# Designing a curriculum around the needs of adults: the WBIS programme at the University of Chester

What does it tell us about the prospects for the spread of RPL practices?

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## 1. Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) practice globally and in the UK as a context for a case study of the Work Based and Integrative Studies (WBIS) programme at the University of Chester. WBIS is an example of a 'shell framework' – a curriculum framework validated by the university without specifying a subject. It is designed around the needs of adult learners in the workplace rather than having a subject discipline as starting point. WBIS seeks to enable adults to gain accredited qualifications which are completely tailored to the needs of learners in a way which preserves academic rigour as the basis for informed reflective learning.

This makes an interesting case study for two related reasons. First, the programme is trans-disciplinary and therefore able to accommodate a broad range of practice knowledge. Second, unlike conventional programmes, the WBIS Programme and Module Learning Outcomes are specifically designed to accommodate the knowledge of practitioners and translate it into formal academic credit. WBIS offers some insight into both how RPL can be maximised in higher education as well as the many barriers to more widespread practice, suggesting fundamental reasons why it is destined to remain limited. Maximising the potential of RPL requires educationalists to not only re-think curriculum design but also what is to be regarded as legitimate knowledge. In turn this requires tutors to partially cede their established role as the sole arbiters of 'expertise' in favour of a more facilitative role. Personal experience of the author suggests that even where this occurs there are profound institutional disincentives for recognising past learning in an environment where student fees are an important consideration.

## 2. Context one: RPL – a global perspective

RPL describes two types of academic practice. First, it is used to allow non-standard entry onto a formally accredited programme of learning by virtue of having previous non-accredited knowledge (West & Fraser, 1992). This can be automatic or is more usually by means of an entrance exam. The second type of practice, with which we

are concerned in this chapter, is the process of translating Non-formal and Informal learning into credit as part of a formal qualification. 'Non-formal learning' refers to planned, structured learning often taken in the form of company training programmes, unaccredited courses, Continuing Professional Development or online learning from MOOCs. 'Informal learning' refers to the incidental, unplanned everyday learning which occurs, especially in professional contexts (Bjornavold, 2000). In the context of RPL practices it is also useful to distinguish between 'Specific' and 'Generic' credit (Association of Colleges, 2014). Specific credit is that which can be aligned with learning outcomes for a module or whole programme. Generic credit is awarded in two circumstances. First, where there are no learning outcomes – such as a formal award outside the European Credit Transfer System. Second, where the student's learning is broadly compatible with HE level indicators but is not tied to a specific, named award. This is common practice in the USA but highly unusual in most European countries as degrees are subject specific (Brigham & Klein-Collins, 2010).

The first examples of practice occurred in the 1930s in the USA (Travers, 2012) and France (Pouget & Osborne, 2004), although the contexts and drivers are very different from one another. In France, direction has been from the centre through national legislation. The US by contrast is far more diverse in terms of institutions and, with one exception, relied upon institutional initiative, where practice evolved in response to the work of educational progressives, especially Dewey (1897; 1910). For Dewey learning is a human trait which occurs in many contexts, not just classrooms, so that it is heavily mediated by personal and social factors and the requirements for knowledge they create – in contrast to a fixed curriculum determined by and within the confines of subject disciplines. In France, the impetus to practice was less theoretically driven and more the product of a long established progressive cultural predisposition (Jallade, 2000). In the US, practice did not really spread greatly until after World War Two, when federal legislation enabled colleges and universities to recognise training gained in the Armed Forces. A second driver for the spread of practice was the Civil Rights movement in the 1970s. Especially important was the creation in 1974 of a self-funding organisation with the specific goal of increasing RPL practice – the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) (Thomas, 2000; Wong, 2014). By 1980 over 2000 US institutions were using RPL either as a means of admission or for credit as part of a formal programme (Billingham & Travaglini, 1981). 1100 of these indicated they used RPL mainly for admissions purposes. Later research by Hoffman, Travers, Evans and Treadwell (2009) indicated a further spreading of practice especially in colleges specialising in adult education. In France, there is a tradition of government legislation giving students the right to make RPL claims so that every university has established processes and procedures. There is no equivalent to CAEL and no specialist adult education colleges (Charraud, 2010). Another important difference is the dominance of subject specific awards in France, compared with the large number of generic awards in the US (Alcouffe & Miller, 2010).

In other nations, which have started later, there is a mixed pattern of RPL, but international surveys consistently conclude there is scope for far greater practice (An-

nen, 2013; Corradi, Evans & Valk, 2006; Harris, Wihak & Breier, 2011; OECD, 2021; Weber, Voit, Lengauer, Proinger, Duvekot & Aagaard, 2013; Werquin, 2010). The broad international pattern is replicated in single nation studies such as Canada (Belanger & Mount, 1998), Australia (Service Skills Australia, 2010) and Denmark (Andersen & Laugesen, 2012). The introduction of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) was thought to better facilitate credit transfer and RPL, but there is little evidence of this on the ground. The regular European surveys of practice (CEDEFOP, 2004; 2005; 2008; 2010; 2014; 2016; 2018; 2021) reveal the same pattern of low level, fragmented practice.

As a result of the failure to introduce widespread RPL there is a body of literature which attempts to identify reasons why. These include a lack of awareness among students that RPL is an option (Hawley, 2010, p. 15) and conservative university culture (Hoffman et al., 2009). Pitman and Vidovich (2013) identify institutional mission as an important constraint. Practice appears to be heavily concentrated in lower status, vocationally led teaching institutions of recent origin rather than those focussed on more traditional subject disciplines and research, where opposition is often at the level of philosophy and principle. It also appears that resistance is greater in 'pure' subjects in both the humanities and sciences than in more applied subject areas (Travers, 2011). Another barrier to adoption is the way academic curriculums are planned. Anderson, Fejes and Ahn (2004) and Whittaker, Brown, Benske and Hawthorne (2011) note that traditional programme design mitigates against RPL since it requires the students' learning to conform to pre-determined learning outcomes. Rarely are curricula designed to adapt to the knowledge of students. In their South African study Cooper and Harris (2013) identify the dominance of subject discipline as the organising principle in curriculum design as another key source of inflexibility. Sin (2014) also identifies the emphasis upon didactic instruction within the confines of subject discipline as yet another barrier to a flexible, student approach to learning. Even where RPL is practised, the processes are often 'cumbersome, inflexible and lengthy' (Hurlimann, March & Robins, 2013, p. 639).

Interestingly, there is no comparable body of literature outlining the factors which are likely to enhance the adoption of RPL practices. All in all, an unbiased observer may conclude that, taken as a whole, universities are not greatly concerned with RPL, except in isolated pockets. After almost a hundred years, its practice is still very much the exception to conventional academic delivery modes.

## 3. Context two: UK RPL policies and practices

UK higher education is dominated by autonomous but predominantly publicly funded universities. There is also delivery on a smaller scale by what are termed Further Education Colleges (FECs), whose primary role is to deliver vocational education and training up to EQF Level 3. There is also an increasing number of private providers. As with many other facets of life in Britain, UK HE is a kind of halfway house between the US and continental Europe. From Germany came the modern Humboldt

model of a broad range of subject disciplines with teaching alongside research. From the US the adoption of a modern credit system was largely complete by the 1980s, which in turn heavily influenced the creation of the European Credit Transfer System (Bekhradnia, 2004). Today there are 165 chartered HE providers (Universities UK, 2021). For most institutions, the core of their business is delivering bachelor degrees to full time undergraduates. The principal source of income is therefore the tuition fees which are currently £9,250 p.a. (€10,806). Although students pay the full economic cost of tuition, they are able to access government loans, repayable once in work. Funding issues are important with respect to RPL, as we will see.

The relative freedom of institutions means that each HE provider creates its own regulations, including those relating to RPL. There is guidance on procedures from the Quality Assurance Agency (2013; 2021) but these are not prescriptive. As a result there is a significant variation in practice both between and within institutions. There is no sector-wide UK study on University RPL regulations. A small study I conducted suggests that the majority make some allowance for past learning but not all (Talbot, 2017a). At least one university allows for a full award to be comprised of past learning, but this is unusual. Typically, universities allow either a third, half or two thirds of an award to be comprised of past learning. The University of Chester allows for up to two thirds of an award.

Another gap in our knowledge is the amount of credit awarded for RPL. The Higher Education Statistics Authority (HESA) keeps no records on RPL, so there is no official record. Pokorny (2011) suggest that it is heavily concentrated in Nursing and Work based learning departments. It appears that RPL practice largely began from the 1980s and 1990s as a result of the work of the Learning from Experience Trust (LETs), modelled on the US Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) (Evans, 2000). Like CAEL, LETs embarked upon an active campaign to encourage the uptake of practice. Unlike CAEL, LETs depended upon government funding, which dried up as politicians lost interest. No similar successor body exists in the UK today.

The lack of official data means that we have to rely upon periodic independent studies to gauge the extent and nature of practice. The first of these in England found the widespread presence of procedures but little use of them (Merrifield, MacIntyre & Osaigbovo, 2000). The same pattern is evident in Scotland (Whittaker et al., 2011). More recent studies by Atlay, Bridges and Finn (2011) and Atlay and Turnbull (2017) reveal a similar pattern – low levels of usage of procedures and few attempts to record the volume of credit awarded. Their research identifies various barriers, including low awareness and understanding by academic tutors, administrators and students, a lack of staff time, a lack of institutional commitment, complexity and concerns in respect of quality assurance. Howieson and Raffe's (2013) study of credit transfer in Scotland identified similar cultural issues such as a distrust of credit gained elsewhere, fears over a lack of income and unfamiliarity with other qualifications. A 2013 NIACE study of practices in a variety of non-HE institutions drew similar conclusions in respect of limited application of practice. While it is difficult to gauge, given the lack of systematic monitoring, there is a sense that the spread of practice in England has stalled in

recent years (Watson, 2013). Other surveys such as that by Souto-Otero (2013) provide interesting case studies where practice flourishes, but there is little sense of extensive engagement. The overall picture of RPL practice in the UK which emerges is consistent with that elsewhere: one of islands of good practice surrounded by whole oceans of non-engagement.

## 4. RPL at the University of Chester – the WBIS Framework

The WBIS Framework at the University of Chester is a flexible, open access programme specifically designed around the needs of adult learners. It is located in a specialist unit with a team of a dozen academic tutors and three administrative staff. It was created in 1998 and has grown steadily in student numbers over the years so that there are now around 1300. There are no formal entry requirements onto WBIS other than students must be in employment and capable of benefitting from higher education study. It is an unusual programme in many respects. It can be adapted for use by individuals or cohorts and is explicitly designed to capture RPL. WBIS is a product of the autonomy which exists in UK universities. It was not created as a result of government direction or at the behest of the leadership of the university. Academic tutors created the programme in what is an otherwise conventional university. It was developed at a time when other universities, notably Middlesex and Derby, were creating similar shell frameworks. The origins of shell frameworks can be traced back to a now defunct pioneering programme developed at North London Polytechnic in the 1960s and 1970s (O'Reilly, 1989).

Shell frameworks like WBIS enable the creation of award titles and curriculum based upon the specific learning requirements of individuals and organisations. Shell frameworks can be best understood as 'Whole Programme Learning by Contract' (Talbot, 2017b). Learning by contract was originally developed by Knowles (1986) as a means of introducing negotiated (with the student) elements into a curriculum. Knowles did not question the primacy of subject discipline so that his conception of the practice was within a conventional curriculum. Shell frameworks are not as constrained and recognise the legitimacy of the knowledge of practitioners, whether defined by subject discipline or not. Nicolescu (2002) distinguishes between single discipline, inter-discipline (two), multi-discipline (three or more) and trans-disciplinary knowledge (knowledge external to discipline). Costley and Pizzolato (2018) observe that practice knowledge is by its nature trans-disciplinary and that conventional disciplinary approaches to education fail to acknowledge this.

Freed from the constraint of 'discipline only', WBIS can encompass forms of knowledge conventional programmes cannot. This might be a whole field of practice, such as facilitating and assessing competence for driving by the impaired or small animal surgery or procedural and organisational knowledge. Within WBIS, the intimate connection between knowledge and application is recognised so that a distinction is made between 'work-based' and 'work-related' learning and knowledge. Work-based learning, which involves direct application to practice is strongly encouraged;

work-related learning, where this is not feasible or desirable, is relevant to practice but not directly applicable. Two examples illustrate the difference. Someone working in an operational role in a university requires specific knowledge and competences – such as handling admissions, dealing with finance and so on. But they also benefit, albeit less directly, from having a broad contextual knowledge of higher education, so would benefit from completing a module in this respect. Students are actively encouraged to engage with their colleagues in respect of their studies so that their work is not simply personal learning. This is especially the case where students embark on workplace projects.

Award titles and pathways within the framework (i.e., the curriculum) are wholly negotiable with learners, whether as individuals or cohorts. Since the programme is designed to meet the needs of adult learners in the workplace, it is able to maximise the potential for incorporating past formal, informal and non-formal learning into an award, in addition to facilitating the acquisition of new knowledge. In creating their pathway, learners may incorporate past learning (RPL) and present learning in the form of experiential learning based around live workplace projects. They may also engage in learning for future application – studying topics which are likely to be of value in a future role. For example, a mid-career manager may anticipate becoming a budget holder and therefore complete a finance management module. Even where students study conventional subject modules the emphasis is always upon practice. The student learning something of finance in the quoted example is encouraged to engage in dialogue with colleagues in that area and assignments are based around application. All awards are made within the National Qualification Framework, itself aligned with the European Qualification Framework. It is not assumed that learners require full awards (Bachelor or Masters), and many students opt for interim or short awards such as a Post Graduate Certificate (30 credits ECTS). WBIS pathways are often composed of multiple knowledge bases. There may be RPL (past learning), some negotiated work based workplace projects (i.e., current, trans-disciplinary learning) and some conventional subject discipline modules.

Induction into what we might call 'The WBIS way' is usually via an initial module called 'Self Review and Negotiation of Learning'. In the module students assess their own learning in relation to their past and present professional practice, from which they construct their own negotiated pathway and award title. They also complete an exercise in formal reflective learning in order to become familiar with the use of reflective learning as a tool for personal learning in the workplace. Students are expected to utilise academic and other authoritative literature as a means of analysing their own lived experience so that reflective reviews obey standard academic practices and conventions. Whilst completing the module, judgements are made in dialogue with a tutor about the potential a student has for making RPL claims. The university permits the award of credit for up to two thirds of a recognised award such as Bachelor's or Master's degree. The credit system is based upon blocks of 10 ECTS credits so awards can be 10–60 credits at each level. All claims for RPL must be consistent with the focus of the negotiated award. The size of claim is determined by the volume of experiential

learning so that a person who has substantial experience is likely to make a larger claim than someone with less. There is no restriction on the number of claims so that some students make a single large claim, others a series of smaller claims.

Practices in respect of RPL in WBIS have been strongly influenced by help from the aforementioned LETs in the 1990s. This is especially true in respect of assessment. Prior to their involvement and the creation of WBIS, the expertise of LETs was drawn upon in order develop RPL procedures, especially in respect of assessment, for which there are two types. In the first, existing credit held by the student gained from another programme is simply transferred into their WBIS qualification. This is referred to as Accreditation of Past Certificated Learning (APCL). Transferring credit from another programme requires the credit to be relevant to the WBIS award, at the same level of learning and to be current – that is within five years of award. In cases where the credit is more than five years old students are required to write a reflective review of up to half the normal word tariff, either explaining how knowledge gained from the previously awarded credit has been applied or, where this is not possible, updating the knowledge inherent in the previously awarded credit to give it currency.

The second type of assessment is concerned with unaccredited learning and is referred to as the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL). APEL captures learning of two types: non-formal learning such as Continuing Professional Development or online learning from MOOCs, while informal learning refers to the incidental, unplanned everyday learning. APEL is not assessed by portfolio, a method Butterworth (1992) calls 'credit exchange'. APEL submission are instead assessed using the 'developmental model'. Students, with guidance, provide proof they have carried out the work they claim. This might be simply a letter of appointment, an affidavit from an employer, records of CPD events or a certificate from automated assessment from a MOOC. The evidence is appended to a reflective review comprised of three elements. The first part describes the knowledge gained, whether it be non-formal or informal. The second part analyses that experience by reference to authoritative literature. The literature is likely to be derived from a variety of sources, academic and non-academic. For example, in many occupational fields there are recognised examples of best practice, which students should be aware of. The final part of the review considers the learning from the experience, informed by wider reading and reflection as the basis for future actions. In order for the student to pass, the level of analysis must be consistent with Learning Level descriptors and obey standard academic conventions. Submissions are assessed by academic tutors in the same way any other submission would be assessed.

The credit exchange/portfolio method of assessment has some advantages, especially in technical subjects such as Engineering where the principal aim of the RPL process is to demonstrate competences, related to learning level in a practice setting. But in many other respects, the developmental model has significant advantages. Portfolios without an explicit academic content are difficult to assess in terms of volume and level of learning. There is a tendency for students to produce voluminous evidence, which is difficult for tutors to assess. It is also often very difficult to disentangle

the student's contribution from what is usually a team effort. Because of the varied and often voluminous nature of evidence, assessment is usually by a panel or team making the process time consuming and inefficient. Assessment by portfolio almost inevitably results in grading on a Pass/Fail basis with limited opportunities for feedback of the kind usually provided on academic programmes. The process also lacks transparency and accountability since it is very difficult for external examiners to make sense of what is presented in the time available. Portfolios are also inflexible since they assume there is only interpretation of experience and hence learning. The developmental method allows for multiple ways to interpret experience. For example, what of the student who has experienced racism in the workplace and wishes to make sense of the experience? How is this to be demonstrated by a portfolio of artefacts? Finally, awarding credit without engagement, without formal academic learning disadvantages students progressing onto more traditional academic modules. By translating the claim for credit into a formal academic exercise, students develop the necessary skills in literature searching, synthesis and analysis necessary for further study.

Before taking a wider view of RPL, three other issues are worth noting. First, in the UK university students are liable for the full cost of tuition. Since there is no formal delivery, fees for RPL credit on the WBIS programme are less than that where there is tuition. APCL or credit transfer is free since it involves minimal time in administration while APEL claims are charged at half the normal rate. This is an important issue for learners and employers, especially in cases where a student is self-funding. The full cost of a UK Bachelor's degree is usually £27,750 (€32.500); a WBIS degree comprised of two thirds APEL brings that down to £18,500 (€21,675). If a student has the appropriate existing credit at Levels 4 and 5, the cost is £9,250 (€10, 836). For the university this is a loss of income and we will return to this issue in the concluding remarks. The second issue concerns ethics. All students are made aware of potential ethical issues when making claims so that for example, in their narrative account, individuals are not identified. The final issue is quality assurance. All claims for past learning are assessed by a first marker and sample second marked on a 25% basis. There is no grading; all RPL credit is deemed a 'pass'. Within the faculty there is a credit coordinator whose role it is to oversee the veracity and validity of claims. Finally, independent external examiners from other universities are able to see all submissions to ensure academic standards are maintained.

## 5. Concluding comments

In the past, the introduction of RPL has often been seen by educationalists as a means of enhancing social justice. Examples include the aforementioned impact of the US Civil Rights movement and mitigating Apartheid in South Africa (Alexander, van Wyk, Bereng, & November, 2011). In recent years, a new impetus for the greater use of RPL has come from policy makers concerned with the disjuncture between the educational system and the requirements of modern, knowledge based economies (Singh, 2015). The result is an increased awareness of and interest in the knowledge

practitioners create and use (Fischer, Boreham & Nyhan, 2004; Gibbons et al., 1994; Nowotny, Scott & Gibbons, 2001). These developments imply that educational systems must alter traditional conceptions of legitimate knowledge in order to remain relevant (Redecker et al., 2011). For advocates of change, academic programmes should recognise the value of learning in the workplace and facilitate its incorporation into formal academic programmes (Boud & Solomon, 2001). Closely related to the idea of the 'Knowledge Economy' is the concept of 'Lifelong Learning' – the idea that the demands of the modern economy are such that conscious learning should continue throughout life and have the flexibility to accommodate real world learning (Field, 2005). Related to both these drivers of change is a belief that traditional approaches to the curriculum and pedagogy are ill-suited for real world, workplace oriented learning required by adults. As traditional conceptions of formal adult education as remedial or for leisure purposes are challenged, sole reliance upon traditional approaches to learning by didactic instruction are inappropriate since they ignore the learning (and hence existing knowledge) acquired through practice (Knowles et al., 2012). These various strands in understanding the role of practice knowledge and its importance underpins recent interest in RPL by bodies such as UNESCO (2012), the OECD (2010) and European Union (European Council, 2012). The problem for policy makers is that they are removed from educational practice and may be unaware or unable to influence the significant barriers to the greater spread of RPL practice – which, as we have noted, are the result of cultural beliefs, the dominance of subject discipline, ignorance of policy and procedures, inflexibility and so on.

Experience of RPL in the WBIS programme suggests there are even greater entrenched institutional barriers to the more widespread adoption of practice than is widely understood. Leading voices such as Villalba-Garcia (2021a) observe that the adoption of widespread RPL depends upon the adoption of an individually oriented approach to the curriculum. Programmes like WBIS which do precisely that and are designed to facilitate the acquisition of genuine workplace practice knowledge are rare so experience with it is extremely valuable. Until now we have considered WBIS in the way it operates for individual students, but most students on WBIS do not study individually negotiated pathways; the majority are in cohorts. WBIS is mostly used for cohort delivery for employers or training organisation wishing to convert their training programmes into a fully accredited university award. At any one time there are a number of different partner organisations using a prescribed pathway within WBIS. Although no numbers are kept on the proportion of students studying individually and those in cohorts, the vast majority are on a prescribed programme as part of a programme. Indeed if this was not the case, WBIS would not be viable since individual tuition is expensive to deliver. Although WBIS tutors are not engaged in traditional delivery mechanisms such as lectures, individual tuition relies greatly upon the use of formative assessment. Tutors play an important facilitative role which is time consuming. Cohorts, by definition, imply a standard experience for all, which mitigates against a highly tailored approach. There are some types of arrangement where it has been possible to incorporate past learning, such as employers paying a

fixed annual sum and leaving employees to negotiate their own learning. RPL within the WBIS framework has also proved useful for other cohorts. After 2009, nursing became a graduate only profession in the UK but many older nurses lacked a Bachelor degree. It was therefore relatively easy to top up their professional diploma (in the form of a claim for past learning) to a full WBIS Bachelor degree. Nonetheless, these are exceptions and it remains true to say that it is not just the dominance of subject discipline which inhibits the use of RPL – so do cohorts. RPL is never likely to play a major part in education unless and until education is more oriented towards individual rather than cohort learning – and a corresponding willingness for someone to pay for it. Individual tuition in the sense described here has been abandoned in some other universities in the UK precisely because of the cost advantages of cohort delivery. For now, WBIS has been able to maintain individual tuition since as a whole it is financially viable and because individual tuition is an important marketing tool. Individual learners who have a good experience with WBIS sometimes persuade their organisation to buy in.

WBIS also illustrates another significant constraint in an age where there is greater pressure to pass the cost of tuition away from the state and onto learners and employers. WBIS was developed at a time in the UK where fees were either low or non-existent so that reduced fee income from RPL was not an issue for a university since income was derived from the state. What follows is anecdotal but l think significant. Whilst acting as a consultant for another university seeking to introduce greater flexibility, I advised greater use of RPL, but because it is difficult to justify full fees, the idea received very short shrift. In situations like that in the UK where the currency of higher education is not student numbers but fee income, RPL is unlikely to gain many new advocates. This is a very important issue which will have to be addressed if policy makers are serious about introducing more RPL.

There is a widespread assumption by policy makers and those who write on these matters that RPL is both necessary and on the way to widespread adoption in European countries and beyond (Villalba-Garcia, 2021b). The evidence, such as it is, suggests there are a host of institutional reasons why this is not likely to occur, even in the most propitious of circumstances as in France, where the past decade has seen a steady decline in RPL (Werquin, 2021). The evidence from Chester suggests that the greater spread of practice will not occur without both a greater commitment in resources and a more radical approach to understanding the nature of practice knowledge, curriculum design, assessment and the role of the tutor. As ever, changed practice will also require harder thinking about resources. Practice at Chester would not have developed without the significant input of a specialist agency and a mechanism developed to cross subsidise individual learning. These are formidable barriers.

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