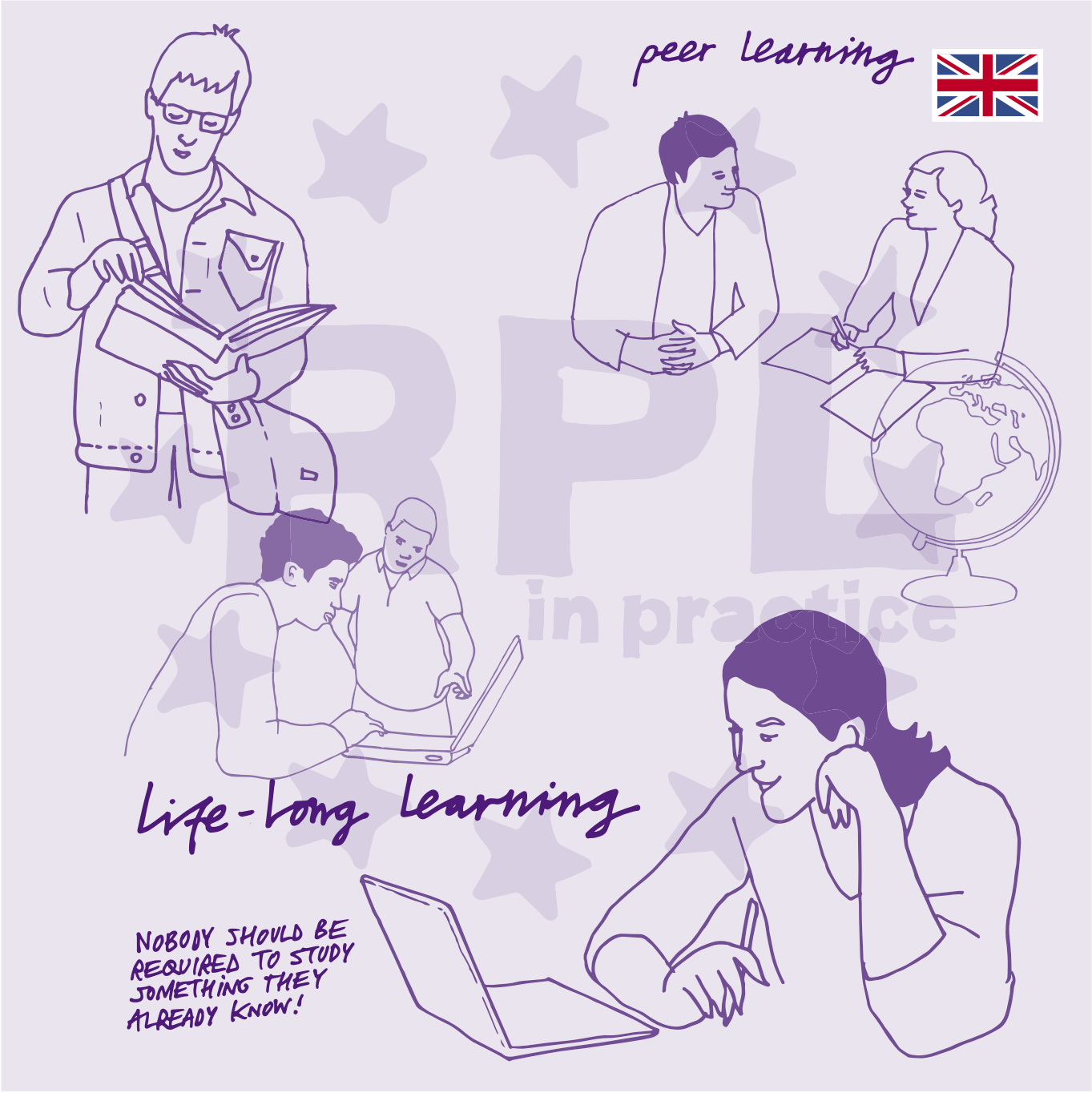
Swedish Council for Higher Education

Report 2021:4

Recognition of Prior Learning in Practice

Putting policies to work – experiences from two years of peer learning



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National contexts

An important part of the project's peer learning approach was sharing information about national and institutional contexts. At the peer learning events, the project participants shared information about the national and institutional regulations, guidelines and practices. The participating countries and institutions had reached different levels of national coordination and implementation of RPL practice at institutions.

Some of the countries had national projects for the recognition of prior informal and non-formal learning in parallel with this project. During the project's lifespan, a lot has happened. Some developments are a direct effect of the project, but much has been done in parallel and cannot be referred to as a direct result of the project. This is the nature of the peer learning approach – it is sometimes impossible to distinguish between cause and effect. One conclusion the project has drawn is that peer learning works particularly well when it involves participants that are in a development phase. The drawback is that it is difficult to discern the direct results.

In this chapter, the participating partners from each country describe the status of RPL and national developments over time. The national descriptions are all structured in in a similar way, describing the legal provisions, the status of RPL at the start of the project, followed by national developments.

Austria

Legal provisions for RPL in Austria:

Initial situation – a restrictive legal basis for RPL

In Austria, recognition of prior learning in the higher education system was, for a long time, limited to the recognition of formally acquired competences. The introduction of alternative entrance qualifications, the TVE Diploma Examination and the university entrance qualification examination, can be seen as the first important steps towards opening higher education to new, non-traditional target groups and rethinking questions of recognition and crediting of competences. A second major step in this direction was taken with the establishment of the new higher education sector of Fachhochschulen (Universities of Applied Sciences – UAS) in Austria in 1994. For the first time, vocational qualifications were recognised for access to studies and also for exemptions. This was a milestone, in that recognition gained importance not only in the procedural sense as a result of a validation process, but also in the sense of "societal" recognition of the value of competences acquired in a professional context.

RPL gained further importance with the Austrian strategy on lifelong learning (LLL strategy) of 2011. In one of its lines of action, this strategy

stipulates: "*The acquisition of knowledge in classic education institutions such as schools and higher education institutions is complemented by learning at non-formally organised learning facilities. Acquired skills and competences are recognised and certified as qualifications regardless of where they were obtained and are equal to non-formal and informal education processes.*"[18]

The vision from the national strategy on lifelong learning, to allow non-formal and informal education processes to be of equal value alongside formal education pathways, was opposed in Austria at that time by the rather restrictive legal basis, which until recently essentially limited recognition to the cases mentioned in the first paragraph.[19]

About ten years later, Austria is facing a major amendment to the legal provisions on the recognition of competences. In the course of 2021, recognition of non-formally and informally acquired competences will be possible in all sectors of the higher education system and for all study formats. The path to this goal was accompanied by a great deal of information and persuasion work on the part of representatives of HEIs, the responsible ministry and the national quality assurance agency AQ Austria.

National development and implementation projects – implementation steps for RPL in the national higher education system

Despite the restrictive legal framework and a generally low level of knowledge about the principles and procedures of RPL, there had already been initiatives and efforts to implement RPL and some development projects at some HEIs. For example, the University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences (BOKU), a project partner in our national project and also in the RPLip project, ran the Erasmus+ project "Peer Review on Validation of informal and non-formal Learning – the external evaluation of VNFIL institutions/providers by Peers" from 2015 to 2018. The focus was on quality assurance through a peer-to-peer process. A quality framework developed in the project 'Europeerguid-RVC' (2014–2015) was implemented. This contributed to the European guidelines for the validation of non-formal and informal learning which were published in 2015[20].

Building on such initiatives and experiences and the interest of some HEIs, the implementation of the above-mentioned objective of the LLL strategy started in Austria. With the support of the responsible ministry, a project group was formed in which recommendations for the design of procedures for the recognition and crediting of non-formally and informally acquired

18. LLL:2020, Strategie zum lebensbegleitenden Lernen in Österreich; Bundesministerium für Unterricht, Kunst und Kultur; Bundesministerium für Wissenschaft und Forschung; Bundesministerium für Arbeit, Soziales und Konsumentenschutz; Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft, Familie und Jugend; July 2011, p. 44 f.
19. Subsequently, RPL was included in two other national strategies, which are listed in the last chapter.
20. http://www.peer-review-network.eu/pages/peer-review-vnfil-extended.php

competences were developed.[21] These recommendations were intended to contribute to the development of quality-assured procedures in HEIs and thus to strengthen confidence in recognition and credit procedures. In addition, these recommendations formed a basis for further developing RPL at the national level and expanding the legal framework.

In order to ensure the practicability and relevance of the results and to ensure the use of the results, the project was carried out together with HEIs that already had experience with RPL processes and/or had a strong interest in their development and implementation. For the development of common understanding, it was important to involve all relevant stakeholders. Therefore, all higher education sectors (private and public universities, universities of applied sciences and university colleges of teacher education) were represented in the project.

The project was coordinated by AQ Austria. This not only ensured the relevance and practicability of the project results through cooperation with the HEIs, but also ensured the development of quality-assured procedures. The involvement of the Ministry also made it possible to continue dialogue about necessary changes in the law. Experts from abroad who had experience with RPL were regularly involved in the development work. Experiences from European countries were also brought in through participation in conferences. As a result of these extensive activities, the 'Recommendations for recognition and crediting procedures' were presented and published in 2016.

We would like to mention some of them here, as they are important to us as a basis for our work and accompany us in all discussions and procedures:

- RPL should be integrated into the HEIs' strategy. The commitment of the university management is necessary.
- HEIs should develop appropriate, quality-assured procedures.
- Transparency in the design and implementation of procedures is a basic requirement.
- Transparency can be achieved primarily through the development of regulations, the provision of information on the procedures, the clear definition of responsibilities, the definition and adherence to criteria, the documentation of the procedures and the training of the advisors.

This publication – also translated into English – formed an important basis for information work in the Austrian higher education area, but also for active cooperation with European partners, such as in the present project. The recommendations of the project group could also be introduced into relevant national strategy development processes and thus contributed significantly to an increased and more positive perception of RPL in Austria.

After completion of this phase, it quickly became clear that the recommendations on quality-assured procedures now had to be followed by concrete implementation steps at the universities. For this reason, AQ Austria – again

21. AQ Austria 2016: Recognition of non-formally and informally acquired competences. Recommendations for recognition and crediting procedures. https://www.aq.ac.at/de/anerkennung_anrechnung/dokumente-anerkennung-anrechnung/AQ_Austria-2016_Recommendations-RPL.pdf?m=1615218375&

with financial support from the Ministry – launched another project dedicated to the implementation of the procedures at HEIs.

The principles from the first project were retained: the involvement of (eleven) HEIs from all HEI sectors, cooperation with the Ministry, focus on quality assurance and involvement of experts from abroad with experience in implementing RPL at HEIs. The focus of the project activities this time was on counselling for the implementation of RPL procedures at the individual HEIs. This took place within the framework of counselling interviews conducted by AQ Austria together with experts from Germany and Finland directly at the universities (on site). In this way, concrete pilot projects could be developed at some HEIs, while at other HEIs internal guidelines were developed or adapted to RPL aspects with this support, as the following examples show.

FH Campus Wien, project partner in the national and the international projects, found in this consulting project that an organisational development process was initiated, which included several levels up to a cultural change. It is about motivation, attitudes and behaviour, which are then expressed in policies and procedures, for example. In Austria the heads of the study programmes at UAS are responsible for recognition of prior learning. Therefore, the processes for RPL must be designed in cooperation with all heads of study programmes in a UAS. Development can therefore be very time-consuming, and the above-mentioned organisational development process and the rethinking are therefore a necessary basis for successful implementation.

At BOKU, a project on the implementation of validation procedures in the context of lifelong learning has been launched, which is to be implemented in the performance agreement 2019–2021 between the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research and BOKU. The overarching goal is transparency at all levels to make people's diverse and rich learning experiences visible and to enable access to higher education. BOKU sets high standards to meet reliability, validity and quality assurance. Particular emphasis is placed on the correct procedure and transparency. However, it is also important to involve all important departments in the development, to gain the greatest possible acceptance. This makes it all the more important to have quality-assured independent or external monitoring, in this case by the national quality assurance agency, AQ Austria.

An important aspect in this consultation phase was that the Ministry had taken over the financing of the counselling sessions, thus also underlining the importance of implementing RPL at HEIs. Parallel to these processes, the project group was also active in supporting the implementation of the still missing legal foundations. Advice for the legal design was regularly provided in the form of recommendations, which have now largely been incorporated into the development of the new regulations.

The new legal regulations

After the amendments of 2020, RPL is still regulated in the various laws, currently still with deviations in definitions and also with different levels of detail in the requirements. The latter results from the different nature of the sectors: private universities versus public universities, universities of applied

sciences with a stronger vocational orientation compared to the scientifically oriented universities; universities of teacher education, which are federal agencies and whose autonomy is comparatively strongly restricted.

Nevertheless, all laws are based on the same idea: that RPL should be made possible and quality-assured procedures should be developed and applied. Insofar as the legal requirements provide for this, RPL procedures have also become part of external quality assurance.

The legal basis will probably be tightened to some extent in 2021. The amendment to the Universities Act, which regulates public universities (and by far the largest sector), will not be passed at all until 2021. Therefore, we would like to refer at this point to a central website[22], which will keep the current versions available.

Parallel to these amendments, a legally regulated[23] national contact point for RPL issues in the higher education sector has been established, located at the national quality assurance agency, AQ Austria. This is responsible for information and counselling on questions of recognition of non-formally and informally acquired competences for all higher education sectors.

Outcomes – cooperation in the RPLip project and what we have learned from it

On the one hand, the project in question was an excellent opportunity for an exchange with partners who are at a similar stage of development as Austria. On the other hand, it was invaluable to learn during a period of two years from an institution, the Cork Institute of Technology CIT, which can already look back on 20 years of experience with RPL and has already developed strategies, processes and documentation, and is very generous in making its knowledge and experience available.

As we had already set up the national project group in Austria, it made sense to link this with the RPLip project. Therefore, project partners from Austria also participated in the RPLip project, namely FH-Campus Wien, BOKU, and the University of Teacher Education Upper Austria.

Activities in Austria during the project period can only be attributed to the RPLip project per se in isolated cases at the national level, as a very structured process was already underway in Austria. Rather, it was important to support the national project with experiences from the partner countries and to bring about decisions in this way, but also to be able to justify them. An example of this was the question that accompanied us from a national perspective for almost the entire duration of the project: whether all HEIs should be obliged to RPL or whether the benefit is greater if the legal foundations "only" enable and promote RPL. The Austrian legislator opted for the "voluntary" option, as we had also taken away from the project as a suitable way. We also learned

22. Legal framework in English: https://www.aq.ac.at/en/recognition/legal-framework/legal-framework.php Legal framework in German: https://www.aq.ac.at/de/anerkennung_anrechnung/rechtliche-rahmenbedingungen/rechtliche_rahmenbedingungen.php

23. Section 3 para 3 item 12 HS-QSG: Federal Act on the External Quality Assurance in Higher Education and the Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation Austria (Act on Quality Assurance in Higher Education – HS-QSG)

in the project how a national qualifications framework and RPL can interact constructively and how the communication of the formulation of learning outcomes can be promoted at HEIs.

From our point of view, the exchange in the project was also particularly fruitful because here too – as in our national cooperation – all relevant actors were represented: different HEIs and types of HEIs, the ministries or central institutions entrusted with coordinating national tasks, and the quality assurance agencies. The interplay of these different functions and perspectives was thus never lost sight of, and there was always the possibility of an exchange with similar institutions, even in a short way.

In concrete terms, the HEIs in the project have tested the self-assessment template developed within the project and discussed the learning experiences. FH Campus Wien collected this template in interviews with programme leaders and supplemented it with a university-wide survey on the understanding of RPL. This created a dynamic in the university to deal intensively with the topic and organisational as well as individual learning was initiated. FH Campus Wien used its experiences with the template and the survey in one of the two webinars designed in the project. FH Campus Wien shows a way to build up procedures and motivation of the stakeholders on RPL.

Peer learning was also particularly important, discussing the challenges but also the positive examples at the HEIs and proposing solutions. The BOKU Lifelong Learning Department was able to learn a lot about the heterogeneous target group of candidates and to learn from this for the relevant areas at BOKU.

In the long-term perspective, we assume that international cooperation will continue, at least on an informal level. The more optimistic scenario would be to put long-term cooperation on a more stable footing; we would certainly commit ourselves to this from an Austrian perspective.

Outlook

As already mentioned, the coming years will be important for continued work with RPL in Austria: information work for and at the HEIs, implementation of the procedures at the respective institutions, training, persuasion work, etc. We are looking forward to the new legal framework, which provides us with a better position for implementing RPL.

Through our involvement with RPL, our understanding of other areas (including problems) has also developed, such as the link between curriculum development and learning outcomes orientation with RPL or the contribution of qualification frameworks to recognition procedures, which we will work on more intensively in the future.

What we would like to maintain, and also formulate as a recommendation for imitation, is to set up an implementation process with all the relevant actors and to remain in dialogue with each other. At the national level, we will form an institutionalised network from the existing project cooperation and continue to seek international contact. We would also like to recommend the development and recording of a common understanding of how RPL can

be promoted and how procedures and processes can be developed according to the principles of organisational development.

Voices from the project

"Peer to peer learning was also particularly important, discussing the challenges but also the positive examples at the HEIs and proposing solutions. Validation of non-formal and informal learning is not a very good research object; it is something you have to discover through implementation. Within this group it was obvious that persons who had the opportunity to lead candidates through the whole process, they were really satisfied with the work they had done. My personal opinion is that projects are more lively, more energetic if there are good examples of implementation with real results – in this particular project, best practice examples of people who went through a validation process and their success. Within this project we all gained motivation to work with validation and it gave us the impression that validation could change views, opinions, open doors and lead to success stories."

Christina Paulus
Universität für Bodenkultur Wien (BOKU), Austria

RPL in Austria – brief facts

National coordination

- The integration of lead actors, institutions, the Ministry and the National Agency is an effective model for starting the implementation process in all HEI sectors.
- A legally regulated national contact point for RPL issues in the higher education sector has been established, which is located at the national quality assurance agency AQ Austria. This is responsible for information and counselling on questions of the recognition of non-formally and informally acquired competences for all higher education sectors.

National policy

- There is a national commitment to RPL, which is laid down in a strategy paper from the ministry. The objective here is: acquired skills and competences are recognised and certified as qualifications regardless of where they were obtained and are equal to non-formal and informal education processes.
- Recommendations for the design of RPL procedures were drawn up in a cooperation between HEIs and AQ Austria.
- In 2021, the adaptation of the legal basis for RPL will be completed, then RPL will be possible in all higher education sectors.

Implementation of RPL in HE

- RPL has not been possible in all higher education sectors until now.
- Accordingly, there has been different progress in the various sectors.
- At the universities of applied sciences, RPL has been provided for since their foundation in 1994 and is accordingly established. The universities and teacher training colleges are partly breaking new ground here.
- In 2020, pilot projects for implementation were started at individual universities.

Obstacles

- The biggest obstacle so far, which is soon to be resolved, has been the lack of a legal basis for RPL at universities and teacher training colleges.
- Besides very convinced, committed and informed university representatives, there are also those who are suspicious of RPL; this is often due to a lack of knowledge about the principles and procedures of RPL.

Data

- Apart from university admission data based on qualification, there is currently no central data collection on RPL issues.