

Forum Insights

Recognition of Prior Learning in Irish Higher Education

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This *Forum Insight* aims to build a common understanding of recognition of prior learning for Irish higher education. Building on existing good practice, it explains the various forms of learning that can be recognised and outlines the conditions which can assist staff to ensure that the potential of every student to succeed is optimised.

Introduction

Equity of access to Irish higher education is a key strategic priority at national level (Higher Education Authority (HEA), 2015). In order for access, transfer and progression within higher education to be flexible and sufficiently adaptable to keep pace with evolving graduate attributes, workplace requirements and societal priorities, it is necessary to recognise all forms of learning which are relevant to programmes of study. Recognition of prior learning (RPL) is mentioned in many of the current mission-based performance compacts of higher education institutions across the country (National Forum, 2015).

A national framework for RPL, to be recognised by all higher education institutions, has been set out as an objective in the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*. RPL is seen as a way to shift emphasis from educational inputs towards learning outcomes (Department of Education and Skills (DES), 2011). If institutions across the country are to develop effective RPL practices it is important that a common understanding of the concept is first established.

What is recognition of prior learning?

RPL is a process that allows for access, transfer and progression within higher education to take account of any current and relevant knowledge and skills students can demonstrate.¹ It usually happens in one of the following four circumstances:

For access

Prior learning can be recognised to allow access to a higher education programme for students who have not completed the standard required qualification, e.g., the Leaving Certificate or QQI Level 5.

For exemption

Prior learning can be recognised to grant exemption from one or more modules in cases where the student can demonstrate having already achieved the learning outcomes for the given module(s).

For advanced entry

Prior learning can be recognised to allow students advanced entry to a programme of study in cases where the student can demonstrate having already achieved the learning outcomes for all modules of the year(s) for which they are seeking an exemption.

For a full award

Prior learning can be recognised to grant students the award of a degree in cases where the student can demonstrate having already achieved the learning outcomes for the entire programme of study.

Access through standard entry requirements or progression through usual routes from one stage of a programme of study to another do not constitute RPL.

It is also important to note that any access or exemption granted to students on the basis of recognised prior learning does not necessarily exempt the student from payment of the fees associated with the higher education programme of study.

The recognition of prior learning has many benefits for institutions. *The Professional Development Framework for All Staff Who Teach in Higher Education* recognises various forms of professional development for higher education staff (National Forum, 2016). Similarly, RPL allows for various forms of student learning to be recognised. This can result in reduced time to certification, a more diverse student body, and enhanced relevance and currency of programmes of study (National Forum, 2015).

¹ RPL is also referred to in the European context as the validation of non-formal and informal learning (Cedefop, 2015).

What forms of prior learning can be recognised in Irish higher education?

Prior learning is only recognised where it is **current, sufficient, and relevant** to the module/programme outcomes for which an exemption is being sought or, in the case of access to a programme, where it clearly demonstrates that a student has attained the skills necessary for entry to the programme. Table 1 displays the forms of learning that can be taken into account when recognising prior learning in Irish higher education, as well as some examples of typical evidence of learning sought in each case.

Table 1 Forms of prior learning that can be recognised

Accredited prior learning ²	Non-accredited prior learning ³	
	Structured	Unstructured
Prior learning for which credit has been awarded.	Prior learning for which credit has not been awarded but the learning took place in a structured setting.	Prior learning such as that gained through work experience or life experience which resulted in achievement of relevant learning outcomes.
Examples of forms of learning		
Relevant professional qualification, ECTS credits, special purpose award, apprenticeship, advanced certificate, minor award, international award.	Relevant non-accredited workshops, summer schools, MOOCS.	Skills gained from years working in a profession, experience gained through leadership positions, knowledge gained through personal interests.
Examples of evidence used to support recognition of prior learning		
Transcript, module descriptors, NARIC Statement of Comparability, European Diploma Supplement.	Certificate of attendance, digital badge, letter of confirmation.	Letter of confirmation, interview, written statement.

Potential to succeed as the key criterion

In order to recognise prior learning, an institution must first identify what prior learning is being proposed for recognition, review the evidence of this prior learning, and judge whether the prior learning can be recognised for access/exemptions within the programme of study. Prior to making such judgements, institutions should take note of the guidance provided in *Policy and Criteria for Access, Transfer and Progression in Relation to Learners for Providers of Further and Higher Education and Training* (Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), 2015) and transparent statements should be available to students.

When making judgements about the recognition of prior learning, if the submitted evidence is deemed current, sufficient, and relevant, the key criterion institutions must then consider is whether the student has the **potential to succeed** in the programme if granted the proposed access/exemptions. In order to maximise a student's potential to succeed, the decision to grant access/exemption(s) can be accompanied by recommendations (desirable but not required) or conditions (required). For example, it could be recommended or required that the applicant attend academic English support or complete a pre-start mathematics programme or a bridging module prior to taking up their programme of study.

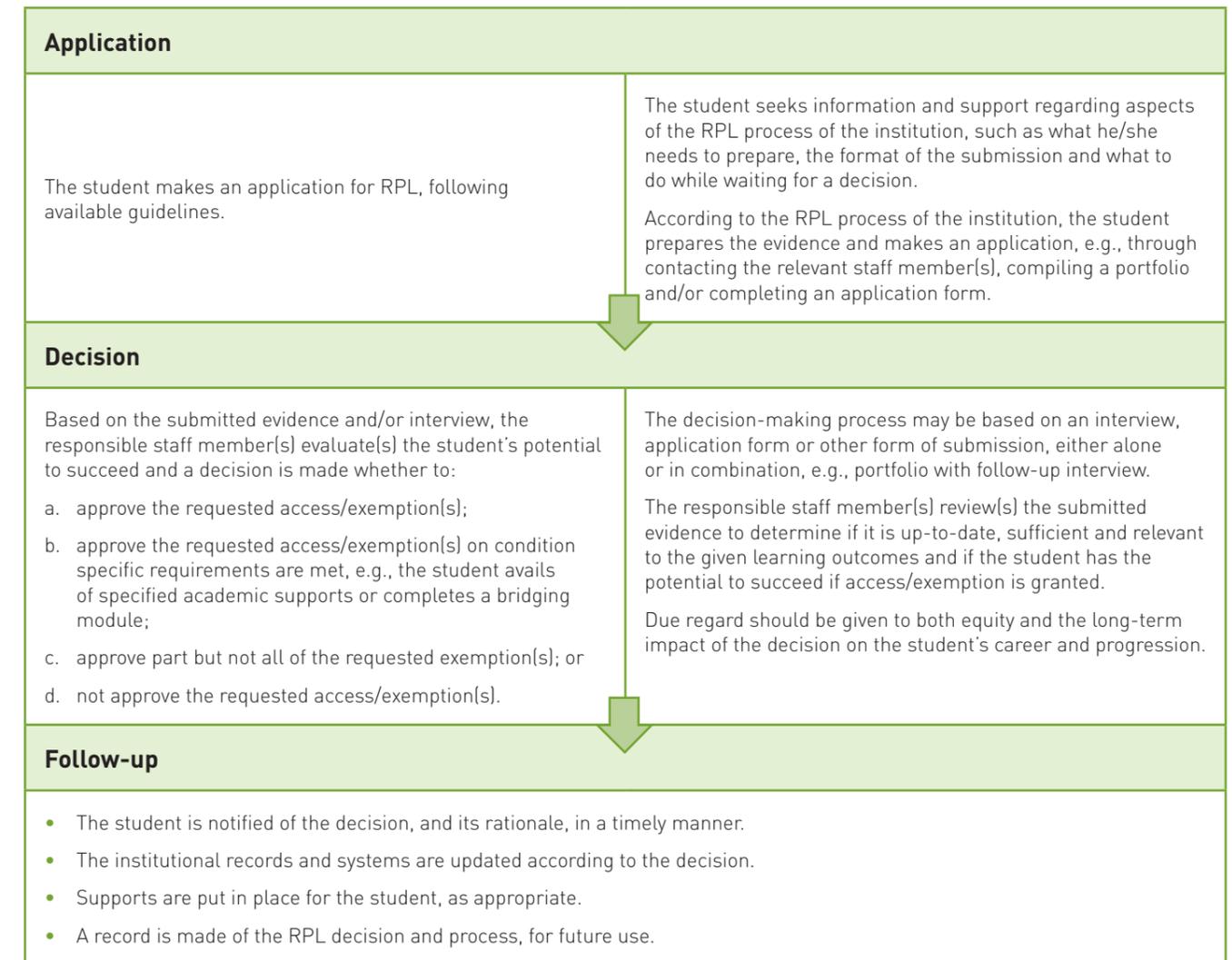
² This is a form of formal learning, i.e., always organised, structured and engaged in consciously, it has clear learning objectives and is judged and evaluated for recognised credit.

³ This includes informal and non-formal learning: Informal learning is defined as non-conscious learning, it is not measured against a construct, and there are no criteria for progression. There may be a learning objective but there is no judgement or evaluation. Non-formal learning is always organised, structured and engaged in consciously. There may be a learning objective but there is no judgement or evaluation.

What does the RPL process look like?

There is no set national process for recognising prior learning. Each institution will have its own way of facilitating students who wish to have their prior learning recognised. The RPL process may be managed at departmental level, with the head of department or a key member of staff having responsibility for assessing applications. It may be managed at institutional level, with a person appointed to manage the process across the institution (Cork Institute of Technology, for example, has a dedicated RPL co-ordinator; see www.cit.ie/rpl). It may even be facilitated at regional level, as evidenced by a National Forum-funded initiative which has resulted in an online tool for those wishing to recognise their prior learning in Galway-Mayo IT, Letterkenny IT or Sligo IT (see www.myexperience.ie).

Although there is no prescribed process, there are characteristics common to effective RPL processes, as outlined below.



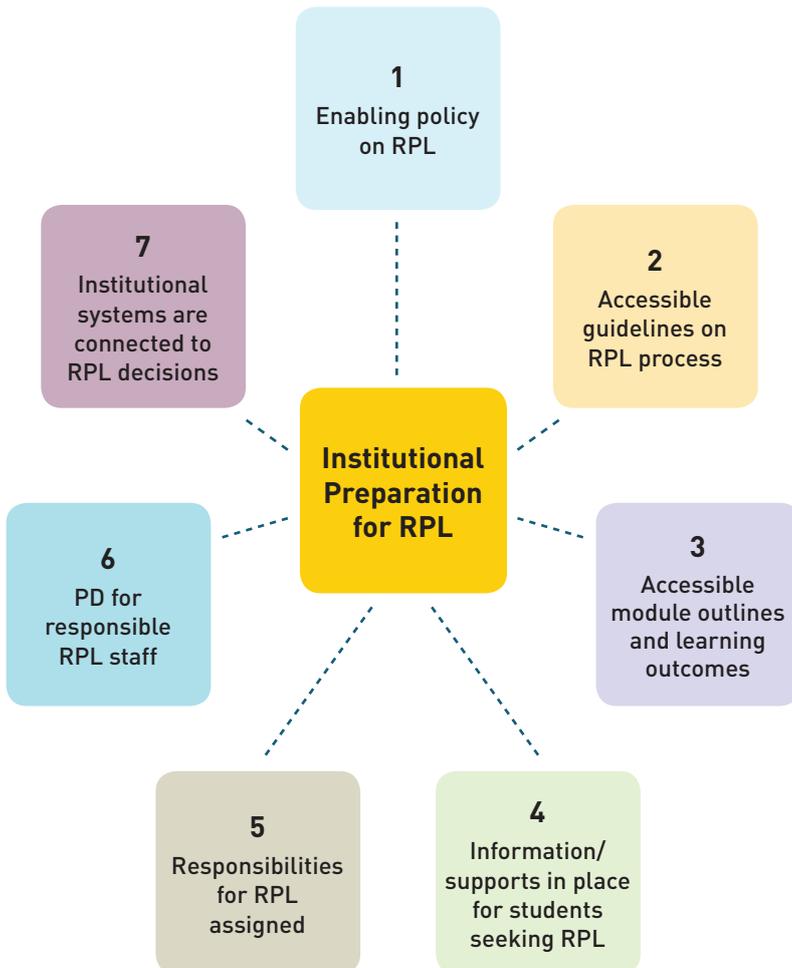
The RPL Practitioner Network Ireland is a group of practitioners working and interested in the area of RPL. The network aims to:

- provide a coherent practitioner voice to shape and inform policy development;
- support the development of a community of practice, providing opportunities to share learning face-to-face, online and through practical sharing of toolkits and resources; and
- promote good practice, informed by national and international practitioner and policy perspectives.

You can find out more about this network and become a member at www.rpl-ireland.ie.

How can a higher education institution prepare for effective RPL?

Whatever process an institution uses for recognising prior learning, there are a number of conditions at institutional level which will help to ensure the process runs smoothly. These are illustrated and explained here.



1 At institutional level, an enabling policy is in place that focuses on RPL. The policy is clear and accessible to all institutional staff. (Enabling policies are those which are rooted in practice and framed by the needs of those they aim to guide.)

2 Guidelines for the RPL process in the institution have been compiled in a clear and transparent format and are available to all staff, students, external candidates, stakeholders and professional bodies. The guidelines make explicit the kinds of prior learning the institution recognises and the criteria and process for different forms of recognition.

3 All module outlines and associated learning outcomes are accessible to staff and students.

4 Supports are in place for students who may be considering embarking on the RPL process and students are aware of such supports.

5 Staff involved in facilitating RPL are clear about their roles and responsibilities.

6 Staff involved in facilitating RPL are given opportunities to take part in professional development to support them in such roles.

7 Institutional systems are connected in such a way that when RPL is granted to a student this will be reflected in the student records and, where applicable, in the records of associated support services. This may mean, for example, updating module attendance lists, connecting with support services and updating the student's institutional transcript and European Diploma Supplement.

References

- Cedefop. (2015). European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning. Luxembourg: Publications Office.
- DES. (2011). National strategy for higher education to 2030. Dublin: Author.
- HEA. (2015). National plan for equity of access to higher education 2015-2019. Dublin: Author.
- National Forum. (2015). A current overview of recognition of prior learning (RPL) in Irish higher education. Dublin: Author.
- National Forum. (2016). National professional development framework for all staff who teach in higher education. Dublin: Author.
- QQI. (2015). Policy restatement. Policy and criteria for access, transfer and progression in relation to learners for providers of further and higher education and training. Dublin: Author.

Further Reading

National Qualifications Authority of Ireland:

Principles and operational guidelines for the recognition of prior learning in further and higher education and training. (2005)

Principles and operational guidelines for the implementation of a national approach to credit in Irish higher education and training. (2006)

Quality and Qualifications Ireland:

Assessment and standards. (2013)

Policies and criteria for the validation of programmes of education and training. (2016)

Policy and criteria for making awards. (2014)