

REFNILLO

Recognition of formal, non- and informal learning: use of learning outcomes

Final Report

- Public Part -

Project information

Project title: REFNILLO: Recognition of formal, non- and informal learning: use of learning outcomes

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Project Summary

Project Objectives

Project objectives

The main objective of REFNILLO has been to seek agreement within the NARIC network on how to deal with RPL certificates and to offer NARICs recommendations on how to evaluate RPL certificates. It thereby also examined the usefulness of learning outcomes.

Overall, the objectives of REFNILLO were threefold:

1. To establish what information each NARIC would require for RPL certificates to be taken into consideration in their evaluations
2. To collect more examples of existing (good) practice, in the form of certificates and possibly also evaluations of such certificates
3. To seek agreement within the NARIC network on how the certificates could be improved and how they would be evaluated

The international recognition of non-formal and/or informal learning is a key priority in view of the shift towards competency based education within Europe that currently takes place. As such it addresses various European policy objectives supporting this development, such as the Bologna Process, Lifelong Learning and the European Qualifications Framework.

REFNILLO followed up on the outcomes of the 'Study of Formal Recognition and Non-Formal and Informal Learning', undertaken last year. This study started to explore the possibilities of international recognition of RPL and the outcomes of this study showed that there is still a lot to be done. REFNILLO aimed to contribute to fill this need for recognising RPL certificates, by formulating recommendations for NARICs on how to undertake such evaluations. Thereto REFNILLO investigated what information each NARIC would require to take RPL certificates into consideration for their evaluations and further to formulate recommendations for the NARIC network on how the certificates could be improved and how they would be evaluated.

The REFNILLO project has been carried out by the same consortium as the 'Study of Formal Recognition and Non-Formal and Informal Learning', involving: Nuffic, UK NARIC, CIEP and Högskoleverket.

Potential impact upon and benefits to the target user groups

The main target group of REFNILLO are the credential evaluators of the NARIC network. By using the recommendations, credential evaluators are supported in their day to day work when dealing with the recognition of RPL certificates and diplomas that are based, either partly or fully, on the award of RPL.

Moreover, during the project, NARICs have been given the opportunity to be actively involved by responding to the web based survey. This activity potentially has had an impact on its own as it already involved the NARIC members actively in thinking about the different aspects of how to evaluate RPL certificates and how learning outcomes can be useful in doing so.

The outcomes of the REFNILLO project can be sustained through the use of the outcomes of REFNILLO in the daily work of the credential evaluators of the NARIC network. It has the potential to do so as REFNILLO addresses a lack of transparent information on how to approach the evaluation of RPL certificates. Moreover, the recommendations are formulated by the NARIC members themselves, by providing input to the web based survey.

The NARIC network provides information on recognition to credential evaluators, national policy officers and the general public. As such, each NARIC office is also free to further disseminate the recommendations to all of their national partners, such as universities.

Project Outcomes and Undertaken Activities

Activities & methodology

Besides the recommendations (see below), the different activities undertaken during the project are also to be considered outcomes on their own.

Activities:

- **NEEDS ANALYSIS:**
Defining the conceptual framework of the project.

- **DESIGN OF THE SCHEMATIC RPL MODEL CERTIFICATE:**
The project team designed a schematic RPL model certificate that served as a web-based survey consisting out of five sections, that systematically inquired on:
 - Recommendations.
 - Importance of types of information displayed.
 - Structure of the information provided.
 - Added value of learning outcomes in evaluating RPL certificates.
 - General Questions.

- **COLLECTING FEEDBACK FROM THE NARIC NETWORK BY LAUNCHING THE WEB SURVEY:**
Each NARIC has been requested to provide feedback on the schematic model certificate. The outcomes have been captured in graphics.

- **PRESENTATION AT ANNUAL ENIC/NARIC MEETING OF THE (PRELIMINARY) OUTCOMES:**
Inform the ENIC/NARIC network of the preliminary project results of the REFNILLO project in order to act on the opportunity to collect feedback from the network.

- **RECOMMENDATIONS BASED ON RESULTS OF WEB-BASED SURVEY:**
Formulation of the recommendations, following the NARIC members' feedback on the

schematic model certificate. The recommendations are published in the final report.

- WEBSITE:

The latest updates of the project are reflected on the website, as well as the projects' outcomes.

- OVERALL ORGANISATION:

Successful project management, including: coordinating the project, monitoring planning and progress, reporting, dissemination and financial management.

Methodology

Initially the methodology comprised the collection and selection of real-life RPL certificates, on the basis of which the project team were to design two model certificates. The project team would then design a questionnaire for the NARIC network to evaluate these two certificates, via a web-based survey with the aim of identifying what information NARIC centres require in order to take such certificates into consideration. Furthermore, it would seek agreement on how these can be improved and, ultimately, evaluated. The analysis of the questionnaires is published in this final report, which will also provide recommendations to the whole NARIC network.

However, it became clear in the early stages of the project that the partnership was not able to collect a representative sample of RPL certificates that could be considered to be good practice and on which the model certificates could be based. As a result, the designed model certificates might have been too random and/or biased, which could potentially have prevented the development of a robust questionnaire and therefore risk the credibility of the project results. Also, using the real life diplomas/certificates of previous project may have led to similar results, when the idea is to elaborate on the findings from last year.

Consequently, instead of designing two model certificates and a questionnaire, a 'schematic model certificate' had been developed that was tested through the questionnaire to systematically inquire about the information that is intended to be the output of the project. As one of the main aims of the project as a whole is to see if the recommendations of the last project can be extended to the whole network, inquiring about the information NARIC's need to see displayed based on our recommendations is probably a more neutral and effective way of eliciting results.

Outcomes

The main objectives of the REFNILLO project were to establish what information each NARIC would require for RPL certificates to be taken into consideration in their evaluations and to seek agreement within the NARIC network on how the certificates could be improved and how they would be evaluated. This has been done through the launch of a survey into the NARIC network. In the following, first the survey will be discussed and then the outcomes and recommendations of the project

About the survey

The survey contained 9 questions spread through the following 6 parts:

Part I - Recommendations to credential evaluators

Part II - General questions

Part III - Importance of the information displayed on a RPL certificate

Part IV - Structure of the information provided

Part V - Learning outcomes

Part VI- Further comments

The majority of the questions were open questions of which some also allow for additional comments. There has been given the possibility for general feedback at the end of the survey. A couple of questions related to the main outcomes (discussed below) inquired about the importance, which respondents could indicate on a scale from 1 to 5:

1. This information is not at all important when considering the RPL certificate for evaluation and could be left out;
2. This information has no real added value, it is not necessary to display this information on the RPL certificate;
3. Useful information, but I could take the RPL certificate into consideration without this information;
4. Important information I need to consider the RPL certificate for evaluation;
5. Crucial information, without it I cannot consider the RPL certificate for evaluation.

RPL has been used in the survey in a broader definition than the abbreviation of Recognition of Prior Learning. In the survey RPL explicitly referred to the process by which an authority or institution in one particular country assesses the knowledge, skills and competences than an individual possesses as a result of for example a period of 1) learning acquired in a non-formal setting, 2) learning that did not lead to a formal qualification, or 3) learning acquired through work experience.

Recognition in this context is understood in the sense of validation through an assessment procedure. 'Recognition' in RPL therefore does not refer to the process of evaluating an international credential.

In the survey a clear distinction was made between 'RPL qualifications' on one hand and diplomas that are partly or completely obtained through RPL on the other. In the survey a RPL certificate was understood as a qualification that is issued by a HEI after an assessment procedure, reflecting learning achievements based on RPL. When 'Diploma' was used, it was referred to a Bachelor, Master or PhD degree that is issued by a HEI and is partly or fully obtained on the basis of RPL.

The survey was completed by a total of 13 NARIC centers, out of a possible 32 NARICs to which the web survey was sent. This constitutes a response rate of 40,6%, that reflects a high level of interest within the NARIC Network in the topic of the recognition of RPL. The user-friendly web format may have been helpful as well in achieving a relatively high response rate. A good regional spread all across Europe was achieved, and the participating countries represent various educational systems and recognition procedures. Therefore, we consider the outcomes of this survey to be representative of actual recognition practices within the NARIC Network.

Support NARIC network on recommendations

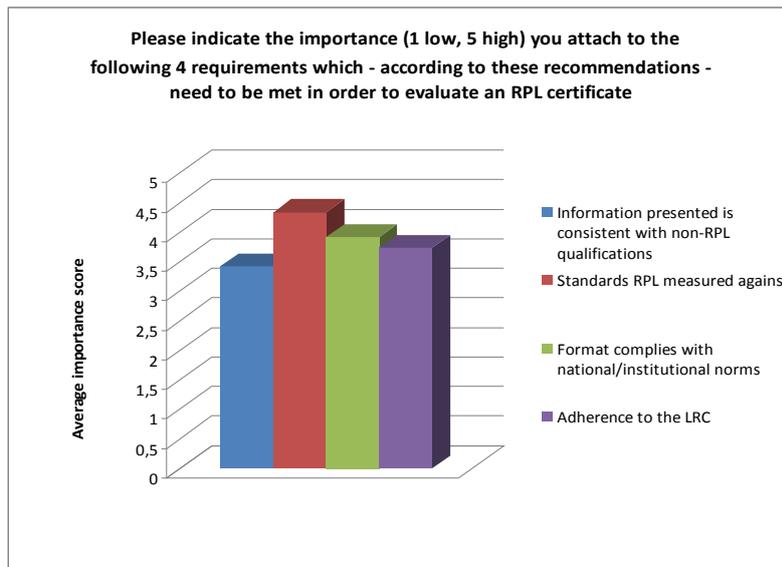
One of the main outcomes of the survey is the broad support given to the importance of the recommendations of the previous project -the 'Study on formal recognition of non formal and informal learning'- on how to deal with RPL qualifications and diplomas that have been partly obtained by RPL. The questions in the survey were designed to gauge the importance of these recommendations, in order to develop more structured guidelines for the whole network.

The respondents supported the importance of the following 4 requirements, that all need to be met in order to evaluate an RPL qualification:

1. For the sake of consistency, ensure that the information presented on the RPL qualification is similar, in content and format, to information provided on qualifications

- issued following a period of formal learning;
2. Identify the standards against which the non-formal or informal learning has been assessed (e.g. NQF);
 3. Check that the format of the RPL certificate complies with national and/or institutional norms;
 4. When evaluating RPL certificates, credential evaluators should adhere to the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

Figure 1



In addition to the above mentioned requirements 38% of the respondents felt that more requirements should be fulfilled. The suggestions included that *'it must be ensured that the issuing of a RPL-certificate is done in accordance with national legislation'* and *'the RPL-procedure should be assessed within the quality assurance and/or accreditation procedures of the higher education institution / programme. In that way, the results of the RPL-procedure can not be doubted by credential evaluators'*.

The calling into attention of the need for quality assurance has been brought to the forefront by another respondent at the end of the survey, whom stated that *'The quality assurance is essential. Common standards regarding RPL should be a priority, otherwise RPL might be developed in such a diversified way that its credibility could be undermined'*.

These additional requests mirror the findings and recommendations of the previous Study, which could be interpreted to highlight a need for more standardised European guidelines as well as general consensus amongst network members.

Should RPL be included in a Diploma?

The network seemed to be divided on the question if it should be stipulated on a diploma or qualification that it was obtained via RPL, either partly or fully. Where 44,5% agreed it should not be included, 33,3 % found this information important. 22,2% had no opinion. From the respondents who agreed it should not be stipulated, one held the opinion it should still be stipulated on the Diploma Supplement. Moreover many respondents used the opportunity to support their choice by providing a comment (more than with the other questions in the survey).

One of the advocates of not including the information that the qualification was obtained through RPL stated argued that *'what is important is, that the institution has issued a*

diploma and we will evaluate it exactly the same way, whether it is obtained fully on the basis of formal studies or whether RPL forms part of the qualification’.

One of the respondents advocating the inclusion of including the information that a qualification was obtained (partly) through RPL, argued that: *‘The qualification may seem less suspicious if it is clearly stated how it has been obtained. If it is clearly stated on the qualification that it has been obtained via RPL, it will become more transparent and easier to get a grasp of the qualification’.*

Information to be displayed on a RPL certificate

Another outcome of the survey was the importance given to 13 ‘types of information’ that should be included in a hypothetical RPL certificate, which are listed below. The question ‘What kind of information do you need to see on a RPL certificate in order to take it into consideration for your evaluation?’ aimed at inquiring into the importance of various types of information for credential evaluators to be displayed on an RPL certificate in order to be able to evaluate this. These types of information were selected from collected RPL samples.

The question itself referred to a hypothetical qualification based solely on RPL which is not a diploma (BA, MA, PhD), but which is issued by an accredited Higher Education Institution. This hypothetical case has been adopted by anticipating current policy developments which might lead to future RPL qualifications being issued by higher education institutions.

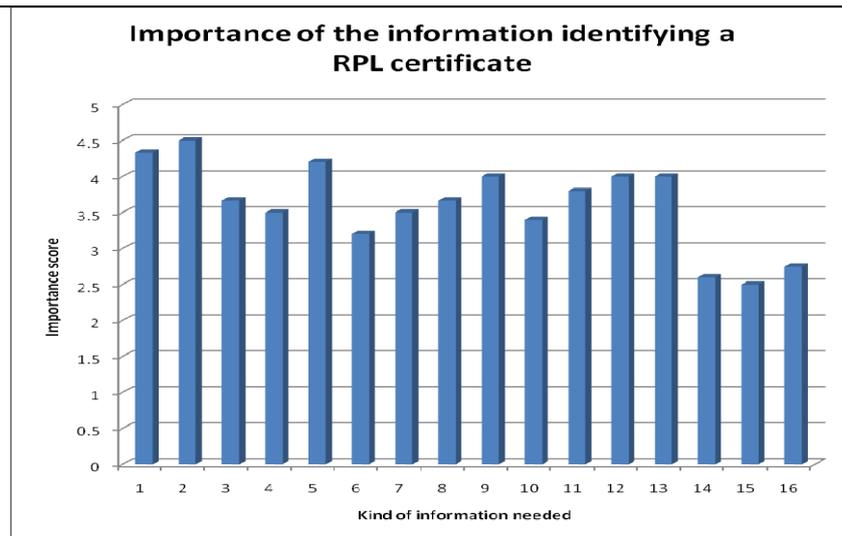
The following types of information are considered to be important to be included in a RPL qualification (they all had a score between 3 and 4,5, as reflected in the figure below):

1. Name of certificate
2. Orientation of programme
3. Learning outcomes of whole programme
4. Learning outcomes achieved through RPL
5. Level at which RPL was assessed
6. Individual marks/grades achieved
7. Exemptions granted in terms of institutional/national credits
8. Date of RPL decision
9. Date certificate issued
10. Reference to QA procedure/body
11. Profile and brief contents of programme
12. RPL assessment method used
13. Information on assessment instruments

The following 3 types of information scored around 2,5 and could therefore be considered less important:

14. Function or position of RPL assessor/jury
15. Glossary of abbreviations
16. Reference to contact point at institution for more information

Figure 2



(The numbers listed above correspond with the numbers in this figure)

Where to display information on RPL?

The previous project 'Study on formal recognition of non formal and informal learning' and also the efforts to collect examples in REFNILLO showed that most examples of qualifications containing RPL are part of a qualification such as a diploma. Therefore the survey inquired about the preference of where –if at all- information about RPL should be displayed, in case RPL is part of a diploma. Hereto the respondents could indicate where the following kind of information should be included (if at all) on the Diploma, Diploma Supplement, both Diploma and Diploma Supplement, or neither of the two:

1. Name of the certificate obtained
2. Orientation of the programme assessed (exemption of study or professional orientation)
3. Learning outcomes of the whole programme
4. Learning outcomes achieved through RPL n
5. The level at which the RPL was assessed
6. Individual grades/marks given (if applicable)
7. Exemptions granted in terms of institutional/national credits
8. and/or ECTS credits and level (see example)
9. Date when the RPL decision was taken
10. Date of issue of the certificate
11. Reference to the Quality Assurance Procedure/ QA body
12. The profile and brief contents of the course/module/programme for which exemption/certification/crediting on the basis of RPL was sought and was assessed against
13. The RPL assessment method used to gain exemptions/credits
14. Information on the assessment instruments /jury
15. Function or position of RPL assessor
16. A glossary of abbreviations
17. Reference to a contact point at the institution to supply further information

The outcomes showed that most information should be included, and a majority gave a preference to include the information in the Diploma Supplement, except for 'Orientation of the programme assessed (exemption of study or professional orientation)' and 'The level at which the RPL was assessed' where a majority indicated this information should be displayed both on the Diploma and the Diploma Supplement.

Another exception where a substantial part of the respondents considered the information should not be included, concerns the 'Information on the assessment instruments /jury'

(60%), the 'Function or position of RPL assessor' (66.6%) and to a lesser extend The RPL assessment method used to gain exemptions/credits' (40%).

Use of learning outcomes

Part V inquired about the use of learning outcomes. The following 4 options were given on the question 'Do you feel learning outcomes give an added value when evaluating qualifications based on RPL (more than when evaluating a qualification where RPL was not part of the procedure)?':

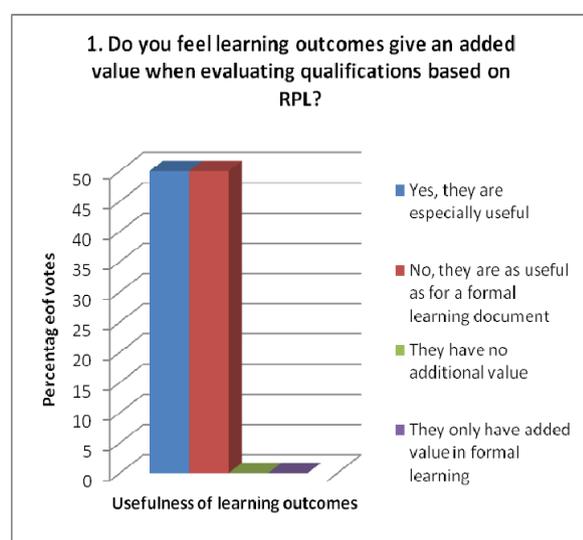
1. Yes, learning outcomes are especially useful when evaluating an RPL qualification
2. No, learning outcomes are as useful for evaluating a traditional diploma obtained in formal learning as for evaluating a RPL document
3. Learning outcomes of a programme have no additional value
4. Learning outcomes only have added value in formal learning

None of the respondents chose option 3 and 4, from which one could conclude that the use of learning outcomes are considered to be of value to the respondents. One of the respondents captured the importance as follows: *Learning outcomes are the magic words: they show what a person has achieved. For updated real credential evaluators this is more important than how the person started and how much time the holder of the qualification spend on it.*

At the same time, about half of the respondents considered learning outcomes to be especially useful for the evaluation of a qualification containing RPL, while the other half stated it was as useful as a normal document evaluating a traditional diploma.

The preference as how the learning outcomes should be presented differed equally. 37,5 % indicated to have a preference for learning outcomes to be presented by level, 25% by module and 37% by both level and module.

Figure 3



Dissemination

The outcomes of REFNILLO are published in a report. This report will be made available on the REFNILLO website in a Pdf version. Preliminary results of the project were already disseminated during the ENIC/NARIC 2009 annual meeting in Cyprus and at the EAIE 2009 Conference in Madrid. The results have also been presented at the NARIC meeting in Brussels in November 2009.

The project results are further disseminated on national and international conferences, both within the network as well as outside the network of the partners involved.

NARICs are encouraged to inform their national network on the recommendations of REFNILLO.

Further, the outcomes and recommendations of REFNILLO are taken on board in the new NARIC study 'European Area of Recognition', which will be carried out in 2010-2011. EAR will contribute to a European higher education Area for Recognition in which all European countries practise a methodology of recognition that is based on similar standards. In the EAR project a so called 'recognition manual' will be developed, containing standards and guidelines for recognition. The results of former (NARIC) projects related to recognition will serve as input for this manual.

Impact on target groups

The main target group of REFNILLO are the credential evaluators of the NARIC network. The recommendations will enable the NARIC credential evaluators to better understand and evaluate RPL certificates. As REFNILLO fills a clear need for recommendations on how to evaluate qualifications based on RPL, it is expected that it will be useful for the daily work of credential evaluators.

Website & Contact

Website

More information on REFNILLO can be found on the REFNILLO website:
www.rpl.naric.org.uk.

The website is freely accessible for any interested party and also includes the outcomes of REFNILLO's predecessor, the 'Study on Formal Recognition of Non-formal and Informal learning'.

European added value & multi country partnership

In order to enable European wide mobility of staff and students it is of increasing importance that people who have qualifications based on RPL will be recognised within the European Union, as well as abroad. This is especially pertinent in view of the current Lifelong Learning agenda of the European Commission (e.g. EQF) in which recognition of competences (whether they are gained through formal, informal or non-formal ways) play a key role. To foster mobility it is therefore desirable that there is a European practice or at least a common understanding regarding recognition of RPL in this field.

REFNILLO addresses this clear need for European cooperation in the field of international recognition of RPL and for recommendations on what information should be included in order for NARICs to be able to evaluate these. Currently there is no agreed European practice on how to recognise RPL certificates and the aim of REFNILLO is to formulate recommendations on how evaluations can be undertaken.

The European added value is inherent in REFNILLO, as an agreement/common view should be sought on European level and this cannot be done from a national view.

Therefore this project included 4 NARICs (Nuffic, UK NARIC, CIEP, Hogskoleverket), representing the European network of information centres on recognition. Furthermore,

the recommendations are based on consultation of the whole NARIC network. All this will ensure that the results, which will be applicable all over Europe, will also be supported on a European scale.

Contribution to EU Policies and Impact

In the following an overview is given how REFNILLO is contributes to EU policies:

I - Priority areas

The Louvain/Leuven (28-29 April 2009) Communiqué of the 6th Bologna Ministerial Conference:

“Successful policies for lifelong learning will include basic principles and procedures for recognition of prior learning on the basis of learning outcomes regardless of whether the knowledge, skills and competences were acquired through formal, non-formal, or informal learning paths.”

“We reassert the importance of the teaching mission of higher education institutions and the necessity for ongoing curricular reform geared toward the development of learning outcomes... Academics, in close cooperation with student and employer representatives, will continue to develop learning outcomes and international reference points for a growing number of subject areas.”

The London (17-18 May 2007) Communiqués of the 5th Bologna Ministerial Conference:

“..To further develop the use of learning outcomes in credential evaluation with a view to improving the recognition of formal, non-formal and informal learning and in line with the existing and emerging qualification frameworks (Bologna and EU)”.

The schematic model certificate specifically inquired if the learning outcomes could give an added value when evaluating an RPL qualification and furthermore on how the learning outcomes should be presented (by level, module, both, other, or none). In this way REFNILLO contributes to the creation of a common understanding in the NARIC network on how learning outcomes could be used to recognise formal, non-formal and informal learning, which will enable their use and thus will contribute to improve recognition.

II - Specific objectives of the programme

Decision 1720/2006/EC establishing the Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP), Chapter V , Article 32 (transversal programme), 1(b) (to promote quality and transparency):

“..the specific objectives of the transversal programme shall be: ...(b) to promote the quality and transparency of Member States' education and training systems”.

REFNILLO contributes to the transparency and quality of Member States' education and training systems from the perspective of recognition of RPL, as the recommendations are of importance to credential evaluators (at higher education institutions) evaluating RPL in particular and organisations that offer or conduct RPL procedures in general.

The outcomes of REFNILLO indicate what information the NARIC network considers to be necessary to appear on RPL certificates in order to be able to evaluate and recognise

them.

III - Operational objectives of the programme

Decision 1720/2006/EC establishing the Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP), Article 21.2.c stipulates that one of the operational objectives of the Erasmus programme shall be:

"...to increase the degree of transparency and compatibility between higher education and advanced vocational education qualifications in Europe".

REFNILLO's findings and recommendations contribute to enhance the transparency and comparability of RPL qualifications within European Higher Education, by formulating what the NARIC network considers to be necessary information to appear on RPL certificates. This in itself enables the process of comparability between higher education and advanced vocational education RPL qualifications in Europe.

IV - Broader objectives of the programme

- Decision 1720/2006/EC establishing the Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP), Article 5.1.f states that the Lifelong Learning Programme shall comprise:

"...actions to support transparency and recognition of qualifications".

The main objective of REFNILLO has been to formulate recommendations on how to evaluate RPL certificates, which thus far are not treated in the same way as certificates recognising formal learning achievements. As the recommendations are expected to lead to enabling consistent evaluation of RPL certificates, this will lead to more transparency in recognition procedures. Students and diploma holders will benefit from this increased transparency.

- Decision 1720/2006/EC establishing the Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP), Article 20(h) provides that within the framework of this programme, the Erasmus programme shall be aimed at:

"...bodies providing guidance, counselling and information services relating to any aspect of lifelong learning".

And further:

- Decision 1720/2006/EC establishing the Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP). In the administrative and financial provisions of the Decision, under section B.2, under (2) Designation of beneficiaries, the constituent national units of the NARIC network are explicitly listed among the bodies which act as instruments to implement the Programme at national level, in conformity with the provisions of Article 54(2)(c) of Regulation (EC, Euratom) No. 1605/2002 as amended by Council Regulation (EC, Euratom) No. 1995/2006 of 13 December 2006 and of Article 38 of Regulation (EC, Euratom) No. 2342/2002 as amended by Commission Regulation (EC, Euratom) No. 478/2007 of 23 April 2007.

The consortium consists of four NARIC centers: UK NARIC, French NARIC, Swedish NARIC and Nuffic. As such the consortium meets the objective that NARICs act as instruments to implement the LL Programme at national level by carrying out this

project.

- Decision 1720/2006/EC establishing the Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP), Chapter V, Article 33 (the transversal programme) article 1(e) mentions under the key activity of policy cooperation and innovation in lifelong learning:

"...action to support transparency and recognition of qualifications and competences including those acquired through non-formal and informal learning, information and guidance on mobility for learning purposes, and cooperation in quality assurance, as referred to in Article 5(1)(f), which may include: (i) networks of organisations which facilitate mobility and recognition, such as Euroguidance and National Academic Recognition Information Centres (NARICs)".

The main objective of REFNILLO has been to formulate recommendations on how to evaluate RPL certificates, thus including competences gained through non- and informal learning-, with the aim of enhancing the recognition of these certificates. The project has been carried out by a consortium consisting of four NARIC partners, as required in article 5 (1)(f).