

Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning in Further and Higher Education and Training

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Principles

Introduction

This paper sets out the principles and operational guidelines for the recognition of prior learning in further and higher education and training established by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland following consultation with stakeholders.

Background

The National Framework of Qualifications forms the basis of a new, more flexible and integrated system of qualifications. The need for such a system arises in the main from the national objective of moving towards a ‘lifelong learning society’, in which learners will be enabled to take up learning opportunities at chosen stages throughout their lives.

The National Framework of Qualifications was launched in October 2003 with the publication of three documents setting out policies, criteria, procedures and determinations relating to the Framework and the linked objective of enhancing access, transfer and progression for learners. These documents are as follows:

- Determinations for the Outline National Framework of Qualifications
- Policies and Criteria for the Establishment of the National Framework of Qualifications
- Policies, Actions and Procedures for Access, Transfer and Progression for Learners

In addition, an overview of the Framework was published at that time.

The concept of lifelong learning indicates that learning should encompass the whole spectrum of formal, non-formal and informal learning. Learning occurs in many contexts that 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 or when in life it is achieved. A major objective of the National Framework of Qualifications is to recognise all learning achievements. It aims to do this by supporting the development of alternative pathways to qualifications (or awards) and by promoting the recognition of prior learning.¹

Recognition is a process by which prior learning is given a value. It is a means by which prior learning is formally identified, assessed and acknowledged. This makes it possible for an individual to build on learning achieved and be formally rewarded for it. The term ‘prior learning’ is learning that has taken place, but not necessarily been assessed or measured, prior to entering a programme or seeking an award. Prior learning may have been acquired through formal, non-formal, or informal routes.

The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland has set out the purposes of the recognition of prior learning in the Policies, Actions and Procedures for Access, Transfer and Progression for Learners:

- entry to a programme leading to an award
- credit towards an award or exemption from some programme requirements
- eligibility for a full award

¹ For the purposes of this paper, 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, more recently Learning Outside Formal Teaching (LOFT).

In addition, the recognition of prior learning can also be directly relevant in terms of facilitating employment. While there is not necessarily a direct link with qualifications in such recognition, this is a very important dimension to the recognition of prior learning.

For the purposes of developing a national approach to the recognition of prior learning, prior learning encompasses:²

1. **formal learning** which takes place through programmes of study or training that are delivered by education or training providers, and which attract awards.
2. **non-formal learning** that takes place alongside the mainstream systems of education and training. It may be assessed but does not normally lead to formal certification. Examples of non-formal learning are: learning and training activities undertaken in the workplace, voluntary sector or trade union and in community-based learning.
3. **informal learning** that takes place through life and work experience. (And is sometimes referred to as experiential learning.) Often, it is learning that is unintentional and the learner may not recognise at the time of the experience that it contributed to his or her knowledge, skills and competences.

It is a policy of the Qualifications Authority to promote the co-ordination and harmonisation of processes for the recognition of prior learning on the part of education providers and awarding bodies. It sees the development of national principles and operational guidelines as a first step in this direction. There are a number and a variety of different approaches to the recognition of prior learning on the part of education providers, awarding bodies, in the workplace and elsewhere. In Ireland, a number of universities, the Dublin Institute of Technology, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council the Further

² Adapted from: Commission of European Union, 2000, *Memorandum of Lifelong Learning*, Commission Staff working Paper, Brussels

Education Training and Awards Council, Institutes of Technology and private providers have policies and procedures, or are in the process of drafting these, on the recognition of prior learning. In European Union, a set of common principles regarding recognition of non-formal and informal learning with the aim of ensuring greater comparability between approaches in different countries and at different levels has been developed.³ A number of countries have developed principles for the recognition of prior learning, such as Australia, New Zealand and Canada as well as many European states (France, Norway, Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands). In addition, states such as France have created individual rights backed by legislation to the recognition of prior learning while others evidence ‘bottom-up’ approaches where local training centres and workplace initiatives have been developed.

Rationale for a national approach to the recognition of prior learning

The principles are intended to encourage the development and expansion of processes for the recognition of prior learning by education and training providers and awarding bodies so that they may:

- communicate their commitment to the recognition of prior learning
- bring coherence and consistency to the recognition of prior learning
- remove difficulties that may confront an applicant wishing to transfer within and between the different education and training sectors.

A national approach builds on and takes account of developments already taking place both nationally and internationally: many awarding bodies are, or have been, actively developing their own policies and practices, thus there is a need to develop a national approach to ensure coherence and widespread acceptance of the outcomes of recognition. The intention is that these principles will be built on to develop operational guidelines which will be an exemplar of the nature of arrangements that further and higher education and training bodies (the Further Education and Training Awards Council, The Higher Education and Training

³ These principles are set out under the following main headings: individual entitlements; obligations of stakeholders; confidence and trust; and, credibility and legitimacy.

Awards Council, the universities and the Dublin Institute of Technology) should consider putting in place.

Benefits of developing principles for the recognition of prior learning

Recognition of prior learning should meet the needs of learners. Recognition of prior learning can support the socially inclusive purposes of further and higher education and training, in that it facilitates entry to programmes, gives credit to or exemptions from a programme of study or access to a full award. Recognition of prior learning can address the needs of disadvantaged groups, part-time students and mature students, and can have a positive impact on retention of students. In addition, recognition of prior learning gives opportunities to providers of education and awarding bodies to use their assessment capability to up-skill individuals and meet workforce needs at local and national levels. Recognition of prior learning can bring benefits to the workplace by enhancing worker's employability and a better matching of skills demand and supply.

Recognition of prior learning can assist in supporting staff development within organisations by increasing staff motivation to undertake appropriate education or training. It can reduce the amount of time required to acquire a qualification.

Use of the term *Applicant*

In developing these principles, it is recognised that the terms *learner* and *applicant* are interchangeable. The term *applicant* will be used throughout to reflect the fact that an individual is applying to have his or her prior learning assessed or recognised. *Learner* will be used where it is more specifically appropriate, as in lifelong learner.

Principles for the recognition of prior learning

The principles for the recognition of prior learning are addressed to education and training providers, awarding bodies, and those in the workplace. The principles are available to those who are developing systems of recognition of prior learning and to those who wish to make use of the prior learning that has been recognised by other providers or awarding bodies.

General

- The recognition of prior learning will give value to all learning, no matter how that learning is achieved.
- Participation in recognition is a voluntary matter for the individual.
- The recognition of prior learning will be part of an inclusive approach to learning by education and training providers and awarding bodies.
- Recognition of prior learning will provide opportunities for access, transfer and progression to education and training and for the achievement of an award.
- Recognition of prior learning will provide opportunities for learners to participate on an active basis in society in general and within a workplace context.

Quality

- Recognition of prior learning should be fully embedded within the quality assurance procedures of providers and awarding bodies.
- Recognition of prior learning should maintain the standards of the National Framework of Qualifications and its awards.
- Processes for the recognition of prior learning should be credible to all stakeholders.
- The outcomes-based approach of the National Framework of Qualifications supports the attainment of awards through diverse routes, including the recognition of prior learning, and such recognition of prior

learning will maintain and support the standards associated with the National Framework of Qualifications and its awards.

Communication/documentation

- A clear statement of the policies, processes and practices of the education and training providers and awarding bodies for the recognition of prior learning should be available to all users.
- Processes and practices for the recognition of prior learning should be clearly documented.
- Processes and practices for the recognition of prior learning should be communicated openly and clearly to all. (Applicants, education and training staff and assessors).

Assessment

- Assessment criteria for the recognition of prior learning should be published, made explicit 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 the relevant awarding bodies.
- Assessment and verification mechanisms for the recognition of prior learning should be appropriate and fit for purpose.

Process

- Guidance and support should be available for applicants and all involved in the processes of recognition of prior learning.
- An appropriate appeals mechanism should be in place.
- Recognition of prior learning processes should be easy to understand, fair and transparent, and be conducted in a reasonable time frame.
- The recognition of prior learning processes should be organised in such a way that they do not create barriers for the applicant.
- Appropriate resources to support the processes for the recognition of prior learning should be in place.

Operational Guidelines

Introduction

These operational guidelines build upon the principles above. The Authority considers that in developing a policy and approach to promoting co-ordination and harmonisation of the processes for the Recognition of Prior Learning, it is helpful and appropriate for the Authority to develop operational guidelines for further and higher education and training awarding bodies and providers. The intention is that these guidelines will give an exemplar of the nature of the arrangements that further and higher education and training awarding bodies and providers (the Further Education and Training Awards Council, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council, the universities and the Dublin Institute of Technology, referred to in these guidelines as the further and higher education and training awarding bodies) should consider putting in place.

In so doing, the Authority is building on the approach set out in the Policies, Actions and Procedures for Access, Transfer and Progression for Learners that it published in October 2003.

Awards Councils

In its policies, actions and procedures, the Authority noted the particular role of the awards Councils and set out that:

“while the Authority has an overall role in developing the policy approach to access, transfer and progression, the Councils have the key

facilitatory and, indeed, regulatory role in ensuring that the policies of the Authority are appropriately developed, and that the procedures set by the Authority are implemented by providers (both providers with programmes leading to [or to lead to,] the awards of the Councils and providers with delegated authority to make awards). While the Councils do not have a role in programme provision, in terms of either development or support, it is their role to ensure that the procedures of the Authority in relation to access, transfer and progression are implemented by providers and to do so, in part, through their approaches to performing their functions in relation to validation and delegation.

“Arising out of these statutory roles and responsibilities, actions and procedures have been defined to elaborate the part to be played by the awards Councils in implementing each of the policies of the Authority for the promotion and facilitation of access, transfer and progression.”

The awards Councils have a unique responsibility in relation to the recognition of prior learning in that they have a statutory function to make awards to persons who apply and who, in the opinion of the Council, have achieved the relevant learning outcomes. It is thus possible for a learner to achieve an award without participation in a specific programme. It is open to the Councils to seek the assistance of a provider in confirming that the necessary learning outcomes have been achieved before an award is made in this way. Indeed, the Higher

Education and Training Awards Council has now commenced the implementation of this statutory provision.

In the drafting of these guidelines, the Authority is requesting that the Councils would develop policies and procedures for themselves and for the providers with programmes leading to, or to lead to, their awards or delegated authority to make awards in a manner consistent with the national approach set out in these guidelines.

Providers of Further and Higher Education and Training

In its policies, actions and procedures, the Authority noted the particular role of providers of further and higher education and training and set out that:

“Under the terms of the Qualifications Act and under their own legislation and charters, providers of further and higher education and training generally have their own rights and responsibilities. Providers, such as those who will have programmes validated by either of the two Councils or with authority delegated by either of the two Councils to make awards themselves, as well as other providers with independent awarding powers, such as the universities and the Dublin Institute of Technology, all have essential roles to play in meeting the objectives of the Act. It is important that the arrangements put in place in the national framework of qualifications and in related matters facilitate the involvement of all of these providers in attaining the objectives of the Qualifications Act.”

“A key function of the Authority is to determine procedures for the promotion and facilitation of access, transfer and progression to be implemented by providers of programmes of education or training. Some of the policies set out below require a process of development before the Authority can fully establish procedures through which they will be implemented. However, a range of procedures have been formulated by the Authority at this stage to complement the effectiveness of the framework. These are to be implemented in the short term by providers: they are outlined in the following sections of this document. It should be noted that these procedures may impact on providers to varying extents, as the providers are diverse in nature, in their status as awarding bodies, and in their relationship to the awards Councils.”

In the drafting of these guidelines, the Authority is requesting that, providers with independent awarding powers, such as the universities and the Dublin Institute of Technology would consider these guidelines in the context of the development of their own procedures. In relation to providers who have programmes validated by either of the two Councils, or with authority delegated by either of the two Councils to make awards themselves, it is the intention that the policies and procedures developed by the Councils will be consistent with the guidelines.

In the case of all of these providers it is of note that the procedures established by the Authority for implementation by providers of further and higher education and training set out that:

The Authority considers that it is appropriate to determine interim procedures for providers prior to the implementation of a national approach to credit. These procedures relate to the specification of arrangements for the recognition of prior learning by providers of education and training programmes leading to [, or to lead to,] awards. These are as follows:

- all providers are required to develop a statement of arrangements available in respect of each of their programmes for the recognition of prior learning, for entry, for credit towards an award and for access to a full award. These statements should define the purposes for which recognition of prior learning processes can be used, ie., to enable entry to the programme; to provide exemption from programme requirements or credit towards an award; or to establish eligibility for a full award. Where the recognition of prior learning is used to enable entry to a programme, the statement of arrangements available should indicate to learners the competences needed to succeed on the programme*
- in relation to providers whose programmes are validated by the Councils or who have been delegated authority by a Council to make awards, this statement of arrangements must be consistent with the policies and procedures of the relevant Council.*

It is a statutory requirement that providers who have programmes validated by either of the two Councils or with authority delegated by either of the two

Councils to make awards themselves, as well as the Dublin Institute of Technology, implement the Authority's procedures. on access, transfer and progression. In addition, the implementation of these arrangements by the universities is to be reviewed by the Authority.

Elements in Guidelines

It is suggested that further and higher education and training awarding bodies and providers would each develop policies and procedures for recognition of prior learning which would each have the following elements:

- Review and updating
- Operational approaches
- Assessment
- Applicants
- Communications

Breakdown of Elements

Review and updating

- Each further and higher education and training awarding body will review and update the policies and procedures that it has in place for the recognition of prior learning following the publication of these guidelines

and each body will review its policies and procedures on a regular basis in the future.

Operational approaches

- The units, modules, programmes and awards that can be achieved on the basis of recognition of prior learning should be identified.
- Where any limits are put in place on the proportion of learning that can be recognised as prior learning, these should be explicitly stated. (In the case of direct applicants, the awards Councils cannot put in place any such limits for their awards)
- The roles and responsibilities of those involved in the process should be clearly set out, for example, the applicant, the assessor, and any other persons or boards/committees involved in recognition processes.
- Process should ensure that, where possible, the applicant can complete the recognition process in a shorter time than it would take to achieve the relevant unit, module, programme or award.
- Collaboration across sectors and between awarding bodies, providers and stakeholders should be encouraged.

Assessment

- Assessment of prior learning should be carried out by persons who are competent.
- Assessors and other persons involved in the recognition process should be given training and support as appropriate.
- The development and use of a range of assessment mechanisms should be encouraged. These should be proportionate to the task and comparable to other assessment processes used to determine whether learning outcomes have been achieved.

Applicants

- Applicants should 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 the recognition of prior learning, including the learning outcomes against which prior learning will be assessed.
- The availability of guidance and support to applicants in the submission of evidence for assessment will be promoted.. There should be contact points for advice and support and they should be clearly signalled.

Communications

- Information for learners/applicants should be clear, accessible and fit for purpose.
- Awarding bodies should promote the availability of the recognition of prior learning.
- Awarding bodies should publish information on a regular basis describing the extent to which their policies on the recognition of prior learning have been implemented and setting out good examples of practice.

Implementation

The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland will address issues relating to the implementation of these principles and operational guidelines with further and higher education awarding bodies. These discussions will include the identification and addressing of implementation issues. A key issue in this regard is the resourcing for the implementation of these principles and operational guidelines. The Authority's view is that there needs to be an agreed, shared and equitable basis on which to proceed in this regard.