



RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING (RPL)

Policy Document

INTRODUCTION

Government policy in Ireland has increasingly aspired to widening opportunity for lifelong learning with emphasis on social inclusion, equity of access to higher education, wider participation and partnerships with community, educational and business organizations. Consequently education providers, including higher education, must acknowledge the significance of learning obtained in a breadth of contexts prior to admission and formulate policies to enable formal recognition of such learning.

The aim of this policy document is to provide a coherent framework for the recognition of prior learning in University College Cork.

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is a process that allows students to gain admission to a programme of study or to gain exemptions/credit from some parts of a programme, based on demonstrated learning achieved prior to admission. UCC recognises that knowledge and skills can be acquired from a range of learning experiences. The policy provides opportunities for **access, transfer and progression** to education and training at third level. While flexibility in structures and increased opportunities for entry to UCC programmes and transfer between programmes (intra and inter institutionally) are central to the principles of RPL, it is essential that academic standards for all programmes are maintained.

CONTEXT

This policy has been developed in the context of the National Skills Strategy and has been formulated in accordance with the following:

- HEA. *National Plan for Equity of Access to Education 2008-2013*. In its recently published 5 year plan the National Office for Equity of Access has the stated policy objective of progressing 'the lifelong learning agenda through the development of a broader range of entry routes' and explicitly commits to 'support the development and implementation of a national action plan for the recognition of prior learning.' (HEA, 2008, 13, 48.)
- NQAI *Principles and Operational Guidelines for the implementation of a national approach to credit in Irish Education and training* (NQAI, 2004, 23).
- OECD. *Thematic review and collaborative policy analysis recognition of non-formal and informal learning: Ireland*. Recommendations contained in the OECD report of the review visit to Ireland in February 2008: 'From a lifelong learning perspective, broad provision of RPL would be logical so that a wide array of citizens can use RPL as an instrument to access education [and] to measure their existing skills, knowledge and competences.' (OECD, 2008. 65).

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is an important element of EU policy for widening access to qualifications and supporting lifelong learning. The Irish Government has made a commitment to support RPL¹.

DEFINITIONS

Prior learning is learning which has taken place prior to admission to a programme. Such learning can be certified or experiential.

Recognition of Prior Certified Learning (RPCL) is a process of formal acknowledgement of formal (certified) learning that has taken place and has been recognised prior to student enrolling on a programme. It may support the applicant's application for **admission** to a programme or allow for **exemptions** from some parts of a programme.

Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning (RPEL) is a process of awarding credit for learning that has not previously been accredited, that is, experiential learning (both non-formal and informal). It may support the applicant's application for **admission** to a programme overall for **exemptions** from some parts of a programme.

Experiential learning is achieved parallel to mainstream systems of education and training and does not lead to an award. Experiential learning includes:

Non-formal learning, which can take the form of organised, structured or planned training that may be assessed but does not lead to formal certification.

Informal learning encompasses learning gained through life experience in work, community or other settings.

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

¹ (Government of Ireland, 1998, 2000; Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999)

UCC RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING POLICY

The following principles apply to the implementation of RPL within UCC.

1. General Policy

1.1 Recognition of prior learning is a part of UCC's procedure for the admission, exemption and the award of credit.

1.2 All Colleges are required to ensure that their policies and procedures for the recognition of prior learning are clearly stated and documented, and readily available to all applicants, academic and administrative staff as required.

1.3 The modules and programmes eligible for recognition of prior learning shall be identified and specific assessment criteria and procedures shall be defined, documented and made available as required under 1.2.

1.4 The focus of the RPL process shall be on the achievement of learning outcomes rather than the experience of learning.

1.5 The first point of contact is the College which is responsible for overseeing the RPL application process. The final decision regarding the granting of exemption for admission or transfer rests with the appropriate academic unit, in consultation with relevant officer(s) as appropriate and shall be reported to the relevant Examination Board.

2. Quality Principles

2.1 The policies and procedures for the recognition of prior learning are embedded within the quality assurance procedures of UCC. Therefore they shall be included in the academic regulations of each programme as appropriate.

2.2 The academic standards for the outcome of the RPL process must be maintained in such a way that the academic standards of awards of UCC are maintained.

2.3 In defining their arrangements, Colleges shall ensure that their process of application, assessment and recognition shall be comprehensive, transparent, consistent and fair, and conducted within a reasonable time frame.

3. Assessment Principles

3.1 Specific RPL procedures shall be put in place by individual programmes and modules at the design stage and if implemented, post-programme approval shall be approved by College Council in accordance with College procedures.

3.2 As part of the assessment for RPL applicants must demonstrate that they understand the theory as well as the practical learning elements of the module.

3.3. In seeking recognition under RPL prior learning must be evidenced in writing or through the medium appropriate to the particular learning outcomes of the module and accompanied by authentication as necessary.

3.4. For RPL the learning outcomes refers to learner's knowledge, understanding, skills and/or competences, i.e. what the learner knows and can do to the required standard as a result of prior learning.

3.5 Recognition will normally be given:

- For complete modules only;
- Where all of the learning outcomes of a module have been achieved;
- It is at the discretion of each programme to determine the proportion of credit which may be awarded at each stage of study up to a maximum of 50% of the total credits available for the programme overall. There is no requirement that credit is granted at any stage of a programme and, in particular, programme co-ordinators shall be mindful of professional and statutory body requirements and the appropriateness of awarding RPL in the final year.

Candidates will normally be entitled to apply for exemption for entire modules only, not parts of them. Exceptionally, when the module is composed of clearly distinguishable and distinct parts, for example theory + practical components, exemptions from a component may be permitted with the approval of the College Council in accordance with agreed College procedures.

3.6 Credit gained by RPL cannot be double-counted for purposes of second qualification at the same level.

3.7 The applicant is responsible for submitting relevant evidence in accordance with appropriate programme-specific guidelines. An applicant who is admitted via RPL and is found to have submitted false or misleading evidence is in breach of the University regulations. False or misleading evidence is a disciplinary matter and in all cases will be referred to the Student Discipline Committee.

3.8 Upon a submission of RPL application and relevant evidence, the applicant will be given feedback on the judgement and may be permitted to re-submit on one subsequent occasion.

3.9 The student record entry in respect of RPL is undertaken within the Student Records and Examination Office upon notification by the Examination Board.

4. Assessment Criteria

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

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| 4.1 Validity | Does the prior learning presented match the learning outcomes required by the relevant module? Is the prior learning being presented by the applicant at the academic level required. |
| 4.2 Sufficiency | Is there sufficient evidence to demonstrate that the learning outcomes have been achieved? |
| 4.3 Authenticity | Can it be verified that the prior learning is that of the applicant? |
| 4.4 Reliability | Is the evidence of prior learning presented reliable? |
| 4.5 Currency | Is the prior learning achieved and being assessed current? Is it up to date with current knowledge and practice? |

RPL PROCESS

1. The applicant initiates the process by providing appropriate outline information in support of their application for RPCL and for RPEL.

2. Consultation shall be arranged in accordance with College procedures and applicants shall receive advice and guidance for preparation of evidence and verification of prior learning in the required format
3. Initial judgment is made by the programme co-ordinator or designated member of staff as to whether the application for RPL is appropriate and the process may continue. If decided that it should continue, the applicant must then submit evidence of learning by providing the required detailed information to support the application within the specified timeframe.
4. The learning evidence shall be submitted to the programme co-ordinator or designated member of staff who shall make the submission on behalf of the applicant to the relevant College authority.
5. The outcome of the assessment process once verified shall be notified to the Examination Board as part of the student profile for assessment and the outcome reported to Student Records and Examinations Office for entry onto the student record.
6. The recommendation on the outcome of the assessment process for RPL prior to verification by the Examination Board shall be notified to the applicant within a reasonable period of time.

IMPLEMENTATION

It is for Colleges to design and agree local arrangements for the implementation of this policy in keeping with the universities strategic activities (Leading Action point 3 and 4, page 11 and Key Projects numbers 2, 3 and 4, page 18) and in the context of subject and professional body requirements.

REVIEW

This policy will be reviewed, in the first instance within two years from the date of adoption by Academic Council and a full policy review will be undertaken after five years. The review will be led by the Vice President for Teaching and Learning.