Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning (RPEL) on Entry to UK Degree Apprenticeship Programmes: Potential and Problems

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Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning (RPEL) on Entry to UK Degree Apprenticeship Programmes: Potential and Problems

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Abstract
When considering degree apprenticeships, Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning (RPEL) has the potential to provide an accessible entry route into higher education (HE). However, there is evidence to suggest that offering RPEL on entry to degree programmes is far from simple to accomplish (Peters, 2006; Singh and Ehlers, 2019). As higher education institutions tend to have established definitions of knowledge and what is valued in learning (Valk, 2009), questions arise regarding how RPEL is offered, and whether there is sufficient incentive and support for apprentices to consider an RPEL entry route.

The approach taken to the research is predominantly a qualitative ethnographic case study. Initial data collection took the form of review of UK apprenticeship policy documentation and RPEL guides. A series of interviews with those involved in putting RPEL policy into practice, involving both academic and academic-related staff, gave further insight into the RPEL processes. The final phase engaged the apprentices themselves in order to gain further insight into their experiences of RPEL. Data were analysed using thematic analysis, in order to build a rich narrative from multiple perspectives.

Initial findings suggest that RPEL can be more problematic than RPCL (Recognition of Prior Credited Learning) to implement when trying to bridge the gap between academic study and what has already been learned in the workplace. It can be difficult to determine how a varied range of prior learning can best be matched to relatively large academic modules. Verification for RPEL can also be extremely challenging. However, RPEL has the potential to save apprentices time and effort by appreciating the skills they have developed in the workplace. The is the potential to incorporate Short Learning Programmes (SLPs) into degree apprenticeship programmes as they can be adaptable to learner and employer requirements (Dunn, 2019). Recognition could be gained via short microcredentials, providing a flexible route within formal degree education. (Cedefop, 2017; MOONLITE, 2020).

The research has the potential to contribute to professional practice by uncovering the reality of degree apprentice RPEL opportunities and barriers by hearing the voices of the stakeholders involved in the process. Ultimately, the aim is to create opportunities to move towards an inclusive model of recognising prior experiential learning in the arena of degree apprenticeships.

Keywords: Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning (RPEL), assessment, apprenticeships, micro-credentials
1. Introduction to the research

The research explores the opportunities, and challenges, associated with recognition of prior experiential learning (RPEL) on entry to UK Higher Education (HE) apprenticeships at the Open University (OU). Recent legislation demands that RPEL is available (IfATE, 2020), as UK government funding for apprenticeships excludes components such as applicable work experience, prior education, training or associated qualifications. In addition, the aspiration underlying the development of degree level apprenticeship programmes is to offer opportunities for development of existing skills, relating to wider government-led goals such as widening participation and progression (UK Parliament website, 2019). The implication is that apprentices should have an opportunity to build on these skills and gain academic recognition for such learning, for which RPEL is an ideal vehicle.

To differentiate between recognition of prior learning (RPL) and recognition of prior experiential learning (RPEL), RPL is an umbrella term for accreditation of credit transfer, experiential, or non-formal learning, and is a process for “assessing previous learning that has occurred in any of a range of contexts including school, college and university, and/or through life and work experiences” (QAA, 2018, p.31). The credit or exemption can be used towards academic qualifications, or career development and, within HE, RPL can be implemented via formal transfer of Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme (CATS) points between universities for academic accreditation. CATS points are only counted for a complete module or modules, so there is a limitation on the extent to which accreditation is applied. In contrast, RPEL specifically focuses on experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), and has the potential to offer additional flexibility and opportunities for entry into HE for those from a wide range of educational backgrounds. One such group for whom this is appropriate is degree apprenticeship applicants.

As apprentices are in work, sponsored by their employer with a range of work-based experiences, RPEL entry is particularly relevant. There is very little research into RPEL processes for UK HE apprentices, yet the wider literature suggests that restrictions on RPEL in various contexts is an enduring and ongoing issue across HE in general (Peters, 2006; Singh and Ehlers, 2019). Questions arise regarding how RPEL is implemented and presented, and whether there is sufficient incentive for applicants to consider an RPEL route into HE. In addition, the availability of guidance for applicants is not standardised, so support mechanisms can also be called into question (Harris, Breier and Wihak, 2011). What should be an open, inclusive accreditation policy could in fact be very restrictive.

There is an opportunity for RPEL to bridge the gap between what has already been learned prior to applying for an apprenticeship and what is required for degree accreditation, yet difficulties could arise at universities that are unfamiliar with an RPEL entry approach. This raises the issue of what counts, or doesn’t count, towards accreditation. Recommendations in the Wolf Report (Wolf et al., 2016) and the Augar Report (Augar, 2019) highlight the need for addressing restrictive, academic assessment by offering more opportunities such as RPEL for assessing learning already gained from various contexts. For apprentices, there is no direct mandate on how prior learning is assessed; rather RPEL must be an option. Thus, there is the potential for tensions within educational settings on implementation of RPEL.

In addition, if learning is not acquired in their own, formal teaching setting, academics may question its validity, even if via direct credit transfer from another university (Valk, 2009; Cooper & Harris, 2013). The issue of validity is amplified when considering recognition of experiential learning from outside academia. Studies suggest that academics have the power to judge what is deemed recognisable (Peters, 2006), yet they may have fixed attitudes against experiential learning, thus acting as gatekeepers with a reluctance to credit those
who are seen as outsiders (Guo & Andersson, 2006). If such attitudes predominate, the accreditation process for RPEL becomes very narrowly defined, via a credential-based exercise of matching prior knowledge directly to academic Learning Outcomes (LOs). Such an approach raises the question of how to create opportunities to move towards a more inclusive developmental model, with emphasis on a reflective RPEL process.

2. Experiential learning and its relevance to apprenticeships
The foundations of RPEL are based on existing theories relating to the principles of experiential learning, so it is necessary to consider the question of how experiential knowledge, such as that gained at work, and academic knowledge compare. Academic knowledge develops, for example, by the acquisition of formal literacy practices, recognised through assessment of academic skills (Boud & Falchikov, 2006). However, this could be viewed as a very narrow definition of learning, as knowledge should not be treated simply as a product, or as merely completing a checklist against specific competencies (Wihak & Wong, 2011). Knowledge and learning can be effectively achieved via a range of experiences, through the process of personal development or via social practice and collaboration. Drawing on what has already been learnt can benefit both society and the individual (Andersson et al., 2013). Yet within academia, there are questions about the value of experiential learning, partly as there is no direct association with a formal taught curriculum. In consequence, there are discourses at play that tend to position formal academic learning as superior to experiential learning.

In relation to experiential learning, Kolb’s reflective learning theory underpins a variety of learning contexts, specifically the type of learning that embodies experiential ‘learning by doing’ (Kolb, 1984), as outlined in Figure 1. Via active experimentation, both concrete experience and abstract analysis can be combined and, when experimental ideas are put into practice, another cycle for extending experience is generated.

![Experiential learning cycle (Kolb 1984)](image)

While this definition of experiential learning is valid, for RPEL it can be viewed as just one facet of what it means to capture the complexities of adult learning (Harris, 2006). However, a cautionary note comes from Graf (2016), proposing that experiential knowledge and academic knowledge are not the same and are often for different purposes.

From the perspective of apprentices, there are the difficult dual targets of achieving recognised academic qualifications alongside development of relevant and transferrable working skills. In the UK, the take up of new-style higher level, degree and graduate level apprenticeships has been slow (Belgtay, 2018), which could be partly due to the difficulty in establishing a clear connection between apprenticeship experiential learning
and its recognition in the higher education system. Apprenticeships have a long tradition for robust skills development with the aspiration of an expert in their field passing on their skills to a novice via a lengthy training process of several years. As, historically, there was a clear focus on manual skills development (Keep & James, 2011), this model of skills development necessarily has an emphasis on experiential learning, with the dual aims of recognising competence in achievements alongside potential for development. Yet, throughout the twentieth century, uptake of traditional apprenticeships has fallen into decline (Chadderton & Wischmann, 2014) and, more recently, new government-led apprenticeships have been developed across many countries.

3. RPEL potential and problems for apprentices

In the UK, a changing model of apprenticeships has emerged which moves away from labour-intensive occupations towards office-based roles such as business management and IT support (IfATE, 2021). The driving force is to introduce opportunities for flexible role-based education and training, which combine development of skills-based competencies in conjunction with academic learning, thus blending experiential and academic. Therefore, rather than adopt the traditional master-apprentice relationship, modern apprenticeships follow a tri-partite model which includes an education provider in addition to the employer and apprentice. The implication is a shift in focus towards appreciation of experiential learning in an academic context, with inherent difficulties in how this might be achieved. As apprenticeships are well established in many countries, an exploration of global experiences can help highlight the potential of experiential learning in other contexts.

3.1 RPEL Potential

Pedagogically, RPEL acknowledges that learning can be achieved in a variety of formal and informal settings and provides an opportunity to articulate such learning. As the implication is that apprentices have an opportunity to build on skills and gain academic recognition for previous learning, RPEL is the ideal vehicle. This can be of particular advantage for mature learners, and for those with a working background. From an apprentice perspective, RPEL could be seen as empowering, as a way of accrediting previous experiences within a formal academic setting (Pokorny, 2012). There is the potential for increasing student confidence and self-esteem (Harris, 2006; Andersson, 2006; Klindt, 2021). RPEL can also be transformative, by digressing away from traditional education practices, thus helping to break down barriers between theoretical and experiential learning (Peters, 2006).

In addition, RPEL offers the academic community the opportunity to appreciate real-world experiences from a variety of occupational areas (Whisemore, 2015). There are two main ways that this might be accomplished; widening participation and advanced standing on programme. Firstly, considering RPEL in a widening participation context, it can create opportunities for access to HE for those without formal qualifications (Garnett & Caveye, 2015). Furthermore, Dyson & Keating (2005) argue that RPEL can be inclusive as an appealing route for women, and part-time learners. In addition, Van Kleef (2011) notes the potential for RPEL as an entry route to education for older learners, and Wheelahan (2006) suggests it as particularly appropriate for mid-career workers. This is of relevance to apprentices, many of whom have been in employment for a number of years. However, as the OU has an open entry policy, the second RPEL option, of advanced standing on qualification (Andersson, 2006), is of particular relevance to this study.

However, regardless of the potential of RPEL in these two areas, the application of RPEL can be ad-hoc, with many variations in practice (Andersson et al., 2013), and little evidence of widespread use of systematic processes in the adoption of RPEL in the UK (McCreary, 2018). Yet there is the opportunity for RPEL processes to be thought of differently, in order to meet learning needs of the future (Klein-Collins & Travers, 2020). For
example, there is the potential to incorporate Short Learning Programmes (SLPs) into degree apprenticeship programmes as they can be adaptable to learner and employer requirements (Dunn, 2018). Recognition could be gained via short microcredentials, providing a flexible route within formal degree education (Cedefop, 2017; MOONLITE, 2020; Pittinsky, 2015). Although micro-credentials could provide development and recognition of employability developed outside the traditional learning system that may occur prior, after or during formal qualifications, it should be noted that for HE apprentices in the UK only prior experience can be counted towards an apprenticeship qualification due to finding rules. Thus, the potential of RPEL should be reviewed with caution due to restrictions on what is achievable in practice.

3.2 RPEL Possible Problems

There is very little research into RPEL processes for UK HE apprentices, yet the wider literature suggests that restrictions on RPEL in various contexts relate to enduring and ongoing accreditation issues across HE in general (Peters, 2006; Harris, 2006; Singh and Ehlers, 2019). However, the literature also suggests that it can be difficult to cross contexts, for example translating learning across from a work setting to an educational context, possibly compounded by academic restrictions. One such academic restriction is that it is only possible to award credit transfer for a complete module or modules, which limits the extent to which RPEL may be applied. More significantly, a further explanation for such restrictions is that RPEL applicants have limited academic experience and could, therefore, be unfamiliar with underlying conventions, such as a lack of exposure to academic discourse and writing experiences (Peters, 2006). In addition, the transition of counting experiential knowledge toward accreditation on an academic programme is a complex process (Cooper & Harris, 2013).

When making an RPEL claim, applicants must prepare the claim in accordance with academic guidelines, which in itself can appear daunting and time-consuming. The onus is on the RPEL applicant to take the initiative and are required to negotiate the process with little support, as ‘an introspective and cognitive exercise’ (Harris, 2000, p34). Further, if applicants are influenced by their own underlying assumptions about education and knowledge, they could be unaware of the significance of their prior experiential learning (Pokorny et al., 2017). Further, applicants may have insufficient time to prepare and submit their RPEL claim (McCreedy, 2018). Hence, questions arise regarding how RPEL is implemented and presented, and whether there is sufficient incentive and support for applicants to consider the complex transition to academia via an RPEL route.

4. Methodology underpinning the research design

Case study was selected for this research to best answer the research questions, although several methodologies were initially considered. As the research questions sought to uncover contemporary issues within the field of OU degree apprenticeships relating to ‘how’ and ‘why’ a social phenomenon works, case study research was relevant (Yin, 2018).

- **Research question 1**: In the context of Higher Education (HE) what are the policy-level benefits and barriers when offering RPEL as a flexible entry route onto apprenticeship programmes?
- **Research question 2**: What are the opportunities and barriers for HE academic and academic-related staff when designing and implementing RPEL on apprenticeship programmes?
- **Research question 3**: What are the opportunities and challenges of RPEL from an apprentice perspective, on entry to HE programmes?
Figure 2 demonstrates how the different stakeholder views feed into the research. Central to the model is the RPEL experience of the apprentice.

Figure 2: RPEL System change model and links to research questions - figure adapted from Millar and Xulu (1996), Cited in Harris (2000)

Considering the research from a macro level, political perspectives are most prominent. From a government viewpoint areas to consider include key policies, legislation, and reports relating to apprenticeships across the UK. From an educator perspective the provision of degree level apprenticeships introduces many challenges to the more traditional teaching and learning at this level in the UK. There is a particular question regarding the perception of experiential learning within a formal academic setting. From an employer viewpoint it is necessary to consider expert reports, specifically those that give an insight into the views of businesses regarding the take-up of apprenticeships.

5. Research Methods

Both qualitative and quantitative research methods were utilised, with emphasis on qualitative. Relating to qualitative methodology, Cooper and Harris (2013) give good direction on how to design a series of interviews that capture the voices of the many stakeholders relevant to research. The theme of researching across a variety of stakeholders was further extended by Pokorny (2012), where she interviewed learners and the tutors who performed the RPEL assessment. In the case study, theoretical knowledge underpinned the practical knowledge generation that was achieved predominantly via qualitative research methods, alongside some elements of quantitative, for example via data analytics and survey demographics. This combined approach adds to the validity of the research, as triangulation of data, is recommended for case studies (Yin, 2003).

As the purpose of the study was to understand the practices of RPEL via an in-depth case study, it was necessary to focus the data gathering around different stakeholder views. The initial participants within this study were identified through existing professional networks within the RPEL community so the sample choice was to some extent pragmatic, due to the limited range of stakeholders involved in RPEL. However, careful
selection of participants is essential in research as the data gathered plays a vital role in ensuring findings are reliable, even if not transferrable across contexts. To overcome some of the limitations of researching in a specialist area via case study, purposeful sampling was selected, alongside snowball sampling (Merriam, 1998). Purposeful sampling ensured appropriate samples within the case, and snowballing sampling involves asking subjects to refer me to others in the field. These methods both have the benefit of pinpointing subjects with a high level of expertise in the area of research.

6. Data collection and analysis
Understanding the context of RPEL was important, so the data collection tools were selected according to the requirements of the research in helping to answer the research questions. There were three stages to the research, one for each of the three research questions. For each stage, the main method of collecting qualitative data was via semi-structured interview, with appropriate ethical permission in place for staff and students (Wise et al., 2018). In addition, data were collected from internal reports, policy documents and surveys. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was utilised when analysing the data, with concepts and themes amalgamated and consolidated via Nvivo (2022).

Stage 1 was an initial review of policy documents and grey material relating to RPEL. This was supplemented by analysis of internal academic RPEL guidance documents. The main qualitative aspect of the research was via interviews with two RPEL leads, one from the case study university and an RPEL expert adviser from another university. Relating to the second research question, at Stage 2, OU academic staff were interviewed, specifically those with relevant RPEL backgrounds, in order to analyse the current RPEL narratives from a pedagogic viewpoint. Eight academic staff were interviewed, from three faculties; Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM), Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies (WELS), and the Faculty of Business and Law (FBL). For the third research question, the focus was on the practice of implementing RPEL. In particular the experiences of apprentices and those introducing RPEL to apprentices were sought. Over 200 apprentices were surveyed, seven apprentices were interviewed, and six business-related staff were interviewed.

7. Results and discussion on recommendations
For this case study, a range of sources was explored in detail, to tell the ‘story of the case’ (Simons, 2009). These included external and internal documents, university websites, surveys, and interviews.

7.1 Benefits: learner benefits, employer benefits, institution benefits
Motivational considerations was a common theme for learners. The document review of perceptions of RPEL across various government and regulatory bodies clearly exposed an overwhelming positivity around the potential for RPEL from a policy level, especially from learner and employer perspectives. RPEL now more established, with increased opportunities to apply for RPEL at higher level studies. Of particular relevance is the potential for RPEL opportunities for a range of HE apprenticeships in many kinds of professions, as shown in the student sample detail in Figure 3. It can be seen from the figure that a number of the apprentices are employed at managerial level, suggesting that they have a good level of experience when entering their apprenticeship. What is less clear is whether there was the opportunity to capture this experience via the RPEL process.
The RPEL experts both promoted the opportunities for RPEL, suggesting that RPEL could be empowering, and a means of accrediting previous experiences within a formal academic setting. The RPEL lead at the case study institution suggested that RPEL could help increase access to HE, noting ‘opportunities for us [OU] to attract learners that would not normally consider studying’. This highlights the potential value of experiential learning, that could otherwise be overlooked. The RPEL lead also emphasised the desire to value all learning, in particular by acknowledging that prior, informal learning already exists, suggesting that educators are ‘valuing that learning is of the same quality level as what you would study on the module’. The second RPEL expert noted that ‘you want people to feel that they’re continually building on their personal development and their lifelong learning’, and ‘add value to society’. The suggestion is that RPEL can be inclusive and help to increase student confidence and self-esteem. Clearly there is a desire to appreciate all learning, not just that studied in formal academic situations, yet how this might be accomplished is far from straightforward.

In addition, the reduced time taken by the learner to complete a programme was noted, with one of the RPEL experts suggesting that there is ‘opportunity for them to spend less time and cost on completing a qualification’. There is a linked potential benefit to employers, in that reduction in duration of study can lead to cost savings. This was emphasised by one of the business related professional interviewees, who noted that ‘we’re looking at options as to how we can potentially maybe offer a fee reduction to the employer so that we’re not duplicating learning’.

Further, from the employer viewpoint there were positives within the document review and interviewee responses, indicating that RPEL implementation could help combat skills gaps, as noted in the literature review by Singh and Ehlers (2019). From the wider document review, RPEL has emerged in several countries as a levelling-up process, thus reinforcing the positives aspects from both an employer and learner perspective. The difficulty is establishing how to align the experiential learning gained from the workplace role with the academic requirements of the apprenticeship. This must be accomplished prior to enrolment onto an apprenticeship, and requires an accurate assessment of prior learning. As an example, one member of the apprentice recruitment staff noted that ‘once we have... the skills audit that they will complete with their line manager, it gives us a real indication of prior experience and how that fits into their current role’.

From an educational institution perspective, the increase in RPEL opportunities within the education sector suggests that there are new opportunities, in particular for the HE sector. The introduction of mandatory RPEL
within UK apprenticeships, also mentioned in the document review and interviews, has helped to increase RPEL opportunities, with the case study RPEL lead noting that ‘outside of apprenticeship space, I think there are opportunities for us to attract learners that would not normally consider studying’. This in turn could enable higher level learning to take place in contexts other than traditional universities, and being accredited via RPEL. There is the opportunity to build the experiential learning into learning programmes, as suggested by one of the academic leads; ‘So we will, we will build it in right from the start, rather than what we ended up doing on [this module], which was retrofitting it.’ The promise of such opportunities is exciting, yet much work is needed to put into practice.

7.2 Barriers
There were defined barriers revealed via the research question, in particular relating to uncertainty and contradictions regarding RPEL, time and workload issues, scalability, and academic reputation.

Considering potential RPEL barriers, potential applicants’ uncertainty around the concept of RPEL was raised as an issue. A concern was that apprentices might say ‘I don’t want to be RPELed for that module, because, you know, I don’t know what I don’t know’. The evidence suggested that potential applicants could be unaware of the significance of their prior experiential learning (Pokorny, Fox & Griffiths, 2017). Further, from the review of RPEL documents and website detail, it was clear that understanding what RPEL is, and how to apply, is far from straightforward.

Also from a learner viewpoint, questions were raised on how open RPEL is in practice, and how widely it is publicised. There is no easy way to advise potential applicants on the regulations regarding the currency of learning or how they may be supported if applying for RPEL, especially as the document and website reviews revealed wide variations of practice. For example, for those who completed the apprentice survey it was evident that most of those who responded indicated at least a partial match of their work experience to their apprenticeship study area, as shown in Figure 4.

However, take-up of RPEL has been very low. Survey findings showed that reasons for not applying included issues relating to currency of study, for example experience being out of date, and uncertainty of the RPEL process prior to starting study. The uncertainty is not surprising as, with reference to Figure 5, it can be seen that there is variation between a cross-section of UK universities regarding how RPEL can be implemented, and whether it is RPEL for entry to qualification, for credit on qualification, or both.
Time and workload issues were also both major factors mentioned in the interviews as inhibiting factors. The RPEL leads both expressed concern that although RPEL could, in principal, align with the mantra of “less time, more options” (Dyson & Keating, 2005), the restrictions on apprenticeship programmes made this difficult to implement. RPEL barriers also related time for learners to engage in the RPEL process, with a suggestion that the reason why RPEL was not taken forward was due to extremely tight deadlines, with the internal lead noting ‘there’s quite a quick turnaround required’. This is at least partly due to the complexities of the RPEL process itself, with many stakeholders involved. Also mentioned was the amount of evidence that must be produced, leading to the suggestion that apprentices might think ‘why don’t I just do the module?’

Further RPEL process complexities and uncertainties were raised from an educational institution perspective. For example, the internal RPEL lead reported that RPEL policies were reviewed from ‘institutions across the sector, across the different nations, to just identify how they … award recognition for prior experiential learning’. Following this review, RPEL pilots were implemented, with objectives being to define and test a method for assessing RPEL which meets both the institution’s needs and funding agencies’ requirements, which are not always compatible. Uncertainty was also raised around funding issues that the institutions offering RPEL needed to address with one of the RPEL experts suggested that funding rules were ‘not as black and white as the government thinks, particularly when they’re looking at auditing funding for apprenticeships’.

The interview discussions also revealed complexities relating to the high volume of stakeholders and stages of the RPEL process, resonating with the findings of Cooper and Harris (2013) where they suggest that counting experiential knowledge toward accreditation on an academic programme is a complex process. Both RPEL experts suggested that applicants may not have insufficient time to prepare and submit their RPEL claim. The consequence is that the costs and workload of RPEL implementation could hinder the introduction of RPEL on degree level study.

On a related note, the complexity of implementing RPEL brings scalability into question. If feasible to encourage a large number of RPEL applicants, the financial implications must be considered if fees are
reduced. A related concern was the size of modules, and the internal RPEL lead raised a specific point, saying ‘I think we are quite unique in the sense that we have 60 credit modules and 30 credit modules’. There is the need for agreement on an appropriate and scalable method to assess RPEL claims across all nations, as well as identify the method for processing an RPEL claim. One of the academic staff expressed concern, stating that ‘if it [RPEL] did bring in large numbers, how would we cope? And could we adapt existing systems to give us something that would work that way?’ Clearly some mechanism of scaling up RPEL processes would be needed, and the academic went on to suggest ‘there is a whole sort of, you know, cottage industry that would need to be set up behind it, and it would need to be sustainable’.

The implication is that the task for potential RPEL candidates is onerous to complete within a limited timescale, and also involves much work for academics when making the assessment. In fact, one of the RPEL leads suggested that we are ‘doing it [RPEL] for apprenticeships, because we have to.’

A further major barrier was revealed as concern regarding reputational credibility relating to assessment and verification from educational institutions. Issues raised included the impact of RPEL on the endpoint assessment for apprenticeships with one RPEL lead suggested that ‘As an academic organisation, we have to be confident that what they’re saying is true.’

8. Conclusions and future research

Although recommendations in the Wolf Report (Wolf et al., 2016) and the Augar Report (Augar, 2019) highlight the need to address conventions relating to restrictive, academic assessment, this can be extremely difficult to achieve. As revealed in the findings, there is a real tension in the myriad ways of applying RPEL. The RPEL leads reported many challenges associated with the different RPEL activities that take place when assessing prior learning, as outlined by Atlay and Turnbull (2017). RPEL processes are not as recognised or defined as RPCL, as credit transfer has been established for many years (Pollard et al., 2017). The complexity of the RPEL process could lead to uncertainty within the academic institution, the implication being a possible lack of promotion of RPEL as suggested via the conference summary.

Concerns were raised, even though RPEL offers the opportunity to appreciate real-world experiences from a variety of occupational areas (Whisemore, 2015). Interviewees reported that it can be extremely difficult for assessment to cross contexts, an issue raised by Guo and Andersson (2006). The implication here is that validation of RPEL could be problematic and, in particular, the question arises on how academics view experiential learning when compared to academic study. The pedagogy of RPEL is less fully defined (Pokorny, Fox and Griffiths, 2017) and hence the value of experiential learning might be questioned.

However, there are new opportunities to consider, for example by introducing an element of online testing into the RPEL process, or by assessing RPEL via microcredentials. Clearly RPEL has potential for increasing access to HE, and valuing that experiential learning is valid across a range of contexts. Further research is currently investigating the feasibility of such innovations in the implementation process relating to RPEL.
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