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**Arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning**

The general purpose of processes for validating non-formal and informal learning is to widen participation in formal, further and higher education amongst those who lack the relevant formal qualifications, for whatever reason. The recognition arrangements are aimed at ensuring that there are no arbitrary and unnecessary barriers to admission or progression that might disadvantage particular groups, rather than targeting particular groups themselves.

**Within regulated (general and vocational) qualifications**

There is no national prescribed position on, or approach to, recognising non formal and informal learning in England. However, the qualifications regulator, Ofqual [1] (the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation), allows for the recognition of prior learning (RPL) for awarding organisations [2] and associated regulatory criteria underpinning the Regulated Qualifications Framework.

While the actual offer of RPL depends on the providers themselves, Ofqual’s General Conditions of Recognition state that where an awarding organisation has in place a policy for the recognition of prior learning it must:

- ensure that the policy which it has in place enables the awarding organisation to award qualifications in accordance with its Conditions of Recognition

- publish that policy
- comply with that policy.

The procedures and tools to be used to assess prior learning are left to the discretion of the awarding organisations, but e-portfolios are a common method used.

National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) are a means of validating workplace learning. They are aimed mainly at people in work or may be taken as part of an apprenticeship. They provide evidence of professional competence against a nationally recognised occupational standard.

To evaluate prior learning, students may be required to undertake the same assessments as those followed in the formal course of learning, although they do not have to attend taught sessions.

The second option is to submit a portfolio of evidence based on previous learning, skills and/or competence, which must be cross-referenced to the learning outcomes and assessment criteria of the relevant unit(s).

There are no specific qualifications required for staff involved in validation.

### Within higher education

Although not required by law to do so, all Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) design their qualifications in accordance with The Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of Degree-Awarding Bodies in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ [4]). The framework forms part of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education [5], the definitive reference point used to assure the quality and standards of UK higher education providers. The FHEQ is based on the premise that qualifications should be awarded for the achievement of outcomes and attainment, rather than years of study.

As autonomous institutions, HEIs have discretion as to whether or not they recognise prior learning for entry to a learning programme. The selection processes and procedures employed by HEIs addressed in Chapter B2 [6]: Recruitment, selection and admission to higher education of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, include the recognition of prior learning for the purposes of meeting entry requirements for a programme. The Quality Code does not, however, specify the criteria to be used for selection, but encourages each institution to ensure that its own policies and procedures are transparent, explicit and communicated effectively.

Many Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) give credit for prior study and informal learning acquired through work or other experiences for advanced standing within a learning programme. They must then align their procedures for RPL to Chapter B6 [7]: Assessment of students and the recognition of prior learning of the Quality Code.

Credit may also be used to help students transfer to another programme either within the same institution or at a different institution. As each HEI’s programmes are different, the requirements for credit vary between institutions. HEIs may use the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS [8]), but most use national credit systems which articulate with it.

Chapter B6 on assessment [7] of students and the recognition of prior learning in the UK Quality Code for Higher Education says that consideration should be given to the appropriateness of assessment tools for the nature of the prior learning to be assessed. Examples of tools that might be used include:

- a portfolio of evidence
• a structured interview

• completion of a piece of work accompanied by a reflective account of the learning achieved

• artefacts

• a performance-based assessment

• completion of the assessment used to demonstrate learning in the module/programme for which comparability is being claimed.

Other common tools include observation at the workplace, questionnaires and viva voce.

There are no specific qualifications required for staff involved in validation, although The UK Quality Code for Higher Education - Chapter B2: [6] Recruitment, selection and admission to higher education states:

Higher education providers are vigilant to ensure that all those authorised to make decisions on behalf of the provider about whether or not a place should be offered to a prospective student are fully briefed, and competent to do so.

Further information

For arrangements to recognise the learning outcomes of volunteering, see the article ‘Skills recognition’ [9] in the ‘Voluntary Activities’ chapter.


Another good source of information on non-formal and informal learning is the Cedefop publication, Country report UK, England and Northern Ireland: 2016 update to the European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning. [12]

See also section 4.3.2. Recognition of non-formal and informal learning in The European Higher Education Area in 2015: Bologna Process Implementation Report [13]

Information and guidance

The provision of information, advice and guidance in relation to the various methods of validation in place is delivered by the individual learning providers and awarding organisations which offer validation opportunities.

Learning providers and awarding organisations which recognise prior learning have their own policies in place and this includes for the type of information and guidance they offer.
Chapter B2 [6]: Recruitment, selection and admission to higher education of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education says:

Providers decide what information they will make available and how it can be communicated most effectively to the diverse range of prospective students and their advisers. Such information may include: details of the recognition of prior learning for the purposes of meeting entry requirements...

The chapter on assessment of students and the recognition of prior learning [7] in the UK Quality Code for Higher Education gives, as an indicator of sound practice, that:

Those who might be eligible for the recognition of prior learning are made aware of the opportunities available, and are supported throughout the process of application and assessment for recognition.

Applicants benefit from being engaged in discussion and negotiation about the form(s) of assessment to be used in their case, and from having a shared understanding of the learning that would need to be evidenced as well as the nature of the evidence to be provided.

Quality assurance

Awarding organisations and higher education institutions [3](HEIs) determine their own quality assurance arrangements for the validation of non-formal learning. For example at the London School of Economics [14], the internal academic board reviews the quality assurance processes. The Quality Assurance Handbook provides guidance on what School-level and departmental-level responsibilities look like under the new devolved framework, and set out further information about the operating environment i.e. national and School level Quality Assurance arrangements. The Quality Assurance Agency’s Quality Code for Higher Education [5] is the definitive reference point for HEIs.