Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Policy and Practice

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1. Introduction

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.

Dundalk Institute of Technology recognise that knowledge, skills and competencies can be acquired from a range of learning experiences, including formal, non-formal and informal. This is in line with the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) 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 at Dundalk Institute of Technology (DkIT) 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 programmes at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. It is designed to ensure consistency and transparency in the application of the principles of RPL throughout the Institute.

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is the generic term for systems such as Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) or Advanced Academic Standing, which are used within Higher Education to describe the awarding of credit / exemptions to learners on the basis of demonstrated learning that has occurred prior to admission. 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 RPL[1]. The purpose of RPL is to expand access to educational programmes and qualifications for people previously lacking formal qualifications and to reduce the time and cost of programmes for people who already possess some of the *knowledge, skills and competences* which a programme seeks to develop in learners.

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

2 Definitions

2.1 Recognition of Prior Learning

Prior Learning is learning which has taken place prior to admission to a programme or module. 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.

2.2 Recognition of Prior Certified Learning (RPCL)

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

2. 3 Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning (RPEL)

This involves the awarding of *credit* for 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, exemption or credit*. As a general principle, credit is given for *learning*, not for experience per se.

2. 4 Learning Routes

Prior Learning may have been acquired through *formal, non-formal or informal*[2] *routes.* For the purposes of this policy document these learning routes are defined as follows:

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

Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner's point of view. It takes place through planned, organised learning activities but typically does not receive certification. Examples of non-formal learning are: learning and training activities undertaken in the workplace, voluntary sector or trade union and in community-based settings.

Informal learning is not organised or structured (in terms of objectives, time or learning support). Informal learning is in most cases unintentional from the learner's point of view. It takes place through life and work experience – and is sometimes referred to as experiential learning. It typically does not lead to certification.

2.5 Learning Outcomes

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

2.6 Qualifications not on the NQF

In the case where a learner presents a qualification that was achieved outside of Ireland, the learner may be expected to contact the NQAI to get his/her learning on the Irish framework of Qualifications.

2 These definitions are widely accepted by EU, OECD.

3. DkIT RPL Policy Principles

The following principles will apply to the implementation of RPL within Dundalk Institute of Technology, corresponding to those principles outlined by the NQAI.

- Through the recognition of prior learning, the Institute commits to give value to all relevant learning, irrespective of mode or place of learning.

- Participation in RPL is a voluntary matter for applicants and will be facilitated by the Institute.

- Recognition of prior learning should provide opportunities for access, transfer and progression to education and training and for the achievement of an award. The RPL processes will be organised in such a way that they do not create barriers for the applicant.

- Processes and practices for the recognition of prior learning should be communicated openly and clearly to all stakeholders (e.g. applicants, potential applicants, those who advise and guide them, education and training staff and assessors).

- 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 at the appropriate level(s).

- The focus of the Institute s RPL process will be on the achievement of learning, or the outcome of learning, rather than the experience of learning.

- People who register will be expected to complete their submission within a time frame.

- Recognition will normally be given :

    - For complete modules only. Exceptions may be made when the module is composed of clearly distinguishable and distinct parts, for example: theory and practical.

    - Where all of the learning outcomes of a module have been achieved Programme Boards will define the level of available exemptions and the points of entry to

specific programmes on the basis of RPL. The exemptions available through RPL will be specified and written into programme submissions and Approved Course Schedules.

- Exemptions from modules may be granted at the non-award stages of a programme on the basis of recognising prior learning, according to the rules and processes stated in this Policy.

- Where prior learning has not previously attached credit under the European Credit Transfer system (ECTS) framework or similar framework, credits may be awarded for that learning in the context of the relevant course schedule and according to the following rules:

    - Credits and exemptions are awarded on the recommendation of the Programme Board.

    - At the Award Stage, or for elements of a course contributing to the Award, prior learning is not considered for exemption but is graded.

- Through the RPL process, candidates will demonstrate the appropriate academic level of learning and, where applicable, produce evidence of practical skills.

- The Institute will ensure that academic standards comparable to those attained on programmes by traditional modes of learning will be maintained and applied throughout the RPL process.

- Recognition of prior learning will be embedded within the quality assurance procedures of DkIT.

- All recommendations of exemptions, grades or marks will be subject to the approval of the appropriate Examinations Board.

- RPL will be available only at certain times of the academic year, to be determined from time to time at the discretion of Institute management.

- RPL is subject to the normal Institute appeals system.

3.1 RPL in a Non-Award Stage

Where an applicant seeks RPL of a module which does not have input to the overall classification of the award being sought by the applicant, they are therefore applying for RPL in a Non-Award Stage. Recognition or accreditation will only be given:

1. For complete modules
2. Where 100% of the learning outcomes for the module have been achieved at a pass level

Marks/grades will not be awarded at non-award stage. Where an end of year classification is to be calculated, such calculations will be based entirely on the modules that have been examined.

3.2 RPL in an Award Stage

Any module which has an input to the overall classification of the award being sought by the applicant is deemed to be part of the Award Stage for the purpose of this Policy. Recognition or accreditation will only be given:

1. For complete modules
2. Where 100% of the learning outcomes for the module have been achieved at a pass level
3. For prior learning which has not previously been recognised.

Module exemptions are not granted at the Award Stage, but marks/grades are awarded.

4. RPL Processes

4. 1 Presentation of Learning for Evaluation

Responsibility for submitting claims for the recognition of prior learning rests with individual applicants.

The mechanism proposed by the Institute for the presentation of learning is that of the Learning Portfolio in which the applicant presents evidence of learning. Each Learning Portfolio will be accompanied by an RPL Application Form.

Applicants will normally have an initial consultation with an RPL Officer, established within the Institute. This point of first contact will carry out an initial assessment of the applicant and will identify the appropriate School or Department to which the applicant will be referred.

The RPL Officer will also arrange periodical group tutorial sessions and workshops on how to construct a portfolio.

The RPL Officer will communicate the outcome of the process to the applicant.

An Academic Advisor will be appointed to advise applicants on the preparation of evidence for verification of prior learning. Such advisors would, in all likelihood, be the academic staff of the school/department who are the subject and programme experts. In some instances a number of department staff may be involved as advisors in relation to a single application.

An Academic Assessor or Assessors will be appointed to assess and grade an applicant's portfolio. Academic Assessors may be staff members or may be contracted externally. Applicants will pay a fee to cover the costs associated with of portfolio assessment.

From time to time an application may include a combination of prior certified learning and experiential learning. However in order to clearly distinguish between the two and for the purposes of this procedure, RPCL and RPEL are considered separately.

(A) Prior Certified Learning

Recognition of Prior Certified Learning (RPCL) is the recognition of learning that has already been accredited by an awarding body such as HETAC, FETAC, or other state recognised colleges/institutes. RPCL can also include qualifications received abroad.

Workshops will be made available periodically in order to provide training on Portfolio preparation to potential RPL applicants.

The Admissions Office will periodically circulate and update any documentation that details the equivalences between academic programmes and levels across jurisdictions.

Full-time learners will be made aware about the RPL process prior to or at the beginning of their course. Should they choose to pursue the RPCL option, they will be provided with the module descriptor which includes the learning outcomes, by the module lecturer. It is the learner's responsibility to apply for an exemption(s) on a programme. Applicants must submit their application to the RPL Officer no later than two weeks after the commencement of the module. Full-time Learners will continue to attend classes until a decision has been made to whether or not to grant the exemption(s) sought. The learner can expect to attend an interview.

An applicant (whether external or registered full time/part time learner) will be required to gather the required documentation (original certificates, transcripts, results, exam papers, and module syllabi) and submit them to the Institute's RPL Officer.

The RPL Officer will liaise with the relevant HOD who will appoint a suitably qualified Academic Advisor (ideally the subject lecturer(s)). The Advisor will mentor the applicant on the preparation of evidence for verification of prior learning.

A suitably qualified Assessor will also be appointed who will recommend that exemptions or marks/grades as appropriate be (a) granted, (b) granted subject to certain conditions (i.e. additional documentation, attendance at certain workshops, preparation of additional academic work – e.g. research, essay, project or (c) denied.

In arriving at a recommendation, the Assessor will consider the applicants academic record; previous courses/programmes of study; module and programme content, learning outcomes, programme/module contact hours, forms of assessment undertaken; NQAI level of qualification awarded and awarding body.

A final decision on RPCL should be communicated to the applicant by the RPL Officer within 3 weeks of receipt of the fully completed application.

Appeals

Applicants who are not satisfied with the outcome of the RPL process may apply for a review, in line with existing Institute procedures.

This is the reconsideration of examination material (RPCL portfolio in this instance) by a second external reviewer. All applications for a review will be adjudicated on by the Registrar. If a review is granted, a further fee per module will be payable in order to cover the additional cost of the review.

Applicants may request a review of the decision in regard to their application on the following grounds:

That the Assessor did not give sufficient weight to any special or extenuating circumstances notified to the Institute at the time of submitting the application.

That the assessment did not take into account some significant element of the certification supplied.

That there was a material administrative error or irregularity in the assessment procedure, which made a real and substantive difference to the outcome.

(B) Prior Experiential Learning

Recognition of Prior Experiential (Non-Certified) Learning (RPEL) involves the awarding of credits and marks for prior learning based on experience.

Workshops will be made available periodically in order to provide training on Portfolio preparation to potential RPL applicants.

Full-time learners will be made aware of the RPL process prior to or at the beginning of their course. Should they choose to pursue the RPEL option, they will be provided with the module descriptor which includes the module learning outcomes by the module lecturer or Head of Department.

In the case of RPEL, applicants must demonstrate that their previous learning experience matches the learning outcomes for the module by preparing a Portfolio of Evidence that supports their claim for module access, exemption or credit.

It is the applicant's responsibility to apply for RPEL on a programme. Full time registered learners must submit their application to the RPL Officer no later than two weeks after the commencement date of the programme. Full-time registered Learners will continue to attend classes until a decision has been made whether or not to grant the exemption(s) sought.

The RPL Officer will liaise with the relevant HOD who will appoint a suitably qualified Academic Advisor (ideally the subject lecturer(s)). The Advisor will mentor the Learner while they are preparing their Portfolio of Evidence. The Portfolio will typically contain:

- References.
- CV.
- Job Descriptions.
- Details of Training Courses completed.
- Certificates of any qualifications.
- Sample work (e.g. Drawings, reports, presentations, articles, business/operational plans).
- Evidence from the learner's personal life.
- Published work.
- Professional Licences, registrations, memberships.
- Any other relevant material.

- Verification from employer will be required.

A suitably qualified Assessor will be appointed. The Assessor will recommend that exemptions or marks/grades as appropriate be (a) granted, (b) granted subject to certain conditions (i.e. additional documentation, attendance at certain workshops, preparation of additional academic work – e.g. research, essay, project) or (c) denied.

Assessors must satisfy themselves that the learning demonstrated matches the minimum standard of the learning outcomes set for the module for which credit is being sought. (Assessors must have received RPEL Assessor training before they can assess RPEL portfolios). As part of the assessment, the Assessor will interview the applicant. The interview process will be managed by the RPL Officer.

The RPL Officer should communicate a final decision on the RPEL portfolio to the applicant within 4 weeks of receipt of the fully completed application and portfolio.

Appeals

Applicants who are not satisfied with the outcome of the RPL process may apply for a review, in line with existing Institute procedures.

This is the reconsideration of examination material (RPEL portfolio in this instance) by an external reviewer. All applications for a review will be adjudicated on by the Registrar. If a review is granted, a further fee per module will be payable in order to cover the additional cost of the review.

Applicants may request a review of the decision in regard to their portfolio on the following grounds:

- That the Assessor did not give sufficient weight to any special or extenuating circumstances notified to the Institute at the time of submitting the application.

- That the assessment did not take into account some significant element of the portfolio.

- That there was a material administrative error or irregularity in the assessment procedure, which made a real and substantive difference to the outcome.

4.2 Criteria for Assessment

Assessment criteria for the recognition of prior learning should be published, made clear to applicants and applied consistently and fairly. Assessment criteria should be based on learning outcomes of awards or standards of knowledge, skill and competence set out in the National Framework of Qualifications and by DkIT.

Assessment and verification mechanisms for the recognition of prior learning should be appropriate and fit for purpose. The following key criteria will be used by Advisors and Assessors 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?

Authenticity: Is it clear that the prior learning is that of the applicant?

Reliability: Is the evidence of prior learning presented reliable?

Currency : Is the prior learning achieved and being assessed current? Is it up to date with current knowledge and practice?

4.3 Outcome of Assessment Process

The outcome of the assessment process can be one or more of the following:

- The granting of admission to a specific academic programme within DkIT Advanced academic standing within a programme of study.
- The granting of individual Module exemptions or credits if the required learning outcomes have been met.
- Refusal of admission to a specific academic programme at DkIT.
- Refusal to grant individual module exemptions or credits.

4.4 Validation

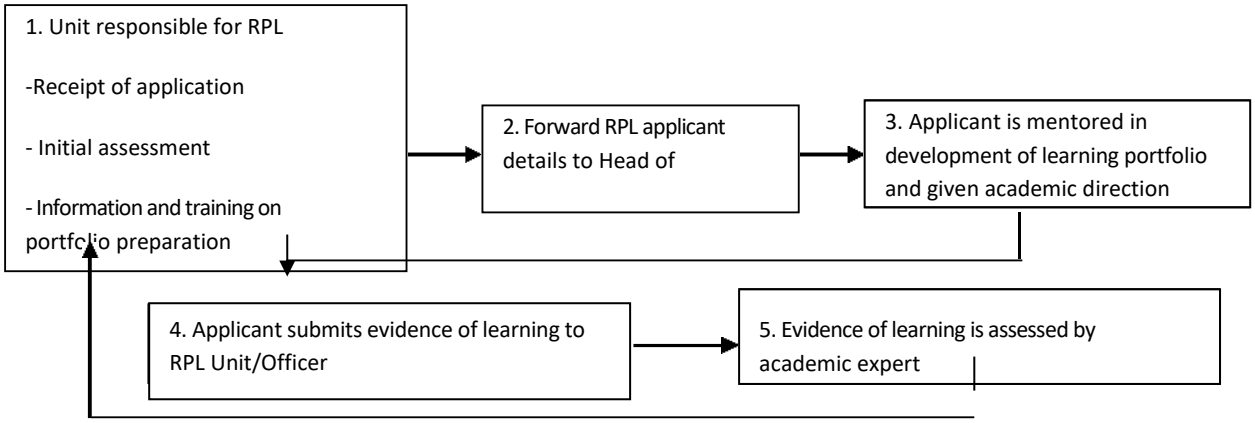
All RPL decisions must be validated by the appropriate Examinations Board.

4.5 Communication

All prospective applicants and enrolled students will be made aware of RPL opportunities in programme literature and on the Institute website. Applicants will be 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 Institute, of the outcome of the RPL assessment process. All applications will be made through the RPL Officer and the results of all assessments will be communicated to the applicant via the RPL Officer.

4.6 High-Level DkIT RPL Process

In summary:



1. Information regarding the RPL process will be made available to applicants.

2. The applicant initiates the process by providing appropriate outline information in support of their application. An RPL Application Form may be used by the applicant to provide this information.

3. Consultation with an RPL Advisor will be arranged. Applicants receive advice and support for preparation of evidence and verification of prior learning in the required format.

4. The learning evidence plus the completed RPL Application Form will be presented for assessment by an appropriate Assessor.

5. The outcome of the assessment process will be verified by the relevant Department Examinations Board and communicated to the RPL Officer and any other relevant administrative units.

6. The outcome of the assessment process will be transmitted to the applicant within a reasonable period of time.

5. Review and Revision

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

6. DkIT RPL Derogations

Department	Programme	NFQ Level	ECTS Credits	Rationale
Humanities	*Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Social Care*	8	240	• CORU, the multi-profession regulator for health and social care, established under the Health and Social Care Professional Act 2005 (as amended) has published the criteria for Social Care programmes of education. • Each programme of education must ensure that any graduate has met all Standards of Proficiency while studying as part of the named programme listed on the by-law for Social Care. Therefore, recognition of prior learning (certified or experiential) is not possible.