

RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING POLICY

Introduction

1. The University of Suffolk recognises that learning may take place in a wide variety of contexts, including via formal taught courses, self-directed study and professional or life experiences. The Recognition of Prior Learning Policy is designed to facilitate formal recognition of learning undertaken elsewhere, supporting our institutional mission to widen participation and promote equality and diversity. The Policy has been mapped to the [UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#) (2024), together with the associated Code Advice and Guidance and other Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) publications. The overall aim of the Policy is to provide a framework within which decisions about Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) are valid, consistent, timely and fair.

Definitions

2. For taught provision, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is the overarching term used for the award of credit on the basis of demonstrated learning that has occurred at some time in the past either through attending formal courses (prior certificated learning) or through paid or unpaid work, self-directed learning or other life experiences (prior experiential learning). The theme common to both prior certificated learning and prior experiential learning is that learning, and not just the experience of the activities alone, is being recognised and awarded credit. The term is also used for the recognition of prior training and/or research towards a postgraduate research (PGR) award, to allow entry into a more advanced stage of a research degree programme.

3. Recognition of Prior Certificated Learning (RPCL) is the process for assessing, recognising and awarding credit for learning that has been previously accredited, formally recognised or certificated through a higher education institution or other higher education / training provider. This can include professional development or employment-based awards offered at higher education level that have not led to the award of credits or qualifications positioned on the [Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree Awarding Bodies \(2024\)](#) (FHEQ).

4. Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning (RPEL) is the process for assessing, recognising and/or awarding credit for learning that has been achieved through experience and/or training that has not been formally assessed.

Principles

5. Credits may be given for prior learning where the level, standard, content, relevance and currency of that learning are appropriate to a particular programme of study. Credit may be awarded via RPL for:

- a) individual modules (noting that RPL can only be awarded for whole modules), where the applicant or student can demonstrate that they meet the assessment requirements for the module through knowledge, understanding and/or skills that they already possess as a result of prior learning and/or
- b) for an entire level of study (i.e. 120 credits), where the applicant or student can demonstrate that they meet the assessment requirements for the relevant level of study through knowledge, understanding and/or skills that they already possess as a result of prior learning.

6. Applicants or students awarded credit against modules or levels of study are exempt from the requirement to study those modules or levels as part of their programme of study. Students may still be required to pay a module fee (see paragraph 42).

7. Credit achieved at Level 3, including Foundation Year Courses, will not usually be considered for RPL, but may be considered when assessing whether an applicant meets the entry requirements for a course.

8. For postgraduate research degree applicants, recognition of prior learning may be granted as part of the admissions process where prior training and/or research towards a PGR award demonstrates achievement of the University's postgraduate research milestones for the relevant stage of study for which they are seeking exemption. Applicants granted recognition of prior learning will have their standard period of study reduced to allow entry into the relevant stage of the research degree programme.

9. The maximum amount of credit that can be awarded or prior learning recognised via RPL is specified within the framework and regulations for the relevant type of award. Any course-specific variations to these regulations must be identified and approved at the point of course validation or re-approval and recorded as variations detailed within the relevant Frame and Regulations for the award (for example, some awards may exclude or limit the use of RPL due to Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body (PSRB) requirements). RPL cannot be awarded for undergraduate (Level 6) or postgraduate (Level 7) dissertation or research project modules.

10. To avoid double counting, credits obtained through prior certificated learning cannot be recognised where the qualification previously awarded is at the same level and in a similar subject area to the intended University of Suffolk award. Recognition of credit towards a University of Suffolk award at a higher level may be permitted, subject to the limits on RPL set out in paragraph 7 above.

11. Credits for RPL are of the same value as those gained within the institution and are recorded on a student's Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR). However, unless they involve internal transfers (as discussed in paragraph 16 below), the credits are ungraded and therefore do not contribute to the overall degree classification. Credit recognition is facilitated by the Higher Education Credit Framework for England and the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS).

12. A student granted credit towards an award on the basis of prior learning cannot subsequently use that credit towards a further award offered at the institution, unless the student is granted credit for prior learning as part of a course with a direct progression route (for example a Foundation degree course with an associated Level 6 honours degree progression route).

13. The period of time for which prior learning remains valid and worthy of credit is discipline-specific. Decisions on the 'shelf-life' of prior learning must be made at course level. Normally, learning should have occurred within the past five years, unless the applicant or student can evidence updating of skills and knowledge in the subject area since completing the prior learning (for example through professional practice or continuing professional development activity).

14. Course documentation (including the definitive course record) must be explicit in stating where there are PSRB requirements that might affect an applicant or student's ability to make a RPL claim for credit against certain modules or levels of study. Students are responsible for familiarising themselves with this information in order to make informed decisions about the consequences of applying for RPL.

15. The RPL assessment process must be applied consistently in accordance with these principles and any specific RPL requirements of individual courses, as determined at validation.

Credit gained at the University of Suffolk

16. In accordance with the University's [Student Transfer Arrangements](#), students who gain credit on one course at the University of Suffolk, but subsequently transfer to another University of Suffolk course and do not receive an intermediate exit award may be able to have the credit

and marks transferred to the new course where there is appropriate alignment in terms of learning outcomes. For such internal transfers, the credit and marks at the appropriate level may be used to determine the final degree classification.

17. Students who withdraw from a course may not rejoin the same course if they were originally required by the Assessment Board to withdraw from that course for academic reasons including academic failure or misconduct; if they were required to withdraw for reasons relating to fitness to practise; if the course leads to professional registration with a PSRB and they have already been awarded an exit award (which is considered a final award); or where the maximum period of registration has been exceeded. The decision as to whether there is a good cause to permit a student to rejoin the course or join an alternative course with academic credit will be made as part of the standard University admissions process. Where necessary, the application may be referred to the Assessment Board to determine whether there should be a cap on the overall module mark for any modules that the student previously failed and needs to retake. The student must complete a minimum of 60 credits on rejoining the course or joining an alternative course in order to be eligible for a higher level award. Only the credit achieved on rejoining the course or joining the alternative course with academic credit will be used to determine the final degree classification.

18. Students wishing to return to study in the cycle immediately after are required to make an application in the usual way and will be subject to the terms of the Admissions Policy.

Applying for RPL – University apprenticeship programmes

19. All apprenticeship programmes must operate in accordance with the Government funding and performance management rules for apprenticeships, as published by the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) (hereafter referred to as “the funding rules”). In accordance with the University of Suffolk [Higher and Degree Apprenticeship Framework](#), the University is responsible for checking the eligibility for funding for individuals prior to admission to the apprenticeship programme, in accordance with the eligibility criteria outlined in the funding rules. As part of this, the University is required to demonstrate that the content of the apprenticeship programme for each individual apprentice is materially different to any prior learning. An initial assessment of the apprentice’s existing knowledge, skills and behaviours against those required to achieve occupational competence must therefore be undertaken as part of the process for determining eligibility for admission to an apprenticeship programme, through discussion between the Course Leader and the apprentice. This should include consideration of any knowledge, skills or behaviours gained via prior certificated or experiential learning.

20. Any relevant prior learning identified through the initial assessment process should be recorded on the apprenticeship Initial Needs Assessment form and formally approved by the Course Leader for credit recognition purposes. All documentation relating to the Initial Needs Assessment, including associated RPL decisions, should be stored in the apprentice evidence pack and made available for subsequent Assessment Board (including external examiner) scrutiny.

21. Where prior learning is formally recognised, the University must ensure that the content, duration and price of the apprenticeship programme is adjusted accordingly. This is to ensure that apprenticeship funding is not used to pay for, or recognise and accredit, existing knowledge, skills and behaviours. For University apprenticeship programmes, this should be undertaken in liaison with the Finance Department, the Head of Apprenticeships and the ILR and Funding Manager.

Applying for RPL – all other programmes

22. Applicants should normally request RPL as part of the admissions process, with the Admissions team coordinating the process on the applicants' behalf. Potential applicants who may be eligible for RPL should be made aware of the opportunities available, and associated timescales, as part of the recruitment and admissions process. RPL may be awarded at other points during a student's period of study at the discretion of the relevant Assessment Board (for example where an enrolled student is studying part-time and gains relevant learning experience through employment in parallel to their academic studies), and in these situations the process will be coordinated by the Course Administration team or partner equivalent.

23. Applicants and students should be encouraged to request RPL in a timely manner, to enable RPL decisions to be made prior to the commencement of the element(s) of the course for which they are seeking exemption. This is particularly important for applicants who are seeking exemption from an entire level of study as part of the admissions process, so that their application can be considered and approved before they commence their studies at the appropriate level. Where applicants or students are seeking exemption for individual module(s), they should attend and submit any appropriate assessment for those elements of their course for which RPL is being sought while they await the outcome of their RPL application.

24. Applicants with prior certificated learning are required to submit evidence of their prior learning (see evidence requirements in paragraph 28) in accordance with specified deadlines, to enable the Admissions team to complete Part A of the RPCL application form. If the evidence is not submitted by the specified deadline, the applicant will be considered for admission to the

course at the standard entry point. Where appropriate for applicants applying to the same course with the same prior certificated learning from the same institution, the RPCL application form may be used to seek RPCL for multiple applicants. The applicant will be notified by the Admissions team of anticipated timescales for reaching a decision on their application and the means by which they will be informed of the outcome.

25. Applicants or students with prior experiential learning will be required to complete a RPEL mapping sheet and provide a portfolio of evidence to support their application (see evidence requirements in paragraphs 29 and 30), with the support of the relevant Course Leader. Receipt of submitted RPEL mapping sheets will be formally acknowledged within ten working days, and the applicant / student will be notified of anticipated timescales for reaching a decision on their application and the means by which they will be informed of the outcome.

26. Postgraduate research degree applicants who have undertaken prior training and/or research towards a PGR award will be required to discuss their application with the PGR lead within the relevant academic school prior to submitting it. Their application should include documentary evidence of the prior learning (for example progress review records and/or a statement from their previous institution confirming their period of registration and that progress has been satisfactory). Prior learning/training and research outputs should be mapped against the postgraduate research milestones for the relevant stage of study for which they are seeking exemption, as outlined in Appendix A of the Framework and Regulations for Research Degree Awards.

27. Information and guidance for applicants and students on applying for RPL (both written and verbal) will clearly outline the process for making an application, the evidence that is required to support applications, the criteria against which decisions will be made, and the potential implications of a successful RPL application in terms of a student's registration status, tuition fees and final degree classification. In addition, Course Leaders or their nominees are responsible for providing subject-specific information, advice and guidance to applicants and students on applying for RPL.

Evidencing prior learning

28. Evidence of prior certificated learning should include:

- a) copies of relevant certificates
- b) course documentation evidencing content, learning outcomes and level of study
- c) details of module results (for example via an academic transcript or equivalent).

29. Evidence of prior experiential learning should include:
- a) a systematic personal reflection on relevant learning experiences and how these have furthered their understanding of the relevant subject area
 - b) clear statements about the learning achieved through these experiences and how this relates to the learning outcomes for the relevant element(s) of the University of Suffolk course for which they are seeking exemption
 - c) evidence to support these statements, which might include:
 - confirmation of job responsibilities and job description by a line-manager
 - a record of achievements
 - details of specialist training / skills
 - contact details of referees who can comment on the applicant's achievements
 - other documentation to demonstrate the learning outcomes achieved.

30. Evidence of prior experiential learning is usually submitted via a portfolio, although alternative forms of assessment may also be employed to suit the particular needs of individual courses (including structured interviews, presentations, performances or other assessment tasks). Interviews, presentations or performances should be recorded so that there is a reproducible record evidencing the demonstration of prior learning.

Assessing prior learning

31. Decisions regarding RPL are a matter of academic judgement, and may be influenced by the requirements of any relevant PSRBs or, for apprenticeship programmes, the associated funding rules. The decision-making process and outcomes should be transparent and demonstrably rigorous and fair.

32. For apprenticeship programmes, prior learning will be assessed by the Course Leader in accordance with the process outlined in paragraphs 19 and 20 above. For other taught programmes, academic assessment of RPL applications will be undertaken by the relevant Course Leader or nominee based on information provided in the RPCL application form or RPEL mapping sheet and supporting evidence. The Course Leader or nominee will conduct a mapping exercise to determine whether the prior learning maps against those elements of the course for which RPL is being sought.

- a. For RPCL applications, the Course Leader or nominee will complete Part B of the RPCL form to evidence the outcomes of this mapping exercise and make a recommendation regarding approval, and this will be submitted to the Associate Dean for Learning and

Teaching or nominee, or in the case of an academic partner the Director for the Centre of Academic and International Partnerships (CAIP) or nominee, for final approval under Part C of the RPCL form. Where the Course Leader is also the Associate Dean for Learning and Teaching, the form will alternatively be submitted to the Executive Dean of School for final approval. Where applications are complex, the Associate Dean or nominee may refer the application to a RPL panel for broader consideration.

- b. For RPEL applications, the Course Leader will complete the RPEL application form, drawing on information provided by the applicant in the mapping sheet, and make a recommendation regarding approval to a RPL panel.

33. Depending on volume, RPL panels may be convened to consider individual or multiple applications for RPL. The RPL panel should include, as a minimum, a trained Assessment Board Chair (as Panel Chair), a member of academic staff not previously involved in consideration of the RPL application(s) and the Course Leader(s) concerned (or their nominees). A Clerk must be in attendance to coordinate the process and ensure that there is a formal record of the meeting. Meetings may be conducted virtually where necessary to facilitate timely decision-making. Prompt consideration of applications is particularly important for applicants wishing to seek exemption from a whole level of study as part of the admissions process, and therefore it may be necessary to have more frequent RPL panel meetings at the start of the academic year to accommodate this.

34. Credit can be awarded for prior learning where the applicant or student has demonstrated achievement of the intended learning outcomes for the relevant element(s) of the course for which they are seeking exemption, and is adequately prepared to complete the remaining elements of the course. It is recognised that for the RPL in relation to a large amount of credit (for example an entire level of study), mapping against module learning outcomes can be a barrier rather than an enabler of RPL, and therefore mapping against course level learning outcomes and/or level descriptors may provide a more appropriate and flexible form of assessment.

35. In making judgements, claims for RPL will be evaluated against the following criteria:

Level	Is the prior learning at a level that is at least equivalent to the relevant element of the programme of study for which the applicant or student is seeking exemption?
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Relevance	Is there an appropriate match between the evidence presented and the prior learning that the applicant or student is seeking to demonstrate? Is the prior learning specific? Can it be identified and categorised? Was the learning in a context understood by the learner?
Currency	Does the evidence relate to current learning? Does it meet course validation and/or PSRB time limits in terms of currency of prior learning?
Sufficiency	Is there sufficient evidence to demonstrate full achievement of the learning claimed?
Authenticity	Is the evidence valid and reliable? Does it clearly relate to the applicant or student's own efforts and achievements?

36. The Associate Dean for Learning and Teaching or nominee / partner equivalent (for RPCL) and the RPL panel (for RPEL) have delegated authority from the relevant Assessment Board to make decisions on RPL and to award the relevant credit, with the outcomes reported to the next full meeting of the Assessment Board for information. Approval may be conditional upon the receipt of additional documentation, such as an official transcript and/or certificate or evidence of continued currency in the subject area. All documentation relating to RPL applications and decisions should be made available for subsequent external examiner scrutiny.

37. For research degree applicants, prior learning will be assessed by the PGR lead within the relevant academic school in liaison with the proposed supervisory team, based on information provided by the applicant. Consideration should be given to confirmation of PhD status, progression milestones achieved and the remaining period of study required, whether ethical approval is required, training needs and supervisory capacity within the school. Where the applicant wishes to transfer from an MPhil or Professional Doctorate programme to a PhD programme, consideration should also be given to the suitability of the proposed research project for the intended PhD award, including whether it will make an original contribution to knowledge in the field of study. Applicants should only be permitted to transfer to the University of Suffolk if a substantial portion of their research degree programme remains. The standard period of registration should not normally be reduced to any less than one year for full-time students or two years for part-time students.

Notification of outcomes

38. Applicants should be notified of the outcome of their RPL application (including the level and volume of credit being awarded) via the Admissions team as part of the admissions process. Where existing students are applying for RPL, they should be notified of the outcome of their

RPL application (including the level and volume of credit being award) via the Academic Administration team or partner equivalent. Where the application is rejected (in full or in part), correspondence on the outcome should include feedback from the Course Leader and/or Associate Dean on the reasons for this decision and guidance on obtaining the relevant credit within their programme of study. The feedback should also highlight their right to make a complaint about the decision in accordance with paragraph 39 below.

Complaints about RPL decisions

39. A complaint about an RPL decision may only be made on the grounds that there was procedural irregularity, prejudice and/or bias, or the appearance of prejudice and/or bias which undermined the validity of the decision. Complaints concerning the academic judgement of the Course Leader, Associate Dean (or nominee / partner equivalent) and/or RPL panel and/or complaints based upon the informal assessment of the RPL application by members of academic staff will not normally be considered, as these are not deemed as valid grounds for complaint.

40. A complaint should be made in writing to the Office for Student Appeals, Complaints and Conduct (OSACC) within fifteen working days of notification of the outcome of the RPL application, in accordance with the procedures outlined in either the Applicant Appeals and Complaints Procedure or the Student Complaints Procedure.

Monitoring and evaluation

41. The University of Suffolk will monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the Recognition of Prior Learning Policy and reflect upon the outcomes for enhancement purposes as part of its regular cycle of policy review. This review will draw upon audits of RPL documentation and feedback on the RPL process from those involved. This is intended to ensure that decisions regarding RPL are valid, reliable and consistent across the institution, in accordance with the requirements of this Policy.

Fees

42. Fees may be charged for claims for RPL. Where applicable, these are set out in the [Tuition Fee Policy](#) which is updated annually and is available on the University of Suffolk website.