



# Recognition of Prior Learning

## Faculty of Medicine & Health Sciences

RCSI DEVELOPING HEALTHCARE LEADERS WHO MAKE A DIFFERENCE WORLDWIDE

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## 1. Introduction

The RCSI regulations for the Recognition of Prior Learning provide a process and framework for validating and placing a value on prior learning for the purpose of:

- A. Admission
- B. Exemption
- C. Advanced Entry / transfer between programmes

The EU Council (2012) defines validation as a process of confirmation by an authorised body that an individual has acquired learning outcomes measured against a relevant standard which consists of four distinct phases:

1. Identification – dialogue of particular experiences of an individual
2. Documentation – making visible the individuals experiences
3. Assessment – formal assessment of these experiences
4. Certification – the results of the assessment

These regulations are intended for use by the RCSI staff and faculty involved in admissions processes relating to applicants seeking assessment of their prior learning for the purposes of admission, exemption or advanced entry/ transfer between programmes and to provide clarity and direction for candidates during their application process.

## 2. Context

RCSI is committed to supporting national developments for the recognition of prior learning (RPL) as well as access, transfer and progression in Higher Education, whilst simultaneously ensuring the academic integrity of our education programmes (table 1).

**Table 1: National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 Recommendation**

Develop clear routes of progression and transfer, as well as non-traditional entry routes, as follows:

- Delivery of higher education in Ireland must be characterised by flexibility and innovation
- All students, whether full-time or part-time, on-campus or off-campus, should be equally supported by the funding model used to allocate resources to and within institutions.
- Undergraduate students should be encouraged to spend some time in a work or service situation, and formally acknowledge such work through accreditation or inclusion in the student's Diploma Supplement.
- Routes of progression should be flexible into, within and across higher education institutions.
- A national framework for the recognition of prior learning (RPL) must be developed and recognised by all higher education institutions.

**(Hunt Report, 2011)**

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) is the recognised authority for establishing policies and criteria for access transfer and progression under the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education & Training) Act 2012. As a Designated Awarding Body, RCSI is obliged to comply with such criteria. Current practice continues to be based on the 2005 National Qualifications Authority of Ireland's (NQAI) Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning. A consultation and reflection process is underway by QQI in a number of policy areas including RPL. (EU Commission 2014)

These regulations have been devised on the basis of current best practice, including guidance from the National University of Ireland (2013), Framework Implementation Network (2011) and NQAI (2005) and will be subject to regular refinement and review in line with QQI policy development.

### 3. Definition of the Recognition of Prior Learning

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is defined as the process by which prior learning is given a value. It is a means by which prior learning is formally identified, assessed and acknowledged (NQAI, 2005). 'RPL' encompasses and replaces the terms 'Accreditation of Prior Certified Learning' (APCL) and 'Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning' (APEL) that have previously been associated with this practice (NUI, 2013) (see table 2).

RPL involves the assessment of knowledge, skills and competence previously acquired. Learning occurs in many contexts which include work, involvement in social and community activities, or learning through life experience generally. In order to enable the individual to learn throughout life, equal value should be given to all these forms of learning regardless of source, how it is achieved and when in life it is achieved (NQAI, 2005).

**Table 2 Summary of the terms associated with RPL**

<b>Term</b>	<b>Definition/ explanation</b>
Informal learning	Learning resulting from daily activities related to work, family or leisure and is not organised or structured in terms of objectives, time or learning support (e.g. project management skills, ICT skills, languages, intercultural skills) (EU, 2012)
Formal learning	learning which takes place in an organised and structured environment, specifically dedicated to learning and typically leads to the award of a qualification (EU, 2012)
Non-Formal learning	learning which takes place through planned activities (in terms of learning objectives and learning time) where some form of learning support is present (e.g. in-company training, structured online learning) (EU, 2012)
Types of Prior Learning	RPL is considered as encompassing all types of prior learning: AP(E)L has tended to become a collective term which encompasses, for example, Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL); Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL); Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning (APCL); Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL); Accreditation of Prior Learning and Achievement (APL&A); Recognition of Current Competencies (RCC); and Learning Outside Formal Teaching (LOFT) (NQAI, 2005)

Within RCSI, and in accordance with NUI guidance (2013), RPL may be used to gain:

- a) Admission to courses/ programmes where a person may not have obtained the standard entry requirements;
- b) Exemptions from course modules which duplicate the learning outcomes an individual has already demonstrably acquired through prior learning;
- c) Advanced entry into a programme of study (i.e. into year 2 or year 3)/ transfer between programmes where normal entry would duplicate the learning outcomes an individual has already demonstrably acquired through prior learning.

RPL may not be used to gain a qualification solely on the basis of prior learning.

#### **4. Purpose**

These regulations have been developed as an assurance to the integrity of our third and fourth level education and aim to put a framework in place for the assessment of all types of prior learning. Recognising that we should not inappropriately allow, or equally prevent people from getting credits for previous work, the regulations provide a toolkit for those involved in admissions processes and RPL decisions across the Faculty of Medicine & Health Sciences, ensuring consistency and transparency for our students and prospective students.

The purpose of these regulations is to facilitate Programme Directors as they seek to support prospective students who apply to have prior learning recognised. The responsibility for deciding the most appropriate course of action for a student lies with the Programme Director, subject to the principles contained within these regulations.

#### **5. Scope**

Regulations for the Recognition of Prior Learning apply to all accredited programmes of the Faculty of Medicine & Health Sciences leading to an award formally mapped to the National Framework of Qualifications and recognised as such by the RCSI Awards & Qualifications Committee and National University of Ireland.

Variations in our admissions processes are acknowledged and caveats have been made as follows:

##### **5.1 Undergraduate Programmes**

The criteria for admission into undergraduate (level 8) programmes (both Direct and Graduate Entry) in Medicine, Pharmacy, Physiotherapy and Nursing (RCSI Bahrain) is governed by the Admissions Committee in consultation with Heads of Schools. These RCSI courses are professional in nature and as a general principle, involve integration of learning and skills development in clinical environments so specific RPL exemptions for parts of such programmes are not feasible. Undergraduate admissions and transfer policies should be read in conjunction with these regulations and will have primacy over and above these regulations.

##### **5.2 Taught Postgraduate Programmes**

Admissions to taught postgraduate programmes are managed by the relevant School in consultation with the Programme Director. The entry requirements and programme specific rules for recognition of prior learning are documented in the course application material.

### **5.3 Degrees by Research**

Admissions to higher degrees by research are managed by the School of Postgraduate Studies in consultation with Research Supervisors and/or the relevant doctoral programme steering committees. The entry requirements and programme specific rules for RPL are documented in the course application material. RPL may only be sought for taught components of degrees by research.

### **5.4 Professional considerations**

Professional bodies and relevant accreditation agencies, in all jurisdictions where RCSI operates, may have their own RPL guidance/regulations. These should be taken into consideration by the RPL Assessor and stated in the course application material. The Programme Director should become familiar with these guidelines and advise the Committee on any updates as they become available. Where such guidance is in conflict with these regulations any statutory regulations will take precedence.

## **6. RCSI Core Principles on the Recognition of Prior and Experiential Learning:**

RCSI has adopted a principles based approach to the Recognition of Prior Learning as follows:

- i. Each programme will have explicit programme specific RPL criteria, published in relevant course application material;
- ii. It is the responsibility of individual applicants seeking RPL to complete the relevant Assessment Portfolio sufficiently in advance of the relevant deadline and to supply all evidence and documentation in support of their application to ensure a timely decision. All issues relating to RPL will normally be resolved at least one month prior to the course commencement date. An outline of the application process is presented in section 8 below;
- iii. An application will normally be submitted before the applicant commences the programme. RPL will not normally be considered retrospectively following registration;
- iv. In the case of joint or collaborative awards, applicants should seek clarification on the RPL process but should normally submit their application to their home institution;
- v. Full awards will not be awarded through RPL;
- vi. RPL decisions are made by RCSI academic staff/ Programme Directors identified as RPL Assessors on the basis of academic judgment and mapping of learning outcomes (in the case of advanced entry/exemption), using the information and evidence provided by the applicant in the Assessment Portfolio;
- vii. Course documentation will state the programme specific RPL criteria regarding credit thresholds (minimum and maximum amounts) of exemption permitted – this will take account of the desired level of coherence needed to satisfy the learning outcomes and the overall programme experience (FIN, 2011 pages 6, 34 and 56) (HEA, 2013 pg. 24). Notwithstanding this the maximum credit allowed for prior learning for bachelors or taught degree programmes is normally 50% of the entire programme of study and the minimum claim allowable is normally equivalent to a whole module. Exceptions may be considered on a case by case basis;

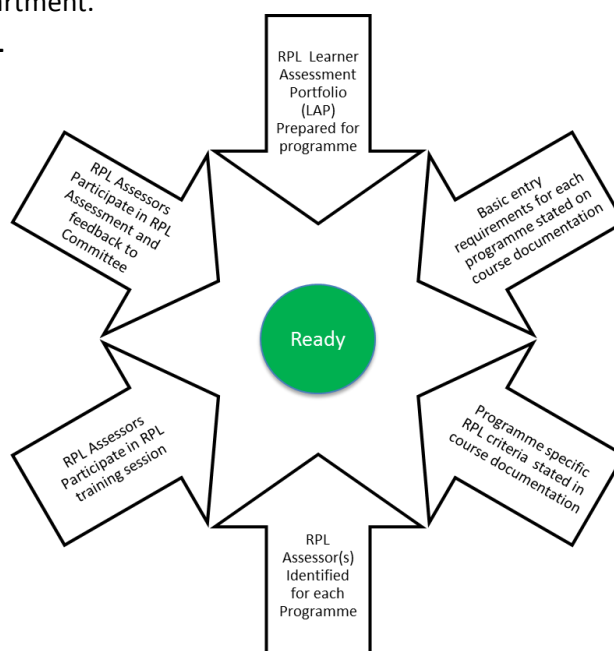
- viii. RPL may only be granted towards taught programmes or taught elements of a research programme and it cannot normally be provided for research activity (i.e. not for any module that comprises of a research project or dissertation) subject to specified thresholds referred to in vi above;
- ix. Learning outcomes achieved on the basis of prior learning must be considered at the appropriate level corresponding to the National Framework of Qualifications, as described on the course material/Assessment Portfolio;
- x. The submission must normally be current i.e. achieved within the last five years. Submissions will be considered on a case-by-case basis. The RPL Assessor should consider developments (e.g. technological, theoretical) since the learning was achieved and determine whether this would impact on the knowledge, skills and competence required on graduation;
- xi. Credit will not be awarded and may not be counted twice for the same achievement. Where credit from a prior award has been used to gain entry to or exemption from an award, students should be advised to represent themselves as having the highest level award only;
- xii. RCSI will consider credits awarded by a range of institutions at the discretion of the RPL Assessor contingent upon relevant documentation and verification provided by the applicant – such verification may include formal assessment of prior learning by agencies such as UK NAIRC (National Recognition Information Centre) or other qualification recognition services as may be recommended or advised from time to time the cost of which will be borne by the applicant.

## 7. Departmental Preparation and Staff Training

Recognition of Prior Learning will be assessed by members of academic staff, normally Programme Directors, identified as “RPL Assessors”. RPL Assessors and school administrators will undergo training and be competent to undertake their role in the assessment and administration of RPL (NQAI, 2005 pg. 32).

The RCSI “Learner Assessment Portfolio (LAP)” will form a central tool in the provision of information and assessment of Recognition of Prior Learning (Each programme will have a defined LAP with stated or appended programme-specific criteria relating to RPL). Figure 1 shows the cycle of preparing for RPL within a School or Academic Department.

**Figure 1: Preparing for RPL**



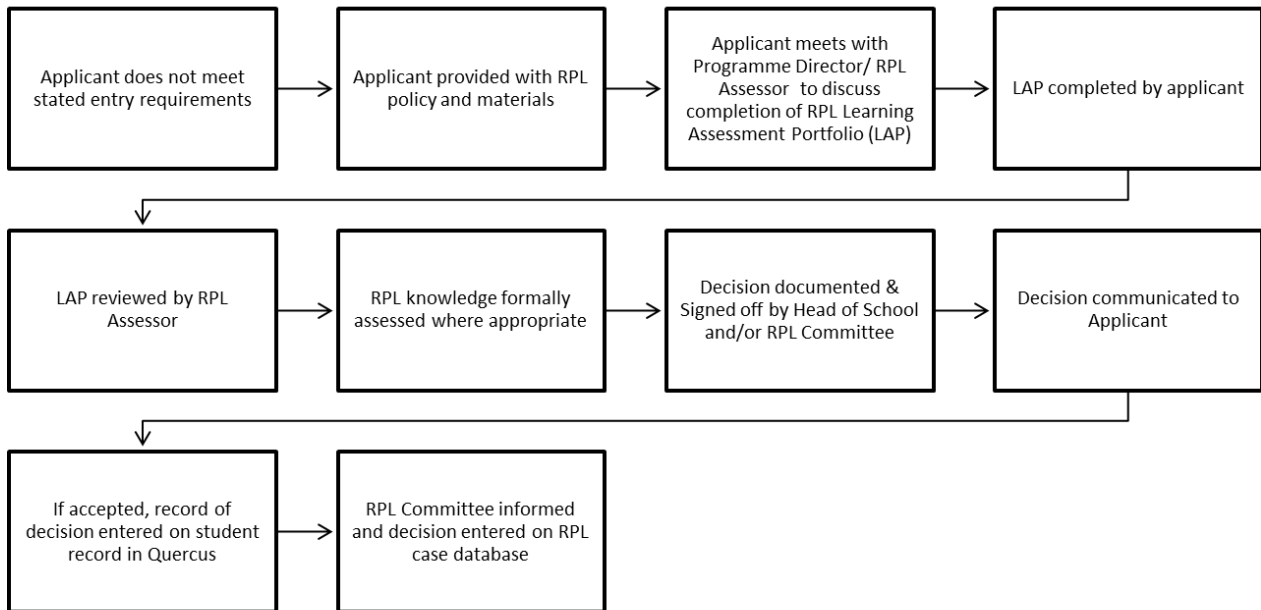
## 8. RPL Application and Assessment Process

Submission deadlines will be stated on the course/ application material. All issues relating to RPL will normally be resolved at least one month prior to the course commencement date.

### 8.1 Recognition of Prior Learning for Admission

Figure 2 outlines the process for the assessment of applications where the applicant does not meet stated entry requirements.

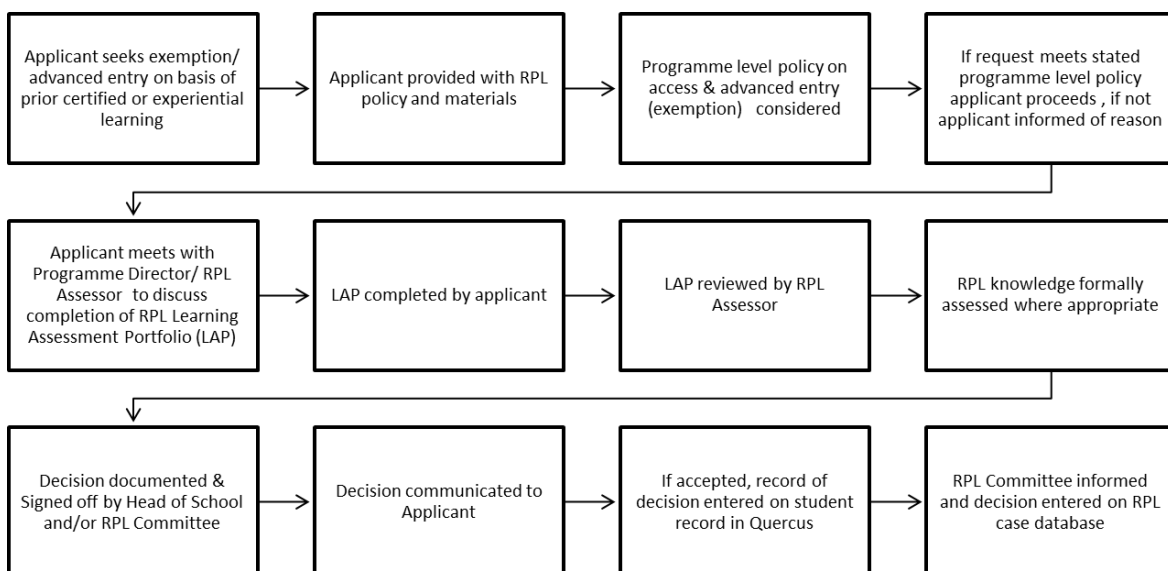
Figure 2 – RPL Process for Admission



### 8.2 Recognition of Prior Learning for Advanced Entry

Figure 3 outlines the process for the assessment of applications where the applicant seeks exemption/ advanced entry.

Figure 3 RPL Process for Exemption / Advanced Entry



### **8.3 Principles of Assessment of Recognition of Prior Learning**

The decision on whether or not to accept prior learning is carried out following an assessment of the applicants learning portfolio and is based on equivalence. The Programme Director/ RPL Assessor must be satisfied that the learning derived from prior learning satisfies the learning outcomes at the appropriate level of the module or modules where credit is being sought. (Aston University, 2005)

The simplest, fairest and most transparent way to judge equivalence is to look at the module learning outcomes for the areas where credit is sought and to compare with the description of prior learning (Aston University, 2005). A judgment is made as to whether or not the outcomes are equivalent in content and level. The Learning Assessment Portfolio has been devised to assist the RPL Assessor to gather information required to make the judgment.

### **8.4 Learning activities for the assessment of RPL**

Competence needs to be shown to be current to have any value or to be accredited. If there is insufficient convincing evidence of current competence, the Assessor will need to consider other assessment formats (Murray 1994). The RPL Assessor should choose one or more of the following assessment tools, in addition to the LAP, to formally assess prior learning:

- Interview or viva (oral questioning)
- Completion of the usual assessment used to demonstrate the learning in the module for which equivalence is being claimed;
- Simulation
- Demonstration
- Workplace assessment
- Assignment or project
- Written examination
- Letter of validation

The above list is not intended to be exhaustive and other modes of assessment may be used at the discretion of the RPL Assessor.

### **8.5 Support to Applicants**

The RPL Assessor and relevant administrative staff within the School/Academic Department must be available to provide support and clarification to applicants seeking RPL with contact information stated on the course application material. In the case of a Research focussed degree (MSc, PhD or MD), that person should not be the proposed thesis supervisor.

The assessment of RPL should be carried out in a timely way, and details of the timescales for the overall process should be clear and communicated to the applicant. Everyone who might be involved in the process must be certain of their role and the locus of authority and responsibility for making and verifying decisions should be clear.



## **8.6 Grading of RPL and Identification Transcripts**

The transcript of marks should clearly indicate any module where credit is obtained through RPL. The following principles should apply to credit, grading and official records:

- 8.6.1 In the case of prior informal/non-formal/experiential learning where no official grade is available, this should show as “exempt”;
- 8.6.2 In the case of prior learning obtained within RCSI, credits and grades may transfer with the agreement of the relevant Programme Directors and will be shown as “exempt”;
- 8.6.3 In the case of prior formal learning obtained from another institution, this will be shown as “exempt”;
- 8.6.4 If the module counts towards a final award classification, the classification will be calculated using the weighted average; Students will not be disadvantaged in the class rankings due to RPL.

## **8.7 Documenting Decisions and Student Records**

The following principles will apply to record keeping:

- A note of RPL for admission or advanced entry must be kept in the student record in Quercus;
- All credits transferred, or exemptions, awarded must appear on the student transcript in Quercus or other relevant system;
- All LAP's/application documentation must be retained for a period of 1 years post-graduation;
- RPL decisions must be reported to the RPL Oversight Committee ('the Committee')
- All records, in as far as possible, should be kept in electronic format;

## **9. Governance. Academic Oversight and Quality Assurance**

Governance, oversight and arrangements for the regular monitoring and review of Recognition of Prior Learning activities across the Faculty of Medicine & Health Sciences will be through the RPL Oversight Committee.

Assessment of prior learning derived from RPL must attest to RCSI standards and quality assurance procedures and will be signed off by the Head of School and/or RPL Oversight Committee.

A summary of decisions regarding Recognition of Prior Learning will be considered by the RPL oversight committee and entered in an RPL case database to promote shared learning and development of a central repository of decisions. Periodic audits will be carried out, including a random selection of application forms where compliance will be verified.

## **10. Appeals Mechanism**

Applicants who wish to appeal decisions of their RPL assessment should refer to the RCSI Appeals Regulations.

## REFERENCES:

- Department of Education & Skills (Hunt Report, 2011), *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*;
- European Commission (2014); Cedefop; ICF International. *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2014: country report Ireland*;
- EU Council (2012), Official Journal of the European Union, *Council Recommendation of 20<sup>th</sup> December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning (2012/c 398/01)*;
- FIN: The University Sector Framework Implementation Network (2011). *Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in the University SecStor: Policies, Case Studies and issues arising*;
- Higher Education Academy (HEA) (2013), *Review of credit accumulation and transfer policy and practice in UK higher education*;
- National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) (2005), National Framework of Qualifications; *Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in Further and Higher Education and Training*;
- National University of Ireland (NUI) (2013), *Recognition of Prior Learning*;
- Murray (1994), *Portfolios and Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) make credits ... or problems? Nurse Education Today* (Impact Factor: 1.46). 07/1994; 14(3):232-7. DOI: 10.1016/0260-6917(94)90087-6.

## Benchmarks

The following documents are acknowledged as benchmarks in the preparation of these regulations:

- Aston University (2005), REG/05/290(4), Guidance Note on the Accreditation of Prior Learning;
- UCD Registry (2012) Recognition of Prior Learning Academic Policy;
- DIT (2010) Recognition of Prior Learning in the Dublin Institute of Technology General Information for Applicants;
- NUI Galway (2012) Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Policy & Practice;
- DCU (2011) Recognition of Prior Learning in Dublin City University;