Appendix 2

National University of Ireland, Galway Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Policy and Practice[1]

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. NUI Galway recognises that knowledge and skills can be acquired from a range of learning experiences, including formal, non-formal and informal. This is in line with the National Qualifications Framework 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 in NUI Galway 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 University.

2. Context

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 RPL[2] . 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.

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[1] Further information on RPL in NUI Galway is available from:
http://nuigalway.ie/adulteducation/RPL/welcometorpl.html
[2] Government of Ireland, 1998, 2000; Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999

3. **Definitions**

Recognition of Prior Learning

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

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.

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.

Learning Routes

Prior Learning may have been acquired through **formal, non-formal or informal[3] routes**. For the purposes of this policy document these learning routes are defined as follows:

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[3] These definitions are widely accepted by EU, OECD, Cedefop, NCVA, HETAC, FETAC, etc.

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.

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.

Types of Credit

Specific Credit is granted where the learning outcomes achieved are deemed equivalent to the learning outcomes of a specific programme module

General Credit is granted when prior learning is not directly relevant but is deemed equivalent in level and credit weighting to modules in the proposed programme of study.

4. **Policy Principles**

The following principles will apply to the implementation of RPL within the University.

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

- RPL recognises learning which has occurred before admission to a course or to the relevant stage of a course.

- 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 University's RPL process will be on the achievement of learning, or the outcome of learning, rather than the experience of learning.

- Prior *certified* learning may entitle the candidate to exemptions on a programme, not credits. Learning which has been previously accredited is not ascribed credit on a second occasion.

- Exemptions or credits for prior *experiential* (non-certified) learning may be awarded on the basis of demonstrated learning which shows that a candidate has achieved specified learning outcomes for the programme.

- Time limits may be applied in assessing/evaluating the currency of prior learning.

- Recognition will normally be given :

    o For complete modules only;

    o Where all of the learning outcomes of a module have been achieved;

    o Up to a maximum of 50% of the total credits for an academic programme;

    Candidates will normally be allowed exemption for entire modules only, not parts of them. Exceptions may be made when the module is composed of clearly distinguishable and distinct parts, for example theory + practicals.

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

- Participation in the RPL process is voluntary for applicants and will be facilitated by the University.

- Processes and practices for RPL will be clearly stated and documented and available to all potential applicants.

- In the RPL process candidates will demonstrate the appropriate academic level of learning as determined by the academic unit involved.

- During assessment for RPL, candidates must demonstrate that they understand the theory as well as the practical learning elements of a module.

- The University will ensure that the RPL process shall be consistent, fair and transparent. It will be conducted within a reasonable timeframe for each applicant.

5. The Practice

Presentation of Learning for Evaluation: The Learning Portfolio

Responsibility for submitting claims for the recognition of prior learning rests with individual applicants. Applicants will normally have an initial consultation with a dedicated RPL Advisor who will provide information and advice about the process and who will explain the steps involved in making an application.

The mechanism proposed by the University 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.

(A) Prior Certified Learning

In the Certified Learning Portfolio, evidence of learning will be presented by the applicant in the form of official transcripts of results and formal syllabi accompanied by relevant support documents.

(B) Prior Experiential Learning

In the Experiential Learning Portfolio, the applicant will present evidence of learning, arranged to demonstrate the achievement of learning outcomes of the relevant programme module. Where experiential learning is concerned a number of methods can be used to demonstrate the achievement of learning outcomes. These may include: written evidence, a formal presentation, an interview, performance of set tasks or combinations of these. Experiential Learning may include both informal and non-formal learning.

Evaluation of Prior Certified Learning by the University

Evaluation of prior certified learning will be carried out by persons who are trained and competent. Recognition of prior certified learning is subject to evaluation of the following: student's academic record; course/programme of study; syllabus, course description, learning outcomes, number of contact hours, forms of assessment(s); NQAI level of qualification awarded and awarding institution.

Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning by the University

Assessment of prior experiential learning will be carried out by persons who are trained and competent – ideally those who are or have been involved in the conventional assessment process for the subject(s)/module(s) in question.

The use of a range of assessment mechanisms will be facilitated. These will be appropriate to the module content and comparable to other assessment processes used to determine whether learning outcomes have been achieved. Assessment may be based on the portfolio submitted or other methods such as written exams, essays, assignments, multiple choice questionnaires, oral presentations etc, which may be used as appropriate. In general, the assessment will be based on an evaluation of the prior learning presented. Evidence submitted by an applicant will be available for review by the External Examiner.

Assessors and other persons involved in the recognition process will be given training and support as appropriate.

Criteria for Assessment

The following key criteria will be used by staff 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?

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 the University; advanced academic standing within a programme of study; exemptions or credits if the required standards of learning have been met.

Validation

All RPL decisions must be validated by the appropriate Academic Unit and signed off by the relevant College which will advise the Admissions Office of all RPL recommendations and decisions.

Communication

All prospective applicants and enrolled students will be made aware of RPL opportunities in programme literature and on the University's website. Applicants will be fully 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 University, of the outcome of the RPL assessment process.

6. **The 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 to the University for assessment by the relevant academic unit.

    5. The outcome of the assessment process will be verified by the relevant University Board/Committee and communicated to the Admissions Office 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.

7. **Review and Updating**

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