



## **SPA briefing: Accreditation and Recognition of Prior Learning – definitions and examples**

October 2014

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### **Introduction**

As part of SPA's remit to promote fair admissions and disseminate good practice across the HE sector,<sup>1</sup> we are committed to supporting HE providers in the holistic assessment of each applicant as an individual. This includes working with HE providers to facilitate the consideration of:

- vocational as well as 'traditional' qualifications
- prior certificated and/or experiential learning
- relevant work experience and skills
- contextual information and data

This 'definitions and examples' briefing document is intended to assist HE providers with developing policy on the recognition of prior learning (RPL) for entry to their programmes, and the accreditation of prior learning (APL) for advanced standing or to be exempted from particular modules/units. This is not meant to supply an exhaustive list of the ways in which these areas are described by HE providers, but to discuss them within the context of ensuring that applicants with all types of qualifications and experience are provided with quality of opportunity to progress to HE.

### **SPA's definitions of prior learning, RPL and APL**

Recognition and accreditation of prior learning form an approach by which the effective use of learning from life and work experience can contribute to progression to HE. Such an approach demonstrates positive support for access and widening inclusion, and recognises the achievements of students who have followed less traditional educational routes.

#### *Prior learning*

Approaches to prior learning typically include policies and practices designed to recognise or accredit learning and achievement which:

- occurred prior to the formal HE programme on which the applicant is planning to embark, *and*
- has been previously assessed and certificated, *or*
- occurred in a work-/community-based setting, but not as a formal part of that experience, *or*
- was concurrent with – but not a formal aspect of – participation in an HE programme, *or*
- was gained through experience and critical reflection, outside of a formal learning programme

#### *Accreditation of prior learning*

SPA uses the term *accreditation of prior learning* (APL) to encompass consideration of prior learning both for fulfilling the entry requirements for an HE programme and to support a request for entry with advanced standing (e.g. into the second year of a degree course) or exemption from particular units or modules. This can further be broken down into two key types of prior learning:

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on SPA's work, see [www.spa.ac.uk](http://www.spa.ac.uk).

- accreditation of prior certificated learning (APCL) – giving recognition to learning that has been formally assessed, and for which a certificate has been awarded; in many cases this will be relatively straightforward to identify and recognise
- accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) – giving recognition to knowledge and skills gathered through experience (including employment and voluntary activities), rather than through a certificated programme of study or training

### *Recognition of prior learning*

The term *recognition of prior learning* (RPL) is essentially synonymous with *accreditation of prior learning*, describing the process of identifying and evidencing learning that has occurred outside of formal educational contexts. It is more prevalent among HE providers in Scotland, where QAA Scotland is working with HE providers to develop a [National Framework for the Recognition of Prior Learning](#).

### *Advanced standing*

The term *advanced standing* is generally used in relation to HE providers awarding credit on the basis of one or more learning outcomes of a particular HE programme having been met by study completed elsewhere. If sufficient course curriculum or achievement requirements have been met, this may enable the student to enter the course/programme at a later date or in a later year.

For some HE providers, advanced standing will be a common progression route, for example for students progressing to a degree programme from an HND/HNC or from a foundation degree. Other HE providers may only occasionally consider applications for advanced standing, on a case-by-case basis and after details have been submitted directly to the provider in parallel with a standard application.

In either case, HE providers will need to define their understanding of advanced standing within their courses/programmes, and indicate clearly within entry requirements whether APL for advanced standing is available for each course/programme, and what the procedure and requirements for consideration are. In addition, HE providers should give thought to the fact that students starting in anything other than the first year of their chosen programme of study are likely to have differing support needs to those following the standard progression route.

### *Credit accumulation and transfer systems (CATS)*

There has been an interest in the use of credit accumulation and transfer systems (CATS) in the UK stretching back to the 1963 Robbins Report's recommendation that there should be 'opportunities for the transfer of a student from one institution to another'.<sup>2</sup> There is currently no consistent CATS among UK HE practitioners; however, some HE providers choose to articulate their APL policy within a CATS framework, to enable the recognition and accreditation of knowledge and skills acquire both within and outside of HE. [University College Falmouth](#) provides one such example.

HE providers considering a CATS approach may find it instructive to consider the guidelines and key documents provided for implementation of the [European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System](#) (ECTS), which links into the Bologna process and aims to allow for the transfer of learning experiences across Europe.

### **The QAA's definitions of recognition and accreditation of prior learning**

The QAA chooses to create a clear distinction between the recognition of prior learning for the purposes of meeting HE entry requirements, and the accreditation of prior learning to facilitate entry with advanced standing or to gain exemptions from part of a programme. These are covered by different Chapters of the *UK Quality Code for Higher Education*, and thus by different Expectations.

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<sup>2</sup> The Robbins Report, p. 9, [www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/robbins/robbins1963.html](http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/robbins/robbins1963.html), accessed July 2014.

It is worth stressing, however, that the *Quality Code* is intended to function as a whole, and SPA recommends that HE providers wishing to accredit prior learning for advanced standing/exemption develop their policy with reference to both Chapter B6 and Chapter B2, and ensure that this policy is either embedded within or clearly signposted from the overarching admissions policy.

#### *RPL to meet entry requirements for a programme*

The QAA covers the use of RPL to meet entry requirements under [Chapter B2: Recruitment, selection and admission to higher education](#). The Expectation for this chapter covers all aspects of recruitment, selection and admissions – in essence affirming the principles for fair admissions recommended in the Schwartz report<sup>3</sup> - but specific mention of prior learning is made in the explanatory text for Indicator 7 (which stipulates transparent entry requirements that present ‘no unnecessary barriers’):

*In assessing achievement and potential to succeed, or in differentiating between prospective students with broadly equivalent knowledge, skills and experience (including recognition of prior learning), higher education providers give careful consideration to the different ways in which required or desirable characteristics might be demonstrated, and the variety of ways in which learning can take place. For example, learning can be experiential (for example, acquired through the workplace) as well as formal.*

Reference is also made to RPL in the context of ensuring sufficient and correct information is communicated to prospective students and their advisors. The focus within the context of the chapter is clearly placed on using RPL to give fair treatment to those who may not have ‘traditional’ qualifications.

#### *APL for credit and/or advanced standing*

The use of APL for credit or advanced standing is explicitly excluded from the remit of Chapter B2, and instead covered by [Chapter B6: Assessment of students and accreditation of prior learning](#). This chapter sets out the following Expectation, applying to both internal assessments and accreditation of prior learning:

*Higher education providers ensure that students have appropriate opportunities to show they have achieved the intended learning outcomes for the award of a qualification or credit.*

The QAA also note the relevance in this context of the Expectation for [Chapter A6](#):

*Higher education providers ensure the assessment of students is robust, valid and reliable and that the award of qualifications and credit are based on the achievement of the intended learning outcomes.*

The Indicators and explanatory text of Chapter B6 do not draw out the distinction between assessment of current students and accreditation of prior learning, and it is clear that the same standards and level of evidence should be used to demonstrate internal and external achievement of learning outcomes.

### **Resources and example HE provider policies**

HE providers should have a transparent policy in relation to APL/RPL, both for the meeting of entry requirements and for exemptions or advanced standing – this remains true even if the policy is not to permit advanced standing under any circumstances. Clearly articulating this policy in all relevant printed materials and on your website demonstrates a commitment to transparency with regard to your treatment of prior learning.

A clearly articulated policy is also a vital resource for ensuring a coherent approach to APL/RPL in more devolved admissions systems. While specific approaches may justifiably differ between courses and programmes, the methodology and rationale for consideration of prior learning should be consistent across the institution.

<sup>3</sup> See [www.spa.ac.uk/resources/what-fair-admissions](http://www.spa.ac.uk/resources/what-fair-admissions) for more detail on the principles of fair admissions and the Schwartz Report.

The resources and example policies – some at the institutional level, some at the course/programme level – provided below may be of help in designing, evaluating or reviewing your policy on APL/RPL. The inclusion or particular HE providers' policies within this list does not constitute endorsement by SPA of the content or structure of these documents, and individual discretion is advised in deciding what elements, if any, to incorporate within your institution's own admissions policy.

*Example HE provider policies on APL/RPL<sup>4</sup> and other resources*

[Aberystwyth University](#) – including use of a CATS framework

[Bath Spa University](#) – including questions to ask when assessing APCL claims

[Birkbeck, University of London](#)

[University of Birmingham](#)

[Buckinghamshire New University](#)

[Durham University](#)

[Edge Hill University](#)

[University of Essex](#)

[University College Falmouth](#) – including use of a CATS framework

[University of Gloucestershire](#) – including [FAQ for students](#)

[University of Huddersfield](#) – presented FAQ-style

[Liverpool John Moores University](#)

[University of Manchester](#)

[University of Nottingham](#) – including policy on 'double counting'

[Queen's University Belfast](#) – see page 9

[University of Reading](#)

[University of St Andrews](#)

[University of Stirling](#) – including links to ECTS

[University of West London](#)

[University of Winchester](#) – including guidance on portfolio evidence for APEL

[QAA Quality Code, Chapter B2: Recruitment, selection and admission to higher education](#)

[QAA Quality Code, Chapter B6: Assessment of students and accreditation of prior learning](#)

[QAA Scotland's work on streamlining and developing a National Framework for RPL](#)

[European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System \(ECTS\)](#)

If you have a recommendation for further policies or other resources to be added to this list, or any enquiries with regard to APL/RPL, please contact [enquiries@spa.ac.uk](mailto:enquiries@spa.ac.uk).

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with acknowledgments to Annie Doyle, previously SPA Senior Project Officer.

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[www.spa.ac.uk/](http://www.spa.ac.uk/)

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<sup>4</sup> SPA takes no responsibility for the content of external websites; all links active at time of publication (October 2014).