

Recognition of Prior Learning: An International Scan

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Introduction and aims

The report is based on a digital scan of the publicly-available information about recognition of prior learning (RPL) on the websites of 39 higher education providers. The aim was to provide an overview and examples of RPL approaches and practices internationally. Information published on a range of national and international organisations concerned with RPL policy and practice was also included to provide context for the exploration of national and institutional engagement with RPL. The scan of institutions includes providers in Australia, the USA, Canada, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, New Zealand, Sweden, Singapore, South Africa, England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The countries were chosen because they have broadly comparable higher education sectors and it was possible to access webpages in the English language. The scan reflects the diversity of higher education providers across the countries selected and includes institutions with varying missions and status in relation to other higher education providers, different organisational types, public and privately-funded providers, subject-specialist institutions and providers offering a broad range of courses. (See Appendix 1 for a list of the institutions included in the scan.)

Although it is recognised that the findings of the scan are limited by what information institutions choose to provide publicly, the exercise has generated a lot of information on the extent and types of RPL implemented internationally and provides examples of interesting and innovative practice. It also provides insights into the clarity and accessibility of information for prospective students and RPL candidates which is available on institutional websites.

Naming RPL

The process of recognising prior learning is referred to by various terms internationally. For example, what is known as RPL in Australia, South Africa and New Zealand is known as 'prior learning assessment' (PLA) in the USA, and 'prior learning assessment recognition' (PLAR) in Canada. The terms, 'accreditation of prior learning' (APL) and the 'validation of prior learning' (VPL) are also used internationally. The Council of the European Union refers to the 'validation of non-formal and informal learning' (VNFIL); the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) refers to 'recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes' (RNFILO); the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) uses the phrase 'recognition, validation and accreditation of the outcomes of non-formal and informal learning' (RVA).

The learning recognised in the RPL process is also variously named. The terms 'formal', 'non-formal', and 'informal' learning are widely used by the higher education providers included in the international scan and by organisations concerned with RPL at national and international level. Formal learning is generally interpreted as structured and intentional, achieved through courses of study at accredited educational institutions and/or recognised by a regulatory body/professional organisation for certification. Non-formal learning is also intentional, gained through participation in, for example, organised workplace training, but does not generate formal credit. Informal learning is incidental learning from life experience, work, volunteer activities, and/or self-directed learning and study. For example, the Australian National University policy on the recognition of prior and external learning, states:

'Formal learning is the learning that takes place through a structured program of learning that leads to the full or partial achievement of an officially accredited qualification. Micro-credentials are also considered formal learning for the assessment of credit.

Non-formal learning refers to a successfully completed unit of learning that takes place through a structured program but does not lead to an officially accredited qualification.

Informal learning refers to learning gained through professional activities and experiences. Typically, informal learning is not organised or externally structured in terms of objectives, time or learning support.'

The terms 'experiential', 'certificated' and 'non-certificated' learning are also used in some institutions. Where the term 'experiential learning' is used, this is normally interpreted as the knowledge and skills acquired through life experience, working experience and study which are not formally attested through educational or professional certification.

In some institutions, RPL policy and practice is focused on processes used to evaluate skills and knowledge gained only through 'non-formal' and 'informal' activity and 'experiential' learning. Evaluation and recognition of 'formal' learning is managed through separate credit transfer policies and practices. In other cases, the RPL policy incorporates 'formal', 'non-formal' and 'informal' learning.

No matter how RPL is labelled and prior learning defined, the scan demonstrates that the process of identifying and then valuing in some way the past learning of individuals and its results is widely practiced by higher education providers around the world.

The wider context and drivers of institutional approaches to RPL

Institutional approaches to the recognition of prior learning have developed and operate in the context of varying national and international policy and regulatory environments. For example, the Council of the European Union (2012) recommended that member states put in place, by 2018, arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning to enable individuals to obtain full or part qualifications. Education and training providers were recommended to:

'facilitate access to formal education and training on the basis of learning outcomes acquired in non-formal and informal settings and, if appropriate and possible, award exemptions and/or credits for relevant learning outcomes acquired in such settings'

One of the underlying principles of the EU recommendation is to increase participation in lifelong learning and access to the labour market for disadvantaged groups, the unemployed and those at risk of unemployment. In the same year, UNESCO (2012) published the 'Guidelines for the Recognition, Validation and Accreditation of the Outcomes of Non-formal and Informal Learning', proposing minimum standards required for implementing RPL as part of national lifelong learning strategies in order to:

'offer learning opportunities for all, throughout life, to improve the quality of life, to promote a more just society, and to equip people to anticipate and tackle the challenges they face.'

Cedefop (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training) maintains the European inventory on the validation of non-formal and informal learning which contains the state of play and an overview of developments in 36 countries (this includes the EU member states). The 2018 update shows that all EU member states have taken up the challenge set in 2012 and have been putting in place, each in its own context, national arrangements for validation, most commonly in the education and training sector.

At national level, the development of RPL policies, with different levels of national coordination and compulsion, can also be linked to local economic and social agendas,

regulatory arrangements and the creation of qualifications and credit frameworks. RPL is variously used to promote lifelong learning, improve employability and meet labour market demands, improve social inclusion and social justice. For example, in Australia, the *Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards)* requires that assessment for RPL is undertaken and the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) has identified RPL as a pathway for admission and/or credit that must be available to all applicants into any qualification at any level. Higher education institutions are encouraged to offer multiple pathways into their undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, including enabling admission (and credit) for applicants from a wide range of backgrounds and with a wide range of prior learning.

In South Africa, RPL is a key element of the National Qualifications Framework objectives of facilitating access to, and mobility and progression within, education, training and career paths and accelerating the redress of past unfair discrimination in education, training and employment opportunities. The New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) guidelines on RPL explicitly recognise the changing nature of work, the impact of new technologies and the need for lifelong learning to maintain currency in the workforce. In Ireland, RPL is integrated into the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 and the National Skills Strategy and providers are required to have policies on credit accumulation, credit transfer and identification, and for the formal assessment of the knowledge, skill and competence previously acquired by learners.

Some countries have also developed approaches to RPL in response to specific circumstances and the needs of social groups. For example, Finland's Supporting Immigrants in Higher Education in Finland project - proposed by the Ministry of Education and Culture in 2016 - aims to enhance the identification and recognition of prior learning of refugees and migrants to make it easier for people to find appropriate education and career paths. Several Finnish higher education institutions are involved in the project. Similar initiatives and activities are taking place in other European countries - for example, in Sweden and Canada. In the USA, many states, in accordance with state law and regulations, have long-standing policies to recognise and award credit for military service and experience.

The scan identified examples of international and national guidelines and codes of practice relating to the implementation of RPL in higher education. For example, Cedefop published European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning in 2015 (an update of the 2012 publication). In Australia, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) maintains a guidance note on credit and recognition of prior learning to support institutions in meeting the requirements of the Higher Education Standards Framework. In the UK, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) has a note on RPL in its advice and guidance on assessment to support the Expectations of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education for standards and quality. In South Africa, the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) has developed a National Policy for the Recognition of Prior Learning to promote consistency in the implementation of RPL. In Ireland, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) has published the *Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning in Further and Higher Education and Training* to support the development of a national approach to RPL and assist institutions in meeting the requirements of QQI's Statutory Quality Guidelines. The New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) publishes guidelines for tertiary education providers to develop and implement regulations, policies and processes that assist learners to have their relevant learning recognised and credited. The Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA) has produced a Quality Assurance Manual for the Recognition of Prior Learning in Canada.

Institutional reasons for implementing RPL

The higher education providers included in the scan have diverse institutional missions and histories with regard to engagement with the recognition of prior learning. The information contained on institutional webpages regarding the reasons for implementing RPL largely reflects those individual characteristics as well as the impacts of the wider national and international policy and regulatory contexts relating to RPL and qualification frameworks described above. The main reasons given on institutional webpages for implementing RPL are: to attract, improve access and meet the needs of a wider range of learners; to redress historical inequalities; to encourage life-long learning; to increase efficiency by reducing duplicate education and (sometimes) reducing costs to students; to facilitate the movement of students between programmes, institutions and countries; and to comply with regional and national policy, regulatory and legal requirements. There are also a few examples of linking RPL to other considerations including the benefits of diversity to the institution. For example, the National University of Singapore 'welcomes the experience, maturity and motivation of adult learners who will add to the rich diversity of our undergraduate community'. The University of Cape Town sees RPL as a way 'to enrich the academy and the curriculum by facilitating dialogue across sites of knowledge and practice.' Mature students, with or without non-standard entry qualifications, are valued at London Met because 'they bring a wealth of life experiences with them which enrich their studies, and those that study with them.' However, the explicit linking of RPL policies and the benefits of diversity were not generally evident in the information on the webpages or in accessible policy documents.

The scope and purpose of institutional approaches to RPL

The scan of international practice demonstrates that RPL processes serve a number of purposes. These include: admission to a programme where an applicant does not have the standard/common entry qualifications; admission to a programme at an intermediate level (for example, into Year 2 of an undergraduate degree - sometimes referred to as entry with advanced standing); and for awarding credit within a programme, allowing a student to gain exemption from individual modules.

Credit transfer arrangements, recognising credits earned from successfully completed courses/modules at other higher education providers for advanced standing or course exemption, are in place in all the institutions in the scan sample. However, there are differences in the extent to which the recognition of non-formal and informal learning is implemented for admission, advanced standing and exemption, and the processes for doing so.

The scan identified 29 institutions out of the 39 which had information on their websites about routes for undergraduate entrants without standard school leaver qualifications, and/or those who have been out of education for some time, which includes consideration of life and work experience as potential eligibility criteria. These approaches are often accompanied by positive messaging and support information directed specifically at 'mature' or 'adult' students on admissions pages - see below. From a total of 34 institutions which offer courses above bachelor's level, 20 provided similar information for entry to taught graduate/postgraduate courses.

For example, the admissions pages of higher education providers in Australia offer multiple pathways into their undergraduate and postgraduate degrees for students with different educational and experiential backgrounds. These pathways include a defined route for prospective students with vocational educational qualifications and mature students without recent secondary school experience to be considered for entry using a combination of work and life experience, prior education achievement and demonstrated competence in key skills. In South Africa, the admissions pages of the University of the Western Cape states:

'RPL is an integral part of the Admissions Policy at UWC and finds expression in a range of services to support mature students seeking alternative undergraduate or postgraduate access into higher education degree/qualification programmes at UWC.'

Similar defined routes for adult students are evident on the webpages of institutions in Canada, Sweden, New Zealand, England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

In addition to the implementation of RPL through general admissions policies, there are examples of the development of specific programmes and courses of study to facilitate access to higher education for older students with experience and those without standard entry qualifications. For example, the National University of Singapore School of Continuing and Lifelong Education has developed a specific pathway known as Advance@NUS for adults learners, leading to a range of undergraduate programmes in business, engineering, humanities and science:

'This new pathway allows adult learners with rich professional experience, but do not have a university degree to apply to one of the undergraduate degree programmes offered. The selection process focuses on professional experience rather than academic qualifications.'

In the USA, the New School has developed a bachelor's programme for adults and transfer students:

'The program is designed for adult students who have life and work experience and wish to earn an undergraduate degree in a program that can be tailored to meet their unique needs and allows them to realize their unique goals. College-level learning from life and work experience may be eligible for transfer credit through Prior Learning Assessment.'

Information about the recognition of non-formal and informal learning for advanced standing and/or exemption on undergraduate courses, was visible on the webpages of 30 of the total 39 institutions, and on 21 of the institutions which offer graduate/postgraduate programmes. All providers had a common definition of RPL across the institution. The scan illustrates variation between institutions in their approaches to the maximum number of credits that can be recognised towards an award, any impacts on grading or classification, and variation in the extent to which RPL policies apply to all or only some modules and programmes within institutions.

RPL practice - the process for guidance, support and assessment of RPL

Information for students and initial guidance

The provision of information to students which is accessible and clear is widely regarded as good practice in guidelines on the implementation of RPL internationally and is considered the first step towards an effective system. All the scan institutions operating some kind of RPL provide web-based information and initial guidance for prospective and/or current students. The information typically includes definitions of RPL, how RPL can be used, amounts of credit from RPL which can be claimed, the application process and requirements, how the application will be assessed, the costs of the process, and arrangements for appeal.

Information was not always easy to find or clearly signposted, especially for prospective students. There was some evidence of proactive approaches which make it easier for

students to ascertain the possibility of using credit from prior non-formal and informal learning early in their engagement with the institution. For example, the University of Waikato, New Zealand, provides clear information about RPL which could count towards an award on its undergraduate application pages and encourages students to apply before the beginning of their course. In other cases, information about RPL was located on the current student pages, or other locations, and so was not readily visible to prospective students.

At a more general level, there were also differences between institutions with regard to the tone and presentation of information with some providers conveying information in a more engaging, encouraging and optimistic way than others. The samples of practice highlighted in the following paragraphs exemplify some of the more proactive and engaging approaches to the provision of information and support.

In addition to general webpage information and links to policy documents, the following initial guidance was visible on some institutional websites:

- mature students' pages with information and guidance specifically targeted at older applicants
- dedicated RPL information and services pages
- downloadable guides to RPL and the application process
- opportunities to engage in online chat, including in some cases with students, for further information
- opportunities to email for further advice and guidance.

There were several examples of encouraging and informative webpages targeted specifically at mature students with work and life experience. For example, James Cook University, Australia, provides an accessible mature students' page with information about the application process and routes into undergraduate study for older students from different educational backgrounds, including those with work and life experience. Berkeley College, USA, has a good range of information for adult students accessible from the admissions pages which includes the admissions process, services to support adult students and information about credit for prior experiential learning. Bradford University, England, has an adult learners' page which includes case studies of students who have returned to education as mature students, illustrating their experience and different routes into study.

The scan identified examples of detailed downloadable guides to RPL. For example, Belfast Metropolitan College's guide includes information explaining what RPL is, who it is for and what the process involves. Similar guides are provided by Massey University, Munster Technological University, Berkley College and Bradford University.

Munster Technological University, Ireland, the University of the Western Cape, South Africa, and HAMK, Finland, provide examples of dedicated RPL webpages and service information for students. Munster's pages provide dynamic detailed information and guidance on how the RPL process works - including introductory and explanatory videos by specialist RPL staff - and the support available to students. The webpages also include testimonials from undergraduate and postgraduate students who have been through the process reflecting on their experience and enabling RPL applicants to benefit from the experience of students who have already successfully gone through the process.

Further support

The scan demonstrates a range of further guidance and support arrangements for students on the application process and the submission of evidence to support their claim. In addition to text-based, self-help resources such as downloadable guides, instructions on web pages

and online application forms, the following types of support were identified on some institutional sites:

- Workshop on Credit for Prior Learning providing instructions on how to compile evidence for the portfolio (The New School, USA)
- Examples of completed portfolios (The New School, USA)
- RPL development programme for undergraduate access – five-month programme which includes portfolio development (University of the Western Cape)
- Bookable online information sessions about the assessment process, evidence gathering and presentation; downloadable slides from information sessions: (Munster Technological University, Ireland; University of British Columbia, Canada)
- Videos providing step-by-step guides to the process of applying (Hame University of Applied Sciences (HAMK), Finland; Munster Technological University)
- Non-formal learning portfolio preparation guides (many examples - see comments above relating to downloadable guides - including Auckland Technological University)

Students are signposted on the webpages to a range of institutional roles and departments for guidance and support, demonstrating a variety of practice between institutions with regard to the organisation and provision of student support services for RPL. Roles and departments include, for example:

- Student Support Advisor
- Office for Prior Learning Assessment
- RPL Unit
- Adult Admissions Unit
- Admissions specialists and counsellors
- Transfer/RPL Advisor
- RPL Coordinator
- Adult Learning Advisor
- Department/faculty staff.

It is not always clear from the webpages the extent to which RPL guidance and support are centralised or decentralised within institutions. There were examples of central RPL units and/or coordinators and specialist advisers acting as a central point of contact for students and working with department/faculty/school subject specialists to advise and guide students. More decentralised practices are also evident.

RPL application and assessment process

Students were most often advised to make applications for recognition of non-formal and informal learning after acceptance of a place or after enrolment/registration, with fewer institutions permitting applications to be made earlier. In all cases, students are responsible for initiating the process. The webpages indicate that assessment decisions are overwhelmingly made by staff involved in teaching and/or managing at faculty, department or school level.

A wide variety of types of mechanisms for gathering and presenting evidence for RPL claims were described in policies and online information for students - different mechanisms are used for different types of RPL:

- certificates and transcripts
- portfolios
- personal statements

- examinations and tests
- interview
- employer references
- CVs
- samples of work
- reports
- observations of workplace skills
- presentations
- demonstrations
- artefacts
- auditions.

Information about the *basis* of the assessment decision was not always provided on the webpages - some of the more detailed information only being available on protected student portals. Where information is available this clearly indicates that providing evidence of alignment of prior non-formal and informal learning with module/course and programme learning outcomes, and/or statements in national qualifications frameworks, is widely used, depending on the volume of credit being claimed.

The use of some kind of portfolio of evidence as part of the RPL application process was mentioned by 15 of the institutions in the scan. Precise requirements for the portfolio differ between institutions and between programmes of study but is normally a collection of materials which includes provision of evidence of work or other experience and written statements by students explaining how their experience aligns with course/programme/module outcomes.

It is evident from instructions to candidates that portfolios can be complex and time consuming to put together and that the requirements to provide written statements and evidence to substantiate alignment of experiential learning with module or programme outcomes can be challenging. For this reason, some practitioners recommend the use of e-portfolios, utilising templates to structure and organise the presentation of RPL evidence, to streamline the assessment process. Establishing whether the portfolios referred to by the scan institutions are paper-based or electronic was not always easy. However, a structured e-portfolio was evident at Hame University of Applied Sciences (HAMK) which uses a student desktop called 'PAKKI' for the purpose. Students complete the application online using an electronic template after initial consultation with a guidance counsellor, attaching job descriptions, CVs and other evidence when prompted in the template, and providing written statements about alignment with required degree learning outcomes.

Less reliance on portfolios and greater use of other methods of assessment is also recommended to better enable the articulation of prior informal learning. Not all institutions in the scan use portfolios. The Australian National University, for example, requires applications for the recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning to include a statement of no more than 1,000 words on how the prior non-formal or informal learning addresses the relevant learning outcomes for which they require. The scan also confirms that, in some cases, a variety of assessment methods may be used depending on the knowledge and skills being recognised. For example, Humber College's information for students explains:

'tools such as challenge exams, demonstrations, structured interviews, simulations and portfolios can be used alone or in combination, for experiential learning'.

The webpages identify examples where assessors have discretion in the choice of how alignment with learning outcomes could be demonstrated. In the example above from Humber College, the Programme Coordinator, in discussion with the student, decides on the

most appropriate assessment method. Also, the Newcastle University Policy on Credit Transfer and the Recognition of Prior Learning states

'Once a student has submitted an initial application for RPL, the DPD (Degree Programme Director) should establish what form of assessment will be appropriate to determine that the appropriate learning outcomes have been met.'

The Newcastle policy then goes on to explain that where a student has provided evidence of prior experience (for example, work experience), the standard assessment should be either an assessed interview or a reflective writing exercise, so that the student can work through his/her prior learning and map it onto the Newcastle module(s). In some cases, other tasks - for example, an industrial report or alternative method of assessment - might be more appropriate. Similarly, Bradford University advises staff:

'Although the University often uses a portfolio approach for RPEL, based on the individual needs of the student/applicant and the learning outcomes to be assessed, an alternative form of assessment may better demonstrate they have met the relevant learning outcomes.'

Quality assurance of RPL processes

As outlined above, there are a number of national and international guidelines and codes of practice to support the development, implementation and quality assurance of RPL.

Information relating to institutional approaches to the quality assurance of RPL visible on provider webpages tended to be limited to those elements of the process of direct relevance to students' applications, and did not include, for example, details of internal arrangements for monitoring, review and enhancement of RPL. Much of the available information focuses on the assessment of RPL and suggests that the quality assurance of the RPL assessment process mirrors the normal quality assurance processes for programme assessment, overseen and managed within the provider's assessment regulations, exam board arrangements, and so on. Information on the websites indicates that providers have defined institution-wide regulations, policies and procedures for: the amount of RPL credit that can be imported into programmes; the assessment process; the assessment principles and criteria used in deciding RPL applications; assessment methods; the time frameworks for decisions; arrangements for feedback on assessment decisions; arrangements for student appeals against assessment decisions; the recording of credit from RPL on student transcripts. The principles of authenticity, relevance, currency and sufficiency in the assessment of evidence presented in support of RPL claims were commonly included in provider descriptions of RPL assessment processes.

There was very little indication on the websites of the information provided to teachers/lecturers on the RPL process to promote consistency of implementation and assure quality. An exception was the University of Helsinki which made available its 'instructions for teachers' as well as instructions for students on its website. Helsinki's guide for teachers provides information on: forms of recognition; types of RPL; process and roles; and assessment and processing, including the time frameworks for decisions and the requirements to provide assessment decisions in writing, as well as the reasons for rejection.

Conclusion

The scan demonstrates that the process of identifying and then recognising learning that has occurred in a range of educational and training contexts and/or where learning is achieved outside education or training systems, is widely practiced by higher education providers internationally and is used for admission, and/or counted towards the completion of a course of study and the associated award or qualification. Although the clarity and accessibility of information and guidance for potential RPL candidates available on provider websites varies between institutions, the scan identified examples of positive and engaging information and initial guidance, using videos and case studies, and the use of technology to provide accessible guidance materials to support the application process. The websites also reveal the availability of a variety of face-to-face guidance arrangements in place alongside the use of technology.

RPL application and assessment processes vary between institutions and there is a wide variety of mechanisms used in gathering evidence for RPL. Assessment methods most commonly involve: the assessment of evidence, presented by students in the form of narrative statements, completed application forms and/or portfolios (paper-based and e-portfolios), against course/module learning outcomes; and/or the use of tests and examinations to assess knowledge and skills. Alternative assessment methods and discretion in the choice of method to suit the applicant and course were evident in some cases. Available information indicates that quality assurance of the RPL assessment process is overseen and managed within the provider's assessment regulations, exam board arrangements, and so on.

Appendix 1

List of higher education providers included in the scan

Australia

Australian National University
Bond University
Griffith University
James Cook University

Canada

University of Alberta
University of British Columbia
University of Toronto
Humber College
Emily Carr University of Art and Design

England

Newcastle University
Bradford University
London Metropolitan University
Arden University
Warwickshire College Group

Finland

University of Helsinki
Hame University of Applied Sciences (HAMK)
The University of the Arts, Helsinki

Germany

Free University of Berlin

Iceland

University of Iceland
Iceland University of the Arts

Ireland

Munster Technological University

New Zealand

Auckland University of Technology
Massey University
University of Waikato

Northern Ireland

Queen's University Belfast
Belfast Metropolitan College

Singapore
National University of Singapore

South Africa
University of Johannesburg
University of Cape Town
University of the Western Cape

Sweden
Stockholm University
Stockholm University of the Arts

United States of America
Harvard University
University of California, Berkeley
Louisiana State University
Berkeley College
Borough of Manhattan Community College
The New School

Wales
Bangor University

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