard for Adult Educators since 2004. The Adult Education qualification standards are on NQF levels 5 to 8. The Estonian NQF has been referenced to the EQF and thus Adult Education qualification standard levels are in accordance with EQF levels.

The Estonian Adult Educators Association (ANDRAS) is the qualification awarding body and has developed the process of awarding qualifications. The process is entirely based on the principles of RPL and is supported by policy. Applying for the qualification standard is voluntary and depends on the applicant's wish to formalise his/her professional skills. The application process comprises a portfolio compilation and competence interview. The portfolio includes applicants' self-analysis and relevant evidence material to support his/her claim. Applicants undertake a self-analysis, which is a reflective writing assignment to evidence the required competences. The competence interview is carried out based on the portfolio and focuses on the applicants' competences. A person of any profession or vocation who teaches and/or mentors adults can apply for the professional qualification of adult educator. Thus Estonia has a mature process in place and currently over 400 adult educators have applied for qualification standard. The application process is open twice a year and in each time there are over 50 new applications.

Major challenges in the process for applicants have been writing the self-analysis and finding relevant evidence that support their claim to competence. Therefore prior to the application rounds, ANDRAS has been running workshops for potential applicants in order to support reflective writing, evidence selection and preparation for the interview.

ANDRAS workshop leaders had a meeting in 2015 to evaluate the REAL Toolkit and find possible ways of using it in Estonia. It was pointed out that the Toolkit can be used in the workshops to support adult educators in writing reflective accounts, recognising the competencies they have and/or might need to improve. Various templates in the toolkit were seen as highly usable at the workshops as these emphasize nearly the same values and competencies that Estonian adult educators qualification standard.

### ***Ireland***

The Irish Educational system is undergoing significant changes at this juncture. This change is being experienced at all levels, to which there has been varied responses. A key feature of the change is the erosion of adult education as a separate domain of professional practice and the merging of it into the Further Education Sector. Until recently, Adult Education was primarily delivered by the recently abolished Vocational Education Committees (VEC) and it was these bodies which employed the

greatest percentage of adult educators. To October 2010, there were 33 VECs, but, following restructuring in that year, the number was reduced to 16. In 2013, with the passing of the Education & Training Boards Act of 2013, these VECs were abolished and replaced with Education & Training Boards. The vast majority of individuals teaching within the system are qualified and registered teachers with the Teaching Council of Ireland. In other words, with formal adult education, changes in the Irish system have moved towards a situation in which people have to be qualified and professionally registered as teachers in order to be employed. These shifts have seen an associated growth in the number of bespoke professional degree programmes offered by universities for what in the past would have been identified as adult educators.

Thus, while there are no national standards and a NQF, as in Scotland, the labour market situation for adult educators and provision of qualifications is somewhat different, influencing the possibilities and constraints for RPL. This does not mean that RPL in general is not significant for Ireland. RPL is shorthand for many practices, embracing for instance, non-formal learning, informal learning, work based learning and experiential learning. In the context of the REAL Project, there can be little doubt that the most important development has been the publication of the Green Paper on The Recognition of Prior Learning, which attracted a relatively low number of submissions, but which means there are national policies in place. However, the extent to which they are in place in practice or being used by adult educators is more open to questions.

To assess the potential for the REAL Toolkit to be used as the basis for a credit exchange scheme, a focus group of providers of qualification and national bodies was conducted in 2015. The outcomes of the focus group were:

- The Toolkit provided a strong basis for adult educators to be able to evidence their learning based upon the self-assessment processes and levelling against NQF and EQF levels.
- The extent to which the portfolio would be accepted for credit in the different contexts that people may come from remains unclear. The lack of a competency framework in Ireland puts limits on the extent to which credit exchange is possible, despite setting evidence against levels in the NQF. More generally, RPL and the possibility for credit exchange tend to draw upon a learning outcomes approach, when the REAL Toolkit tends to focus more on critical professional reflection. This might act as a barrier to exchange.
- The Toolkit might prove as useful as the basis for recognition by professional bodies for registration than for the award of academic credits. In other words, there may be some scope for professional development and registration than the formal award of qualifications.

The outcome from the focus group was that the generic nature of the REAL Toolkit and the specific contextual factors in Ireland meant that there remained significant barriers to credit exchange, despite the levelling against SCQF and EQF.

### *Romania*

Recognition of prior learning was until recently one of the main professionalisation pathways for adult educators in Romania. The previous shape of the professionalisation system for adult educators provided three routes to qualification:

1. Academic – Masters degree provided by some universities in the country;
2. Continuing vocational training system – specialisation/qualification certificates obtained after short term course, awarded by authorised training centres;

3. Validation of professional competences – certificate awarded by authorised assessment centres as a result of the competence assessment process (based on the previous professional standard – valid until 2012); IREA was an authorised RPL centre until December 2013.

During the past two years there have been significant changes in Romania regarding the professionalisation pathways for adult educators. If, until recently it was possible to obtain a formal qualification as adult educator through RPL, the changes to the professional standards and the implementation of the new NQF no longer allows for this process to take place.

The NQF entered into force together with an annex, which makes the correspondence between the NQF levels and the type of diplomas/certificates gained after the completion of a certain study programme. According to this, the previous qualification routes are now placed at the following levels:

- route 1: is placed at level 7 NQF/EQF
- route 2: is placed at level 4 NQF/EQF
- route 3: is placed at level 3 NQF/EQF

However, the new professional standard (valid as of 2013) for adult educators describes competences only for level 6 NQF, which at the moment does not cover any of the previous or existing routes for qualifications (there is no BA programme in adult education) and moreover, removes the possibility to get a formal qualification through RPL.

The initiation of the REAL project in 2012 fitted very well into the then policy on RPL for adult educators and seemed to bring significant added value to RPL practice in general. The REAL Toolkit had good potential for being used by adult educators to assess their competences before deciding to undertake an official RPL process, but also to be proposed and used as a stand-alone instrument in the formal RPL process, as part of the self -assessment component.

However, the results of a focus group (five adult education experts and two competence assessors) conducted in 2015 and a discussion with the National Qualifications Authority (responsible for the adult education system) indicate that:

- RPL for adult educators is no longer a formal process regulated by national policies. The National Qualification Framework sets RPL gained certificates at maxim level 3 in the framework. The new professional standard sets level 6 as a general NQF level for adult educators, while the professional standard fails to describe competences relevant for the diversity of adult education roles and domains. A sectorial approach towards adult educators' roles is missing, while the current professional standard focuses to a large extent on competences relevant for adult educators who work in vocational training, which is a very dominant role in Romania. A competency framework levelled against the NQF would be needed to re-launch the discussion around RPL for adult educators;
- The limitations in the NQF, setting RPL certificates at level 3, and correlated with the professional standard at level 6, leaves future adult educators with no professionalisation pathway. From this perspective, the REAL Toolkit cannot be used in any formal accreditation process;
- The REAL Toolkit is very useful for evidencing learning that adult educators have acquired and so it can be used successfully in training programmes and activities;
- With Higher Education institutions interested in developing adult education study programmes, the REAL Toolkit could be used as a pre-access step in the study programme.

If Romania returns to the RPL policy for adult educators, the REAL Toolkit can cover a significant part of the self-assessment component, both initially and during the RPL process.

### **Barriers to Credit Exchange and Ways Forward**

From the country focus groups, it is clear that, while the REAL Toolkit is identified as being of great potential value in providing RPL and credit for adult educators, significant policy issues within individual contexts mitigate against its full use. These include:

- Variation in national and institutional policies practices towards RPL in general and specifically in relation to adult educators;
- Changing national policies in relation to adult education and lifelong learning
- The sophistication of RPL practices in relation to accessing/gaining credit within qualifications and awarding specific/general credit;
- The extent to which national standards exist for adult educators;
- The levels against which national standards for adult educators are matched within NQFs/EQF, reflecting the different labour markets for adult educators within and across nations.

While different nations within the EU can seek to develop RPL to enable professionalisation and labour market flexibility, for an EU system to develop requires first a shared set of standards and qualification levels for adult educators to be developed and implemented. The way forward for credit exchange for adult educators requires clearer articulation of standards of practice against shared levels of qualifications, if RPL is to fulfil its full potential in relation to professional qualification and labour market flexibility. The REAL Toolkit is only a small contribution to building this bigger picture.

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