Code:	QA222
Title:	Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)
Policy Owner:	Deputy President and Registrar
Date:	6th June 2023
Approved By:	Academic Council Standing Committee

Contents

1. Purpose

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is an important element of EU policy for widening access to qualifications and supporting lifelong learning. The purpose of RPL is to expand access to educational courses and qualifications for people previously lacking formal qualifications and to reduce the time and cost of courses for people who already possess some of the *knowledge, skills and competences* which a course seeks to develop in learners.

University of Galway recognises that knowledge and skills can be acquired from a range of learning experiences, including formal, non-formal and informal. This is in line with the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) goals which aim to recognise all learning achievements by supporting the development of alternative pathways to qualifications (or awards) and by facilitating the recognition of prior learning.

This policy document aims to support the development of RPL in University of Galway by providing a coherent framework and principles which can be used by all academic units to guide them in the operation of RPL within their courses at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. It is designed to ensure consistency and transparency in the application of the principles of RPL throughout the University. The implementation of this policy approach will be developed over the coming years, and each College of the University will be required to develop its local practices within the overall spirit of University policy.

Given the diversity of academic courses and requirements across the university, the policy is as an enabling framework, which may be subject to operational differences from College to College, as course needs dictate.

2. Scope

In principle RPL applies to all courses, at all levels, in all modes and in all disciplines of study leading to a University of Galway award. RPL takes place in undergraduate, postgraduate taught, and postgraduate research programme contexts. Full-time and part-time modes of study are also included. It can apply to programmes that take place on campus, those that are blended or flexible, and those that involve online or remote learning. As well as major awards, RPL may also occur in the contexts of minor awards, micro-credentials, special-purpose awards, and supplemental awards. In the case of collaborative courses, RPL is subject to agreement between the collaborating parties. Exceptions may arise for a number of reasons, e.g. due to professional or regulatory requirements.

3. Definitions

1. **Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)**

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is a process by which prior learning is formally valued. It is a means by which prior learning is identified, assessed, and recognised by an educational institution. This makes it possible for an individual to build on learning achieved and to be rewarded for it (e.g. in the form of acknowledgement or accreditation).

2. **Prior Learning**

Prior Learning is learning which has taken place prior to admission to a course, or to a stage of a course, but has not necessarily been assessed, measured or assigned credits. The learning can be certified or experiential.

For the purpose of this policy document the generic term RPL will be used and will incorporate the terms Recognition of Prior *Certified* Learning (RPCL) and Recognition of Prior *Experiential* Learning (RPEL). RPCL and RPEL will be used in this policy document where precise clarification between the two terms is required.

3. **Recognition of Prior *Certified* Learning (RPCL)**

Where an applicant has already been awarded certification for a formal course taken at another institution or training organisation, this prior learning can be recognised and may entitle the applicant to admission to a course, exemptions from some parts of a course or advanced entry within a course.

4. **Recognition of Prior *Experiential* Learning (RPEL)**

This involves recognising learning from experience, i.e. learning which has not previously been academically accredited. In this case, the candidate must prove that the required learning outcomes have been achieved. This proof can then be used to support a claim for admission to a course, exemptions from/credit for some parts of a course or advanced entry within a

course. As a general principle, recognition is given for evidence of learning, not for experience *per se*.

5. Learning Routes

Prior Learning may have been acquired through formal, non-formal or informal routes. For the purposes of this policy document these learning routes are defined as follows:

Formal learning is course-based learning which takes place in an organised formal way. It is specifically designated as learning, with specific course content, learning objectives, stated duration for the course and learning support. It typically leads to certification. Formal learning is sometimes referred to as certified or accredited learning.

Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner's point of view. It takes place through planned, organised learning activities alongside or outside the mainstream systems of education and training. It may be assessed but does not normally lead to formal certification. Examples of non-formal learning are planned learning and training activities undertaken in the workplace, voluntary sector, or in community-based settings.

Informal learning is not organised or structured (in terms of objectives, time or learning support). It takes place through life and work experience – and is sometimes referred to as experiential learning. It typically does not lead to certification.

6. Learning Outcomes

Learning outcomes are clear statements of what a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate at the end of a period of learning. *Module* level learning outcomes will be specific to the learning that takes place in a module. Programme level learning outcomes are high level learning outcomes, expressing the knowledge, skills or attributes a graduate of an entire course should be capable of demonstrating.

7. Types of Recognition

Specific Recognition is granted where the learning outcomes achieved are deemed equivalent to the learning outcomes of a specific course module

General Recognition is granted when prior learning is not directly relevant, but is deemed equivalent in level and credit weighting to modules in the proposed course of study.

4. Policy Principles

The following principles will apply to the implementation of RPL within the University.

- The RPL process is fully embedded in the quality assurance procedures of the University and is aligned with the National Framework of Qualifications.
- The learner is central to the RPL process.
- Participation in the RPL process is voluntary for applicants concerned.
- Through the recognition of prior learning, the University aims to take account of the inherent academic value of relevant learning, irrespective of mode or place of learning.
- RPL recognises learning which has occurred before admission to a course or to the relevant stage of a course.
- The University will ensure that academic standards comparable to those attained on courses by traditional mode will be maintained and applied throughout the RPL process.
- The assessment of prior learning is an academic activity that is performed primarily by academic staff.
- RPL will be facilitated by the University, where possible in the context of the overall structure and requirements for particular courses of study and will be at the discretion of individual College authorities.
- In seeking recognition under RPL, prior learning must be evidenced in writing or through whatever medium is appropriate to the particular learning outcomes and authenticated [1]at the appropriate level(s).
- Time limits may be applied in assessing/evaluating the currency of prior learning.
- Recognition will normally be given:
    - For complete modules only;
    - Where all of the learning outcomes of a module have been achieved;
    - Up to a maximum of 50% of the total credits for an academic course;

    Candidates will normally be allowed exemption for entire modules only, not parts of them. Exceptions may be made when the module is composed of clearly distinguishable and distinct parts, for example theory + practicals.

- *Prior certified learning* may not contribute to the classification of a second award. Under the principle that credit should only be awarded once [2]such prior learning may

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[1] The authenticity of documentation submitted for RPL should conform to guidelines for academic integrity.
Academic integrity 'assumes that all interactions with the HEI are approached with the value system of honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility, and courage. This includes all documentation and artefacts submitted to the institution for academic purposes. Responsibility for demonstrating academic integrity lies with the enrolled learner'. QQI (2021), *Academic Integrity Guidelines*, p.10.
[2] (Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of a National Approach to Credit in Irish Higher Education and Training, 2006). https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/media/file-uploads/principlesandoperguidelinesgreen.pdf

be recognised by (a) awarding module exemptions, enabling the learner to contribute towards the credit requirements of a course, (b) offering direct entry to a course or (c) offering advanced entry to a course.

- *Recognition for prior experiential (non-certified) learning* may be awarded on the basis of demonstrated learning which shows that a candidate has achieved specified learning outcomes related to a course or module standard.

- Within the parameters of this policy learners may have the option to apply for RPL in relation to all modules, on all courses, at all NFQ levels, in all modes of study, and in all disciplines of study. However, exceptions may arise for a number of reasons.

  Whilst every effort will be made to facilitate recognition of prior learning, it may not always be possible to grant such recognition in the case of certain degree courses, or course elements, for which an applicant is seeking exemption. Certain courses of study at University of Galway are constructed according to specific course requirements where particular course elements (especially experiential learning elements) cannot be treated in isolation from the rest of the course of academic study. This may include courses where external professional accreditation is being sought. In these cases, overall learning outcomes can only be successfully achieved and properly evaluated through an integrated course of study, where experiential elements are undertaken within the context of the prescribed academic course structure. In these instances, the RPL process may not be feasible and Colleges will advise accordingly.

- Processes and practices for RPL will be clearly stated and documented and accessible to all potential applicants.
- In the RPL process candidates must demonstrate the appropriate academic level of learning as determined by the academic unit involved.
- During assessment for RPL, candidates must demonstrate that they understand the theory as well as the practical learning elements of a module.
- The University will ensure that the RPL process shall be consistent, fair and transparent. It will be conducted within a reasonable timeframe for each applicant.

5. The RPL Process

The RPL process typically includes five stages. These are:

1. Information

2. Identification

3. Documentation

4. Assessment

5. Recognition
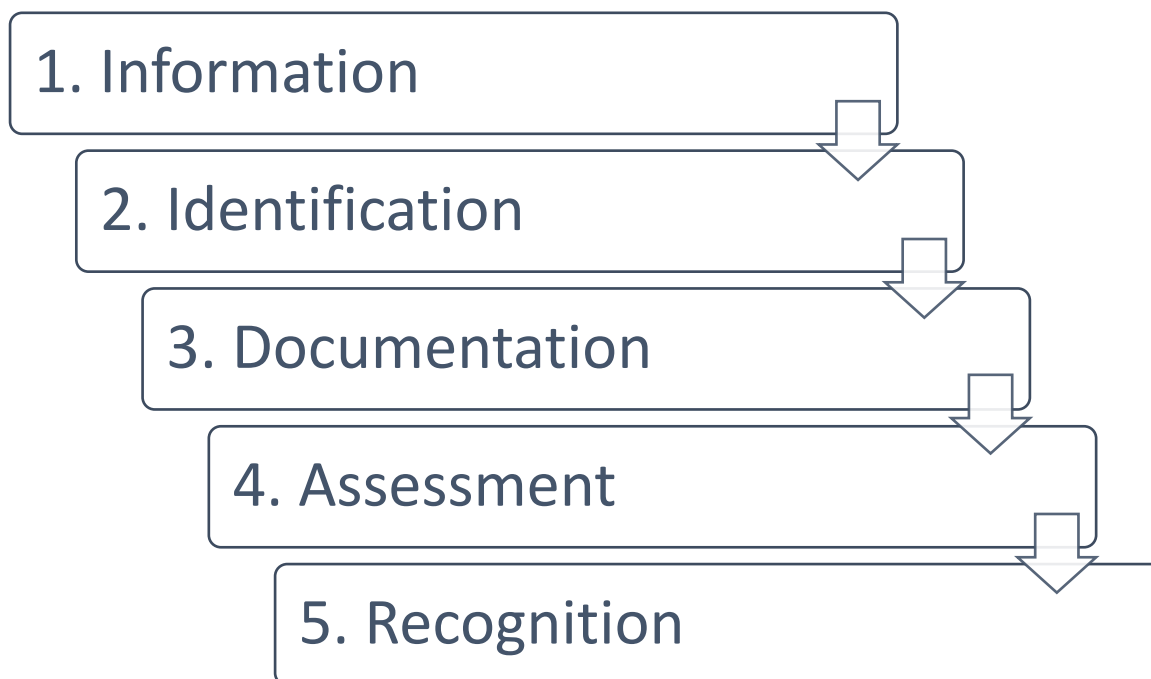
Stage 1. Information
During this stage, the learner will be provided with accessible, user-friendly information about what is possible and how the RPL process works.

Stage 2. Identification
During this stage, the learner explores their prior learning (e.g. in relation to a course's entry requirements or the learning outcomes of a module) with a view to making an application for formal recognition.

Stage 3. Documentation
This stage makes visible the individual's learning in the context of their application. For the learner, this involves a reflective process, the gathering of relevant materials to substantiate their application and the presentation of the learning claim for evaluation.

Responsibility for submitting claims for the recognition of prior learning rests with individual applicants. They will engage with this stage of the RPL process by providing appropriate information in support of their application. Applicants should review the RPL application information documentation for details of the steps involved. Where required the prospective applicant may contact the Course Director for further clarification on course content or entry standards.

The RPL Application <u>and</u> the Learning Portfolio

The mechanism proposed by the University for the presentation of learning is that of a RPL Application Form (Form RPL1), in which the applicant presents the details of their claim for RPL <u>and</u> A Learning Portfolio (Form RPL2) which contains the evidence of learning to support their claim.

A. **Claim for Recognition of Prior Certified Learning**

A claim for the recognition of Prior Certified Learning will consist of a RPL Application Form <u>and</u> a Learning Portfolio. In a Prior Certified Learning Portfolio the evidence of prior certified learning will typically be presented by the applicant in the form of official transcripts of results and formal syllabi accompanied by relevant support documents. These should be arranged to demonstrate the achievement of the learning outcomes of the relevant module/course standards for which the claim is being made.

B. **Claim for Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning**

A claim for the recognition of Prior Experiential Learning will consist of a RPL Application Form <u>and</u> a Learning Portfolio. In a Prior Experiential Learning Portfolio, the applicant will present evidence of learning, arranged to demonstrate the achievement of learning outcomes of the relevant module/course standards. Where experiential learning is concerned a number of methods can be used to demonstrate the achievement of learning outcomes. These may include: written evidence, a formal presentation, an interview, performance of set tasks or combinations of these. Experiential Learning may include both informal and non-formal learning.

Stage 4. Assessment

During this step of the RPL process the learner's application is assessed. A range of assessment mechanisms may be used (e.g. portfolios, interviews, essays, examinations, etc.). This stage must be appropriate to the application and fit for purpose. Depending on the outcome of the assessment process, the learner proceeds to receive either recognition or further information.

Evaluation of Prior Certified Learning by the University

Evaluation of prior certified learning will normally be carried out by Course Directors, or their nominees, in consultation with relevant course staff- ideally those who are or have been involved in the conventional assessment process for the subject(s)/module(s) in question.. Recognition of prior certified learning is subject to evaluation of the following: student's academic record; course of study; syllabus, course description, learning outcomes, number of contact hours, forms of assessment(s); NFQ level of qualification awarded (or equivalent if outside Ireland) and awarding institution.

Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning by the University

Assessment of prior experiential learning will normally be carried out by Course Directors, or their nominees, in consultation with relevant course staff – ideally those who are or have been involved in the conventional assessment process for the subject(s)/module(s) in question.

The use of a range of assessment mechanisms will be facilitated. These will be appropriate to the course entry standards or module content and comparable to other assessment processes used to determine whether learning outcomes have been achieved. Assessment may be based on the learning portfolio submitted or other methods such as written exams, essays, assignments, multiple choice questionnaires, oral presentations etc., which may be used as appropriate.

In general, the assessment will be based on an evaluation of the prior learning presented. Evidence submitted by an applicant will be available for review by the External Examiner.

Assessors and other persons involved in the recognition process will be given training and support as appropriate.

Criteria for Assessment

The following key criteria will be used by staff to help them to determine if the evidence of learning presented is appropriate and sufficient.

Validity	Does the prior learning presented match the learning outcomes required by the relevant academic unit? Is the prior learning being presented by the applicant at the academic level required by the relevant academic unit?
Sufficiency	Is there enough evidence to demonstrate that the learning outcomes have been achieved? Is the evidence presented appropriate to the level and the award?
Authenticity	Is it clear that the prior learning is that of the applicant? Is it possible to verify that the learning is that of the applicant?
Reliability	Is the evidence of prior learning presented reliable? Is the evidence what you would expect from a leaner with a similar learning profile?
Currency	Is the prior learning current? Is it up to date with current knowledge and practice?

Stage 5. Recognition

If the application is successful, the learner will receive formal recognition (i.e. acknowledgement) which will lead to one or more of the following outcomes:

- Admission to a course
- Advanced entry to a course
- Exemption from some course modules

Validation

All RPL decisions must be validated by the Course Board and by the relevant College Officer. Decisions must be communicated in a timely fashion to all relevant administrative units. Where

module exemptions are granted the relevant College office will request the Registry Office to update the learner's record accordingly.

6. Communication

All prospective applicants and enrolled students will be made aware of RPL opportunities in course literature and on the University's website. Applicants will be fully informed of the application process, the stages within it and the nature and range of evidence that is considered appropriate to support a claim for recognition of prior learning, including the learning outcomes against which prior learning will be assessed. All applicants will be advised, in writing, by the University, of the outcome of the RPL assessment process within a reasonable period of time.

7. Appeals Process

The RPL applicant has the right to appeal the outcome of the RPL assessment process. Students cannot submit an appeal unless they have already either gained informal feedback on their outcome from their Course Director or a discipline representative.

8. Resources

    a. University of Galway RPL SharePoint Site :

       https://nuigalwayie.sharepoint.com/sites/RecognitionofPriorLearning

    b. University of Galway RPL Website: https://www.universityofgalway.ie/rpl/

    c. National RPL in Higher Education Website: https://www.priorlearning.ie/

    d. National Pilot Framework for the Recognition of Prior Learning in Higher Education:

       https://www.priorlearning.ie/resources-tools/pilot-framework-rpl-higher-education

9. Review and Updating

These RPL policies and practices will be subject to regular review and updating in line with emerging good practice.

Visit the P&P Repository on the Quality Office web site for other policies, procedures, regulations and guidelines.

Name	Responsibility
Deputy President and Registrar	Owner
Course Director and Course Boards	Approval and Management of RPL at course level
Registry	Recording RPL exemptions awarded