The Recognition of Non-Formal Education in Higher Education: Where Are We Now, and Are We Learning from Experience?

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Abstract : The increasing availability of non-formal education in the form of Open Education Resources (OERs) and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) gives rise to the questions of how such education can be formally recognized for credit. Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR), and Qualification Frameworks are fields of practice actively engaged in and associated with the recognition of non-formal education (RNFE) and can provide guidance on RNFE for the recognition of OERs/MOOCs. A scoping exercise reviews the literatures from the three fields and associated practical exemplars. Findings suggest a growing demand for, growth in, and diversification of, the recognition of non-formal education. Synergies or creative combinations of expertise across the three fields that could be further exploited to gain maximum traction for RNFE are identified. These are multi-dimensional: top-down, bottom-up, sector to sector, country to country, qualification framework to qualification framework, system to system, field to field. There is ample evidence that the process of recognition, albeit demanding, *does* have a positive effect on the quality of the NFE, and by association, it is hoped, on the qualification status of individuals and their access to related social and economic benefits.

Keywords: non-formal education, recognition, PLAR, OER, qualifications frameworks, accreditation

Résumé: L'offre croissante d'éducation non-formelle sous forme de ressources éducatives libres (RELs) et de cours en ligne ouverts et massifs (CLOMs) soulève la question de savoir dans quelle mesure une telle éducation peut être formellement reconnue et accréditée. La validation des acquis de l'expérience (VAE) et les nomenclatures de qualification sont des champs de pratique activement engagé dans et associé avec la reconnaissance de l'éducation non formelle et peuvent servir de guide à la reconnaissance de l'éducation non formelle offerte sous forme de RELs ou de CLOMs. Une revue de littérature s'intéresse aux trois champs et associe des exemples pratiques. Les résultats suggèrent l'existence d'une demande croissante concernant l'ampleur et la diversité de la

reconnaissance de l'éducation non-formelle. Les synergies ou les combinaisons créatives d'expertise existant dans les trois champs et qui pourraient par la suite être exploitées pour favoriser au mieux l'éducation non formelle sont identifiées. Ces dernières sont multidimensionnelles : du sommet à la base, de la base au sommet, secteur par secteur, pays par pays, nomenclature de qualification par nomenclature de qualification, système par système, champ par champ. De nombreux éléments prouvent que le processus de reconnaissance, bien qu'exigeant, a un effet positif sur la qualité de l'éducation non-formelle, et devrait, par association, en avoir sur les statuts de qualification des individus et l'accès aux avantages sociaux et économiques qui les accompagnent.

Mots-clés : éducation non-formelle, reconnaissance, VAE, REL, nomenclatures de qualification, accréditation

Introduction

Prior to the digital revolution, 'non-formal education' was defined as a flexible type of formal education, usually referring to programs offered by employers, community organisations, and other providers of education to adults. Such programs were sometimes formally recognized under the umbrella of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR), and, more recently, in relation to national or transnational qualification frameworks. The increased availability of non-formal education in the form of Open Education Resources (OERs) and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) gives rise to the questions addressed in this research paper: The Recognition of Non-Formal Education in Higher Education: Where are we now, and are we learning from experience?

To address these questions, this study scopes the three literatures and their associated fields of practice. Firstly, Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) where the focus is on recognizing non-formal education rather than informal learning. Secondly, non-formal education in the form of OERs (Open Educational Resources) and MOOCs (Massive Open On-line Courses) and the extent of their formal recognition. Thirdly, qualification frameworks where non-formal education can be recognized either by directly placing it on a framework or doing so indirectly, using third-party arrangements. The focus of the study, therefore, goes beyond e-learning and distance education. Where it does address e-learning and distance education it does so *only* in relation to the recognition of non-formal education.

Literatures and Associated Fields of Practice
1.   RNFE in the field of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR)
2.   RNFE as formal recognition of OERs/MOOCs
3.   RNFE in relation to qualification frameworks

Figure 1: Recognition of Non-Formal Education

The Research Design and Methods section discusses our approach in detail. Because our method involves scoping three literatures, there is no separate Literature Review section – this is included in the Findings. Our Research Design and Methods section therefore leads directly into Findings: 1) an overview of the three literatures; and 2) an analysis and classification of exemplars from each associated field of practice. The paper ends with a discussion of findings and concludes with ideas for possible synergies and pointers for future practice in the recognition of non-formal education (RNFE) in higher education.

Research Design and Methods

Peters et al. (2015) argue that scoping is relevant when bodies of literature have not previously been comprehensively reviewed. This is precisely the case in this study where we are bringing three literatures together for the first time. In terms of method, Colquhoun et al. (2014, pp. 1292-94) describe scoping as: "a form of knowledge synthesis that addresses an exploratory research question aimed at mapping key concepts, types of evidence, and gaps in research related to a defined area or field". Again, this statement matches the nature of this enquiry into the recognition of non-formal education (RNFE) across three fields.

Some clear steps, stages and applications have evolved over the last decade or so (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Levac, et al., 2010). Colquhoun et al. (2014) recommend use of the six methodological steps outlined by Arksey and O'Malley (2005) (one of which is optional): identification of research question; identification of relevant research; selection and review of that research; charting the data in a specific way, and summarizing and reporting. The optional step is to consult with stakeholders as a way of increasing the validity of the findings. Our research is a modified scoping review placing greater emphasis than Arksey and O'Malley on iteration and progressive focusing.

In the first stage, our 'geographical scoping', the guiding question was: How is non-formal education recognized outside of North America, particularly in Europe? The second stage, our 'mode scoping', asked: How is non-formal education via OERs and MOOCs recognized? In the third stage, our 'depth scoping', which included the optional consultation, the guiding questions were: How does recognition of non-formal education happen in relation to qualification frameworks? How is academic oversight undertaken? How is quality assured?

An inclusive approach was taken to the types of literature to include: peer-reviewed articles, chapters in books, research papers, conference presentations and 'grey' literature such as official policies, practice reports, comparative studies, working papers, and websites. The speed at which developments take place mean that, unless of great significance, most of the literature reviewed is less than ten years old. We only included literature in English, i.e., originally in English, or translated into English.

The scoping began with a PLAR (Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition) database for scholars, practitioners, and policy-makers set up under the auspices of Thompson Rivers University, British Columbia, Canada[i]. The database houses upwards of 500 scholarly resources, representing most of the extant literature in PLAR, which remains a relatively small field. Progressive focusing, the use of keyword and synonym searches via Google Scholar, and conference attendance enlarged the literature pool to encompass the other two fields – OERs and qualification frameworks. Requests were then made to international PLAR researchers to identify key stakeholders or role-players to interview for depth-focused consultation in relation to RNFE and qualification frameworks. Semi-structured interviews were subsequently conducted with six individuals.

Data (literature and interview) were analysed using content/theme analysis guided by the overarching and stage-related research questions outlined above. Although presented here in a retrospective and unified way, the scoping proceeded through the stages as outlined and was reported accordingly (Harris, 2015; Harris & Wihak, 2016). As this is not a systematic literature review, and as the environment is changing so rapidly, findings cannot claim to be exhaustive. A balance between comprehensiveness and feasibility has been sought.

Findings 1: Overview of the Three Literatures

The scoping review findings are presented in two sections: 1) an overview of the three literatures 2) an analysis and classification of practical exemplars of recognition of non-formal education across the three fields. The boundary between the two sections, i.e., between literature and practice is both porous and functional: porous, because most of the literature is about practice anyway; functional, because the exemplar section provides an opportunity to go beyond the overarching literatures, to

engage with some smaller-scale activities, and to add findings from the consultative interview data – our 'depth scoping'.

RNFE in the Field of PLAR

Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR), also known as Recognition of Prior Learning, Prior Learning Assessment, and Validation of Prior Learning emerged as a named practice in the 1970s in the United States (US). Over 40 or more years, practices have developed across North America, the United Kingdom (UK), Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and Scandinavia. It is rare these days to find a country that has not had, at the very least, some policy exposure to PLAR. Associations and advocacy bodies have developed: The Council on Adult and Experiential Learning in the US; the Canadian Association of Prior Learning Assessment; the Learning from Experience Trust in the UK; the Norwegian agency for lifelong learning; the European Observatory of Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning; the Knowledge Centre/Kenniscentrum in Holland; New Opportunities Centres in Portugal; the Prior Learning International Research Consortium, and more. The training and professional development of PLAR practitioners has been taken increasingly seriously (Sava, 2012; UNESCO, 2012; Travers & Harris 2014; Cedefop, 2015). Inventories of PLAR practice have been undertaken, particularly in relation to qualifications frameworks (Werquin, 2010; European Commission, 2014; UNESCO, 2015; Cedefop, 2016).

The result is a small but expanding and professionalizing field of practice with a growing research base (as documented by Harris et al, 2011 and Harris et al, 2014). In terms of the way PLAR is practised, individualized approaches tend to be foregrounded. By this we mean that an adult learner makes a claim that his or her prior learning matches or is equivalent to formal learning. A body of expertise has built up around matching or profiling prior learning in relation to institutional and curricular standards (some course-specific, some more generic and level-oriented) and gathering evidence of same. Standards are often based on adaptations of Bloom's Taxonomy (see, for example, Andres et al., 2015). A wide variety of assessment methods are used, for example, reflective portfolios, interviews, professional discussions, practical demonstrations, essays. Significant attention has been paid to quality and quality assurance in PLAR (Stenlund, 2010, 2013; Van Kleef, 2014).

Although highly developed and increasingly sophisticated, individualized approaches to PLAR are labour intensive and cannot be taken to scale. So, the question becomes: what aspects of PLAR practice are particularly relevant to RNFE where the focus is recognizing a course or program rather than an individual's learning? To answer this, we look to North America, to the UK, and to continents and countries around the world where non-formal education has long been, and remains, an

important part of education systems, for example, Asia, Africa, and recent Eastern Europe accessions to the European Union.

Starting with North America, the American Council on Education (ACE) - established in 1918 - remains a leader in the evaluation of education and training obtained outside the formal classroom (Lakin et al., 2015). ACE endorses standardized challenge tests through which learners can earn credit for learning gained outside formal education. The College Level Examination Program (CLEP) is perhaps the best known of these. A pass in a CLEP subject will be accepted by many institutions against program completion requirements. Since 1974, a service called ACE CREDIT® has reviewed non-formal education programs making recommendations for credit equivalency in relation to formal post-secondary education, with 70 percent of institutions participating in a 2006 survey accepting these recommendations (Hart & Hickerson, 2009). RNFE also happens in consortia in the US. For example, modelled on the ACE CREDIT® process, a consortium of five adult-focused colleges/universities has developed systems and agreements for sharing each other's reviews of non-formal education (CACE, 2015). These practices, some of which are very long-standing, have much to offer to RNFE more broadly.

A European conference held in the UK in 2014 – Making Learning Visible - looked specifically at RNFE[ii]. The European Commission subsequently established Peer Learning Activities to further investigate existing practices and the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) is currently involved in a six-country study identifying the RNFE state of play in Poland, Croatia, France, Austria, Germany and Scotland). This study is called NQF-IN and will be completed in September 2018.

RNFE as Formal Recognition of OERs/MOOCs

Open Education Resources (OERs), our second literature, have emerged and expanded rapidly over 15 years of increasingly digitalized education. As mentioned in the Introduction, the ready availability of high-quality OERs/MOOCs dramatically increases access to non-formal education, begging the question of formal recognition to support learners in acquiring qualifications. In theory, the formal recognition of OERs/MOOCs at course or program level should present fewer challenges to higher education than PLAR, because they are usually developed by specialist educators according to conventional modes of structuring and sequencing complying with academic norms. In practice, OERs and MOOCs are viewed with suspicion because they have not gone through an academic oversight process. The likelihood (or not) of an OER or MOOC achieving formal recognition is addressed by Witthaus et al. (2016) via a 'traffic light' model or 'matrix' which maps the assessment robustness of OERs and the likelihood of their formal recognition, on a scale from: "an

unauthenticated completion certificate/statement of accomplishment or badge showing proof of participation or completion"; through to formal European Credit Transfer Service recommendations (p. 21). The model is intended as a guide to OER and MOOC providers to support the credit-worthiness of a program, but as Frieson and Wihak (2013) point out, to date, it is only PLAR practices that have earned the authority to accord formal value to non-formal and informal learning/education. OERs/MOOCs are still struggling to achieve such status.

A small literature addresses the relationship between OERs/MOOCs and PLAR (Cedefop, 2016d). On the positive side, and in line with the PLAR literature review above, Conrad (2013, p. 44) argues that PLAR 'can provide cognitively-sound, thoughtful and integrative assessment protocols that bridge the gap between learners' "open" accomplishments and post-secondary structure'. There are drawbacks, however. Not all universities have PLAR processes in place, and, those that do are not equipped to go to scale. Moreover, there are resource implications: Conrad and McGreal (2012) surveyed 31 post-secondary institutions in ten countries to determine if existing PLAR processes would allow the recognition of OERs. They found that although 71% of institutions offered PLAR, institutional arrangements, fees charged, and assessment methods varied widely. Furthermore, most of the institutional PLAR practices were based on individual petitioning rather than recognizing the OER in and of itself. Conrad et al (2013, pp. 46-47) conclude that the "disaggregation of assessment and credentialing services for OER learning provides a viable pathway for more affordable access to post-secondary education and formal academic recognition". In this regard, Friesen and Wihak (2013) suggest that new or existing challenge exams, such as those offered through the College Level Examination Program (see above), could be used to assess and accredit learning from OERs. There are obvious connections with ACE CREDIT® which has been operating on the disaggregation principle for over 40 years.

RNFE in Relation to Qualification Frameworks

Qualifications frameworks, our third literature, address RNFE, increasingly including OERs/MOOCs. In the UK, the scoping reviewed the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (Hawley, 2014) and the regulatory body for England and Northern Ireland's Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF). These are not integrated frameworks: By that we mean that the Welsh framework has a separate 'pillar' for lifelong learning, and the Regulated Qualifications Framework does not include provision located in the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications. Although increasingly NFE can be recognized in these frameworks, the SCQF, the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework, is arguably the most well-developed and integrated framework with advanced procedures for RNFE. This will be discussed at greater length later in the paper.

Elsewhere in Europe, in Austria, 15 non-formal certificates from adult education and second-chance education have been placed directly on the Austrian national qualifications framework. This type of activity is ongoing, involving the re-description of existing NFE programs in relation to the architecture of qualification frameworks. Likewise, in Denmark, the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) is increasingly open to the direct registration of non-formal qualifications and certificates from the private and public sector. In other European countries, the European Credit Transfer System is used as a currency to connect NFE to formal frameworks. Similar developments exist in Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Slovakia[iii]. This suggests that RNFE has existed in various ways in European countries for a long time, albeit not always at the university level. It is most common in countries at the early stages of developing the NQF-related systems which will probably reconfigure RNFE as PLAR (which, in turn, will individualize the recognition process).

Raffe's (2009, 2013) taxonomy of qualifications frameworks helps to understand favourable policy conditions for RNFE. He distinguishes between three types of framework – communications, reforming, and transformational – suggesting that the communications type is most amenable to RNFE because it is less regulated and more flexible. Within the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework - a communications framework, higher education institutions, publicly-funded tertiary colleges and several other approved organizations (such as professional bodies) are designated Credit Rating Bodies which means they can award Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework qualifications based on formal, and increasingly, non-formal education. Strict criteria must be met to become a Credit Rating Body, for example: being of good standing; having a robust quality assurance system, and appropriate levels of capacity and commitment (SCQF Handbook, p. 77). A Scottish Credit Rating Body can also apply to credit-rate the non-formal education of other providers – this is called a 'third-party' arrangement. As 'lead partner', the Credit Rating Body ensures that the secondary partner's quality assurance systems are compliant by addressing 'arrangements for programme design, approval, delivery, validation, accreditation, assessment and certification' (SCQF Handbook, p. 80), and endorsing *inter alia:* staff expertise, the planning systems in place, quality assurance - essentially the same criteria as required to become a Credit Rating Body[iv]. Whether directly registered, or via a third-party arrangement, all recognized non-formal education is entered into the SCQF database, with ownership retained by the original provider. For example, the Complementary Therapy School, the Association for Project Management, the Academy of Realist Art, Mercat Tours Ltd., Global Respiratory Educational Advancement Trust, Counselling and Psychotherapy in Scotland, Apex Hotels Ltd., Shetland Islands Council, all retain ownership of their non-formal education in the database.

Findings 2: Analysis and Classification of Practical Exemplars of Recognizing Non-Formal Education across the Three Fields

This section of findings goes beyond the three overarching literatures to engage with a more diverse range of exemplars of practice. It also drills down to our 'depth scoping' and empirical interviews. Table 1 presents the three categories of RNFE - PLAR, OER and qualifications frameworks. Analysis revealed three levels of practice within these categories: 1) the national level; 2) the cross-jurisdictional level, and 3) the institutional level. Each part of Table 1 is explicated in the sections that follow: well-developed and exemplary RNFE practices are presented to illustrate the nature of each of the nine subsets.

Table 1: Recognizing Non-Formal Education: Analysis and Classification of Practices

Field/Category	National	Cross-jurisdictional	Institutional
RNFE in the field of PLAR	Academic Credit Bank System, South Korea	ACE CREDIT®, USA	Thompson Rivers University, Canada
RNFE as formal recognition of OERs/MOOCs	SWAYAM, India	ACE CREDIT®, USA OERu	Exams and tests post-MOOC, e.g., Charter Oak State College and edX
RNFE in relation to qualification frameworks	Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework	Youth Work in Europe	Crossfields Institute, England

RNFE in the field of PLAR: Practical Exemplars

At the National Level

The best exemplar of RNFE in the field of PLAR at the national level is in South Korea where a country-wide, higher-education, credit accumulation system for recognising non-formal education has been in place since 1997. There may be similar systems in the Philippines, Thailand and Japan although not always up to degree level (UNESCO, 2014, 2015). Usher (2014, p. 3) describes the South Korean Academic Credit Bank System (ACBS) as 'that genuinely rare thing in higher education: something new' - a degree-granting institution that allows students to gain a degree by combining

credits from different sources. The Ministry of Education's National Institute for Lifelong Education recognizes and accredits non-formal education programs, including: unfinished formal higher education; part-time courses offered by recognized universities and colleges; programs and certificates offered by ACBS-accredited institutions (including private providers), and master and apprentice activities which are regarded as traditional and culturally valuable.

Some credit-rating is relatively straightforward because the NFE programs are already deemed to be at degree-level. In other cases, in-depth program review is undertaken, and repeated every four years (or every two years in the case of private and especially private online providers). Non-formal education programs are reviewed against National Institute for Lifelong Education ACBS curriculum models (although the Institute is not a provider, it has curricula models that are based on national higher education curricula and used as benchmarks). The quality of the non-formal education is, therefore, assured according to the extent to which it aligns to these benchmarks. Over and above curricular alignment, providers must demonstrate adequate facilities, qualified staff, coverage of the necessary subject/major areas, appropriate assessment methods, and so on. A high point for the ACBS was 2009, when 34,058 bachelor's degrees were awarded, a tenth of all undergraduate degrees in South Korea that year, plus 14,058 associate degrees (Usher, 2014). More recent figures show that in 2013, ACBS offered 109 majors for 24 bachelor degrees and 109 courses for 13 associate degrees (NILE, 2013). The relationship between ACBS and traditional higher education is clear: it is either one or the other. A learner cannot enrol in both, and the latter only accepts an agreed number of credits from the former. Despite restrictions on credits, ACBS has encouraged traditional higher education to widen access to non-traditional learners.

With an increasing number of online providers, ACBS is currently dealing with a higher volume of programs with the potential to be credit-rated.

At the Cross-Jurisdictional Level

An excellent example of RNFE in the field of PLAR at cross-jurisdictional level is ACE CREDIT® (referred to in the Literature Review section). The difference between ACE CREDIT® and the ACBS in South Korea is that the latter awards qualifications whereas the former recommends or advises credit volume and level; the decision to accept credit rests with the receiving institution. The role of the ACE CREDIT® evaluator is to determine that the content, scope, and rigor of the non-formal program align with courses taught at accredited institutions. Bloom's taxonomy is used for this purpose along with scrutiny of teacher and student materials, learning outcomes, course outlines, syllabi, assignments, and most importantly, assessment methodology — including rubrics.

At the Institutional Level

Thompson Rivers University, British Columbia, Canada is a good exemplar of RNFE at an institutional level within a PLAR department. Situated in the Open Learning Division of the University, PLAR staff operate a Credit Bank which recognizes pre-assessed non-formal education from selected employers, private training organizations and continuing studies programs. Quality assurance is ensured by comparing the non-formal education to University courses on a course-by-course and/or program-by-program basis across a range of dimensions: assessment, instructor qualifications and so on. Upwards of 50 non-formal education programs have been credit-rated in this way, with agreed volumes of credit allocated and accepted against a range of degree and diploma programmes e.g., Bachelor of General Studies, Bachelor of Health Sciences, Diploma in General Studies, Bachelor of Commerce.

This institution-based Credit Bank operates in addition to the acceptance of ACE CREDIT® and other organizations' and institutions' credit recommendations. It extends PLAR to local and/or regional providers of non-formal education such as the Canadian Academy of Dental Hygiene's Dental Hygiene Program, which is awarded 54 credits towards a Bachelor in Health Science, or the Canadian Association of Medical Radiation Technologists' Fundamentals of Quality Management on-line course, which carries three credits towards the Certificate in Management Studies, Bachelor of Health Science.

RNFE as Formal Recognition of OERs/MOOCs: Practical Exemplars

At the National Level

A very recent initiative involving the formal recognition of OERs and MOOCs at national level is SWAYAM. Established by the Government of India's Ministry of Human Resource Development, and launched by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in August 2016, SWAYAM is a technology platform designed to host MOOCs[v]. The aim is to bridge the digital divide for learners who do not have access to mainstream education by taking the world's best teaching and learning resources and making them widely available. The goal is to offer free programs to millions of learners. In liaison with foreign universities, MOOCs will cover engineering education, social science, energy, management, and basic sciences. At the outset, about 2,000 MOOCs will be available - from senior school to postgraduate levels. These are currently being rolled out under seven national coordinators.

The level and quality of the content, teacher qualifications, and so forth, are taken as assured and pre-evaluated. The formal recognition piece is what is important here, and in this regard, SWAYAM will likely share some of the challenges faced by OER/MOOC providers and their learners elsewhere. The

plan is to offer post-MOOC proctored examinations for a fee. Marks and grades secured in this way will be transferred to the learners' academic records/transcripts. The next challenge is for mainstream universities to identify courses and programs where these credits will be accepted and transferred-in. It is still very early days for this exciting and ambitious project.

At the Cross-Jurisdictional Level

ACE CREDIT® evaluations now extend to recommending credit for a small number of MOOCs. Coursera, Udacity, and the Saylor Foundation/Academy have all sought recognition in this way (Lequerica, 2016). The Open Educational Resources University, the OERu, is also relevant here. The aim of the OERu is to widen access to affordable education for those excluded from traditional formal systems. A formal philanthropic network of institutions has been in existence since 2011, including universities, polytechnics and community colleges from five continents. Each institution is developing at least one OER program or course, which network partners may accept as formal credit.

At the Institutional Level

The Open University in the UK owns a MOOC online social learning platform called FutureLearn. Beginning as a partnership of 12 high-ranking, research-intensive universities, FutureLearn is now a private company with over a hundred UK and international university and non-university partners. In 2016, the Open University Business School announced that learners would be able to use FutureLearn MOOCs to earn academic credits for its undergraduate degrees and Master's in Business Administration (MBA), professional qualifications, and accredited continuing professional development. For example, 30 credits towards a Bachelor in Business Studies can be earned by studying eight MOOCs; 15 credits towards an MBA can be earned by studying four MOOCs. The Executive Dean of The Open University Business School is quoted as saying: "We are the first business school in Europe offering a route to formal qualifications via MOOCs, including our flagship MBA programme". To earn the MBA credits learners must complete four MOOCs in Digital Economy, buy four Certificates of Achievement through FutureLearn, and successfully complete an Open University Assessment Module.[vi]

In the United States, two post-secondary institutions have specifically partnered with edX (Bolkan, 2015; Lequerica, 2016). For example, Charter Oak State College recognizes a limited number of MOOCs, awarding transcript credit to students who have chosen to have their learning assessed in edX's "Verified Certificate" track. Arizona State University has worked with edX to develop the "Global Freshman Academy", comprising seven edX MOOCs with the "Verified Certificate" Track. In the "Verified Certificate" track, edX verifies a student's identity by having the student show a picture ID via webcam to a virtual exam proctor. The student pays an extra fee to take the Verified Track, but

the cost remains affordable compared to usual tuition costs. Other institutions have taken the "open" out of MOOC by partnering with MOOC providers to offer on-line graduate programs, but using a traditional admissions process (e.g., Georgia Tech's partnership with Udacity for an Online Masters in Computer Science).

RNFE in Relation to Qualifications Frameworks: Practical Exemplars

At the National Level

RNFE in relation to the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) was explored in the Literature Review section of the findings. The interviewee drew attention to the benefits of RNFE for all parties. Learners benefit from the 'increased currency, recognition and credibility' of the NFE, plus the option to use the credits as stepping stones to progression to other programs. Providers benefit from the opportunity to benchmark their NFE programs against formal criteria and in so doing improve their own quality assurance processes. Professional development for staff as the NFE provider goes through the recognition process was also highlighted (and is discussed in more detail below in relation to Crossfields Institute). On the downside, the interviewees noted how time-consuming recognition processes are, and how much administration is involved. Although interviewees recommended 'getting behind the hype' to ascertain exactly how much RNFE is happening in relation to the SCQF, it does seem to be 'rather a lot'.

At the Cross-jurisdictional Level

The youth work sector in Europe is a leader in RNFE in relation to qualifications frameworks at the cross-jurisdictional level. Over the last decade, the European Youth Forum (YJF) with support from the European Commission and the Council of Europe, has emphasized improving the quality of non-formal education as the basis for formally recognizing it. A quality assurance framework for NFE with 11 quality indicators covering resources, educator qualifications, content, and learning processes has been established (YFJ, 2011). These indicators inform internal and external review. Recognition of non-formal education in this field varies in terms of degrees of formality, with European Credit Transfer Service credits being the most formal. There are some concerns not to over-formalize non-formal youth education such that it loses its flexibility and important connection to contexts (SALTO-Youth, 2016, p. 17).

At the Institutional Level

The challenging nature of credentialing non-formal education at an institutional level was highlighted in an interview with a senior member of a small NFE provider in England. The Crossfields Institute is

a higher education institute and awarding organisation developing and delivering holistic and integrative education and qualifications based upon approaches such as that of the Austrian philosopher Rudolph Steiner, as well as Montessori and others. After a period of working as a centre of the awarding organization Pearson, Crossfields Institute was approved in 2015 as an independent regulated awarding organization by the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual), the body that holds the register of Regulated Qualifications Framework in England – a process usually only followed by leaders in an industry specific field. A picture emerged of a five- to six-year process to develop and assure the standing of the organization and the quality of its programs. With hindsight, the interviewee said the long process was hard but worth it, as it improved the quality of the programs along the way, but 'it *is* a very long time'. The Institute is now approved to develop and offer Ofqual-regulated qualifications in the Health and Social Care, Agriculture, Horticulture and Forestry, Child Development and Well Being, Teaching and Lecturing sectors. With the benefit of hindsight, the interviewee reported that 'we gave our submission our all' - 'we didn't find working with Ofqual as onerous as we thought' - however, 'they *are* regulators' and they *are* strict. The year that the Crossfields Institute completed the approval process, the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation had received 50 similar applications and had only accepted two into the process: 'it's not for the faint hearted'. The Institute now works in collaboration with other like-minded schools and colleges to design, develop and deliver qualifications through "approved centres". As the interviewee put it: "Lots of small providers/organizations may not know how to go about converting their programs into regulated qualifications – it's too big and scary for some – you need to be very conscious and abide by a different set of criteria – it's all a bit of a minefield, but there is a need, and it does drive up quality".

Discussion and Conclusions

The field of PLAR provides evidence of successful and professionalizing practices grounded in educational theory and attuned to social inclusion. This field has a lot to offer to wider debates around RNFE, namely, robust quality assurance, valid and reliable assessment methodologies, professional development programs for practitioners, active networks and centers, and experience of working with formal academic institutions. However, as is clear, most PLAR is conducted on an individualized basis, and is not scalable to a level where non-formal education programs can be recognized.

RNFE on a course or program rather than individualized basis needs to address two dimensions: the *recommendation* of credit and the *acceptance* of that credit. The Academic Credit Bank System in South Korea awards credit for NFE and is moving into the formal recognition of non-formal online learning. Thompson Rivers University in Canada extends PLAR to the formal recognition of pre-assessed non-

formal education programs, and one can imagine OERs and MOOCs falling under its purview in time. The Open University Business School is breaking new ground by accepting FutureLearn MOOCs as formal credits on its programs, subject to additional assessment. SWAYAM in India is aiming to formally recognize MOOCs but that will depend on negotiating acceptance and transfer-in arrangements with mainstream universities. ACE CREDIT® is constantly expanding its business but can only recommend credit levels and volumes; that credit still needs to be 'cashed in' and accepted by a formal body.

Qualification frameworks open further opportunities for the RNFE, with the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework as a strong exemplar. Direct registration of NFE including OERs onto a qualification framework is an onerous task for a provider, and supportive third-party arrangements are common. Whether the formal recognition is undertaken by way of a qualifications framework, a system such as the Academic Credit Bank System or ACE CREDIT®, or an individual institution, complex scrutiny of the NFE is required, covering curricula, provider, staff, materials, rubrics, and so on. This can be particularly onerous, especially when reviewed and renewed every few years.

In response to 'Where are we now?' in the title of the paper, this study points to fast growing demand for, growth in, and diversification of, the recognition of non-formal education. The discussion above points to some of the synergies or creative combinations of expertise across the three fields we examined that could be further exploited to gain maximum traction for all types of RNFE. In response to 'Are we learning from experience?' the answer is 'yes' and 'no'. Optimal synergy across the three fields of practice does not yet seem to have been reached.

The scoping revealed several positive examples of support and help from peers and third-parties. This can only be encouraged. Potential synergies are multi-dimensional: top-down, bottom-up, sector to sector (as in the youth work example), country to country, qualification framework to qualification framework, system to system, field to field. These could be further developed, centering on where expertise is strongest.

One of the reasons PLAR has succeeded in earning the authority to accord formal value to NFE is because theory and practice are firmly located in educational discourses. Over time, this credibility has allowed PLAR to extend to a wide range of non-formal and informal education and learning. Conversely, and somewhat paradoxically, the recognition of OER and MOOC learning and education is struggling with formal recognition, even though OERs and MOOCs more closely resemble the pedagogic structuring and sequencing of traditional formal education than much of the learning endorsed through PLAR. The recognition of OERs and MOOCs seems to be out of step with the very sector that produces the resources themselves, partly, as we suggested above, because they are

developed outside of conventional academic oversight processes. We would suggest more synergy between the technical and technological aspects of recognition (from the OER/MOOC domain) and the educational aspects (from the PLAR domain). We are not suggesting a neat combination; rather, a critical look at both sides to develop thinking and practice.

It has always been an open question as to whether the relentless formalization of learning and education is desirable, even in an era where credentialing is so prevalent and embedded as to be taken for granted. Revisiting this question after this piece of research suggests that RNFE *is* desirable especially given the extent to which all parties seem to derive benefit from it. There is ample evidence that the process of recognition, albeit demanding, *does* have a positive effect on the quality of the NFE, and by association, we hope, on the qualification status of individuals and their access to related social and economic benefits.

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