

Building on evidence of your own learning

Using Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) to support career development

We all know that learning on the job is a vital part of our development. Sometimes evidence of that learning finds its way into our personal development reviews, or records of training. However, very often we don't even recognise that we've learned new things. Over the past couple of years, the NES ACS team has been working with projects in a number of NHS Boards to help staff gain recognition of their learning in the workplace – and to see how this can help them with their own career plans. Here are some of the results so far.



Getting credit for your experience

***Moira Macdonald** led NHS Greater Glasgow & Clyde's project, designed to help Estates Supervisors gain the degree they need to compete for more senior management roles.*

In NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, we recognised that many of our senior managers in Estates are nearing retirement. We also knew that these roles could be very hard to fill. They require people with a degree qualification, and with strong experience of what it is like to work in estates departments in the health sector. Unfortunately, many of our very experienced estates staff haven't had the opportunity to study to degree level, so we wanted to find out if they could use the learning and experience gained in the workplace to 'fast track' through a degree programme.

We invited supervisors in Estates to workshops with the Learning & Development Team and our education partner in the project, the University of the West of Scotland (UWS). The workshops introduced the ideas behind RPL and gave the supervisors the opportunity to go through an RPL process to see if they could gain 'credit' for their learning in the workplace. Having credit might mean that they could avoid having to start the degree from scratch and repeat things they already knew.

The supervisors gathered together the evidence of their learning, such as certificates gained from completing different courses and evidence they had in their training records. Our colleagues in UWS then assessed this evidence to see how much credit individuals might gain – and how this might help them move more quickly through a degree.

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Getting credit for your experience

All of us – the supervisors, the Estates management team and the learning and development team – were very pleased with the results. Four students had enough credit to allow them to enter directly into the second year of a BSc degree programme in Engineering. Other people didn't have quite enough credit to do that – but the process did help them understand what they could do to move forward. As a result of this, this group are now participating in a course to help them improve the skills they need to be successful students: this includes developing their research, maths and academic writing skills. We hope that, next year, they may be ready to move into a degree programme too.

Overall, the RPL project has been very positive for a number of reasons. First, it has helped everyone – managers and staff – understand that experience and workbased learning can translate into academic credit. It has helped avoid the feeling that you have to 'start at the beginning' – which can be really demotivating when you are very experienced in your role. It has also made everyone aware that evidence of learning – whether it's certificates or workbooks you complete in the workplace – has a real value if you want to progress your career. And, perhaps most importantly, it has helped NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde develop career opportunities for staff in Estates, and create a pool of people who will be able to compete for senior roles when they become available.



RPL for Registration

Monica Hunter was the Project Lead for the NHS Tayside project. Here, she describes how using evidence of learning from different sources helped pharmacy technicians achieve the qualification they needed for registration with their professional body.

All pharmacy technicians in Scotland must be registered with The General Pharmaceutical Council. This requirement, introduced in 2011, means that everyone in a technician role needs to complete a recognised qualification or learning programme. For NHS Tayside, this involves staff taking the SVQ2 in Pharmacy Services. To complete this qualification, we ask individuals to complete 12 study modules and eight units which demonstrate their competency in their role. When the Pharmacy Technicians RPL Project started in 2012, we knew that many of our staff probably had a good level of knowledge and competency already – but we needed to find a way to prove this.

The RPL Project involved us working with the learning provider, Buttercups Training, to look at the evidence of learning which individual staff members could provide. This evidence came from a wide range of sources, including their training records, completed learning workbooks, and competence checks carried out by their managers. Buttercups Training reviewed all of this evidence to see how it measured against the SVQ and to identify where people had gaps in their knowledge or competence. Staff would only have to complete the parts of the qualification identified as gaps.

We knew this was an experimental approach, and we asked people to volunteer for the project. Some people taking the SVQ at the same time decided to participate in the RPL Project.

The results have been really amazing. Everyone who participated gained some recognition of the learning they had already completed, and all of them were able to complete the qualification more quickly than those who took the traditional route. The RPL Project has meant that the service was able to meet its registration requirement more quickly, and that individuals don't have to repeat things which they already know or do well.

And what about the participant's viewpoint? Elaine Smart, Senior Assistant Technical Officer in NHS Tayside's Pharmacy Department tells us what the participating in the project meant for her.

I wanted to participate in the RPL Project because I have five years' experience in pharmacy services, and to see if this could count towards my qualification. After looking at the modules and units which I needed to complete, it was clear that I had evidence that could be used to cover many of the requirements.

I collated all of the written work, certificates and other evidence which I thought matched the requirements and sent it to Buttercups. Their feedback was really positive. I had provided enough evidence to show I had the knowledge needed for seven out of the twelve learning modules, and I only needed to complete one out of the eight units. It meant that my experience counted for something – and I knew that the five modules I needed to complete would be new information for me.

I'm really pleased that I participated in the project. It meant that I completed the qualification I needed much more quickly than if I'd started from scratch – and filling the 'gaps' meant I gained new and important knowledge.

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Paving the Way for RPL for Biomedical Support Workers in NHS Lothian

Sarah Smith was the Project Lead for an RPL project in NHS Lothian which focused on making sure that in-house learning could count towards qualifications for Biomedical Support Workers.

Recently, NHS Lothian has redesigned its Laboratory Medicine Services. Part of this work has involved looking at career development for biomedical support workers, and the introduction of a formal Modern Apprenticeship programme for people joining the service. This programme requires people to complete a Higher National Certificate (HNC) in Applied Science, and a vocational award in Laboratory Associated Technical Activities.

We worked with Fife College to deliver the programme and we realised that a lot of the mandatory training which we were providing in NHS Lothian was being duplicated in the college's programme. We realised we needed to find a way to help staff demonstrate how the learning they completed as part of their mandatory training at work matched what was needed by the qualification. If we did this, we'd be able to reduce the duplication we had found.

Working with the college, we developed a workbook for staff to record their learning and show how they were applying it in their work. When they completed this, they could then use it to demonstrate how they met some of the requirements of the qualification they were working towards.

Developing this workbook took a lot of time – but it has been worth it. It means that staff who are taking the qualification no longer have to undertake the same training twice, first at work and then at college. The evidence gathered in their workbook shows how they meet the standards required for their role, and also how they meet what is required in the qualification. Being able to use the evidence gathered in the workbooks in this way really helps individuals see the point of gathering it in the first place – and supports them to progress in their learning.



Claire Mutter is a Biomedical Support Worker who has used the new workbook. Here she speaks about her experience.

The RPL workbook has become part of our local induction paperwork that all staff are required to complete within the first 12 – 16 weeks of their employment.

I was one of the first members of staff to complete the workbook and doing this has allowed me to achieve a number of things within a very short time: I have successfully met the Mandatory Healthcare Support Worker Induction Standards, completed my initial in-house training plans and completed four units towards the Level 3 vocational award – Laboratory Associated Technical Activities. I will complete this vocational award over the summer before beginning the HNC part of the programme in September.

Using the RPL workbook has helped me realise that the evidence which I have collected can be used for a number of purposes. As well as meeting the mandatory induction standards, I'm well on my way to completing my vocational award. Prior to this workbook, staff who undertook the award did much more work, a lot of it duplicating what they had already done in initial training.

All NES resources to support the recognition of prior learning (RPL) will be included on the **Qualifications Explained** section of the **VQ Finder** in Winter 2014. Including:



- **Pathways to Recognition**, an online workshop for staff who develop or deliver in-house learning, designed to help you link in-house learning programmes with formal qualifications.
- **RPL Guidance for NHSScotland**, with information for employers, individuals and learning providers.
- **RPL Case Studies**, including more on the projects featured in this article.

Remember to bookmark www.vqfinder.nes.scot.nhs.uk !