

# **The power of credit in securing professional teacher status for teaching assistants and early years' practitioners.**

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**Abstract.** This article presents innovative practice at Middlesex University London, around the recognition of prior learning (RPL) to develop professional progression opportunities for teaching assistants, unqualified teachers and early years' practitioners. From the literature and student feedback it is suggested that these practitioners have traditionally lacked professional status and found it difficult to access fulltime teacher training programmes. Flexible work-based degree pathways, based on RPL for general credit followed by work based projects, have been devised. Case studies on students who have successfully gone on to access professional teacher status are used to illustrate the pathway and the empowering effect of the process. Issues around the consistency of credit claims required for progression to post graduate teacher training programmes, are discussed. The key conclusion is that clear guidance is needed on the structure and focus of RPL credit claims to ensure successful professional progression.

**Key words.** RPL, accreditation, 'unqualified teachers', 'early years', 'teaching assistants', work-based.

## **Introduction:**

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is now firmly embedded in the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (QAA, 2013) as a legitimate mechanism for the award of university level credit. The QAA (2013) highlights in the quality code, that the use of RPL supports equality of opportunity and inclusive practice in higher education. Middlesex University London, has a tradition of flexible work-based learning programmes and the recognition of both prior certificated and experiential (or informal) learning for general credit towards a university award. This article presents how RPL processes have been successfully used to provide real progression opportunities for unqualified teachers, higher level teaching assistants and senior early years' practitioners. These practitioners commonly lack professional status, have

low pay scales compared with qualified teachers and lack career progression opportunities (The Key for School Leaders 2016 and TES 2016). Our students have told us that teacher training programmes needed to gain qualified teacher status (QTS) are hard to access for these practitioners as they are often fulltime or require a first degree. Innovative pathways at Middlesex University have been developed to enable these practitioners to gain recognition for their experience, gain degree certification and progress onto professional teacher training programmes at a post graduate level. Both the processes used and the impact it has had on these practitioner's professional journey will be explored. To inform this article, four practitioners who graduated with a work based learning degree in July 2015, were contacted one year later by email. They were invited to 'tell' the story of their professional journey in response to written open questions. Respondents 1 and 2 were unqualified teachers on entrance to the degree; respondent 3 was a higher level teaching assistant and respondent 4 was a senior early years' practitioner. All four progressed onto post graduate initial teacher training programmes. While feedback from all four respondents has informed this article, respondent 1 has been used as a case study to illustrate the unqualified teacher pathway and respondent 4 has been used as a case study to illustrate the early years' practitioner pathway. Direct quotes are used with their permission. Names are anonymised.

## Policy context:

The role of both teacher's assistants and unqualified teachers in English schools is substantial, especially in Academy schools, with about 17,000 unqualified teachers employed in English schools in 2015 (Jefferies 2015). There is debate about whether there has actually been an increase but there has been a relaxing in laws since 2012, giving state schools permission to employ unqualified teachers on the basis of their specialist skills such as music, foreign language and physical education (Fullfact, 2015). Teacher's assistants are used especially in primary schools to support classes and provide 1:1 work with children with learning or behavioural needs but are often then required to take on extra responsibilities (TES 2016). This is part of a wider policy shift in English state education towards de regulation giving greater freedoms to Academy Schools in particular, to determine their own recruitment needs. One view is that less regulation allows for a more diverse and multi skilled workforce but the other argues that a formal teacher training is essential to uphold the status of the teaching profession.

There is concern that unqualified teachers are increasingly being asked to deliver lessons (Jefferies 2015).

So what of the career prospects of these unqualified teachers and teacher's assistants? Firstly they are on substantially lower pay scales than qualified teachers. Unqualified teachers in outer London earn £19-28K per annum compared with £25-36K if qualified (The Key for School Leaders 2016). Higher level teacher assistants where there are no national pay scales have even lower pay rates averaging £12,000 per annum, and teacher assistants are often employed on term time or casual contracts and pay doesn't change much with experience (TES 2016). Secondly there are fewer progression possibilities as unqualified teachers are not eligible for 'special responsibility top ups' and most leadership roles in schools require qualified teacher status (The Key for School Leaders 2016). This lack of opportunity for career progression was given as the main reason for application to our work based learning degree by all four respondents.

Early Years' professionals also have limited progression opportunities to teacher status because Early Years has not traditionally been a graduate profession. The majority of the work force, including nursery managers, are at QCF<sup>1</sup> level two and three. There have been recent Government efforts to drive up the quality of Early Years provision with the introduction of the Early Years Statutory Framework in 2012 (EYFS updated 2014) and Early Years Teacher Status (EYTS) in 2013. Since 2014 Middlesex University has offered EYTS through a Post Graduate Certificate.

## The work based degree pathways:

Middlesex University has responded to this demand for a degree pathway for these practitioners in a number of ways. We have used our individually negotiated work based degree route, which builds on accreditation of prior experiential as well as certificated learning, for those who need a degree to access post graduate teacher training programmes (such as respondents 1,2 and 3). For early years' practitioners (such as respondent 4), we have also worked with their employer to accredit work place training as a first step towards a degree. For further detail on the work based learning framework to construct negotiated programmes please see Bravenboer and Workman (2015).

To illustrate how this can work let us look at respondent 1, Nicky, who was an unqualified teacher when she came to Middlesex University in 2013.

Nicky had a previous qualification to teach computing to adults but was now employed as an unqualified teacher in a primary school and taught discrete sessions in ICT and maths. She had reached the top of her pay scale and wanted to gain qualified teacher status to progress her career. She had started a part time degree course elsewhere but it was going to take her too long to gain a degree. She felt her only options were to *'quit or look for another route into teaching'*. She said that on entry *'I had been on a path to nowhere'* and *'no matter how many courses I undertook, the degree was vital to progress'*

An individual work based learning degree pathway was negotiated, allowing for the maximum of 240 credits or two thirds of her degree, being gained through credit transfer from another university and credit claims for key aspects of her extensive experiential learning (see Figure 1). It is the recognition of this prior experiential learning in particular which is crucial to the success of this pathway. Not only did it make her degree shorter but the *'review of learning'* process, which guided her through making her credit claims, helped her recognise her own worth. Nicky said that she found this process a *'steep learning curve'* but *'it made me understand how valuable my contribution to the school has been'*. Her degree culminated in a large work based project she undertook in her school, aimed at developing the primary computing curriculum.

Nicky's degree allowed her to progress directly onto a School Direct<sup>2</sup> Initial Teacher training (ITT) programme, which she has now passed and she has started a new class teacher position in her own school. Looking back a year later on the experience of the work based degree she comments that the ground work put in place during this time is having a lasting benefit as a teacher. *'Reflective journaling skills learned from day one at Middlesex has been a revelation and the discipline needed to examine my practice daily.'* It is interesting that all of the four respondents mentioned the importance of the critical reflective skills they learned through the review of learning/accreditation process, to their subsequent teacher training, where this is seen as fundamental to developing good practice. It would appear that RPL is not only instrumental in giving practitioners credit towards a degree qualification and progression opportunities, but the process that they go through to gain the recognition, gives them confidence in their achievements and develops ongoing reflective and analytical skills. Bravenboer and Workman (2015) highlight that this lifelong skill development is an important aspect of a work based curriculum philosophy.

There have however been some issues encountered with supporting these students. Although experienced, some initially lack the academic skills needed at degree level and struggle initially with how to relate theory to their practice in meaningful ways. Prompt questions based around credit level descriptors for various academic levels (SEEC 2016) have been developed to help students make sense of their knowledge and experience and then present their claims for experiential credit in a structured way (see Figure 4). Reflective models such as Gibbs (1988) are also introduced to help them reflect on their learning more critically.

Another issue particular to those wanting to progress to secondary teacher training is the requirement to have a national curriculum subject specialism in their undergraduate degree. This could make a work based degree heavily based around general credit problematic for progression and advice from ITT providers has been sought. Students have been able to evidence a substantial subject specialism, through a clear subject focus in their experiential claims and through the focus of their final projects. This has worked successfully for teachers of Physical education (such as respondent 2), but may not be appropriate for teachers of core national curriculum subjects where subject degrees are favoured. All students are advised of other teacher training requirements such as GCSE English, maths and science, at the outset.

Another way that Middlesex University is facilitating progression to a degree for early years' practitioners is by working with a local authority consortium, to accredit a professional development training programme they offer to senior nursery staff across the borough. This is done through our organisational accreditation service. This training programme consists of a series of modules that staff can take individually or as part of a programme. It is delivered and assessed by the Consortium but workers successfully completing the required module assessments gain credit certificates from Middlesex University for up to 60credits at level 4 and 60credits at level 5.

To illustrate how this has worked successfully for progression, we will look at respondent 4, Benhilda, who is the deputy manager of a nursery in this local authority with 15 years of experience in early years' provision. She has a level 3 childcare qualification, but needed a degree to be considered for the Early Years Teacher Status programme. Recently she has undertaken the accredited training programme with the consortium, so she already had 120 credits. Again a work based learning degree pathway was negotiated to

build on these credits to gain a BA (Hons) Professional Practice in Early Years. (See Figure 2)

However this case study highlights the issue of consistency when individuals making general credit claims wish to progress in a particular profession. Both employers and in this case the admissions tutors for PG Cert Early Years Foundation Stage teaching, want to be confident that students coming from this work based route have a comparable foundation to students coming from a taught Early Years degree program. The QAA Indicator 2 of Sound Assessment Practice, stresses that RPL processes need to be explicit, transparent and accessible to all intended audiences to ensure public confidence in values, standards and quality (QAA 2013).

It was not appropriate to require these work based practitioners to make 'specific' credit claims against the modules of the fulltime BA (hons) Early Childhood Studies programme, as this would have been overly prescriptive. As such this would not have allowed these work based practitioners much scope to claim credit for their extensive knowledge and varied experience. Garnett (2016) and De Graaff (2014) in their work around transdisciplinary, suggest that not relying on a solely discipline-based frame of reference for assessment enables the individual to claim the full extent of their leaning. Our approach was to develop suggested areas of learning for their credit claims, based on a professional reference point, the statutory framework for Early Years' Foundation Stage (EYFS 2014). This provided consistency as well as relevancy to the professional title of the degree to be awarded, but still allowed for some individual flexibility as the nature of the evidence provided was not prescribed (see Figure 3). Also these RPL claims were assessed around general rather than specific learning outcomes at the appropriate level (see Figure 4).

Benhilda also completed her degree with a large work based project, evaluating and developing current provision for under two's in her nursery which is a current UK government priority (Department of Education 2015). On graduation she was accepted onto the Middlesex PG Cert Professional Practice Early Years Foundation Stage Teaching. She feedback that her degree had given her '*the skills to look at something beneath the surface , how it is put together and judging what would be the best ( approach to practice)*'. She also highlighted her learning about how to work effectively with others on a project. Again this suggests that gaining the credit and the

degree is not just a means to an end but a vehicle for gaining useful leadership skills for the future as an early years' teacher or manager.

This particular pathway has now been extended to any early years' practitioner with at least 5 years of experience in an early years setting, a level 3 qualification and preferably at least 60 credits from certificated learning at level 4 or above. This later requirement is partly to support the work force initiatives of our employer partners and partly because from our experience individuals find it very demanding to gain 240 credits through experiential learning claims alone. With the development of apprenticeship standards in Early Years for level 4 and 5 leadership posts, this pathway could also provide a viable progression route for higher apprentices to obtain degrees and access post graduate teaching programmes.

## Conclusion:

The flexible work based degree pathways devised by Middlesex University, illustrate how powerful RPL can be for providing teaching assistants, unqualified teachers and early years' practitioners with substantial credit towards a degree and real progression opportunities towards qualified teacher status. The case studies presented also suggest that the process of reflection and credit recognition has an empowering effect and provides students with useful skills for their ongoing professional development. We have found that providing students with a suggested structure for the credit claims for their prior experiential learning has been useful. There has been some tension between providing the consistency needed for professional progression while maintaining maximum flexibility for work based students with differing experience. Professional reference points such as the EYFS (2014) have been useful to provide students with a consistent framework for their credit claims for experiential learning. Working closely with employers as well as admission tutors for Post graduate teaching programmes, has been key to ensuring that the process is transparent and meets the requirements for ongoing progression to teaching status. Similar models to those presented, could be used more by universities for other experienced practitioners that have difficulty accessing fulltime degrees or in areas of practice that have not traditionally been graduate professions.

End notes:

<sup>1</sup>QCF - The Qualifications and Credit Framework (*QCF*) is a national credit transfer system. It recognises qualifications and units by awarding credits. This has now been replaced with the RQF (Regulated Qualification Framework)

<sup>2</sup>School Direct - School Direct courses are designed by groups of schools in partnership with a university or a school-centred initial teacher training (SCITT) provider and the schools recruit the student as a teacher trainee. School Direct courses generally last a year and result in qualified teacher status (QTS). Most also award a postgraduate certificate in education (PGCE).



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## Figures:

Figure 1: Nicky's pathway

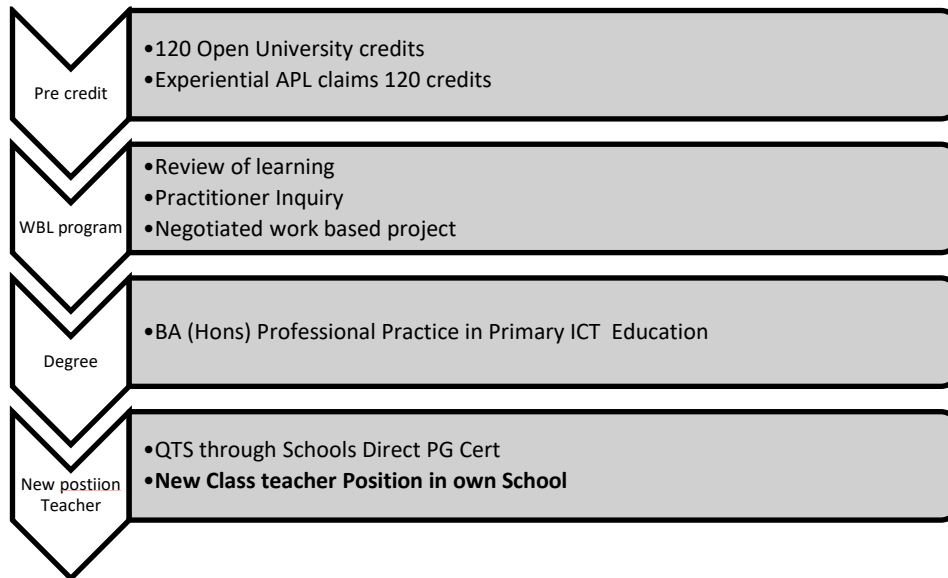


Figure 2: Benhilda's Pathway

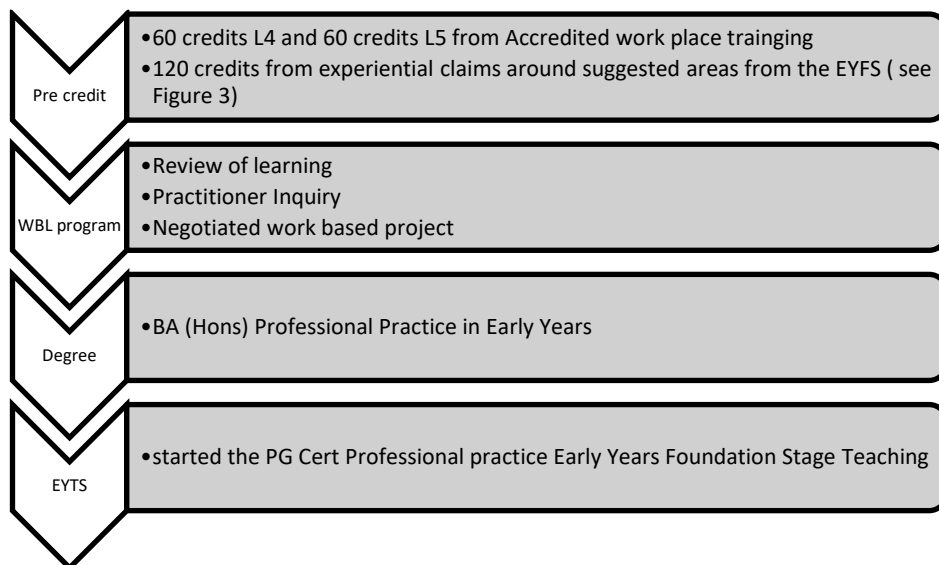


Figure 3: Areas of Learning for Early Years Students (based around the EYFS 2014)

<p>You are given the following list of areas of learning around which to structure your claims. There is some choice of areas depending how many credits you need. The aim is to build on and not repeat areas covered in your pre credit.</p>	
<p>Level 4</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promoting learning and development in Early years (EY)</li> <li>• Safeguarding and welfare in EY</li> <li>• Inclusive practice in EY</li> <li>• Parental partnership in EY</li> <li>• Promoting positive behaviour in EY</li> </ul>	<p>Level 5</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assessing children’s development and learning in EY</li> <li>• Leadership and teamwork in EY</li> <li>• Inter-professional working in EY</li> <li>• Statutory regulation in EY</li> </ul>

(Developed by Dilys Wilson and Ruth Miller, Middlesex University)

Figure 4: Example prompt questions for an RPL claim around a general level 4 learning outcome from the Middlesex University Work based learning framework.

<p><b>Communication and Impact:</b></p> <p>LO 3. Appropriately communicate your ideas, relevant information and outcomes of the work based activity /project.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>What has been the impact of this learning experience on your practice or in your workplace?</i></li> <li>• <i>What changes emerged as a result of the learning?</i></li> <li>• <i>How have you communicated this to others?</i></li> <li>• <i>What <b>evidence</b> do you have of this impact or communication?</i></li> </ul>
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(Questions developed by Ruth Miller and Keith Buckland, Middlesex University)

(Based on the Credit Level Descriptors for Higher Education SEEC 2016)