Ollscoil na hÉireann
National University of Ireland

Degrees and Qualifications of
The National University of Ireland

Recognition of Prior Learning

November 2013

Ollscoil na hÉireann
National University of Ireland

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1   INTRODUCTION

1.1   Education policy in Ireland centres on the concept of learning as a lifelong process; one that occurs throughout the life cycle and in a wide variety of contexts.[1] A substantial proportion of learning occurs outside formal learning environments, e.g. in the workplace or community, which whilst often unaccredited, is equally valid. In order to facilitate an inclusive approach to accessing qualifications of the National University of Ireland (the University), it is important that member institutions remain adaptive to the multiplicity of learning experiences among potential students and establish appropriate mechanisms for the recognition of different forms of learning.

1.2   The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) is designed to help learners map out the diversity of learning pathways and to aid education providers in designing accessible programmes that allow for progression through a range of learning routes. The Framework uses an outcomes-based approach that places the emphasis on learning, rather than education per se. This provides a useful basis on which to develop systems within member institutions for the recognition of prior learning (RPL) for the purposes of access, transfer, progression and award.

1.3   RPL is an important element of EU policy for widening access to qualifications and supporting lifelong learning. It also has associated benefits for individual fulfilment, social inclusion, workforce development and economic regeneration. The principles and practice considerations outlined in this document are intended to underpin the University's support for lifelong learning within a framework of quality, and provide a guide for member institutions in developing their own RPL procedures for programmes leading to NUI awards.

2   DEFINITIONS

2.1   '**RPL**' is defined as "the process by which prior learning is given a value. It is a means by which prior learning is formally identified, assessed and acknowledged".[2] In this document, 'RPL' encompasses and replaces the terms 'Accreditation of Prior Certified Learning' (APCL) and 'Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning' (APEL) that have previously been associated with this practice.

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[1] Department for Education and Skills (2000), *Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education*.
[2] National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (2005), *Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning in Further and Higher Education in Ireland*, p. 2.

2.2   '**Prior learning**' may be acquired through:

- *Formal learning*: programmes of education or training delivered by recognised education and training providers that are assessed and can lead to awards.
- *Non-formal learning*: learning activities undertaken in the workplace, voluntary sector, community etc. that may be assessed but do not normally lead to certification.
- *Informal/experiential learning*: acquired through life and work experience. The learning is unintentional and the learner may not recognise at the time that it is contributing to their knowledge, skills and competence.

2.3   '**Learning Outcomes'** describe what a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to do following completion of a period of learning. Awards in the NFQ are based on learning outcomes which are set at varying levels indicating different standards of knowledge, skill and competence.

3   ROLE OF RPL IN NUI AWARDS

3.1   Where it is considered appropriate by member institutions, RPL may be used, at both undergraduate and graduate levels, to gain, in respect of awards of the University:

(a)   Admission to programmes, at an initial or advanced stage, where a person may not have obtained the standard entry requirements;

(b)   Exemptions from course components where learning outcomes have demonstrably been achieved;

(c)   Transfer between programmes; and

(d)   Credit towards an award.

3.2   It is recognised that it is the policy of some education bodies to make full awards on the basis of evidenced prior learning. As the awards of the University are positioned at the upper levels of the NFQ, requiring the demonstration of high levels of theoretical, abstract and practical knowledge, skills and competence, the circumstances in which it would be appropriate to make a full award solely on the basis of RPL are likely to be highly exceptional. The University does not therefore confer awards on this basis at this time[3]. In an exceptional case, where a Recognised College proposes to make an award solely on the basis of prior learning, it should seek the views of the University at the earliest opportunity.

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[3] NUI Degrees on Published Work are provided for under separate regulations of the University.

4. PRINCIPLES

4.1 To ensure fair and inclusive access to awards of the University, and to safeguard the integrity of those awards, the following principles apply to the operation of RPL:

(a) The University gives value to all learning, irrespective of where or how that learning is achieved.

(b) RPL processes within member institutions provide opportunities for access, transfer, progression and achievement of NUI awards.

(c) The focus of RPL processes is on the achievement of learning, or the outcome of learning, rather than the experience of learning.

(d) In seeking recognition under RPL, evidence of achievement of learning outcomes is recorded in writing (and through any other appropriate medium) and authenticated at the appropriate level(s).

(e) RPL is fully embedded within the quality assurance procedures of member institutions.

(f) RPL assessment criteria are appropriate, fit for purpose, and based on relevant programme learning outcomes.

(g) RPL processes maintain the standards of the NFQ and its awards.

(h) RPL decision-making processes within member institutions, and roles and responsibilities within that process, are clearly defined.

(i) Decisions regarding RPL are a matter of academic judgement and are taken by academic staff competent in the process. External advice and advice from professional/regulatory bodies is sought when appropriate.

(j) Learning which has been previously accredited is not ascribed credit on a second occasion.

(k) RPL processes within member institutions are clearly documented and openly communicated.

(l) RPL procedures are conducted in a consistent, fair, transparent and robust manner.

5 PRACTICE CONSIDERATIONS

Governance

5.1 RPL is a complex process requiring a high degree of academic judgement. In order to protect quality standards pertaining to awards of the University, it is important that RPL activity is conducted within an agreed framework, approved and overseen by the governing structures of member institutions. Roles, responsibilities and decision-making structures should be clearly defined and understood. Any staff involved in RPL should be appropriately trained and all activities subject to appropriate academic oversight.

Programme Suitability

5.2 Whilst member institutions should endeavour to accommodate learner mobility through RPL as far as possible, it is important that the appropriateness of doing so on an individual programme basis is clearly established. The University Sector Framework Implementation Network (FIN) has identified that some programmes are unsuited to the use of exemptions, for example, as they are "designed to provide a coherent experience, the logic of which is reliant on all elements being undertaken by the learner". Similarly, where programmes are externally regulated, exemptions may not be possible, either because of statutory or professional constraints or because of a general perception that the nature and purpose of these programmes are unsuited to the provision of exemption.[4]

5.3 The suitability of RPL for entry, transfer, progression or award should therefore be objectively evaluated on an individual programme basis, with the rationale and proposed assessment criteria made available to the external programme assessor.

Purposes of RPL

5.4 Where RPL is considered appropriate, member institutions should clearly identify the purposes for which prior learning is to be recognised, the arrangements for doing so, and any limitations in its application. Relevant considerations include:

- Entry: quality assurance mechanisms should ensure that all entrants are treated equitably, i.e. that similarly robust entry criteria apply to all entry routes.

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[4] The University Sector Framework Implementation Network (2011), *Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in the University Sector: Policies, Case Studies and Issues Arising*, p. 57.

- Extent of credit/exemptions: whether RPL can be used to exempt applicants from full/part modules, academic sessions. Are there any limitations on the amount of learning that can be recognised for this purpose?
- Credit: whether RPL is awarded credit; if it is graded and any implications this may have for overall classifications.

5.5 Depending on the purposes for which RPL may be used, consideration should also be given to:
- Timeframe: alignment of key stages of the RPL process with the academic calendar.
- Assessment mechanisms and criteria: ensuring alignment with relevant learning outcomes.

Communication and Guidance

5.6 Relevant promotional documentation and websites etc. should outline the RPL requirements for programmes/awards, including:
- the purposes for which RPL may be used and any implications for overall grades and classifications;
- the learning outcomes required and the range and nature of evidence that is considered appropriate to demonstrate evidence of prior learning (e.g. portfolio etc.);
- the assessment criteria to be used in the RPL process; and
- the timeframe and stages within the application process.

5.7 It is recognised that assessments of RPL (particularly of informal learning) can be quite resource intensive, both in terms of assessment and in the level of support provided to applicants. Resource impacts may be reduced by the availability of detailed information about the process, exemplar material, and early discussion with applicants (on either an individual or group basis) about the nature, range and scope of the life experience and learning achievements that might typically be considered for recognition.

Assessment

5.8 The design of mechanisms for the assessment of prior learning should seek to provide applicants with ample opportunity to demonstrate learning whilst maintaining the integrity of admissions standards. The development and use of a range of assessment mechanisms is encouraged. These should be appropriate to the relevant programme content and comparable to other assessment

processes used to determine whether learning outcomes have been achieved. Assessment tools should be designed to ensure that evidence of prior learning is clearly aligned with relevant award outcomes.

5.9 Examples of evidence of learning and assessment mechanisms are outlined in Table 1. Evidence submitted by an applicant should be available for review by the external assessor.

Table 1: Evidence & Mechanisms for Assessment

Learning Experience	Evidence	Assessment Mechanisms
Formal Learning	• Certificates • Transcripts of Results • Syllabi • Learning outcomes • Forms of assessment • Research reports • Theses	• Portfolio • Written Examination • Essay • Assignment • Multiple choice questions • Oral presentation • Interview • Performance of set task
Non-formal learning (work or community-based training courses, self-study)	• Course descriptions and materials • Certificates of attendance	
Work-based learning	Job descriptions Samples of work: • Reports • Project plans • Designs • Photographs Letters of verification HR records	

5.10 In assessing evidence of prior learning, institutions should give consideration to the following criteria:

- **Validity/Relevance**: Does the prior learning presented clearly correlate with the learning outcomes required for the programme/module?

- **Level**: Is the learning at the academic level required for the award? Does it meet the appropriate level descriptors in the NFQ? Is it equivalent to the standard expected of other students?

- **Currency**: How long has it been since the learning was acquired? Is it up to date with current knowledge and practice? Have there been any significant developments since the learning was acquired that might undermine its adequacy?

- **Sufficiency**: Is there enough evidence to demonstrate that the learning outcomes have been achieved?

- **Authenticity**: Is it clear that the prior learning is that of the applicant? Can it be verified?

5.11 Careful consideration should be given to whether all prior learning is good prior learning. The FIN has identified that: "While an institution may recognise prior learning for admission purposes, it may in fact wish to undo what it considers to be negative prior learning over the course of a programme."[5]

5.12 Care should also be taken to avoid duplicating recognition of learning. A principle of the NQF is that learning should only be recognised for an award once.

Data

5.13 In order to facilitate quality assurance and monitoring of RPL activity at both programme and strategic levels, systems for recording relevant data arising from RPL processes should be in place. The availability of such data should assist member institutions in ensuring equivalence of standards, fairness and consistency in decision-making, and in identifying effective practice and scope for improvement.

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[5] The University Sector Framework Implementation Network (2011), *Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in the University Sector: Policies, Case Studies and Issues Arising*, p. 56.

6   REFERENCES AND USEFUL LINKS

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