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)

2023-24

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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 so that action can be taken to remove the document(s).

1. Purpose of this RPL Policy

RPL - the Recognition of Prior Learning (previously known as Accreditation of Prior Learning) is a process through which students may receive credit towards part of their chosen programme of study based on recognition, identification and acknowledgement of learning from previous experience and achievements. This RPL policy takes the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (UKQC) into account, in particular Chapters B2: Admissions and B6: Assessment of Students and Recognition of Prior Learning. There are two RPL pathways through which credit can be awarded:

- **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.

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.

Glossary of terms

Throughout this document the following terms will be used as defined below.

Advanced entry
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.

Advanced standing
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.

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 accumulation
Achieving academic credit over time by successful completion of units of study or by recognition of prior learning.

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 *UK Quality Code for Higher Education, Part A: Setting and Maintaining Academic Standards, The Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies, October 2014*.

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 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 equivalent to, 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 curriculum and is normally worth 20 credits. In the Postgraduate curriculum credit values are more variable. 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 equivalent to, 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.

2. 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 and advice 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 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).

3. Use of RPL for Admission at the Standard Entry Level of a Programme

RPL may be used for gaining entry, at the initial point of entry, to a programme of study validated by the University. Recognition of prior learning for admission is an admissions activity and, as such, the University Admissions Policy and Procedures should be followed and UK Quality Code Chapter B2: Admissions applies. Guidance in relation to the recognition of prior learning for admission at the standard entry point of a programme is provided on the University's Admissions web pages: http://www.bolton.ac.uk/Admissions

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

4.1 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 (Advanced Entry or Advanced Standing);

- recognising previously accumulated credit which can then count towards an award of the University.

The use of RPL for academic credit towards a programme of study is an assessment activity and the UKQC Chapter B6: Assessment of Students and the Recognition of Prior Learning applies:

> The Quality Code sets out the following Expectation about the assessment of students and the recognition of prior learning, which higher education providers are required to meet.
> **Higher education providers operate equitable, valid and reliable processes of assessment, including the recognition of prior learning, which enable every student to demonstrate the extent to which they have achieved the intended learning outcomes for the credit or qualification being sought.**

In other words, Chapter B6 of the UKQC applies both to learning within the student's programme of study and learning at an equivalent level achieved outside of the programme of study. In both cases, recognition takes place in accordance with the University's regulations. As with all assessment decisions, the University has a responsibility to ensure that decisions are conducted transparently, fairly and consistently.

4.2 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, as per the QAA Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ);

- 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 10.1, below).

Examples:
A student who has successfully completed a Higher National Certificate (HNC) applies to a Bachelors 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 Bachelors degree could not use that Bachelors 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.

4.3 The Recognition of Prior *Experiential* Learning (RPEL)

RPEL involves an assessment process that leads to recognition, normally through the award of credit. As stated in the UKQC Chapter B6,

> **The essential feature of (RPEL) is that it is the learning gained through experience which is being assessed, not the experience itself.**

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.

5. 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.

6. Process for Making a Claim for RPL

6.1 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: compile the evidence

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.

6.2 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 learning, often drawing on his or her 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 that expected on a module or programme 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 6.2 (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 a 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.

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:

(a) direct evidence may include project reports, databases, case study notes, correspondence, conference papers, work plans.

(b) 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.

7. 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.

8. Notification of RPL Outcomes

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.

9. Resubmission and Appeals of Unsuccessful Claims for RPL

9.1 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).

9.2 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.

10. LIMITS ON CREDIT RPL CLAIMS

10.1 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.

10.2 The maximum credit claimable through an RPL process is normally two thirds of the total credits for an undergraduate qualification and half of the total credits for a taught postgraduate qualification, although lower thresholds may be applied in some instances, as illustrated in figure 1. Exceptions to these rules for specific programmes may be approved by Senate from time-to-time through the programme approval process, where there is a strong academic case to do so. 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.

10.3 RPL may not be claimed against any component of a 'top-up' degree programme.

Note:
No RPL credit will be awarded for the dissertation element of an Undergraduate or Masters programme.

Figure 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	Total amount of RPL credit permitted
Undergraduate Level Award		
Graduate Diploma	120	80
Honours Degree	360	240
Foundation Degree / Dip HE	240	120
Postgraduate Level Award		
Master's Degree	180	90
Postgraduate Diploma	120	60
Postgraduate Certificate	60	30
Professional Doctorate	540	220
Integrated Masters	240	240

11. Marks Awarded for RPL and Impact on Degree Classifications

11.1 Where a student is awarded credits as a result of a claim for RPL, no marks will normally be awarded.

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

11.3 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 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 Masters 90 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.

12. Fees for RPL Claims

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

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

- All 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.

12.2 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.

12.3 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.

13. Quality Assurance

The Standards and Enhancement Office (SEO) will conduct an annual review of RPL activity which will be submitted to Education Committee for information. This review 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 (or their nominee) (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.

POLICY AND REGULATIONS FOR THE RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING	
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