



# Policy and Regulations for the Recognition of Prior Learning

including the Recognition of Prior Certificated Learning (RPCL) and the Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning (RPEL)

## 2024-25

Issued by the Standards and Enhancement Office

Approved by Senate January 2024

Technical updates of this document are undertaken on an annual basis to reflect changes to the University's organisational and management structures and to incorporate earlier, approved amendments to related policies, procedures and regulations

This document relates to the current year. If you become aware of any previous versions that are available on line please notify [SEO@bolton.ac.uk](mailto:SEO@bolton.ac.uk) so that action can be taken to remove the document(s).

## 1. Introduction

The University recognises the value of different forms of learning wherever it occurs and this Policy sets out the University's principles for the recognition of prior learning gained through experiences or achievements and the associated assignment of credit against a University award.

## 2. Purpose of this RPL Policy

The Policy provides information and guidance for applicants, students, staff, employers and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) on the use of RPL at the University of Bolton. It sets out the University's criteria for assessing applications for the assignment of credit for prior learning, mapped to the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies (FHEQ).

RPL, the Recognition of Prior Learning, is a process through which students may apply for and receive credit towards part of their chosen programme of study based on recognition, identification and acknowledgement of learning from previous experience and achievements. It follows the principle that students should not duplicate previous learning.

The purpose of this policy is to allow flexibility for current and prospective students to use RPL procedures to their best effect while at the same time providing an overall framework within which regulatory and quality assurance issues are addressed across the University.

## 3. Scope and Definitions

The Policy covers the following types of prior learning:

- **Recognition of Prior 'Certificated' Learning (RPCL)** is the achievement of learning that has been formally assessed and certificated from previous study with a higher education organisation.
- **Recognition of Prior 'Experiential' Learning (RPEL)** is the non-certified acquisition of relevant skills and knowledge, gained through relevant experience, which can be evaluated.

Both types of prior learning are equally valid and can be used in the following situations:

### **Admission with Module(s) Exemption**

Where the amount of credit an applicant is awarded via **RPL** allows the applicant to gain exemption from one or more **modules**, but not a whole level or stage of study, within a programme.

### **Admission with Level(s) Exemption**

Where the amount of credit an applicant is awarded via **RPL** allows the applicant to gain exemption from at least one whole level or stage of study within a programme.

The following terms are also used within this Policy:

### **Assessment criteria**

Assessment criteria describe what the learner has to do to show that the **learning outcome** has been achieved. They are based on the intended learning outcomes for the module and assessment tasks being assessed and specify the standards that must be met and the evidence that will be gathered to demonstrate the achievement of the learning outcomes.

### **Credit**

A quantitative measure of the amount of learning required to achieve specified learning outcomes of a module or level within a programme of study, expressed as numbers of credits at a specific level or levels. In the University's credit framework, one credit equates to ten hours of required learning. The learning time includes class contact, directed learning, private study, preparation of assessments, revision and examinations.

### **Credit level**

Credit is expressed in terms of an academic level of study, which relates to the relative demand, complexity, depth of learning and learner autonomy required in order to achieve the learning outcomes of a module or level within a programme. Academic level is benchmarked to the OfS Sector Recognised Standards.

### **Credit transfer**

A mechanism which allows credit awarded by another HE provider to be recognised, quantified and included towards the credit requirements for a programme delivered by the University, and/or between programmes offered by the University.

### **Credit value**

The number of credits at a specified credit level, indicating the amount and difficulty of the learning achieved, based on notional hours of learning.

### **Double counting**

Double counting refers to the awarding of credit for the same learning to two (or more) separate qualifications at the same level. In effect, providing two qualifications 'for the price of one'. The University does not consider double counting to be educationally desirable or defensible and so will not normally permit RPL to be used for that purpose.

### **General credit (and exemption/transfer)**

Credit for prior learning, at a given level or levels, which can be used to gain exemption from studying a specified amount of credit at the given academic level(s) towards a qualification. This type of credit transfer is awarded if the prior learning is at, or above, the academic level(s) of the programme concerned and is deemed relevant to the qualification in terms of knowledge, understanding and skills. This type of credit exemption differs from specific credit exemption in that it does not exempt a learner from any specifically named module/s. Final award transcripts will indicate the number of credits a learner has been exempted from studying, and at what level/s, towards the qualification.

### **Learning outcomes**

Learning outcomes are specific for a programme or module. They describe what a student should know, understand, or be able to do at the end of that programme or module.

## **Module**

A self-contained, formally structured, learning experience with a coherent and explicit set of learning outcomes and assessment criteria. The standard module is the basic course unit in the Undergraduate or Postgraduate curriculum. In the University Professional Development framework some modules may be taken by students as “stand-alone” modules rather than as a component of a programme of study.

## **Notional hours of learning**

The number of hours which it is expected that a learner (at a particular level) will spend, on average, to achieve the specified learning outcomes at that level.

## **Specific credit (and exemption/transfer)**

Credit for prior learning, at a given level or levels, which can be used to gain exemption from a specific module or modules within an award of the University. To be eligible for credit transfer, the learning outcomes and academic level(s) of the prior learning must be at, or above, the learning outcomes and academic level(s) of the module/s from which exemption is being sought, and must be considered to be broadly in-line with the learning outcomes of the chosen qualification. Final award transcripts will specify which module/s a learner has been exempted from studying, along with their credit values and levels, towards the qualification.

## **4. Principles of this RPL Policy**

The University wishes to encourage and facilitate the admission of suitably qualified students to programmes of study through the use of RPL.

The University is committed to the principles of transparency, equity and fairness in RPL and to the principle of valuing all learning regardless of the mode or place of its acquisition.

The University accepts the principle that RPL is an academic activity and should only be performed by competent academic staff. External advice including from professional/regulatory bodies may be sought when appropriate to specific programmes and fields of practice.

The availability of RPL to current and prospective students should be advertised via appropriate University, School, and programme-level publicity. Schools will be responsible for documenting and operating their own RPL procedures which are appropriate for the needs of their programmes and students but which adhere to the general principles of this policy. In the case of collaborative partners, all RPL decisions will be taken by the School or Off-Campus Division RPL Panel whichever hosts the Programme Assessment Board.

RPL assessment by a School or academic area must take place in a timely manner, before or at the start of the programme of study.

RPL will only be permitted where the aims and Learning Outcomes of a programme of study can be met and evidenced. RPL will not normally be awarded to permit a student to obtain two qualifications at the same level (double counting).

It is the learning gained that can be claimed as RPL and in all cases evidence must be presented that shows that such learning has taken place.

All RPL applications must be accompanied with evidence that satisfies the following criteria:

- a) Validity: evidence must be provided (either of credits or qualifications achieved or a portfolio of evidence showing relevant experience) that shows a match between the prior learning and the module(s) at the University of Bolton.
- b) Currency: the prior learning must have been gained recently enough to make it still of value. Learning gained more than five years ago is unlikely to be considered; however, the final decision will take into account all relevant contextual information. Where applicants can demonstrate recent relevant experience, exceptions can be granted and qualifications older than 5 years can be considered under RPCL or RPEL.
- c) Authenticity: any certificates and transcripts must be clearly identified as having been achieved by the applicant/students and should be verifiable.

It is the applicant's responsibility to provide any certificates, academic transcripts or other relevant documents that are not in English with an officially certified translation.

RPL may not be permitted on certain programmes due to professional, statutory or regulatory body requirements.

RPL applications may include both prior certificated and experiential learning.

There is no automatic entitlement to RPL and each application is considered on its own merits.

## 5. Recognition of Prior Learning for Academic Credit towards a Programme of Study

### 5.1 RPL and Assessment

RPL may also be used for:

- gaining entry at a point subsequent to the initial entry point to a programme of study validated by the University.
- recognising previously accumulated credit achieved on a University of Bolton programme which forms part of a higher level award of the University.

The use of RPL for academic credit towards a programme of study is an assessment activity and as with all assessment decisions, the University has a responsibility to ensure that decisions are conducted transparently, fairly and consistently.

### 5.2 The Recognition of Prior *Certificated* Learning (RPCL)

The recognition of prior certificated learning involves the transfer of credit, or exemption from part of a programme, for learning that has previously been assessed. Credit for prior certificated learning may be counted towards a **subsequent** award requiring further credits at the same and/or higher level(s) where it can be established to the satisfaction of the University that this is educationally desirable and consistent with the approved aims, intended learning outcomes and curriculum of the University award.

However:

- credit will not normally be transferable in this way where the previous and subsequent award titles are effectively the same.
- credit will not normally be transferable in this way if it is considered not to be

educationally desirable to do so by the University because of the similarity of the aims, intended learning outcomes or curricula of the programmes leading to the two award titles (double counting).

Credit for previous certificated study awarded by a recognised body are equivalent to those awarded for study at the University.

It should be noted that, depending upon the subject area, the learning claimed for will need to have been undertaken within a reasonable timeframe to ensure that knowledge and techniques acquired remain current and appropriate for the programme of study applied for (see 7.2 below).

**Examples:**

*A student who has successfully completed a Higher National Certificate (HNC) applies to a Bachelor's degree in the same subject at the University. Following assessment, it is agreed that they will not have to take the first year (Level 4) of the programme as their HNC meets the learning outcomes for that level of study on that programme. Note that if the learning outcomes had not matched, the student might not have been able to obtain credit for the entire first year, despite having a qualification worth the same volume of credit as the first year of the undergraduate degree programme.*

*A student who had previously completed a Bachelor's degree could not use that Bachelor's degree to obtain another qualification of the same type, subject matter and level at another or the same institution. So, a business degree from institution X would not entitle a student to use RPL to obtain another business qualification at the same level at institution Y.*

### **5.3 The Recognition of Prior *Experiential* Learning (RPEL)**

RPEL involves an assessment process that leads to recognition, normally through the award of credit. The essential feature of RPEL is that it is the learning gained through experience that is being assessed, not the experience itself. It involves the mapping of approved module or level learning outcomes to learning previously gained through experience.

Evidence of the learning is therefore required which goes beyond simply verifying the learning experience.

Assessment of RPEL takes place at a School level. The School should satisfy itself that the applicant has sufficient knowledge and ability to have a reasonable expectation of completing the programme successfully. If a school is not satisfied that the experiential learning is equivalent to the standard of unit(s), it may require the applicant to undertake an appropriate method of assessment. In the case of collaborative partners, all RPEL decisions will be taken by the School or Off-Campus Division RPL Panel, whichever hosts the Programme Assessment Board.

## **6. Professional, Statutory or Regulatory Bodies and RPL**

RPL may only be considered where the requirements of a Professional, Statutory or Regulatory Body (PSRB) are met and RPL is permitted by the PSRB.

## **7. Process for Making a Claim for RPL**

### **7.1 Claims for the Recognition of Prior Certificated Learning**

In RPCL, the claimant has a certificate to evidence that the learning has been formally assessed by a recognised body or authority. It is the responsibility of the University to determine the status of such certification (including consideration of its content, volume, currency and level) as it relates to the programme of study to which the claimant is applying.

Documentary evidence forms the basis of a claim for RPCL and the process involves the stages laid out below. Where the evidence is fully documented and can be verified, the assessment of evidence may be carried out by the Admissions Tutor or Programme Leader for the programme.

#### **(a) The Process**

The main steps in the RPCL process are:

##### **Step 1: compilation of the evidence by the claimant**

This may include (but is not restricted to) academic transcripts, certificates and academic references, mapping of aims and learning outcomes.

##### **Step 2: submit the RPCL claim**

The claimant submits the compiled evidence together with an RPL claim form to the RPL Advisor, Admissions Tutor or Programme Leader (as determined by the relevant programme authorities).

##### **Step 3: the assessment of claims for RPCL**

The RPCL claim is assessed by an RPL Panel (as outlined by the Assessment Board regulations) organised at School/Division level and ratified by the relevant Assessment Board.

The claimant is then informed of the outcome.

### **7.2 Claims for the Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning**

A claim for RPEL places the responsibility on the (prospective) student to make a specific claim for recognition of prior experiential learning, often drawing on their own unique set of circumstances which need to be precisely identified and expressed and for which appropriate forms of supporting evidence need to be produced.

The learning is then assessed in terms of its equivalence to the learning outcomes for a module or programme level leading to an award of the University. The member(s) of staff assessing the claim, the RPEL Assessor(s), may require additional written assessment, demonstration activities or an interview to achieve a satisfactory assessment. It is important that the claimant is able to establish that they have the requisite knowledge to support their claim. The portfolio of evidence of such learning will form the basis of the claim for RPEL and will be taken through the steps laid out in section 7.2 (b) below.

## **(a) The Criteria**

In order to gain credit via RPEL, the claimant's learning will need to meet the following criteria:

- learning must be clearly differentiated from experience. (It is the claimant's knowledge, capacity for reflection, understanding and skills which are assessed for credit, not the experience in itself);
- learning must be at a level appropriate to the programme offered by the University;
- knowledge, understanding and skills must be current. While experience may have occurred at any time, the claimant must be able to demonstrate that the acquired learning is up to date and has current applicability;
- learning must be generally transferable outside the specific situation in which it was acquired. The learning should not be tied to one particular perspective but should show an ability to relate to a broader outlook;
- learning must be capable of being demonstrated to, and assessed by, an expert in an appropriate subject area.

## **(b) The Process**

The main steps in the RPEL process are:

### **Step 1: establishing the learning experience**

This may include (but is not limited to) work, education, home & family, voluntary work, political activity, travel, leisure interests or reading & research

### **Step 2: identifying the learning which has taken place**

This involves the careful examination and reflection of prior experiential learning to identify:

- the knowledge gained and applied;
- the skills acquired and used;
- other relevant aspects (e.g. feelings, attitudes, key elements of experience).

### **Step 3: expressing the learning and preparing precise learning claims**

The portfolio put forward for RPEL is expected to contain specific claims relating to the claimant's learning. It is important that claims are expressed in a way which indicates as precisely as possible the nature and the level of learning and how these equate to the learning outcomes for the module(s) and level(s) for which exemptions are being sought.

### **Step 4: compiling a portfolio which contains the learning claims and supporting evidence to substantiate these claims**

A portfolio of experiential learning is a collection of materials compiled by the claimant to gain academic credit. It describes the learning which they have derived from their



experiences. The portfolio includes claims to that learning, with supporting evidence, which allows the claims can be assessed.

Each portfolio will be an individualised statement of experiential learning and although there are no specific models or criteria, successful claims will include portfolios that contain both direct and indirect evidence:

- direct evidence may include project reports, databases, case study notes, correspondence, conference papers, work plans.
- indirect evidence may include statements from employers, customers or clients; documentation on courses undertaken; appraisals, references; letters of validation from people who are in a position to judge the value and quality of the learning.

### **Step 5: the assessment of claims for RPEL**

The recognition of prior experiential learning involves an assessment process on the part of the University's academic staff that leads to recognition. The RPEL claim is assessed by an RPL Panel (as outlined by in Annex A and the Assessment Board regulations) organised at School/Division level and ratified by the relevant Assessment Board.

Checks are made to evaluate each item of evidence to ensure that the learning is appropriate to the learning objectives of the academic award being sought.

Normally an assessment interview will be held to test claims to learning. Assessors might ask the claimant to undertake an assessment exercise to substantiate aspects of the learning claims. These exercises could be written assignments, demonstration activities or examinations, possibly taken from the module(s) for which credit is being claimed. Where further evidence is required, the opportunity will normally be given to produce this. If successful, the RPL Panel will assign credit points at the appropriate level to the experiential learning. This credit rating will be subject to the approval of the appropriate Assessment Board.

## **8. The Role of Assessment Boards**

The RPL Panel has designated authority from the relevant Assessment Board. Once claims for RPL have been submitted and assessed they should be presented to an Assessment Board to ratify the RPL decision. The usual policies and procedures relating to mitigating circumstances and academic misconduct apply. The terms of reference for the PRPL Panel is given at Annex A.

## **9. Notification of RPL Outcome**

Following the RPL Panel's decision, the claimant should be advised of the outcome of their claim, and receive feedback on their submission. All claimants should receive summative feedback and where appropriate formative feedback on their application for RPL, whether their claim is successful or not. Assessment forms a key part of the learning process and RPL claimants who do not take part in the usual assessment process for a module or level of the programme should not be disadvantaged. RPL claims are an alternative assessment tool and Schools should ensure the RPL claimants gain as much from the assessment process for their RPL claim as they would through engaging with the usual assessment process for the module or level.

## 10. Resubmission and Appeals of Unsuccessful Claims for RPL

### 10.1 Resubmission of an unsuccessful claim

RPL claimants whose claim for credit is unsuccessful may be permitted one resubmission at the discretion of the Assessor(s).

### 10.2 Appeals in relation to unsuccessful claims

Claimants may request a review of the decisions of the RPL assessment under the University's Appeal Regulations if it is believed they meet the grounds outlined in those regulations.

#### **Note:**

Decisions based on academic judgement cannot form the basis of an appeal.

Submission of an appeal is only possible once the decision on a claim for RPL has been decided by an RPL Panel.

## 11. Limits on Credit RPL Claims

11.1 Applications can be made for any level of a University award subject to any limitations detailed in the programme specification (e.g. limits imposed by course teams or professional bodies) and as stated below. Formal certificated learning that has occurred **up to five years prior** to the start date of the award will normally be considered. The smallest unit of recognition will be one module.

11.2 The guidelines to be followed when assessing RPL applications is indicated in Table 1.

11.3 Exceptions to the guideline in 11.2 are only permitted where they are set out in programme specific regulations. In determining the precise volume of credit exemption applied, due regard will be paid to the overall educational experience and ensuring that there is experience of the taught component of a taught programme.

11.4 Any such exceptions must be clearly communicated to applicants and must take account of the following:

- Sufficient credit must be obtained at the University of Bolton in order for the award to be conferred, including the final stage of a programme. For example, for undergraduate degree programmes this must include the final year of study. Please note that only credits awarded by the University of Bolton will be used in the award calculation.
- The nature of the dissertation or final stage project. Dissertation or final stage projects are not normally eligible for PRL. Consideration should also be given when assessing RPL claims to the benefits associated with undertaking preparatory modules and building supervisor relationships at the University.
- In determining the precise volume of credit exemption applied, due regard will be paid to the overall educational experience and ensuring that there is experience of the taught component of a taught programme.

11.5 RPL may not be claimed against any component of an undergraduate or postgraduate ‘top-up’ programme, except where a module previously undertaken at the University of Bolton forms part of the top-up qualification itself.

**Table 1. Normal limits on RPL Credit for intended awards (note that this table does not apply to exit qualifications)**

Award type	Number of credit points for award	Maximum amount of RPL credit permitted*
<i>Undergraduate Level Award</i>		
Honours Degree	360	240
Foundation Degree / Dip HE/HND	240	120
<i>Postgraduate Level Award</i>		
Master’s Degree	180	100
Postgraduate Diploma	120	60
Postgraduate Certificate	60	30
Professional Doctorate	540	180 Level HE7 Masters modules only
Integrated Masters	480 120 at HE7	320 none of which to be at level HE7

\* Where modules/programmes undertaken previously at the University of Bolton form part of a higher level programme, these RPL credit limits do not apply. For example, if a student has undertaken a 120 credit Postgraduate Diploma at the University of Bolton which forms part of a Master’s degree, then they need only to take the outstanding 60 credits to complete the Master’s degree.

## 12. Marks Awarded for RPL and Impact on Degree Classifications

12.1 Where a student is awarded credits as a result of a claim for RPL, no marks will be awarded, except where exempted modules have been taken at the University of Bolton and are an approved part the overall programme.

12.2 Where no marks are awarded the classification will be based purely on the modules taken at the University of Bolton.

12.3 Where an award offers the possibility of passing with merit or distinction as in the case of taught Postgraduate programmes, a candidate who has been admitted with RPL credit must have attained the following minimum amount of University of Bolton credit to be eligible to be considered for merit or distinction:

- For a Foundation Degree 120 credits achieved at the University of Bolton;
- For a PGCert 30 credits achieved at the University of Bolton;
- For a PGDip 60 credits achieved at the University of Bolton;
- For Master's 80 credits achieved at the University of Bolton.

Where a student may be considered for an exit qualification, normally only 50% of the credits required for that qualification may be drawn from RPL.

### 13. Fees for RPL Claims

Fees may be charged for an RPL claim depending on the circumstances in which the claim is being made.

13.1 Fees **will not normally** be charged for:

- Applications for RPCL;
- RPEL claims used purely for admissions purposes (but not for advanced standing). Charging a fee for RPEL in this circumstance could be regarded as providing a barrier to entry and therefore against the principles of widening participation.

13.2 Fees **will be** charged in the case of applications involving RPEL that are intended to result in the award of credit against one or more modules and that apply to:

- **Part-time** and **full-time undergraduate** students;
- **Part-time** and **full-time postgraduate** (including research) students and professional programmes.

13.3 RPEL fees are charged for the process rather than the outcome. Where incurred, fees are payable:

- **In advance** of submitting the formal application for RPEL;
- At the rate of 20% of the module fee for which specific credit is being claimed;
- At the rate of 20% of the total level fee for the named programme.

#### Notes:

- No refunds will be made for unsuccessful claims;
- An application for RPCL or RPEL may have implications on student funding and financial support arrangements.

## 14. Quality Assurance

The Standards and Enhancement Office (SEO) will conduct periodic reviews of RPL activity which will be submitted to Education Committee for information. Reviews will include:

- The level and nature of RPL activity across the University (including that associated with collaborative arrangements as appropriate);
- Recommendations for amendments to *Policy and Regulations for the Recognition of Prior Learning*;
- Issues of academic standards vis-à-vis RPL;
- School-level summaries of RPL;
- Other Institution-wide issues arising from or related to the *Policy and Regulations for the Recognition of Prior Learning*.

## ANNEX A: MEMBERSHIP AND TERMS OF REFERENCE OF RPL PANELS

### Membership:

Head of School (Chair)

Academic Co-ordinator Standards, Enhancement and the Learner Experience or Quality Lead (Vice Chair)

Two senior academics from the School

Note: A senior academic shall be an academic at the level of Senior Lecturer or higher.

### In attendance:

Relevant Programme Leader (RPL assessor) Member  
of Academic Support Services (Secretary)

The quorum shall be two members. The RPL assessor may not be a member of the RPL Panel.

### Terms of reference:

1. RPL Panels shall operate in accordance with the General Responsibilities of Assessment Boards, as outlined in section 2 of the *Regulations for the Organisation and Conduct of Assessment Boards*.
2. RPL Panels shall consider the recommendations of the RPL assessor in respect of applications for RPCL and RPEL and determine whether credit exemptions should be applied and, if so, at what level and quantity this should be.
3. The RPL Panel should make their recommendation to the Chair of the relevant Assessment Board for further action, including acceptance, rejection or further detail or information.

### Frequency of meetings:

Meetings should be held as frequently as required to expedite a swift response to applications for RPCL and/or RPEL. Meetings may be held virtually provided a record is kept of proceedings.

<b>POLICY AND REGULATIONS FOR THE RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING</b>	
Policy ref: SEO/App2	
Version number	02
Version date	January 2024
Name of Developer/Reviewer	Hilary Birtwistle
Policy Owner (Group/Centre/Unit)	SEO
Person responsible for implementation (postholder)	Heads of Schools, Admissions
Approving committee/board	Senate
Date approved	January 2024
Effective from	September 2024
Dissemination method e.g. website	Website
Review frequency	Annually
Reviewing committee	Education Committee
Consultation history (individuals/group consulted and dates)	Drafts of the regulation have been considered by: Education Committee Senate
Document history (e.g. rationale for and dates of previous amendments)	This was an update of the previous Recognition of Prior Learning policy and procedures.