



ITALIAN JOURNAL OF SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION

Editor-in-Chief: Silvio Scanagatta | ISSN 2035-4983

## **Recognition of prior learning in youth work in the European Union: causes for its limited use and modeling the outcomes**

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### **Article first published online**

February 2015

### **HOW TO CITE**

Schut, J. (2015). Recognition of prior learning in youth work in the European Union: causes for its limited use and modeling the outcomes. *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education*, 7(1), 263-296. Retrieved from <http://journals.padovauniversitypress.it/ijse/content/recognition-prior-learning-youth-work-european-union-causes-its-limited-use-and-modeling>



PADOVA UNIVERSITY PRESS

## **Recognition of prior learning in youth work in the European Union: causes for its limited use and modeling the outcomes**

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*Abstract:* Within the European Union (EU), two main problems were identified related to the recognition of non-formal learning. These are: (1) the limited opportunities for recognition and underuse of these practices and (2) the lack of compatibility and coherence between Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) approaches in the member states of the EU (European Commission, 2012b). This paper addresses these problems in youth work and presents a solution in the form of a model that characterizes the various types of learning outcomes. Three main problems were found causing the limited use of RPL: the lack of a common language, the limited (financial) resources available and limited quality of RPL. The model developed in this project incorporated the key players in the RPL process. By looking at existing models, the actors in the RPL process were identified. From these actors, the assessor and evaluator were used in the new model. Variations in the presentation of these actors led to a model describing four types of recognition.

*Keywords:* youth work, recognition of prior learning (RPL), learning outcomes, TRIZ

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## **Introduction**

Recognition of Prior Learning is seen as a step towards lifelong learning in EU policy. This is true for both informal and non-formal learning (European Commission, 2000; 2001). In this study, RPL is defined as providing recognition of the learning that take place in both formal and non-formal learning activities, as described by Taylor and Clemans (2000). Rapid economic and technological changes require individuals to gain higher and more generic skills (Pool & Sewell, 2007). To keep up with this increasing pace, the full spectrum of learning (ranging from formal education to informal learning) must be used (Malcolm, Hodkinson, & Colley, 2003). However, providing access to the whole range of learning opportunities requires integration of RPL practices into traditional educational systems (European Commission, 2012a). Within the EU, two main problems have been identified regarding the validation of non-formal and informal learning. These are: (1) the limited opportunities for individuals to go through RPL practices; and (2) the lack of compatibility and coherence between RPL approaches in the Member States of the EU (European Commission, 2012b). This paper presents the results of two studies related to this topic: the first provides an overview of the root conflicts that underlie the limited use of RPL in youth work in the EU; the second proposes a solution to one of these causes in the form of a model which characterizes the various types of learning outcomes with regard to volunteers active in youth work and young people participating in these activities. This first study consists of an analysis of the root conflicts leading to the limited use of RPL in the EU. Its aim is to provide a clear overview of these causes. This results in the identification of several problems that would need to be addressed to increase the use of RPL in youth work throughout the EU. The second study aims to design of a model to describe the various goals individuals have when applying for RPL.

## Method

### *Study 1: The limited use of RPL*

A literature review on this topic was carried out to identify the causes that underpin the limited use of RPL in youth work. To structure this process, it was combined with a Root Conflict Analysis (RCA+). This tool is part of xTRIZ, a variation of TRIZ. TRIZ is a problem-solving and analysis theory consisting of multiple tools aimed at developing inventive solutions (Barry, Domb, & Slocum, 2014). As the problem of the limited use of RPL is a complex one, a structured approach helps to identify the causes.

Literature examined during this stage was limited to the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. This means literature on the recognition of specific sectors, professions or activities, for example recognition of youth work, youth workers and volunteering, was not included. Although these fields have similar problems, they are not part of the topic discussed here. As the problem with RPL in the EU is not tied specifically to one sector (for example youth work), literature from all sectors was considered relevant. No geographical boundaries were set but literature related to RPL in the EU was preferred to literature discussing the problem outside this area.

An expert review was conducted with RPL experts to evaluate the outcomes of the Root Conflict Analysis. Selection of experts for evaluating the Root Conflict Analysis took place based on their knowledge of RPL in Europe. This required the experts to have at least five years of experience with RPL in the EU. No connection with youth work was necessary as this analysis deals with RPL in a broader scope. However, experience in the youth work field was considered a benefit. Four experts in this field reviewed the problem analysis.

Quantitative data, gathered in the interview write-ups, was coded and analysed using specialized software and a set of predetermined codes.

### *Study 2: Describing the various types of RPL*

This study aimed to design a model to describe the various types of RPL. This phase consisted of two sub-steps. The first step reviewed existing models in RPL. This identified types and characteristics of these models, that help in

the design and evaluation of the model developed in this project. This is done by conducting a literature review of existing RPL models. The second step consists of the design of the model. This was done based on the literature found in the previous step.

Evaluation was done by conducting an expert review. The evaluation criteria of this step are: the completeness of the model (covers all types of RPL) and ease of comprehension (lack of RPL specific language). Furthermore, conferences on RPL and youth work were attended to evaluate the model.

As the opportunity arose during the project to have the model evaluated by the expert group of the youth partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe (CoE) (from now on referred to as the Youth Partnership), opportunistic sampling (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007) was used to evaluate the model. This group consists of experts from all the stakeholders relevant for this project, which made them ideally suited to evaluate the model with. In addition, conferences to attend were selected using snowball sampling (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007).

Selection of the attended conferences was based on the conference program. RPL and youth work were the key criteria, with preference given to events that included both in the programme. However, conferences on only RPL were still considered. This resulted in participation in three conferences.

Analysis of the data was done in the same manner as in Study 1. Used codes related to the characteristics of the various categories of the model, the types of RPL, the RPL instruments used and the lack of RPL specialist terminology used in the model.

### **Results: study 1**

The starting point of the analysis is the limited use of RPL in the EU. The European Commission (EC) considers this to be one of two main problems in RPL in Europe (European Commission, 2012b). In RCA this problem is formulated as displayed in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The main problem in RPL in Europe



This problem was taken as the starting point of the review. In this review, three groups of causes that relate to different perspectives of looking at the problem. These are the linguistic, the quality and the resource perspective.

#### *The linguistic perspective*

The first perspective discussed is a linguistic one. Although RPL is important at the EU policy level, there is no set of definitions of RPL in this field (Werquin, 2010). Valuing the things learned in life is common all over the world (Hargreaves, 2006), but a lack of consensus between writers, researchers and policy makers regarding the definition of RPL exists (Joosten-ten Brinke et al., 2008). Discussions about what encompasses different kinds of learning (formal, non-formal and informal) in adult education complicate this even more (Conrad, 2008).

Although using different concepts and terminology, all approaches agree that RPL is about increasing awareness by both individuals and society of learning outcomes (Fejes & Andersson, 2009). Another interesting point of similarity between the definitions used is that, they all focus on finding ways to document previous undocumented learning (Taylor & Clemans, 2000). As noted in the introduction, here the definition of Taylor & Clemans (2000) is referred to in this paper. These authors define RPL as “the recognition of non-credentialed or informal learning (that is to say, observable learned outcomes based on experience rather than mere experience or mere outcomes)” (Taylor & Clemans, 2000).

This definition covers the aspects regarding RPL most scholars agree on (non-formal learning and awareness) and does not specify the aim (for example, the increase of employability of individuals) of the recognition. Moreover, this ‘language problem’ is not exclusive to the EU but is also a

problem in other parts of the world (for example, see Conrad, 2008 or Smith, 2004). In Europe, the lack of a common language is one of the main challenges for a wider implementation of RPL practices and the acceptance by the public (Hawley, Souto Otero, & Duchemin, 2010). Furthermore, a lack of common language makes it hard to define a clear purpose to use RPL.

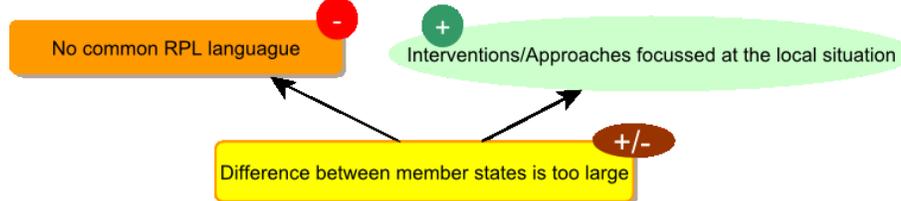
As this problem exists within the field of RPL on a global scale, it directly relates to the limited use of RPL. This results in this problem being the main element of this perspective in the RCA+ diagram. This is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Main problem presented by the linguistic perspective



Within the EU this lack of common RPL language appears to be caused by two causes: the differences between member states and the lack in coherence between RPL definitions. The first element refers to the many differences between member states (Konrad, 2010). As discussed earlier, approaches vary within the EU member states when it comes to RPL. Even though the number of clusters of similar approaches has decreased in Europe from five (Bjørnåvold, 2000) to two (Hawley et al., 2010), RPL practices still differ greatly between countries. RPL approaches either predominantly focus on design and management of initiatives on national or local level. Furthermore, differences also exist in the degree of implementation of RPL practices. These large differences exist between countries and even inside various sectors within the same country (Hawley et al., 2010). However, these differences between Member States regarding the approach also have their benefits. A major benefit of this diversity is the ability to cater for the specific needs of that country and sector. This is positive as it makes RPL easier to apply in the (educational) frameworks of the countries. Although this is not necessary beneficial from an EU perspective, it is from that of individual EU citizens. This results in a contradiction. In the RCA+ diagram as presented in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Contradiction of the differences between member states regarding RPL

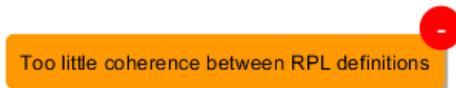


The second underlying cause is the lack of coherence between RPL definitions. There is little or no consensus between writers, researchers and major policy influencing agencies regarding a clear definition of RPL (Joosten-ten Brinke et al., 2008; Smith L., 2004). This results in the use of a wide range of RPL definitions (Stenlund, 2010) with RPL only related to credit transfer between studies or universities (Pitman, 2009), to the notion of RPL as a form of acknowledgement of previous learned competencies, gained through unstructured informal learning (Knight, 2006). Different concepts can also be defined the same or differences can exist between countries or regions. Terms more associated with recognition of formal learning like “credit transfer” and “qualification recognition” are often confused with RPL (National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, 2011). Another example of this is prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR). Although seemingly similar to RPL, PLAR includes recognition of both the formal and informal learning whereas RPL has a tendency to include only informal learning (Conrad, 2008).

Besides this, the term Validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNIL) is also often used in discussions on the EU level (for example, see the Council Recommendation on this topic of 2012 by the European Commission, 2012c). Although this concept specifically focuses on non-formal and informal learning, its primary focus is on the formal recognition by education institutions as a way to increase employability. Even in European policy great differences exist between seemingly similar definitions. For example, ‘recognition of non-formal and informal learning’ as used in Europe’s 2020 strategy is not the same as the term ‘recognition of prior learning’ as used in the supporting documentation of the Bologna treaty, which also incorporates

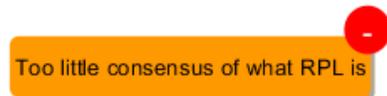
formal education (Hawley et al., 2010). In the RCA+ diagram this lack of coherence is shown as presented in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Second element in the linguistic perspective



Even though the lack of a common definition can be harmful for RPL practices, this is caused by a more fundamental problem. This is the lacking consensus of what RPL is about (Hargreaves, 2006). When talking about RPL, different actors use different concepts. As with the definitions, this ranges from formal qualification to less formal approaches aimed at personal development. Birenbaum (1996) describes this distinction in the context of portfolio use as ‘grading’ versus ‘enquiry reading’. This lack of consensus is harmful for the definition of RPL and therefore mentioned separately in the RCA+ diagram. This is shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Lack of consensus about what RPL is



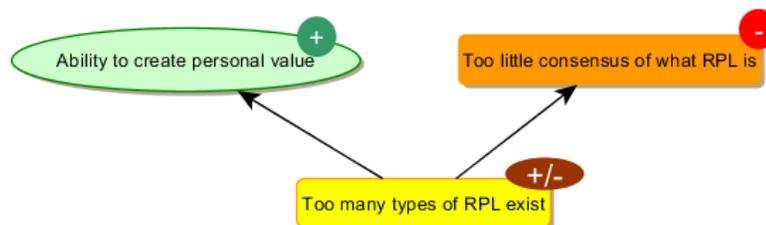
This negative effect seems caused by the existence of a wide range of RPL types. Looking at tools that facilitate RPL exemplifies this. In the United Kingdom an organization called Youth Achievement Foundations (YAF) helps disadvantaged youth to get both formal and other types of recognition of their previous knowledge (Graaf et al., 2011). On the other side there is the example of the French Scouting association Scout et Guide de France (SGF) who developed the “Valorise toi” tool. This tool helps scout leaders to describe what they learn through scouting and guiding in order to put this on their CV (Scout

et Guide de France, 2011). However the existence of various types of RPL is also beneficial. As with the first element, this choice allows solutions to be focused on the local situation and the values of the individual receiving the recognition. However, this is only the case as long as students are not forced to undergo the RPL process (for example, as part of some formal program or external requirement) in which case this value becomes limited (Deller, 2003). In the RCA+ diagram the contradiction is shown in Figure 6.

The connection between the two elements in this perspective is through a so-called “AND” relationship. This means that solving one of these problems leads to overcome the main problem presented in this perspective. To solve the ‘lack of a common RPL language’ problem, RPL approaches have to become more similar or definitions need to be more concise. In this case, similar RPL approaches result in greater common understanding between actors in this domain. This consensus can allow for the existence of multiple definitions, as the used approach and the outcomes are agreed on. On the other hand, solving the second problem will create a foundation for a common RPL language as well clarifying what different parties mean by RPL.

The use of a common definition allows for multiple approaches towards RPL by clarifying the current situation and allowing for better understanding of the approaches used by others. This results in the overview of the linguistic perspective as presented in Figure 7 (see Appendix 1).

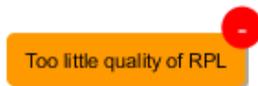
Figure 6. Contradiction related to the existence of various RPL types



*The quality perspective*

The second perspective discussed is that of quality. Concerns exist about the quality of RPL (Joosten-ten Brinke et al., 2008; Stenlund, 2010). These concerns regarding the quality can be divided into two groups. These relate to the perceived and actual quality of RPL and RPL procedures (Figure 8).

Figure 8 The limited quality of RPL

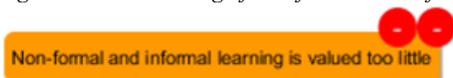


Society mainly perceives RPL negatively (Hawley et al., 2010). For example, in Greece RPL of non-formal and informal learning is looked down upon as something that is less valuable than a similar qualification obtained through formal education (Hawley et al., 2010). Even in Finland, which has a well-developed RPL system, students prefer to go through formal education rather than a validation process (Hawley et al., 2010). Also, other groups than students share the conviction that non-formal and informal learning are less valuable. For example, educational providers in northern Europe expressed being anxious about the implementation of RPL for non-formal and informal learning because of the limited perceived value of these types of learning (Nordiskt Nätverk för Vuxnas Lärande, 2010).

Changing these beliefs is hard and, given the limitations of this study and the extensive nature of this problem, will not be possible to solve in a single study. Therefore, it is considered to be an unchangeable negative effect for now. However, this does not mean a solution for this problem does not exist. It rather is beyond the scope of the project (Figure 9).

Problems about the quality of RPL mainly relate to the validity aspect of RPL. To be considered trustworthy by RPL providers, empirical evidence must be present to ensure validity of the methods used. This lack of empirical evidence is caused by a limited number of empirical studies (Joosten-ten Brinke et al., 2008; Stenlund, 2010).

Figure 9. Undervaluing of non-formal and informal learning

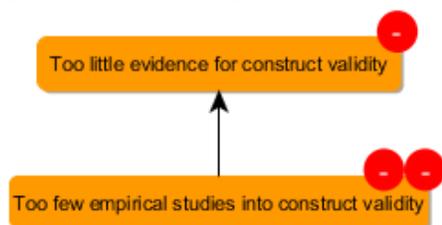


This is in contrast to the theoretical evidence that is available for most procedures regarding construct validity, reliability and perceived trustworthiness (Stenlund, 2010).

This lack of quality assurance is something negative and makes educational institutions limit the amount of RPL they allow in a curriculum (Pitman, 2009). Another downside of the lack of evidence is the preference of educational institutions to recognize learning of students who can present documentation of this learning.

Since RPL intends to give credit to students who learned in an informal environment, this is a negative effect and a potential barrier for these students (Hargreaves, 2006; Pitman, 2009). As this study does not aim to create empirical evidence for specific tools but rather focuses on mapping the various types of RPL this is considered to be an unchangeable negative effect. Again, this is the result of it being outside the scope of the project and not the result of the fact it cannot be solved. This is shown in Figure 10.

Figure 10. Causes relating to the lack of quality in RPL

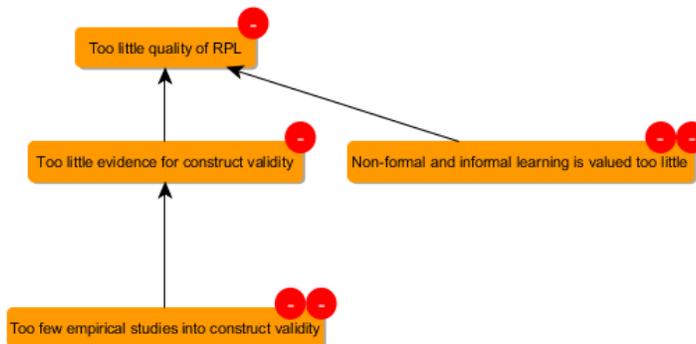


The two presented problems causing the main problem in this perspective connect with an “IF” relationship as they both address different types of quality (actual and perceived). If the problem regarding the actual quality is solved (for

example, by doing more research into the empirical validity evidence) this does not necessarily influence the perceived quality. In this case effort is still needed to reduce the suspicion regarding the lack of perceived quality of RPL.

On the other hand, if RPL became fully accepted, the actual quality of RPL tools still would remain problematic. Therefore, this part of the RCA+ diagram looks as follows (Figure 11).

Figure 11. Overview of the quality perspective



### *The resource perspective*

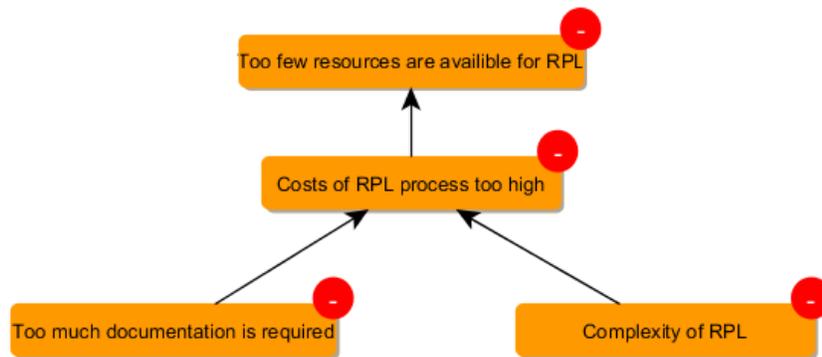
The third perspective that causes the limited use of RPL is the lack of (financial) resources available. The high costs related to this method of learning are a significant disadvantage (Fejes & Andersson, 2009; Smith L. , 2004). These costs, which relate to both time and money, are a major disincentive for both students and RPL providers (Smith L. , 2004).

This seems the result of the complex nature of RPL (Gallacher & Feutrie, 2003; Knight, 2006; Taylor & Clemans, 2000) and a need for extensive documentation (Gallacher & Feutrie, 2003; Smith L. , 2004). In the RCA+ diagram these two causes are connected with an “IF” relation.

Even though simplifying RPL would decrease the need for extensive documentation, this does not necessarily work the other way around.

As a result both negative effects need to be solved. This relation is shown in Figure 12.

Figure 12 Causes resulting in the cost of RPL being too high

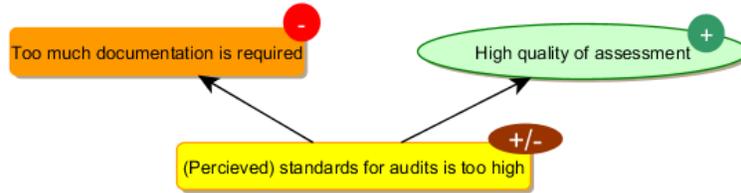


First the need for extensive documentation is further examined. This administrative burden placed on RPL providers seems the result of the high (perceived) standards for audits (Gallacher & Feutrie, 2003; Smith, 2004). Educational providers dislike these administrative requirements strongly (Smith, 2004).

Although it is perceived as something negative, high standards have positive benefits as well. High standards can result in high quality of the procedure and tools used. This is especially important for individuals and institutions that seek recognition with formal educational institutions. In the RCA+ diagram this is shown in Figure 13.

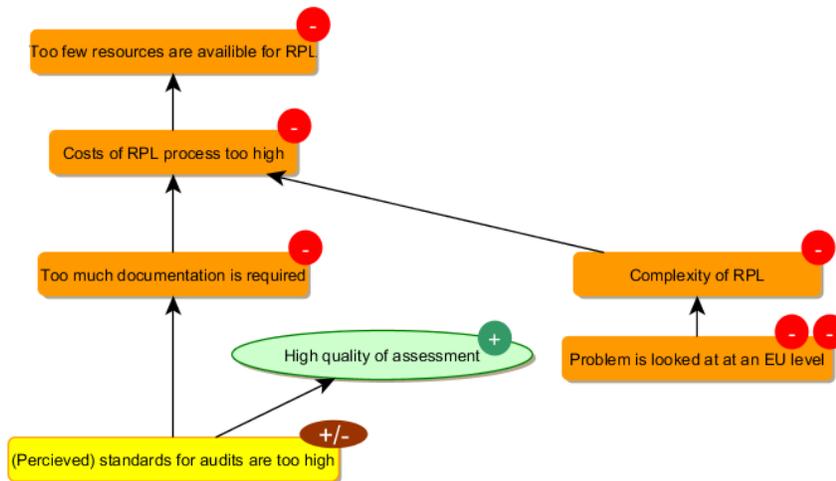
The complexity of RPL appears the result of the fact the problem is approached from EU level. On an individual level, RPL often becomes much simpler. However, the starting point of this analysis is the EU level. Therefore, the complexity of RPL is considered an unchangeable negative effect in this context.

Figure 13. Contradiction between the required documentation and the quality of assessment



This results in an overview of this part of the RCA+ diagram, which is shown in Figure 14.

Figure 14. Overview of the resource perspective

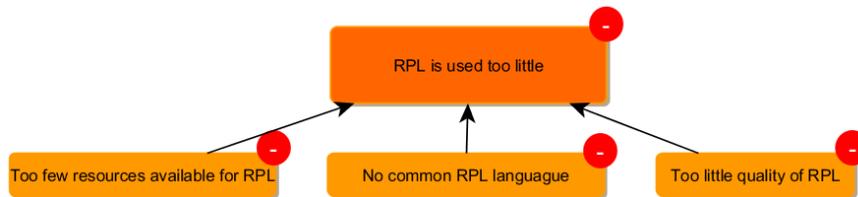


*An overview of all the perspectives*

After examining the three perspectives, they are combined to create an overview of the whole problem. However, the relation between the main

problem (RPL is used too little) and the three perspectives need to be determined. As the perspectives focus on different areas of the problem, they are linked with an “IF” relation. For example, creating a common RPL language has little to no influence on the resources available for RPL. An overview of the main problem and the relation with the four perspectives is shown in Figure 15.

Figure 15. Relation between the main problem and the four perspectives



This completes the RCA+ diagram related to the causes underpinning the little use of RPL. An image of the whole diagram is shown in Figure 16 (See: Appendix 2).

## Results: study 2

Looking at existing RPL models, two types of models were identified: those focusing on the RPL process and those distinguishing different types of RPL. The different models were examined regarding their characteristics and, their advantages and disadvantages. The design of the new model incorporated these pros and cons.

### *Models focusing on the RPL process*

The first type of models discussed is focusing on the RPL process. RPL procedures usually follow a specific pattern, which these models try to capture.

Examples of this type include the model of the university of applied science of Amsterdam (HVA) (BeFlex, 2007), the Dutch organization for international cooperation in higher education (Nuffic) (Scholten, 2007) and Scouting Gelderland (Peeters, 2011). The model presented in the Council Recommendation on non-formal and informal learning (European Commission, 2012c) is also a process model, as it identifies the steps in a validation procedure. The examples shown here follow a number of comparable steps, which overlap with those presented in the work of Whitaker (1989). These steps are: identification, articulation, documentation, measurement, evaluation and transcription. In the first step identifies the knowledge and skills of the person receiving recognition. The second step links this to the selected study program. This is then documented in the third step. The fourth step compares the candidates' prior knowledge with the standards of the chosen program and awards credit in step five. Step six is merely an administrative step in which transcription of the credit takes place into a useful record of achievement. This sixth step is sometimes missing in the models described earlier in this section. This seems mostly the case outside formal education where the goal is not gaining credit but more oriented towards personal development (for example, see Peeters, 2011).

The advantage of this group of model is the clear description of the steps in the RPL process. These models create awareness about the steps one needs to take when working towards RPL. This awareness about the process can help to empower candidates (Leary, 2009). However, the focus on the process, instead of the outcomes of an RPL procedure, makes these models less relevant for this project.

However, another aspect of these models is relevant for this project. This is the identification of key players involved in the RPL process. Johnson (2002) describes three actors involved in the portfolio assessment process: the student, the portfolio advisor and the portfolio assessor. Here, students are mainly responsible for making a claim, receiving support from the portfolio adviser, which an assessor then compares with a standard by the assessor. However, a fourth party, not mentioned by Johnson, can be identified. This key player concerns itself with the approval of the assessed claim. Representations of this

key player differ between RPL settings and are also not limited to a single person or a group of people (Paddison, 2012). Examples of this actor range from employers, who recognize the value of diplomas and experience individuals, put on their curriculum vitae, to individuals, who value the fact they learned something new. This wide notion of possible representations of this key player is especially important in youth work, as here young people do not receive education aimed at a formal qualification but rather for personal development.

It is also possible for several key players to take the form of a single person (for example, being both the individual seeking recognition and the assessor). An example of this is the Valorise-toi tool, where young people are both in the individual seeking recognition and the assessor.

#### *Models focusing on different types of RPL*

The second type of models focuses on different outcomes of RPL. This model tries to describe differences between various forms of RPL. These models are less common but still valuable when it comes to composing an RPL language. Examples of these models are those by Hart et al. (2009), the one by Smith & Tillema (2003) and the one described in the context analysis of Scholten (2007). Although these models mainly describe different uses of the portfolio instrument, they also touch the various types of RPL at the same time. Further, they describe most of the RPL practices, as the portfolio is one of the widest used instruments in RPL (Fejes & Andersson, 2009). However, it must be noted the portfolio is not the only tool that provides RPL (Conrad, 2008).

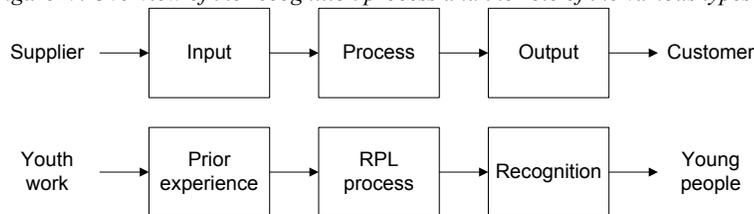
The main advantage of these models is that they describe why an individual seeks recognition. This can help (youth) organizations to define the purpose of the tool they plan to develop and identify the needs of the people they are working with.

#### *The different types of models and the recognition process*

The different model types, discussed in the previous sections, can be placed in the broader context of the recognition process. According to Hammer (2001) a process is “an organized group of related activities that work together to

transform one or more kinds of input into outputs that are of value to the customer”. In this article the youth work organizations fulfil the role of supplier. These organizations provide learning outcomes (the input) which RPL processes then transform (the process). Process models describe this activity. The different steps in these models are the different activities that together make up the process. The outcome models describe the results of these processes, which is the recognition of the learning that took place (the output). Finally, these outcomes are created for the customers, which are the young people that take part in the organizations’ activities. An overview of the whole recognition process and the role of the different types of models is shown in Figure 17.

Figure 17. Overview of the recognition process and the role of the various types of models



#### *Design of a new model*

In this section the model identifying different types of RPL is described. First, the aim of the model is determined before describing the new model before looking at the actors that are involved in the RPL process. Based on these actors a new model is proposed.

The aim of the model is to identify the different types of RPL that exist. This means looking at the various purposes people are seeking RPL for. The model is meant to describe these types rather than to prescribe one. A model that describes the situation, allows for a first step towards a common language.

Furthermore, the model will not try to identify individual or groups of competences. As competences can describe a wide range of skills, trying to

classify them will likely result in generic descriptions, a complex system or limited adoption of the model. For example, people who want to get mechanical engineering competences recognized have no (or a limited) need for a class of linguistic competences. Furthermore, organizations working in the various fields have a better knowledge of their respective domains and thus are more able to develop tools which can be used in the specific fields.

Four actors exist in the RPL process: the student, the portfolio advisor, the portfolio assessor and the evaluator. The first three of those actors originate from research done on the portfolio instrument by Johnson (2002). However, they can apply to a broader context by slightly changing their names. By renaming them into 'the individual seeking recognition', 'the process adviser', 'the assessor' and 'the evaluator' they become tool independent as well as well as disconnecting them from formal education (the concept of students is strongly associated with formal education). Although Johnson (2002) does not mention the evaluator as an actor in the RPL process, the value given to an assessment varies depending on who evaluates it. Therefore, the evaluator has to be considered as an important actor when it comes to valuing learning. Padişon (2012) does so in the context of youth work.

Looking at the importance of the different actors, 'the assessor' and 'the evaluator' are the most important when it comes to the recognition of learning outcomes. Although the other actors are important as well, on an abstract level they do not influence the outcome of an RPL process as much. For example an individual seeking RPL will, without doubt, have different reasons for seeking RPL compared to someone else. However, they are both people seeking RPL and therefore fulfil the same role in the process. The same is true for people advising candidates. Although the methods and number of advisors can vary their purpose (advising candidates) remains similar.

These two actors can have different purposes. Looking at the assessor, a distinction can be made between two categories. In one of those the assessor is the same as the individual seeking the recognition and in the other it is someone else. Examples of this last category can include assessors in oral testing in academic settings or ability testing such as during one's exam for a drivers' license. Even when the test does not require human interaction, such a

paper or computer-based tests, grading takes place externally of the test taker.

An example of the other category is self-assessment. This method can be used to improve the certainty one has about ones' self-knowledge as well as seek information about aspects of their self-concept (Sedikides & Strube, 1997).

The other actor of importance is the evaluator. This actor recognizes the value of the assessment done by the assessor. This extent of this recognition varies for each recognition tool. This extent of the recognition can vary from very limited to extensive. Limited recognition happens when assessment results are compared with personal values or to achievement standards that are not widely adopted. Extensive recognition takes place when external parties yield the same judgment as the assessor and recognize it holds value. This happens when either the individual seeking the recognition or some external standard convinces the actor.

By combining the different representations of the assessor and the evaluator a 2x2 diagram can be created. Here, the types of assessment are placed on the horizontal axis and the extent of the recognition on the vertical one. This results in four types of recognition. These types include the variations in actors as described in the previous subsection. This results in the visual representation as given in Figure 18. In this model four types of recognition can be distinguished.

These are: recognition based on self-assessment with a limited extent of recognition (type I), recognition based on assessment by others with a limited extent of the recognition (type II), recognition based on self- assessment which is recognized extensively (type III) and recognition where assessment is done by others and the recognition is extensive.

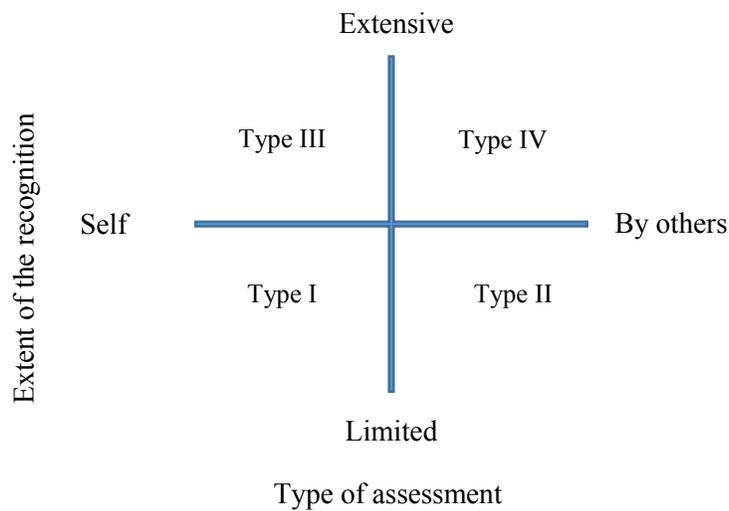
Four types of recognition can be identified from the model. The first type of recognition is characterized by self-assessment and a limited extent of recognition.

It is aimed at creating a better understanding of one's abilities and understanding achievement as discussed by Hart et al. (2009). Ideas closely linked to this type are self-worth and self-value as the recognition takes mainly place within the individual seeking the recognition. As the assessment is done by the individual, it is independent of the values placed on someone by others.

However, this also means the assessment can be influenced by others (e.g. by providing the individual with feedback).

Tools that promote this type of recognition are aimed at identifying what encompasses certain roles and provide individuals information about what can be learned in specific roles. It is up to the individuals to assess if they have these skills and what they are worth to them. Examples of such tools are function profiles (mainly for specific competences) or (digital) questionnaires aimed at identifying one's skills (mainly for more generic competences) (e.g. the Competence profile by KFUM Spejderne, 2012 or the Youthpass tool by Bergstein et al., 2011).

Figure 18. Proposed model describing the various types of RPL



The second type of recognition is characterized by assessment by others and a limited extent of recognition. Its aim is to develop individuals by setting external standards, which are only valued by the individual seeking recognition

or the organization they participate in. By using external standards as proof of their learning, individuals can better understand the value of their achievements.

This is a mix between what Hart, Howieson and Semple (2009) call proving achievement and understanding achievement. However, the difference with proving achievement is this recognition is about proving something to one's self, instead to someone else.

Therefore, it is also closely related to understanding achievement. Tools that ease this recognition are aimed at showing individuals where they are compared with standards. Examples of such tools are diploma's or certificates that used inside organizations without any external value and tools to measure one's ability and compare those with some form of standard (for example, the qualification cards by Scouting Nederland, 2011 or the UNIQUE learning badges by the UNIQUE network, 2013).

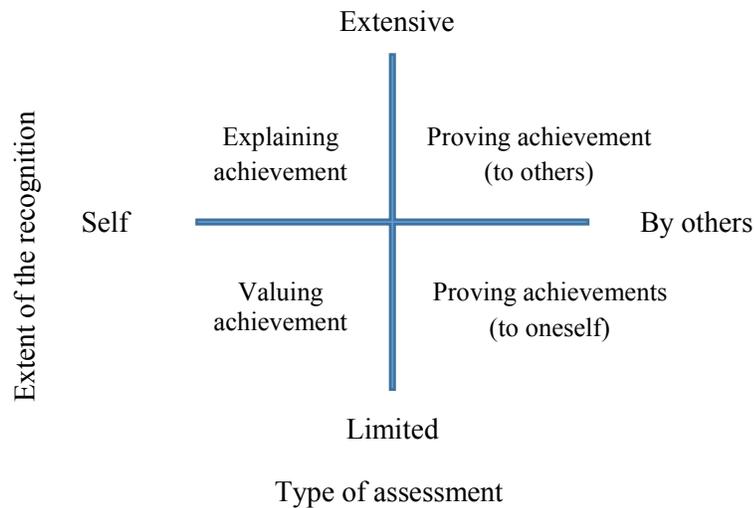
The third type of recognition is characterized by self-assessment and a broad extent of recognition. It focuses on at getting ones' skills externally recognized without the need to provide proof of this learning. This requires the individual to explain what is learned and how this translates to the people recognizing the achievement.

This value can change between different evaluators as their needs are not the same. It closely relates to the notion of explaining achievement as defined by Hart et al. (2009). Tools used to promote this recognition are aimed at helping individuals translate their skills into the language used by evaluators. Examples of this are tools that translate specific skills formulated in specialist language into language understood by the world of business. Individuals can put this on their CV (for example, the Valorise toi tool by Scout et Guide de France, 2011 or the Scout leader skills by Les Scouts, 2012).

The fourth type of recognition is characterized by assessment by others and a broad extent of recognition. It is aimed at achieving external recognition and being able to prove these outcomes. This type of recognition relates the closest to the traditional notion of RPL and is coined proving achievement by Hart et al. (2009).

Examples of this are formal recognition schemes offered by public bodies or formal education institutions and often use the portfolio instrument or assessment centres (for example, the Oscar competence document by Oscar Online, n.d.). An overview of the model with the keywords representing the various types of recognition is shown in Figure 19.

Figure 19. Types of assessment and their keywords related to the different concepts



### Evaluation of the results: study 1

Experts in the field of RPL evaluated the problem analysis part of this article. This was done to see if the method used (RCA+ analysis) resulted in a correct representation of the situation. Furthermore, the use of TRIZ was evaluated as well. This was to see if the method has been applied correctly.

#### *Evaluation of the content*

Four experts conducted the evaluation of the content of the problem analysis. During this review, the experts were asked about the causes underpinning the limited use of RPL in their specific context. The context in which the experts operated varied and is displayed in Table 1. These interviews were summarized in individual write-ups.

*Table 1. Expert interviews and their context*

Interview number	Context	Date of interview
1	RPL in the Netherlands	November 2013
2	RPL in formal (higher) education	December 2013
3	RPL in a European context	December 2013
4	RPL in Dutch youth work	November 2013

The causes related to the limited use of RPL in Europe mentioned by the experts overlapped to a great extent with those suggested in the literature based Root Conflict Analysis. Nevertheless, the overlap did vary between the interviews. The opinions of experts 1, 3 and 4 showed a great level of overlap, whereas expert 2 had a different opinion. Possibly, this was the result of the expert's focus (namely, formal education). Other causes for the limited use of RPL were mentioned that did not show up in the problem analysis by experts 1, 3 and 4. These include the way responsibilities are divided across government departments (expert 1), the low level of organization in the youth sector and that the motivation to initiate youth work projects is not always aimed at learning (expert 4). However, they also confirmed the causes that are mentioned in the problem analysis regarding the lack of resources (experts 1, 3 and 4), the language problem (experts 1, 3 and 4) and the quality problem (expert 1). Especially the language problem appeared to be a recurring topic. Both young people (expert 4) and others seeking recognition (expert 1) appeared to have problems with understanding of the language used in this domain as they find this too difficult and requiring too much previous knowledge. Furthermore, interpretations of the concept of RPL varied. For example, expert 3 asked what was meant by recognition when asked about what caused its limited use. This confirms the need for a common language to identify the various types of recognition. Finally, some aspects that are

mentioned in the Root Conflict Analysis were not confirmed in the interviews. These are the aspects related to the lack of construct validity and the element related to RPL being considered at an EU level.

*Evaluation of the method*

A TRIZ professional evaluated the use of the RCA+ method. The use of the method was considered to be good. This means the method was used. Areas of improvement included comments on the step from “too little consensus of what RPL is” and “too little coherence between RPL definitions”. It was suggested there should be one or more steps between these two elements. However, none of the interviewed experts commented on the lack of intermediate steps.

**Evaluation of the results: study 2**

The model presented to the expert group of the youth partnership was received positively. The fact that the outside world was included and the actor-based approach was perceived as being positive and also a positive addition to the current models. Despite this, the terminology used and the model itself was considered to be too complex for individual youth workers. To overcome this problem, the development of a set of guidance questions to identify the various types of recognition was suggested alongside the use of many examples.

*Participation in conferences*

As part of the evaluation, three conferences were attended. This was done to help evaluate the model with the youth sector. The conferences that were attended are: the Observal-Net Final Dissemination Conference (October 2013), the Eastern Partnership Youth Forum (October 2013) and the EUCIS-LLL week event on validation (October 2013). In the first two conferences, various ways of recognizing learning outcomes were formulated. These categories overlapped with those defined in our model. The categories mentioned in the conferences and the links with the types of recognition defined in this study are shown in Table 2 and Table 3.

*Table 2. Outcomes of recognition as formulated in the Observal-Net conference and their link to the various types of recognition*

Outcomes	Type of recognition
Formal recognition of learning outcomes	IV
Recognition of outcomes by employers as a means to enter the labour market	III
Recognition as a means for empowerment	I and II

*Table 3. Sub-groups made during one of the workshops of the Eastern Partnership Youth Forum and the link with the various types of recognition*

Sub-group	Type of recognition
Employment & entrepreneurship	III and IV (the latter to a lesser extent)
Personal & social life	I, II (personal life) and III (social life)
Empowering & civil participation	I, II (empowering) and III (civil participation)
Formal education	IV

The overlap between the categories suggests that the model covers the various types of recognition that exist.

## Conclusion and discussion

This project aimed to address two main questions. These are: “What causes RPL to be used so infrequently in youth work in the EU?” and “What are the characteristics of a model describing various types of RPL?”.

The outcomes of the RCA+ analysis provide an answer to the first question. Three main contradictions were found that cause the infrequent use of RPL: the diversity of RPL, the differences in RPL policy between EU Member States and even within Member States, and the perception of high auditing standards by RPL professionals. The relations between the different causes are presented in the RCA+ diagram as shown in Figure 19 (Appendix 2). In addition, two problems were identified by the experts who were interviewed as part of the evaluation: (1) that RPL is not purely related to one field of policy; and (2) formal education is more focused on knowledge than on skills. The relations between causes were also evaluated in this project and were considered to be valid by the experts involved in the evaluation.

For the second question, a model describing the various types of RPL was developed. By looking at existing models, the actors in the RPL process were found. From these, the assessor and evaluator were used in the new model. A recurring factor in these models is the variety of modes of assessment in RPL procedures. Another recurring factor was the extent of the recognition. Placing these aspects in a 2x2 diagram resulted in four types of recognition. These types were connected with the main model currently used in the field of recognition in youth work.

In terms of the reliability, the overall reliability of this study was considered acceptable. This is the result of substantial degree of overlap between the opinions of the experts that were consulted in the various evaluation activities which suggests good inter-rater reliability. Similar overlap was found in the conference outcomes, meaning these results are probably also reliable. Furthermore, similar conclusions between the different evaluation activities were found (for example, between the expert review of the model and the conference visits), which also suggest inter-method reliability of the results. Nevertheless, the sample sizes of some parts of the evaluation are low according to the literature (e.g. the number of experts in the review of the model is low, according to Creswell, 2002). This could have affected the outcome of the evaluation as ideas of RPL strategies vary across actors, both within the youth field as on a policy level. For example some organizations tend to advocate validation (type IV recognition as described here) where others are more in favour of self-recognition (type I/II recognition as described here).

The overall validity is considered to be acceptable. However, some questions still remain. These questions primarily relate to the evaluation activities. First, the interviews to evaluate the outcomes of the Root Conflict Analysis can be criticized. The negative point of this method in this context is the possibility of the occurrence of confirmation bias. As the interviews had the aim of checking the results of the Root Conflict Analysis it was in the researcher's interests to confirm these findings through the interviews. Nevertheless, the interview and the coding process were structured and the interviewees checked the write-ups before they were processed further.

Second, the applicability of TRIZ as a method can be questioned. Even though some authors believe the philosophy of this methodology is not exclusively limited to the natural sciences (Kaplan, 1996) and can be used in other domains, including educational science the question of the applicability of the method is a relevant question, due to the methodology's roots in the engineering sciences. However, examples of TRIZ can be found in educational settings (Fan, 2010), the number of these examples is limited.

The results of the root conflict analysis and the model developed in this study are situated in the youth sector, but can be generalized to some extent. Regardless of the evaluation of the model and the tool was restricted to youth work experts, the ability to generalize the outcomes are primarily the result of the abstract nature of the terminology and method used. Nevertheless, generalization to the whole youth sector should be done with some consideration as a good part of the sector does not believe in the possibility to identify and measure the learning outcomes of the activities. The ability to identify and measure these outcomes however was assumed in this study. Another consideration that needs to be made when generalizing the result is the broad range of definitions that are used across the EU to describe youth work (ICF GHK, 2014). As the expert interviewed in this study all used their own definition of youth work, generalizing the results of this study to other countries might cause confusions regarding the activities of youth organizations.

Four areas for future study can be identified. The first area for further study is the validation of the intervention developed in this project. As the various evaluation activities included a limited number of experts, further validation will increase both the content validity and construct validity of the model. This is especially true for the problem analysis as in this study there were only three experts involved. This number is lower than recommended by Creswell (2002) for this purposes.

Second, it remains unclear to what extent the model is representative for situations outside of the EU and outside youth work. As the intervention is based on the EU context, it is worthwhile to compare the outcomes with other policy approaches followed elsewhere in the world. A possible place to start is

the Eastern Partnership (EaP) Countries as a structure, and collaboration between the EU and these countries is already in place in the field of youth work. Another potential area of expansion for the model is the use of the model outside youth work. As only experts who were connected with the field of youth work tested the model, the results are not representative for other domains.

A third area for further research is the type(s) of recognition that can be pursued best by youth organizations in the various EU Member States. As the approaches differ greatly between Member States (and even within them) in both the field of RPL (European Commission, 2012b) and youth work (ICF GHK, 2014) optimal strategies for youth organizations seeking recognition will almost certainly vary.

A final potential area for further research is the development of interventions for the other problems that have been identified as part of the root conflict analysis. As the contradictions in the RCA+ diagram were mostly connected by “IF” relationships, the main problem can only be addressed when a solution is found for all of them. Even though the intervention developed in this study is likely to impact the problem in a positive way, it will not solve it completely. According to Fullan (2007), there are three elements that influence the adoption of a change in educational settings. These are the adoption of: (1) new tools; (2) new methods; and (3) new beliefs. As the interventions developed in this project primarily relate to the adoption of new tools, the other two elements of change need to be developed in order to increase the use of RPL.

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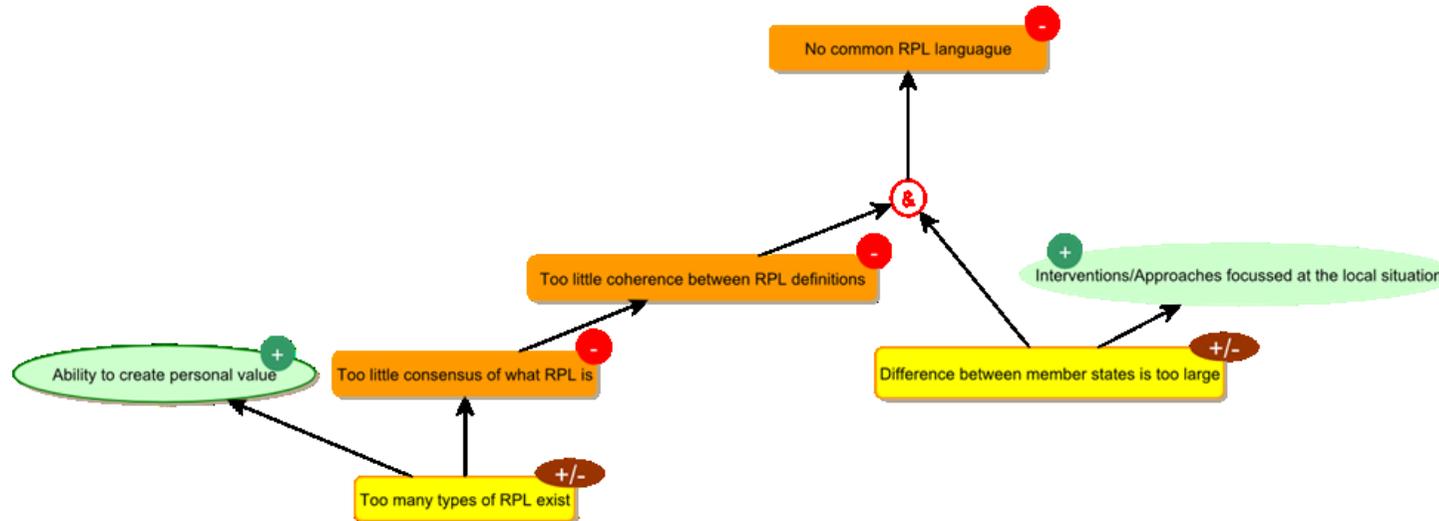
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Appendix 1 – Figure 7. Overview of the linguistic perspective



Appendix 2 - Figure 16. Root Conflict analysis of the limited use of RPL in youth work in the EU

