

Heriot-Watt University

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and Credit Transfer: Procedures

These Procedures on the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and Credit Transfer should be read in conjunction with the accompanying [Policy](#) on the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and Credit Transfer, which sets out the scope and definitions of RPL at Heriot-Watt University. The Policy and Procedures are available (including externally to potential RPL applicants) on the [Learning and Teaching Policy Bank](#).

The Policy and Procedures were approved by the Senate at its meeting on 13 May 2015 and were 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 revised Policy and Procedures were produced by the Academic Quality Division, Registry and Academic Support, and progressed via the Learning and Teaching Academic Operations Committee (26 March 2025) through to the University Committee for Quality and Standards for approval (approved by UCQS, 28 May 2025).

1. Applications for Admission to the Start or Intermediate Stages of a Programme

- 1.1 The process for admission to the start or subsequent stage of a programme based on Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) will be outlined on the University's website, prospectuses and other forms of public information available to potential applicants. General information about the University's processes for applicants with non-standard qualifications is provided on the website as part of ["other routes to entry"](#).
- 1.2 Criteria specific to particular programmes will be detailed and made accessible to potential applicants through relevant forms of public information, such as the University's website, prospectuses or the School website. In addition, information should be provided to potential RPL applicants on the application process for recognition of prior learning, the timescales involved and the means by which the applicant will be informed of the outcome.
- 1.3 An applicant whose prior learning is recognised as being equivalent to a programme's stipulated entry requirements may be admitted to the start of that programme.
- 1.4 An applicant whose prior learning exceeds a programme's stipulated entry requirements may be admitted to an intermediate stage of that programme in the case of undergraduate programmes.
- 1.5 The University's Admissions Teams will provide advice on RPL to potential applicants in accordance with the University's Regulations, Policy and Procedures. Thereafter, requests for admission based on recognition of prior learning should be directed in the first instance to the appropriate Admissions Tutor within the School, who will decide on whether the application should proceed. The Admissions Tutor may recommend a subject advisor to assist the applicant in preparing an application.
- 1.6 Applications for admission should be accompanied by appropriate documentation and supporting statements from the applicant and, if required by the School, from at least one referee. The School

will invite the applicant to demonstrate that he or she has reached the appropriate level of achievement by one or more of the following means:

- presentation of evidence of prior certificated learning which may include award certificate, a transcript of results, programme structures and course descriptors;
 - presentation of evidence of prior experiential learning which may include a portfolio of evidence together with a reflective account of the learning achieved¹ and completion of the School's RPL form (where such a form is used);
 - satisfactory completion of an assessment set by the School, which may be part of the assessment taken by other learners, a structured project or an assignment specifically set for the purpose.
- 1.7 In using the above forms of evidence, the School should have a process in place for mapping these against the relevant programme learning outcomes and levels descriptors. [SCQF \(Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework\) Levels Descriptors](#) are available on the SCQF website.
- 1.8 Advice on RPL claims made by applicants who hold international qualifications can be sought from the University's Admissions Teams. Additionally, further information may be obtained from the [ENIC-NARIC](#) website.
- 1.9 Credit points awarded for previous stages of a programme will be recorded on the applicant's record on admission as a student of the University. The record will make clear, through the use of the grade/result EX, that these credit points have been awarded through RPL as "exemption" from the relevant stage(s). A "P" (pass) Grade is not used to award RPL credit for exempted stages.

2. Applications for Exemption from Courses

- 2.1 An applicant who has submitted an application for admission to a programme based on prior learning may also apply for exemption from specific courses. Exemption from courses is normally based only on prior certificated learning.
- 2.2 Any course exemptions based on prior experiential learning require approval by Executive Dean of the School or the Director of Learning and Teaching/Associate Executive Dean (Education and Student Life), who may be nominated by the Executive Dean to undertake this role. Recommendations for exemption from courses shall be made by the Admissions Tutor in consultation with the (Global) Programme Director and/or (Global) Course Leader.
- 2.2.1 In the case of the taught component of research degrees, in addition to the role holders specified in paragraph 2.2, the School's Director of Research/Associate Executive Dean (Research and Impact) shall be included in the approval process.
- 2.3 Only full exemption from (and full credit for) courses can be given on the basis of RPL; partial credit/exemption cannot be awarded.
- 2.4 The process for exemption from particular courses within a programme based on prior learning will be outlined and made accessible to applicants through relevant forms of information, such as the programme handbook or the School's RPL procedure. In addition, information should be provided on the timescales involved and the means by which the applicant will be informed of the outcome.
- 2.5 Applications for exemption from courses should be directed in the first instance to the appropriate Admissions Tutor within the School, who may then forward the application to one or more members of academic staff with expertise in the subject area.

¹ The QAA's [Recognition of Prior Learning: Framework for Scotland](#) provides a helpful table on direct and indirect evidence for recognising prior learning through RPL (see p.12). Greater use of e-portfolios, podcasts, vlogs and video presentations can replace or complement traditional written portfolios.

- 2.6 An applicant must provide evidence of having achieved the specified learning outcomes of the course and of having successfully completed a similar course at the same SCQF level at another institution. Such evidence should include a transcript with assessment results and a course descriptor.
- 2.7 Applications for course exemption should be accompanied by supporting statements from the applicant and, if required by the School, from at least one referee.
- 2.8 If course exemptions are awarded through RPL and result in applicants studying less than 120 credits (equivalent to one year of full-time study), advice should be sought, in the case of Scottish-Domiciled students, from the University's Admissions Team or Student Records and Awards Team (within Registry and Academic Support) on potential impact on full-time funding and should be communicated to applicants before they accept an offer of study.
- 2.9 Credit points awarded for course exemptions shall be recorded on the applicant's record on admission as a student of the University. The grade/result is presented as EX, ie "exemption". A credit-bearing grade in the A-E range is not used to award RPL credit for exempted courses.

3. Evaluation of Applications for Recognition of Prior Learning

- 3.1 An application for the recognition of prior learning will be assessed by the appropriate members of staff such as the Admissions Tutor, (Global) Programme Director or (Global) Course Leader, in terms of:
- relevance – there is an appropriate match between the evidence presented and the learning claimed, and the learning relates directly to the learning outcomes of the programme or courses for which credit is being claimed.
 - sufficiency - the learning has reached a level to allow the applicant to fulfil the aims of the programme; there is sufficient evidence to demonstrate the achievement of the learning claimed.
 - authenticity - the applicant has provided reliable evidence of having personally completed what is claimed, and the evidence clearly relates to the applicant's own efforts and achievements.
 - currency - the learning is sufficiently recent to allow the applicant to fulfil the aims and learning outcomes of the programme. Where experience from more than five years prior to the claim is referred to in a substantial way, the applicant should provide evidence of having kept up to date with recent developments in the intended area of study.
- 3.2 Applicants who are applying for recognition of prior learning must have demonstrably reached the academic standards required for the programme and intended award. There must be a reasonable expectation, in approving an application, that the applicant will be able to complete the programme successfully and within the normal duration.
- 3.3 The process of recognising prior learning must be appropriately documented. A record of the evaluation and decision-making must be kept and made available on request to the appropriate Board of Examiners (Course Assessment Board, Progression Board, Award Board).

4. Awarding Credit and Allocating Levels

- 4.1 The process of credit-rating and allocating levels to prior learning is undertaken in accordance with the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework, with which all of Heriot-University awards are aligned and credit-rated against:
- Each undergraduate course is credit-rated at 15 SCQF points (in some cases, 20 SCQF points) and is allocated to one of five levels (SCQF levels 7 to 11, corresponding to each

stage of an up to five-year undergraduate degree). Graduate courses are typically rated at SCQF Levels 10 or 11.

- Each taught postgraduate course is credit-rated at 15 SCQF points (in some cases, 20 SCQF points) and is allocated to SCQF Level 11. Graduate courses are typically rated at SCQF Levels 10 or 11.

4.2 In the case of claims for admission and exemption based on prior certificated learning, the allocation of credits and levels will depend on the extent to which the applicant's previous learning covers the requisite content and reaches the academic standard required of other learners admitted by standard routes. The learning outcomes and assessment criteria of the HWU programme and/or courses concerned, when matched with the applicant's previous qualifications and matched against the relevant SCQF level descriptor, will facilitate this process.

4.3 The allocation of credits and levels to claims for access and admission based solely on prior experiential learning or on a combination of certificated and experiential learning is a more complex process. In such cases, the effective, informed judgement of the assessor is fundamental. The following indicators can assist the assessor in this process:

- SCQF Levels descriptors
- SCQF Qualifications descriptors
- Pre-requisites
- Learning outcomes
- Assessment criteria
- QAA subject benchmark statements

4.4 It is the learning gained through experience which is assessed as part of RPL, not the experience itself.

4.5 RPL is not a mechanistic and automatic process of credit transfer - credit is the tariff awarded at the end of a *successful* assessment process. Recognition of prior learning is above all a matter of academic judgement about the nature of the individual's prior achievement, not about the amount of credit which the applicant comes with. Such a judgement is at the discretion of Heriot-Watt University as the receiving institution and, as such, the University is not obliged to recognise all, or indeed any, of an applicant's prior learning.

5. Restrictions on Prior Learning

5.1 Any programme-specific restrictions on the recognition of prior learning need to be specified in the appropriate programme documentation, including externally accessible websites, and made clear to potential applicants at the point of enquiry. Programme-specific restrictions must meet the University minimum criteria, as detailed below.

Foundation and Undergraduate Programmes: University-Level Minimum Criteria

5.2 The minimum criteria in terms of restrictions applicable to undergraduate programmes are as follows:

5.2.1 At least 50% of the credits required for the stage at which a student enters a programme must be completed at the University in order to qualify for the award associated with that stage. For example, a student who is given advanced entry to Stage 3 must complete successfully and be awarded the credits for at least 50% of Stage 3 credits to qualify for the award of an Ordinary Degree.

5.2.2 Schools may require a larger proportion of credits to be completed than those specified in 5.2.1 above. School-specific requirements will be specified in the appropriate programme website or other form of publicly available documentation.

- 5.2.3 The structure for each programme of study shall specify the award criteria, along with the method of calculating the degree classification, to be applied in the case of students who are admitted, under the terms of this Policy, to the final stage of a programme.

Taught Graduate, Taught Postgraduate Programmes and Research Degrees with a Taught Component: University-Level Minimum Criteria

- 5.3 The minimum criteria in terms of restrictions applicable to taught graduate and taught postgraduate programmes and research degrees with a taught element are as follows:
- 5.3.1 At least 50% of the credits for each graduate or postgraduate award available within a programme must be completed at the University in order to qualify for that award.
- 5.3.2 At least 50% of the credits associated with the taught element of a research degree must be completed at the University in order to be deemed to have successfully completed the taught component.
- 5.3.3 Schools may require a larger proportion of credits to be completed than those specified in 5.3.1 and 5.3.2 above. School-specific requirements will be specified in the appropriate programme website or other form of publicly available documentation.

All Programmes

- 5.4 Credits from an award already held by an applicant can contribute to a higher award, but cannot be used towards a lower award or an award at the same level in the same discipline, nor can credits be used for an award of the same type in the same discipline.
- 5.4.1 For the purposes of clarification, the “same type of award in the same discipline” restriction means that, for example, an applicant with the award of an MSc in Business Management cannot use credits towards an MSc in Business Management with a specialism (eg in HR Management). Likewise, an applicant with a BSc Honours in Computing cannot be given credits towards a BSc Honours in Computer Science; an applicant with an Ordinary degree in Computing could, however, be admitted to the final stage of the BSc Honours in Computer Science programme, as this is a higher award.
- 5.4.2 The “same type of award in the same discipline” restriction must be made explicit to applicants at the point of enquiry, particularly where the title of a HWU programme/award could be interpreted as implying that the HWU programme was substantially different the applicant’s existing qualification.
- 5.4.3 For the purposes of clarification, “credits can contribute to a higher award, but cannot be used towards a lower award or towards an award at the same level in the same discipline” means that:
- 5.4.3.1 If a student who has been admitted to the final stage of an undergraduate programme through RPL does not perform to the required academic standard and does not fulfil the criteria for the award associated with that stage, they cannot be given a lower-level award for credits not completed at Heriot-Watt University. For example, a student admitted to Stage 4 of an Honours Degree cannot be given an Ordinary Degree as a compensatory award if they do not meet the Honours requirements. In such cases, the student will receive a “No Award” Decision and the transcript will show performance in the individual courses studied at Heriot-Watt University.
- 5.4.3.2 If a student has been admitted to a Higher Degree of Master based on an existing Postgraduate Certificate award and/or equivalent prior experiential learning and does not meet the criteria required for the award of Master or Postgraduate Diploma, a HWU Postgraduate Certificate can only be awarded if the student has acquired at least 60 HWU credits. If the student has not acquired at least 60 HWU

credits, the student will receive a “No Award” Decision and the transcript will show performance in the individual courses studied at Heriot-Watt University.

- 5.4.4 For the purposes of clarification, if credits are being used from an existing HWU award towards an additional, higher HWU award in the same discipline (eg PG Certificate to MSc or Ordinary to Honours), then the previous award will be rescinded.

6. Fees for Processing Applications

- 6.1 No fees are to be levied by a School in processing applications for admission or exemption based solely on prior certificated learning.
- 6.2 A School may charge applicants a fee for processing claims for admission and/or exemption based on prior experiential learning or on a combination of prior certificated and experiential learning. Any such fees levied will be retained by the School.

7. Approval Procedures

- 7.1 The relevant Admissions Tutor within the School, or the Admissions Tutor in conjunction with the (Global) Programme Director and/or (Global) Course Leader, will determine the number and level of credits to be awarded through the recognition of prior learning and will make a recommendation on admission to the start or intermediate stage of a programme and on exemption from courses.
- 7.2 For all programmes (foundation, undergraduate, graduate, postgraduate taught and research degrees with a taught element), recommendations for approval should be made by the Admissions Tutor to the Executive Dean of the School or, if nominated by the Executive Dean, to the Director of Learning and Teaching/Associate Executive Dean (Education and Student Life). The Admissions Tutor will inform the applicant of the decision of the Executive Dean or nominee.
- 7.2.1 In the case of the taught component of research degrees, in addition to the role holders specified in paragraph 7.2, the School's Director of Research/Associate Executive Dean (Research and Impact) shall be included in the approval process.
- 7.3 If an application for admission to an intermediate stage is approved, credits for the earlier stages of the programme will be awarded. See paragraph 1.9.
- 7.4 If an application for exemption from specific courses is approved, credits will be awarded for the exempted courses. See paragraph 2.9.
- 7.5 The Executive Dean of the School or the Director of Learning and Teaching/Associate Executive Dean (Education and Student Life). may, on recommendation of the Admissions Tutor, require particular courses be undertaken instead of certain optional or elective courses so that the applicant has the pre-requisite knowledge and experience comparable to those who have progressed from earlier stages and/or already completed the designated courses. Credits will be awarded for any such courses successfully completed.
- 7.6 If an application for recognition of prior learning is not approved, the Admissions Tutor should provide feedback to the applicant, outlining the reasons for rejection and providing, where appropriate, advice on other opportunities. 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.

8. Record of Prior Learning

- 8.1 Online results and the formal, official Transcript of Assessment Results issued to graduating students by the Academic Registry will specify those stages and courses for which credits have been awarded through recognition of prior learning.

9. Supporting Transitions

- 9.1 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, eg through induction, summer school, transitional courses.

M.King
Academic Quality
September 2015; updated October 2016; minor revisions, December 2016
Reviewed for factual accuracy, May 2019

Revised and updated, December 2024
Revised version approved by UCQS, 28 May 2025