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Recognition of Experiential & Accredited Learning

Final Report

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Executive Summary

Lifelong learning is a key to innovation and inclusion within the EU. Adult education and adult educators play a central role in supporting lifelong learning. Yet to date, there are huge variations in the labour market positions of adult educators across the EU, uneven development of professional standards, diverse opportunities for professional qualifications and limited opportunities for labour market mobility. The REAL Toolkit (<http://www.realrpl.eu/>) attempts to support qualification and mobility by providing a set of open access, downloadable and adaptable resources, designed with and for adult educators, to enable practitioners to make claims for the recognition of prior learning (RPL) for the purposes of entry into or credit towards adult education professional qualifications.

Based upon a collaboration between partners in Scotland, Estonia, Ireland and Romania, and with extensive engagement of adult education practitioners in the design process, the REAL Toolkit offers flexible and adaptable resources through which to map one's prior learning against national standards, where they exist, national qualifications frameworks (NQFs), and the European Qualification Framework (EQF). The development process entailed a scoping of existing practices of RPL in this field, a mapping of adult education practices against NQF and EQF descriptors, an extensive and iterative design and testing process, and a consultation with providers of qualifications on the potential uses of the Toolkit.

Despite the positive reception among adult education practitioners to the REAL Toolkit, challenges remain. Some are contextual, for example, the differing labour market positions of adult educators in different organisations and countries, the existence or not of national standards for adult education, the qualifications available for adult educators, and the strength of policies and practices in relation to RPL. Others are specific to the practices of RPL, where consultation found biases towards:

- (a) RPL for entry to qualifications rather than credit within them among providers of learning opportunities; and
- (b) the award of specific credit for RPL rather than general credit.

While these challenges are likely to impact on the uptake and impact of the REAL Toolkit in the short term, its reference to the EQF will give long-term validity to any validation processes that are derived from it.

As well as facilitating RPL for adult educators, the practitioners contributing to the project identified two further uses for the Toolkit:

- (a) as a tool for reflection and identifying professional development needs;
- and
- (b) as a way of developing model answers for job applications.

Adult educators are active in many and varied contexts and possibly have the widest reach in terms of diversity of adult learners of any educational sector. It is therefore of considerable importance that they should have their competences recognised, as they can be powerful advocates for this process of recognition.

Table of Contents

1. PROJECT OBJECTIVES.....	7
2. PROJECT APPROACH.....	10
3. PROJECT OUTCOMES & RESULTS.....	12
4. PARTNERSHIPS.....	14
5. PLANS FOR THE FUTURE.....	15
6. CONTRIBUTION TO EU POLICIES.....	16
7. EXTRA HEADING/SECTION.....	18

1. Project Objectives

The REAL project is focused on raising the qualification profile of adult educators through valuing and assigning credit to their practice-based experiential and informal learning without the requirement of further study. The central component of this aim is the use of national qualifications frameworks referenced against the EQF to enable the levelling of this experiential learning. This project seeks to place the adult educator at the centre of the process, thus giving them a primary role in the recognition of their own professional learning. In addition, the project focused on making the RPL process learning-centred in order that the learner can further develop their learning skills and their practice through the activities contained within the RPL Toolkit.

The project has five aims:

1. To establish a set of commonly agreed criteria against which the skills, knowledge and competences of an identified group of adult educators can be assessed and thus valorised, irrespective of the national and institutional contexts in which they are operating.
2. To enable a group of adult educators to have their experiential and informal learning formally recognised as learning of equal value when set against accredited learning on a demonstration basis.
3. To place these adult learners at the centre of this project and work with them through the development of this toolkit to ensure that it reflects their needs and to roll this out across the sector.
4. To raise the qualification profile of these adult educators.
5. To set out a progressive pathway for a credit exchange system whereby national qualification framework levelled experiential and informal learning can be recognised on a more general basis by national awarding bodies.

To achieve these aims, the REAL project followed certain objectives:

1. To work directly with adult educators to ensure that project development maintained a central focus on their needs.
2. To bring together an experienced group of researchers, practitioners and academics whose skills and knowledge of adult education practice, of experiential and informal learning in this field, of the training of adult educators, of national qualification frameworks, of credit and qualification systems and of learner progression and achievement are nationally and internationally recognised.
3. To draw on best practice in the area of RPL through an examination of current and recent research and practice in the field. In particular we will work directly with adult educators enabling them to assess previous and current RPL recording instruments to ensure that gaps in the process are addressed through the REAL Toolkit.
4. To promote and progress the understanding of the quality and value of experiential learning of adult educators.
5. To produce a Toolkit that will enable this NQF levelling process.
6. To disseminate this knowledge and instruments electronically across the European Union.
7. To investigate the possibility of a credit exchange scheme with national qualification agencies and set out a procedure for this scheme to progress.

2. Project Approach

The REAL project's methodology is based upon the notion of co-production, that is, involving the users of products and services in their design. We have therefore involved adult education practitioners in the four partner countries throughout the project in a range of meetings, workshops and activities to assist in the iterative design of the REAL Toolkit. This is consistent with the overarching aim of the project to value the experiential learning of those working in the adult education arena who may not themselves be professionally qualified in adult education.

This specifically means that the REAL project has:

- (a) placed adult educators at the centre of the project activities to guide and inform the development of the work undertaken on the project;
- (b) investigated and identified previous work undertaken and instruments developed in the RPL field;
- (c) tested the effectiveness of these instruments with adult educators;
- (d) developed a specific toolkit arising from this detailed work on previous instruments and through close working and testing with adult educators;
- (e) tested the developed toolkit in partner countries in the most appropriate format for their adult education sector and their national qualifications framework;
- (f) undertaken an investigation into a credit exchange scheme with providers of adult education professional qualifications and national awarding bodies;
- (g) ensured that the toolkit is made openly available, electronically;
- (h) promoted and disseminated the work of the project through: national fora and networks; a European seminar and conference; and through social media.

The co-production approach is evidenced by the number and range of adult educators contributing to the process and the types of feedback the project received as the Toolkit was developed:

'The toolkit would be useful to me as I have no qualifications in adult literacy (my

current job!) and it would be useful to get recognition of my abilities and a measure of my level of skill. It would also help my CPD and force me to self-evaluate and encourage me to further my learning'. (Adult literacies tutor)

'For me this toolkit has really made me think about and recognise what I have learned during my working life – much more than I had appreciated'. (Voluntary sector trainer)

'I see enormous potential in this. I think that my colleagues... may find it helpful to examine their own skills and experience as educators. I have found it personally useful in highlighting skills and experiences.' (workplace educator)

The REAL project was premised on developing an initial pilot toolkit in Scotland, which would then be transferred for piloting in Estonia, Ireland and Romania. However, as a result of our engagement with adult education practitioners and wider evaluation of the initial pilot the approach was modified to enable a more iterative development process for the final REAL Toolkit. This continued through the engagement of practitioners in evaluating Toolkit materials through to the final project conference in March 2015, thus enabling a more extensive co-production approach to inform the work of the project.

At the appropriate times throughout the project, the Project Co-ordinator and team have liaised with the External Evaluator to review the progress of the project against project objectives and project timetables. The use of an experienced external evaluator, Professor Mike Osborne, has added to the quality of the project. Using Prof Osborne in this role has strengthened the project management and enhanced project co-ordination procedures. In addition, we have drawn upon the expertise of an external consultant, Bernard Godding, who was formerly a participant in the Flexi-Path project (<http://www.flexi-path.eu/index.htm>) and the lead author of its resulting Toolkit. Mr Godding has provided valuable guidance on the development of the present Toolkit materials and been active in supporting the dissemination strategy. These external roles have encouraged critical reflection on actions and the outcomes of this have informed project activities, outcomes and impacts.

3. Project Outcomes & Results

The principal outcome of the REAL project is the REAL Toolkit (<http://www.realrpl.eu/>), which is available as an open access online resources. The Toolkit has a range of resources to enable:

- (a) individual adult educators to reflect on their professional experience, identify the learning arising within and from that experience, develop a portfolio of evidence of that learning and level that against National Qualifications Frameworks and the European Qualification Framework;
- (b) employers and adult education support organisations to organise professional development opportunities for adult educators to enable them to utilise the resources for career development and professional qualification purposes.
- (c) experienced adult educators to gain recognition (both formal & informal) for what they actually do in successfully supporting non-formal learning in their own communities.

Four blogs on the project can be found at: EPALE (<https://ec.europa.eu/epale/en/blog/placing-adult-educators-centre-real-toolkit-adult-educators>), SCQF (<http://scqf.org.uk/real-toolkit/>), PASCAL (<http://pascalobservatory.org/pascalnow/blogentry/lifelong-learning/co-producing-rpl-toolkit>) and ProPEL (<http://propelmatters.stir.ac.uk/2015/04/24/co-producing-an-rpl-toolkit-the-real-deal/>).

In addition to the Toolkit enabling adult educators to make RPL claims, the practitioners contributing to the project identified two further uses for the Toolkit as:

- (a) a tool for reflection and identifying professional development needs; and
- (b) a way of developing model answer for job applications.

This extends the potential significance and impact of the REAL Toolkit.

The project has also identified significant barriers to the development of RPL for adult educators across the EU. 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.

4. Partnerships

The REAL project partners bring a range of adult education research, development and practice experience to the project. This range of expertise has been supplemented by the involvement in the project of practitioners from the adult education community in the co-production of the REAL Toolkit.

The core partners include the University of Stirling, Learning Link Scotland and the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework Partnership in Scotland, Tallinn University in Estonia, the University of Limerick in Ireland, and IREA in Romania. Each has in turn drawn upon their extensive adult education and other key networks at local, national and European levels to assist in the development and dissemination of the REAL Toolkit. These have included public, private and third sector providers of adult education, providers of professional qualifications for adult educators, organisations involved in national standards development and national qualifications frameworks, and researchers and practitioners in RPL. Partnerships with the former have proved most significant in enabling the co-production of the REAL Toolkit.

5. Plans for the Future

The REAL Toolkit website (www.realrpl.eu) has been designed as an open access resource from which adult educators, providers of learning opportunities for adult educators and adult education employers across the EU can download and customise materials to support RPL practices. At present, this is housed on the University of Stirling website, but the project aims to explore long term housing of the Toolkit on a European-wide organisation's website.

The REAL Toolkit is being promoted through blogs on four websites: EPALE (<https://ec.europa.eu/epale/en/blog/placing-adult-educators-centre-real-toolkit-adult-educators>); SCQF (<http://scqf.org.uk/real-toolkit/>); PASCAL (<http://pascalobservatory.org/pascalnow/blogentry/lifelong-learning/co-producing-rpl-toolkit>); and ProPEL (<http://propelmatters.stir.ac.uk/2015/04/24/co-producing-an-rpl-toolkit-the-real-deal/>). Social media, such as Twitter, is being used to promote the work of the project and relevant websites.

Each of the partners in the REAL project is approaching dissemination and sustainability of the products developed by the project in a number of ways. Each partner is using their own organisational networks to promote the REAL Toolkit. Those partners whose organisations have the power to award qualifications are working with their central administration services with a view to having each organisation make use of the project's products to widen access to learning and qualifications. We also anticipate that the inclusion of adult educators in the development of the REAL Toolkit will deliver a 'bottom up' approach to its dissemination and use. In addition, where feasible, each partner is promoting the REAL Toolkit and other project products to other awarding bodies within their own country to encourage and promote the use of the Toolkit to encourage the awarding of credit for previous learning and the mobility of adult educators across the EU.

In Scotland, the University of Stirling is:

- (a) exploring how to integrate the REAL Toolkit and claims arising from it within its Teaching Qualification (Adult Education).

Learning Link Scotland is:

- (a) organising four further workshops with the University of Stirling in 2015 to promote the REAL Toolkit as a route to qualifications.

- (b) organising three workshops per year using the resources developed by the REAL project. These workshops would have the aim of assisting adult educators to assess their skills knowledge and understanding gained through their experience and learning as adult educators.
- (c) continuing to promote the REAL Toolkit through their own website, members meetings and e-bulletins.
- (d) exploring the development of a nationally recognised competency-based framework for Scotland based on the REAL Competencies for Scotland.
- (e) exploring the development of a professional development framework for adult education in Scotland to support the REAL resources.

The SCQF Partnership is promoting the REAL Toolkit in its RPL workshops for both learners and institutions, their own website, members meetings and e-bulletins.

More widely in the United Kingdom, representatives of the Workers Educational Association have taken a close interest in the development of this project and are known to be considering using the material and approaches that have been developed in their own funded professional development programmes.

In Estonia, Tallinn University is promoting the REAL Toolkit as part of its provision of RPL for adult educators.

In Romania, IREA is:

- planning to use the REAL Toolkit in its teacher training workshops and recommend it to teacher training organisations;
- hosting both the English and Romanian versions of the Toolkit on its own website and continue to promote the toolkit at national level;
- using the Toolkit to advocate for the re-development of the RPL policy for adult educators;
- exploiting the knowledge gained in the REAL project in order to propose the development of a competency framework for adult educators and levelling of the professional standard to the national qualifications framework; and

- proposing the REAL Toolkit as resource materials for the adult education discipline within the Educational Sciences Department at the West University of Timisoara, both at BA and MA level.

In Ireland, the University of Limerick is engaged in wide dissemination of the REAL Toolkit and is also working on how best to sustain the work of REAL and to ensure its use into the future. The National University of Galway, which is the largest provider of accredited Adult Learner Qualifications, is exploring using the Toolkit as part of their selection process.

6. Contribution to EU policies

Previous projects, from which the REAL Project derives its base, have highlighted the need to make practical progress in developing EQF as a genuine and effective instrument at the operational level, within national frameworks and in terms of the EU's wider goals for labour mobility and the knowledge society. So far, many of these Europe wide goals exist more in terms of policy statements than they do in practical measures. There are of course many factors involved in this, one being institutional inertia, but predominantly a lack of common institutional structures and common descriptors of actions in the workplace. This project has worked from direct practical experience amongst adult education practitioners to define and refine terms that can be used more widely to benchmark practices. In doing so, it provides a significant stepping point to the Lifelong Learning Programme 2013-2020. There is no common or standardised 'adult educator' in Europe with a specific professional profile. Across the EU there appears to be a range of entry points to become an adult educator and a range of approaches to the employment of adult educators and expectations in terms of practices and qualification requirements. As well as the lack of a single point of entry to become an adult educator there is no specific agreement on the nature, level and content of a national award to become an adult education professional across the EU.

The REAL Toolkit and its benchmarking of standards of adult education practice against National Qualifications Frameworks and the European Qualifications Framework provides the basis for developing a more standardised approach to qualifications, thereby enhancing possibilities for RPL and professionalisation of the arena and potential labour market mobility across the EU.

The REAL project will contribute to helping the partner countries to meet the EU's recommendations for the validation of informal and non-formal learning which were published in December 2012 after the commencement of the REAL project. Each participating country will be required to report on how they are meeting these recommendations in 2018 and the REAL Toolkit provide a key development in this area. The REAL project was highlighted in the 2014 inventory of informal and non-

formal learning which is regularly updated by CEDEFOP. A link to both the recommendations and inventory can be found at: <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning>.

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.

7. Acknowledgement

The REAL partners would like to acknowledge the contribution of Jim Bradley, formerly of the University of Stirling, to the conceptualisation and early leadership of the project. Without his dedication, enthusiasm and commitment, the REAL Toolkit would not have been developed. Ill-health meant Jim retired from the University before the project reached its conclusion.

