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# Examination as the method in the recognition of prior language learning

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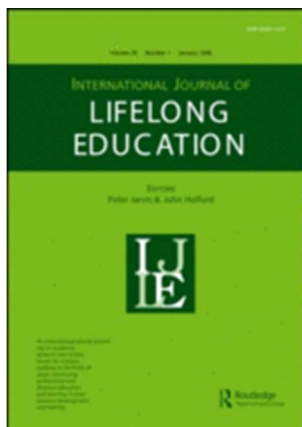
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## Examination as the method in the recognition of prior language learning

### Abstract

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) is a principle in education to acknowledge and validate learning acquired during and throughout an individual's lifetime. Formal, non-formal and informal learning can be assessed, recognised and accredited for various purposes in an individual's education or professional life. The methods of assessing prior learning vary across educational levels but examinations and portfolios are the most common methods in European higher education. This study investigated how Finnish university students perceived and RPL examination as the method of recognising their non-formal and informal learning of English for academic purposes. During a three-year period data were collected with a questionnaire and interview from RPL participants studying Business and Economics, and with an electronic survey with non-participant students from the same degree programme. The findings indicate that Finnish university students in both groups preferred the examination as the RPL method for non-formal and informal learning of academic English, and some RPL participants were critical of the option of a portfolio for the assessment of prior language learning. This can be seen to emphasise the use of similar assessment methods in both the RPL assessment and the equivalent formal learning instruction.

**Key-words:** recognition of prior learning, higher education, English for academic purposes, non-formal and informal learning

### 1. Introduction

Recognition of prior learning (RPL), also known as validation or accreditation, is a principle in education to recognise and value all learning acquired by an individual during his/her lifetime. RPL, in connection with lifelong learning, can be seen to generate a bond between different forms of learning, areas and stages of life. Therefore learning from these formal, non-formal or informal learning environments can also be assessed and validated for study-related purposes, including higher education (HE). The processes of recognition and validation aim towards the support of lifelong learning, the reduction of overlapping education or training, increasing national and international mobility and more flexible approaches to working and studying (Pokorny & Whittaker, 2014; Werquin, 2010).

In addition to the mobility and flexibility perspectives, RPL should be seen as an inherently learner- and learning-centric approach that functions to validate individual skills and knowledge and to enhance self-awareness and self-esteem (UNESCO, 2012). Through theoretical ideology recognition can also be seen as fulfilling an element of social justice (Scott, 2010; Wong, 2014) as RPL processes also promote the introduction of new students to HE and widening access particularly for non-traditional learners (Harris, 1999). As a result, RPL functions on various economic, social, educational and psychological levels and the recognition processes aim to meet the needs of both individuals and the society.

The methods used for RPL to assess non-formal and informal learning vary across higher education institutions (HEIs) yet particularly for university subject and knowledge-based learning, various portfolio processes appear to be prominent (cf. Breier & Ralphs, 2009; Shalem & Steinberg, 2002; Taylor, 1996). Consequently, relatively little research overall has been performed on the use of the examinations in the assessment of prior learning or students' perceptions of examinations as the recognition and validation method. Therefore, this study investigates how Finnish university students perceive the use of RPL exemption examinations in the validation of non-formally and

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3 | informally acquired skills and competence in English for academic purposes (EAP)<sup>1</sup> for their  
4 | degrees. The study aims to provide a learner-centric view on the use of examinations from ~~from~~  
5 | students both involved and not involved in the RPL process.  
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7

## 8 **2. Theoretical framework**

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10  
11 In HE, recognition practices originate from the 1980s, with similar developments taking place in the  
12 UK, France, USA and Canada (Challis, 1993; Valk, 2009). However already in the 1970s the  
13 recognition of prior learning was seen providing connections between life experience and education  
14 and encouraging the 'validity of all learning that is relevant to a college degree and for actively  
15 fostering recurrent education' (Willingham, 1977, p. 95). In the 1980s also Kolb (1984) noted that  
16 'people do learn from experience, and the results of that experience can be reliably assessed and  
17 certified for college credit' (p. 3).  
18

19  
20 In European HE, the principle of RPL is based on the Bologna process which instigated the  
21 harmonisation of the European higher education area (EHEA) through which increased consistency  
22 of degrees and enhanced cooperation, networking and mobility were sought. This transparency and  
23 comparability of HE degrees in turn contributed to the need for more comprehensive recognition of  
24 prior, non-formal, informal and lifelong learning (Räisänen & Fortanet-Gómez, 2008). As a result,  
25 in addition to formal learning acquired in institutions, today higher education institutions (HEIs) can  
26 also validate non-formal learning, i.e. courses or other training that may not otherwise qualify for  
27 formal accreditation; and informal learning, which can be amassed from various conscious or  
28 unconscious learning situations at one's work, free time, travels or in any social contact (European  
29 Commission, 2001; Marsick & Watkins, 1990).  
30

31  
32 Regardless of the mode or type of learning, at the core of any RPL process lie the learning  
33 outcomes which enable HEIs to measure and assess prior knowledge, skills and competencies  
34 against those outcomes (Cedefop, 2009). According to Werquin (2010), there are typically five  
35 steps in any process that aims to recognise an individual's relevant non-formal and informal  
36 learning: identification, assessment, validation, certification, and social recognition. These steps can  
37 be seen to comprise most recognition processes in European HE, even if different methods of  
38 assessment are utilised.  
39

### 40 **2.1 Assessment methods in validating non-formal and informal learning**

41  
42 Several methods can be adopted in the assessment of learning outcomes, including various  
43 summative testing and examinations, evidence-based methods such as portfolios, other evidence,  
44 observations, simulations or work practices (Colardyn & Bjørnåvold, 2005). The key issue, as in  
45 any assessment, is that RPL assessment is authentic, valid, transparent and reliable to ensure the  
46 quality and validity of the system, the assessment and the validation (Evans, 2006; Werquin, 2010).  
47 Typically policies and studies on RPL recommend the usage of similar methods for assessing all  
48 formal, non-formal and informal learning so that the RPL assessment is not constructed differently,  
49 or made more demanding than the equivalent formal learning assessment (Werquin 2010).  
50

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51  
52 | <sup>1</sup> Courses on English for academic purposes (EAP) focus on learning academic English through tasks, texts  
53 | and content relating to academic English for study and research purposes. In EAP courses students develop  
54 | their knowledge of language features, style, vocabulary and organisational structures found in academic texts  
55 | and communicative situations (Carkin, 2005).  
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3 Similarly, Evans (2006) has called using more stringent criteria or methods for RPL purposes as  
4 'improper, dishonest and academically irresponsible' (p. 216).  
5

6 For the assessment methods of prior learning Butterworth (1992) earlier identified the credit  
7 exchange model and the developmental model. The first refers to evidence being provided by the  
8 applicant of his/her knowledge or learning, and credits are awarded if the required knowledge and  
9 abilities meet the learning outcomes. Osman (2004) has viewed this credit exchange model,  
10 typically involving performance testing or examinations, as a straightforward way for students to  
11 obtain equivalent credits. However, the credit exchange model has also been criticised for the lack  
12 of reflection as RPL claimants in this type of process 'have not learned anything they did not know  
13 before' (Butterworth 1992, p. 45). Yet Trowler (1996) has viewed the credit exchange model as  
14 including elements of reflection, such as identifying relevant skills and prior learning through self-  
15 assessment. Reflection, however, is a more integral part of the developmental model where both the  
16 reflective contribution by the student and the evidence of prior learning are required for the  
17 awarding of credit. Andersson (2006) has similarly divided the assessment of prior learning into  
18 two forms: convergent and divergent. The convergent method, much akin to the credit exchange  
19 model, refers to assessing the claimant's prior knowledge against specific learning outcomes often  
20 through examinations or other testing, while divergent methods function more holistically to  
21 ascertain the extent of the RPL applicant's or claimant's skills and knowledge.  
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23

## 24 **2.2 Challenges in RPL assessment**

  
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26 Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning in its multitude and variety can be  
27 challenging. First, even defining the concepts of non-formal and informal learning can be  
28 problematic, especially in the HE context (Fenwick, 2006; McGivney, 2006). Secondly, obstacles to  
29 recognition still include time constraints and workload issues of HE teachers and RPL assessors,  
30 difficulties in describing all HE learning as measurable learning outcomes, and potential prejudices  
31 of teaching staff towards validating non-formal and informal learning at HE level, particularly at  
32 science universities (Valk, 2009).  
33  
34

35 A common cause for concern in university-level RPL is therefore the issue of maintaining the  
36 quality, standards and status of university education (Dismore et al., 2011; Stenlund, 2011). In fact,  
37 Peters (2006) claims that RPL has been 'colonized by a traditional university assessment discourse  
38 which exerts a high degree of control over what is accepted as valid knowledge' (p. 168). Therefore  
39 because of the inherent power held by the assessors in the RPL process, regardless of the type of  
40 assessment but perhaps most evident in the portfolio and/or interview scenario, the assessors can  
41 function as so-called gate-keepers of what is legitimate knowledge (Hamer, 2013; Wong, 2014).  
42  
43

44 Learner expectations can be another issue in RPL assessment where ability, proficiency or  
45 performance are assessed against set learning outcomes. This manner of assessment can be  
46 perceived as restrictive by students (Garrett, Portwood & Costley, 2004; Pokorny, 2011). Some  
47 students may possess a myriad of experience and knowledge not specified in the learning outcomes  
48 and if the RPL process does not allow the full depth of the student's experience to be demonstrated,  
49 this can be a source of frustration. On the other hand, if learning outcomes are expressed very  
50 broadly they can become burdensome for students seeking the assessment of the skills and  
51 knowledge.  
52

53 However, despite the assessment method, each RPL applicant's experience of the process can be  
54 improved by stringent attention to the reliability of the assessment. Each RPL participant must  
55 receive equal and fair information and treatment during the RPL process, from the initial guidance  
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3 to the signing up, to taking part in the assessment and to the feedback regarding the outcome  
4 (Halttunen & Koivisto, 2014). RPL assessors should also be familiar with RPL concepts and  
5 principles to ensure the quality, validity and fairness of the assessment (Werquin, 2010; Travers &  
6 Harris, 2014), and typically the same person would be in charge of the formal learning assessment  
7 and the RPL assessment for the same course or study module (Vau, 2012).  
8

### 9 10 **2.3 Examinations and portfolios**

11 In the European RPL policy context Cedefop (2009) lists tests and examinations as one  
12 recommended method of direct assessment of specific skills obtained through non-formal and  
13 informal learning, especially for their perceived cost-effectiveness, extended applicability and  
14 fairness. While examinations are a common method for assessing prior learning, some RPL scholars  
15 are critical of examinations as the validation method. Andersson (2008) has argued that  
16 examinations are a method of governing and intrinsically linked to formal education as whereby in  
17 RPL assessment examinations serve to highlight the power relations of the recognition process.  
18 Hence examinations can be seen to force non-formal and informal learning into formally accepted  
19 and recognised competence, and enforcing previously invisible learning into disciplinary and  
20 productive forms of knowledge and learning (ibid.). Similarly Hamer (2013) has argued that  
21 recognising non-formal and informal learning in formal ways such as examinations can limit the  
22 assessment to the knowledge required and leave out much of the learner's own interpretations of  
23 experience.  
24  
25

26 Yet many researchers have also been critical of the portfolio for RPL assessment since portfolios as  
27 the method of assessment in RPL can place students with varying communicative competences or  
28 beliefs in their own abilities in unequal positions (Castle & Attwood, 2001; Brinke, Sluijsmans &  
29 Jochems, 2009). Self-reported estimates of informal learning such as portfolios compiled by  
30 students can underestimate the actual amount of informal learning because of the embedded and  
31 tacit nature of the learning (Livingstone, 2006).  
32  
33

34 Another source of concern with portfolios and/or narrative interviews compared to examinations  
35 can be the reliability of the evaluation of the students' learning. Stenlund (2010) has questioned the  
36 use of portfolios for RPL because of their potential for bias in the scoring and interpretation of the  
37 results. Armsby, Costley and Garrett (2006) also maintain that portfolio work or narrative  
38 interviews can be influenced unnecessarily by the RPL assessor's professional and personal stance,  
39 and therefore create an unbalanced assessment situation where the assessor's ideological  
40 perspective can have an effect on the RPL process.  
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43 A portfolio process for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning may also be deemed too  
44 bureaucratic or time-consuming by HE students. Some students have found a portfolio process,  
45 lasting several months and involving constant reflection, very demanding prompting arguments that  
46 experiences such as these may in fact play a key role in why an RPL process for non-formal and  
47 informal learning is not actively sought by more students (Cleary et al., 2002). Further, particularly  
48 students who may spend considerable time compiling their portfolios but in the end are not awarded  
49 credits or exemption because their descriptions do not match the expressed learning outcomes, may  
50 feel critical of the RPL process. After unsuccessful portfolio applications students have questioned  
51 the authority and expertise of the RPL assessors, claiming they were possessive of their study  
52 modules and not familiar with the process of recognition (Peters, 2005).  
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### 55 **2.4 Examinations in the validation of non-formal and informal language learning**

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3 Many forms of proficiency and performance testing have been actively utilised for language  
4 assessment purposes since the 1970s (Shohamy, 1996). Also since the 1970s in Finland, all  
5 undergraduate university degrees have included compulsory language and communication  
6 requirements (Karjalainen & Laulajainen, 2011; Tuomi & Rontu, 2011). In 2004, the potential to  
7 recognise also non-formal and informal learning as part of Finnish university degrees was  
8 introduced and this allowed students to be accredited for learning acquired outside of formal  
9 learning, including their language and communication proficiency in the academic and field-  
10 specific context.

11  
12 In 2011, national recommendations for the recognition of non-formal and informal language  
13 learning were produced in Finland (RPL in Higher Education, 2011). The recommendations offer  
14 university language centres various methods to assess students' prior learning such as examinations,  
15 portfolios, interviews, other written or oral contributions, expert lectures, learning diaries or  
16 assignments, the European Language Portfolio or any other suitable combination of the above. At  
17 present, a variety of written and oral examinations are most commonly used for the recognition of  
18 non-formal and informal learning of English in Finnish university language centres, followed by  
19 portfolios and/or oral interviews (Anttila et al., 2014).

20  
21  
22 Testing languages for academic and specific purposes in HE can be seen as a specialised form of  
23 communicative language testing which considers not only language performance but also the  
24 specific contexts for the language use and the student's overall communicative capacity (Douglas,  
25 2000). Therefore evaluating students' non-formal and informal prior learning of EAP with RPL  
26 examinations can be seen as administering proficiency and performance tests for recognition  
27 purposes where the academic language and communication skills are assessed and validated in  
28 relation to the course-specific learning outcomes.

### 3. Methodology

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34 In a mid-sized Finnish science university that had exclusively adopted the use of RPL examinations  
35 for the validation of non-formal and informal learning of academic English, during a three-year  
36 period RPL participants were asked about their perceptions of the examination system using a  
37 mixed methods research design. Data from RPL participants from Business and Economics were  
38 collected with a questionnaire (n=31) and individual interviews (n=18), and following the RPL data  
39 collection, from non-participants in the same field with an electronic survey (n=105). Both student  
40 groups were asked about the use of the examinations, the process, information and guidance of the  
41 examination procedure, and if they had preferred another method of validation for their prior  
42 learning of academic and field-specific English.

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44  
45 As a mixed methods design, the study used quantitative and qualitative questionnaire data,  
46 qualitative interview data from RPL participants and quantitative and qualitative electronic survey  
47 responses from the non-participants. The mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods in the  
48 sequential mixed methods design was used to provide more versatile processing and interpretation  
49 of the data, expand the explication of the results and provide a more in-depth view of the studied  
50 phenomena (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

#### 3.1 Questionnaire for RPL participants

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54 Between January 2013 and December 2015, 45 students of Business and Economics at a Finnish  
55 science university attended the exemption examinations for their degree-required courses on EAP.

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3 Of those students, 31 (68.9 %) completed the questionnaire on the RPL procedure and their  
4 perceptions of the examination. The questionnaire for RPL participants was administered on the six  
5 examination days held in 2013, 2014 and 2015. In each data collection event, the study was  
6 explained to the students verbally, with an emphasis that taking part was voluntary but naturally  
7 appreciated. According to Andersson (2014), even if the focus of the RPL research is on the  
8 perspectives and experiences of the claimants or developing the RPL process, any participation in  
9 the study must be voluntary.  
10

### 11 **3.2 Interviews with RPL participants**

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13 Participants for the individual interviews were invited using an informed consent form which was  
14 distributed with the questionnaire. 18 of the 31 students who had completed the questionnaire  
15 consented to be interviewed. All 18 participants chose to be interviewed in person but two  
16 interviews were later arranged online after scheduling issues. With all interviews the date, time and  
17 location of the interview were arranged individually to encourage the convenience of attendance  
18 (King & Horrocks, 2010). The interviews were conducted in Finnish, the participants' mother  
19 tongue, and audio recorded. After the conclusion of the interviews, the recordings were transcribed  
20 verbatim. The transcripts were later translated into English.  
21  
22

### 23 **3.3 Electronic survey for non-participants**

24  
25 Following the RPL participant data collection, the electronic survey was sent in October 2014 to all  
26 enrolled degree students of Business and Economics at the same university who had not taken any  
27 RPL examinations for their English courses during their studies (n=734). The electronic survey was  
28 created to be accessible and time-efficient. In the survey students were asked why they had not  
29 participated in the recognition of their prior learning of English, how they perceived the use of the  
30 examination for RPL and if they had preferred another method. The online survey was open for 14  
31 days, during which two separate reminders were sent to non-respondents. In the end the overall  
32 number of respondents was 105, with a 14.3 % response rate. Unfortunately online surveys are  
33 today less likely to obtain as high response rates as paper versions of surveys (Nulty, 2008; Sax,  
34 Gilmartin & Bryant, 2003), which also transpired in this study.  
35  
36

### 37 **3.4 Data analysis**

38  
39 The qualitative data items from the questionnaires, electronic survey responses and the interview  
40 transcripts were analysed with the qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti. Topic coding with  
41 tags and labels within the data was used, followed by axial coding which allowed for the  
42 segmentation of the codes into larger categories for themes and patterns related to the use of the  
43 examination as the RPL method.  
44  
45

46 In this mixed methods study mixing occurred during the data collection and the analysis as all data  
47 from the three methods were ultimately analysed together and subsequently merged through a  
48 mixed analysis provided in the results and discussion sections of this study. The processing and  
49 analysis of the data were also approached throughout the study with an explicit minimisation of  
50 researcher bias and subjectivity (Creswell, 2014; Johnson & Christensen, 2012).  
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## 53 **4. Results**

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3 The participants of this study include students from only one degree programme in one university in  
4 Finland, yet the subjects can be argued to be representative of Finnish university students. The  
5 mean age of all the participants in the different phases of this study (N=136) was 26 (SD 7.2) and  
6 median age 24. The participants' ages ranged between 18 and 63 which reflects the heterogeneous  
7 age structure and varied backgrounds of Finnish university students and thus the prevalence of adult  
8 students and lifelong learners in Finnish HE (Moore, 2006).  
9

#### 10 **4.1 RPL participants' perceptions of the examination**

11  
12 According to the questionnaire open-ended answers and the interview data, most RPL participants  
13 studying Business and Economics appeared to perceive the course-specific examinations for the  
14 RPL assessment quite positively in the validation of EAP proficiency. The versatile nature of the  
15 examination in evaluating various elements expressed in the learning outcomes was seen in the  
16 interview data:  
17

18  
19 *I find this exam maybe best for the student, that it is one clear thing that you pass or you*  
20 *don't, based on what you know and do.*  
21

22 *It was good overall, that it [re: the exam] looks at what the student can do in a versatile way.*  
23

24 Many of the RPL participants appeared to also value the communicative and collaborative structure  
25 of the EAP examinations, especially with the oral components. Students who attended the same  
26 examination completed the oral tasks (e.g. academic presentation) with the other examination  
27 participants and the RPL assessor as the audience.  
28

29 *I like having other people there too. Then it's like a performance and you forget it's an exam.*  
30

31  
32 In the subsequent interviews (n=18) the RPL participants also discussed various RPL methods to  
33 demonstrate prior learning. Based on the interview data, a portfolio (and subsequent interview)  
34 would have been the preferred option for five participants (n=5) who wished for more time for the  
35 written tasks or would have wanted to complete a larger project or assignment at home without  
36 time-constraints. However, one of the five students also emphasised presentations or other oral  
37 components as part of all EAP exemption examinations, especially for students of Business and  
38 Economics:  
39

40 *To use something other than the exam, the portfolio sounds quite suitable but in Finland you*  
41 *also need to practice performing in English.*  
42

43  
44 In the interviews the remaining RPL participants could be seen question the portfolio for RPL  
45 assessment. Because many students were familiar with the corresponding formal learning courses,  
46 they appeared somewhat sceptical that a portfolio could reflect the learning outcomes in the same  
47 way as the exercises and tasks used both in the examination and the corresponding course:  
48

49 *If the course includes tasks like a sales speech and practising job interviews, how can you*  
50 *demonstrate that with a learning diary or a language portfolio?*  
51

52 *I may be old-fashioned but if the course is in the curriculum and everyone has to complete it*  
53 *then I think the same learning should be covered in the course and the RPL.*  
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Several RPL participants in the interviews also expressed concern about the validity and fairness of the RPL assessment if the non-formal and informal learning were assessed with different methods than the equivalent formal learning course, particularly as the EAP courses for Business and Economics entail numerical assessment:

*If someone brings a portfolio, how would you [re: the assessor] evaluate it? With the same grades? How do you compare the portfolio and the course tasks with the same assessment criteria? It's not possible, is it? Or at least it's not equal for the students.*

*The activities in the exam should be what they are in the course, I think. It's not the same thing if you put together some texts, or have had years to write them and fix them and then who knows if you've even written all of them yourself.*

The interview data can be seen to reflect previous studies on RPL assessment where assessing portfolios has been viewed as potentially biased by the assessor's ideologies (Armsby, Costley & Garrett, 2006; Brinke, Sluijsmans & Jochems, 2009; Stenlund, 2010). Some RPL participants also envisioned a portfolio process as superficial or labour-intensive while lacking authenticity:

*Creating a portfolio at home to me would feel a bit silly and superficial, I don't see the point.*

*I imagine a portfolio could end up being as much work which would defeat the purpose why people even come to RPL in the first place.*

The latter citation can be seen to reflect the time-saving aspect of RPL, an integral part of RPL policies. The time- and cost-savings aspect of examinations for RPL purposes with non-formal and informal learning has been recommended by Cedefop (2009), and similar perceptions with regard to time have been previously reported with university students (Tuomainen, 2014). Therefore a frequent view on RPL from the student perspective appeared to be the efficiency and time-effectiveness of the RPL examination process.

#### 4.2 Non-participants' perceptions of the examination

In addition to gaining information on RPL participants' views on the examination they had participated in, to assess the general perception of the examination as the RPL method it was necessary to investigate the views of the parallel student group of Business and Economics students. The non-participants who responded to the electronic survey had not taken part in any academic English exemption examination during their studies. The survey items focused on the use of the examination as the method to determine whether the examination as the method was a threshold to attending the RPL process.

In the electronic survey the non-participants were asked to indicate their preferred method(s) for demonstrating non-formal and informal learning. The respondents were provided a selection of options based on the Finnish national recommendations for language and communication studies, and the results can be seen in table 1.

[Insert table 1]

As the results demonstrate, the majority of the non-participants preferred the examination for the RPL method for academic English (n=66). Of the 66 selections for the examination, 45 were the sole option chosen. For the non-participants the portfolio and interview was the second most

frequently preferred RPL method (n=29). However, 16 of those who preferred the portfolio and interview had also selected the examination as a potential choice, which may imply that some non-participant students may have wished to have an option for the RPL method rather than being provided only one method for the RPL process.

In the exclusive choices, the examination was followed by the portfolio and interview (n=4), the European Language Portfolio (n=1) and a learning diary (n=1). It would appear that most RPL non-participants were open-minded towards other methods than the examination and may have wished to be able to choose from several methods or have an individually tailored method for the RPL assessment.

In the survey open-ended questions the non-participants were asked how they viewed the concept of RPL in general, and similarly to the RPL participants, the aspect of saving time was connected to RPL and most commonly mentioned in the open-ended answers:

*The good thing is that with RPL you can replace a course where you would be learning things you've already learned somewhere else. It leaves time for other things.*

However, some non-participant students were also critical of the examination as the method. The survey included a question, 'What is your primary reason for not taking part in an RPL demonstration for EAP?' with eight ready-made options to facilitate answering and completing the survey. The selections and percentages are illustrated in table 2.

[Insert table 2]

As seen in table 2, the most frequent reason (n=31) for not taking part in the RPL process for assessing non-formal and informal learning of EAP was the supposition of not passing the examination. Information about the exemption examinations is available and accessible to all students on the university's website, including course learning outcomes and self-assessment questions for each examination. This function adheres to the guidance and information guidelines recommended by Cedefop (2009) and assists students in evaluating their learning before registering for any RPL examination. However, some students were ~~still~~ also unaware of the RPL opportunity although all Finnish university students should receive RPL guidance from their department or faculty from the faculty advisor or other designated RPL staff (Halttunen & Koivisto, 2014). Some students also ~~or they~~ found the examination an unsuitable option because of the scheduling, the workload or the method. In the open-ended answers, nervousness about the examination process was mentioned as one reason:

*In an examination situation one cannot necessarily show his/her best. At work I might speak a foreign language fluently but in an interview part of an exam I will freeze.*

Examination or performance anxiety are known to connect also to foreign language learning (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012), and speaking activities, oral language use and oral presentations in particular are considered most affected by foreign language anxiety (Gregersen, 2005; Woodrow, 2006). Therefore some students may avoid the EAP exemption examination because of anxiety but arguably these students would benefit from the classroom activities performed on the course.

## 5. Discussion

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3 According to the European Students' Union (2012), recognition of prior learning is an element of  
4 student-centred learning, involving students in the construction of the learning process. Therefore  
5 also competences from outside the formal system must be recognised and the process of recognition  
6 facilitated. Across Europe, national HE policies emphasise consistent and transparent practices for  
7 RPL to facilitate more rapid progression of studies and to ensure an equal treatment of students.  
8

9 While RPL policies in European HE recommend tests and examinations as methods for recognising  
10 non-formal and informal learning for their cost-efficacy, fairness and applicability (Cedefop, 2009),  
11 another rationale for assessing prior learning through testing and examinations can be the  
12 established use of examinations the equivalent formal learning. In this study context, the use of  
13 examination tasks very similar to the tasks on the equivalent formal learning course was based on  
14 European and Finnish RPL recommendations of utilising similar methods and criteria in the  
15 validation of non-formal and informal learning as in the related formal learning course (European  
16 Commission, 2011; Ministry of Education, 2007).  
17  
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19 However, for both student groups in this study, the RPL participants and non-participants, to prefer  
20 the examination as the RPL method for academic English may indicate some challenges in the  
21 reflection and self-evaluation of language and communication skills and abilities. Examinations, an  
22 inherent part of university education in Finland, may be seen as the familiar, safe or time-efficient  
23 choice, so the one-day RPL exemption examination for EAP appeared to be functional in a time-  
24 and resource-efficient manner. Another issue is that the participants in the study represent only one  
25 degree programme, Business and Economics and thus it could be presumed that the perceptions and  
26 views may alter with a more multidisciplinary sample.  
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29 However, from a deep learning aspect it ~~could~~can be argued that a more reflective or  
30 comprehensive or otherwise organised RPL assessment process could ~~entice and~~ engage students  
31 more in a process of self-assessment and reflection regarding their existing non-formal and informal  
32 learning-knowledge of EAP. An examination does require preparation and contemplation of skills in  
33 advance but also utilises the application of skills and knowledge in the examination, whereas a  
34 portfolio would encourage and require a more extensive and comprehensive-versatile reflection and  
35 self-assessment of skills and the compilation of evidence. Therefore the use of examinations for  
36 RPL requires further scrutiny. Yet the RPL process and assessment, at least in this limited scope,  
37 was also viewed positively: the collective examination experience of participating in a  
38 demonstration of skills and proficiency with peers was considered beneficial from the  
39 communicative development and peer learning perspective.  
40

41 It could be argued that working on a portfolio process, even with language proficiency, could entice  
42 more reflection and analysis from RPL claimants and force students to utilise their lifelong  
43 language learning in a more comprehensive manner. Some of the non-participants in this study may  
44 indeed have preferred a more narrative and contemplative manner of exploring their non-formal and  
45 informal learning of English for academic purposes. Another choice would be to provide various  
46 options as the method of demonstrating prior learning. Some Finnish HEIs already provide students  
47 a choice between two or three RPL options (e.g. examination, portfolio or another tailored method)  
48 (Haapoja & Heikkilä, 2009). In the Finnish RPL context, Airola (2012) has also highlighted the  
49 multidimensionality of RPL assessment to improve the understanding and acceptance of learner  
50 differences and to enhance the validity and reliability of RPL assessment.  
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53 In the end, the methods of recognising and validating prior learning in HE may vary but in the core  
54 of any RPL process is the student and the value of all learning, the key principles of any educational  
55 level or assessment process. Hopefully an increasing number of HE students will be consider RPL,  
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be more aware of its potential and be analytical and critical of the practices. Being more conscious of prior learning and the recognition processes provided will encourage more students to demonstrate their valid and relevant prior, non-formal and informal learning.

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Table 1. Non-participants' preferred RPL method (N=188)

Preferred RPL method	Frequency
Examination	66
Portfolio + interview	29
Individually tailored method	25
No preference	17
Learning diary	15
On-the-job observation	15
European Language Portfolio	13
Expert lecture	8
<b>Total</b>	<b>188</b>

Table 2. *Non-participants' reasons for not participating in RPL (N=105)*

<b>Reasons for not participating in RPL</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percent</b>
I would not pass the examination	31	30 %
I want to participate in the course	20	19 %
I haven't known about this opportunity	20	19 %
I want a good grade by participating in the course	16	15 %
Other	11	10 %
The examination time/date is unsuitable	2	2 %
The examination as a method is unsuitable	2	2 %
No response (void)	2	2 %
Preparing for the examination is too much work	1	1 %
<b>Total</b>	<b>105</b>	<b>100.0</b>