



Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL): Guide for UCD Academic Staff in assessing RPL applications

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What is the purpose of the *RPL Guide for Staff*?

This guide supports the *Recognition of Prior Learning Academic Policy* (available at <http://www.ucd.ie/governance/resources/policypage-rplpolicy/>) by providing additional information about assessing RPL applications within UCD, both for certificated and experiential learning. The document is arranged under the following headings:

1. What is RPL?
2. What are the possible outcomes of an RPL application?
3. Responsibilities and timelines
4. Assessing an RPL application
5. Useful resources

1. What is RPL?¹

In the principles and operational guidelines for the recognition of prior learning in further and higher education in Ireland (NQAI, 2005), 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”. (p. 2)

The key terms associated with RPL are:

- a. ‘prior’², i.e., learning outcomes already achieved; and
- b. ‘process’ i.e., the distinct stages of identification, assessment and certification.

RPL encompasses all forms of prior learning, including learning acquired by following a course of study (i.e., formal learning), learning acquired outside of the formal education system which may not lead to certification (i.e., non-formal learning) and learning acquired through experience.

RPL is used to gain:

- Admission to programmes where a person may not have obtained the standard admissions requirements; and
- Credit towards a programme of study so that an individual does not duplicate learning outcomes already acquired.

There are different means of assessment in place for RPL depending on the type of RPL an individual wishes to gain, for example, it can be dealt with by a Head of School or an Admissions Tutor who reviews previous certification and experience, or (in the case of experiential learning) it can involve an assessment of the individual against the learning outcomes associated with the relevant module, programme or qualification.³

2. What are the possible outcomes of an RPL application?

- a. Prior learning recognised for the purposes of admission to a programme: where an applicant does not meet the required admissions criteria as set down for a particular programme of study in UCD they may apply to be admitted based on prior learning, including experiential learning, or as a mature student.
- b. Prior learning recognised for the purposes of having credit transferred towards the requirements of the UCD programme of study.

Please note:

¹ In previous UCD academic policies, the terms ‘accreditation of prior certificated learning’, ‘accreditation of prior experiential learning’ and ‘internal credit transfer’ were used. ‘Recognition of Prior Learning’ embraces each of these terms.

² For exceptions to ‘prior’, please refer to item 3 below (‘Special Circumstances’).

³ Adapted From: The *University Sector Framework Implementation Network (FIN)*. (October 2011). *Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in the University Sector: Policies, case studies and issues arising*. P. 26 (Table 1).



Programme/Graduate School Boards are responsible for determining and publicising the possible outcomes of an RPL application for their programme(s), i.e.

- Is RPL accepted for admissions purposes only?
- Is RPL accepted for admissions and/or credit exemption?

3. Responsibilities and timelines

This section of the guide briefly summarises some aspects of the applicant's and Programme/Graduate School Board's responsibilities. The roles and responsibilities of the applicant, Programme/Graduate School Board, School, Programme/School Office and UCD Registry are outlined in full in Section 6 of the policy document, available at <http://www.ucd.ie/governance/resources/policypage-rplpolicy/>.

Applicants may apply to have prior learning recognised towards their UCD programme of study as part of their admissions application or after they have accepted a place on a programme of study. They are responsible for reading the policy and *RPL Guide for Applicants* and ensuring they understand any possible implications e.g. regarding professional accreditation.

Applicants must make an application for RPL:

- At the earliest possible time, preferably before they commence the relevant module/stage/programme or before the third week in the semester/term in which a module(s) is offered where their application relates to a particular module(s), and
- On the official University form, supplying all necessary supporting evidence and documentation.

Please note:

It is recommended that transfer applicants upload their RPL application to their online transfer application.

Special circumstances: exceptions to 'prior to first registration'

Normally, recognition of prior learning applications relate to learning achieved before a student first registers to their programme of study. However, there are some exceptions to this requirement and recognition of prior learning applications may be considered at the discretion of the relevant Programme/Graduate School Board under the following circumstances:

- a. Where a student is returning to their programme of study following time out (including, for example, a leave of absence⁴ or withdrawal⁵) and achieved learning outcomes during the period of leave of absence or while they were withdrawn, or
- b. Where a student has achieved learning outside their normal programme of study (e.g. at a summer school).
 - It is at the discretion of the relevant Programme/Graduate School Board whether to recognise such learning for credit towards the programme of study.
 - The same criteria apply to these applications as to all RPL requests.

The Programme/Graduate School Board acting on delegated authority decides on all recognition of prior learning applications and is responsible for ensuring the academic integrity of its programme(s). As required, the Board may delegate decision-making authority to Deans, Graduate School Directors and/or Standing Committees, but retains responsibility for oversight of all decisions.

The Board is also responsible for ensuring applicants are informed of the outcome or status of their application within four weeks of submitting it.

- Each Programme/Graduate School Board, subject to stipulated maximum amounts of credit and recommendations from the School, will determine the amount of credit an applicant may

⁴ A student returning to their programme following a leave of absence does not need to make an RPL application relating to work completed in UCD as part of their programme of study prior to their leave of absence period.

⁵ Where a student is seeking re-admission to the same programme of study following a period of withdrawal they do not need to make an RPL application relating to the work completed on this programme prior to their withdrawal as this is considered as part of the re-admission process (the *UCD Withdrawal Procedure* refers: https://sisweb.ucd.ie/usis!/W_HU_MENU.P_PUBLISH?p_tag=GD-DOCLAND&ID=130).



have recognised towards their programme based on an application for the recognition of prior learning. Please refer to item 5.4 ('Amount and types of credit') in the policy document.

- The amount of credit based on prior learning that an applicant may have recognised towards their UCD programme is determined by the Programme/Graduate School Board based on the UCD mapping of evidence that an applicant provides in their application against the published learning outcomes for the programme/modules.

Please note:

The University does not normally offer professional advice/counselling in the preparation of evidence/documentation except as agreed within individual programmes or within specified modules operated by the University. In such cases, it is the responsibility of the relevant Programme to provide written guidance notes to applicants.

4. Assessing an RPL application

This section is sub-divided into four sections:

1. General information
2. Principles and overarching questions
3. Assessing certificated learning applications
4. Assessing experiential learning applications

With regard to whether the application is for the purposes of admission and/or exemption, the process of assessing whether an applicant has achieved the required learning outcomes will be similar. Hence, the guide does not differentiate based on the possible outcome of the application but instead suggests key reference questions to support the assessment of applications.

4.1 General information

All recognition of prior learning decisions are made on the basis of academic judgement and criteria within a particular programme subject area. All decisions are based on an evaluation of the evidence an applicant provides in order to determine whether the prior learning demonstrated is equivalent to the learning 1/ as required for admissions, 2/ that would have been achieved by fulfilling all requirements of the UCD programme of study in UCD and 3/ to map the learning outcomes outlined in the application to the UCD programme of study.

- The **minimum amount of credit** that can be awarded is one module (e.g. five ECTS credits at undergraduate level or 2.5 ECTS credits at graduate level). Credit is not awarded for part of a module.
- Credit awarded for prior learning may only be applied to **taught programmes or to taught elements** of a research programme, not to research activity.⁶
- Specific or general credit may be granted. Wherever possible, specific credit should be allocated.
 - **Specific credit** is granted when the learning outcomes of the prior learning are equivalent to the learning outcomes of a current UCD module(s) and where the prior learning has not already been counted towards an award.
 - **General credit** is granted when the learning outcomes of the prior learning are relevant but not directly equivalent to modules in the relevant UCD programme and/or where credit associated with the learning outcomes has already counted towards an award.
- **Grading prior learning**
 - The grades associated with specific credit may be transferred directly, or with appropriate equivalencies mapped into the UCD academic record. All such grades will be recorded on the UCD transcript but will not normally be included in GPA calculations unless otherwise determined by the Programme/Graduate School Board.

⁶ One distinction between taught and research activities is that taught activity is awarded ECTS credits, while research activity is awarded nominal credits, with the exception of minor theses and dissertations on undergraduate and graduate taught programmes.



- General credit is awarded as a block of credit that contributes to the overall credit requirements of the programme. It does not carry a grade and may not be included in GPA calculations.
- With regard to prior UCD learning, where a module(s) is directly applicable or where the Programme Board has allowed a module(s) to transfer to the new programme, the module(s) and grade(s) will normally be mapped directly into the new programme and such grades will be used in relevant GPA calculations.⁷ A module will only be mapped where it has not already been counted towards an award. If it has already been counted towards an award, general credit must be awarded instead.
- A grade may only be associated with experiential learning where a UCD-set assessment has been completed by an applicant.

4.2 Principles and overarching questions

All decisions to recognise prior learning are based on evidence of the following principles and informed by answers to the questions included below:

- **Learning outcomes** rather than the learning experience is evaluated – there must be evidence of learning at the appropriate level.⁸
- **Relevance of learning outcomes** – how relevant is the learning to the particular programme and at what level was the learning achieved?
- **Equivalence of learning** – is the learning equivalent to the UCD credit to be granted?
- **Currency of learning outcomes** – how long has it been since the learning was achieved; what developments have taken place in the interim period that might mean the learning is no longer current and therefore credit exemption should not be allowed?
- **Professional accreditation concerns** – the School should advise both the applicant and the Programme/Graduate School Board if there are concerns or issues pertaining to accreditation that will effect either the application for prior learning or an applicant's ability to subsequently achieve compliance with professional requirements of relevant accrediting bodies.

In addition, the fact that certain modules may act as **pre-requisites** for other modules must also be taken into account in assessing applications.

4.3 Assessing certificated learning applications

In assessing **learning accredited at another Higher Education Institute**, the following information should be considered:

- Knowledge of the former institution.
- The previous academic record/transcript, including the name of the course or programme of study and NQAI level.
- Syllabus and course description, learning outcomes, number of contact hours, form of assessment(s). Where an application applies to a module(s), this information should be assessed for each module.
- Time elapsed since prior learning was achieved.
- Advances in the relevant field(s) of study.
- Does the learning relate to specific UCD modules?

In assessing applications relating to **learning previously accredited at UCD**, such applications are normally submitted as part of a transfer application where the modules do not automatically map to the programme a student is transferring into. Alternately, they may relate to UCD pre-modular achievement credits. In such cases, the following information should be considered:

- The official UCD transcript.
- Module/Course title, code and credit value.
- Grade/Mark awarded on completion of the module/course.

⁷ With regard to applications relating to UCD pre-modular achievement credits (e.g. where a former UCD student had completed part of a programme before 2006), the Programme Board will determine the credit block to be applied to the new programme and whether it is appropriate for this to be graded or grade point neutral and included in relevant GPA calculations.

⁸A useful tool here may be the *UCD Level Descriptors* document, which can be accessed at https://sisweb.ucd.ie/usis!/W_HU_MENU.P_PUBLISH?p_tag=GD-DOCLAND&ID=142.



- Time elapsed since prior learning was achieved.
- Advances in the relevant field(s) of study.
- Does the learning relate to specific UCD modules in the new programme?

4.4 Assessing experiential learning applications

Applicants are advised of a number of approaches to mapping and assessing prior experiential learning in order to demonstrate learning outcomes. They are asked to provide information according to the following areas:

- Future learning plan and the role of RPL in this.
 - What is your main reason for considering third level education now and how best would RPL contribute to this?
- Life/work experience, including experience and skills gained through volunteerism/care work.
- Education details: second level and any subsequent education and training courses undertaken, including work-related training
- Other achievements, including awards or prizes or publications.

They are further advised that they may also be required to do one or more of the following:

- i. Complete a portfolio of evidence,
- ii. Attend at an interview,
- iii. Undertake a simulation/practical exercise,
- iv. Undertake a diagnostic test(s),
- v. Complete a piece of work or special assignment,
- vi. Produce an artefact.

In assessing experiential learning applications, the following questions should be considered:

- How much experience does the applicant have and in what roles?
- What is their identified skill set?
- What evidence is provided? What information is provided through references?
- What training have they attended and when?
- What learning outcomes have been met based on their prior learning?
- How relevant is their experience to the UCD programme of study (including specific modules)?
- To what extent do their learning outcomes apply to the current UCD programme of study (including specific modules on the current curriculum)?
- Does the learning relate to specific UCD core/option/elective modules?
- What period of time has elapsed since the prior learning was achieved?
- What advances have been made in the relevant field(s) of study?

5. Useful resources

- Information on learning outcomes and levels of learning can be found in the *UCD Level Descriptors* document at https://sisweb.ucd.ie/usis/!W_HU_MENU.P_PUBLISH?p_tag=GD-DOCLAND&ID=142
- Information on module descriptors/programmes can be accessed at http://www.ucd.ie/students/course_search.htm.
- *Recognition of Prior Learning Academic Policy* available at <http://www.ucd.ie/governance/resources/policypage-rplpolicy/>
- *Recognition of Prior Learning Guide for Applicants* available at <http://www.ucd.ie/governance/resources/policypage-rplpolicy/>

