

A UK Perspective on Validated Prior Learning

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Validated Prior Learning as an Instrument for Access to Higher Education by Two Marginalised Groups

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Introduction

The focus for this chapter⁸ is Validated Prior Learning (VPL) as an instrument for access to Higher Education (HE) in the United Kingdom (UK) by two marginalised groups. The United Kingdom comprises four countries: England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland but the chapter is located within two of the four countries of the United Kingdom: England and Wales. The decision to select the two countries was made because whilst each of the four countries of the UK has its own education system, England and Wales share documentation and similarities which are not shared by Scotland and Northern Ireland, for example, funding is significantly different in England and Wales from funding in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

The first marginalised group in focus comprises people who have a special need or disability or a special need and a disability. Truszczyński (2012) distinguishes between 'special educational needs' as a term used for children in school and 'disability' as a term for adults once they have left school. Nevertheless, since many students in HE are newly emerged from school and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are educational organisations, the term 'special educational needs' and 'disability' are used interchangeably in this document. The second marginalised group in focus comprises HE students in the 50-plus age category. In the UK and Europe, the population is ageing (Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2012a). Currently, over 22 million people in the UK are aged 50 years and over, representing over a third of the UK population (Age UK, 2014a). Equally, one out of every six people in the UK is older than 65 but by 2050 one in-four will be older than 65 (UK Parliament, 2010). The role of Validated Prior Learning (VPL) processes in supporting access of these two marginalised groups to HE and the extent and nature of the uses of these processes are discussed at macro-, meso- and micro-levels, with reference to specific case studies. Two major VPL focus points were

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identified in the UK data: (a) prior learning or experience reducing or eliminating entry requirements and (b) allowances during the course ease progress through degree.

The chapter opens with a consideration of the European and UK contexts. Discussion then turns to characteristics of the two selected groups before moving to focus on VPL processes at macro-, meso- and micro-levels in the UK. The conclusion draws together the UK findings in regard to the two selected groups to posit that a varied picture of VPL supporting Access to HE in the UK exists, influenced by an asymmetric power relationship between HEIs and individual citizens, with HEIs the hegemonic partner.

Europe

The United Kingdom has been a European Union member since 1973 and as such must comply with EU legislation and policy specific to qualifications and employment. The European context is characterised as a co-operative, knowledge-based economy where citizens have mobility and the ability to 'acquire the skills, knowledge and competences required of them' (Europa, 2013). In this regard, comparability of qualifications and transparency across member states are considered crucial (Brockmann, Clarke and Winch, 2011). Professional and academic qualifications and vocational education and training (VET) are each regarded as highly important for the European economy (European Parliament, 2005; CEDEFOP, 2011). Nevertheless, significant barriers to achieving the EU Commission's characterisation seem to prevail, with a quarter of adults within the EU identified as lacking basic skills to be successful in a modern knowledge economy (European Commission and OECD, 2013).

In 2000, the Lisbon European Council acknowledged the potential value of high quality VET to promoting of employability, competitiveness, social cohesion, mobility and social inclusion (Europa, 2011). The Copenhagen Process and Declaration (2002) (Europa, 2011) were drivers towards enhanced European cooperation in VET. They consisted of a political element, the development of instruments across Europe to increase quality and transparency of qualifications and competences as well as mobility, co-operative learning at European level and involvement of all relevant stakeholders at national level with a view to enhancing VET quality assurance. Work flowing from the Copenhagen Process continues in through contributions to the Education and Training 2020 framework within the Europe 2020 strategy (The Council of the European Union, 2009). The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) and the European Training Foundation (ETF) are the main bodies involved in supporting cooperation in VET.

Alongside the Copenhagen Process and Declaration runs Directive 2005/36/EC which models recognition of professional qualifications across Europe (European Parliament, 2005). This document focuses on greater mobility for professional workers through more straightforward administrative procedures, greater flexibility of labour markets, enhanced freedom in provision of services and more automatic recognition of professional qualifications (Europa, 2010). Nevertheless, there remain significant barriers

to the free marketing of professional services across EU member states (Kerneis and Prentice, 2011).

Together with attempts to align VET and professional qualifications across Europe, the European Parliament (2006) has identified Key Competences for Lifelong Learning, which it sees as both preparation for adult life and updating of skills throughout the life course. Competences included are communication, mathematics, science and technology, learning to learn, social and civic areas, initiative and entrepreneurship, cultural awareness and expression. The acquisition of key competences aligns with the EU principles of equality and access for all. Nevertheless, key barriers have been identified to the universal achievement of Key Competences for Lifelong Learning (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2012). These include students' motivation for taking up STEM subjects and careers, low achievement in basic language, mathematics and scientific skills and poor 'transversal competences', such as entrepreneurship, ICT and civic and social competences (p.9). The Key Competences for Lifelong Learning framework applies universally so includes disadvantaged groups who may need support to realise their educational potential. These groups are identified by the European Parliament (2006) as '...people with low basic skills, early school leavers, the long-term unemployed, people with disabilities, migrants'. This chapter focuses on two of these groups.

Bifurcation of VET and professional qualifications tends to be linked to status and has been identified as a particular barrier to positive outcomes and trajectories for socially disadvantaged students (Colley, Chadderton and Nixon, 2014). This suggests that more open access to HE for marginalised groups might be a factor in achieving the European Commission's ambition for a co-operative, knowledge-based economy where citizens have mobility and all have the ability to '...acquire the skills, knowledge and competences required of them' (Europa, 2013).

England and Wales in the UK

According to the most recent statistics, the resident population of England and Wales is 56.1 million, with 9.2 million aged over 64 years (Office for National Statistics, 2012b); in 2013 there were 12 million graduates in the UK (Office for National Statistics, 2013). The UK HE sector is currently regarded as among the best in the world (SMCPC, 2013b). Across England and Wales, there are 126 Universities, with 9 of these in Wales; within the scope of this study, a sample of eight Universities was selected in order to explore approaches to VPL. The eight universities were selected according to two criteria: their geographical location spread across England and Wales and provision of a good cross representation of universities across England and Wales, in reference to national league tables (The Guardian, 2011).

Within England and Wales, the VPL agenda fits within a 'widening access and participation' agenda and associated with that is the focus on retention and student experience (HEFCE, 2014; HEFCW, 2014a). In considering the effects of legislation on

VPL, it was necessary to consider the legislation which directly influences practices, for example, the European Charter on Life Long Learning (EUA, 2008) as well as that with indirect influence on practices. The latter is important in this context because access and the wider ‘student experience’ may impact on the extent to which the cultural climate of an institution encourages and promotes the use of VPL. Moreover, variations in the quality and nature of learning in terms of formality may have a bearing on adoption of VPL. The European Commission (EC) (2001) makes clear distinctions between formal, non-formal and informal learning, defining formal learning as ‘typically provided by education or training institutions, structured (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support) and leading to certification...intentional from the learner’s perspective’ (p.32). Equally, the EC (2001) distinguishes non-formal learning as that not provided by an education or training institution; whilst non-formal learning does not typically lead to certification, it is structured according to learning support, learning objectives or learning time and importantly, the learner has an intention to engage in learning. On the other hand, the learner generally does not set out to learn when he or she engages in informal learning; informal learning occurs in the course of daily life, for example those occurring during leisure, family or work activities., family or leisure. It is not structured to fit learning time, learning support or learning objectives and it does not result in certification.

The effects of variable influences of legislation on differential learning formalities and vice versa can be displayed graphically in a model that allows for commentary regarding VPL (Table 1):

Table 1: A Model for Commentary regarding Validated Prior Learning

	Direct Influence of legislation	Indirect Influence of legislation
Formal learning		
Non-formal learning		
Informal learning		

The rationale for considering indirect policy as an influence is that access and the broader ‘student experience’ all contribute to whether the cultural climate of an institution encourages and promotes the use of VPL (Prior, 2010).

Whilst the United Kingdom was one of the original countries that signed the Bologna Declaration in 1999, many UK universities have not fully aligned their practices to this process and in effect, the terms ‘Accreditation of Prior Learning’ (APL), ‘Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning’ (APEL) and ‘Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning’ (APCL) are more prevalent terms used than VPL; some institutions use ‘Recognition of

Prior Learning' (RPL) or 'Accredited Work Based Learning' (AWBL) (CEDEFOP, 2007; SEEC, 2013). Students who do not gain enough qualifications at school to enter through financial routes can also enter HE through Access to Higher Education courses (QAA, 2011a). Although this is not the focus of this study, it indicates that students have a choice to either explore a VPL route or attend an access course. In addition, it should be noted that national data in the UK does not categorize students according to specific ages, but does distinguish students (18-24 years) from mature students (25 plus). National admission trends data tends to focus on undergraduate or post-graduate and students or mature students (Universities UK, 2013). Information on special needs and disability is dependent on voluntary disclosure by the students themselves, raising ethical and other questions for the providers, students and advocates of VPL (Riddell, Edward, Weedon and Ahlgren, 2010).

England

A major reform to HEIs in England began in June 2011 and the consultation concluded in June 2012 (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2012). England is an unequal society: at one level this appears socio-economic, but this inequality affects access to other areas of society. As part of the UK, England is identified as relatively wealthy (International Monetary Fund, 2013; Legatum Institute, 2013; Bennion *et al.*, 2013), yet a rising trend in England's wealth has not been matched by equality of opportunity: poor social mobility is rife in England (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (SMCPC), 2013a). In England, for example, young people from socio-economically disadvantaged homes are less likely to become well-paid professionals than their more advantaged contemporaries (Jerrim, Vignoble and Ferrin, 2013). In regard to its weak congruence between wealth and social mobility, England is not aligned with other English speaking wealthy countries (Blanden 2013). Nevertheless, the role of education, including HE, has been identified as a key factor in social mobility for England (Education and Social Research Council, 2006; Stuart, 2012).

English government monitors fair access to higher education via the Office For Fair Access (OFFA). Nevertheless, the gap between HE participation rates of students from the most and least socio-economically disadvantaged homes diminished in the latter decades of the twentieth century. Most recently, government has extended student loans to part-time students and provided additional money to students (SMCPC, 2013a), yet fair access to HE in England remains problematic. Whilst HE has expanded five-fold over the past forty years, disproportionately few students are recruited to good universities from socio-economically disadvantaged homes (Millburn, 2012: 2). In short, children from wealthy families have gained most from HE's expansion (Blanden, Gregg and Machin, 2005; Goldthorpe, 2012). Moreover, England's most selective universities are weakest for recruiting their students from the full range of socio-economic classes: Oxbridge are 100 times more likely to admit nineteen-year-olds who have been privately educated than those who were eligible for free school meals in Year 11 (SMCPC, 2013a).

Current government ministers – themselves predominantly born into socio-economic privilege (Hope, 2013) - see a ‘full university experience’ as the preserve of an ‘elite’ drawn from two groups: the talented and the socio-economically advantaged (Scott, 2013). From that position, English government has recently introduced several policies, including capping student numbers, higher tuition fees, abolishing Aimhigher, replacing the Educational Maintenance Allowance available to eligible 16-to-18-year-olds with a discretionary allowance and impoverishing careers guidance in schools. These policies have presented difficulties to universities attempting to widen participation in higher education as a vehicle for social mobility and are identified as deterrents to potential students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds applying for graduate study (SMCPC, 2013a).

Yet concurrently – and apparently paradoxically – government has significantly strengthened OFFA’s role (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (DBIS), 2011). OFFA now monitors the work of HEIs more closely to ensure they ‘fulfil their outreach and retention obligations’ (p.7) and present ‘active and energetic challenge’ to HEIs (p.11). Additionally, HEIs must present ‘Access Agreements’ for annual review by OFFA.

Wales

A narrower gap between the rich and the poor prevails in Wales than in the rest of the UK, yet significant inequalities do exist in Wales and many for the life course of individuals (Davies *et al.*, 2011). Social mobility is currently less of a focus in Wales than is the case in England (SMCPC, 2013a). Welsh government is highly committed to tackling poverty and its potential effect on education; one feature of its strategy that relates directly to HE is the provision of a grant to Welsh students for HE tuition fees of more than £3,500 per year – at least 59% or more of individual Welsh students’ tuition fees are paid by the state (SMCPC, 2013a; Kemplay, 2014). Welsh government devolves money to the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW). HEFCW works with Welsh universities to ensure that funds it allocates to them are spent; these funds are based largely on student enrolments (HEFCW, 2014b).

In 2011-12 (most recent figures) 102,110 Welsh citizens were in HE out of a population of 3,063,456 (ONS, 2012) – a rising trend from 93,405 in 2001. In comparison with other areas of the UK, Welsh universities have had greater success in attracting participation from students from non-traditional backgrounds (Welsh Government, 2013). This may be the result of a rise in Welsh government funding for Welsh HEIs, averaging 13.8 per cent in 2013–14 (Welsh Government, 2013). Equally, the Welsh Government states clearly its commitment to HE for ‘all those with the potential to benefit from it’ (Welsh Government, 2013: 2). A characteristic of Welsh HE is that much is delivered in Welsh language (Wales, 2014).

Two Marginalised Groups

Characteristics of the two marginalised groups in focus are discussed here. As outlined, the first comprises people who have a special need or disability or a special need *and* a disability and the second comprises HE students in the 50-plus age category.

Truszczyński (2012) indicates that several million EU citizens have a disability or special educational needs. He states that this is 'one of the largest groups of disadvantaged citizens in the EU' (p.1) and furthermore posits that it is common for citizens within this group to experience 'institutional segregation', or be denied opportunities for education or employment altogether. Nevertheless, countries across Europe classify the terms 'special educational needs', 'disability' and even 'inclusive education' differently, making international comparisons challenging (NESSE, 2012). Consistently across Europe, though, people with disabilities are far less likely to access HE than their peers (European Commission, 2010).

In the UK, a person is defined as disabled if he or she has '...a physical or mental impairment that has a 'substantial' and 'long-term' negative effect on (his or her) ability to do normal daily activities' (Her Majesty's Government (HMG), 2010). In the UK, children with special educational needs are those who:

'... have needs or disabilities that affect their ability to learn. For example:

- *behavioural/social (eg difficulty making friends)*
- *reading and writing (eg dyslexia)*
- *understanding things*
- *concentrating (eg Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder)*
- *physical needs or impairments'. (UK Government, 2013)*

About 18 per cent of the overall UK working population is disabled, although Wales has a comparatively high percentage of people with disabilities at around 21.7%. (Riddell et al., 2010); equally, 20% of children in UK schools have a special educational need, amounting to around 1.6 million children (UK Government, 2012). Since 2010, the English government has put in place 'capability' assessments to assess adult work fitness and many more people who had previously been assessed as disabled have had those assessments overturned. Nevertheless, the system for the assessments has been identified as highly flawed and discriminatory (Dugan, 2013; Royal College of Nursing, 2013). Contemporaneously, English government has sought to remove 'the bias towards inclusion' (Rose et al., 2011). Runswick-Cole (2011) challenges the assumption that such a bias exists and indeed, extant legislation is clear that while '...children who want (and whose parents want) a mainstream education, will be placed in a mainstream school', this is predicated on the caveat '...as long as this is thought to be compatible with the efficient education of others in that school' (Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education, 2013). Although these moves have been proposed for the Children and Families Bill which covers England and Wales, the aspects addressing special educational needs (SEN) do not apply to Wales as they do to England. Recently in England, then, progress that

had been made towards inclusion has been in danger of erosion and that is in a context in which access for people with disabilities to HE is already more limited than their peers. In the UK, people with disabilities are half as likely as their peers without disabilities to have a degree: although around 28% of working age people without disabilities are graduates, the figure for people with disabilities who have a degree drops to 14.9% (Office for Disability, 2014), indicating a clear discrepancy.

According to SHARE (2013), whilst many experiences for European people aged 50+ depend on the countries they live in, across Europe this group is distinguished by particular characteristics. Many - though not all - are financially impoverished, leading to poor quality of life. Many suffer poor health yet many are themselves carers. Equally, many are working for more years than they had intended to do yet, suggests SHARE (2013) social policies and institutional structures can ensure fulfilled lives for people aged 50+.

In the UK there are currently over 21 million people aged 50-plus, constituting about one third of the population (Age UK, 2011). Equally, there is concern that social division will increasingly leave many older people with a poor standard of living (Age UK, 2014b), with older women particularly vulnerable as a high number of women aged 50-plus currently work in poorly paid part-time jobs in England (Trade Union Congress (TUC), 2014). One way of addressing the issue of poor living standards among the 50-plus population might be to upskill older workers by giving them access to HE which would enable them to contribute more actively to a dynamic knowledge economy and reap rewards from doing so. Yet in most UK HEIs, the number and proportion of undergraduates aged 50-plus is fewer than two per cent (Hill, 2005).

VPL processes at macro-level in the UK

This section addresses national VPL processes as a macro-level focus. National legislation, strategy and guidance focused on VPL are all addressed. Key organisations involved in administration of VPL are considered as well as the financing of VPL generally and for target groups at national level. The roles of different VPL professionals are considered, alongside the main VPL functions, the organisation of quality assurance systems for VPL and the relationship of VPL to the national qualification framework.

Elements of VPL are influenced by the dialogue on inclusion, diversity and equality (Hockings, 2010) and the present study found that aspects of VPL are influenced differentially in UK universities by policy, practice and culture. For the present study, a representative sample of eight of the 126 universities in England and Wales was selected for exploration of the approaches to VPL. Selection criteria included the HEIs' geographical location and a good cross-representation of universities across England and Wales. For the purposes of this chapter, they are given pseudonyms, as indicated in Table 2:

Table 2: Representative sample of 8 universities in England and Wales

Yellow University
Orange University
Green University
Brown University
Purple University
Blue University
Red University
Pink University

Whilst considering the influence of legislation on VPL, it was necessary to consider those institutions that have direct reference to, for example, the European Universities' Charter on Life Long Learning (European University Association, 2008) as well as those that have indirect impact on practices. In the UK, all institutions must comply with the Equality Act (2010), though organisations often publish their own policies and schemes that incorporate the Equality Act (HMG, 2010) for example, advice for students with a disability is provided by UCAS (2014a).

A set of policies and related concepts was indicated in data gathered from the public domain for the selected UK HEIs; this provides a national overview of the influence of legislation on VPL in HEIs in the UK (Table 3). Whilst policies generally related directly to legislation, related concepts were often embedded within policies and were indirectly influenced by legislation. Further analysis indicated that each of the policies and related concepts related to policy, practice or culture, or a combination of each.

In the UK VPL is usually referred to as APL - Accreditation of Prior Learning. This overall term defines the process. Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning (APCL) is used to award specific credits to students for learning that has been recognised and certificated by another awarding body. Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) is used to award credits to students for learning gained through work or other life experiences that are relevant to the student's intended programme of study (Garnett, Portwood and Costley, 2004).

The use of APEL in the HE sector developed from the pioneering work of the *Learning from Experience Trust* (Evans 1988) and in 1986 the academic credit for mature entry was provided by the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA), the academic awarding body for the polytechnics and other non-university institutions such as colleges of higher education. The CNAA legitimised APEL in HE with a specific regulation: 'Appropriate learning at higher education level, wherever it occurs, provided it can be assessed, can be given credit towards an academic award' (CNAA, 1986). This development drew heavily on the work of the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) in the USA and was driven by the perceived need to extend access to HE for mature students at a time when it was feared that demographic trends would severely

restrict numbers of 18-year-olds seeking entry to higher education. Thus the initial primary purpose of APEL was to increase the supply of students to HE. Nevertheless, each individual institution retains autonomy for applications.

Table 3: A National Overview of the Influence of Legislation on VPL in UK HEIs

Policy / Related Concept	Brief overview	Policy Practice Culture	Adherence by sample HEIs [out of 8]
Anti-Discrimination	Policies or legislations which are used to protect people from discrimination	Policy	8
Implementation	Plans and actions for promoting policies which regard to equality and diversity	Practice	8
Protect Group	Diversity groups of people who need to be protected by equality legislation or policy from discrimination	Policy Practice	8
Manager Responsibility	Management responsibilities for ensuring making sure the objectives and outcomes of the policy are achieved	Practice	8
Inclusion	Responsibility and capability to create a welcoming inclusive atmosphere, climate or environment in order to value and promote diversity	Culture	7
Access Ability	University's ability for accessing disabled students in their enrolment, recording keeping, confidentiality, and individual learning plan	Practice	7
General Duties	Provision of broad guidelines to promote equality (race, disability and gender)	Practice Culture	7
Attitude	Attitudes or beliefs that impact upon the students with disabilities or their inclusion in the university	Culture	6
Disability Discrimination Act 1995	Legislation	Policy	5
Physical Access	Accessibility of facilities, accommodation and building for disabled students	Practice	5
Legislative Requirement	Requirement of policies, initiatives and legislations in promoting, ensuring and monitoring the implementation of equality and diversity	Policy	5
Learning Support Assistant/Advisor	Workers who support learning	Practice Culture	4
Communication	Working with external organizations, relevant stakeholders or internal department to include input and involvement in relevant activities across the campus	Practice Culture	4
Policy Committee	The committee in the university which is responsible for (a) ensuring the aims regarding equality and diversity are met and (b) fostering a working and learning environment in which staff and students can fulfil their potential	Policy	4
Disclosing Disabilities	Why, how, what the university does to disclose disabilities	Practice	3

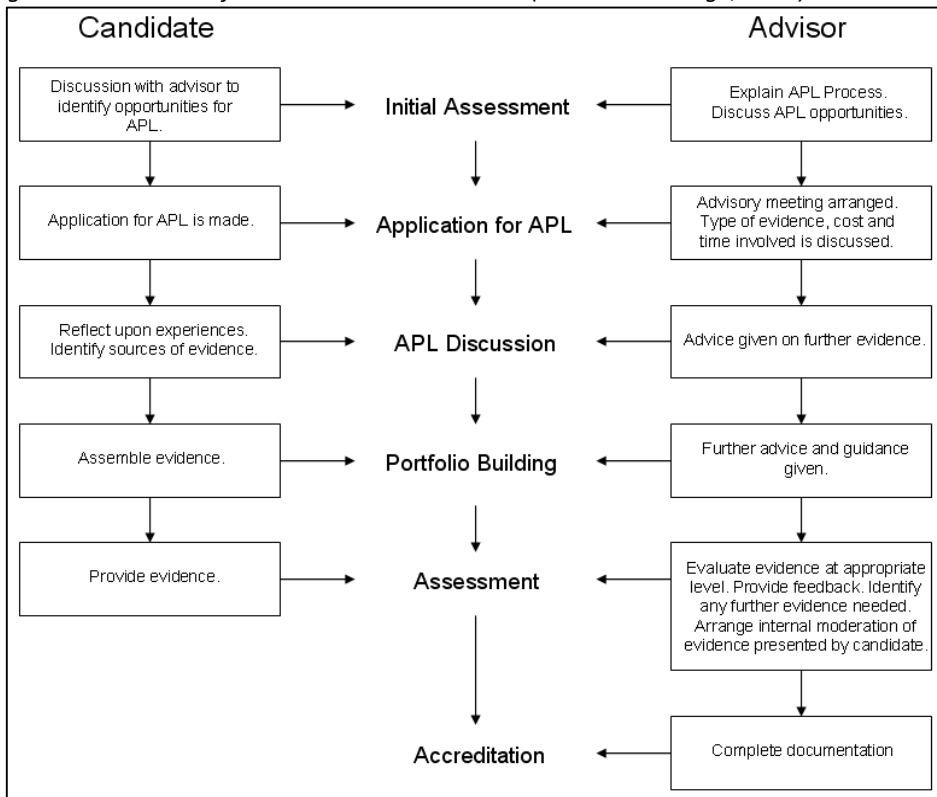
Enrolment	Official policy with regard to enrolment in the university	Policy	3
Confidentiality	Confidentiality of disabled students' disclosing their disabilities	Practice Culture	3
Assessment	Any form of assessment, monitoring and review of a student with disability	Practice	3
Individual Responsibility	Individual disabled and non-disabled students' responsibility to co-operate in making sure the objectives and the outcomes of the policy are achieved	Culture	3
Learning Support Facilitator	Workers who co-ordinate support	Practice Culture	3
Individual Study Plan	Formulation or implementation of tailored plans for disabled students to support their learning in the university	Practice	3
Inclusive Curriculum Project	The curriculum system which is established by the university to fit and promote needs of students with disabilities and special educational needs	Practice Culture	3
Examination Access	An examination which is designed by the university for disabled students	Policy Practice	3
Learner Development Service	Services which ensure that disabled students and students with specific learning difficulties, such as dyslexia have appropriate study related support	Practice Culture	2
Short Term Disabled	Disabled students with short-term injuries or illness, which are likely to last less than 12 months and are not covered by the provision of the DDA (2005) / Equality Act (2010)	Practice	2
Development and Training	Training provided by the university to promote programmes and development for disabled students	Practice Culture	2
Data Protection Act 1998	Legislation	Policy	1
Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001	Legislation	Policy	1
Human Right Act 1998	Legislation	Policy	1
Equality Act (2010)	Legislation	Policy	1
Mentor	Workers who support students' learning and pastoral needs	Practice Culture	1
Disabled Students File	Profiles held by campus administration group, including disabled students' contact details, individual learning plan, assessment and other records related to the students' learning and living in the HEI	Practice	1
Student Complaint Procedure	Protocol for how complaints from students are reported to the Governance Committee on a regular basis	Policy Practice	1
Child Care Provision	Refers to the service which will be able to look after children for the parent students studying in the HEI.	Practice Culture	1

Alongside following European guidance for VPL processes (CEDEFOP, 2007), UK universities have national guidelines for VPL processes to which they can refer (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), 2004). Moreover, separate documentation on assessment of students' APL has been provided by QAA (2011b),

which provides fifteen indicators for assessment. In the UK, the key organisations involved in administration of VPL include the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) (UCAS, 2014b), the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) which is responsible for safeguarding standards and improving the quality of UK higher education (QAA, 2014). Moreover, UK institutions take note of CEDEFOP (2009).

Currently, the UK government policy document 'Students at the Heart of the System' (DBIS, 2011) is driving the legislation nationally, but as mentioned, Welsh students are financed more generously by government than English students. The focus in DBIS (2011) is on ensuring education continues beyond school, improving the student experience, changing funding arrangements, increasing social mobility via HE and above all serving the economy. Nevertheless, a cynical attitude to VPL has often been adopted in the UK (Evans, 2003).

Figure 1: VPL Process for Advisors and Candidates (Blake Hall College, 2010).



Over many years, different funding bodies from both private and public sectors have been involved in financing VPL in the UK (Learning Experience Trust (LET), 2013). However, a more strategic approach was taken in England from 2005 to 2010: HEFCE

provided development funding to pilot flexible provision in eight 'pathfinder' HEIs. The programme included SEND and mature students in its target groups and participant HEIs reported successful development of flexible provision, especially work-based learning and student increases over the time of the project (Outram, 2011).

In the UK, VPL professionals usually have a clearly defined role within each institution in the process which involves scrutiny, mapping of qualification or experiential learning to the learning outcomes of the modules and programmes of study. Whilst these roles are not standardised across universities, distinction is generally made between a VPL Advisor and VPL Assessor (Day, 2002). According to Day (2002), the main functions of the VPL Advisor are helping the individual to identify relevant learning, agreeing and contributing to an action plan to demonstrate prior learning and helping the individual to prepare and present evidence for assessment. An example of the stages involved in this process is given in Figure 1 (Blake Hall College, 2010). Conversely, the role of the VPL Assessor includes agreeing to and reviewing an assessment plan, judging evidence and providing feedback and making an assessment decision and giving feedback.

All students in the UK will usually have access to a range of assessment opportunities to provide evidence for VPL:

- Oral questioning.
- Letters of authentication from work regarding previous learning.
- Qualification certificates.
- Employer references.
- Independent references.
- In-company training.
- Supporting documentation such as job descriptions.

Nevertheless, in the UK, quality assurance is addressed nationally by the QAA, although individual HEIs generally have internal QA procedures in the UK. VPL can be administered at any point of the UK national qualification framework (QAA, 2008) (Figure 2).

UK HEIs have their own policies in response to the legislation. This may be within the admissions policy or, more usually, within a separate VPL policy. For example, Purple University has a clear VPL policy and procedure that covers roles and responsibilities of the Admissions Team, Admissions Tutors, Senior Admissions Tutors, Programme Leaders, the University APEL Champion and the VPL Sub-Group. The membership of the VPL Sub-Group is outlined and precedents, timescales, turnaround times, fees and processes are all addressed. Equally, Green University highlights its VPL 'Scheme' in which exemptions, transfer options and verification are emphasized.

Figure 2: National Qualifications Framework (adapted from QAA, 2008)

UNIVERSITY				
LEVEL 8	Doctorate (PhD, EdD, DPhil)			
LEVEL 7	Master's Degree (MA, MSc, MPhil)			
LEVEL 6	University Degree (BA, BSc, BEd)			
LEVEL 5		Foundation Degree (FdA, FdSc)		Higher National Diploma (HND)
LEVEL 4				Higher National Certificate (HNC)
SCHOOL / 6 TH FORM		FURTHER EDUCATION (FE)	COLLEGE	
LEVEL 3	Advanced (A) Levels	A2 AS	Level 3 Extended Diploma (National Diploma) Level 3 Diploma (National Certificate)	
LEVEL 2	General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE) (Grades A-C)		Level 2 Diploma (1 st Diploma)	
LEVEL 1	General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE) (Grades D-G)		Level 1 Diploma (Foundation)	
LEVEL 3	Key Stage 3		E3 Diploma (Foundation)	

At UK HEI level, responsibility for the management of VPL varies. For example, at Yellow University responsibility rests with an Admissions Policy Subcommittee, while at Purple University the Student and Academic Services Team is responsible. At Green University a Programme Committee manages VPL, at Brown University the University Accreditation Board has responsibility, at Blue University the Programme Leader or Director, the Admissions Tutor and Senior Leadership Team all manage the process and at both Red and Pink Universities responsibility for VPL management rests with the Faculty team.

Equally, UK HEIs have different approaches to decision-making about awarding VPL. At Yellow University, a clear process is mapped and involves the Admissions Office, Admissions Tutor, VPL Admissions Tutor, Faculty VPL Adviser and VPL Subgroup depending on the complexity of the case. Meanwhile, at Orange University decisions are made by an Accreditation Panel comprising members of each course board. At Brown University, the Admissions Manager consults with the Programme Leader for APCL and the Institute for Work Based Learning for APEL applications and at Green University the Programme Leader or relevant Head of Department decides. At Purple University, each faculty has at least one VPL tutor: the tutor works with the Admissions Team in making the initial decision. The Admissions Tutor and Senior Admissions Tutor both sign off the paperwork after applying the policy, mapping the VPL and awarding the specified number of credits. This is then considered by the VPL Sub-group who ratify or do not ratify the VPL – the VPL Sub-group is where the ultimate responsibility for the decision is

taken. At Blue University, faculty Learning and Teaching Committees make the awarding decisions, while at Red University decisions are taken at Faculty or Course Team level. Finally, at Pink University, VPL is referred to External Examiners. Special processes are available for appeals against decisions at all the sample UK HEIs, with the exception of Green University, where resubmission is possible.

In terms of who supports and guides candidates through the VPL process, a variety of sources is available. All sample universities have reference to VPL within their online materials. Additionally, as mentioned, Purple University has an APEL champion who advises, mentors students producing portfolios, supports the assessment and validation process, sits on the APL Sub-group and provides training for students in the process. Furthermore, at Purple, Yellow and Blue Universities, Admissions Tutors and Officers and the Admissions Teams provide initial information packs and all the relevant forms for the process. Student Advisers are available at Pink and Green Universities and Faculty Advisers at Yellow University. At Red, Orange and Blue Universities, programme leaders or course teams provide the information candidates need to support and guide them through the VPL process.

To assess VPL candidate applications, most UK HEIs adopt five underpinning values and principles for VPL data collection. Information provided by the student must be:

- Current
- Sufficient to cover the learning outcomes of a unit/units or part thereof.
- Authentic
- Relevant (appropriate) to the module or part thereof to which the student wishes to apply for VPL
- Valid

Candidates are required to provide evidence. This takes a variety of forms and includes:

- Certificates
- Transcripts of study
- Syllabuses and learning outcomes of previous study
- CV
- References from employers or institutions/ testimonials
- Evidence of Continuing Professional Development (CPD)
- Reflective statement
- Portfolio

Some universities may also apply the following:

- Interview
- Attendance at a workshop or module to support APL
- Observation of performance
- Presentation
- Assessment of skills
- Exam taken for relevant module

Within the VPL process, more evidence is generally needed for Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) than Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning (APCL). All universities map the learning to the appropriate module of programme of study learning objectives. This is the joint responsibility of the student and the designated member(s) of staff. Two examples of UK HEIs' required evidence for VPL assessment are given below in Table 4:

Table 4: Examples of UK HEIs' required evidence for VPL assessment

<i>Yellow University</i>	Transcripts of study, certificates, syllabus and learning outcomes of previous study, portfolio if required. For APCL older than 5 years - CV detailing employment and CPD (evidenced), reflective statement explaining how learning has been maintained, employer reference.
<i>Pink University</i>	Mapping learning achieved to the learning outcomes of the module. APEL - Structured interview plus corroborating evidence, work based observation plus portfolio or other record. Assessment which may include assessment/ exam set for relevant approved module / unit of study.

In relation to VPL, all the sample UK universities make reference to expert groups in their literature, indicating that they engage with them. Links to key organisations are on the sample UK HEI websites. Some are nationwide support or expert groups but some universities use local networks. Examples of local networks include the North London Regional Access Centre (for DSA assessments), the Access Summit Resource Centre and Bristol Mental Health services. National networks are also listed in most of the sample UK HEIs' literature. Named national networks with whom the sample UK HEIs work include the National Autistic Society, Royal National Institute for the Blind, Royal National Institute for the Deaf, Mind and the British Dyslexia association. Furthermore, Orange University overtly names organisations consulted as part of the development of its equality and diversity policy.

The financial management of VPL within UK HEIs is not specified in most UK HEI VPL policies but the cost of VPL would be available to specific students on application. At Purple University, there is a standard fee of £150 for APEL claims and an administration fee of £50 is charged for APCL claims. Finance is seen as a specific barrier to APL – this emerged in the micro-level data for the UK.

All sampled UK HEIs have a procedure for quality assurance for assessing the effectiveness of VPL at institutional level. This procedure is usually conducted through a specific committee. For example, at Yellow University, the Admissions Policy Subcommittee reports to the Senate Committee's Quality, Enhancement and Standards Committee. At Green University the Programme Committee conducts the procedure. Brown University involves its External Examiners involvement and at Purple University

the VPL Subgroup reports to the University's Academic Quality and Standards Committee.

In relation to maintenance of records relating to applications and the support provided, across all the sampled UK HEIs, VPL is clearly identified on all documentation, including student results records and transcripts. This is presented to the external examiners as appropriate. All mapping is recorded.

Each VPL claim is made by the students using the appropriate forms. Moreover, a precedents list is kept by universities to ensure smooth running of the processes. Some examples of records include student transcripts (Yellow, Purple and Red Universities) as well as a student achievement profile presented to Award Board for APEL at Purple University. Green University records each decision on a special form and there, application for APEL must be included in sample of student's work considered by External Examiners. Finally, Pink University supplies students with VPL with a 'Certificate of Credit'.

At meso-level, individual sampled UK HEIs do not identify institutional barriers to the implementation of VPL. However, other literature is more elucidating. For example, Crichton (2008) cites the perception of students and staff that portfolio preparation and assessment as part of the APEL process is onerous and this prevents its more widespread use. Equally, Aylott and Northrop (2010) identify cost and time as barriers to successful VPL in UK HEIs: practical time management issues tend to impact on staff workloads. McKee (2003) found that UK HEIs sometimes find it difficult to match the level of prior learning to academic levels; prior learning is frequently matched to only part of a unit so does not cover all learning outcomes. McKee (2003) also recommended that programmes should be flexible so that students can access separate sections. Nevertheless, A further finding showed that student group cohesion can be reduced if some students do not have to complete elements of the programme.

Conversely, there are some UK HEIs where VPL is well introduced. Analysis of policies and procedures at the sampled UK HEIs shows that each has its own strengths. For example, Yellow University has useful flowcharts and clear procedures outlining the APL process while Orange University's postgraduate courses outline VPL on the website. Purple University's policy is recommended as good practice in a Best Practice Guide (McKee, 2013); Purple University's APEL Champion, appointed to support students and advise staff, also seems an asset. Blue University provides clear procedures available on the internet, while Green University's 'Scheme for the Admission of Students with Advanced Standing Following Accreditation of Prior Learning' is noteworthy. Equally, there is evidence of VPL introduced in the voluntary sector in the UK to support student development (JISC, 2008). Moreover, Brown University actively markets the availability and benefits of APEL and APCL to voluntary organisations. Finally, this section turns to successes reported for VPL at meso-level). Given the wealth of data available on UK HEI VPL policies and procedures, it is a little surprising that little published data exists with

focus on the successes of VPL at HEI level. Generic examples of success stories include Houston, Hoover and Beer (1997) and Chettiparamb, (2008).

VPL processes at micro-level in the UK

At UK micro-level, ten individual case studies were co-constructed for the present study. The case studies focused on the two target groups: HE students with SEND and HE students aged 5-plus. Pseudonyms were given to the case study participants:

1. Elaine, Student aged 50-plus
2. Claire, Student with SEND
3. John, Student aged 50-plus
4. Louise, Student with SEND
5. Jane, Person aged 50-plus
6. Suzy, Student with SEND
7. Peter, Student aged 50-plus
8. Jenny, Student aged 50-plus
9. Rachael, Student with SEND *and* aged 50-plus
10. Jack, Student aged 50-plus

The break-down of the micro-level sample comprises three participants with SEND, six participants aged 50-plus and one participant who had SEND and was also aged 50-plus. At the micro-level, a number of considerations were made for the study and these are discussed in this section. The ways information is provided for candidates in relation to VPL and the accessibility of that information are addressed. Individuals' main motivations for their interest in VPL are covered. The section also explores institutional barriers to VPL encountered by individuals in learning and in work contexts, as well as personal barriers. Sources of support for individuals making applications for VPL are addressed as is the role played by the individual in VPL. The availability of training for self-management of competences is considered, as are cost implications of VPL for individuals and successes reported for VPL at micro level.

Data indicate that information is provided for candidates in relation to VPL through UK HEI websites which display policies and practice as well as application forms in some cases. Examples include Yellow, Purple and Green Universities. Face-to-face meetings are also provided in many UK cases. Among the present study's UK micro-level data, the following emerged:

- Having read the university's online information, Suzy was able to make a personal request to the University and they responded; other universities she applied to offered information but did not respond personally to Suzy.
- Rachael found a course entry online on the university website as well as a hard copy university prospectus provided by the HEI faculty. She encountered face-to-face disability support provided by the university student support team.

- Jack was offered a face-to-face meeting with his course tutor at the application stage

Information is generally accessible via UK HE websites but these sites tend to have variable levels of guidance. For example, Brown University's procedure for accepting students with advanced standing is transparent, whereas students have to go through a gatekeeper at Red University: VPL is mentioned on the programme specification alongside an invitation to e-mail for further details. Moreover, Pink University restricts access to information and guidance to those holding login details.

The main motivations for individuals' interest in VPL in the UK seem to vary. Focus on personal development emerged as one motivation. For example, having been educated abroad after his family emigrated many years previously, John (aged 50-plus) had completed his first year of university and then returned to the UK for family reasons. After years working in the IT sector he decided to make a career change and enrolled on the degree course. The need for certification or qualification for insertion or promotion was a second motivation. For example, Claire had recently been diagnosed with dyslexia. She described herself as not having done very well in school. Claire had worked as a nurse and a community social worker but it was whilst working as a secondary school teaching assistant that the SENCO suggested that she could embark on an education degree which would be funded by the school. The need to have recognised qualifications in order to be recruited is a third motivation that emerged from the data. With cerebral palsy and associated speech and language difficulties, Suzy is a wheelchair user and requires assistance with much of her personal care. Her educational history includes time in a special school, followed by a period in mainstream education where she reports she was bullied. She attended a local vocational college to gain some academic qualifications whilst doing voluntary and paid work in care homes and children's homes. She then attended a specialist vocational college where she did a course in child care. Having completed a BA (Hons.) degree in Social Work, Suzy now works as a self-employed disability advocate working mainly in schools. A final motivation for individuals' interest in VPL in the UK is focus on personal development linked to a specific situation. For example, Jenny found a long career in the financial sector was not recognised as VPL for entry to an initial teacher training degree course so undertook an Access Course which was acceptable.

Individuals in UK HEIs reported encountering institutional barriers to VPL in both learning and working contexts. These comprised:

- a) Some institutions do not transfer qualifications and experience between disciplines
- b) Retention of support staff
- c) Poor employability post-university.
- d) Time management for assignment submission
- e) Lack of access to support services
- f) Separate applications for each assignment extensions are required, despite diagnosis of specific learning difficulty.

- g) Differentiation can marginalise students
- h) When a course is taken part-time over a longer period to support a student with SEN or a disability, students lose contact with supportive peers who complete the course full time.
- i) Lack of help for completing application for additional support assistant so application was not completed and no additional support assistant was provided
- j) Age may be a reason why candidates do not present with contemporary qualifications regarded as pre-requisite for study but this factor is not considered sufficient reason by itself for exemption from entry requirement
- k) National requirements imposing on institutional entry requirements
- l) HE advisor and government advisor advice contrary to legal requirement

Given the wide range of reported barriers, examples for just three are included, within the scope of this article:

- (c) Poor employability post-university: following university, Suzy found employers unwilling to offer flexible support for her disabilities as she endeavoured to enter work place.
- (e) Lack of access to support services: even though she was diagnosed with dyslexia, Louise found that she could not gain access to specialist dyslexia tutors in her UK HEI.
- (l) HE advisor and government advisor advice contrary to legal requirement: Jenny was advised that her age (50-plus) would be a barrier to her entering an initial teacher training degree course.

Individuals also report a range of personal barriers to accessing VPL. These include:

- Concern about disclosure of SEND: Claire had always hidden her dyslexia and it was difficult for her to disclose her needs and accept the help that was available to her.
- Social exclusion: Louise, a dyslexic student who took the course part-time when most other students were full time felt that during group presentations she was left to work with the students no-one else wanted to work with, who do not work hard or get high grades and this had an impact on grades for the whole group, including her own.
- Access to HE courses may not provide sufficient information about HE study: Jenny would have liked her Access to HE course to give her better knowledge, understanding and skills about the nature of HE study.
- Having to identify and negotiate support whilst trying to manage newly acquired disability: An expectation that Rachael should find her own proof-reader was difficult for her with a newly acquired visual impairment and she found university support team did not listen to her. She reported they lacked flexibility and were neither supportive nor approachable.

Four support sources emerged for individuals in relation to making applications for VPL:

- Anti-discrimination legislation : in respect of SEND, Claire, Louise, Suzy and Rachael found anti-discrimination legislation supported their VPL applications
- HEIs: John's HEI regarded his qualifications gained outside the UK and his career experience as VPL.
- Employers: Elaine and Claire were provided with positive endorsements from employers that supported their VPL applications.
- Qualified counsellors: Louise, Suzy and Rachael had their needs assessed and recommendations given by counsellors qualified in respect of their individual needs.

UK individuals scored their role as agents in the VPL process and the majority perceived themselves as the 'client-to-be-guided' rather than claiming agency for the VPL process which has the potential to shape their lifelong outcomes:

- Score 1 for independent, strong, co-producer: Rachael
- Score 2 for average, client-to-be-guided: Claire, John, Jane, Suzy, Peter, Jenny, Jack
- Score 3 for dependent, no control: Elaine, Louise,

Aligned with this point, there seems to be no product in evidence for training self-management of competences. However, occasionally an explicit expectation is articulated by the institution. For example, Purple University states in its documentation:

"...you have significant responsibility for the management of your support. It is therefore essential that we discuss your individual needs as we understand that having support in place at the start of your course is critical to your success. We will therefore be in contact with you if you indicate that you are disabled on your course application"

Equally, whilst Rachael found that her HEI expected her to find her own proof-reader, this was difficult for her with a newly acquired visual impairment.

On a more positive note, there is no evidence of cost incurred by individual students for the VPL process. Dyslexia tutors were provided for Claire at no cost to her. Louise was not charged for taking her course part-time rather than full-time or for a computer provided by her HEI. Suzy found that the cost of her support assistants was borne by her home local authority and Jack found that he incurred no cost for the HEI's waiving of traditional entry requirements. Moreover, Rachael found that her disability assessment was free and that costs for a laptop, software, recording device, transport and proof-reading service were all met through an allowance that was granted as a result.

Finally, all but one of the individual case studies reported successes regarding VPL, indicating that it is working positively in UK HEIs at least some of the time at micro-level for students with SEND and students who are aged 50+. The experiences reported by case study individuals indicated that VPL may:

- release a student from study time .

- enable a student to complete a nationally recognised degree and make a career move.
- enable a student to fulfil an ambition .
- provide for allowance of additional time needed to complete and submit assignments , complete tasks and work alongside degree.
- provide access to specialist support tutors for academic and moral support.
- provide access to a laptop and software.
- lead to greater job satisfaction.
- lead to progression through a degree.
- enable a student to engage with peers of different ages.
- enable non-traditional students to access higher education.
- lead to students believing they are treated equitably.
- ensure personalised nature of provision that recognises individual need and is flexible enough to make adjustments to HEIs' existing procedures.

Only Suzy who had the most complex needs of the case study individuals did not report success regarding VPL.

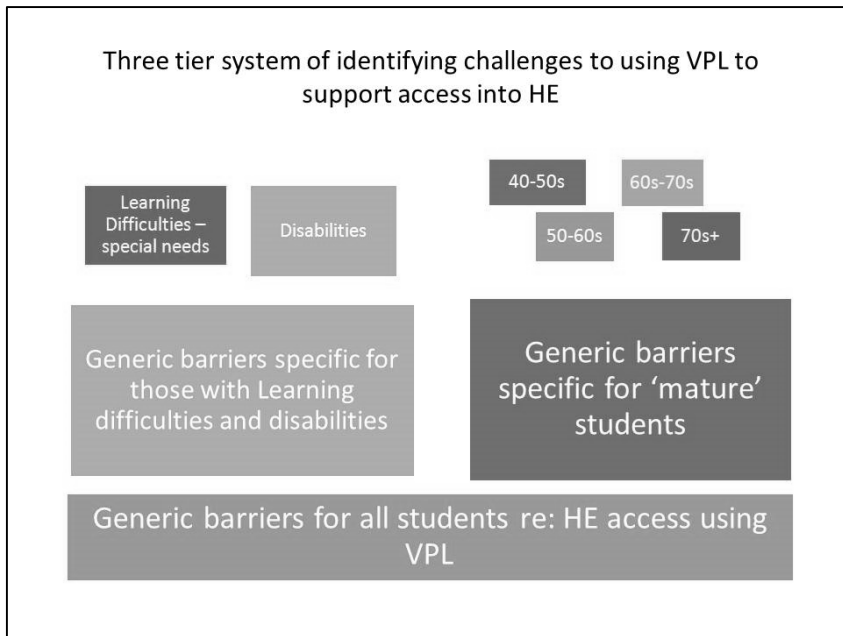
Conclusion

Having contextualised the UK's position in regard to its citizens' access to HE, this chapter has laid out findings addressing the UK perspective in the European AllinHE study. The chapter has revealed support and barriers for VPL in UK HEIs at macro-, meso- and micro-levels and it has focused on two marginalised groups: students with SEND and students who are aged 50-plus. The three tier model of identification (Figure 3) was developed as part of the present study to demonstrate the distinctions between general barriers to VPL for all students, generic barriers for target groups and specific barriers for target groups. The model indicates the potential impact on students classified as having a special need or disability (SEND) or being mature.

The UK picture of VPL supporting access to HE is varied. Policy, practice and culture affect VPL at macro-level, UK HEIs view their own VPL provision, policy and practice positively at meso-level, yet individuals who have experienced the macro- and meso-level structures indicating they are not always working as well as they are intended to do. Although the majority of individuals were able to report at least some level of success in regard to VPL, it is important to note that that all the UK case studies included in this project have studied in HE, so were not a representative sample of the population. A recommendation for future research would be to source a larger, more representative sample of individuals.

Nevertheless, the data indicate two major focus points where VPL is applied at least some of the time in the UK HEIs, resulting in some satisfaction for individuals: prior learning or experience reducing or eliminating entry requirements and allowances during the programme to ease individuals' progress through the degree.

Figure 3: Three tier model of identification



The present study indicates that once equality legislation is accounted for, the UK government tends to devolve many of the VPL processes relating to access to HE to HEIs. Whilst aspects of the VPL processes are evident in most UK HEIs, there is a lack of consistency and transparency so that individuals attempting to access HE often find it difficult to navigate their way through the VPL processes. In regard to access to HE and VPL processes, an unequal power relationship exists between HEIs and individuals, weighted towards HEIs; this especially disadvantages marginalised groups who are likely to be in the greatest need of access to VPL processes in order to access HE.

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