

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

1. Introduction

This policy applies to Occupational Awards qualifications, including those on the Regulated Qualifications Framework. However, not all qualifications allow the use of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). Where the use of RPL is permitted, this will be stated within the qualification specification. The use of Recognition of Prior Learning is not mandatory. However, if centres choose to implement it, centres must have an internal policy on RPL and the appropriate resources to do so.

Policy statement

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is a method of assessment, leading to the award of a qualification, that considers whether learners can demonstrate that they can meet the assessment requirements for a unit through knowledge, understanding or skills they already possess and do not need to develop through a course of learning.

Note: RPL should not be confused with exemption, unit equivalency or credit accumulation and transfer.

RPL enables recognition of achievement from a range of activities using any appropriate assessment methodology. Provided that the assessment requirements of a given unit or qualification have been met, the use of RPL is acceptable for accrediting a unit, units or a whole qualification. Partial unit completion is not acceptable. Evidence of learning must be:

- Valid
- Current
- Reliable.

Occupational Awards allows the use of RPL where it is of value to centres and learners in facilitating assessment. Centres which use RPL must follow these principles and keep appropriate records.

Terminology

RPL policies and procedures have been developed over time which has led to the use of a number of terms to describe the process. Among the most common are:

- Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL)
- Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL)
- Accreditation of Prior Achievement (APA)
- Accreditation of Prior Learning and Achievement (APLA).

These terms broadly describe the same process. Occupational Awards uses the term Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL).

Amplification

The use and application of RPL is of particular value to learners without formal qualifications, who are either in employment, preparing to enter, or returning to employment. It enables them to gain all or part of a qualification without having to undertake a formal learning programme. RPL can be used where a learner has not had their prior learning formally recognised.

RPL focuses on assessment and awarding for prior learning which may count as evidence towards:

- a unit accumulated towards a full Occupational Awards qualification
- a unit or units recognised by an Occupational Awards Certificate of Achievement of a full Occupational Awards qualification.

All evidence must be evaluated using the learning outcomes and assessment criteria from the qualification or unit being claimed. In assessing a unit using RPL the assessor must be satisfied that the evidence produced by the learner meets the assessment standard established by the learning outcome and its related assessment criteria.

Centres must have personnel with appropriate expertise and knowledge to facilitate this and make decisions about RPL. Evidence used for RPL will be subject to external quality assurance review (EQA) as normal. Most often RPL will be used for units.

The prior achievement that would provide evidence of current knowledge, understanding and skills will vary from sector to sector. It will depend on the extent of the experience, technological changes and the nature of the outcome claimed. If the currency of any evidence is in doubt, the assessor may use questions to check understanding, and ask for the demonstration of skills to check competence.

Note that the assessment strategy for each qualification must be adhered to. Where evidence is assessed to be only sufficient to cover one or more learning outcomes, or to partly meet the need of a learning outcome, then additional assessment methods should be used to generate sufficient evidence to be able to award the learning outcome(s) for the whole unit. Where Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning evidence is being assessed against graded units, only pass criteria can be awarded. The RPL process is not concerned with allowing for exceptional entry to, or exemption from, a programme of study.

Centres wishing to carry out RPL must ensure that:

- Identification of any achievement through RPL is prior to learners taking a qualification
- Relevant to the learner's knowledge, skills and understanding which will be assessed as part of a qualification
- Learners are registered as soon as they formally start to gather evidence
- Records of assessment against prior learning are maintained
- Certification claims are made according to normal procedures
- All relevant evidence is assessed before assessment decisions are confirmed
- There are designated personnel with the appropriate expertise to support and assure the RPL process.

The RPL Process

An example RPL process is outlined below, with common steps and actions outlined.

Stage 1 - Awareness, information and guidance

Ahead of enrolling a potential learner, the possibility that they may be able to claim unit(s) for some of their previous learning and/or experience should be raised with them. If the learner is interested in this, they will need to know the:

- Process of claiming achievement by using RPL
- Sources of support and guidance available to them
- Timelines, appeals processes and any fees involved

Stage 2 - Pre-assessment, gathering evidence and giving information

At this stage the learner will carry out the process of collecting evidence against the requirements of the relevant unit(s). In some cases the development of an assessment plan and tracking document or similar may be required, to support the learner through the process. The evidence gathered will need to meet the standards of the unit, or part of unit, that the evidence is being used for.

Stage 3 - Assessment/documentation of evidence

Assessment as part of RPL is a structured process for gathering and reviewing evidence and making judgments about a learners' prior learning and experience in relation to unit standards. The assessor may be looking at work experience records, validated by managers; previous portfolios of evidence put together by the learner or essays and reports validated as being the learner's own unaided work.

Assessment must be valid and reliable to ensure the integrity of the award of unit(s) and, as above, the evidence gathered needs to meet the standards of the unit, or part of unit, that the evidence is being used for. If the collated evidence of RPL for a learner is judged by the centre not to be sufficient to meet all the requirements of the relevant unit(s), then the learner will have to complete the normal assessment for those unit(s) if they wish to be awarded the qualification.

The assessment process will be subject to the usual quality assurance procedures of the centre, for example internal standardisation and internal verification. Evidence gathered through RPL should be clearly referenced and sign posted to aid internal assessment and internal and external verification.

Stage 4 - Claiming certification

RPL processes and evidence used by centres will be subject to the normal standards verification process. Occupational Awards will check RPL via its external quality assurance processes, and if we identify that not all requirements for a unit have been met via the RPL evidence, then more evidence will be needed or the learner will have to undergo the normal assessment requirements.

Once the internal and external quality assurance procedures have been successfully completed, certification claims can be made by the centre. Assessment and internal quality assurance records, along with any additional RPL records completed, should be retained for the standard three year period following certification.

The assessor must ensure that all learning outcomes and assessment criteria being claimed for each unit are achieved and that the records of assessment are maintained in the usual way.

Stage 5 - Appeals

As with any assessment decision on procedural grounds; if a learner wishes to appeal against a decision made about their assessment they need to follow the standard centre policy and procedures and then Occupational Awards Appeals procedures. A copy of the Appeals Procedure is available on our On-Line Portal.