

The Recognition of Non-Formal Education: Scoping the extent and nature of practices and their quality assurance

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Small abstract

In this literature review and empirical study, we extend our previous papers (Harris, 2014; Harris and Wihak, 2016) on the use of the Recognition of Non-Formal Learning (RNFE) to allow learners to gain formal credentials for learning acquired through non-formal means, such as OERs and MOOCs. We address the following research questions: What is the current state of play in terms of awarding credit for NFE? How does credit-rating of NFE happen? How are quality and academic oversight assured in the processes that are in use?

Our previous investigations spanned established national RNFE practices in the USA, South Korea, and Europe (particularly Scotland and England where providers of NFE can become officially recognised bodies and register their programmes directly onto qualification frameworks). In this paper, we use desk research and interviews to deepen our understandings across system-wide, sector-orientated, institutional, qualification and programme-specific levels in a range of countries and contexts. We investigate approaches to RNFE that are developing in particular sectors such as youth work; we drill deeper into what actually happens when providers of NFE register their programmes directly onto qualification frameworks in Scotland and England; and we provide examples of some of innovative practices at institutional levels that are developing in terms of recognising OERs and MOOCs.

We argue that VNFIL offers a rich theoretical base with origins in educational discourses of widening participation and social justice. This is in contrast to some of the technological discourses that underpin the development of assessment and recognition practices of MOOCs, especially. In our view the main aim in future has to be bringing all approaches to RNFE together rather than treating VNFIL, recognition of NFE that is face-to-face, and

recognition of OERs and MOOCs separately. We are not sure that optimal synergy has yet been achieved. And this can only be done by building supportive partnerships of providers based on where expertise is strongest and where NFE already highly valued. This paper provides pointers to that expertise.

Keywords

Recognition, Credit, Non-Formal Education, VNFIL, OERs, MOOCs

Purpose of research

In previous research and from the perspective of our backgrounds as theorists and practitioners in the field of Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning (VNFIL) we have explored the Recognition of Non-Formal Education (RNFE) as a discrete entity (Harris, 2014; Harris and Wihak 2016). Our aim in this research is to update our previous study of the current state of play in the practice of awarding credit for non-formal education (NFE). This is because the field is a rapidly developing one. We also wish to deepen and extend our previous enquiries by looking in detail at how the credit-rating of NFE actually happens with particular reference to how quality and academic oversight are assured, and how recent research on recognition in relation to OERs and MOOCs is influencing the field of RNFE as a whole.

Methodology

In this study, we scope and update our initial review of the RNFE at system-wide, sector-orientated, institutional, qualification and programme-specific levels across a range of countries and contexts. This involves three sets of literature:

1. The parts of the VNFIL literature that are pertinent to practices that recognise *provision as a whole* - the learning situation - not with practices that recognise non-formal and informal learning on an individual basis (as is characteristic of much/most VNFIL).
2. New research and literature on the recognition of OERs and MOOCs. Here we are focusing on recognition rather than credentialisation but realise the two also need to

be addressed as a whole in order to get a full picture of progress towards formal recognition.

3. Policy and regulatory literature pertaining to qualification frameworks and the direct registration of NFE onto them.

The following table indicates the ‘canvas’ for our research, which we aim to cover as far as possible:

	National, system-wide	Sector-wide	Institutional, qualification and programme levels
RNFE as part of VNFIL	1A	1B	1C
RNFE as recognition of OERs and MOOCs	2A	2B	2C
RNFE in relation to policy and regulation pertaining to qualification frameworks	3A	3B	3C

After updating ourselves on new literature across our ‘canvas’, and appreciating that there is some overlap between the nine categories (above), we identify a small sample of practices in 3A, where we drill down (through semi-structured interviews) into *how* NFE is accorded formal credit, and *how* quality is assured. The two elements – literature and interviews – proceeded in an iterative way. The former throwing up possibilities for the latter; the latter referring us to new literature, and so on, enabling us to take a fresh look at our topic overall and make new and more sophisticated observations.

Activities that will be covered

Our findings will be discussed in stages. In the first section we expand upon the rationale and aims of our research, including work done earlier. In the second section we clear the conceptual terrain, addressing key terms and definitions and how certain conceptual dimensions fit together for us. We include why we refer to education rather than learning; we

look at how OERs and MOOCs have shifted the contours of previous definitions of non-formal education; we explain why we are concerned with the learning situation not the learner and why recognition (programme review and/or credit-rating) is more important to us than individuals' assessment; we define quality and quality assurance, as these are key for us.

Our research methodology is outlined in detail in section three including how we updated our earlier literature reviews and importantly how we integrated empirical work into this study in order to drill deeper into a selection of particular ways of RNFE.

Section four, reporting our findings will proceed according to the table above. We will cover the areas 1A – 3C in as much detail as we can, drawing attention to where we still need research.

With reference to 1A and 1B (RNFE as part of VNFIL at system-wide and sectoral levels) we will update our discussion on long-standing systems and practices in North America. By far the most advanced practice in this regard is the American Council on Education (ACE) CREDIT® system. There is much to be learnt from these practices, and much that could be extended to a wider range of NFE including from OERs and MOOCs (as is already beginning happening in the USA), especially in terms of the ways in which the ACE CREDIT® system addresses quality across five main areas: design/delivery; learning outcomes; learning materials including texts; instructor qualifications; assignments and assessment methodology. Our paper picks up on the detail of this.

It is noteworthy that the European Commission has established two or three Peer Learning Activities focussing solely on RNFE to work from 2016-17. The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) is currently involved in a six-country EC-funded study. The country reports (Poland, Croatia, France, Austria, Germany, Scotland) will be produced in September 2017 identifying the state of play re: RNFE – what is going on and why, how RNFE works, the nature of the quality assurance process, etc.

Encompassing 1A, 1B and 1C, we found a range of examples of RNFE (as opposed to VNFIL) across European countries. Although these vary in scope and character, from Croatia to Slovenia, they suggest that RNFE has existed in various ways in different European countries over a long period of time, and *still* exists where countries have not yet fully

embraced an NQF and associated VNFIL discourses which tend to converge non-formal and informal learning as an individualised matter.

With reference to 1C (RNFE as part of VNFIL at institutional, qualification and programme levels), we note that there is little data. We have however identified some new and innovative developments at this level, for example, how the Open University (OU) in the UK is planning to refocus and expand its ‘validation’ services to other providers of formal education, which may hold implications for NFE. We investigate how Middlesex University in the UK credit-rates employers’ in-company training and development programmes, and we include examples of the academic oversight procedures deployed by Thompson Rivers University, B.C., Canada.

Our explorations in 2A and 2B (RNFE as recognition of OERs and MOOCs at systems and sector levels) takes us into a review of recent research and distinctions between credentialising and recognising. We note how until recently availability of learning opportunities has been open but recognition has not, and suggest that one of the main reasons for this is that assessment and quality issues are still somewhat contested. Moreover, the notion of unbundling assessment/accreditation and teaching/institutional support remains a challenge for many formal educational institutions. At the national/systems level however we see the USA ACE CREDIT® system taking the lead in terms of including MOOCs in the NFE it provides credit recommendations for. At the institutional level (but with an international remit) we discuss progress the *OERu* has made based on its network of participating institutions recognising each other’s OERs. We also discuss how in relation to 2C exams, tests or face-to-face assessments are being added post-MOOC as the basis for formal recognition (in some ways similar to challenge exams in VNFIL), and how the University of Edinburgh and the OU (UK) allow formal credit for MOOCs on the basis on institutional quality assurance.

It is in 3A, 3B and 3C where most of our empirical inroads are made i.e. RNFE in relation to policy and regulation pertaining to qualification frameworks at national/systems, sectoral, and institutional levels. We conduct an in-depth investigation into Scotland and the SCQF – a particularly comprehensive national/systemic approach to RNFE. A provider of NFE can apply to become a Credit Rating Body (CRB) if it can meet certain criteria, or alternatively can opt to be associated with a CRB acting on a ‘third party’ basis. Aside from being an

organisation ‘in good standing’, a potential credit-rating body must already have in place a documented quality assurance system for programme design, approval, validation, accreditation, assessment or other related activities and have evidence, through internal and external reviews, that this quality assurance system is valid and reliable.

In terms of 3B, one particular sector is leading the way in Europe. Youth work has evolved a high-level policy and practical strategy for RNFE which includes a draft quality assurance framework and ‘road map’. The European Youth Forum is convinced that a quality assurance framework is a serious step forward for RNFE in youth organisations, but also notes that this will not always be an easy process and requires long-term commitment from all actors involved: both youth organisations and institutions. We discuss this in detail.

We present a detailed case study of a NFE provider’s experience of gaining formal recognition as an Awarding Organisation for their programmes on the new Ofqual Register of Recognised Qualifications (RQF) in England and Northern Ireland. This is highly illuminating in terms of 3C i.e. RNFE in relation to policy and regulation pertaining to qualification frameworks at institutional level. A picture emerges of a 5-6 year-long process to assure the quality of the organisation and its programmes across governance, good standing, finances, resourcing, and staffing.

Implications and conclusions

In our Discussion section we argue that what we have found is a mixed pallet of RNFE practices, a piecemeal picture, but a groundswell of possibilities. We bring together our findings to discuss the nature of this mixed pallet, including where the ‘hot spots’ are and levers for future development.

We argue that VNFIL offers a rich theoretical base with origins in educational discourses of widening participation and social justice. This is in contrast to some of the technological discourses that underpin the development of assessment and recognition practices of MOOCs, especially. In our view the main aim in future has to be bringing all approaches to RNFE together rather than treating VNFIL, recognition of NFE that is face-to-face, and recognition of OERs and MOOCs separately. We are not sure that optimal synergy has yet

been achieved. And this can only be done by building supportive partnerships of providers based on where expertise is strongest and where NFE already highly valued.

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