Recognition of prior learning (RPL) among international higher education students in Finland

Réka Merikallio

ABSTRACT

Merikallio, Réka. 2019. Recognition of prior learning (RPL) among international higher education students in Finland. Master's Thesis in Education. University of Jyväskylä. Department of Education.

The importance of recognition of prior learning (RPL) gained through various learning settings has become a central aspect within the discourse on lifelong learning and knowledge-based society. Accordingly, higher education institutions have developed various practices to recognize students' prior learning. RPL practices, however, face challenges when it comes to the recognition of learning that happened informally or in another country. This study set out to examine RPL practices in Finnish higher education institutions through the perspectives of international degree students with special attention to the recognition of informally acquired learning.

Ten international degree students from the field of logistics and nursing shared their experiences regarding the RPL process. This qualitative study was conducted by using semi-structured interviews and the data was analyzed according to the thematic analysis approach.

The findings indicate that assessment procedures predominantly relied on documentation, therefore the prior knowledge that was recognized in the process, was mainly acquired in formal context. Meanwhile skills and knowledge gained through informal learning was poorly recognized. The results have also shown that the study programs after the RPL process sometimes fail to match the actual level of expertise of the RPL student and it results in repetitiveness of studies.

It can be concluded that international students with prior learning experience value both informal and formal learning, however the RPL practices do not always manage to recognize the informal learning experience. It has also become evident that students carry out their studies purposefully and it calls for RPL practices that concern the unique background and aspirations of the students.

Keywords: recognition of prior learning (RPL), higher education, Finland, informal learning, adult education, internationalisation

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to express my greatest appreciation to my supervisor, Dr. Maarit Virolainen for her guidance and all the valuable and constructive suggestions she gave to me throughout the entire process. Her expertise and constant support inspired me to do my best during the thesis work. I would also like to thank Denise Villikka who agreed to help me even when we did not know each other. Her kindness and her willingness to taking the time to support the progress of this research has been deeply appreciated.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my appreciation to all the international students for participating in this research. This study could not have been accomplished without their help.

I would also like to thank my family for their love and encouragement even when we are thousands of kilometers apart. Finally, I would like to express my special thanks to my husband for providing me unfailing support. He has been a constant source of inspiration and strength for me and I am eternally grateful for him and for his love.

Table of contents

1   INTRODUCTION

Constant change in the society and labor market due to globalization and rapid technological development poses new challenges to the education system. In relation to lifelong learning, many recent studies have focused on the recognition of prior learning (RPL) in educational context. Its importance in educational policies and practices is continuously growing, discussions around the phenomenon has become popular, and the topic of RPL has become more and more important topic in the field of adult education in the 21st century. The concept of lifelong learning refers to learning that goes beyond conventional learning environments and educational settings, which means that learning in work, through leisure time, hobbies and in family – just to name a few -, has become valuable and the knowledge and skills that were gained through these experiences are calling for recognition in higher education institutions (CEDEFOP, 2017a).

Recognition of prior learning is seen as a practice that acts as a so called 'window of opportunity' for learning that is induced by various demands of today's world (Duvekot, 2014). The need to recognize and assess adults' life-wide learning experiences is gradually increasing, hence, examining the importance of RPL from the perspective of adult learners is imperative (Cross, 2009). Informal learning, in particular, should be considered as elementary, relevant and valuable in its own right, and not inferior to formal or non-formal learning (Cameron & Harrison, 2012). From the adult individuals' point of view, it provides an opportunity to give a formal value to all the experiences they have throughout their lives. Consequently, the recognition of the value of skills and knowledge gained through life experiences, transform life into a life a constant learning (Andersson et. al, 2013). In this context, where every aspect of one's life is a potential learning situation, formal education needs to find a way to recognize learning achievements that happened in informal settings. The term 'recognition' in this research will refer to the process that embodies documentation, assessment and awarding credits and/or qualifications to the individual (Werquin, 2012).

It has been widely discussed that an important aspect of lifelong learning strategies on the European level and internationally when developing education systems is the recognition of non-formal and informal learning (Andersson, Fejes & Sandberg, 2013).

However, its realization in the formal education systems requires further developments and improvements. M. Singh (2015) argues that there is a growing gap between the demands of the labor market and the kind of knowledge that education provides. She claims that the lack of congruence results in a "major under-utilization of existing human potential, talents and human resources, which people may have acquired in non-formal and informal learning settings" (p. 7). In this study, special attention will be paid to informal learning and how the recognition of learning gained outside of formal education is fulfilled.

In the Finnish context, the validation of previous studies and prior learning, as well as the adaptation of those into the degree studies, is a common practice in many higher education institutions. Universities and universities of applied sciences usually have a framework or certain methods to recognize students' prior knowledge. In addition, there is a growing body of literature that examine students' experiences regarding the RPL process in Finnish higher education institutions. It has become evident that RPL is part of the education policy in higher education institutions (Aalto, 2014), and many studies have dealt with the implementation of RPL into educational policies in a broad context. However, studies about international students' learning experiences, or studies on their experiences concerning validation processes in the Finnish higher education context are not particularly frequent and information on them is difficult to find, particularly when the learning was gained informally. The significance of RPL lays in the fact that it can provide a reliable and effective way to recognize learning that was acquired outside of formal education and in a culturally different context. In addition, RPL practices are aimed to interpret the learning in relation to the learning objectives of the degree program where the foreign student is enrolled. Furthermore, its significance is accentuated, since the global economy and the demand for the movement of human capital calls for a need to develop educational policies that support the identification and recognition of knowledge and skills (Moss, 2014).

In a study that was investigating highly-educated immigrants access to labor market in Finland, it was revealed that even though a foreign individual has good education, and relevant skills acquired through prior learning experience, finding a workplace was not guaranteed due to difficulties in transferring the degree or skills between the countries (Teräs, Osman & Lasonen, 2018). Similar problems are familiar also on the upper secondary level education (Vartiainen, 2019). Granting no value to prior learning achievements can seriously hinder the integration process of immigrants and result in great losses for the labor

market. Therefore, in the globalized world it is essential to develop fair, flexible and accessible RPL practices in education in order to provide mobility and transferability of skills and knowledge through different countries and learning environments. By implementing RPL into educational policies, transition from work to education and combining work and studies can be more flexible and efficient. Thus, the benefits of identifying and recognizing students' prior learning are noticeable not only from the educational institutions' point of view but also from the society's and labor market's perspective (Aalto, 2014).

Nevertheless, in this thesis the focus is on the international students' perspective, therefore their experiences will be examined at a more extensive level. The grounds for examining RPL practices from the international students' perspective are the fact that despite of being an immensely relevant and important topic, little is known about RPL practices and students' experiences. By interviewing international RPL students about their experiences regarding the RPL procedure and the study program after the RPL process was completed, this research seeks to obtain data which will help to address research gaps. Furthermore, the realization of recognizing prior learning that was acquired outside of formal context will be examined, as it is a cornerstone of lifelong learning policy and the RPL practice.

This study has been divided into six chapters. After the introduction, in chapter two the most relevant theoretical concepts are outlined with regards to the research topic. The concept of knowledge-based society and lifelong learning will be discussed as contexts that induce the need of RPL. It is followed by a section focusing on learning outcomes as a curriculum approach that enables connecting the learning that has taken place through various contexts and environments. The concept of recognition of prior learning will be also discussed in the chapter, with special emphasis on the functions of the recognition and the various assessment methods that are utilized to identify and recognize students' prior learning. Furthermore, the relevance of RPL will be discussed briefly from the perspective of the individual, society and labor market. The theoretical overview also includes the introduction of formal, non-formal and informal learning environments, since one of the main purposes of this research is to explore how informal learning occurs and how it can be recognized in formal context. In addition, the chapter also discusses the major adult learning theories suggested by previous researches in order to help understanding the specific needs

of adults as learners. Presenting this conceptual framework helps to shed light on the specific attributes of adults as learners and act as reference points to improve the RPL practices and study programs according to their specific characteristics and needs. At the end of the chapter, RPL will be discussed in the Finnish context with special focus on the internationalization of higher education institutions and on its relevance. The research context, objectives and research questions are presented in chapter three which is followed by chapter four where the methodology is outlined. In the fourth chapter the data collection procedure and the participants of the research are introduced along with the data analysis method. Chapter five embodies the findings of the research, organized according to the themes that emerged through the data analysis. In chapter six, the findings of the research are discussed in relation to previous research on the topic. Furthermore, the findings are discussed in connection to the research questions and a summary is provided regarding the whole study. Lastly, the limitations of this study and recommendations for further research on the topic are presented.

2 CONCEPTUALISATION OF RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING (RPL)

2.1 Knowledge-based society

The world around us has been changing at a rapid pace. Scholars are talking about paradigm shift (Alava, Halttunen & Risku, 2012) which means that there is a transition from Newtonian paradigm to quantum paradigm. While the Newtonian world was determined by certainty, predictability and simplicity, where concepts were explicit and clear, and the consequences of action were foreseeable; the quantum world is based on complexity of concepts, chaos and uncertainty (Alava et. al, 2012).

Modern society and economy are described as knowledge-based, which refers to knowledge being takes as a fundamental value and at the same time giving basis to human capital (Blaszczak, 2013). In the era of globalization and knowledge-based economy, the role of education for tackling social and economic problems has been more significant than ever (Benjamin, White, MacKeracher & Stella, 2013). It is believed that in order to meet the demands of the knowledge-based economy, developing *learning society* or *knowledge society* could be the answer, of which underlying concept is lifelong learning (Livingstone & Guile, 2012).

It has been suggested already in the 1980s by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) that the link between economy and education needs to be reassessed due to the increasing value accredited to knowledge in the economic sphere (Rubenson and Beddie, 2004). In other words, the needs of the knowledge society have influenced the synergy between education and the labor market, and transition from school to work and vice versa has become a central issue. Bradley and Devadason (2008) state in their study that the current economic era is characterized by flexibility and insecurity, which affects young adults' employability to a great extent. They say that transition from education to work is no longer a linear route, but young people's professional and educational paths nowadays happen in parallel with work, or they occur on an intermittent basis. Recent findings from Eurostudent VI-study confirm their argument (Vanhanen-Nuutinen, Saari, Kotila & Mäki, 2018).

Cristian (2014) argues that contemporary society is seen both as knowledge society and competitive society. He states that knowledge and competition fundamentally determine the society and the economics, which results in an immense need for adult education. In the contemporary society, individuals are required to gain new knowledge and skills, and to constantly develop themselves to keep pace with the changes in the working and learning environments (Miguel, Ornelas & Maroco ,2016; Koenig 2011).

According to Werquin (2010), the demands of the labor market is the main reason why there is a growing need for systems that recognize learning outcomes gained in various learning environments. In the workplaces, employees will face more and more complex tasks that will challenge them to use skills that are not necessarily related to their professional skills or can be achieved in formal education. It is crucial especially, if we consider warning signs presented by OECD (2016). According to a recent study by OECD, skill mismatches and shortages are a common issue in today's society and economy; which call for a policy intervention in labor market and education system. Among the various actions that have been made in different countries around the world, the common intersection is the recognition of the need for a better alignment between education and workforce needs (OECD, 2016).

In order to be more responsive to the demographic, social and economic changes; mobility between education and work is required, which is part of the European Union's (EU) lifelong learning strategy. In EU practices learning outcomes have become important guidelines, since they act as appropriate measurements for recognizing and assessing knowledge gained through various learning environments. One of the key strategic objectives of the Council of the European Union is to make lifelong learning and mobility a reality (European Commission, 2009). Among the actions to achieve this goal, the council proposes to establish more flexible learning pathways, therefore, its policies include (1) improving the transition between training and education sectors; (2) encouraging to open towards unconventional learning environments; and (3) increasing the transparency and acknowledgement of learning outcomes (European Commission, 2009).

2.2   The concept of lifelong learning

In the era of lifelong learning higher education institutions are facing challenges in how to make learning that was gained through unconventional learning environments and learning situations, more visible (Bjornavald, 2001). Access to education and providing educational opportunities throughout the whole life span has been the fundamental idea of the concept of lifelong education (Miguel et al., 2016). While examining the concept of the recognition of prior learning, it is important to clarify the term 'lifelong learning' and 'lifelong education' since they are essential pillars of understanding RPL. Although, the term 'lifelong education' and 'lifelong learning' are used usually as synonyms, the concept of lifelong learning tends to be used even more commonly. It goes further than 'lifelong education' by connecting the different learning environments and forming a continued learning process. Comparing lifelong education to lifelong learning, the latter is a broader concept of education and training, meanwhile the term 'lifelong education' is more likely to exclude non-formal and informal learning (Field & Leicester, 2000).

In order to promote quality lifelong learning, it is imperative to be conversant with the different settings of lifelong learning, including the formal education system and other environments where learning can take place and new knowledge and skills can be obtained (Singh, 2017). As results of globalization and technological development, the skills and competences that suit the labor market have changed significantly, which simultaneously affects the education system. In connection to the era of lifelong learning, the topic of 21st century skills has emerged as a central issue within the field of education among experts and policy makers and also raised an interest in the private sector (Ananiadou and Claro, 2009). The emphasis for the need of 21st century skills derives from an understanding that new approaches are required in the field of education as an answer to meet the needs of the learners, future employees, employers and society in the knowledge-based economy (Ananiadou and Claro, 2009).

According to the OECD framework, the 21st century skills and competencies can be defined as follows: "those skills and competencies young people will be required to have in order to be effective workers and citizens in the knowledge society of the 21st century" (Ananiadou and Claro, 2009, p. 8). This framework organizes the skills according to three

dimensions: (1) information, (2) communication, and (2) ethics and social impact (Ananiadou and Claro, 2009).

According to another way organizing demanded skills, Binkley et al. (2012) identified four groups based on the skills (Table 1): ways of thinking; ways of working; tools for working; and living in the world.

Ways of thinking	Creativity
	Critical thinking, problem solving, decision making
	Learning to learn, Metacognition
Ways of working	Communication
	Collaboration (teamwork)
Tools for working	Information literacy
	ICT literacy
Living in the World	Citizenship – local and global
	Life and career
	Personal and social responsibility – including cultural awareness and competence

TABLE 1. 21st century skills organized into four groups by Binkley et al. (2012, p. 18-19).

As an individual in the 21st century, having these skills is essential to be able keep up with the pace in a world where information and knowledge change so rapidly. Furthermore, as a result of digitalization, our life and working culture is moving to a direction where new skills are demanded in order to manage our lives.

Such essential skills that are required by citizens in the knowledge-based society in order to succeed in various areas of life, are also referred to as generic skills, key skills or core competencies (Virtanen & Tynjälä, 2018). Educational institutions need to focus on offering education where these generic skills can be acquired irrespective of the study field and in a way that they could be applied in various situations (Jääskelä, Nykänen & Tynjälä, 2016).

A much debated question is to what extent these skills are taught in formal learning or are they more commonly gained through informal learning. As Kivunja (2015) noted, most of them have not been part of higher education institutions' core curricula, however, due to the demands of the Information Age, their role is more significant than ever. Therefore, he calls out higher education institutions to seriously consider implementing pedagogical approaches which enable to acquire these skills within the frameworks of their curricula.

The acknowledgement of prior knowledge learnt through all kinds of learning situations during the whole life span is a challenge set by knowledge economy. It is in accordance with the principle of lifelong learning, which includes not only formal learning situations but also supports (1) citizenship education; (2) encourages inclusion, therefore support social participation; and (3) promotes learning in order to provide better economical welfare (Field & Leicester, 2000). The basic idea that supports this approach is the importance of recognizing the individual freedom and the ability to make decisions on our own in order to develop ourselves individually (Field & Leicester, 2000).

From the perspective of RPL, lifelong learning policies serve as essential foundations to understand and develop RPL policies (Harris et al., 2011). Additionally, it is argued that RPL is a fundamental element in promoting lifelong learning, and it plays a significant role in the learning, social inclusion, and economic prosperity of adult learners (Thomas, 2000).

Taking into consideration that the research subjects of this current study are international students, mobility and transferability are important concepts in this study. First, they are essential, underlying principles when it comes to the transfer of skills and knowledge from one country's system to another (Burksaitiene et al., 2011). Secondly, transferability of skills and knowledge between informal and formal learning settings is one of the fundamental ideas of the RPL process. Therefore, placing mobility and transferability of skills and knowledge in the center of the education policies is imperative. It would allow the students or employees to have their existing knowledge and skills recognized and utilized the same way as they were in the country where they were acquired. The European Qualification Framework (EQF) is a result of the endeavor to create a general framework that enables the comparison of qualifications between the national education systems of the members of European Union (Isopahkala-Bouret, Rantanen, Raij & Järveläinen, 2011). It is aimed to support transparency, comparability and mobility of qualifications inside the European Union, thus, foster consistency of qualifications at international, national and institutional levels (Cort, 2010; Louise Sarauw, 2012; CEDEFOP, 2017b). The framework is an instrument that provides comprehensible description of what "the learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate on the successful completion of the approved program of learning" (Gudeva, Dimova, Daskalovska & Trajkova, 2012, p. 1307). Completing one's studies in a degree program that is in line with the framework, enables the individuals to continue their studies at the same or even higher level by classifying their

current knowledge and qualification level. It creates a bridge between the qualification systems of the member states of the EU and it functions as a *translation device* to make qualifications more transparent (Gudeva et. al, 2012).

While agreeing upon the general European Qualification Framework (EQF) that applies to the European Higher Education Area, the member countries also created their own National Qualification Frameworks (NQF) which is in line with the comprehensive EU-wide EQF (Louise Sarauw, 2012). Recommendations to the member states were released by the European Parliament and Council and they included among others the use of EQF as a reference tool that supports comparison between qualification levels of various qualification systems while respecting the uniqueness and diverse nature of the education systems (European Parliament and Council, 2008). By the beginning of 2016, 39 countries of the continent have set up their own NQF or were in the middle of the process of doing so (Mikulec, 2017), thus promoting the mobility and transparency between the education systems all around Europe. Such international movements and policies in education and lifelong learning resulted in a growing interest in the concept of validation of non-formal and informal learning and to create a bridge between these two learning environments and formal education. Thus, emergence of recognition of prior learning as a policy area accentuates the value of all kinds of learning, regardless of the age of the learner, the context where the learning took place, and by that it has become an essential part of the lifelong learning system (Werquin, 2010).

2.3   Learning outcomes

Identifying and recognizing students' prior learning experiences might be challenging, especially in those cases when the learning happened in a different context than the recognition. Learning outcomes can be used as an important tool to support transparency in education and serve as a bridge between different learning settings. Recent developments in policy-making have been suggesting that the issue is an increasingly important area not only in education but also in work life.

There has been a shift in the field of education from the traditional teacher-centered paradigm to a student-centered approach. It means that instead of focusing on the teachers' input and assessment throughout the learning process, the new approach has placed

students into the center and a greater emphasis has been placed on what the students will be able to do after the learning process (Kennedy, Hyland, Ryan, 2007). Due to the Bologna Declaration, which was aimed to improve the collaboration and mobility between national education systems inside the European Union; when recognizing prior learning that was gained in another country and other context, the emphasis of attention has moved to learning outcomes instead of how and where the learning took place (Nykänen, 2014). Inside the European Union every citizen has the right to live, work, study and learn in any of the member countries and it entails the assessment and clear definition of knowledge, skills and competences (Tereseviciene, Zuzeviciute, & Hyde (2007). At the same time, a greater attention has been given to the validation of informal and non-formal learning and higher education institutions are encouraged to adapt assessment tools to recognize informal and non-formal learning achievements (Kaminskiene & Stasiunaitiene, 2013; Tereseviciene et al., 2007).

In sum, analyzing the concept of learning outcomes is inevitable while examining RPL, since it is strongly linked to the identification of prior learning by focusing on the learning attainments regardless of the learning environment (Werquin, 2012). It is in line with the definition given by CEDEFOP (2014), which defines the notion as "the set of knowledge, skills and/or competences an individual has acquired and/or is able to demonstrate after completion of a learning process, either formal, non-formal or informal" (p. 164-165). For the purpose of the current thesis, this definition of learning outcomes will be used for the following reasons: (1) it indicates that it is not merely a statement of what is expected to be acquired throughout the learning but what has been obtained after the completion of the learning, whether it is in the form of competences, skills or knowledge; and (2) it includes all the possible settings of learning, namely: formal, non-formal and informal.

According to Werquin (2012), learning outcomes act as a foundation for impartial evaluation within the discipline of education and lifelong learning. Consequently, the learning that has been acquired outside of the formal education system has to be "translated" into learning outcomes, or in other words, presented in terms of learning outcomes (Burksaitiene et al., 2011).

The core idea of learning outcomes approach is describing the end product of the learning process: what is the student capable of once he/she completed the learning process as opposed to the earlier approach which was focusing on the various ways of obtaining

knowledge (Kennedy, Hyland & Ryan, 2007; Werquin, 2012). Recognizing learning outcomes is a "process of granting official status to knowledge, skills and competences either through: (1) validation of non-formal and informal learning; (2) grant of equivalence, credit, units or waivers; (3) award of qualifications (certificates, diploma or titles)" (CEDEFOP, 2014, p. 212; CEDEFOP 2009). Thus, in order to recognize and assess the prior knowledge of the adult student, the recognition of learning outcomes from the previous learning processes is an important step to get a more accurate overview of the process. In formal setting, especially when the prior learning occurred in formal education context, a credit-based system provides the foundations of recognizing learning outcomes. However, there is a need for connecting non-formal and formal learning by recognizing, identifying and evaluating the achievements of prior learning that was obtained outside of formal setting (Tereseviciene et al., 2007). The demand to recognize non-formal and informal learning outcomes is not only essential in order to harmonize formal and non-formal learning, but it is also essential from the perspective of the labor market, since workplaces are considered to be significant settings for informal and non-formal learning (Werquin, 2010). Furthermore, formal education does not always provide appropriate answer to the demands of labor market, meaning, that formal system is not entirely able to produce the knowledge, skills and competences that meet the demands of the labor market (Tereseviciene et al., 2007; Werquin, 2010). Nevertheless, Werquin (2010) argues that in formal learning system the whole learning process is monitored, well-structured, and the input process is clearly determined. Thus, defining learning outcomes and giving validation to them is more feasible and therefore, they are generally more accepted by actors and stakeholders. Whereas in the case of the recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes (RNFILO), it is usually unknown how the competences were acquired (Werquin, 2010). Consequently, their recognition is less likely by the different stakeholders, thus would not be given any value to those qualifications in the society (Werquin, 2010).

It is evident, therefore, that in order to reconciliate the end products (knowledge, competences, skills) of various learning situations, learning outcomes framework is a tool which helps to give meanings to the acquired knowledge, skills and competences in a way that they could be recognized and utilized in various aspects of one's life. The fact that the concept of learning outcomes has become one of the fundamental aspects of education policies, reflects the relevance of recognizing learning gained in different contexts.

2.4   Recognition of prior learning – an ambiguous concept

From the education system perspective and the viewpoint of society the task of lifelong learning is to encourage people to learn throughout the whole lifespan and provide the necessary circumstances and adequate instruments for it. In today's world adults learn all the time, however, that does not mean automatically that they are aware of the occurrence of learning. It is notable that the end result of a learning process, in other words competences, in many cases are tacit in their character (Bjornavald, 2001). In other words, it means that adults acquire "a form of knowing that is not codified, because not "calculable" with some analogue of a ruler" (Gascoigne & Thornton, 2013, p. 3). When entering or reentering to formal education system, enabling the adult learners to invoke their tacit knowledge can give a broader understanding of what constitutes the future students' capabilities and knowledge. It does not only let the adult learners to gain new insights in their professional and personal lives, but it has proved to be beneficial for the society. Furthermore, it does not only consolidate the experience but also support the accessibility, flexibility and transparency of educational goals in the formal education context (Burksaitiene et al. 2011; Werquin, 2010).

2.4.1   Various terms for RPL

Besides the term RPL, numerous other terms are used to describe the same phenomenon. Depending on the context and the country, terms used to refer to similar processes as RPL also include prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR); prior learning assessment (PLA); the assessment of prior learning (APL); the assessment of prior experimental learning (APEL); the validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL); recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes (RNFILO); or recognition, validation and accreditation of non-formal and informal Learning (RVA) (Andersson et al., 2013; M. Singh, 2015; Thomas, 2000; Werquin, 2012). Each of these procedures and terms gives somewhat different emphasis on core characteristics involved in the recognition and validation process depending on the country and education context (see section 2.4.2). In this paper, the researcher chose to use the term 'recognition of prior learning' consistently for two reasons: (1) agreeing with Thomas (2000), it describes the practice in a comprehensive way; and (2)

the term RPL is used on the English surfaces in most of the websites of the universities of applied sciences in Finland.

The various names for the same phenomenon imply that several definitions have been proposed to define processes alike RPL. Similarly to the names, the definitions also vary. Most of them suggest that RPL is a process where those knowledge and skills are reviewed, assessed and recognized that were obtained outside of formal education (Kaminskiene & Stasiunaitiene, 2013; Snyman & Van den Berg, 2018), or as generally called, through life experience (Miguel et al., 2016), whereas other researchers include in the definition also attainments through formal education (Andersson et al., 2013, Snyman Thomas, 2000; Harris, Breier & Wihak, 2011; Joosten-ten Brinke, Sluijsmans & Jochems, 2009).

In her study, M. Singh (2015) reviewed the literature from various researchers regarding the different approaches to recognize learning outcomes gained through formal, non-formal and informal learning. She indicates that a more practical way to look at recognition, validation and accreditation (RVA) is to acknowledge learning outcomes from all kinds of learnings: formal, non-formal and informal. Similarly, Joosten-ten Brinke et al. (2009) mention the importance of taking into consideration the entire spectrum of the individuals' knowledge and experience, regardless of the learning setting. The term RPL, therefore in this study refers to the broader definition, which includes recognition of skills and knowledge gained through prior learning regardless of the place and time of the learning activity.

2.4.2 The purpose of RPL based on the assessment approach

While researchers of the field of RPL refer to the same process in broad terms, they give slightly different emphasis on its different characteristics in terms of the different assessment methodologies based on their aims and purpose (Bjornvald, 2001; Morrissey et al., 2008; Pokorny & Whittaker, 2014; Whittaker, 2011). Other names, such as validation, accreditation and assessment are often used as well but they refer to different aspects of relatively similar processes (Andersson, 2017). Some argue that in formal education and training setting there are two main purposes tht usually drive the assessment (Bjornvald, 2001; Morrissey et al., 2008), namely summative recognition and formative recognition, meanwhile Pokorny and Whittaker (2014) suggested that three main forms of recognition can be identified: summative, formative and transformative. The issue of assessment has

been a controversial and much disputed subject within the field of education, in terms of whether summative and formative assessments are compatible. Wiliam (2000) argues that the different assessment forms serve contradictory interest, however, it does not mean that they cannot be compatible. Combining summative and formative assessment, however, can be workable, as they assess different aspects of the competence, thus leading to a complementary assessment outcome (Buchholtz, Krosanke, Orschulik & Vorhölter, 2018).

The goal of the summative recognition is formalization of learning experiences and learning outcomes in a formal process, consequently, its purpose is to give certification or qualification to the individual (M. Singh, 2015; Morrissey et al., 2008). Formative recognition can be a more informal procedure in which the focus is on the identification of prior learning, hence creating a foundation for further learning, instead of providing formal certification of learning outcomes (Andersson et al., 2017; Morrissey et al., 2008). It is also described as an approach that focuses on the development of the learner identity, recognizing further learning needs and identifying possible career options (Pokorny and Whittaker, 2014). According to Bjornvald (2001) purpose of summative recognition is to provide a formally recognized evidence of the learning procedure, meanwhile the purpose of formative approach is to support the learning process. Morrissey and her colleagues (2008) see the pan-European example for assessment, where the summative and formative approaches are "interdependent and necessary to building a cohesive and comprehensive approach for assessing and recognizing learning in all its forms: formal, non-formal and informal" (p. 175).

As it was mentioned before, there is a third approach considered besides summative and formative, which is transformative assessment. Recognition processes that give priority to development usually bear formative characteristics and they aim to create some transformation or change (Pokorny and Whittaker, 2014). Transformation can be merely the side-effect of the assessment, hence, it is not necessarily primary goal of the assessment process. However, it is possible that in an assessment process of prior learning the main goal is to strengthen the learners' self-confidence by making them realize that the learning has occurred and possibly as a further goal, by encouraging them to keep building on that learning (Andersson et al., 2017). It enables learners to look at their own prior experience and learning from a different perspective. Based on that it can encourage them to reevaluate

their career choices or learning pathways in the reflection of that transformative experience (Pokorny and Whittaker, 2014).

2.4.3 Assessment methods and tools in RPL process

A wide range of tools are utilized to recognize adult learners' prior learning in formal education context, depending on the country, the field, the nature of the learning experience, and the nature of the degree program he or she is applying for. The diverse assessment tools enable students to prove their existing and relevant prior learning, however, it is imperative that the most suitable assessment tool is applied in the RPL process (CEDEFOP, 2015). Finding the right assessment tool(s) is not only essential from the perspective of the outcome of the whole process but it also has a significant effect on the learner's identity both positively and negatively (Brown, 2015). The most commonly used assessment tools include work certification, degree, transcript of records, portfolio, demonstration of skills, written exam, interview, test or essays (Kiviniemi, 2016). In many cases, more than merely one assessment tool is employed in the RPL process in order to explore the students' existing knowledge by shedding light on different aspects of their expertise (Joosten-ten Brinke, Sluijsman & Jochems, 2010).

Assessing learning outcomes requires evidence that proves the existence of the skills and competences. Different methods for extracting skills were categorized into six groups by CEDEFOP (2015):

A. Texts and examinations – The RPL student proves his or her knowledge by answering questions in a test about a field related to his or her studies that was decided beforehand. Possible to conduct both as oral or written form.

B. Dialogue or conversational methods – The RPL student shows his or her skills through interview or debates (or 'discussion').

C. Declarative methods – The RPL student states and presents arguments that his or her prior knowledge and experience aligns with the requirements of the relevant educational and professional standards. The method uses both oral and written techniques.

D. Methods based on observation – The RPL student demonstrates his or her skills and proves his or her capability to apply his or her knowledge in a realistic and original situation.

E. Simulations – The RPL student is placed into a situation that resembles as if it were in real-life and demonstrate his or her competences.

F. Evidence extracted from work or other practice – The RPL student presents relevant evidence of learning outcomes that could be gained through various learning experiences (e.g. work, hobby, family, volunteering).

Further tools were categorized as tools that are employed to present evidence. Under this category are CV and individual statement of competences, third party reports, and portfolios (CEDEFOP, 2015).

The most common method discussed in the literature is the prior learning assessment portfolio or in other name, experiential learning portfolio. As it is implied already in its name (experiential learning portfolio), in the RPL process it is used to identify and give meaning to prior learning experiences. According to Brown (2001), portfolio can be viewed "as a structure that enables adult students to pause and reflect on prior experiences that facilitated learning" (p. 2). However, Miguel et al. (2016) points out that experience itself does not mean that learning has always occurred. It is in line with Day's (2001) critical statement who says that in the RPL process credits are allocated not for the experience but for the learning that can be demonstrated. Burksaitiene et al. (2011) found that portfolios are generally used for the assessment of non-formal and informal learning, either as the only method applied in the whole process or sometimes complemented with other assessment methods such as interviews, reflective reports, tests or simulations. Further assessment tools may be utilized in case of any doubt after the submission and assessment of portfolio, such as test of competence, simulation, essay or interview (Scholten, 2007).

If the prior learning was gained in formal context, documentation is a practical way to identify the learning outcomes. Documents such as certifications, diploma, transcript of records awarded by the educational providers are analyzed and compared to the institution's requirements where the RPL takes place (Scholten, 2007). Scholten (2007), however argues that despite of the mutual agreements that have been developed to support mobility within the EU, relying only on documentation in the RPL process can be questioned due to increasing diversification of formal learning. Within the European Union, diploma supplement and the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) are two common and important tools in academic recognition (Scholten, 2007). Surprisingly, however,

according to Penttilä's (2011) study in the Finnish higher education sector, official certifications and transcript of records were the most used assessment tools not only in the recognition of formal learning, but also in recognizing non-formal and informal learning. Although comparing formal documents might be an easy and efficient way of recognizing one's prior learning experience, students can experience the lack of diverse assessment tools as a problem (Mäkinen-Streng, 2016).

The diverse range of assessment tools and methods implies that RPL process can happen in many ways, however, the underlying idea is to find the best tool that suits the best for the purpose of the assessment, hence, drawing an authentic picture of the adult learner's knowledge and competences.

2.4.4   Why is RPL important? - The effects of RPL

It has been established that RPL policy is a powerful tool to grant formal recognition to prior learning, regardless of the time and setting of the learning, however, there are further identified effects of RPL. Workplace learning, community learning, artistic or further activities in different areas of live can serve as learning situations, along with workshops and trainings that do not offer specific certificate after completion (Harris et al., 2011). Finding common ground between the learning outcomes gained through such different learning environments, is challenging, yet, not impossible with a tool such as RPL.

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) has been proved to play a significant role in providing opportunities for adults to be able to transit successfully from working life to education (Castle and Attwood, 2001). Consequently, the education system is a major setting for RPL. Nevertheless, not only education relies on RPL, but it plays an important role also in work to work transition, and in the third sector (Andersson, et al., 2013). For instance, an answer for solving the serious problem of skills shortages in the labor market can be the implementation of RPL in work life (Werquin, 2010). Therefore, giving recognition to competences and skills gained outside of formal education can enhance mobility and transferability within the sector and even support actions against unemployment.

Furthermore, RPL plays an important role in social justice by recognizing non-formal and informal learning and providing access to formal education for certain groups of people who did not have the opportunity to enroll in the formal system due to various reasons,

such as financial problems, finding balance between studies and other aspects of life or because of pressure in the labor market (Burksaitiene et al., 2011). In addition, with the help of the recognition process, students have the chance to shorten their education and complete the degree program earlier by being exempted from certain parts of the study program (Aalto, 2014). Accordingly, graduating earlier enables the students to (re)enter the labor market without spending long time in the education system (Aalto, 2014).

The positive benefits of RPL, therefore, are clearly observable, not only from the perspective of the different sectors but also from the individuals' and the society's point of view.

2.5 Various learning environments

Throughout the discussion of lifelong learning and RPL in the previous chapters the concept of formal, non-formal and informal learning settings has emerged, therefore it is necessary here to clarify exactly what is meant by various learning environments. Learning in adulthood differs in many ways from learning in childhood. In most of the cases adults already possess prior knowledge and depending on their adult age also previous qualifications. Furthermore, their life experience, current life situation and motivation play essential roles in their further studies. Consequently, there is a wider range of settings where learning occurs in adulthood.

The most common classification of learning environments are formal, non-formal and informal learning settings (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Researchers, scholars and policy makers tend to focus on the learning outcomes that are gained in formal education, such as in higher education institutions; meanwhile giving greater attention to non-formal and informal learning has been a relatively new thing (M. Singh, 2015). It is argued that this specific typology is not entirely explicit, mainly because the meanings behind the different groups tend to overlap; nevertheless, based on the experiences of scholars of the field and adult learners, these three groups are used in most of the cases while talking about learning environments (Merriam & Bierema, 2014).

According to the European Commission (2001), in the *Making a European Area of Lifelong learning a Reality* document, formal learning is described as an intentional and structured learning process with regards to learning objectives, time and support. Werquin

(2012) has broadened this definition by adding that it is strictly organized in terms of financing, too, meanwhile the OECD (2005) definition highlights the importance of a certificate or qualification at the end of the learning process.

The term non-formal learning has embodied various concepts; therefore, the definitions vary among researchers. An aspect that is generally accepted among scholars that differentiates non-formal learning from formal is that at the end of the learning process, no socially or legally recorded qualification or certification is admitted to the learner (Joosten-ten Brinke et al., 2009). In addition, it is usually shorter and voluntary learning activity (Merriam and Bierema, 2013). According to Björnavald (2001), non-formal learning includes informal learning, and it can be explained as unintentional or unplanned learning in various situations that take place outside of formal education. Although, he notes that it might be also intentional learning processes (similarly to formal learning) - but it is not recognized in formal educational context or in training system (Björnvald, 2001). Kyndt et al. (2009) included in their definition that determining learning objectives can also be a characteristic of non-formal learning, in a similar way as there are in formal learning. These attributes of non-formal learning strengthen the preconception that there is interrelatedness between formal and non-formal learning environments.

The most typical setting where non-formal learning can take place is workplace, however any type of non-accredited course falls into this category (Joosten-ten Brinke et al., 2009). From the perspective of RPL, learning outcomes that are gained through workplace trainings and experience are usually prevalent base for recognition.

Workplace learning, however, can fall under the umbrella of informal learning as well. By definition, informal learning refers to learning in everyday life (Scholten, 2007). Accordingly, such learning experiences can be for instance learning through family life, free time, the media, crime prevention and health promotion (Andersson et. al, 2013). It is unstructured, unintentional and it does not result in certification (Joosten-ten Brinke et al., 2009). Typically, it takes place without the awareness of the individual, unless if it happens as part of the recognition process, which by its nature can lead to realization and conceptualization of learning outcomes (Werquin, 2012).

It is undeniable, therefore, that learning is no longer seen as only taking place in formal education, and even though the different learning settings vary significantly in nature, in particular in terms of structure, outcome, scheduling and whether it is intentional or not,

none of the learning environments should be considered less or more valuable than the others because they all carry endless possibilities for learning. In this study, the term 'informal learning' will be used to learning experiences that happens unconsciously and spontaneously (Kyndt et al., 2009).

2.6   Adults as learners

As it was previously discussed, engaging in various learning activities enables adults to gain new knowledge and skills or update their existing ones in order to succeed in the knowledge-based economy (Boeren, 2017). Given that the current research is focusing on adult students, the characteristics of adult learners need to be examined in order to get a broader picture of its relevance to the RPL practices. Boeren (2017) argues that when adults participate in lifelong learning activities, there are important factors that can hinder or support their engagement in learning activities. She highlights among others that adults' previous experiences as students, their motivation, social status and financial situation can play an important role in whether they participate in a learning activity or not. In addition, as it was mentioned before, the majority of RPL students are usually adults who have a certain amount of experience from working life, and it is common that they have other responsibilities than studying, such as family and non-work-related engagements (Snyman & Van den Berg, 2018). The richness of various learning situations, life and work experiences means that the individuals who enter continuing education in adulthood will have a more diverse background, age, aims, motivation, learning styles given, that everyone's life trajectories are different (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Consequently, in this chapter the adult learners will be examined as self-directed, experienced individuals with their personal needs and motivation to learn.

Merriam & Bierema (2014) proposed that there are three major adult learning theories, namely andragogy, self-directed learning (SDL) and transformative learning. The three major theories are presented in the following shortly to provide background for understanding the specificities of the learning process where RPL takes place. These theories can share commonalities. Themes such as the importance of prior experience, active involvement in the learning progress, manifold roles and responsibility, as well as the

competence to critical reflection are essential segments of the learning theories (Snyman & Van der Berg, 2018).

2.6.1   Andragogy

Andragogy is a fundamental and significant conceptualization of adult learning. It was introduced by Malcolm Knowles in order to distinguish adult learning theory from the traditional pre-adult pedagogy (Knowles, 1974), and it was in a way pioneering theory that shaped the field of adult education by systematically examining the attributes of adult learning (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). His pioneering theory on adult learning has become an essential basis for many adult learning theories that have developed through the last decades. It is based on six core assumptions or principles that determine the adult learner, which are the following, according to Knowles, Holton & Swanson (2011):

1. *The need to know.* It refers to the reasons why the adult learners need to learn and how can they apply the knowledge they enquired in the learning process in their professional and personal life.

2. *The learners' self-concept.* It stands for the desire to be treated as an independent and substantive individual who is capable of self-direction. This trait of adults develops through the process of maturing.

3. *The role of the learners' experiences.* When enrolling in an educational activity, adults bring their prior experience to the learning environment, which results in a group of adult learners with immensely diverse background, learning style, motivation, needs, aims and interests. Their experiences define their identity, therefore acknowledging adult learners' prior experience is an essential aspect of adult learning according to the andragogical model.

4. *Readiness to learn.* Adults are motivated to learn if they know that it will help them deal with real-life situations, particularly if it is related to the developmental tasks that helps them to move forward to a next level.

5. *Orientation to learning.* Adults are motivated to learn if they are able to apply the knowledge immediately in their personal or professional life, therefore their learning is more life-centered (or task-centered/problem-centered) as opposed to children and youths.

6. *Motivation.* Adults are more driven by internal motivation, such as the aspiration to be more satisfied at their job; self-esteem; and improvement in quality of life. However, external motivators also play a role in their learning (e.g. promotion, higher salaries).

Initially Knowles proposed only four assumptions (number 2-5), the other two principles were added a few years later. Andragogy serves as a very strong basis for adult education and human resource management, and it is actively studied even nowadays, and experts of the field manage to find new ways to apply it in practice in various fields, which proves its relevance and significance while examining the characteristics of adult learning (Merriam & Bierema, 2014).

2.6.2   Self-directed learning

Another conceptualization of the nature and characteristics of adult learning if self-directed learning (SDL). Adult learners have the need to feel that they are in charge of their own learning and development, thus SDL is an essential dimension of adult learning. The term SDL is defined according to Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner (2007) as the following: "a process of learning, in which people take the primary initiative for planning, carrying out, and evaluating their own learning experiences" (p. 110). Based on this definition, the learning happens deliberately, and the adult learner takes responsibility for the complete learning process from the identification of the goals until the evaluation of the learning outcomes (Merriam & Bierema, 2014; Boyer, Edmondson, Artis & Fleming 2013).

Knowles (1975) suggests (as cited in Merriam & Bierema, 2014) that SDL can be built on a six-step process which would serve as an agreement between the instructor and the adult learner. The steps are the following: (1) creating an atmosphere that relies on mutual respect (2) identifying the learning needs, (3) developing the learning aims based on these needs, (4) discovering the necessary recourses in order to achieve the goals, (5) selecting and applying the adequate learning strategies to attain the goals, (6) and deciding how to evaluate the learning outcomes. Going through these steps, the adult learner feels in control of their own learning process, therefore, it can help them to gain self-confidence that they are capable, which is especially critical if the adult learner starts the learning process with negative experiences due to earlier education.

After going through the RPL process, the RPL students are usually characterized as adult students who require autonomy to a certain extent, and feel that they manage their own learning, as well as their lives as students (Thomas, Collins & Plett, 2002). Naturally, the formal education system gives a frame for the adults' learning, however, it is imperative that their unique traits such as goals, motivation, personality, and learning style are acknowledged.

2.6.3   Transformative learning

To date, several studies have attempted to explain the concept of transformative learning, providing numerous definitions, frameworks and interpretations of this dimension of adult education. The central idea of this theory is how adults make meaning to their experiences in their life. Mezirow introduced his theory about transformative learning in the 1970s, which dealt with the question how adults interpret their own experience (Merriam et al., 2007). According to Mezirow and Taylor (2009), transformative learning can be defined as "learning that transforms problematic frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, reflective, open, and emotionally able to change" (p. 22). Frames of reference can be among others: rules, language, ideology, codes and standards, which influences how one interprets his or her own experiences, self, events, beliefs and other people (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). These assumptions play a significant role in how one feels, thinks and what are his or her habits (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). Consequently, the transformative learning theory builds on the idea that the adult learners actively reflect on their own experiences and interprets them in a critical way. It challenges the individuals to constantly reevaluate their own assumptions by making meanings of their experiences. Therefore, the focus is not on what we know but how we know (Baumgartner, 2001).

In the context of RPL, portfolio is seen as assessment tool that relies on the learner's own interpretations of experience (Leiste & Jensen, 2011). Identifying and analyzing their prior learning as part of the portfolio can result in significant changes in how they value and interpret their own learning (Leiste & Jensen, 2011). Furthermore, similarly to portfolio, writing a short report on one's prior learning experience in reflection to the learning objectives of the study program can also challenge the student's understanding of their prior experiences. Werquin (2014), however argues that recognizing non-formal and informal learning experiences cannot be considered as a process that aims to teach or train the

students. He states that the recognition process helps to organize students' experiences in terms of learning outcomes, however, an important criterion for that is that they have prior learning experience that can be related to the studies where he or she wishes to utilize the prior learning.

2.7   Recognition of prior learning in Finnish context

The reputation of the Finnish education system, the high-quality of life, and the opportunity of free education even for foreigners are among the most common pull-factors that bring international students to Finland (e.g. Helliwell, Layard & Sachs 2019). In Finland, one of the main principles of education system is to provide a base for the idea of lifelong learning by ensuring that there are no dead ends in an individual's educational path (Karttunen, 2015). The concept of lifelong learning is aiming to establish a foundation to a society where they prevent social exclusion and assure that everyone is given the chance to develop their skills and gain new knowledge, regardless of their age or the learning environment (Ministry of Education, 2006). At all level of the education system, students have the opportunity to change their path if they wish so, which is possible due to the flexibility and transparency of the whole system. Furthermore, the whole concept of recognizing prior knowledge, in particular, that of acquired through non-formal and informal learning, has a long history and it is valued in the Finnish society, education, and labor market (Karttunen, 2015).

According to the Bologna process, a framework for qualifications has been introduced in Finland, which has been a part of the National Qualifications Framework since 2005, and which applies to the higher education sector as well (CEDEFOP, 2017b). In higher education, recognizing adults' prior knowledge is a common practice, whether the institution is a university (*Yliopisto*) or university of applied sciences (UAS) (*Ammattikorkeakoulu*). In UAS institutions the concept of RPL was introduced earlier (August 2003), while at universities the application of the RPL process happened two years later (Kiviniemi, 2016). It was also found according to a recent survey, coordinated by the Ministry of Education and Culture's Department for Higher Education and Science Policy, that more students apply for recognition of their prior knowledge at universities of applied sciences, although the

difference between universities of applied sciences and universities is not notably significant (Mäkinen-Streng, Ojala & Haltia, 2017).

The RPL practices used in Finnish higher education institutions are mainly based on the guidelines defined at the Brahea Centre at the University of Turku in 2009-2013. Drawing upon those recommendations, universities and polytechnics established their own practices in the recent years (Mäkinen-Streng et al., 2017).

The concept of RPL (in Finnish: *Aiemmin hankitun osaamisen tunnistaminen ja tunnustaminen [AHOT]*) is based on the principle of entirely recognizing and accrediting prior learning as part of a degree program or any kind of studies (Aalto, 2014). The AHOT procedure focuses on assessing student's competences in relation to the learning objectives defined in the training. (Kiviniemi, 2016). Similarly to international trends, shifting from the traditional approach, where higher education institutions acknowledged mainly knowledge gained through formal education; the current practice is that alongside formal education, skills acquired through informal and non-formal learning, should also be taken into account while assessing the students' competences (Kiviniemi, 2016). Such change in the principle of RPL in Finland has contributed to the development of flexible training pathways and to the progress of developing methods for identifying previously acquired competencies that can be used to make the studies more flexible and faster (Kiviniemi, 2016). Accordingly, the aim is to avoid unnecessary duplication of training in areas, where the student already has sufficient skills along with the shortening of the study period and helping students recognizing their own skills and competencies.

The cooperation between all actors of the field of education is a key aspect of successful RPL system in Finland, given that all stakeholders are involved in the whole process, starting from the designing phase of the qualification requirements, to the personal assessing stage (CEDEFOP, 2017b). In an endeavor to ensure that people's skills and knowledge is recognized and utilized the best, employment offices, educational institutions, and actors of the labor market work together to support immigrants' integration with the help of RPL.

2.7.1   RPL in practice

The Finnish definition of RPL usually refers to identification (tunnistaminen) of prior knowledge besides recognition (tunnustaminen). The underlying theory behind it is that in

order to be able to recognize previously acquired knowledge, it must be identified first (Pyykkö, 2010). Identification requires clarification, analysis and evaluation (Pyykkö, 2010), and it can be viewed from the perspective of both the university and the students (Ministry of Education, 2007). The students strive to understand the skills they acquired earlier and to understand and structure them in relation to the objectives of the courses so that they can demonstrate their skills (Ministry of Education, 2007). Identification, therefore, is an attempt to understand previously acquired knowledge and skills in relation to the current educational goals (Penttilä, 2011). Usually the study program's program coordinator or an instructor helps the students identify what they know and then compare the skills to the learning goals (Pyykkö, 2010). Recognition, on the other hand, is the process of granting official status to previously acquired knowledge which can be obtained through formal, non-formal and informal learning (Ministry of Education, 2007). In recognition, an assessor makes the decision based on the students' application and the evidence (Pyykkö, 2010).

The practice of RPL includes accreditation (hyväksilukeminen), inclusion (sisällyttäminen) and replacement or substitution (korvaaminen) (Penttilä, 2011). Accreditation refers to the acceptance of studies, apprenticeship, work experience or competencies as part of the studies (Elomaa, 2005). Inclusion and replacement are considered to be the basic concepts within crediting (hyväksilukeminen) (Kiviniemi, 2016). Inclusion means that studies carried out somewhere else can be linked to the current study program and accepted as a sub-unit, part of optional studies or elective studies (Kiviniemi, 2016). Replacements, on the other hand, is understood as a practice where similar studies completed in another study program will replace compulsory parts of the current degree studies (Penttilä, 2011). In the practices of some higher education institutions, a third way of accrediting prior learning is used, which is the demonstration of competence. Competences acquired prior to the current studies enables students to demonstrate their competence in a competences test, provided that it meets the degree criteria and objectives (Aalto, 2014). This form of RPL is particularly applied when the studies were completed longer than five to ten years before the enrollment of the current study program because in these cases replacement and inclusion cannot be applied (Aalto, 2014).

To demonstrate one's skills, there are various ways that can be utilized in the RPL process. Naturally, the most effective way to prove one's knowledge and skills are official documents, such as diplomas, work certificates, transcript of records, and certificates of

competences (Mäkinen-Streng et al., 2017). However, taking into account that there are numerous ways to acquire knowledge and develop skills, official documents are not always available options to recognize prior learning. As mentioned earlier, commonly used tools for proving existing knowledge and skills are, for example, personal study plan, portfolio, learning diary, demonstration through work, interviews, CVs, writing articles, tests, and exams (Mäkinen-Streng et al., 2017). The challenge, however, is to make these tools work more efficiently, and to renew them to identify, evaluate and recognize knowledge (Ministry of Education, 2007). In the case of international students, the different school system, cultural context, crediting system, and language can set further challenges in selecting the most suitable and reliable assessment tool to recognize prior learning experience.

2.7.2 Internationalization and RPL in Finland

Internationalization is a fundamental part of the everyday life of all Finnish higher education institutions due to exchange programs and international degree programs and they have created a demand to apply effective RPL practices to meet the needs of the students (Ministry of Education, 2007). It is argued that internationalization is a way to develop the quality of education and the research, development and innovation work (Alvenharju, Kujanpää, Puhakkka-Tarvainen, Sihvonen & Tallinen, 2015). The most common activities are international cooperation, exchange programs, internationalization of the region and working-life through international RDI programs (Alvenharju et al., 2015). However, so far there has been little discussion about the practices and experiences regarding the recognition of studies and prior experiences that happened in another country than the recognition process itself.

According to statistics, the total amount of foreign degree students in Finnish higher education institutions was 20 362 students, out of which 9 601 studied at a university of applied sciences and 10 761 students studied at a university (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2018). The same report shows that 72% of the students come from a non-EU/EEA country, which implies that if a student would like to undergo the RPL process, the well-established ECTS system cannot be used as a basis of the recognition. It is known that RPL is not only possible through credit transfer, however, it raises the question, what are the

tools and methods that are applied in the Finnish system to recognize studies acquired abroad?

The Ministry of Education and Culture (2019) addresses the issue of educational tracks and integration of immigrants in Finland in their recently published report. It has been acknowledged that higher education immigrants have a lot of completed studies and skills that are not sufficiently recognized in the labor market or in the education system. In November 2018, the Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC) provided funding for a project to support guidance and counseling services for immigrants in higher education sector, as well as the development and expansion of the RPL services (Ministry of Education, 2019). Taking into account that one of the major obstacles to employment and training pathways for higher education immigrants is the limited options to participate in Finnish and Swedish courses, the project also supports language courses and further training (Ministry of Education, 2019). Before that project, in 2016-2017 another project funded by MEC, named Supporting Immigrants in Higher Education in Finland (SIMHE) was launched. It was part of MEC's national initiative to support and enhance Finnish higher education institutions' essential role in the integration of immigrants. Throughout the project, it was revealed that essential improvements are required, in particular in the development of recognition of prior learning (Häkkinen, Käyhkö & Bogdanoff, 2017). Challenges in identification and recognition of prior learning are among others the lack of structure in RPL process for non-degree students, language barriers, difficulties in interpreting foreign study records and diplomas, translating grades from one system to the other and identifying skills acquired outside of formal education (Häkkinen et al., 2017). Furthermore, challenges may arise due to differences in education systems, since the acquired knowledge in one education system is not necessarily considered to be as valuable from the Finnish education system's point of view (Häkkinen et al., 2017).

The recent projects indicate that internationalization in higher education is a centre issue nowadays and the education system needs to take serious measures in order to meet the demand of the increasingly diverse society.

3 RESEARCH CONTEXT

3.1 Research context

Due to globalization and immigration the number of foreigners in Finland is gradually increasing. The educational sector is facing new challenges to meet the needs of the immigrants -whether they are asylum-seekers, economic migrants, or immigrants who arrived in the country for other reasons-, in a way that it is in line with the needs of the host country. With the growing number of foreigners in Finland the need to give recognition for prior studies and identifying skills is also increasing (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2016). Recognition of prior learning is known as a tool that supports flexible education paths and mobility within different countries and higher education sectors, furthermore it enhances the link between education sector and labor market. Giving recognition for foreign qualifications in Finland can happen in various ways depending on factors such as the intentions of the immigrant (is he/she applying for a job or a study place) and the general requirements of the study place or work position (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2017). This current study is focusing on the issue in question at the higher education level. Students at universities and universities of applied sciences in Finland are offered the chance to apply for recognition based on prior learning and/or experience. Few studies have investigated the topic of the RPL process from the students' point of view in Finnish context, however, there has been little discussion about how international students perceive the RPL process and their studies after that. One remarkable initiative, however, deals with this issue. The program called Supporting Immigrants in Higher Education in Finland (SIMHE) has been focusing on assisting highly educated immigrants who arrive to Finland. After the completion of the pilot project, various challenges have been identified that require further development from higher education institutions to play a more active role and undertake more responsibility in building appropriate educational pathways for migrants (Häkkinen et al., 2017).

Due to identified challenges in recognizing immigrants' prior experience and knowledge and the growing demand for reliable and well-functioning practice has prompted the current study where international RPL student share their experiences with regards to RPL in Finnish higher education.

3.2   Research objectives and research questions

The current research attempts to gain a deeper understanding of the RPL process from the international students' point of view in terms of the study programs in which they are enrolled in after participating in the RPL process, and how their prior experience and knowledge is recognized in the process.

Dwelling upon the above-mentioned aims of the research, the research questions of this study are the following:

A. How informally acquired skills are recognized in the RPL process according to the RPL students?

B. How do international students perceive their study program having gone through the RPL process?

By answering the first question the aim is to assess the link between informal learning and RPL learning. As the question indicates, a more holistic approach is implemented, focusing on the RPL procedure, as well as on the assessment tools, and on the students' experience. Whereas the second question aims to discover the student's perception of the current study program after the RPL process, since various factors can affect the studying experience. They have prior experience that is related to the study field and the context where their gained their prior knowledge can be considerably different from the current context.

Consequently, the purpose of the research questions is to place the students' experience in the center of the interest and to contribute to the understanding of the links between prior learning acquired in a different context then the Finnish formal education system and the recognition of that prior learning in order to 'translate' it to the language of formal education. Furthermore, students' perception of the study programs after the RPL process can provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of the RPL processes in terms of how legitimate and purposeful students find the whole process. Accordingly, this latter perspective gives information about how effective they find the RPL process at interpretative level.

4 METHODOLOGY

4.1 Qualitative research method

Based on the focus of the study and the research questions, qualitative research method is employed in this study, since it enables the researcher to aim attention at lived experiences that are authentically placed in their contexts. Furthermore, qualitative methods offer an effective way of capturing the views and outlooks of the participants (Yin, 2016). Another reason to use qualitative method is that it allows to bring the participant viewpoints and stories to the surface (Tracy, 2012), which is imperative in this current research given that its purpose it to gain new insights into the topic by dwelling on the experiences of the RPL students. In addition, this approach enabled the researcher to understand the context that influenced the participants' experiences in connection to the research topic, thus gain a holistic picture of the researched topic (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Consequently, the researcher aspired to obtain a comprehensive picture of the participants, taking into account various factors that can contribute to a deeper understanding of the participants' experience. Therefore, during the research process, factors such as participants' prior studies and experiences and their motivation to pursue their current degree, were taken in to consideration. Discussing these topics allows the researcher to outline a more precise picture of the participant.

4.2 Data collection procedure

To find international students who have applied for recognition of their prior learning, first, the researcher contacted a teacher from a university of applied sciences in August 2018. According to the contact person's guidance, the researcher submitted a request of research authorization to be signed by the vice rector of the higher education institution. Having the application for research authorization approved, the researcher contacted three teachers from the institution who were in charge for three different international Bachelor's programs (in the fields of business, nursing, logistics). The head of the programs forwarded the researcher's invitation/introduction email to the student of the three programs. Accordingly, the researcher did not have the chance to contact students directly, as privacy

issues did not allow the institution to share the contacts of the students with the researcher. Three students contacted the researcher immediately, however, only one of them fit the requirements to be able to participate in the study, as the others did not go through the RPL process.

In the course of four months, six students contacted the researcher to volunteer for participation. To ensure that there would be sufficient data on the topic, the researcher contacted another UAS and throughout a similar process (research proposal, approval of the ethics board, invitation/introduction email to the students), four more students were found to participate in the research.

The individual interviews were carried out between September 2018 and January 2019. Each participant received the privacy notice and consent form via email prior to the interview.

The conversations were audio-recorded after receiving the consent of the interviewees. The researcher decided not to take notes during the conversations, in order to fully devote her attention to the interviewees. Nevertheless, following the interview, the researcher wrote down important notes into her journal that seemed relevant to the overall research process. The voice recordings were transcribed by the researcher.

4.3   Participants

The researcher's aim was to find participants who have first-hand experience on the topic in question, therefore the selection of participants happened according to the purposeful sampling method (Patton, 2015). Each participant had some prior experience or prior studies on which base they applied for recognition. Table 2 presents an overview of the main characteristics of the research participants. They were from six different countries (Russia, Philippines, Brazil, Finland, Tanzania, Nepal), and they were pursuing Bachelor level degrees in the field of nursing (Participant 2, Participant 5, Participant 6, Participant 7, Participant 8, Participant 9, Participant 10), and logistics (Participant 1, Participant 3, Participant 4). Six of them were males and four of them were females. The amount of credits earned in the RPL process varies from 10 to 160 ECTS. Bachelor's degree programs in the field of nursing consist of 210 ECTS, and 240 ECTS on the field of logistics. Some participants

were not able to tell the exact number of the credits, since they were either in the process of applying for recognition or because they did not remember.

Participant	Nationality	Gender	Field of study	University of Applied Sciences (UAS)	Credits earned in the RPL process
Participant 1 (P1)	Russia	male	Logistics	UAS1	10
Participant 2 (P2)	Filipino	female	Nursing	UAS1	around 100
Participant 3 (P3)	Brazil	male	Logistics	UAS1	50
Participant 4 (P4)	English-Finnish	male	Logistics	UAS1	30-40
Participant 5 (P5)	Tanzanian	male	Nursing	UAS1	45
Participant 6 (P6)	Nepalese	female	Nursing	UAS1	around 90
Participant 7 (P7)	Filipino	male	Nursing	UAS2	150
Participant 8 (P8)	Filipino	female	Nursing	UAS2	150
Participant 9 (P9)	Filipino	male	Nursing	UAS2	150
Participant 10 (P10)	Filipino	female	Nursing	UAS2	160

TABLE 2. Research participants

The interviewees were students at universities of applied sciences. Eight students already had another degree (P2, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10). Participant 4 completed his previous Bachelor's degree at the same institution where he currently studies. The others completed the previous degree program also at Bachelor's level in their home country. For Participant 1 this is the first time that he is enrolled in higher education study program, whereas Participant 3 was pursuing a Bachelor's level degree already at his home country but he did not finish the study program. All the students who are currently studying nursing have already obtained a degree in the same field in their home country. However, their qualifications do not enable them to practice their profession without Finnish education because they are coming from outside of the EU, therefore their qualification cannot be recognized in the same way as it can be for EU citizens with the help of the EQF (Vartiainen, Pitkänen, Maruja, Raunio & Koskela, 2016). With respect to logistics students, only Participant 4 had prior experience from the field.

4.4   Interview as data collection method

In the field of education, interviewing has been the most popular research tool for more than a century (Tierney & Dilley, 2001). According to Patton (2015), interviewing enables the researcher to "enter into the other person's perspective" (p. 426), and it is based on the presumption that the interviewee's perspective is valuable and it can be expounded. Tracy (2012) argues that this research method enables the researcher to hear the participant's opinion and motivation by listening to the narratives about the research topic. Through the discussions with the international RPL students it is possible to learn about aspects of the RPL process that have not necessarily been taken in to account in the policy making. Furthermore, issues that might remain latent in the recognition and studying process of a Finnish student in the Finnish system, could arise in the case of an international student. Rubin & Rubin (2004) described qualitative interviews as "conversations in which a researcher gently guides a conversational partner in an extended discussion" (p. 4). The interviews were semi-structured which provided freedom and flexibility for the participants to open up a topic based on his/her own judgment and what he/she finds the most relevant in connection to the topic. Based on the degree of their experience and willingness to share, the interview questions varied between each interview (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Nevertheless, following an interview guide ensured that all the relevant and important topics were covered for the research, thus enabling the researcher to discover similar patterns in the analysis phase.

The same topics were covered with each participant and the process of the interviews followed the same structure (see Appendix 1). The warm-up questions served simultaneously as background questions, providing information on the current study program, previous studies and prior experience related to the current study field. Followed by this first short section, the main topics were discussed: the RPL process; evaluation of the assessment tool(s); judgment of current studies in the light of the RPL process and prior experience; and meaningful learning experiences in the participants' lives. The interview questions encouraged the RPL students to reflect on their previous learning experiences and evaluate their achievements in formal and informal settings based on those experiences and the RPL process.

Out of 10 interviews 9 were conducted in public places and one of them via Skype. The language used in the interviews was English, which neither the researcher, nor the participants native language, except Participant 4, whose mother tongue was both English and Finnish. The length of the interviews varied between 35 minutes to 75 minutes.

4.5   Ethical considerations

In order to ensure that the research is carried out ethically, each participant signed a research consent and privacy notice that are in line with the EU's General Data Protection Regulation and the researcher did not deviate from those guidelines (see Appendix 2 and Appendix 3). The consent and privacy notice were sent to the participants beforehand via email to ensure that they have the chance to examine it carefully before participating in the research. Furthermore, the content of the two documents were discussed personally at the beginning of each interview. Participation in the research was voluntary and the participants had the right to withdraw their participation from the study. The content and purpose of the study were provided for the participants by the author. Pseudonyms were given to each participant after the interviews. The researcher asked for individual permission to audio-record the conversations (Silverman, 2013). The interviewees agreed on that and the interviews were recorded using a voice recording device. After the transcription of voice recordings, the files were deleted permanently, and confidentiality was maintained during the whole data collection process.

4.6   Data analysis

The objectives of the research, the research questions and the research method that was employed for data collection fundamentally determined the data analysis process and approach (Johnson & Harris, 2002). There are various qualitative analytic methods to choose from in order to capture the essence of the data in a way that it supports the aim of the research, such as thematic analysis, conversation analysis, discourse analysis, grounded theory, qualitative content analysis, phenomenological analysis or narrative analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Flick, 2014). Here, an inductive thematic analysis was chosen to help understand how international RPL students with prior learning experience perceive their

current studies having earned credits for their prior learning, and how they evaluate their prior experience after participating in the RPL process and studying in their current study program. According to the definition of Braun and Clarke (2006), "thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within the data" (p. 79). This specific method shares similarities with other qualitative methods, such as content analysis, thematic discourse analysis, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) and grounded theory (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Indeed, to a certain extent the methods overlap, based on the similarities they share, such as searching for patterns and themes in the data, however, the differences between these theories lie in how much they are bounded to theoretical frameworks (like IPA, grounded theory, narrative analysis DA) (Braun and Clarke, 2006), or whether the researcher is seeking to quantify the data at the same time like in content analysis (Vaismoradi, Turunen & Bondas, 2013). Nevertheless, as it has been outlined by Yin (2016), qualitative data analysis goes through five phases: (1) compiling the data, (2) disassembling the data, (3) reassembling, (4) interpreting the findings and finally, (5) concluding. Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 87) presented a similar process, specifically focusing on thematic analysis: the first step is familiarizing yourself with the data, then generating initial codes, followed by searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and as a last step, producing the report.

The author followed these steps in the analysis of the data collected from the RPL students. Inductive approach was employed, as it allows the researcher to explore the data through the identified themes and generate new insights and explanations without looking for themes based on theory and established concepts (Patton, 2015). It allows the researcher to identify and create the themes according to his or her own interpretation (Thomas, 2006). The analysis began with the researcher reading the transcriptions of the interviews carefully to familiarize herself with the data and get an overall idea for potential patterns (Braun and Clarke, 2006). After reading an interview thoroughly, the researcher read the transcripts again, and assigned codes to certain parts of the data set. Codes were assigned to longer text segments than merely a word, bearing in mind that the context is imperative to interpret the text. The extracts with the codes, then, were copied into another file. Following the coding phase, the next step included searching for recurring patterns and similar codes in order to compile them into themes. The researcher used colors and mind maps to support the organization of codes through visual representations. In the next phase the researcher was

looking for connections between themes. The extracts that were assigned to the codes were reread to ensure that the data is corresponsive to the theme. In the case of ambiguity or vagueness, the code was added to the group of 'uncategorized' codes. It was imperative in this phase to pay considerable attention to whether the extracts are coherent with the theme to which they were selected to, or the codes were misunderstandable and they did not fit to the theme. Some units of data belonged to more than only one theme as multiple codes were connected to them. In many cases, assigning various codes to a certain unit of data served as a form of brainstorming, which, as it is discussed in the next step, helped to capture the essence of the data and, eventually, create a comprehensive theme from separate themes. As a next step, the researcher assessed how the themes related to the overall research framework, particularly to the research questions. Giving names to the themes and defining them briefly was particularly useful to identify the focus of the themes. Accordingly, separate themes were merged into each other and either new themes or sub-themes were created as a result of this phase.

5   FINDINGS

5.1   The accreditation process

5.1.1   Assessment procedure

A crucial aspect of the RPL process is the tool that was utilized in order to identify and recognize students' skills and knowledge. In all the cases, the assessment predominantly relied on official documents that proved the existence of the work and study experience.
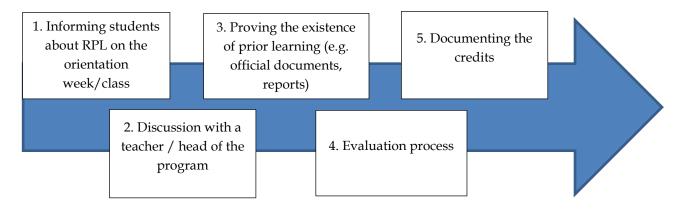

FIGURE 1. The RPL process according to the international students' experiences

Figure 1 shows the different steps of the RPL process based on the compilation of the narratives of the interviewees.

The introduction to the opportunity to have RPL is crucial in order to provide a chance to every student to apply for recognition for their prior learning experiences irrespective of whether it was the intention of the student to apply for RPL or not. All the students from UAS 1 reported that after being informed about the opportunity of applying for recognition, they turned to the person responsible for the RPL process from the institution's side, with whom they briefly discussed how the RPL process can be carried out. It is important to note, however, that according to one of the participants (P6), on the orientation class the students were told that in that case if they have completed a degree earlier at another institution, they can apply for recognition, however, the knowledge and skills acquired informally was not mentioned as basis for recognition. According to Participant 2, she also initiated RPL process after learning about it on the orientation week. Meanwhile other students of UAS1 reported that they took the initiative and enquired about the possibility of getting

accreditation for their prior learning and work experience (P1, P3, P4, P5). Students of UAS2 were informed by the institution about the opportunity to get accreditation. It is important to note that both Participant 7 and 8 said that they were deliberately looking for the university of applied sciences in Finland where they can complete the nursing program in the shortest possible time.

In the institutional procedures considering provision of evidence about prior knowledge and experience there was no remarkable difference between the 10 students. In all cases, the participants reported that RPL process was mainly relying on official documents such as certificates of previous studies, transcript of records, curriculum used in the home country, content of the courses/course descriptions, and practical training certificates (see Table 3). The documents were required to compare them to the Finnish institution's curriculum.

Assessment method	Assessment tool
Official documentation	Diploma
	Transcript of records
	Curriculum
	Course description
	CV
Declarative method	Report on work experience

TABLE 3. The assessment methods used in the RPL process

Also, CV was mentioned as a type of document used in the RPL process, as it shows the career path of the participant and the document usually includes contact information to prior employers or colleagues. In some cases declarative method was also utilized, which is used to allow the student to express with his or her own words why his or her prior learning is relevant in the current study program (see chapter 2.4.3). Participant 1 and Participant 4 also reported that they were asked to write a short report as part of the RPL process. Participant 1 mentioned that in the report he had to answer a list of questions that were related to the prior work experience, such as what the job was related to, what he has done during the work and how long did the employment contract last. Participant 4 on the other hand had to write short description of his skills and what he had been doing. Usually the documents that the students were submitting as proofs of prior learning and experience were in English. In general, the higher education institutions accept the documentations in English, therefore no obstacles were found in this matter. One student, however (P3), was

not able to present the official documents in English, only in Portuguese. Talking about this issue, the interviewee said:

> "The name of the courses was in Portuguese but I kind of made up a correlation like trying to translate to English. Then I showed them of course the transcript of records which showed my name, my university, my grades. The content is the same, it was also in Portuguese. So, when they asked what the content of the course is, I translated to the English."

Hence, in the case of Participant 3, the institution demonstrated remarkable flexibility and approved the RPL application of the student despite of the language of the documents. The recognition phase itself usually included a personal discussion with the head teacher who is responsible for the accreditation. Students had the chance to share what they have done before that is related to their current studies. The discussion between students and teachers allows the RPL applicant to share their experience and the grounds their RPL application is based on. After the discussion and the submission of the official documents, the examiner from the institution made the decision and informs the student about the amount of ECTS that were accredited. The analysis of the data revealed that depending on the nature of the courses they were applying for accreditation, there were different paths how students undertook their studies. Some started the courses while waiting for the decision whether the RPL was approved or not. Others decided to register for all the courses to evaluate personally, based on the first couple of lessons, whether it is worth applying for recognition or not. As Participant 4 put it:

> "I was waiting until the courses come up then I find out exactly what's coming up in the course and then I'll discuss with the teacher or the tutor teacher or someone if what I have done before, whether it's been working or what I've studied before is close enough to be accredited."

Meanwhile another student evaluated his prior knowledge in relation to the content and the learning outcomes of the courses and decided to register for some courses to deepen his understanding of the topic. According to his words:

> "Even if teacher may feel like that this is not necessarily important to you based on your experience, but maybe if you want to go deeper into it, you want to learn something new, it's better to do it. "(P5)

Meanwhile in UAS1, the amount of credits given to the students in the RPL process varied greatly, and therefore the study program was designed differently in each students' case. In UAS2, according to the participants, the students are granted a standard number of 150 ECTS for their prior studies and are required to register for the same courses. However, Participant 10 was pursuing a bachelor's degree program in nursing for a year at another Finnish UAS until she left that institution because of not receiving recognition for her prior

attainments despite of the initial promises. Hence, when she enrolled in the study program at UAS2, she received 10 more extra credits than her peers (altogether 160 ECTS), as some of her prior learning achievements from the other Finnish UAS was taken into account in the RPL process.

5.1.2   Satisfaction with the RPL process

The overall opinion about the RPL process was positive among the interviewees. A common view amongst interviewees was that it is advantageous that one's prior knowledge and experience can be considered, and there is no need to repeat the studies that have been completed once. As one participant commented on the issue: "there is no use of it because if you have already studied that thing and have practiced it, why study it again?" (P6). On the other hand, it was also noted by another student that even though she has completed a degree in the same field before, she felt the need to register to some courses because she forgot many things from her previous studies: "I was thinking that it's better to do the course because I might have forgot things. If you don't do what you studied, there is a great possibility that you forget everything" (P2).

The analysis of the data showed that students were generally satisfied with the length of the process and with the amount of credits that was approved in the RPL. In addition, they found the assessment tool appropriate to reveal their prior achievements. A recurrent way to describe the RPL process was fair, efficient, quick. As one logistics student (P4) described the process:

> "I think it's efficient. It's thorough enough so they can see and check that you really know what you are doing and if they want more information or more proof, then they will ask for it but for my experience it has been very smooth and very easy."

Participant 10 expressed her immense satisfaction with the following words:

> "I really cannot say anything negative about it. I was very satisfied [with the process] because they asked us if we disagree with the decision, we can ask for reassessment or something like that. They were very nice at asking us: do we deserve this 160 ECTS or do we need to do more or should we do less."

On the other hand, there was a sense of dissatisfaction expressed by Participant 7 with regards to the assessment tool and the length of the studies. He found the one year long nursing program still long, considering how much he had learnt and worked before in the field, furthermore, he did not agree with the practice of the RPL process, in a sense that it

was utilizing only official documents as grounds for recognition. His view is expressed as follows:

> "I think we should have gone just straight to practical trainings. What I'm thinking is go to the practical trainings straight so that you would be able to assess the students for their competence straight ahead. (…) Theoretical [knowledge], we already have that. Since we have been educated previously already from somewhere. I think since the setup here is different form the setup we had had in the Philippines for example. I think they should focus on just the training. The experience, the …*thinking* … practical training. They should have focused more on that. Straight there."

Other students expressed similar views: although documentation is a useful way to provide proof about their prior accomplishments, other assessment tools could have been utilized in order to get a more complete picture of their skills and competences. For example, observing them while working would be considered as a preferable tool to identify and recognize their skills. Exams were also proposed as an alternative assessment method, and in the students' opinion, they could have allowed them to show their existing knowledge and skills.

> "If they could give accreditation for that by taking some exam or like that then it would be better. Because I have worked for two years at the same ward so I know most of the knowledge of that so it would be better if … actually I don't have a certificate about that, only the work experience certificate but not the formal education certificate but they can have me take an exam for that for example and do the accreditation." (P6)

Participant 8's view on the issue was similar to P6 and P7, and she suggested that "some sort of skill assessment would have been nice" to enable students demonstrate their skills. Nevertheless, students generally agreed on the fact that the most important benefits or RPL is that it allows them to graduate earlier by completing courses from the upcoming years instead of studying subjects they were already familiar with. In addition, some of the interviewees reported that they have time to work besides their studies which was an important aspect before they decided to enroll in the study program. However, some students argued that if they intend to graduate as soon as possible, they have to take the next years' classes, which results in a busy schedule and leaves no time for work besides studies. Participant 4 mentioned that he works part-time besides his studies, even though he does not need to. According to him, he is working only to keep himself busy.

During the analysis of the data it has also emerged that students found the RPL process helpful with respects to self-assessment. It helped them to recognize their own level of knowledge by discussing the curriculum with the teacher at the beginning of their studies, and it helped them evaluate whether it is worth to undertake certain courses or not.

Satisfaction was expressed towards the effectiveness of the staff in the RPL process. The overall opinion about the guidance offered in the RPL process was positive, as the instructions and requirements were clear, according to the interviewees. Students valued the routine and proficiency of the staff.

> "She [the teacher-examiner] had a lot of experiences with it. She had students who were from Tanzania, too, so she knows how the system works there. She was like "according to my experience, you should take this course because this is different in the way of how we do it from how it is done in your country". She knows the differences and what is useful. She has been in this system for a long time, so she knows which is done differently in certain countries. "(P6)

> "I think it's quite easy. It's not the first time that the university has done it because also previous students have done it, so it was kind of easy for me already. Because they had experience already with it in this field. "(P2)

Accordingly, students commented on the need for staff members with routine in recognizing international students' prior learning, when they experienced the absence of it.: "maybe they should have someone, especially trained for the accreditation process because those who are accrediting are the teachers and they change all the time" (P8).

5.2 Connection between students' views on their current studies and RPL process

The students' satisfaction regarding the RPL process was discussed as part of the previous theme. In the analysis process, however, students' views surfaced in relation to their studies after going through the RPL process. These results are particularly important in relation to research question 2 (RQ2).

As the students had different study and work paths prior to their current studies, their perception of the current study program also varies greatly. There are numerous factors that affect the students' views on their own professional and educational trails. Hence, it plays a significant role in their perception of their current studies. The country of origin, the education system they were studying before, the technological development in their field, the society, their motivation, and of course, their personality is among those influencing factors that shapes the students' understanding of their experiences and how they see their current studies. The main themes that emerged were: (1) repetitiveness of studies, (2) opportunity to update their existing knowledge, (3) familiarization with new cultural context, and (4) the benefits of learning in an intercultural setting (Figure 2).
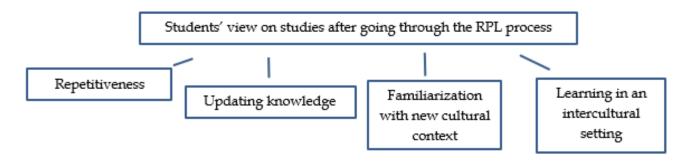
FIGURE 2. Students' perception of their learning experiences in the study program after the RPL process

Opinions differed as to whether the courses they need to complete after the accreditation process proved to be useful, interesting, repetitive, or absolute waste of time. A recurrent theme in the interviews was a sense amongst interviewees that part of the courses felt repetitive. The extent of how often they felt that varied amongst students. Some of them commented that most of the courses feels repetitive, to others it was just occasional, such as some lessons but not a complete course. Usually students, who have completed a degree earlier in the same field and worked on the field, find the classes more repetitive. They even commented on them as" dull" and "a waste of time". One nursing student who got 45 ECTS recognized (the total value of the program in credits is 210 ECTS), commented as follows: "of course everything I'm learning here, I have studied already. It's only a few things which is new" (P5). It is echoed by another nursing student: "not everything that I study is new but some are. But most of them have been repetitive" (P6). She further went on that "I just think it's a waste of time. Bust when there is something new and interesting, then it's okay".

On the other hand, going through the same courses does not necessarily feel always a waste of time. It was also mentioned that there are benefits of undertaking some courses again. Due to long breaks between one's prior studies and current studies, the knowledge acquired once in the previous study program might not be relevant anymore. Consequently, enrolling in courses that have been completed once before at another study program, could be not only a waste of time but also a very useful and valuable opportunity to review the subject. In addition, the need to update their knowledge due to the rapid changes in technology and medication was a common issue mentioned by some of the nursing students.

When it comes to the planning and organization of their studies, the students told that they mainly registered for classes from the upcoming years to supplement the space they had in their schedule due to the RPL process. With the words of Participant 4:

> "If I don't have to take one [course] because I got accredited, then I'm gonna take something else to fill up that stuff. I take as much as I can to fill in my schedule (…) usually only from my own study plan."

Another logistics student commented on this issue as follows: "When I didn't have any course because of accreditation, I got new courses from other years or other elective studies, minors" (P3). Participant 1 also said that he was taking courses from other departments, such as business and language courses. Accordingly, most of the students choose to find courses from the upcoming years to fill up the space of the accredited subjects, with the purpose to graduate earlier. Whereas others are taking advantage of it in another way as well and register for other than merely mandatory courses.

Interestingly, no unsatisfaction was expressed by the students about the decision that they were required to take some of the practical course trainings in their current studies, even though many of them had years of experience from the field. On the contrary, students appreciated the practical trainings and, in some cases, even preferred them over the lectures. Participant 10 even felt that the 10-week compulsory practical training is too short, taking into consideration that she has not been working in the nursing field for 5 years, and she was afraid that the 10 weeks would not be enough for her to regain her confidence. Participant 9 also expressed his views about the need for practical training in the new context: "all the training portion… I think, it is a must what we take it up because we don't know how the hospitals work here, even if we have experience from our own country".

During the analysis of the data, it has been also revealed that the cultural factors play a significant role in how international RPL students perceive their current studies. Recurrent comments about the cultural differences between the students' home country and Finland have emerged. As Participant 5 commented on the issue about utilizing his experience in Finnish context: "I have a lot of experience in the nursing field but still my experiences feel very little". Differences deriving from the different cultural contexts between the students' home country and Finland, motivates them to enroll in classes even though that they might have been able to apply for recognition for some of those courses in the RPL process. However, it has emerged from the data that a lot of attention is paid to the cultural differences throughout the RPL procedure. It has been reported by the students that at the

beginning of the RPL process in the discussion between the RPL students and the teachers, the cultural context was seen to be an issue of significance in deciding whether the student should enroll in certain courses or not. When asked about the importance of knowing the cultural context they are studying in, the interviewees were unanimous in the view that it is essential.

Furthermore, not only the new cultural context but also the intercultural aspect of the study program motivated many students to register for classes. As the Tanzanian nursing student (P6) commented:

> "It's international. People express different feelings and experiences from different countries. In Africa, we are just thinking in ... not even African but Tanzanian way. It's the same way. But here we might have someone from China who says that in China we do this but in Finland we do it in another way."

A Filipino nursing student (P9) with years of experience in the field of nursing and a previous BA degree in nursing expressed his opinion about studying again in another cultural context, as the follows:

> "I think it is fair that we don't get automatically … that we have a bachelor's degree and then we come here and then we automatically become nurses. I don't think it would work. The language is different, the culture is different and for sure, the working environment will also be different. So having to study extra would actually be an advantage for us because we would be able to learn what will be the difference before we eventually try to work in, for example in the hospital or any setting where we would like to work. "

Furthermore, a third aspect that emerged from the data analysis in relation to cultural aspects of the study programs, is the difference between the education systems. In Finland, the lectures seemed to be built more on active participation from the students' side, instead of just merely relying on frontal teaching. Furthermore, students experienced more flexibility in the school system and a general sense of independency was also mentioned. As Participant 5 said in connection to the issue: "teachers don't give anything ready for you, just some lectures. Then you find the things yourself. Relevant things. It's a good thing to learn here." Flexibility, however, was first a challenge to some. Students were used to a more rigid and formal education system in their previous countries of residence in comparison with the Finnish system. A nursing student commented on how flexible planning of the studies turned out to be a challenge for her: "back in the Philippines, the school manages your time for you. In here, I have to do it myself" (P2). Whereas Participant 3 pointed out that the power distance between teachers and students in the Finnish school system is less visible than in other education systems:

"Something that I really like in Finland is that I don't think many countries have is that the teachers are not on another stage. Here you can talk to the person freely, more open. The hierarchy is not that present."

Finally, technology was mentioned by the students as a remarkable difference between Finland and some countries they are from. For example, in Tanzania, where Participant 5 worked for years as a nurse, they e-systems were not used as opposed to Finland. Meanwhile the Nepalian nursing student pointed out that the technology is not as developed in her home country as it is in Finland. In addition, both logistics and nursing students also appreciated that they had the chance to familiarize themselves with different machines in the laboratories or on demonstration days, so when they have to use them in practice, they would be able to handle them properly.

5.3 Meaningful learning experiences

The aim of this section was to get a deeper understanding of what kind of situations are considered to be learning situations by the RPL students and in what context did they acquire essential skills or knowledge that are related to their field. In this research, the term 'meaningful learning experiences' refers to various activities in students' lives where upon reflecting the experiences they have realized that learning has occurred, and skills or knowledge was gained or developed. In the second part of the interviews, students were asked in general to get a more holistic view of their prior learning experiences in contrast to the RPL process. Students had a relatively solid idea about what is the relevance of learning in formal, non-formal or informal context in their lives, studies and careers. The examples of the 21st century skills had helped them to reflect on their previous learning experiences and describe the situations that helped them to develop certain skills.

A variety of perspectives were expressed by students as they were reflecting on their prior learning experiences, and two important sub-themes emerged within the meaningful learning experiences theme during the data analysis. First, students were comparing their learning experiences in formal education in relation to the learning experiences while they were working in the field. Secondly, they identified many informal learning situations from their own lives that helped them develop skills that can be utilized in their field.

5.3.1 Formal learning and learning through work are seen as complementary

It has been revealed from the data analysis that RPL students value both formal learning and learning through work, however, a common view amongst interviewees was that since these two learning settings are very different from each other, one or the other cannot be considered as superior, but they were found more like as complementary learning contexts. The special features of formal learning and learning through work according to students' perceptions, is presented in Table 4.

Formal learning	Learning through work
Learning the theory in general	Adapting the theory to specific situations
Normal situations	Abnormal situations
Simulations	Real-life situations
Essential to acquire knowledge before working	Gaining experience
Certification	Building networks
Confidence	Confidence

TABLE 4. The relevance of formal learning and learning through work according to students (cf. Resnick, 1987)

Among the interviewees formal learning was generally understood as *learning the theory*, whereas learning through work was seen as *adaptation of the theory* to the situation. As Participant 3 pointed out:

> "At the university you receive the concept. You have 6-7 seven types of phases, process of purchasing, you have the theories. But then you go to work, it's different. The theory is one thing and then the practical side, when you do the work is another. You cannot think that it's going to be exactly the same. For me it's like that you have to adapt what you have learned about the theory to the practical studies."

Viewing formal education as a base for learning through work was a common viewpoint between the students, especially in the nursing field. In all cases, the nursing students reported that without acquiring the knowledge about the theory of the discipline, it is impossible to move to the field of practice, especially because they are dealing with others' life in their work. Participant 7 was commenting on the issue as "the theories are the fundamentals of being a nurse. It must be studied or be taught from a formal perspective." The same point of view was expressed by Participant 5: "for my field, for my point of view, for my thinking, formal learning is the key. For the safety of yourself and for the safety of

the patient." However, students who had more work experience already, were more critical than others with respect to formal education.

In formal education it is taught what happens *normally* but in practice, students often face *unusual* or *unexpected* things, and the way to handle those uncommon issues usually can be learned through more practice instead of formal education. Furthermore, it was mentioned that simulations or demonstrations of certain situations are helpful in formal education, however, in working life there are many factors that affect the working process that it is not possible to go always according to the books. For example, the diversity of people's personality and their attitudes are usually a great challenge at work:

> "The most common problem that is not taught in school is that people are very different, so when you take care of one patient, it would be different from when you are taking care of another patient."

Even though giving psychological support for patients is an essential part of the nursing job, students agree on that that it cannot be taught in formal education, as the circumstances and the personality of the patients influence it greatly. Thus, it was mentioned as a subject that although that it is addressed in formal education, it can be developed truly through experience in the workplace.

In the logistics field, students also agreed that experience helps them to broaden their knowledge and learn more about the field: "you really see the world when you are not just sitting in the lesson" (P3); "if you can do hands-on work in actual warehouse or factories or stuff like that, then of course you are gonna learn a lot more than just hearing about the theory" (P4). Participant 1, who has not worked at a job related to logistics before he started the study program, had a slightly different perspective on the value of work experience based on his experience as an intern: "you are working for free but you are getting an experience, and after you graduate you have a possibility to find a job at a place where you have worked before." Hence, work experience as an intern is not only beneficial for all the learning that happens there but also for networking and for potential workplaces in the future.

On the other hand, the value of formal learning is imperative when it comes to certification. It has been revealed in the data analysis, that students find it important to have an official document that proves their knowledge.

> "Hopefully it gives advantage into finding new and different workplaces and then you can prove that you have the basic knowledge ... Whereas if you don't have the paper and you've just been

working staff, they might think it's very specific stuff that you might know … whereas if you have the engineering degree then you have a bit broader knowledge about various things. "

Another interviewee, when asked about the topic, said: "you can actually apply with that [certificate about formal education] legally (…) so I think it's very useful because of the certificates and you have a proof there black and white" (P8). It has been argued by all the participants that besides the important theoretical background knowledge that can be acquired through formal education, the official certificate at the end of the study program is another great advantage of learning in formal context.

Turning to the last concept that has emerged from the data analysis with regards to formal learning and learning through work, it had become apparent that learning in formal setting and through work gives confidence, according to the interviewees. However, opinions differed as to whether self-confidence can be strengthened more through formal learning or through work. Students, who stated that they gained confidence through work, argued that in formal education they practice things only as part of demonstrations or simulations, meanwhile at the actual work they are required to perform the same thing for real. Therefore, the more experience they have at work, the more confident they become. On the other hand, other students argued that having a strong foundation by learning the theories through formal learning, is the right way to build confidence. Without a secure background of theoretical knowledge, one cannot be self-confident enough at work, according to some students.

Overall, the results indicate that students find both formal education and learning through workplace important and experiencing both learning concepts helped them realize the value of various learning situations. The fact that students see formal and informal learning as two different learning environments, strengthen the belief that transferring learning outcomes gained in one learning setting to another learning context still has its limits and needs to be developed. Similarly to the differences between the education systems in different countries, the contrast between formal and informal learning environments can be considered as main reasons why RPL is needed and at the same time it is also one of the biggest challenges of the process.

5.3.2   Developing skills in informal learning settings

Turning now to the informal learning experiences identified by the interviewees from their own lives, various situations and settings emerged in the analysis. Students were asked to think about meaningful learning experiences from their lives. To get a better understanding how RPL processes were embedded in their overall learning experiences, students were given a list of the 21st century skills as thought-provoking reference points about what could be for example in the center or the outcome of a learning situation.

Group works were mentioned as great opportunity to develop collaboration and initiative skills. Teaching or mentoring others proved to be a learning experience also for interviewees who have done that kind of job before, as they needed to be an expert of a certain subject in order to share the knowledge. Another student pointed out that moving from one country to another was a meaningful learning experience in his life:

> "When you come from Brazil, from a faraway country, then you have difficulties with the language, culture, you might have culture shock. You have to learn the language, learn about the culture so I think this time here gives me a good experience. Lot of maturity. "(P3)

To Participant 7, the parents played an important role in terms of challenging him to think critically or to be creative. Moreover, as role models they showed different ways to handle difficult situations, being flexible, and communicate effectively with other people. He also pointed out that by playing video games, one can develop various skills, such as communicating effectively with the teammates, collaborating, or being flexible in a situation where a strategy is not working and they need to come up with a quick solution. Participant 8 said that being a leader of a church choir helped her develop leadership skills, whereas Participant 1 mentioned that watching cartoons and movies in English played an important role in his English language learning. In addition, one interviewee (P6) reported that simple conversations with professionals from the same field as hers can turn out to be valuable learning experiences.

As it can be seen, students have had various meaningful learning experiences in their lives prior to their current studies. It is also important to note, however, that not only the learning process is relevant but also how students can apply those skills in different contexts. As Participant 4 commented the issue: "I think it takes skill to recognize that you can apply these or that you need to work on them or develop them".

To sum up, it has been evident that formal education alone has not given the students sufficient and adequate competences for entering labor market and running their lives abroad. In this study it was important to bring up the students' informal learning experiences in order to enhance understanding about what they consider meaningful learning situation and how it could be relevant in their professional development. Furthermore, it was also imperative in this research to picture how RPL process is focused only a limited part of all learning and transformation that international students are going through. Thus, making this section part of the research report was an ethical choice and aimed to give the participants room for voicing their learning experiences.

5.4   Employment

When asked about their plans after graduation, all the interviewees with one exception (P3) said that they would like to work in Finland. The participants were unanimous in the view that completing a formal study program in Finland will increase their chances on the labor market. It has been revealed from the data analysis that students plan and complete their studies deliberately in order to succeed in the Finnish working context. They learn the Finnish language and complete their mandatory practical trainings at Finnish workplaces, so as to meet the needs of the labor market.

The Filipino nursing students (P2, P7, P8, P9), for instance, were recruited through an agency in the Philippines, that is specialized for recruiting nursing students, teaching them Finnish, and employ them in the Finnish health care system, as there is a great demand in the health care field for professionals. The Filipino nurses were aware of the fact that the need for qualified nurses increases their employability perspectives and they were confident that they would be able to find a job after graduation without significant challenges. However, some of them were unsatisfied with the legislation because as non-EU citizens, their prior studies cannot be recognized completely, and they usually have to study for years again before they can be employed as registered nurses, even though the labor market would need them. Meanwhile, at the same time they also admitted that learning about Finnish legislation, Finnish culture, and to familiarize themselves with the technology used in Finland, will be beneficial once they enter the labor market. Participant 9 commented the issue as follows:

"I think that's the best to see things in the Finnish context. Because it would also prepare me, the student to eventually learn more and when you go out to work you have something to tell to your future employer. So there is a higher chance that they would hire you."

These issues surfaced mainly in relation to the benefits of the RPL process. Participant 9 also added that both parties (international students and Finnish labor market) benefit from the RPL process:

"I think it would be advantageous for us who came here or for the immigrants in general. I think it would also be advantageous to the labour market because one thing that we have noticed is that a lot of this health care facilities need workers. So I think we can contribute as part of the labour force in providing this particular services in the hospital, in the elderly care and in all the other health care facilities."

Additionally, the value of the formal education and as a result, a formal certification is seen as an important tool to improve one's career. Students both in the logistics and nursing study program shared the same view, that formal education is needed in order to advance in their career. Consequently, RPL is seen among students as an important tool to improve their perspectives in their career, and at the same time it offers great benefits for the labor market, as it enables the skilled and qualified professionals to enter the job market faster. Moreover, the fact that some of the students had already work experience from Finland (although usually as apprenticeship or part-time job), enables them to carry out their studies in accordance to real-life experiences in Finnish context.

6   DISCUSSION

The purpose of this chapter is to act as a bridge between the relevant literature discussed in Chapter 2 and the findings of the current research. With the help of the previous researches on the topic, the results of this study can be interpreted in relation to findings in other contexts. In addition, according to the initial aim of this research, it is hoped that discussing the findings can provide further insights on the topic of RPL among international higher education students in Finland and support the development of RPL processes.

This study set out with the aim of investigating how the RPL system works in Finnish higher education institutions when it comes to recognizing international students' prior learning experiences as part of their degree program. Since the topic of RPL is extremely widespread, this study explored the process by focusing only certain aspects of the concept. Accordingly, in the center of the research was the practices how international students' learning experiences acquired in various learning environments are recognized in the Finnish higher education system, as well as the students' views on their study program after going through the RPL process.

However, it has become evident during the data analysis that the interrelatedness of various aspects of RPL cannot be disregarded, which is well discernible from the participants' answers. For instance, the topic of employment was not explicitly part of the interview questions, yet, it has emerged in almost every discussion while the interviewees shared their experiences related to RPL. Thus, it was important reason for the interviewees for participating in the RPL and has built the meaning they find in the RPL process overall. Nonetheless, letting the interviewees expound their views elaborately on their prior learning experience, the RPL process and their study programs, has led to the emergence of valuable factors that shape their understanding of the RPL.

In the following, the themes identified in the previous chapter will be discussed in relation to the research questions. The results of this study indicate that international students find the RPL process relatively quick and fair. It predominantly relies on official documentations as proof of the prior learning experience. Even though, students think that formal and informal learning are equally important in their fields, essential skills that are mostly acquired through informal learning, are poorly recognized in the RPL process. Nevertheless, regarding how they perceive the value of their learning on the labor market,

students reported that pursuing a degree in formal education would give them an advantage in finding a job in their field. When it comes to their study program after the RPL process has been finished, a sense of repetitiveness was discernible among students, however, they appreciated the international character of the study program and they valued the opportunity to familiarize themselves with the Finnish culture.

6.1   Quick and fair RPL process

The present study was designed to examine how students felt about the study program and how they saw the efficiency of RPL process with respect to it. However, while discussing these topics in the interviews, students' narratives eventually revealed a much broader picture of the whole RPL process than just the study programs and the assessment tools to identify informally and non-formally acquired learning.

Accordingly, students generally found the RPL process quick, fair and effective. This result may be explained by the fact that the assessment process was relying on official documents, such as work certificate, transcript of record, certificate of previous studies in formal settings, curriculum of previous study program, course descriptions and official record of practical training. These results seem to be consistent with other research on RPL in Finnish higher education institutions, which find that documentation is the most common assessment tool used in the RPL process (Mäkinen-Streng, 2016; Penttilä, 2011; Kettunen, Pulkkinen & Saari, 2013).

Penttilä (2011) reported that 48% of those who participated in RPL process, proved their prior learning experiences through official certificates, regardless of the learning environment where their prior learning took place. In addition, 41% of the students presented their transcript of records as a tool to demonstrate their prior learning, which also falls under the umbrella of official documents. Merely in 1% of the RPL cases was portfolio utilized as an assessment tool, although, according to the literature, it is one of the most complex and commonly use method, especially in terms of recognizing prior learning through non-formal or informal learning (Cedefop, 2015). Similarly, Kettunen et al. (2013) found that 91% of the RPL students proved their prior learning via official documents, and in 23% the cases, some sort of written report, and in 15% of the cases exams were also utilized besides the official documents.

The rather surprising results in relation to the striking homogeneity of the assessment procedures may be due to the challenges for formal education systems to recognize informal and non-formal learning, particularly when they were gained in a culturally different context. Even though that recognition of informal and non-formal learning is in theory an essential part of the RPL process, the findings of current study indicate that the students' prior learning that could be demonstrated through official documents, were recognized predominantly.

The fact that all of the students were applying for RPL based on previous studies and work experience also implies that documentation seemed to be the most appropriate tool to recognize the students' prior learning. Consistent with the findings presented by Mäkinen-Streng and her colleagues (2017), applying for recognition based on everyday learning, learning through hobbies or civic activities is not common among the RPL students. According to their findings that is based on a EUROSTUDENT research among Finnish higher education student, the most typical basis for RPL is prior studies and apprenticeship in Finland, followed by work experience as a reason for RPL on the second place, and studies and apprenticeship abroad on the third place. Meanwhile the least common ground for recognition is organizational activities and hobbies. The same outcomes are reflected to a certain extent in the findings of this research, since students who completed prior studies and had work experience (paid work or apprenticeship) from Finland, reported that those experiences could easily be recognized. Meanwhile, studies completed in another country were also relevant grounds for accreditation, however, comparing them to the objectives of the Finnish study program was significantly more challenging and resulted in less approved credits.

It is important to mention, however, that the previous studies conducted in Finnish context do not mention, whether there were international students among the research participants, but it reveals only that the context of the researches were Finnish higher education institutions. Therefore, the results from the above-mentioned researches do not necessarily reflect the real situation when it comes to RPL among international students.

It is interesting to note that even though students were generally satisfied with the RPL process and with documentation as an assessment tool, the need for more versatile recognition process emerged in the findings. Naturally, their prior experience and especially the context where the learning took place affected students' views on the

comprehensiveness of the RPL process. Various other methods were recommended by them that, in their opinion, could have helped to provide a more extensive picture of their knowledge and skills. They suggested that tests, skill demonstration and exposure to work and observation by an assessor would have provided a more accurate picture of their prior learning. These results echoes Penttilä's (2011) and Kiviniemi's (2016) findings that students were missing methods from the RPL process that could assess their skills more clearly, like demonstration of skills or portfolios.

While, it is important that employing various assessment methods in the RPL process can be seen as positive, since it allows to capture different aspects of the learning experience (Cedefop, 2015), it calls for a qualified assessor who is able to facilitate the RPL process and to determine what sort of methods will be used to recognize one's prior experience. With regards to the assessors, this study revealed that their ability and routine to assess their prior learning is imperative. It was interesting to see how students expressed their view on the importance of qualified assessors unanimously, whether they experienced it positively or negatively. It is confirmed by Travers & Harris (2014), who assert that "the quality of Recognition of Prior Learning process is completely dependent upon the abilities of those who carry out the procedures" (p. 250). This implies that not only the assessment methods but the assessor's ability to apply the most suitable practice(s) into the RPL process has a great impact on the outcome of the RPL process.

It is worth noting that translating skills and knowledge acquired through informal and non-formal learning is one of the biggest challenges in the RPL process. In relation to the first research question, which was aiming at exploring how informally acquired skills are recognized in the RPL process, these are significant findings. Many of the respondents of this study remarked that the RPL process was strictly focusing on knowledge that could be proved with official documents, which indicates that skills acquired outside of formal education are most of the time not recognized in the RPL process. Some students, although, received recognition for prior work experiences but it is important to note that those experiences enabled them to be absolved only from basic level practical trainings, or practical trainings that could be done at any field. Kiviniemi (2016) findings support the same idea, that students were doubting the positive attitude of staff members towards prior experience acquired outside of formal education. Furthermore, his study revealed that the staff members of Finnish higher education institutions found it difficult to identify and

recognize informally acquired skills and they were missing more consistent practices and clearer assessment criteria.

Even though this current research did not concern staff members' perspectives on the topic, it is imperative to take into consideration their views on the RPL process. Therefore, it can be concluded that the general opinion about RPL process was positive regarding the length and fairness of the procedure. However, if we go deeper, it becomes apparent that the recognition of informal and non-formal learning is still a challenge due to the different cultural contexts, the challenges to translate informal learning into formal learning, and possible feeling of doubt from staff members towards informally acquired skills and their compatibility with the formal learning objectives.

6.2   Formal and informal learning as equally important keys to success

The various career and study paths of the interviewees resulted in a rich data on their views on formal and informal learning. The diverse backgrounds of the students provided basis for multiple perspectives on how they perceive the Finnish school system compared to the education system in their home country, as well as for reflection on meaningful learning experiences in their lives. Furthermore, the interviewees perspectives were enriched due to their prior experience in different fields of work.

The results revealed that students value equally formal and informal learning and they see the learning outcomes as complementary aspects of their expertise. The value of formal learning lays in the learning of the theories and basics of the field, and in the official certificate at the end of the study program. However, students reported that formal education enable them to see how things happen in normal circumstances and how to 'act according to the book'. Meanwhile, informal learning is essential to learn how to adjust to a real-life situation and enquire essential skills and practices for their professional lives. To students, informal learning means that they need to adapt the theory to specific, unusual or unforeseeable circumstances. Therefore, it can be concluded that RPL students perceived informal and formal learning as learning experiences that are related to different aspects of their expertise, however, they are strongly interrelated with each other. This finding seems to be consistent with a research carried out by Cameron & Harrison (2012), who found that

"most skills are gained by combinations of forms of learning; in particular, combinations of (1) life experience and work experience, representing non-formal and informal learning; and (2) life experience, work experience and formal training/study, representing non-formal, informal and formal learning" (p. 302).

The finding about formal and informal learning being complementary and equally important and relevant is corroborated by Tynjälä (2008), who also claims that both formal and informal workplace learning are essential in order to develop professional expertise, even though they differ from each other in terms of nature.

In most of the cases, informal learning among the participants was understood as learning through work where they experience the things they learned about in formal education but this time in real life. Jääskelä et al. (2016) report that according to higher education graduates, the skills and competences that are required in their work cannot be acquired sufficiently through formal education, which is in line with the findings of this current research. In the same vein, Eraut (2004) also found that working with others at the workplace enables individuals to learn from others by observing and listening, and thus, capture the nature of other people's tacit knowledge, and be more familiar with different kind of knowledge and expertise.

According to the participants of this study, formal education provides the basics, predominantly theoretical knowledge, meanwhile through work they learn how to apply their knowledge to practice. Eraut (1994) claims (as cited in Andersson et al. 2017, p. 31) that in terms of job-related skills and acquiring knowledge, learning at the workplace is more effective than learning in formal context. Meanwhile, Crebert et al. (2004) examined the development of generic skills in workplace environment and at universities and found that almost 80% of the students reported that the university contributed to the development of their generic skills, and they also expressed the significance of learning in the workplace. Majakulma (2011) who examined the employment of international graduates in Finland, found that the UAS institutions were succeeding in transmit theoretical knowledge to the graduates, however, were not successful with providing them with practical or self-regulation skills.

The study also shed light on the importance of interactive group learning in university context in order to develop generic skills, which was mentioned by the participant of this study as well as an important setting to develop relevant skills in formal education.

65

Communication, leadership, social skills and flexibility was mentioned by the participants as skills that could be developed in group works, which is line with the findings of the previously referred study by Crebert et al. (2004). Whereas, in workplace context, the responsibility given by their supervisors and collaboration with other employers were the grounds for skill development, according to higher education students in the same study. Similarly to the study carried out by Crebert et al. (2004), the findings of the current research show that interaction with other people through work helped them to develop generic skills, whether it happened with colleagues, supervisors, patients or customers.

Guile (2002) also talks about routine and novel cases which learners come across and how it affects the need for different kind of skills and knowledge. Since various contexts call for diverse skills and knowledge, the real challenge here is to develop generic skills that enable people to adjust their existing skills and knowledge to different situations. He argues that generic skills are needed when undertaking both routine tasks and novel cases and both the education system and the workplaces need to support the students and employees to develop context-free skills (Guile, 2002). Meanwhile Jääskelä et al. (2016) argues that in this constantly changing world the focus should be rather on developing conditions and terms that enable lifelong learning, since it cannot be foreseen what kind of knowledge and skills will be in demand in the future. However, the findings of this research on the contrasting features of formal and informal learning indicates that the various learning settings support the obtainment of specific skills and knowledge and the transferability of those skills are not always possible. As long as different actors of the education system (e.g. teachers, staff members, students) view formal and informal learning as two learning settings that produces divergent skills and knowledge, the realisation of context-free skills is still a long way to go.

However, it is important to note, that the findings of this research indicate that generic skills are more common to be developed outside of formal education than within formal context. Furthermore, thinking outside the box and considering other situations than formal education and work, enabled students to reflect on further meaningful learning experiences from their lives. Learning experiences through hobby, family, and everyday life emerged to the surface as grounds for developing generic skills. It is important to note, however, that students were visibly shy when they were asked about other learning settings than work or

formal education. Presenting a list of the 21st century skills helped them to recognize further learning settings besides work and formal education.

One unexpected concept emerged in the findings related to informal and formal learning, which is self-confidence gained through learning. In previous studies, it has been reported that one aim of the RPL process can be to strengthen students' self-confidence by making them realize their knowledge and skills (Andersson, 2017; Pokorny & Whittaker, 2014). However, in this case, students explicitly mentioned informal or formal learning as a source for self-confidence in their profession. It is difficult to explain why to some students formal learning, meanwhile to others informal learning provides more self-confidence. Singh (H. Singh, 2015) argues that acquiring generic skills is essential in order to become confident. He argues that group/collaborate activities play an important role in developing generic skills, which is in line with the previous studies presented in this chapter and the findings of the current research. Taking into consideration that generic skills can be acquired both in different learning contexts, one possible explanation for developing self-confidence in formal or informal learning could be meaningful prior learning experiences of the students in terms of positive affect on their self-confidence.

The current study revealed relevant findings on RPL students' views on formal and informal learning by providing more insights on meaningful learning experiences from their lives and how generic skills (or 21st century skills) can be developed through various learning contexts. Furthermore, the present results are significant in terms of the relevance of the recognition of informal prior learning, since it demonstrates that how manifold students prior experience is and focusing only on the formal achievements could lead to disregard of valuable and relevant learning experiences. It can also be concluded that RPL students plan and carry out their studies conscientiously. In general, they understand the value and importance of both informal and formal learning and they complete their studies in a thorough and responsible way after participating in the RPL process.

6.3   Students' perception of the study program in the context of their former informal and formal learning experiences

The second research question was focusing on the study programs with special emphasis on students' views on their studies having gone through the RPL process. As it was

discussed previously, participants of this research were generally satisfied with the RPL process itself, however, the researcher of this study believes that exploring students' view on their current study program can also provide a valuable feedback on the effectiveness of the RPL process.

Having gone through the RPL process enabled students to shorten their study time at the UAS institutions. The shortest study program was at UAS2 for the nursing students, who respectively earned 150 ECTS in the RPL process (except P10 who earned 160 ECTS), and thus they are able to complete the 3,5-year-long bachelor's degree program in merely one year. At this point of their studies, not all students from UAS1 were able to estimate whether the RPL process helped them to shorten their study time and if yes, how much. Nevertheless, there was a consensus that each of the RPL students were motivated to graduate as soon as possible, possible with shorter study times than the original duration of their degree program.

The participants of this study are in different life situations and with a variety of memories about formal education, and most of all, their motivation of pursuing the study program derives from various reasons. Knowles' andragogical principles emphasize the different personal attributes of adult learners (Knowles et al., 2011), which have emerged through the interviews with the RPL students in this research as well. As Yang (2004) put it: "andragogy stresses the role of the learners' needs, self-concept, and internal motivation in adult learning" (p. 248). It became evident for example by the adult students' purposive decision to pursue a formal study program based on their various needs, predominantly deriving from the need to develop themselves professionally. Since most of them were planning to be employed in Finland after their studies, their prior motivation was in relation to the benefits of a Finnish qualification. However, beside the extrinsic factors, many of them decided to study again because of intrinsic factors, such as to develop themselves, and to revise their old learning in order to gain back their self-confidence as professionals. While going to the courses, they focus on how they can apply the new information in their professional lives. The participants of this research reported that due to their extensive work experience, they learned to be more purposeful and mindful about their learning, particularly when it comes to applying the new knowledge and skills in work-context. They rely on their experiences, which, according to them, significantly change their way of

thinking about how they learn informally in comparison to those peers who do not have prior work experience.

Having delineated the characteristics of adult learners according to the results of the research, it is important to note that the study programs need to be designed in a way that the diverse experience and characteristics of adult learners are given extra attention. The process of RPL is a tool to identify these needs by assessing the level of expertise of the adult students, however, the findings revealed that students found several courses repetitive after the RPL process and commented them as waste of time. This result is specifically worth paying attention to, given that according to Mäkinen-Streng et al. (2017), the main aims of recognizing one's prior learning is to make education more efficient, avoid duplication of studies, and shorten the study time in order to support faster transition from education to work. Fejes (2006) also argues that not recognizing sufficiently adult students' prior learning experiences in formal education and making them study things that they have studied before in another context cannot be afforded. Consequently, it might be beneficial to employ follow-up consultations with the students after the RPL process in order to increase the effectiveness of procedure and ensure that the courses are in accordance with their level of knowledge.

On the other hand, it has been also revealed that there are other factors that influence how the students perceive the study programs after the RPL process. Meanwhile some students expressed a sense of frustration not being able to be exempted from some courses even though they have prior knowledge on the subject, others take advantage of all the classes and focus on the possible benefits of being enrolled in the courses. Keeping in mind that after graduation most of them were planning to work in Finland, they consciously put a great emphasis on familiarizing themselves with the Finnish culture throughout their studies. Accordingly, it was a common view among the RPL students that the greatest benefit of the study program is to learn and see how things work in the Finnish context before they enter the labor market. Students unanimously agreed on that practical trainings are one of the most essential aspects of their studies, especially among the nursing students who have already completed the same level nursing studies in their home countries. Furthermore, the Finnish school system was considered to play a significant role in helping students familiarize themselves with the Finnish culture, which is imperative in that case they are employed in Finland after graduation. These results support the idea that "higher

education institutions should not only provide academic preparation and transmit knowledge to the students, but effectively prepare them for the labour market and the world of work in general" (Majakulma, 2011, p. 46).

The intercultural aspect of study program was also generally appreciated by the RPL students. It has been revealed that sharing experiences and ideas with international students from the same field is seen as a valuable experience for the RPL students. This finding is specifically significant since the importance of having international degree programs is that it does "not only provide new contact opportunities between students, researchers, and institutions but also provides a firm basis for economic cooperation in the long run through the development of a mutual awareness and understanding" (Cai & Kivistö, 2013, p. 61). Hence, supporting the internationalization of Finnish study programs is not only important from the students' point of views but also from other stakeholders' perspectives in education.

These findings revealed relevant information with respect to the second research question which was aimed at examining how students perceive the study programs after the completion of the RPL process. A sense of repetitiveness indicates that the RPL process did not fulfil its mission completely in terms of avoiding duplication of studies. Studying the same subjects over again was considered as a waste of time and resulted frustration to some students. However, giving full recognition for immigrants' prior education and skills should be handled with caution, since it also raises ethical questions. In the cases of health care workers, for example, it is important to consider whether the quality and the safety of care in the host country's health care institution is ensured (Vartiainen, Pitkänen, Asis, Raunio & Koskela, 2016). Some students agree with this idea and they also feel the need to deepen or update their knowledge in formal education for a while before entering the labor market in a different country, especially in the nursing field. In Finland most health care professions are regulated. Professionals are registered by the National Authority for Welfare and Health (i.e. Valvira), and they are required to have a certificate by an acknowledged institution in order to get employment for these regulated health care professions (Vartiainen et al., 2016).

Accordingly, students found various positive aspects in their study programs even though if it was to a certain extent repetitive. As a matter of fact, repetitiveness, in a sense, is beneficial for the students. In case the prior learning occurred a long time ago, studying

again in formal setting can be imperative. Updating their knowledge according to the present-day practices, technology and the new cultural context is essential in order to practice their profession according to the host countries standards and regulations. Thus, studies after the RPL process enables student to familiarize themselves with the new environment in terms of technology and cultural differences. Furthermore, at the same time they appreciate the intercultural setting in their formal education, since it allows them to exchange experiences with other students from different parts of the world.

6.4   Connections to the worklife in Finnish context

All the students in the present research had work experience, most of them had even worked for years in the same field as their present studies. Those students with more work experience had relatively concrete ideas and ambitions in terms of their work life once they graduate. International students who are planning to stay in the host society are in a difficult situation as they are trying to meet the demands and needs of the host society and increase their chances in the labor market by enrolling in formal study programs (Kärkkäinen, 2017). The findings of this study showed that international students are ready to learn the Finnish language and look for opportunities to familiarize themselves with Finnish working life through part-time jobs and internships. Moreover, they consider their formal education as a setting where they can learn not only the theoretical aspects of their field but also learn about the Finnish culture, which, later could be beneficial in their working life. These results reflect those of Majakulma (2011) who suggested that higher education institutions have a great responsibility in preparing students for working life and the expectations of the labor market.

The cases of the nursing students in the study demonstrated accurately the challenges that students of regulated professions face in a new country. A regulated profession refers to occupations, where "access to or practice of a profession is restricted by national law to those holding specific qualifications" (Moss, 2014. p. 386). Since the nursing students in this study are coming from outside of the EU, the EQF does not apply to them, hence they cannot ask for recognition for their qualification in the Finnish system. Consequently, they are required to undertake a potentially long training program in order to have their qualifications recognized in Finland (Vartiainen et al., 2016). Due to this regulation, the

students of the nursing degree program reported that they are required to take the nursing studies because their prior studies cannot be acknowledged as equivalent of the Finnish nursing qualification. Through the example of Filipino nurses, it is known that they usually come here through an organized recruitment process, which provides them Finnish language training while they are still in the Philippines. Upon their arrival to Finland they sign a contract with an organization where they work as assistant nurses and at the same time study in vocational college to become practical nurses. However, it is important to mention, that assistant nurses are on the lowest level of the wage hierarchy, followed by practical nurses and then registered nurses on the top (Vartiainen et al., 2016). Therefore, starting to work as assistant nurses while learning to become practical nurses in vocational school (which is not even higher education level) means that foreign nurses' qualification is recognized in a considerably lower level than their original qualification in the country of their origin. This phenomenon is called in the literature as 'dequalifying' the foreign professionals in the RPL process (Moss, 2014).

Despite of not being able to work as registered nurses in Finland, most of the nursing students did not complain about their current study and work situation. In fact, many of them found it important to take further studies, in particular due to the new cultural context. A possible explanation for that might be that they had been in Finland for a couple of years when the interviews took place and they all had time to 'accept' the current situation that they are required to undergo further studies. In addition, since many of them had some work experience in the Finnish context, it could have affected their views on the importance of education in the Finnish context. Furthermore, as it was mentioned before, students consciously carried out their studies by considering their study time as an opportunity for integration into Finnish society. Even though some of the participants emphasized the need to upgrade and/or deepen their knowledge in the field, in most of the cases, preparing for employment by learning the Finnish language and learning about the Finnish culture and working life were the determining factors in their formal studies.

It was surprising that students in general did not mention improvements that were needed in relation to future employment opportunities and how their current degree program can improve in supporting their future aspirations, particularly if they are planning to work in Finland after graduation. It is important, however, to note again that the present study did not place special emphasis on the employability of international

graduates in Finland. Therefore, elaborating on students' views on the shortages of the international degree programs in relation to the labor market cannot be done according to the findings of this research.

However, drawing on prior studies, some important issues need to be addressed that can support the improvement of the education system and recognition practices in order to enhance the learning experience and eventually the employability of international students with prior learning achievements. Lack of trust and discrimination of immigrants in the labor market can result in serious losses and barriers to find qualified professionals in certain occupations (Kärkkäinen, 2017). Consequently, in order to prevent wasting the valuable skills and knowledge of people, actions need to be taken to create a standard vocational training and qualifications framework on a global level (Vartiainen et al., 2016). With respect to recognizing immigrants' prior knowledge and skills, it needs to be a central questions of immigrant policy (Souto-Otero & Villalba-Garcia, 2015). Due to nation specific differences in occupational structures and divisions of labor in work organizations this has proved to be challenging task though. It is in the best interest of both the labor market and the immigrant employees to support their employment, especially when the profession in question is in a field where qualified professionals are in great demand. Meanwhile, with regards to the education system, Majakulma (2011) emphasizes that drawing on the diverse needs of international students is essential, with special attention to students, whose intention is to find workplace in Finland after graduation. In addition, she claims that compared to immigrants in general, international students who graduate from Finnish higher education institutions have better chances to be employed, due to the Finnish degree and their experience of Finnish culture and working life. This approach seems to be the underlying idea of international degree students' view on pursuing a degree in a Finnish higher education institution. Students who participated in this study said that familiarizing themselves with the Finnish language and culture will be beneficial for them in the labor market once they graduate from the Finnish formal education system.

The results of this research revealed the strong connection between education and labor market, since even without asking specifically about the topic of work after graduation, students looked at their current studies in relation to the labor market. Their views on how their studies are connected to work life, provides valuable insights on their perception of the degree program they are currently enrolled in and their experiences as

RPL students in Finland. The strong connection between the labor market and the education system resulted in a situation that it is the labor market who dictates the required competences and skills that education should provide for the students. Higher education institutions, therefore, must develop practices, where students' prior learning is recognized even if the learning occurred outside of formal education and in another cultural context.

6.5   Concluding remarks

The initial aim of this research was manifold. First, to contribute to a deeper understanding of the link between informal learning and RPL practices and the uniqueness of each international student. Secondly, to examine how it affects their perception of the study program having gone through the RPL process. The study has identified that the RPL practices used in some universities of applied sciences in Finland sometimes fail to identify and recognize international students' prior informal learning. The students' narratives provided valuable information on how they value their own informally and formally acquired skills and how the RPL practices enable them to demonstrate those skills and knowledge. The evidence from this study suggest that having work experience before engaging in a formal study program makes students more aware of the value of informally acquired skills. Furthermore, they are able to understand the relevance of formal learning and informal learning as two different, yet interrelated and complementary learning contexts.

The research has also shown that the study programs after the RPL process sometimes fail to match the actual level of knowledge and skills of the RPL students. Repetitiveness of studies emerged as the most dominant feature of the study program according to international RPL students. The duplication of studies cannot be strictly categorized as negative or positive aspect. Taking into consideration that one of the primary aims of RPL is to avoid duplication of studies, the repetitiveness of studies, in a way, implies that the RPL practice failed to identify and recognize every aspect of the student's expertise. However, in other cases, revising the studies is exactly what RPL students need in their formal education. Consequently, individualization needs to be a key aspect in the RPL practices in order to ensure that RPL fulfils its mission and supports the effective and

reliable transferability of skills and knowledge between different countries, sectors and learning contexts.

6.6   Limitations and recommendations for further research

There are limitations in this study that need to be addressed in order to present it as a transparent and reliable scientific work. The first limitation concerns the variety of participants in terms of degree program and nationality. Initially, the author's intention was to interview RPL students whose field of studies encompass various disciplines and they are from different countries. Unfortunately, the researcher could not contact students from different degree programs directly. In order to act carry out the research according to the regulations of the two higher education institutions, the researcher had to get in touch with the head of the study programs and ask them to forward the researcher's invitation email to the degree students. This step resulted in a great loss of potential research participants, since most of the teachers did not forwards the researcher's email to the students and there was no other option to get in touch with RPL students because the institution cannot reveal personal information of the students. Considering that out of 10 participants 5 was from the Philippines and they were all nursing students, it resulted in a less diverse data set regarding certain aspects of the research. For example, the similarities between the RPL processes to recognize Filipino nurses' prior learning were prominent. It is assumed that interviewing students with more diverse study fields and nationalities would have led to richer data set. Accordingly, for further research it is recommended to explore students' experiences on RPL in other disciplines as well. New assessment methods and practices might be revealed since the skills and knowledge vary among study fields greatly.

Another limitation is the fluency of the language used in the interviews. English is not the native language of the researcher and in most of the cases, the interviewees also had other native language than English. The fact that most of the interviewees could not express themselves on their mother tongue might have caused situations where the interviewee's words did not completely reveal his or her real opinion. This assumption derives from the fact that some interviewees apologized for their language skills during the interviews or they had difficulties sometimes finding the words in English.

The data analysis revealed important insights on employability and the value of prior learning in the labor market for the students. It reflects well the widely discussed interrelatedness of education system and labor market. As a theme it turned out to be relevant in the research, although, the topics of the interview questions were not aimed at exploring the issue. It is found to be a deficiency of the research that in the interviews the question of prior learning's value on the labor market did not play more significant role. The findings of this study suggest that the way how international RPL students perceive their degree program is highly affected by their individual plans and ambitions after the graduation. Further work is needed to gain more understanding on international RPL students' learning paths. Therefore, it is recommended for further research to examine more closely RPL practices for international students with special attention to how the unique needs and plans of the students are taken into consideration. While examining, it is important to keep in mind that students have different kinds of work experiences which vary greatly in terms of length and whether they have up-to-date knowledge within the discipline.

In conclusion, the findings of this research have significant implications for the understanding of how international students perceive the RPL practices in Finland in relation to their prior learning experiences and to their ambitions as professionals of their field. Further research is required on how to develop RPL practices in a way that it incorporates international students' prior learning experiences, their unique aims and ambitions and the demands of the Finnish labor market.

REFERENCES

Aalto, S. (2014). Recognition of prior learning: a way to quicker graduation. In Vänttinen, T. (Ed.) (pp. 66-70). *Enhancing learning outcomes evaluation. Benchmarking learning outcomes in Finland, Scotland and Kansas.* Mikkeli: Mikkeli University of Applied Sciences.

Alava, J., Halttunen, L. & Risku, M. (2012). *Changing school management. Status review -May 2012. Publications 2012:13.* Helsinki: Finnish National Board of Education. Retrieved 26 March, 2019, from https://www.oph.fi/download/146781_Changing_school_management.pdf

Alvenharju, T., Kujanpää, O., Puhakka-Tarvainen, H., Sihvonen, S. & Tallinen, K. (2015). Internationalisation of UASes needs an up-to-date approach. *Journal of Finnish Universities of Applied Science*, 2015 (3). Retrieved 13 March, 2019, from https://uasjournal.fi/tutkimus-innovaatiot/internationalisation-of-uases-needs-an-up-to-date-approach/

Ananiadou, K. and Claro, M. (2009). 21st century skills and competences for new millennium learners in OECD countries. *OECD Education Working Papers, 41.* Paris: OECD Publishing. doi:10.1787/218525261154.

Andersson, P. (2017). Validation as a learning process. In: Duvekot, R., Coughlan, D., & Aagaard, K. (eds.) (pp. 121–127). *The Learner at the centre: Validation of Prior Learning strengthens lifelong learning for all.* Houten/Aarhus: European Centre Valuation Prior Learning/VIA University College.

Andersson, P., Fejes, A. & Sandberg, F. (2013). Introducing Research on Recognition of Prior Learning. *International Journal of Lifelong Education, 32*(4), 405–411. doi:10.1080/02601370.2013.778069.

Andersson, P., Halttunen, T., & Nistrup, U. (2017). *Quality in validation of prior learning: experiences from work with the nordic model for quality in validation of prior learning.* Retrieved 26 March, 2019, from http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1197887/FULLTEXT01.pdf

Baumgartner, L. M. (2001). An update on transformational learning. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, 89*, 15-24.

Benjamin, A. J., White, M., MacKeracher, M., & Stella, K. (2013). The impact of globalization on adult education in a have-not province. *Brock Education: A Journal of Educational Research and Practice, 22*(2), 28-40.

Binkley, M., Erstad, O., Herman, J., Raizen, S., Ripley, M., Miller-Ricci, M., & Rumble. M. (2012). Defining twenty-first century skills. In Griffin, P., McGraw, B. & Care, E. (eds.) (pp. 17-66). *Assessment and teaching of 21st century Skills*. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands.

Bjornavald, J. (2001). Making learning visible: Identification, assessment and recognition of non-formal learning. *Vocational Training: European Journal, 22*, 24-32.

Blaszczak, I. (2013). Contemporary perspectives in adult education and lifelong learning - andragogical model of learning. In: Popov, N., Wolhuter, C., Almeida, P. A., Hilton, G., Ogunleye, J. & Chigisheva, O. (Eds) (pp. 305-310). *Education in One World. Perspectives from Different Nations.* Sofia: Bulgarian Comparative Education Society.

Boeren, E. (2017). Understanding adult lifelong learning participation as a layered problem *Studies in Continuing Education, 39*(2), 161-175. doi: 10.1080/0158037X.2017.1310096

Boyer, S. L., Edmondson, D. R., Artis, A. B., & Fleming, D. (2014). Self-directed learning. *Journal of Marketing Education, 36*(1), 20-32.

Bradley, H., & Devadason, R. (2008). Fractured Transitions: Young Adults' Pathways into Contemporary Labour Markets. *Sociology, 42*(1), 119–136. doi:10.1177/0038038507084828

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77-101.

Brown, J. O. (2001). The portfolio: A reflective bridge connecting the learner, higher education, and the workplace. *Journal of Continuing Education, 49*(2), 2-13. doi:10.1080/07377366.2001.10400426

Brown, J. (2015). Exploring the transformative potential of recognition of prior informal learning for learners: *A case in Scotland. Journal of Further and Higher Education, 41,* 60-78. doi:10.1080/0309877x.2015.1062850

Buchholtz, N.F., Krosanke, N., Orschulik, A.B., Vorhölter, K. (2018). Combining and integrating formative and summative assessment in mathematics teacher education. *ZDM Mathematics Education, 50*(4), 715-728. doi:10.1007/s11858-018-0948-y

Burksaitiene, N., Tereseviciene, M., & Kaminskiene, L. (2011). Portfolio use for documentation of personal and professional growth gained outside academia. *Baltic Journal of Management, 6*(2), 245-262. doi:10.1108/17465261111131839

Cai, Y., & Kivistö, J. (2013). Tuition fees for international students in Finland: where to go from here? *Journal of Studies in International Education, 17*(1), 55-78.

Cameron, R., & Harrison, J. L. (2012). The interrelatedness of formal, non-formal and informal learning: Evidence from labour market program participants. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning, 52(2)*, 277-309. Retrieved from https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1000165.pdf

Castle, J., & Attwood, G. (2001). Recognition of prior learning (RPL) for access or credit? Problematic issues in a university adult education department in South Africa. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, *33*(1), 60–72. doi:10.1080/02660830.2001.11661441

CEDEFOP (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training) (2009). *The development of national qualifications frameworks in Europe (September 2009).* Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Retrieved 25 March, 2019, from http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/6104_en.pdf

CEDEFOP (2014). *Terminology of European education and training policy* (Second edition). *A selection of 130 key terms.* Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. doi:10.2801/15877

CEDEFOP (2015). *European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning.* Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities. Retrieved 25 March, 2019, from http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/3073_en.pdf

CEDEFOP (2017a). *Global inventory of regional and national qualifications frameworks 2017. Volume I: Thematic chapters.* Retrieved 25 March, 2019, from http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/2221

CEDEFOP (2017b). *Publication Analysis an overview of national qualifications framework developments in European countries. Annual report 2016. FINLAND. European inventory on NQF 2016.* Luxembourg: Publication Office.

Cort, P. (2010). Stating the obvious: The European qualifications framework is not a neutral evidence-based policy tool. *European Educational Research Journal, 9*(3), 304-316. doi:10.2304/eerj.2010.9.3.304

Crebert, G., M. Bates, B. Bell, C.-J. Patrick, and V. Cragnolini. (2004). Developing generic skills at university, during work placement and in employment: graduates' perceptions. *Higher Education Research & Development, 23*(2), 147–165. doi: 10.1080/0729436042000206636

Creswell, J. W. & Poth, C. N. (2017). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (Fourth ed. International student edition). Los Angeles: SAGE Publications

Cristian, S. (2014). The involvement of the universities in adult education – compulsion or necessity? *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences, 142*, 214-219. doi:10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.07.689

Cross, S. (2009). *Adult teaching and learning: Developing your practice.* Maidenhead, England; New York: McGraw Hill Higher Education

Day, M. (2001). Developing benchmarks for prior learning assessment. part 1: Research. *Nursing Standard, 15*(35), 37-44. doi:10.7748/ns2001.05.15.34.37.c3026

Duvekot, R. (2014). Lifelong learning policy and RPL in the learning society: The promise of Faure? In Harris, J., Wihak, C. and J. Van Kleef (Eds) (pp. 65-85). *Handbook of the Recognition of Prior Learning.* Leicester: National Institution of Adult Continuing Education.

Elomaa, N. (2005). *Higher education glossary.* Kielipalvelun julkaisusarja. Ministry of Education. Helsinki: Helsinki University Press.

Eraut, M. (2004). Informal Learning in the Workplace. *Studies in Continuing Education, 26*(2), 247-273. doi: 10.1080/158037042000225245

European Commission (2001). *Making a European area of lifelong learning a reality.* Brussels: Commission of the European Communities.

European Commission. (2009). Strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training. Notices from European Union Institutions and Bodies: *Official Journal of the European Union, Council Conclusions 2009.* Brussels: European Commission.

European Parliament and Council (2008). Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European qualifications' framework for lifelong learning. *Official Journal of the European Union.* C 111(1), 1–7.

Fejes, A. (2006). *Constructing the Adult Learner – A Governmentality Analysis.* (Dissertation). Department of Behavioral Sciences, Linkoping University: Linkoping.

Field, J. & Leicester, M. (2000). *Lifelong learning: Education across the lifespan*. London; New York: Routledge.

Finnish National Agency for Education (2017). *Recognition of foreign qualifications in Finland.* Retrieved February 21, 2019, from https://www.oph.fi/download/177026_esite_2017_EN.pdf.

Finnish National Agency for Education (2018*). Facts. Express. Statistics on foreign degree students in Finnish higher education institutions in 2017*. Retrieved January 20, 2019, from https://www.oph.fi/download/195396_FactsExpress9b_2018.pdf

Flick, U. (2014). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative data analysis*. London: SAGE Publications

Gascoigne, N. & Thornton, T. (2013). *Tacit knowledge.* Durham: Acumen.

Gudeva, L. K., Dimova, V., Daskalovska, N., & Trajkova, F. (2012). Designing descriptors of learning outcomes for higher education qualification. S*ocial and Behavioral Sciences, 46*, 1306-1311. doi://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2012.05.292

Guile, D. (2002). Skill and Work Experience in the European Knowledge Economy. *Journal of Education and Work, 15*(3), 251-276. doi:10.1080/13639080022000012058-1

Harris, J., Breier, M., & Wihak, C. (2011). *Researching the Recognition of Prior Learning: International Perspectives.* Leicester: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education

Harris, J., and Wihak, C (2014). Introduction and Overview of Chapters. In Harris, J., Wihak, C. and J. Van Kleef (Eds) (pp. 13–24). *Handbook of the Recognition of Prior Learning*. Leicester: National Institution of Adult Continuing Education.

Helliwell, J., Layard, R., & Sachs, J. (2019). *World Happiness Report 2019*. New York: Sustainable Development Solutions Network.

Häkkinen, M., Käyhkö, K. & Bogdanoff, M. (2017). *"Enemmän kuin pelkkä projekti". Supporting Immigrants in Higher Education in Finland. SIMHE-UniPID- pilottihankkeen yhteenveto [Summary of the SIMHE-UniPID pilot project]*. University of Jyväskylä: Jyväskylä.

Isopahkala-Bouret, U., Rantanen, T., Raij, K. & Järveläinen, E. (2011) European Qualifications Framework and the comparison of academically oriented and professionally-oriented master's degrees. *European Journal of Higher Education, 1*(1), 22-38, doi:10.1080/21568235.2011.577180

Johnson, P. & Harris, D. (2002). Qualitative and quantitative issues in research design. In Partington, D. (Ed.) (pp. 99-116). *Essential skills for management research*. London: SAGE.

Joosten-ten Brinke, D., Sluijsmans, D. M. A., & Jochems, W. M. G. (2009). Quality of assessment of prior learning (APL) in university programmes: Perceptions of candidates, tutors and assessors. *Studies in Continuing Education, 31*(1), 61–76. doi:10.1080/01580370902741894.

Jääskelä, P., Nykänen, S., & Tynjälä, P. (2016). Models for the development of generic skills in Finnish higher education. *Journal of Further and Higher Education.* 1-13. doi:10.1080/0309877X.2016.1206858

Kaminskiene, L., & Stasiunaitiene, E. (2013). Validity of assessment and recognition of non-formal and informal learning achievements in higher education. *Quality of Higher Education, 10,* 28-47. doi: 10.7720/1822-1645.10.2

Karttunen, A. (2015). How informal and non-formal learning is recognized in Europe. Finland country report. Retrieved 26 March, 2019, from https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/BSt/Publikationen/GrauePublikationen/LL_Finland_FINAL_Web.pdf

Kennedy, D., Hyland, A., Ryan, N. (2007). *Writing and using learning outcomes: A practical guide; using learning outcomes and competences. Planning and implementing key Bologna features.* Retrieved 27 March, 2019, from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/238495834_Writing_and_Using_Learning_Outcomes_A_Practical_Guide.

Kettunen, K., Pulkkinen, S. & Saari, J. (2013) Ammattikorkeakoulujen aikuisopiskelijat. [Adult students in universities of applied sciences].*OTUS* 38/2013. Retrieved 27 March, 2019, from https://www.otus.fi/julkaisu/ammattikorkeakoulujen-aikuisopiskelijat/

Kiviniemi, K. (2016). "*Työkokemukseen perustuvaa osaamista ei prosessissa arvostettu ": Tutkimus hyväksilukujen ja aiemmin hankitun osaamisen tunnustamisen toteutumisesta*

*keskipohjalaisessa korkeakoulutuksessa.["*Competence based on work experience was not appreciated in the process": Research on the realization of accreditation and recognition of prior learning in higher education in Central-Pohjanmaa]. Kokkola: University of Jyväskylä, University Centre of Kokkola Chydenius.

Kivunja, C. (2015). Teaching students to learn and to work well with 21st century skills: Unpacking the career and life skills domain of the new learning paradigm. *International Journal of Higher Education, 4*(1), 1-11. doi: 10.5430/ijhe.v4n1p1

Knowles, M. S. (1974). Human Resources Development In OD. *Public Administration Review, 34*(2), 115-123. Retrieved from ProQuest Central

Knowles, M. S., Holton, E. F., III & Swanson, R. A. (2011). *The adult learner: The definitive classic in adult education and human resource development* (7th ed.). Oxford: Elsevier

Koenig, J. A. (2011). *Assessing 21st century skills: Summary of a workshop.* Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press.

Kyndt, E., Dochy, F., & Nijs, H. (2009). Learning conditions for non-formal and informal workplace learning. *Journal of Workplace Learning, 21*(5), 369-383. doi:10.1108/13665620910966785

Kärkkäinen, K. (2017). *Learning, teaching and integration of adult migrants in Finland.* Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä.

Leiste, S. M., & Jensen, K. (2011). Creating a positive prior learning assessment (PLA) experience: A step-by-step look at university PLA. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, 12*(1), 61-79. doi:10.19173/irrodl.v12i1.898

Livingstone, D. W. & Guile, D. (2012). *The Knowledge Economy and Lifelong Learning: A Critical Reader.* Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

Louise Sarauw, L. (2012). Qualifications frameworks and their conflicting social imaginaries of globalisation. Learning and Teaching, 5(3), 22-38. doi:10.3167/latiss.2012.050302

Majakulma, A. (2011). *Enhancing the Employability of International Graduates during Education- A case study based on Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences.* Laurea University of Applied Sciences. Retrieved 11 March, 2019, from http://www.studentintegration.fi/filebank/357-Majakulma_artikkeli.pdf

Merriam, S. B., Caffarella, R. S., & Baumgartner, L. M. (2007). *Learning in adulthood: A comprehensive guide (3rd ed.).* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Merriam, S. B., & Bierema, L. L. (2014). *Adult learning: Linking theory and practice.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Mezirow, J. & Taylor, E. W. (2009*). Transformative learning in practice: Insights from community, workplace, and higher education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Miguel, M. C., Ornelas, J. H., & Maroco, J. P. (2016). Recognition of prior learning: the participants' perspective. *Studies in Continuing Education*, *38*(2), 179-194. doi:10.1080/0158037X.2015.1061491

Mikulec, B. (2017). Impact of the Europeanisation of education: Qualifications frameworks in Europe. *European Educational Research Journal, 16*(4), 455-473. doi:10.1177/1474904116673645

Ministry of Education. (2006). *Education and Science in Finland.* Helsinki: Helsinki University Press.

Ministry of Education. (2007). *Aiemmin hankitun osaamisen tunnustaminen korkeakouluissa* [Recognising prior learning in higher education institutions]. Retrieved 27 March, 2019, from http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-485-292-0

Ministry of Education and Culture, Working group of the Ministry of Education and Culture on immigration issues. (2016). *The educational tracks and integration of immigrants – problematic areas and proposals for actions.* Retrieved January 20, 2019, from http://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/64986/okm6.pdf

Ministry of Education and Culture, Working group of the Ministry of Education and Culture on immigration issues. (2019). *The educational tracks and integration of immigrants. Problematic areas and proposals for procedures III.* Retrieved 27 March, 2019, from https://valtioneuvosto.fi/julkaisut/julkaisu?pubid=URN:ISBN:978-952-263-391-0.

Morrissey, M., Myers, D., Belanger, P., Robitaille, M., Davison, P., Van Kleef, J., & Williams, R. (2008). *Achieving our potential: An action plan for prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) in Canada.* Online Submission. Retrieved from ERIC

Moss, L. (2014). Prior Learning Assessment for immigrants in regulated professions. In Harris, J., Wihak, C. and J. Van Kleef (Eds) (pp. 384-406). *Handbook of the Recognition of Prior Learning*. Leicester: National Institution of Adult Continuing Education.

Mäkinen-Streng, M. (2016) *Selvitys aiemmin hankitun osaamisen tunnustamisesta suomalaisissa ammatti- korkeakouluissa ja yliopistoissa*. [Report on the recognition of prior learning in Finnish universities of applied sciences and universities]. OKM/7/040/2016. Retrieved 27 March, 2019, from https://www.academia.edu/34458176/Selvitys_aiemmin_hankitun_osaamisen_tunnustamisesta_suomalaisissa_ammattikorkeakouluissa_ja_yliopistoissa._OKM_7_040_2016

Mäkinen-Streng, M., Ojala, K., & Haltia, N. (2017). *Opitulle tunnustusta – Aiemmin hankitun osaamisen tunnustamisen (AHOT) yleisyys, käytännöt ja kokemukset korkeakouluopiskelussa. Eurostudent VI –tutkimuksen artikkelisarja.* [Acknowledging Previously Acquired Learning and Skills – Prevalence, practices and experiences

related to the recognition of prior learning (RPL) in higher education studies. Eurostudent VI article series]. Helsinki: Ministry of Education and Culture.

Nykänen, M. (2014). The European context for learning outcomes definition and learning outcomes evaluation. In Vänttinen, T. (Ed.) (pp. 22-35). *Enhancing learning outcomes evaluation. Benchmarking learning outcomes evaluation in Finland, Scotland and Kansas.* Mikkeli: Mikkeli University of Applied Sciences.

OECD (2005). *The role of the national qualifications system in promoting lifelong learning: Report from thematic group 2 – Standards and quality assurance in qualifications with special reference to the recognition of non-formal and informal learning.* Retrieved from http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/57/27/34376318.pdf

OECD (2016). *Getting Skills Right: Assessing and Anticipating Changing Skill Needs*, OECD Publishing, Paris. doi:10.1787/9789264252073-en

Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice* (Fourth edition.). Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications

Penttilä, J. (2011) "Joku liitäntälogiikka täytyy olla, ettei aina mennä ja putsata pöytää" – AHOT korkea- kouluopiskelijoiden näkökulmasta. [Some sort of order for linkages should be available, so that you cannot just go and clean the table" - RPL from the perspective of higher education students]. *Opiskelijajärjestöjen tutkimussäätiö Otus rs 36*/2011. Retrieved from https://www.otus.fi/julkaisu/joku-liitantalogiikka-taytyy-olla-ettei-aina-menna-ja-putsata-poytaa/

Pokorny, H. & Whittaker, R. (2014). Exploring the learner experience of RPL. In Harris, J., Wihak, C. and J. Van Kleef (Eds). (pp. 259–283). *Handbook of the Recognition of Prior Learning.* Leicester: National Institution of Adult Continuing Education

Pyykkö, R. (2010). Laatua tunnistamiseen ja tunnustamiseen. [Quality for identification and recognition of learning]. In Halttunen, T. & Pyykkö R. (Eds.) (pp. 8-15). *Oivalla osaaminen.* Turku: University of Turku.

Resnick, L. (1987). The 1987 presidential address: Learning in school and out. *Educational researcher, 16*(9) 13-14. doi:10.2307/1175725

Rubenson, K., & Beddie, F. (2004). Policy formulation in adult education and training. In Foley, G. (Ed.) (pp.153-166). *Dimensions of adult learning: adult education and training in a global era.* Maidenhead, England: McGraw-Hill Education

Rubin, H. J., & Rubin, I. S. (2004*). Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data.* Sage Publication

Scholten, A. M. (2007). *Exploration of portfolio characteristics for the recognition of prior learning: The identification, assessment and recognition of actual competencies of highly-skilled immigrants.* Twente: University of Twente.

Silverman, D. (2013). *Doing qualitative research* (Fourth edition.). Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

Singh, H. (2015). Developing generic skills in higher education. *Indian Journal of Applied Research. 5*(6), 824-826. doi:10.1080/0729436042000206636

Singh, M. (2015). *Global Perspectives on Recognising Non-formal and Informal Learning: Why Recognition Matters*. Cham: Springer International Publishing.

Singh, M. (2017). Quality lifelong learning: qualifications frameworks and mechanisms for recognizing all learning. In CEDEFOP (2017) *Global inventory of regional and national qualifications frameworks 2017. Volume I: Thematic chapters*. Retrieved from http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/2221

Snyman, M., & Van den Berg, G. (2018). The Significance of the Learner Profile in Recognition of Prior Learning. *Adult Education Quarterly, 68*(4), 24-40. doi:10.1177/0741713617731809

Souto-Otero, M., & Villalba-Garcia, E. (2015). Migration and validation of non-formal and informal learning in Europe: Inclusion, exclusion or polarisation in the recognition of skills? *International Review of Education, 61*(5), 585-607.

Teresiviciene, M., Zuzeviciute, V., & Hyde, J. (2007). The need of validation and recognition of learning outcomes acquired non-formally and informally. *Baltic Journal of Management, 2*(3), 334-350. doi:10.1108/17465260710817528

Teräs, M., Osman, A. & Lasonen, J. (2018). VET and newly arrived immigrants: Challenges of recognition and validation. In Moreno Herrera, L., Teräs, M., & Gougoulakis, P. (Eds.) (pp. 607-623). *Emergent issues in vocational education and training: voices from cross-national research.* Premiss: Stockholm.

Thomas, A. (2000). Prior learning assessment: The quiet revolution. In A. Wilson & E. Hayes (Eds.) (pp. 508–522). *Handbook of adult and continuing education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

Thomas, A., Collins, M., & Plett, L. (2002). *Dimensions of the experience of prior learning assessment & recognition. New Approaches to Lifelong Learning (NALL) working paper.* Retrieved from ERIC: https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.jyu.fi/docview/62147284?accountid=11774

Thomas, D. R. (2006). A general inductive approach for analyzing qualitative evaluation data. *American journal of Evaluation, 27*(2), 237-246. doi:10.1177/1098214005283748

Tierney, W. & Dilley, P. (2001). Interviewing in education. In Gubrium, J. F. & Holstein, J. A. (Eds.) (pp. 453-471). *Handbook of interview research*. SAGE Publications. doi:10.4135/9781412973588

Tracy, S. J., (2012). *Qualitative research methods: collecting evidence, crafting analysis, communicating impact*. Oxford: Wiley

Travers, N. L. & Harris, J. (2014). Trends and issues in the professional development of RPL practitioners. In Harris, J., Wihak, C. and J. Van Kleef (Eds) (pp. 233–258).

Handbook of the Recognition of Prior Learning. Leicester: National Institution of Adult Continuing Education.

Tynjälä, P. (2008). Perspectives into learning at the workplace. *Educational Research Review, 3(*2), 130–154. doi:10.1016/j.edurev.2007.12.001.

Vaismoradi, M., Turunen, H., & Bondas, T. (2013). Content analysis and thematic analysis: Implications for conducting a qualitative descriptive study. *Nursing and Health Sciences, 15*(3), 398-405. doi:10.1111/nhs.12048

Van Kleef, J. (2011). Canada: A typology of prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) research in context. In Harris, J., Breier, M., & Wihak, C. (Eds) (pp. 44- 84). *Researching the Recognition of Prior Learning: International Perspectives*. Leicester: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education.

Van Laar, E., Van Deursen, A. J. A. M., Van Dijk, J. A. G. M., & de Haan, J. (2017). The relation between 21st-century skills and digital skills: A systematic literature review. *Computers in Human Behavior, 72*, 577-588. doi:10.1016/j.chb.2017.03.010

Vanhanen-Nuutinen, L., Saari, J., Kotila, H., & Mäki, K. (2018) *Opintojen aikainen työssäkäynti ongelma vai mahdollisuus ammattikorkeakouluopinnoissa? EUROSTUDENT VI –tutkimuksen artikkelisarja* [Employment during studies – problem or opportunity in university of applied sciences studies]. Helsinki: Ministry of Education and Culture. Retrieved 27vanha March, 2019, from http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-263-556-3

Vartiainen, P. (2019*). Filippiiniläisten sairaanhoitajien polut Suomeen: Tutkimus oppimisesta ja työyhteisöintegraatiosta kansainvälisen rekrytoinnin kontekstissa* [The paths of Filipino nurses to Finland: A study on learning and integration processes in the context of international recruitment]. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved 27 March, 2019, from http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-03-0937-4

Vartiainen, P., Pitkänen, P., Maruja, A., Raunio, P., & Koskela, M. (2016). From the Philippines to Finland: Nurses' Expectations and Finnish Realities. *Journal of Population and Social Studies [JPSS], 24*(1), 30-46. Retrieved from https://www.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/jpss/article/view/102301

Virtanen, A., & Tynjälä, P. (2018). Factors explaining the learning of generic skills: A study of university students' experiences. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 1-15. doi:10.1080/13562517.2018.1515195

Werquin, P. (2010). Recognition of non-formal and informal learning: Country practices. Paris: OECD. 65. http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/22/12/ 44600408.pdf (accessed December 17, 2018).

Werquin, P. (2012). The missing link to connect education and employment: recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes, *Journal of Education and Work*, *25*(3), 259-278, doi:10.1080/13639080.2012.687574

Werquin, P. (2014). RPL, labour markets and national qualifications frameworks: A policy perspective. In Harris, J., Wihak, C. and J. Van Kleef (Eds) (pp. 86-114). *Handbook of the recognition of prior learning.* Leicester: National Institution of Adult Continuing Education

Wiliam, D. (2000). *Integrating formative and summative functions of assessment.* Retrieved 27 March, 2019, from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/311806066_Integrating_summative_and _formative_functions_of_assessment

Yang, B. (2004). Holistic learning theory and implications for human resource development. *Advances in Developing Human Resources, 6*(2), 241-262. doi:10.1177/1523422304263431

Yin, R. K. (2016). *Qualitative research from start to finish* (Second edition.). New York: Guilford Press.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Research guide

Warm up questions

1. Where are you from?
2. Which degree program are you enrolled in?
3. How did you find out about the opportunity of RPL?
4. Why did you choose to apply for RPL?
5. To what extent did the opportunity of RPL affect your willingness to start your studies in the program?
6. What kind of knowledge/skills of yours did you want to have recognized?

Interview questions regarding the RPL process and the study programs

1. How would you evaluate the RPL process?
2. How accurate do you think the RPL process was?
3. How did you prove your prior knowledge and skills?
4. How strict were the requirements in the RPL process?
5. What kind of documents did you have to provide?
6. How did the RPL process affect the length of your studies?
7. What do you think about the courses having gone through the RPL process? Did they match your level of knowledge/skills?
8. What made you feel that your prior learning was (not) accurately assessed?
9. What kind of help did you get during the RPL process?
10. What aspects of the RPL process motivated/discouraged you?
11. What were the benefits of participating in the RPL process (personally and study-wise)?
12. What could have made the RPL process more efficient?

Interview questions regarding learning experiences

1. What kind of meaningful learning experiences have you had outside of formal education?

2. Can you name informal learning situations that happened in your own life?

3. What ways of learning do you prefer the most?

4. What are the values of skills and knowledge gained through informal and formal learning experiences?

5. What kind of field-specific knowledge/skills did you gain through informal learning?

6. What kind of informal learning experiences do you find relevant to your present studies and your future career?

Appendix 2. Consent for scientific research

I have been requested to participate in the following study: Recognition of prior learning (RPL) among international students in Finland

I have read the notification and have received sufficient information on the study and its implementation. The content of the study has also been explained to me verbally and I have received proper answers to all my questions concerning the study. The clarifications about the study were provided by Réka Merikallio. I have had sufficient time to consider participating in the study.

I understand that it is voluntary to participate in the study. I have the right to interrupt my participation or cancel my consent at any time and without explanation during the study. Interruption of participation or cancellation of consent for the study have no negative consequences for me.

I will not participate in interviews when I have a flu or fever, or when I am recovering from an illness or otherwise do not feel well.

By signing the consent document, I accept that my information is used for the research described in the information letter.

☐ Yes

In addition, I accept that personal data revealing my racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs-will be processed for the research.

☐ Yes

I accept that the data will be archived with identification codes after the study.

☐ Yes

I allow my personal data to be transferred to research group members outside the EU/EEA area. I understand that such transfers may be a risk due to the lack of regulation on the adequacy of protection level and appropriate protection mechanisms.

☐ Yes

I allow that I can be identified from the research results [exceptionally, for example, in case of expert reviews]. In this case, the risks of identification must be assessed separately from the viewpoint of the research subject.

☐ Yes

I allow that the interview will be recorded. (The recording will be considered confidential, and it will be deleted once the study is finished.)

☐ Yes

With my signature, I confirm my participation in the study, voluntarily agree to participate in examinations and permit the matters mentioned above.

_____   _____

Signature   Date

_____   _____

Printed name   Date of birth

_____

Address

Appendix 3. Privacy notice

Participation in the research "Recognition of prior learning (RPL) among international students in Finland "is voluntary and the research subject does not need to submit any data. Participation can be cancelled.

    ☐ The privacy notice has been submitted directly to the research subject

    ☐ I have understood the information below and want to participate in the research

    Place and date:

    _____

    Signature:

    _____

    Printed name:

1. Name and duration of the research

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) in Finland.
Participants are students of a Finnish University of Applied Sciences. They share their experiences regarding the RPL process in a form a semi-structured individual interview. It is a one-time study for the researcher's Master's thesis. It is estimated to be completed in May 2019.

2. Legal basis for the processing of personal data

EU's General Data Protection Regulation, Article 6, Paragraph 1

    ☐ The consent of the research subject

    Regulations:
    ☐ Task carried out in the public interest/exercise of official authority vested in the controller
        ☐ Scientific or historical research purposes or statistical purposes

    ☐ For the purposes of the legitimate interests pursued by the controller or by a third party
    The legitimate interest in question:

EU's General Data Protection Regulation, Articles 6 and 9 (specific categories of personal data):

☐ The research subject's explicit consent

3. Controller, scientist-in-charge and contact person

The research is for a Master's thesis completed for the Faculty of Education and Psychology, University of Jyväskylä.

University of Jyväskylä, Seminaarinkatu 15, P.O. Box 35, 40014. Switchboard (014) 260 1211, Business ID 0245894-7**.** Data protection officer of the University of Jyväskylä: tietosuoja@jyu.fi, tel. 040 805 3297.

Contact person(s): Réka Merikallio

Supervisor: Maarit Virolainen

Implementers of the research: Réka Merikallio

Recipients of personal data: The data will not be transferred to a third party.

Transfer of data outside the EU or EEA and appropriate safeguards: The data will not be transferred.

4. Background and purpose of the research

The purpose of this research is to clarify the international student's experiences in the RPL process.

Persons participating, studying or teaching in higher education, aged 19-65 years, are requested to participate in the research. The entry criteria are that the research subject has participated in RPL process at a Finnish University of Applied Sciences and the research subject is non-Finnish. The research will include around 10 research subjects.

5. practical implementation of the research

It takes about 30-60 minutes to participate in the research.

The research is implemented so that research subjects participate in an individual semi-structured interview at a time and place on what the research subject and the researcher agreed in advance. The research includes 1 individual interview with each research subject.

6. Potential Benefits and disadvantages to subjects

The research produces information on recognition of prior learning among international students in Finland.

7. Protection of personal data

The data collected during the research and the research results are processed confidentially in compliance with the data protection legislation. It will not be possible to identify you from the research results, clarifications or publications.

The following have been considered when designing the research:
Safeguards selected to protect personal data.

☐ Actions that make it possible to afterwards confirm and verify who has saved, changed or transferred personal data

☐ Pseudonymisation of personal data

Processing of direct identifiers

☐ Direct identifiers are removed in the analysis phase but the code key is retained

In research results and other documents, the only reference to you is an identification code. The identification code key that enables connecting your personal data to the identification code is held securely and will be disposed after the Master's thesis is accepted.

The research data is stored in accordance with the University of Jyväskylä's data security practices for processing research data.

8. Information received from elsewhere

Your personal information that is necessary for the research can also be collected from other personal registers upon your permission. In all cases, your data will be processed confidentially.

9. Research results

The research will result in the Master's thesis. The research subjects will be informed personally, when the study is completed and how it is available at University Library.

10. Research costs and financial clarifications

Participation in the research will not result in costs to the participants.

The research is not funded by anyone.

11. Rights of the research subject and deviation from them

The research subject has the right to cancel his/her consent if the processing of personal data is based on consent.

A research subject has the right to lodge a complaint to the office of the Data Protection Ombudsman if the research subject considers that the processing of personal data relating to him/her infringes the valid data protection legislation. (Read more at http://www.tietosuoja.fi).

If necessary, in scientific research it is possible to deviate from data subject's rights specified in the General Data Protection Regulation, if the rights are limited by the national legislation (HE 9/2018 vp), with the following protective measures:

> 1. The processing of personal data is based on a research plan.
>
> 2. The research has a person or group in charge of the study.
>
> 3. Personal data are used and transferred only for historical or scientific research or other compatible (statistical) purpose and the procedures are in any case conducted so that the data of specific persons are not revealed to outsiders.
>
> 4. If the legislation requires the data protection impact assessment has been done.

Deviating from the data subject's rights is possible only when it is likely that the abovementioned rights prevent or largely hinder the achievement of the purposes of the research. For example, in a situation where research data is fully pseudonymised or anonymised and the controller does not possess a code key, the use of the data subject's right of access could significantly harm the implementation of the research.

Justification for deviating from the rights: For example, data can be corrected when collecting them, but because all direct identifiers are deleted in the analysis phase, it is not possible to identify research subjects during the study.

There is no deviation from the rights in this research.

12. storage and archival of personal data Storage

The register is stored on the researcher's computer until the research has ended without identification data, pseudonymised. After completion of the study the data will be discarded.

Archival

The research data collected from you will be not be archived.

13. Implementing the rights of data subjects

If you have questions on the rights of data subjects, please contact the University's data protection officer. All requests concerning the implementation of the rights must be submitted to the Registry Office of the University of Jyväskylä. Registry Office and

Archive, P.O. Box 35 (C), 40014 University of Jyväskylä, tel. 040 805 3472, email: kirjaamo(at)jyu.fi. Visiting address: Seminaarinkatu 15, Building C (the Main Building), 1st floor, room C 140.

14. Insurance coverage of research subjects

The personnel and activities of the University of Jyväskylä are covered by insurance. The coverage includes insurance against treatment injury, liability insurance and voluntary accident insurance.

During the study, research participants (test persons) are insured against accidents, damages and injuries caused by an external cause. Accident insurance is valid during physical tests and journeys immediately related to the research. In addition to accidents, the insurance covers muscle or tendon sprains that are the direct result of a specific one-time exertion and movement and for which medical care has been delivered within 14 days from the injury. Compensation will be paid for a period that covers, at the most, six weeks from the date of the injury. Surgical operations and magnetic resonance imaging are not compensated for as treatment for a sprain caused by exertion and movement.

The research unit is prepared to provide immediate first aid for injuries and sudden illnesses during physical testing. The laboratory has first aid equipment, and the personnel are trained to use them. Research participants are recommended to have personal accident/health and life insurance because insurance companies do not offer complete insurance coverage for research projects, for example, in case of a seizure.