

How to Establish and Operate an RPL Centre at a University?

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Introduction

This report is the result of the project labelled “University Recognition of Prior Learning Centres – Bridging Higher Education with Vocational Education and Training” carried out in the framework of the Leonardo da Vinci Transfer of Innovation programme. The project was carried out in 2011-2013 by the Jagiellonian University (Poland), Université Paris-Est Créteil Val de Marne (France), Edinburgh Napier University (Great Britain) and the Institut za Rozvoj Obrazovanja (Croatia).

The aim of the project was the transfer of innovation – solutions for the recognition of learning outcomes acquired outside formal education (Recognition of Prior Learning, RPL) – from countries with a long tradition and mature RPL systems (France, Great Britain) to countries that only begin to develop solutions in this area (Poland, Croatia).

This report aims at presenting the major elements necessary to establish an RPL centre at a university, collected and compiled based on research conducted as part of the project and the experience of the functioning of various RPL systems in different countries and universities¹. Its main target audience are representatives of higher education institutions and their supervisory bodies.

1 The studies we have used have been listed at the end of this publication.

The key assumptions of RPL in higher education

The service of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) involve not only confirming competence. This is also part of the process of education and learning. Participants in such a process learn to run self-assessment and receive guidance on how to further develop their competences.

In order to successfully start the RPL process, a university must understand and apply the following assumptions:

- There is no difference between specific learning outcomes achieved in and outside of university. RPL is an important method of recognizing the effects of learning, regardless of the context in which the learning took place.
- The processes, procedures, practices and all decisions regarding RPL at a university should be fair, clear, reliable and available to everyone interested.
- RPL is a voluntary process, focused on the learner (Candidate). The Candidate should receive guidance and support in the process of RPL, both before submission and during the assessment of the evidence of prior learning.
- The RPL evaluation process must be course to the same quality assurance systems as any other form of services/activities carried out at a university.
- Assessment methods used in RPL must in their standard and rigour be equivalent to all other methods applied at a university, while remaining consistent with the course of the assessment (learning outcomes).
- The obligation to prepare evidence of learning outcomes lies with the Candidate.

RPL as a new education service at universities

To be able to run an effective RPL process, universities establish divisions in their structures, responsible for RPL procedures. These divisions have different names, depending on their functions and the origins of their creation within university structures, but they do share a common purpose: implementation of RPL processes. Such centres often serve as Lifelong Learning (LLL) facilities, whose tasks include the conduct of RPL procedures.

The main goal of educational services in the field of RPL is to determine on the basis of clear evidence and under clear procedures, whether and to what extent an adult, who has not completed formal education, mastered the specific effects of learning characteristic of the specific process of formal education. These effects may relate to different programmes, modules and fields of study carried out at the university.

The experience of other countries shows that RPL Centres are the result of decisions taken by university authorities or the projects implemented in relation to LLL and RPL. The main reason why universities create RPL centres is the fact that delegating the coordination of RPL processes to a single separate unit makes it easier to manage the support of these processes throughout the entire university. It is also important to create appropriate conditions for managing the process of quality assurance in RPL services in the university's internal systems.

A university willing to create an RPL centre in its structure must:

- Hire/redirect administrative staff with the right skills to work in the centre
- Incorporate the recognition process into the university's quality assurance policy
- Recruit specialists from different fields among the academic personnel and train them: all areas of learning, where the university wants to pursue RPL procedures must have assigned assessors
- Provide professional advisors on professional/educational balance, who would help prepare a portfolio and identify the areas of convergence between the effects acquired outside the university and those acquired during the educational process inside it
- Provide complete and comprehensive information on RPL opportunities at the university

RPL procedures

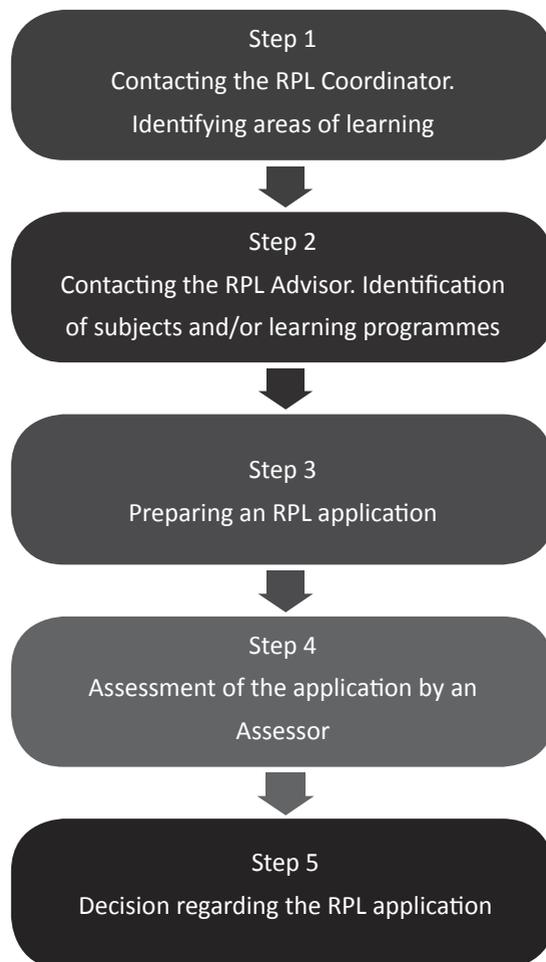
The process of founding an RPL Centre should start by developing RPL procedures that are optimal for the university. These procedures must be in accordance with the university's internal standards as well as the applicable national law. They should also take into account the principles set out in the recommendations of the Council of Europe.

Procedures govern the course of the whole RPL process, ensuring its quality

and compliance with legal regulations, which guarantees reliability and credibility for people applying for the recognition of their learning outcomes. They should also be reviewed continuously (e.g. annually) and improved if necessary in order to adjust to the changing environmental conditions and regulations, especially those regarding the quality of educational services in higher education.

The RPL process at a university starts when an Candidate is able to obtain advice regarding the preparation of an application for the recognition of their prior learning. This is followed by the application process, evaluation phase, and finally, a decision is taken.

Figure 1: Five steps of RPL at a university



After finding out that they have already achieved valuable learning outcomes that they wish to confirm formally, the Candidate should be able to contact the university's RPL centre in person, by email or by phone.

Depending on needs and the number of Candidates, each university may have a different way of organizing the process of Candidate preparation in their approach to RPL procedures. Due to the fact that RPL should have a formative nature that would also allow the Candidate to learn during the procedure, Candidates should receive support across the stage of its duration. Before applying for RPL, the Candidate may (depending on the rules of the institution) acquire personal guidance or take part in a course preparing for the procedure.

The first way is usually based on individual meetings with an RPL advisor, giving the opportunity for personal contact, focusing solely on the particular Candidate's case. However, this method is very costly and time-consuming. Therefore in many universities, Candidates are asked prior to the procedure, to attend courses or workshops organized in group classes, aimed at preparing Candidates to apply for RPL. This method allows reduce the cost of RPL procedures. Due to the workshop nature of the classes, it allows for the interaction between Candidates and RPL advisors who usually run the process. Candidate may choose the form of implementation of the first stage of the procedure. They must, however, be aware of the necessity to bear the adequate expenses.

At this stage, the Candidate should give further consideration to their previous career path and non-formal education in terms of learning outcomes. They should also understand what evidence to provide to confirm said outcomes.

Candidate should be given the opportunity to consult the list of courses, modules, and study courses offered by the institution as well as a list of learning outcomes. They should receive support in order to clearly identify the education programmes (for study courses at a particular level and with specific learning profile) or courses/modules, for which, in the Candidate's opinion, the expected learning outcomes are consistent with the outcomes they had obtained as a result of prior learning at work or by other experience. While doing that, the Candidate should be assisted by an RPL Advisor, who will determine the courses/modules for which the Candidate should apply for RPL. After final identification of specific courses/modules of learning, for which the expected learning outcomes are consistent with those acquired by the Candidate, and for the recognition of which they will apply, the RPL Advisor shall appoint an Assessor (Assessors), whose area

of expertise allows for the evaluation of the RPL application. It is also the duty of the RPL Advisor to contact the Assessor and determine what form of evidence the Assessor requires. In some cases, it may only be a portfolio containing a set of documents, while in others the Assessor may request a presentation, a written assignment, or running an oral exam.

The Candidate should individually adjust the identified learning outcomes acquired outside formal education to programmes/courses/modules in the university's offer that are the most suitable in terms of the learning outcomes they develop. The number of items that an Candidate may apply for shall depend on the scope of prior learning, resulting from experience, professional work, training received etc. and the limitations of the laws in force at the institution or in the country.

Assessment process

The understanding of the RPL assessment should be holistic. This means that the evaluation of Candidate performance cannot merely be a technical, automated process of document assessment.

The assessment of learning outcomes acquired outside the formal education system should:

- Be centred on the learner and focused on their development. This rating is not intended to point out what the learner does not know, but has to be aimed at planning their further development path
- Be understood as a part of a holistic process of lifelong learning and be conducted in a manner that promotes dignity, trust and educational opportunities
- Promote flexibility in the choice of assessment methods adequate to the Candidate's experience and the specific of the evaluated outcomes as well as situation assessment

Each university should have a purpose-designed RPL application form, Candidate's guide and guidelines and evaluation forms for assessors. These documents may be prepared individually by each institution as well as shared for the whole country. The application should be prepared by the Candidate in electronic form. The university should make request forms available in the

form of open files that Candidates can easily edit, thus showing their learning outcomes, or in the form of online forms. The Candidate would usually send the completed application to the RPL Advisor. The form, in which the application is submitted (print, electronic version), should be adjusted to the rules in force at the university.

Work on preparing the application and gathering all the necessary evidence can be time-consuming. Candidates should be able to adjust the length of the process to their own capabilities, professional work and family responsibilities. Therefore, there should be no rigid formal deadlines on the time the Candidate is given to prepare their application and gather the necessary evidence. The principle of the RPL process is that the initiative to prepare and submit an application is always on the side of the Candidate. It is also up to them whether the process is completed or not. The responsibility for the completion of an agreed process of outcome evaluation (e.g. providing evidence of prior learning, writing a paper presenting the learner's self-reflection in relation to the learning outcomes acquired outside formal education, participating in an assessment interview/exam), lies with the Candidate. In different countries, due to the different rules in force on RPL, the process can be course to certain rigidities relating to deadlines, e.g. in certain stages of the procedure or in case of payments. If the Candidate is applying for the recognition of a section of the studies they wish to start, the RPL procedure must be completed before the course starts – in such case, the procedure and schedule must be adapted to the rules in place. Furthermore, there is a need to adapt to general university schedules, such as the organization of the academic year or the study plan.

Methods for assessing applications

There are different methods for assessing applications by RPL Assessors. These methods (consisting of one or more stages) should be appropriate to the nature of the learning outcomes, for which the Candidate requires recognition. The RPL Assessor should not be involved in the preparation of the RPL application. They must also not be in a conflict of interest with the Candidate (e.g. the assessor cannot be the Candidate's employer, family member or former promoter). The RPL Assessor is a member of the teaching staff, familiar with the program or course, to which the application relates, and understands the level of knowledge

and understanding as well as the kind of skills that are required in a given module of students assessed in the conventional manner. As a result, Candidates joining the RPL process can rest assured that every ECTS point awarded will be at the same level and will have the same status in the curriculum, as for every other student.

To ensure the impartiality of the process and compliance with the university requirements in terms of quality assurance, the RPL Advisor and Assessor shall not cooperate in the implementation of procedures for RPL application assessment. The evaluation of a single application typically requires only one RPL Assessor; however, if the Candidate's application relates to more than one major area of expertise, more RPL Assessors may be involved. As with other types of teaching at a university and the evaluation of learning outcomes carried out in its framework, the RPL Assessor should be autonomous in their assessment. They may also ask the Candidate to provide additional evidence to support their claims, e.g. ask the Candidate to take part in an oral or written exam. Upon completion of the assessment of an Candidate's RPL application, the Assessor shall forward their decision to the RPL Coordinator, who is responsible for the formal process of Recognition of Prior Learning. In the event of not recognizing the proof confirming learning outcomes or stating that its level is insufficient, the Candidate should receive clear feedback from the Assessor as to why they have been rejected, or what they need to learn in order to confirm the acquisition of the particular learning outcome.

The evaluation process is complete with a decision on equivalence of learning outcomes acquired by the Candidate outside formal education with the ones acquired by a student who has completed a specific course, module or programme. As a result, it means assigning a certain number of ECTS points at a specific level of NQF and study profile (academic/professional). The equivalence of learning outcomes should be considered in relation to all learning outcomes (in terms of knowledge, skills and social skills) for each course/module. Once the Candidate's application has been evaluated, the RPL Assessor shall inform the RPL Coordinator. The RPL Coordinator forwards the positively assessed applications to the RPL Committee for approval and makes sure that the Candidate has been notified in writing.

Once approved by the RPL Committee, the confirmed effects of prior learning relating to specific courses/training programmes shall be included in

the process of obtaining a degree by the learner (provided the RPL procedure was intended to recognize some of the courses in the programme of studies). As a result of positive assessment, the Candidate should receive an official letter confirming the recognition of prior learning in reference to specific courses/modules offered by the university, complete with information on the number of ECTS points obtained and the NQF level to which they are assigned.

RPL process – organization and main roles

The roles in the RPL process can be divided into those of an administrative nature (RPL Coordinator, RPL Committee), advisory (RPL Advisor) and scientific/educational (Assessor). Depending on the rules in force at a university, the RPL procedure may be more centralized; in such case, Coordinators and Advisors would work in an RPL Centre; or it can be decentralized – in which case, advisory functions as well as assessments are carried out in faculties or institutes. Depending on the university's needs, a decision must be taken to locate the unit (units) responsible for RPL processes somewhere within the organizational structure. This unit may be located at the central level of the university and report directly to e.g. to bodies responsible for the teaching process. The RPL Centre may be part of a larger structure, such as one responsible for Lifelong Learning (LLL Centre).

- RPL Coordinator – an administrative worker coordinating the support of RPL procedures. They are the first point of contact for RPL Candidates, and are responsible for informing Candidates of their RPL opportunities and directing them to the appropriate RPL Advisor.
- RPL Advisor – an expert in the area, in which the Candidate wishes to apply for RPL. They may be a member of academic staff, or employee of administrative detail, knowing the ins and outs of the educational programmes and the requirements for each course. They have the ability to take stock of the educational and professional development. An RPL Advisor assists the Candidate in the preparation of their application for assessment and forwards the application to the appropriate Assessor.
- RPL Assessor – a specialist in a given area and a member of academic staff. They are not usually involved in the Candidate's preparation of the RPL application. The RPL Assessor evaluates the Candidate's application, which

is submitted in the form of a written essay, practical work, oral presentation or other adequate form to prove the achievement of particular learning outcomes. They also suggest the number of ECTS points assigned and the NQF level, at which the outcomes have been achieved.

- RPL Committee – a body functioning at the central level of the university, appointed by the Rector. It is composed of representatives of various Faculties, where RPL procedures are carried out, the RPL Coordinator and possibly other people appointed by the university. The RPL Committee has competence appropriate to the certification body. It formally approves the results of RPL assessment, ensures the correctness of selection of Assessors and the adaptation of procedures to the existing RPL quality assurance system. RPL Committees have been appointed by the Council of Faculties to approve RPL assessment processes. To this end, the Candidates' RPL requests that have been assessed positively by the Assessor should be forwarded to the RPL Committee by the RPL Coordinator. The RPL Committee is convened by the RPL Coordinator.

Competences of RPL staff

Appropriately trained, competent personnel is crucial to RPL procedures at a university. At an early stage of the existence of an RPL Centre and introduction of RPL procedures at a university, activity should be focused on training RPL Champions, academic staff who would act as ambassadors promoting the idea in an academic community.

RPL Champion is:

- Able to influence decision-makers at faculties/institutes and persuade them to adopt RPL
- Credible in the eyes of the academic community, has a reputation

Employees involved in RPL processes should have a good knowledge of the curriculum, learning outcomes, qualification frameworks and the specifics of various professional competences (Coordinator, Advisor) as well as expertise in a given field (Assessor). Social skills are extremely important, especially in communication, teamwork, collaboration with various stakeholders. It is also important to ensure their independence and impartiality.

The RPL Centre staff must have knowledge of quality assurance systems, with regard to educational processes and recognition of qualifications, as well as supporting specific recipients of RPL services. Those involved in the process of advising RPL Candidates (Coordinators, Advisors) must also have the ability to prepare Candidates for the procedure, including an understanding of how non-formal and informal learning outcomes may correspond to formal learning outcomes at a university. Both the Coordinator and the Advisor should also have knowledge of career counselling and compilation of educational/professional balance that allows them to better recognize the range of learning outcomes obtainable in the specific professional environment or through other life experiences, and indicate adequate training modules or programmes at the university.

RPL Advisor shall in particular:

- Have knowledge and experience to carry out RPL processes in the context of the university
- Have the skills and personality traits that help support Candidates throughout the process
- Be able to support Candidates in identifying their prior learning in various contexts and help them to identify specific learning outcomes they have achieved
- Help Candidates to recognize their past achievements, whether obtained by informal or non-formal education

Training of Assessors is essential. The knowledge and teaching experience arising from work at the university are not enough, because in case of RPL evaluation, assessors must compare and evaluate the evidence of learning that comes from a diversity of experience of the Candidate.

Quality assurance

Ensuring the quality of RPL is crucial to the consistency, transparency and accessibility of the process. The university should include a plan for quality assurance in its internal quality system in place in the institution.

A crucial element of quality assurance procedures is to establish a clear policy of assessment. The evaluation policy:

- Provides the framework, within which the Assessors work and the procedures of application assessment are carried out
- Provides a unified understanding of terms, goals and results of the evaluation
- Ensures consistency in the evaluation process by promoting the principles of validity, honesty, reliability and flexibility
- Defines the roles and responsibilities of key stakeholders in the evaluation process

It is important to pay attention to:

- Appropriate information activities on assessment policies, aimed at all staff involved in the process
- Ensuring that documentation of the assessment policy is understandable and accessible to all employees, as well as to Candidates
- Carry out monitoring and evaluation regularly, even if after the assessment policy has already been implemented

Universities should also accumulate databases including information about the submitted applications and the results of evaluation. This will allow for the monitoring and evaluation in the process of continuous improvement of RPL procedures at the university.

Information policy and the use of technology

An appropriate information policy on RPL is very important for effective communication with Candidates. Therefore, while creating an RPL Centre at a university, special attention should be paid to the preparation and sharing of information, especially through the use of web pages.

A good website that provides complete information can be very helpful in the process of distributing information, forms and other important information about the performance of the procedures at the university.

A good RPL Centre website should:

- give the possibility to obtain complete information on the course of RPL procedures, including the evaluation process, include full reviewed information, and familiarize Candidates in a transparent manner with the process and its costs
- present case studies, based on which the Candidate may learn more about the challenges facing those applying for RPL
- provide the opportunity to remotely arrange individual meetings with an RPL Advisor or a teleconference (e.g. via Skype)
- enable electronic filing of applications
- distribute information about the preparatory courses and provide the opportunity to register for the course electronically

Furthermore, the employees of RPL Centres can run blogs, including video blogs that allow everyone interested to learn about the experiences of people who have undergone RPL procedures. Based on that, those interested can understand what issues to expect and be prepared to participate in the procedure. It is also worth noting the activity in social media such as Twitter, Facebook, which allow reaching a wide range of potential Candidates.

In order to minimize the operating costs of RPL Centres as much as possible, using latest technology is also recommended. The flow of documents during the application and evaluation processes should be electronic, which may both improve its speed and reduce costs.

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