Recognition of Prior Learning

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Policy Information

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Queries relating to this document should be directed to the Policy Owner (pvc.aqse@ulster.ac.uk). This document can be made available on request, in alternative formats and in minority languages to meet the needs of those who are not fluent in English.

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1. Purpose and Scope

This Policy sets out the University's approach to the Recognition of Prior Learning to ensure a fair, transparent, inclusive and accessible route to study in the University.

This Policy applies to all persons seeking to make a request for Recognition of Prior Learning to the University, and to all staff members involved in the administration and consideration of these requests.

The efficacy of this Policy is monitored by the Academic Standards and Quality Enhancement Committee which receives an annual report from Admissions and each School and Department on the use of Recognition of Prior Learning via the Learning Enhancement Directorate.

Where any conflict or inconsistency arises between this policy and any other University policy, the Pro-Vice Chancellor for Academic Quality and Student Experience shall determine which policy takes precedence. The Pro-Vice Chancellor shall also make the final determination on the interpretation of any provision of this policy where its meaning and application is unclear.

2. Definitions

Recognition of Prior Learning, formerly known as *Accreditation of Prior Learning*, is the process by which learning undertaken prior to commencing a programme of study at the University is recognised for either or both of the following academic purposes:

- **Admission:** Requestors are deemed to have met the requisite criteria to permit them to commence their programme of study.

- **Exemption:** Requestors are deemed to have met the requisite criteria to permit them to commence their programme of study without undertaking previously specified modules. Exemptions can be granted for specific modules, or for blocks of credit to permit students to commence their programme of study at a later stage (this was previously known as ***Advanced Standing***).

The University acknowledges two forms of **Recognition of Prior Learning**:

- **Recognition of Prior Certificated Learning:** The process by which previously completed and assessed formal learning undertaken at an appropriate educational provider is recognised for academic purposes. This may be referred to as ***Credit Transfer*** in some contexts.

- **Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning:** The process by which learning undertaken in personal or professional settings but not completed through and assessed by an appropriate educational provider is recognised for academic purposes.

3. Policy Statement

A. Recognition of Prior Learning Advisor

When a requestor makes it known that they wish to make use of Recognition of Prior Learning, the requestor shall be assigned a Recognition of Prior Learning Advisor, who typically has relevant subject knowledge and knowledge of the programme the requestor plans to apply to. The Advisor normally be the Programme Director for most undergraduate and postgraduate taught provision, the Module Leader for microcredentials, modular certification and similar qualifications, and the Postgraduate Tutor for postgraduate research provision.

The Advisor should determine whether the requestor should make a request for admission, exemption, or both, provide them with the criteria against which they should evidence their request, and support the requestor in compiling their request in a format acceptable to the University. This should normally be achieved in a single meeting of less than an hour with the requestor. The Advisor normally may only review and provide feedback on one draft submission of request materials. The Advisor should keep appropriate records of all correspondence and meetings between themselves and the requestor.

B. Recognition of Prior Learning Requests

A Recognition of Prior Learning request in its entirety may contain both requests for Recognition of Prior Certificated Learning and Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning, and requests may be made for either or both of the designated academic purposes of admission and exemption. However, as admission and exemption may reflect different levels of the Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies, the same component of evidence presented for admission cannot be counted again for exemption and vice versa.

Recognition of Prior Learning cannot be used for evidence of competency in written and spoken English where a requestor is not in possession of an equivalent qualification as recognised by the University for the purposes of general admission.

Recognition of Prior Learning is a pathway for access and admission to the University. It cannot be used solely for certification of prior learning, without completing a programme of study at the University.

Recognition of Prior Learning cannot be used to “top-up” a Pass or Ordinary Degree or similar classification of undergraduate degree to another classification.

Recognition of Prior Learning is not required for admission to the University from the agreed articulation routes outlined in the Schedule to Ordinance XXIII.

Where Recognition of Prior Learning is sought for admission and/or exemption for an Ulster University programme delivered by or at a partner institution, the process shall be managed in accordance with the relevant partnership agreement.

i. Types of Requests

Requests for Admission

Recognition of Prior Learning can be used for admission to undergraduate, postgraduate taught and postgraduate research programmes when the requestor does not meet the specific criteria for admission as specified by the University.

For admission to an undergraduate programme, the request should evidence appropriate prior learning equivalent to Level 2 and Level 3 of the Regulated Qualifications Framework as required for the programme of study.

For admission to a postgraduate taught or postgraduate research programme, the request should evidence appropriate prior learning equivalent to Level 6 of the FHEQ, aligned to the Characteristics Statement for Bachelor's Degrees and, if required, appropriate prior learning in the discipline as aligned to the relevant Subject Benchmark Statement.

Requests for Exemption

Recognition of Prior Learning can be used to exempt a successful requestor from undertaking required modules that form a programme of study. Exemptions must be approved prior to enrolment on the programme. Exemption can only be given for the entirety of a module and its credit value. Partial exemption for elements of a module, such as towards attendance or assessment, cannot be given.

Exemptions cannot be given for 100% of available credits for a programme. Per the Regulations for Taught Programmes, requestors are expected to study at least the modules forming either the final third of the credit value of the award at the highest level in full undergraduate or postgraduate programmes, or at least the final 50% of the credit value of the award at the highest level in partial undergraduate or postgraduate programmes including but not limited to Cert HE, Adv Cert, Adv Dip, Grad Cert, Grad Dip, PGCert and PGDip.

For exemptions to allow entry directly to level 5 of an undergraduate programme, the request should evidence appropriate prior learning equivalent to Level 4 of the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications for UK Degree Awarding Bodies.

For exemptions to allow entry directly to level 6 of an undergraduate programme, the request should evidence appropriate prior learning equivalent to Level 5 of the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications for UK Degree Awarding Bodies.

Typically, this will require the requestor to evidence having met the programme learning outcomes of the CertHE (Level 4) or Associate Bachelor's (Level 5) or equivalent award for the programme of which exemption is sought.

Requests for exemptions to allow entry directly to the Masters component of an Integrated Masters Programme cannot be made, unless the requestor already possesses the relevant undergraduate degree.

Exemptions for specific modules will typically require the requestor to evidence having met all the module learning outcomes.

ii. Making a Request for Recognition of Prior Learning

The Advisor and the requestor should agree a final submission deadline for the request that is no less than ten working days prior to the planned meeting of the School or Department Recognition of Prior Learning Panel. Late requests will not normally be accepted.

Submission of request documents should be made electronically, and all requests should be accompanied by the Recognition of Prior Learning Request Form and the Curriculum Vitae. The requestor should also complete the anonymous equality monitoring questionnaire.

While cohorts of individuals may wish to enter the university together from a common background or context, and the Advisor may provide support to this cohort overall, group Recognition of Prior Learning requests are not permitted. Each individual making a request must complete their own separate request for Recognition of Prior Learning to demonstrate sufficient authenticity.

Requests can be made using one or a combination of the following methods:

By portfolio

For each admission criterion (Request for Admission), or for each module or programme learning outcome (Request for Exemption), or equivalent, the requestor should:

- make a request for Recognition of Prior Certificated Learning by providing certificates, transcript or similar documents, and the related specifications or similar documents, and explaining which elements are met by which documents. The Advisor should instruct the requestor what documents are required to evidence prior learning.

- make a request for Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning by providing a short reflective account of how the learning was acquired and applied, with supporting evidence verifying achievement and authenticity. For requests aimed at evidencing learning at level 3, appropriate quality of written communication should be demonstrated. For requests aimed at evidencing learning at level 4 or higher, commensurate academic writing and use and referencing of the academic literature should be demonstrated.

The School or Department and the Advisor can suggest how criteria and learning outcomes might be grouped to avoid duplication of effort. The School or Department should agree appropriate and consistent word counts before submission which should not normally exceed 5000 words. The use of non-textual material such as images and videos, appropriately attributed, are encouraged, and supplementary material may be included as appendices.

By set response

Learning may be demonstrated by written responses to discipline specific prompts designed by academic staff to evidence learning at the appropriate level. Prompts may require case analysis, critical reflection, applied problem solving, or theoretical

interpretation, supported by appropriate use of the academic literature and other sources, as well as evidence from the requestor's personal and professional experience.

Each prompt must indicate which admission criterion (Request for Admission) or module or programme learning outcome (Request for Exemption) would be met by its response. The School or Department should agree appropriate and consistent word counts before submission. The prompts should not replicate module assessment unnecessarily or exhaustively.

Set responses undertaken in person or online under significant time constraint and/or invigilation are not permitted, to avoid becoming *de facto* "entrance exams".

By interview

A requestor can demonstrate their learning by responses to set interview questions. Prior to the interview, interviewers should determine for each interview question which admission criterion (Request for Admission), or module or programme learning outcome (Request for Exemption) would be met by its response.

The University is committed to meeting its obligations under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and the Special Educational Needs and Disability (Northern Ireland) Order 2005. The University will consider and, where reasonable, make adjustments to ensure that an applicant with a disability is not placed at a substantial disadvantage when participating in an interview during this process.

All applicants invited to interview must be asked whether they require any reasonable adjustments to participate fully in the interview or selection process. Applicants are encouraged to disclose their requirements as early as possible.

An applicant requesting a reasonable adjustment should provide sufficient information about their disability, the disadvantage they may experience and the adjustment requested. Where reasonably required, the University may ask the applicant to provide appropriate supporting evidence. Information and evidence must be provided sufficiently in advance of the interview to allow the University reasonable time to consider the request and put agreed arrangements in place.

A late request, or the absence of supporting evidence, will not automatically result in a request being refused. The University must consider the circumstances of the individual case, the information available, the practicability of the proposed adjustment and whether an alternative reasonable adjustment can be made.

Information relating to a disability or a request for reasonable adjustments must be handled confidentially and shared only with those who need the information to consider or implement the adjustment.

Interviews should not normally last more than an hour, unless reasonable adjustments are required. The requestor should be interviewed by two members of staff, one of whom should be an academic member of staff and can be the Advisor. The interview should be recorded, transcribed or minuted to permit the Recognition

of Prior Learning Panels to review the request. Where the interview is recorded or transcribed, permission must be sought in advance from the Requestor

Academic Integrity

All work submitted within a Recognition of Prior Learning request must be entirely the own work of the requestor, with the work of others acknowledged through appropriate citation and referencing where required. The University reserves the right to upload the document to its chosen plagiarism detection tool. Artificial Intelligence tools must only be used with the explicit permission of the Advisor, in line with their School or Department requirements for requests, and their use must be declared by the requestor, in line with University guidance.

The University reserves the right to not accept a Recognition of Prior Learning request deemed to contain plagiarised, fabricated or falsified elements. Where it is established that a requestor plagiarised, fabricated or falsified elements of their request, or where there are substantive concerns in relation to the authorship of the submitted materials, the University reserves the right withdraw any offer of Recognition of Prior Learning or admission, or for registered students, to suspend or terminate their registration on their programme of study.

C. Recognition of Prior Learning Panels

i. School or Department Recognition of Prior Learning Panel

Each School or Department should establish a Recognition of Prior Learning Panel who will consider Recognition of Prior Learning requests. The Recognition of Prior Learning Panel will meet at agreed points in the year in line with the admissions cycle of the provision within that School or Department. Exceptional meetings of the Recognition of Prior Learning Panel may take place as agreed by the School or Department. Each meeting of the Recognition of Prior Learning Panel should be minuted.

The Recognition of Prior Learning Panel should be chaired by the Head or Deputy Head of School or Department or the Learning, Teaching and Quality Director, or their nominee, such as a designated Recognition of Prior Learning Co-ordinator, and be constituted of at least two other members of substantive academic staff, one of whom may be the Advisor for the request under consideration.

The request should be considered holistically by the Panel on the following grounds:

- **Validity.** The evidence presented demonstrates a clear and transparent link between the learning being evidenced at the appropriate level and the outcomes against which recognition is being sought.

- **Currency.** The evidence presented reflects current understanding and best practice of the learning under consideration. Prior experiential learning and especially prior certificated learning must have been obtained within a time period agreed by the School or Department Recognition of Prior Learning Panel in line with the programme of study. This should normally be within five years and not normally exceed ten years. Periods of currency may be less, particularly in the cases of programmes with Professional, Statutory, and Regulatory Body or similar requirements.

- **Authenticity.** The evidence presented clearly relates to the requestor's own efforts and achievements.

Decisions of the School or Department Recognition of Prior Learning Panel can be one of following outcomes:

a) **Approved.** The request demonstrates sufficient evidence that the requestor's prior learning can be recognised for all academic purposes as set out in the request.

b) **Partial Approval.** The request demonstrates sufficient evidence that some or all of the requestor's prior learning can be recognised only for the academic purposes determined by the Panel.

c) **Revise and Resubmit.** The request does not currently demonstrate sufficient evidence that some or all of the requestor's prior learning can be recognised for academic purposes but would be able to do so upon revision of the request in line with the Panel's feedback.

d) **Not Approved.** The request does not currently demonstrate sufficient evidence that some or all of the requestor's prior learning can be recognised for academic purposes and is unlikely to be able to do so without significant revision or greater accumulation of learning beyond the scope of the current admissions cycle.

The decision of the School or Department Recognition of Prior Learning Panel should be conveyed in writing to the requestor and recorded on the University Recognition of Prior Learning Register within ten working days of the Panel meeting.

Requestors should be made aware that approval of a Recognition of Prior Learning request does not guarantee an offer of admission to the University, only that an application will be given due consideration.

For decisions of *Partial Approval*, it should be clearly outlined why the conditions were imposed and for which academic purposes the prior learning can be recognised.

For decisions of *Revise and Resubmit*, it should be clearly outlined which elements of the request cannot be recognised for academic purposes, why the panel came to that decision, what the requestor can do make the request sufficient, and the timeframe in which they must do so.

For decisions of *Not Approved*, it should be clearly outlined why the request does not demonstrate sufficient evidence that some or all of the requestor's prior learning can be recognised for academic purposes and is unlikely to be able to do so without significant revision. Exhaustive detail of revisions are not required. Further requests will not be considered by the School or Department Recognition of Prior Learning Panel until the Advisor is satisfied that significant revision or greater accumulation of learning has taken place.

Appeals against a decision of the School or Department Recognition of Prior Learning Panel

A requestor may appeal the decision of the School or Department Recognition of Prior Learning Panel within ten working days of the decision being issued only on the grounds that there has been a procedural irregularity in the consideration of the request by the School or Department Recognition of Prior Learning Panel. The academic judgement of the panel may not be appealed.

Appeals against the decision of the School or Department Recognition of Prior Learning Panel which are received within ten working days and demonstrate grounds for appeal through procedural irregularity will be considered by a Faculty Recognition of Prior Learning Appeal Panel. Late appeals will not normally be accepted. Appeals which do not demonstrate grounds for appeal through procedural irregularity will be rejected with no further right of appeal. Having exhausted the internal process, requestors should be signposted to the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman, where they may lodge a complaint on the grounds of maladministration.

ii. Faculty Recognition of Prior Learning Appeal Panel

The Faculty Recognition of Prior Learning Appeal Panel will consider appeals against the decisions of the School or Department Recognition of Prior Learning Panel that are received within ten working days and demonstrate that there has been a procedural irregularity in the consideration of the request by the School or Department Recognition of Prior Learning Panel.

The Faculty Recognition of Prior Learning Appeal Panel will normally be chaired by the Pro Vice-Chancellor and Executive Dean or the Associate Dean (AQSE) or their nominee and consist of at least one other member of academic staff from outside the School or Department from which the appeal originated.

The Faculty Recognition of Prior Learning Appeal Panel cannot consider the content of the request, nor overturn the decision of the School or Department Recognition of Prior Learning Panel. The Faculty Recognition of Prior Learning Appeal Panel may only direct the School or Department Recognition of Prior Learning Panel to reconsider the request at the next available opportunity, having taken action to correct the procedural irregularity.

The Faculty Recognition of Prior Learning Panel must communicate its outcomes in writing to the requestor within ten working days of the Panel meeting, detailing the Panel's decision, with reasons, to consider or not consider the appeal, and if the request is to be reconsidered by the School or Department Recognition of Prior Learning Panel. There is no further right of appeal following the decision of the Faculty Recognition of Prior Learning Appeal Panel. Having exhausted the internal process, requestors should be signposted to the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman, where they may lodge a complaint on the grounds of maladministration.

D. Completing the Recognition of Prior Learning Request

The decision of the School or Department Recognition of Prior Learning Panel should be conveyed in writing to the requestor and recorded on the University Recognition of Prior Learning Register within ten working days of the Panel meeting. If the Advisor is not the Programme Director, the Programme Director should also be informed.

Once a Recognition of Prior Learning request for admission has been approved, the Recognition of Prior Learning Advisor should inform Admissions so the application can be processed through the established procedures.

Once a Recognition of Prior Learning request for exemption has been approved, the Recognition of Prior Learning Advisor and/or Programme Director should complete the Form for Notification of Approved Module and/or General Credit Exemptions and return it to Student Operations.

All records related to Recognition of Prior Learning are subject to retention and disposal periods in line with the University's Records Retention & Disposal Schedule. Records related to unsuccessful requests, or to successful requests which ultimately do not progress from application to enrolment should be retained for one year

following the communication of the decision to the requestor. For successful requests which progress from application to enrolment, the records form part of the student record and should be retained for six years beginning from the end of the students' time at the University.

RPL requests will be reported annually to the Academic Standards and Quality Enhancement Committee, at which their outcomes will be ratified. Evaluation will also occur to ensure that the provision of RPL meets the stated aims and standards of the University.

4. Communication, Implementation and Training

Further guidance and templates for University staff will be available on the Recognition of Prior Learning SharePoint site.

Recognition of Prior Learning Advising and Assessing Training for academic staff will be provided twice annually and is available on request to Schools and Departments from the Learning Enhancement Directorate.

Support for academic staff on designing set responses and advising on individual requests is available from the Centre for Curriculum Enhancement and Approval. Please contact curriculumenquiries@ulster.ac.uk.

5. Complaints Procedure

Members of the University community wishing to raise an issue about this Policy are encouraged to do so informally in the first instance through contacting the Learning Enhancement Directorate. Should that not resolve the issue, students may make use of the Ulster University Student Complaints Procedure. Staff members may do so first through their line manager, and then through the relevant grievance procedure.

6. Relevant Legislation

This Policy complies with The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 and Northern Ireland Act 1998 with regards to Higher Education in Northern Ireland.

The University is committed to ensuring that all personal data provided by requestors is handled securely, fairly and in accordance with applicable Data Protection legislation. The University's Data Protection Policy and Privacy Notices can be accessed by visiting https://www.ulster.ac.uk/about/ous/data-protection-and-information-compliance/gdpr.

7. Related Policy Documents

Please see the Admissions Policy and the Consumer Protection (Curriculum) Policy as well as the Taught Programme Regulations.

8. Contact Details

This Policy will be reviewed informally annually and formally every five years. If this Policy is not working for you and you have suggested amendments and or clarifications, please contact curriculumenquiries@ulster.ac.uk.