RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING
A GUIDE FOR LEARNERS
This guidance is designed for learners who wish to find out more about using Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL).

There are five sections in the guide:

- SECTION A: UNDERSTANDING RPL
- SECTION B: USING RPL
- SECTION C: RESOURCES
- SECTION D: CASE STUDIES
- SECTION E: GLOSSARY OF TERMS

We recommend that you read all of the information provided and speak to your manager, supervisor or reviewer if you would like to use RPL.
SECTION A
UNDERSTANDING RPL
WHAT IS RPL?

There are three reasons for undertaking the RPL process:

- RPL for personal/career development (also known as formative recognition)
- RPL to gain entry to a learning programme
- RPL for the award of SCQF credit points (also known as summative recognition).

You will find further information on the types of RPL in the Glossary of terms.

RPL is the recognition of learning which has been gained in the past - through work and life experiences, or through a more formal learning programme such as a course or qualification.

RPL allows you to use evidence of work-based experience and learning or formal learning to support your personal and career development. If you have no formal qualifications, RPL can help you value and build on the learning you have gained informally and to use this recognition to go on to:

- more study
- more training
- provide evidence for part of an academic qualification or job application
- gain SCQF credit points.
HOW YOU CAN USE RPL

When you use RPL you are given recognition for what you have learned from your experience and not for the experience itself.

The RPL process can help you to:
- Think about your goals and what you need to do to achieve them: for example, if you could join a vocational or degree programme at a college or university, do a training course, or apply for new job or role
- Consider your options and make decisions about the direction you wish to take in terms of further learning opportunities or career development
- Move from informal to formal learning by supporting you (and others) to value your achievements, and to recognise the importance of learning through experience
- Recognise your learning from experience and help to develop your questioning and learning skills
- Prepare to make an RPL claim for credit to gain entry to, or credit within, a programme of learning at a college or university or in the workplace.

THE RPL PROCESS

In order to get credit for your learning through experience you need to show that you have gained the relevant knowledge and skills required for particular units of a learning programme or qualification, or for a particular job role. This process will involve:
- reflecting on your experiences
- identifying the learning you gained from these experiences, and
- providing direct and reflective evidence of your learning.

Your manager, supervisor or reviewer will support you to carry out these activities.
Identifying learning evidence

In the course of your work, you will gather and record evidence. For example, as part of the personal development planning and review process (PDPR), you need to show how you use your skills in your work and how you are applying your learning. If you record this information carefully, and in enough detail, you could also use it for RPL. You can also use evidence from a range of sources including:

- letters
- project work
- assessment on demand
- training workbooks
- reflective accounts of relevant work experiences
- reports
- work notes and records
- portfolio of evidence
- structured interview
- direct observations
- witness statements
- professional discussion or oral assessment
- existing work-based learning practices
- benchmarking

This is called DIRECT LEARNING EVIDENCE

You will find additional information about the different types of prior learning in the SCQF Partnership’s guide for learners.
Reflecting on your learning experiences

Most people learn a great deal from doing something or seeing someone else do something, and from seeing the consequences of that action. We may learn more from the experience of **doing something** than from reading books or from **listening to** someone.

We can learn from any experience we have had, or from some event we have observed which was in some way significant for us. It might be significant because it:

- changed your outlook on life
- was enjoyable
- taught you a great deal
- had successful results
- was an experience you never want to repeat
- gave you a sense of achievement
- earned you respect and recognition from others
- involved a major investment of your time, energy or effort
- changed the way you do things.

This is called **REFLECTIVE EVIDENCE**
ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The roles and responsibilities of everyone involved in the RPL process are outlined below:

You are responsible for:

- Speaking to your manager, reviewer or supervisor if you want to use RPL.
- Attending regular meetings to discuss your progress. Identifying your relevant previous experiences.
- Identifying the learning you have gained from your experiences.
- Producing evidence of your learning, through discussion and writing.
- Presenting your portfolio of evidence for assessment by the learning provider
- Using your portfolio of evidence to demonstrate your learning in your application for a new role or job.

Your manager, supervisor or reviewer is responsible for:

- Providing you with information about the RPL process and explaining what you need to do.
- Helping you to identify relevant previous experiences.
- Helping you to identify the learning you have gained from your experiences.
- Helping you to produce evidence of that learning, through discussion and writing.
- Setting up regular meetings to review and discuss your progress.
- Supporting you to present your portfolio of evidence to the learning provider
- Advising/supporting you to use your portfolio of evidence when applying for a new role or job.
The learning provider is responsible for:

- Assessing your portfolio of evidence.
- Awarding RPL.
- Explaining what else you need to do in order to claim RPL if you have not presented the required evidence.

It is important to note that awarding bodies, colleges, universities and other learning providers will all have different RPL policies and procedures and may have different requirements for submitting evidence for RPL.

To support you to identify roles and responsibilities a checklist is provided.
SECTION B
USING RPL
As explained in Section A, you will be supported in the RPL process by your manager, supervisor or reviewer.

There are three steps in the RPL process:

1. **STEP 1:** Reflecting on your experiences
2. **STEP 2:** Identifying, recording and producing evidence of learning from your experiences
3. **STEP 3:** Using the evidence of your learning.

If you are using RPL for entry into a course or learning programme, the evidence of your learning will be assessed by the learning provider.

There are many tools and techniques which might be useful as you go through the RPL process. You will find further information about these in **Section C: Resources**.
STEP 1: REFLECTING ON YOUR EXPERIENCES

At this stage in the RPL process, your manager, supervisor or reviewer will support you to reflect on your past experiences.

You will reflect on your experiences in order to discover what you have learned from them. You will not receive credit for the experience itself – you will gain recognition for what you have learned from the experience.

Learning can be an individual or a shared experience. The key to identifying what you have learned through your experience is referred to as reflection.

Reflection helps you to think about yourself, about your past and about how you feel about things now. It helps you to organise your beliefs and attitudes, and might alter the way that you see or think about things. It is something that you often do as part of your day-to-day activities - you often reflect as you are doing things and sometimes change the way that you do things according to that reflection. At other times, reflection is used long after an event or activity has been completed. In both cases, reflection can help you learn from yourself and from your experiences.

Reflection can be done in a number of ways - for example, it might be an activity that you do thinking by yourself. Or it might occur as part of a group learning situation where you talk about and reflect on your experiences and share your thoughts with other people.

How do I reflect?

One way to reflect is to simply think about things from the start of an event to the completion of that event. Another way to reflect is to ask yourself questions. For example, to think about a current or previous work role you might ask:

- What did I do in that role?
- What were my main responsibilities and tasks?
- How easy or difficult did I find that role?
- What were some of the challenges I faced in that role?
- What have I learned from the role?
When you reflect on your experiences as part of the RPL process, you will need to be able to describe to other people:

- what happened during that event
- when it happened
- where it happened
- who was involved
- what the outcome of the event was
- how long it lasted.

You will need to be able to describe the event very clearly.

You will also need to be able to identify the skills and knowledge that you used or learned during the event. For example, you might have learned about or improved:

- your communication skills
- your social and interpersonal skills (listening, talking, being supportive)
- your information gathering skills
- your problem-solving skills.

Whatever experience you are reflecting on, you will need to focus your thoughts on the skills and knowledge that you used by asking yourself:

- What did I have to be able to do?
- What did I have to know to be able to do this?
**STEP 2: IDENTIFYING, RECORDING AND PRODUCING EVIDENCE OF LEARNING FROM YOUR EXPERIENCES**

At this step, your manager, supervisor or reviewer will support you to identify the learning from your experiences. For you to record and produce the evidence of your learning.

You will have regular meetings with your manager, supervisor or reviewer to review and discuss your progress. Through these discussions and writing about your learning, you will produce the evidence you need to claim RPL.

**Types of evidence**

You can produce two types of evidence for RPL: direct evidence and reflective evidence.

*Direct* evidence demonstrates what you can do. It is something you have produced while carrying out your role, or something written about your work activities by someone who has observed these. That person might be your manager, supervisor or reviewer, or a colleague, mentor, trainer or assessor.
Reflective evidence demonstrates your understanding of your role and how you have dealt with particular issues or incidents. These may be experiences that went well or badly. The important thing is to demonstrate what you have learned from them. Reflective evidence can be provided in the form of a written account. For example, you could use evidence from:

- letters
- your PDPR
- project work
- assessment on demand
- training workbooks
- reflective accounts of relevant work experiences
- reports
- work notes and records
- portfolio of evidence
- structured interview
- direct observations
- witness statements
- professional discussion or oral assessment
- existing work-based learning practices
- benchmarking
STEP 3: USING THE EVIDENCE OF YOUR LEARNING

At this stage, your manager, supervisor or reviewer will support you to:

- present your portfolio of evidence in order to claim RPL
- to use your portfolio to support your career development

If you are claiming RPL for entry to a vocational or degree programme or claiming SCQF credit points, you will present your portfolio to the learning provider for assessment.

The learning provider will assess your evidence and make recommendations based on that assessment. If they are satisfied that you have the knowledge and skills for the learning claimed, they will award you entry to the relevant programme or course or the correct amount of SCQF credit points.

If you have not provided enough evidence the learning provider will explain what you need to do in order to be awarded RPL.

If you are using RPL for career development, the evidence you provide can be used to help you demonstrate on an application form that you have the relevant level of experience and learning for the post. When completing the application form you should look at SCQF level descriptors for the level of qualification required for the job.

Using the level descriptors and your portfolio you can map your experience and learning to demonstrate you are working at the appropriate level. You may find it useful to use some of the same language as used in the SCQF level descriptor.
SECTION C: RESOURCES

Mind maps or spider diagrams can help you to generate ideas and record information.

The Admin Centre and Estates and Facilities Portal provide information to support learning and links to a range of different resources, including study guides.

The Literacies Portal provides information and guidance on improving reading, writing, number, English language and computer skills for work and study.

Information about reflective practice.

Roles and responsibilities checklist
## ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES CHECKLIST

### PLANNING FOR THE RPL PROCESS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACTIVITY</th>
<th>LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT</th>
<th>MANAGER, SUPERVISOR OR REVIEWER</th>
<th>LEARNING PROVIDER</th>
<th>LEARNER</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identify clear outcomes and objectives for using RPL.</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Work in partnership to plan for the RPL process.</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discuss the organisation’s needs in relation to using RPL and how learning providers can support the process.</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discuss and ensure understanding of the learning provider’s requirements in relation to evidence for RPL</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Raise awareness and understanding of the RPL process, and ensure all staff have access to relevant information.</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Communicate with senior managers to ensure their buy-in and support.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Support managers, supervisors, reviewers and learners to understand and engage with the RPL process, including roles and responsibilities.</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ensure staff have the knowledge and skills needed to support learners during the RPL process.</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Plan evaluation of arrangements for RPL and of the impacts of using RPL.</td>
<td>✓</td>
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</table>
## USING THE RPL PROCESS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>LEARNER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discuss and ensure understanding of the RPL process, including the role and responsibilities of all involved.</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensure the understanding of the learning provider’s evidence requirements in relation to RPL.</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Have regular recorded discussions to review progress. Ensure the learner understands the purpose of the discussions.</td>
<td>✓</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensure the learner has access to information about the qualification, learning programme or requirements of the specific job role.</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help the learner to understand and use the SCQF Level Descriptors.</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Encourage the learner to take responsibility for their own learning and help to build their confidence.</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Encourage the learner to make links between learning and their work practice(s).</td>
<td>✓</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support the learner to reflect on their previous experiences, to identify learning from those experiences, and to produce evidence of their learning.</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Support the learner to present portfolio of evidence for assessment.</td>
<td>✓</td>
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USING THE RPL PROCESS (CONT)

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<th>LEARNER</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assess portfolio of evidence for entry to vocational or degree programme</td>
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<tr>
<td>Award RPL if satisfied that the learner has the required knowledge and skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>Explain what the learner needs to do if they have not provided sufficient evidence of learning</td>
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PRINT CHECKLIST
SECTION D
CASE STUDIES
SECTION D: CASE STUDIES

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 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.

CASE STUDY 1:

GETTING CREDIT FOR YOUR EXPERIENCE

Moira Macdonald led NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde’s RPL 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 and 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.
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 is 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 work based 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.

Case Study 1: Getting credit for your experience
Case Study 2: Paving the Way for RPL for Biomedical Support Workers in NHS Lothian
Case Study 3: RPL for Pharmacy Support Staff (Level 2 Pharmacy Services)
CASE STUDY 2:
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.
CASE STUDY 3: RPL FOR PHARMACY SUPPORT STAFF (LEVEL 2 PHARMACY SERVICES)

The Project Lead in NHS Tayside was Monica Hunter, Lead Pharmacy Technician for Education, Training and Development. Here she describes how the RPL Project has benefited staff working in Pharmacy Services.

We undertook the project to test how pharmacy support worker staff in NHS Tayside might gain recognition for the formal, informal and non-formal learning that they have completed within the pharmacy working environment in order to achieve a recognised qualification.

The project was aimed at pharmacy support workers, pharmacy assistants, assistant technical officers and pharmacy clerical officers who order medicines. This staff group is required to meet minimum training requirements set by the pharmacy regulatory body, the General Pharmaceutical Council (GPhC). NHS Tayside Pharmacy Services already had a plan in place to roll-out the training over a period of three years to existing staff. However, the RPL project offered the opportunity for trainees to gain recognition for their prior learning towards the accredited qualification – the Level 2 Pharmacy Services.

The first cohort of trainees contained a group of 13 staff. Nine of them opted to participate in the RPL trial. The time taken for individuals to complete their training plan varied depending on the amount of work that was accredited as prior learning, the content of their training plan, individual ability and study time. On average, however, learners in the RPL group completed their training in half the time taken by the non-RPL learners.

Overall, the RPL project has helped to increase the value of workplace learning, showing how it can be used to achieve a formal qualification within a shorter time frame. The staff that completed the programme now meet the GPhC regulation requirements for working in Pharmacy. Some of these staff now also meet the local entry requirements for pre-registration trainee pharmacy technician posts, thereby offering career progression. The learners involved in the project were all experienced staff who felt confident in their roles. However, the learning that they completed has afforded them the opportunity to formalise their knowledge by achieving a recognised qualification and has also allowed them to re-focus on their skills and practice.

The success of the project has meant that we will continue to offer RPL for all staff undertaking the Level 2 training programme and we are also considering this as an option for all training programmes.
Elaine Smart, Senior Assistant Technical Officer in NHS Tayside’s Pharmacy Department, tells us what 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 Training. 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.
SECTION E
GLOSSARY OF TERMS
SECTION E: GLOSSARY OF TERMS

**Formal learning** takes place in education and training institutions and leads to recognised qualifications.

**Informal learning** can be defined as experiential learning and takes place through life and work experiences. It is often unintentional learning. The learner may not recognise at the time of the experience that it contributed to the development of their skills and knowledge. This recognition may only happen retrospectively through the RPL process, unless the experiences take place as part of a planned experiential or work-based learning programme.

**Non-formal learning** takes place alongside the mainstream systems of education and training, and does not typically lead to formal certification. This includes, for example, learning and training activities undertaken in the workplace, voluntary sector or trade union, and through community-based learning.

**Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF)**

The [SCQF](https://www.scotqual.org) is Scotland's lifelong learning framework. It provides a way of comparing qualifications and allows learners to compare evidence of their learning with the learning outcomes of the required qualification or learning programme, or particular job requirements.

An interactive copy of the SCQF is available [here](https://www.scotqual.org).

**RPL for personal/career development**

This form of RPL focuses on recognising prior informal or non-formal learning as part of further learning and development. Using RPL for this purpose helps to build a learner’s confidence by recognising skills and knowledge gained through experience and mapping these to the [SCQF Level Descriptors](https://www.scotqual.org). It also helps learners to identify ways in which their skills and knowledge can be developed through further learning or career opportunities. The outcome of this process can be an action plan, or a personal or career development plan. For some individuals this may be the first stage of an RPL claim for [SCQF credit points](https://www.scotqual.org), but it can also be an end in itself.
RPL to gain entry to a learning programme

Colleges, universities and other learning providers generally give guidance on normal entry requirements for programmes and qualifications. However, learners may be able to use RPL as an alternative to the stated requirements. In these cases, learners would have to demonstrate that they have knowledge and skills which are comparable to the entry requirements. This form of recognition can be described as RPL for entry and will involve some form of written and/or oral assessment.

**Credit points** are used to quantify learning outcomes and give them a value or currency. They are a way of showing how much time it takes, on average, to complete a qualification or learning programme.

RPL for the award of **SCQF credit points** is a process of assessing prior informal or non-formal learning such as that gained through life and work experiences. This learning will have taken place before a learner enters a formal learning programme or embarks on a qualification, and it will not previously have been formally credit-rated for the SCQF. An RPL claim for credit involves comparing the individual’s learning to the aims and/or learning outcomes of the qualification or learning programme for which credit is being sought. This type of RPL will determine the **SCQF Level** and the number of credit points that can be awarded. The outcome of an RPL claim for credit may be the award of SCQF credit points within a qualification or learning programme, or for entry to a programme of study, possibly at an advanced level.

**Level descriptors** outline the general outcomes of learning at SCQF levels under five broad headings:

- knowledge and understanding (mainly subject based)
- practice (applied knowledge and understanding)
- generic cognitive skills (for example, evaluation, critical analysis)
- communication, numeracy and IT skill
- autonomy, accountability and working with others.
Functional literacies

This term covers a wide range of skills, including the abilities to:

- understand and respond to spoken and written information effectively including, for example, the ability to read and understand health and safety information
- communicate effectively in writing
- understand and use numbers effectively
- make effective use of information and communication technology (ICT)
- communicate effectively in the English language.