

Policy on the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and Credit Transfer

This Policy on the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and Credit Transfer replaces the former policy on Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL), which was approved by the Senate in June 2003 and incorporated as Regulation 46: Accreditation of Prior Learning (SM/03/61.1). The RPL Policy was approved by the Senate on 13 May 2015 and has been amended thereafter for minor updates and factual accuracy.

A more substantive review (and related updating) was undertaken in January 2025 as part of a wider review of Learning and Teaching Policies and to take account of two QAA publications: [Recognition of Prior Learning: Framework for Scotland](#) (updated November 2022); [Achieving Credit Transfer at Scale](#) (September 2024).

The regulatory aspects of this Policy are contained in [Regulation A3: Admission, paragraph 11](#).

This Policy on the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and Credit Transfer should be read in conjunction with the accompanying [Procedures](#) on the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and Credit Transfer, which set out: processes for evaluation RPL applications; restrictions on RPL and approval procedures.

The Policy and Procedures are available (including externally to potential RPL applicants) on the [Learning and Teaching Policy Bank](#).

The revised Policy was produced by the Academic Quality Division, Registry and Academic Support, and progressed via the Learning and Teaching Academic Operations Committee (endorsed, 26 March 2025) through to the University Committee for Quality and Standards for approval (approved, 28 May 2025).

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The re-presentation of the Policy as a separate policy document, rather than being contained solely within a Regulation, reflects one of the outcomes of the 2013/14 review of the University's governance arrangements, whereby each of the categories of Ordinances, Regulations, Policies and Procedures was clarified and differentiated (see *The University's Constitutional Framework*; approved by the Court in December 2012; revised version, May 2014 and December 2015).

The replacement of the term "Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL)" with that of "Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)" reflects the terminology changes introduced by the Quality Assurance Agency across the UK HE sector, and by the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) across all forms of educational provision in Scotland.

The University's Policy on the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and Credit Transfer meets the requirements of the [UK Quality Code Principle 9: Recruiting, Selecting and Admitting Students](#), namely to ensure that RPL policies and procedures are *reliable, fair, transparent and accessible*.

The Policy also meets the principles, purposes and findings of the QAA's [Recognition of Prior Learning: Framework for Scotland](#) (updated November 2022); [Achieving Credit Transfer at Scale](#) (September 2022). The Policy has also been informed by the additional guidance from QAA and SCQF (links to various publications can be found [here](#) and [here](#)).

The Policy on the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and Credit Transfer should be read in conjunction with the accompanying [Procedures](#) on the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and Credit Transfer. The Policy and Procedures are available (including externally) on the [Learning and Teaching Policy Bank](#).

The regulatory aspects of the Policy on the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and Credit Transfer are also contained within [Regulation A3: Admission, paragraph 11](#).

Scope and Definitions

- 1.1 This Policy on the Recognition of Prior Learning and Credit Transfer applies to all undergraduate and taught postgraduate programmes across all modes and locations of study. The Policy likewise applies to research degrees which feature a taught element of study. A paragraph referring to this Policy has been incorporated into Regulation A3: Admission, paragraph 11.
- 1.2 In accordance with definitions used by QAA Scotland and by SCQF, Recognition of Prior Learning and Credit Transfer describe the **"process for recognising learning that has come from experience and/or previous formal, non-formal and informal contexts. This includes knowledge and skills gained outside school, college and university, and outside formal learning situations, such as through life and work experiences"**. RPL is also known as "advanced entry"; "advanced standing"; "accreditation of prior learning (APL)."
- 1.3 Where Heriot-Watt University has an articulation agreement or other formal partnership with an educational institution to provide advanced entry to a programme, there is no need for applicants in these cases to apply via RPL, as the curriculum mapping and other arrangements for transfer have already been made when establishing the articulation agreement or partnership.
- 1.4 RPL involves a learner reflecting on experiences, identifying learning associated with the experiences and providing evidence of that learning to enable an institution to reach a decision on awarding credit or mapping to the level of the [Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework \(SCQF\)](#). RPL is part of the University's strategies and approaches to flexible curricula, lifelong learning and widening access.
- 1.5 Two forms of prior learning may be recognised:
 - 1.4.1 **Recognition of Prior Certificated Learning (RPCL)**: the recognition of prior learning which has been previously assessed and/or accredited by an appropriate awarding body as being

equivalent to a particular level within the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework. In this context, the recognition of prior learning is based on credit transfer, as the applicant is given exemption from an entire stage of study and/or individual courses based on an existing qualification, or on credits for courses (including as part of a partially completed qualification), awarded by another institution/awarding body. For example, an applicant with an HND worth 240 SCQF credits may be admitted directly to Stage 3 of a relevant HWU undergraduate programme. Recognition of Prior Certificated Learning is also commonly known as **Credit Transfer**.

- 1.4.2 **Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning (RPEL):** the process of assessing and then credit rating learning which has its source in some experience which occurred prior to the point of entering the current programme, but where that experience was not previously formally assessed and credit rated at a particular level within the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework.

In this context, learning may be gained through experiences or training programmes in the workplace, community or voluntary sector, or more generally through life experiences and events. RPEL involves applicants reviewing and reflecting upon their learning experiences, and then documenting these experiences through a process which enables the University to determine whether an applicant can be given admission to a programme of study or exemption from one or more stages of a programme or courses within a programme. It is the learning gained through experience which is assessed as part of RPL, not the experience itself.

For Heriot-Watt University, given its subject profile, Recognition of Prior Learning is based most commonly on certificated learning, ie an existing academic qualification or individual courses credit-rated by another education institution/awarding body. Where experiential learning is used, this is likely to be presented in conjunction with an existing qualification.

- 1.5 Recognition of Prior Learning and Credit Transfer may be used in two ways:

- (i) to gain admission to the start, or to subsequent stages, of a programme;
- (ii) to gain exemption from individual courses within a programme.

- 1.6 Recognition of prior learning through the award of credits is a matter of academic judgement about the nature of an applicant's prior achievement, not a mechanistic or automatic process of credit transfer. Such a judgement is at the discretion of the receiving School. Schools are not obliged to recognise all, or indeed any, of an applicant's prior learning.
- 1.7 Students who have been admitted on the basis of RPL to the start or intermediate stage of a programme or awarded exemption from particular courses should be supported by their School and by the University in making the transition to HWU and their programme of study.
- 1.8 If an application for RPL has not been approved, the School should provide a rationale in communicating the decision to the applicant. An applicant who has concerns about their RPL application may submit a complaint about the RPL process or service (but not in relation to matters of academic judgement) through the University's formal Complaints process.

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Academic Quality
September 2015; updated: October 2016; December 2024

Policy approved by the Senate, 13 May 2015. Reviewed for factual accuracy, May 2019. Revised version approved by UCQS, 28 May 2025

