



**VÕTA VÕIMALUS**

**MANUAL**  
for the Recognition  
of Prior Learning (RPL)

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Primus is a programme funded by European Union Structural Funds for the period 2008–2013 and implemented by the Archimedes Foundation. The aim of the programme is to support the quality of study in higher education institutions and raise the level of competitiveness of their graduates. Improvement in the quality of RPL is one of the fields of activity of the Primus programme.

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**VÕTA VÕIMALUS**

## Preface

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**Lifelong learning**, one of the priorities added to the Bologna Process by the Prague Communiqué of 2001, is an integral feature of the European higher education area today. Lifelong learning is understood as the acquisition of new knowledge or professional skills, the broadening of existing knowledge and the development of competences and proficiency. The starting point for lifelong learning is the understanding that learning occurs in very many different ways. For example, a professional qualification can be acquired or its level raised by independent learning or by fulfilling the duties required as part of paid or voluntary work. There is a need to recognise the competences acquired by different ways of learning so that they can be used to grant access to education, optimise resources or reach some other goal furthering the development of the individual or society.

The ninth goal established in the Estonian *Lifelong Learning Strategy 2005–2008* **was to implement recognition of prior learning (RPL)** “in all fields and on all levels of study”

([http://www.andras.ee/ul/EESTI\\_ELUKESTVA\\_OPPE\\_STRATEEGIA\\_2005\\_2008\\_1\\_.pdf](http://www.andras.ee/ul/EESTI_ELUKESTVA_OPPE_STRATEEGIA_2005_2008_1_.pdf)).

Six policy documents were prepared to reach this goal. The higher education institutions participating in the project agreed on the principles of RPL within the framework of the respective sub-action of the project supported by the European Social Fund (ESF) 2005–2008 “**Increase of the competition capacity of university graduates (LÜKKA)**” and the proposals to develop RPL in higher education were forwarded to the Ministry of Education and Research (for details, see <http://www.ut.ee/lykka> “Materials for RPL sub-project”). A corresponding chapter was added to the Standard of Higher Education in 2007 and to the Standard of Vocational Education in 2009. (<http://www.hm.ee/index.php?03236>).

*The Development Plan for Estonian Adult Education 2009–2013*, prepared as a continuation of the Lifelong Learning Strategy, pointed out: “During the period of the previous strategy, the development of a system for recognition of prior learning and work experience was started in Estonia. In the framework of an extensive ESF project, Estonian RPL principles were developed that are by now regulated by higher education and vocational education legislation. The RPL principles are generally in use also in the system for awarding professional qualifications. In the field of general education, the RPL system has thus far not

*been initiated and the institutions providing non-formal education have not been involved in the implementation of RPL principles either. The RPL system has to be developed as a whole and implemented in the entire education system” (<http://www.hm.ee/index.php?03236>).*

The development of RPL will be continued by the support of the ESF under the framework of the **Primus programme (2008–2015) for the development of higher education**, implemented by the Archimedes Foundation. Although the Primus programme is primarily targeted at higher education institutions, there is co-operation with various parties, particularly with the Ministry of Education and Research, vocational education development programs and with the Estonian Qualifications Authority.

Within the framework of the program, a national RPL network involving experts and representatives of higher education institutions and other parties has been assembled, and RPL assessment and provision of advice have been supported, along with the organisation of training, seminars and other events. A common RPL application form has been developed for both institutions of higher and vocational education, and a variety of guides for applicants, assessors and advisers have been prepared. Both Estonian and international experiences in the field of RPL have been mapped and the collection of RPL statistics on a uniform basis has been initiated in institutions of higher education. Articles published in the press, various information days and events, and activities held during RPL weeks are intended to raise awareness of RPL and the opportunities it offers.

All documentation, manuals and maps developed within the framework of the Primus programme are available at **the website of the programme** <http://primus.archimedes.ee/node/15>.

The activities showed that different (educational) institutions interpreted both the objectives of RPL and the ways it might be applied differently. There was no common understanding of the principles to define, assess and improve the quality of RPL. For this reason, a working group consisting of the representatives of institutions of vocational and higher education, the Estonian Qualifications Authority and the Ministry of Education and Research was convened under the Primus programme in 2009 and was tasked with reviewing and supplementing the principles of quality of RPL in (educational) institutions and compiling an appropriate manual.

By spring 2010, **the principles of RPL were defined, which also constitute the quality criteria for RPL:**

1. RPL is goal-oriented.
2. RPL is based on the needs of the applicant and is voluntary for the applicant.
3. The organisation and methods of RPL are reliable and based on the standards of education, professional standards and good practices. Trust plays a central role and results from social recognition, precisely defined standards and clear information on the process and criteria of assessment.
4. The assessors and advisers are competent, independent and impartial. Independence and impartiality are key factors in the assessment process and are based on the responsibility of assessors. The roles of assessors and advisers are clear and separate.
5. RPL assessment follows precise and unambiguous assessment principles.
6. The quality assurance process of RPL is systematic, based on the principle of continuous improvement.

We hope that this **RPL Manual** is of benefit for implementing and improving RPL in Estonian educational institutions and institutions awarding professional qualifications (hereinafter referred to as (educational) institutions) according to agreed principles and good practices of RPL. The Manual is, first and foremost, compiled for those responsible for the organisation, quality, development, etc., of RPL, but it is certainly also of use to other interested parties, including employers, bodies awarding professional qualifications, assessors and others who come into contact with RPL in their everyday work.

The structure of the Manual is based on the principles of RPL. Each chapter focuses on one or two principles of RPL (presented in boxes), offering explanations that are more detailed and actual examples from the practice of different Estonian educational institutions. The Manual also includes recommendations and practical hints on improving the organisation of RPL. At the end of each topic, there are questions for users of the Manual to reflect on (presented in boxes).

The RPL Manual **does not replace** the guides for RPL assessors, applicants and advisers developed for higher education institutions (see referenced literature); it is closely related to these, however, and recommends these for further reading in relevant topics.

Constructive feedback contributing to the preparation of this Manual was provided by Anneli Lorenz, Erika Pedak, Nele Rand, Katrin Tammjärv and members of the RPL Advisory committee at Tallinn University. We would like to express our sincere thanks to all of them.

We hope that this RPL Manual is of benefit to everyone who comes into contact with RPL and its development. We would be grateful for all comments and proposals. Kindly send them to [vota@archimedes.ee](mailto:vota@archimedes.ee).

The authors

## Terms and definitions

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**Field of study** means a defined area of knowledge, that is, a more restricted, determined area of science, technology, art, etc. Study programmes may provide opportunities to specialise in one or several fields of study (e.g. an Aviation Management student at the Estonian Aviation Academy can specialise in aviation company management or aircraft maintenance studies; undergraduate students in mathematics at the University of Tartu can specialise in mathematics as their main field of study and choose information technology from the degree programme in information technology as their minor field of study). Within one field of study, it is possible to specialise in that is, one or more specific areas (e.g. the University of Tartu undergraduate programme in Russian and Slavic Philology provides the opportunity to specialise in Polish or Czech; it is possible to study in German in Tartu Raatuse Gymnasium).

**A credit point of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) refers to the** unit for calculating the volume of study specified in the curriculum. One credit point corresponds to 26 hours of work that a student has spent on learning. The volume of one study year is 60 credit points, which corresponds to 1,560 hours of work that the student has spent on learning.

**Assessment criteria** means the requirements used for assessing the correspondence of a learner's knowledge, skills and attitudes to the learning outcomes of a study programme/course or the competency requirements of a professional standard. Assessment criteria are divided into grade criteria and threshold criteria. Grade criteria are criteria used in grading and are defined according to grades (e.g. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 or F, E, D, C, B, A) for each method of assessment. Threshold criteria are assessment criteria defining the basic level in pass or fail assessment, formulated separately in each method of assessment.

**Competence** (also competency) means an integrated combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes, the existence and/or level of achievement of which can be certified and assessed on the basis of specific criteria. Professional standards describe competences by performance indicators. Performance indicators describe behaviour that expresses knowledge, skills, attitudes and the range of independence and responsibility, including the skill of using tools necessary for fulfilling one's job duties.

**Profession** means an agreed set of main tasks as well as components and duties requiring similar training that equip a person to work in a variety of related positions. The basis for defining a profession, including a professional standard, is tradition or new conditions resulting from rapid economic changes.

**Qualification** means a degree, diploma or other certificate, which evidences that an individual's knowledge, skills and attitudes adhere to the learning outcomes of a study programme or the competency requirements of a professional standard and is issued by a competent authority.

- An educational qualification is a level of formal education certified by a competent authority (e.g. a document certifying secondary education, Bachelor's degree, etc.).
- A professional qualification is a professional competence or its level certified by a competent authority (e.g. a professional certificate).
- **Please note!** In some cases, both qualifications can exist together (e.g. a diploma certifying secondary vocational education).

**A competent authority**, in the context of RPL in Estonia, means an educational institution having the right to issue a certificate evidencing nationally recognised education or an institution awarding professional qualifications<sup>1</sup>. In order to be granted the right of awarding professional qualifications, the institution has to participate in a public competition organised by the Estonian Qualifications Authority and meet the following conditions:

- the activities of an awarder of profession include the development of relevant professional activities;
- the awarder of profession must have the means and possibilities necessary to organise the awarding profession;
- the awarder of profession is required to have hired a sufficient number of employees with the necessary education, training and experience for awarder of profession, and has to have set up a professional qualifications committee;
- the awarder of profession must be able to act independently, professionally, impartially and without discriminating anyone.

(See<sup>2</sup><http://www.kutsekoda.ee/et/kutsesysteem/kutseandmine/korraldamine>)<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> For brevity, hereafter the "(educational) institution".

<sup>2</sup> Here and hereafter: links checked as at 17.05.2011.

<sup>3</sup> Here and hereafter: links checked as at 17.05.2011.

**Standard** means a set of quality and other requirements; a document providing requirements for quality, structures, etc.

- **The Standard of Vocational Education** refers to a set of uniform requirements (Government of the Republic Regulation No. 90) for vocational and professional training at the level of basic and secondary education.
- **Professional standard** means a document describing professional activities and providing competency requirements for professions and professional levels, that is, a set of skills, knowledge and attitudes necessary for performing work successfully. Professional standards are approved by professional councils operating under the Estonian Qualifications Authority (see <http://www.kutsekoda.ee>).
- **The Standard of Higher Education** means a document (Government of the Republic Regulation No. 178) establishing uniform standards for study at the level of higher education.

**Learning outcomes** (also: learning goals, study objectives, learning results, study results) means the knowledge, skills and attitudes or their sets (competences, competencies) acquired as a result of learning, the existence and/or level of achievement of which can be certified and assessed on the basis of defined criteria.

**Transferable skills** (also: general competencies, key competences) means the knowledge, skills and attitudes that are not related to any particular field of study or area of knowledge, but which help people in different fields of life and areas of activity to manage successfully, as well as to change their area of activity. The main outcome of transferable skills is a person's professional and cross-professional flexibility and the ability to "cope" in different and changing work areas and environments.

## Meaning and purpose of RPL

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The recognition of prior learning (RPL) is a process that helps a competent authority assess the competence of an applicant based on specific criteria, such as that is, how an applicant's knowledge, skills and attitudes conform to the enrolment criteria of an educational institution, the learning outcomes of the curriculum or its part(s) or the competency requirements of a professional standard. If the applicant's competences meet the requirements, they will be taken into account with respect to enrolment criteria or completion of the curriculum or upon awarding a professional qualification.

The goal of RPL is

- a) to value the competence of a person and provide equal opportunities for assessing and acknowledging it, regardless of the time, place and manner the knowledge and skills were acquired;
- b) to support lifelong learning and mobility between the education system and the labour market and within these;
- c) to improve access to education for people, including people who are socially disadvantaged, to broaden their opportunities to acquire an education and compete in the labour market and so support a more efficient use of the resources of both the individual and society.

Traditional career models where individuals first acquire an education and then start working, with their career progression mainly depending on length of service, are no longer applicable today. Our opportunities for learning and professional development have become more diverse. They are, in particular, influenced by the availability of higher education for an increased number of people, by ever-increasing international mobility, and by changes in the demands of the labour market caused by the rapid development of science and technology.

The role of educational institutions has also changed. Although the right of awarding educational qualifications is still dependent on national recognition ("formal education") and, thus, is reserved for only a limited number of educational institutions, learning no longer occurs in those institutions alone. The "value" of learning does not depend on its time, place and manner but, first and foremost, on becoming aware of the learning. People also learn during in-service training, in hobby groups, and while studying and working independently (informal and non-formal education), achieving proficiency

that cannot necessarily be achieved in an institution of formal education. Experience gained in leisure time or through work-related activities can also significantly support learning in the system of formal education.

### example

*People who have seen technological innovations in their daily work (such as the introduction of a new device or programme) can share this knowledge during their studies with other persons who do not yet have such experience. People who have lived and worked in different countries for a long time are able to enhance the study of cultural differences by giving real examples.*

Even today, people do not always have equal opportunities to access formal education. Socially disadvantaged people (like economically less privileged families, people with special needs, single parents, orphans and those who speak the official language of the country as a foreign language) can have difficulty in accessing education and the labour market, be it because of the enrolment criteria, lack of money or lack of adapted study materials/an adapted working environment, etc.

### example

*Students with reduced mobility or visually impaired students can often not fully participate in contact learning (e.g. because of the price of a personal assistant service, lack of access to academic buildings) and must find other opportunities for learning, including study materials tailored to their needs.*

These people may have different educational paths, but their learning results are equally worthy of recognition as those of any other learners.

In order to recognise the knowledge, skills and attitudes acquired in different times, ways and places, there is a need for an instrument such as the recognition of prior learning or RPL.

However, it should be emphasised that

- RPL is an instrument for formal recognition of what different learners have learned in different ways. Although the wider use of RPL is necessary for various reasons, the objective cannot be to approve as many applications as possible. Recognition presumes compliance of learning with the requirements, that is, the existence of the appropriate level of competences required in the curriculum or the professional standard.

- RPL is not a simple way of acquiring an educational or professional qualification for people who are unwilling or unable to learn, no matter how vast and colourful their life experiences are. What is important is not the existence of an experience but learning from the experience, as well as the depth and range of what has been learned. Evidencing your learning can be a very labour-intensive and time-consuming process that may not necessarily lead to “formal recognition” of learning through RPL. The prerequisite for recognition is the correspondence of learning to the requirements.
- RPL helps people interested in learning to reflect and become aware of what they have learned through different experiences but does not replace conscious and dedicated learning. RPL is only one part of the “traditional” learning process, in which learners and teachers, assessors and the persons assessed have their defined roles. The assessor of RPL applications assesses the correspondence of learning to the requirements.

Therefore, the options for implementing RPL at different levels of formal education are defined by law.

## Implementing RPL in higher education

According to Subsection 12 (3) of the Standard of Higher Education, RPL can be implemented

- 1) for compliance with the conditions for admission established by the educational institution;
- 2) for transfer of previously acquired credit points upon completion of a curriculum; or
- 3) for calculation of prior studies and professional experience as credit points.

An exception is the final theses of the first and second level of higher education, in which case RPL is not allowed.

## Implementing RPL in vocational education

According to Subsection 8<sup>2</sup> (3) of the Standard of Vocational Education, RPL can be implemented

- 1) for compliance with the conditions for admission established by the school;
- 2) to transfer the learning outcomes of previously completed courses, topics or modules (excluding the final examination) and to recognise prior learning or professional experience as the learning result of a course, topic or module; or
- 3) to recognise a previously passed professional examination as a final examination for a professional qualification or in the field of study.

## Implementing RPL in awarding of professional qualifications

The implementation of RPL in awarding of professional qualifications is not yet regulated at the legislative level in Estonia. Institutions awarding professional qualifications can specify operations related to RPL in procedures for awarding professional qualifications (e.g. see the procedure for awarding professional qualifications [http://www.andras.ee/ul/Andragoogi\\_kutse\\_andmise\\_kord\\_04\\_06\\_2009.pdf](http://www.andras.ee/ul/Andragoogi_kutse_andmise_kord_04_06_2009.pdf)).

**Please note!** In general, the **basis for the recognition of prior learning can only be original performance**; therefore, one cannot apply for the transfer of any prior decisions of RPL.

### example

*An undergraduate student has applied for the recognition of the course Sozialpsychologie, passed at a German university, in order to complete a study programme, and the application has been granted, that is, the course is recognised through RPL. If the student wanted to apply for the recognition of the same subject for a Master's degree programme, they would have to re-apply for the recognition of the course Sozialpsychologie, studied at a foreign university, not for the transfer of the RPL decision.*

**Please note!** In case of national curricula, which do not differ in different educational institutions, the RPL Committee of one institution can recognise the decision of the RPL Committee of another institution.

### example

*A landscape building student of Räpina School of Horticulture has applied for the recognition of the module "Introduction to Horticulture" through RPL on the basis of professional experience, and the application has been granted, that is, the module is recognised through RPL. If the student changes educational institution and begins studies using the same curriculum at Luua Forestry School, they do not have to re-apply for the recognition of the module "Introduction to Horticulture", since Luua Forestry School has the right to recognise the RPL decision of Räpina School of Horticulture.*

**Please note!** Even now, there are different views on **whether studies at a lower level of study can be recognised at a higher level of study** (e.g. whether what has been learned in an upper secondary school or an institution of vocational education can be recognised through RPL for studies at degree level or professional higher education). One of the main causes of disagreement is the notion that formal education is hierarchical by nature and that there is a clear-cut difference between different levels of education. In fact, the boundaries between different levels of education can be somewhat diffuse, so that no very rigid lines can be drawn between the levels.

According to the principles of learner-centred and outcome-based learning and RPL, priority should be given to checking the correspondence of prior learning to the level of learning outcomes of the course or module applied for.

#### example

*Besides completing a curriculum at an upper secondary school, a student has participated in courses of scientific research, organised in co-operation between the upper secondary school and a university and conducted by university teachers. When entering university, the student applies for the recognition of the courses in order to complete the degree programme.*

#### example

*In the course of four years of study in professional higher education, a student has completed more courses, both from the degree study programme and the Master's programme, than required by the curriculum. The student would either like to be better prepared for a Master's degree or to work parallel to studies at the next level and is attempting to reduce the future study load by "studying in advance".*

**Please note!** With respect to **RPL between different levels of higher education**, it should be observed that a student has to accumulate a certain amount of credit points from different levels of study: according to Subsection 9 (8) of the Standard of Higher Education, the study load determined in the curriculum of both the Bachelor's and Master's studies and professional higher education and Master's studies is a total of 300 ECTS credit points.

## example

*Jüri has passed only a minimum of his Bachelor's programme (180 ECTS credit points) but has chosen optional courses for 6 ECTS credit points from a Master's programme. He applies for the recognition of these 6 ECTS credit points in his Master's studies in order to complete the Master's programme (120 ECTS credit points). This is possible provided that the learning outcomes of the courses are related to the learning outcomes of the corresponding curriculum. However, Jüri cannot now reduce his studies in the Master's programme by 6 ECTS credit points because, having transferred 6 ECTS credit points from his Bachelor's studies to the Master's studies through RPL, he will not achieve a total of 300 ECTS credit points from the two levels of study. So Jüri must pass other courses of equivalent ECTS validity during his Master's studies.*

*Mari has passed additional courses worth 6 ECTS during her Bachelor's studies (achieving a total of 186 ECTS credit points); these courses are included in a Master's programme she wishes to study. During her Master's studies (120 ECTS credit points), she submits an application for the recognition of these 6 ECTS credit points for the completion of the Master's programme. The RPL Committee approves Mari's application in the volume of 6 ECTS credit points. Therefore, Mari has to pass courses for only 114 ECTS credit points in the Master's programme.*

Which national legislation applies when implementing RPL in your educational institution?

What do you think are the main opportunities for and threats to a wider implementation of RPL?

Could a goal-oriented implementation of RPL help improve the competitiveness of your educational institution in the education landscape? If so, how?

# Creating the system of RPL

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## *1. RPL is goal-oriented.*

### *1.1. The design of the RPL process is based on the goals of RPL.*

### *1.2. RPL is unambiguous.*

RPL is not a separate and independent activity<sup>4</sup> but is inseparably linked to the study process and awarding of professional qualifications. In order to implement RPL systematically and within the law (see above pg. 11), it is necessary to organise RPL in (educational) institutions methodically and in a manner that is clear and understandable for all parties. In the strict meaning, **RPL parties** are the direct participants in the process of RPL, that is, RPL applicants, assessors and advisers; in the wider meaning, they can also be individuals and organisations outside the (educational) institution who are interested in the implementation of RPL, such as (university) student candidates, employers, co-operation partners of an (educational) institution.

## The system of RPL consists of

- the regulatory and organisational framework (including legislation and guides, documentation, workflow, data and information management, counselling and training services, etc.) and
- the process itself, consisting of the phases of advising, application, assessment, recognition and feedback.

## Regulatory framework of the system of RPL

According to national legislation,

- The councils of universities and institutions of professional higher education shall establish the range and procedures of RPL (Subsection 22 (10) of the Universities Act; Subsection 9 (5<sup>1</sup>) of the Institutions of Professional Higher Education Act),
- The statutes of private schools shall set out the conditions and procedures for RPL (Subsection 15 (6) of the Private Schools Act),

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<sup>4</sup> Therefore, it is also advisable to avoid using the term “transfer” in RPL too much as it seems to refer to a single activity.

- The study regulations of institutions of vocational education shall set out the conditions and procedures for RPL (Subsection 8<sup>2</sup> (1) of the Standard of Vocational Education).

There are no more specific requirements established for RPL regulations of educational institutions<sup>5</sup>. A few other obligations for educational institutions are established by the Standard of Higher Education and the Standard of Vocational Education:

- to inform students of the conditions and procedures for RPL (including the terms and costs relating to the assessment that will be borne by the student), and the options for contesting the results;
- to ensure availability of the necessary information and instruction and consulting services for RPL applicants;
- to ensure the uniformity of the procedure or RPL, and the competence and impartiality with regard to the result of the persons who conduct assessment; and
- to establish opportunities for RPL assessors to participate in in-service training and co-operation networks (Section 12 of the Standard of Higher Education and Section 8<sup>2</sup> of the Standard of Vocational Education).

In the light of the above, the legislation of (educational) institutions establishing the conditions and procedure of RPL should include the following parts (the order may vary):

1) General provisions, including

- What does the regulation establish? What can be recognised through RPL? (according to law).

**example** *An (educational) institution may recognise prior learning as part of meeting the enrolment criteria and completing the curriculum, except for final examinations and final papers.*

- What kind of restrictions are there on RPL? (when it is not possible to apply for RPL, the permitted quantity/frequency of applications, if defined, etc.).

<sup>5</sup> Establishing the conditions and procedure for the recognition of prior learning and using these as a basis for submitting and assessing applications, making and contesting decisions of recognition are based on the Administrative Procedure Act <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/686696?leiaKehtiv>

**example**

*A study programme may specify the courses that exclude the option of recognising prior learning. Such courses may then be recognised as optional courses (in the volume prescribed in the curriculum).*

- Who appoints and who are the persons responsible for RPL? (advisers and committees in structural units, the central RPL specialist, the RPL quality committee, etc.).

**example**

*Prior learning is assessed by the RPL Committee formed by the head of the structural unit managing the curriculum. The head of the structural unit appoints the RPL adviser(s).*

- How has the dissemination of information and advising been organised?

**example**

*In issues concerning the preparation of applications, and relating to RPL and the curriculum or the field of study, counselling is provided by the structural unit managing the curriculum or a person designated by the head of the unit.*

- 2) A description of the application procedure, including the rights and obligations of the RPL applicant.

**example**

*An RPL applicant shall submit an application to the head of the structural unit. The applicant shall add to the application documents evidencing his/her prior learning and/or work experience and other materials, unless the passing of the course is recorded in the study information system. The applicant shall be liable for the correctness of the documents and other materials submitted.*

- 3) The principles and procedures for assessment of applications, including the rights and obligations of the RPL assessor;

**example**

*Depending on the learning outcomes, the RPL Committee may ask for additional supporting evidence. The committee shall have a right to ask for the opinion of experts of the relevant field when reviewing the application.*

- 4) The principles and procedure for the recognition of applications, including
  - When are credit points simply transferred, that is, when does a "simplified

RPL" occur? (e.g. when moving from one accredited study programme to another study programme with the same learning outcomes in another educational institution, pre-assessed courses, etc.);

**example** *There is no need to apply for the recognition of prior learning if / ... / the recognition of studies is established by a co-operation agreement between the university and another higher education institution.*

- Deadlines;

**example** *The committee shall review the application, make a decision and notify the applicant in a format that can be reproduced in writing within 30 days as of the receipt of the application. If additional evidence is requested, the committee may extend the term of review of the application up to 30 days as of the day the additional requirement was met, informing the applicant of it in a format that can be reproduced in writing.*

- Requirements established for the content and documentation of the decision;

**example** *The committee's decision shall include the name(s), volume, grade(s) and type (obligatory, elective or optional) of the course(s) or module(s) recognised. If the application has been fully or partially rejected, the decision must be justified.*

- The contesting procedure;

**example** *The committee's decisions can be contested pursuant to the procedure established by study regulations.*

- 5) The fee for the review and recognition of an application, including the conditions for exemption from the fee;

**example** *In general, a fee is charged for the review and assessment of applications. The rates and payment procedure of RPL fees shall be established by the directive of the head of the (educational) institution.*

- 6) Quality assurance mechanisms, including

- Persons responsible for quality assurance and assessment;

**example** *The Director for Academic Affairs forms the RPL quality committee, which is responsible for assessing the RPL quality assurance.*

- Procedures for the collection of RPL statistics and reporting;

**example** *The assessor shall submit a report on the results of RPL decisions and adherence to the terms for review of applications /.../ to the Director and other members of the management once a semester.*

#### 7) Implementing provisions, including

- To whom the procedure does not apply;

**example** *Clause /.../ shall not be applied to students who were registered as visiting students prior to entry into force of this regulation and they have to apply for the recognition of prior learning pursuant to the standard procedure.*

Which regulation established the conditions and procedure for RPL in your (educational) institution? Does it include the above-mentioned components?

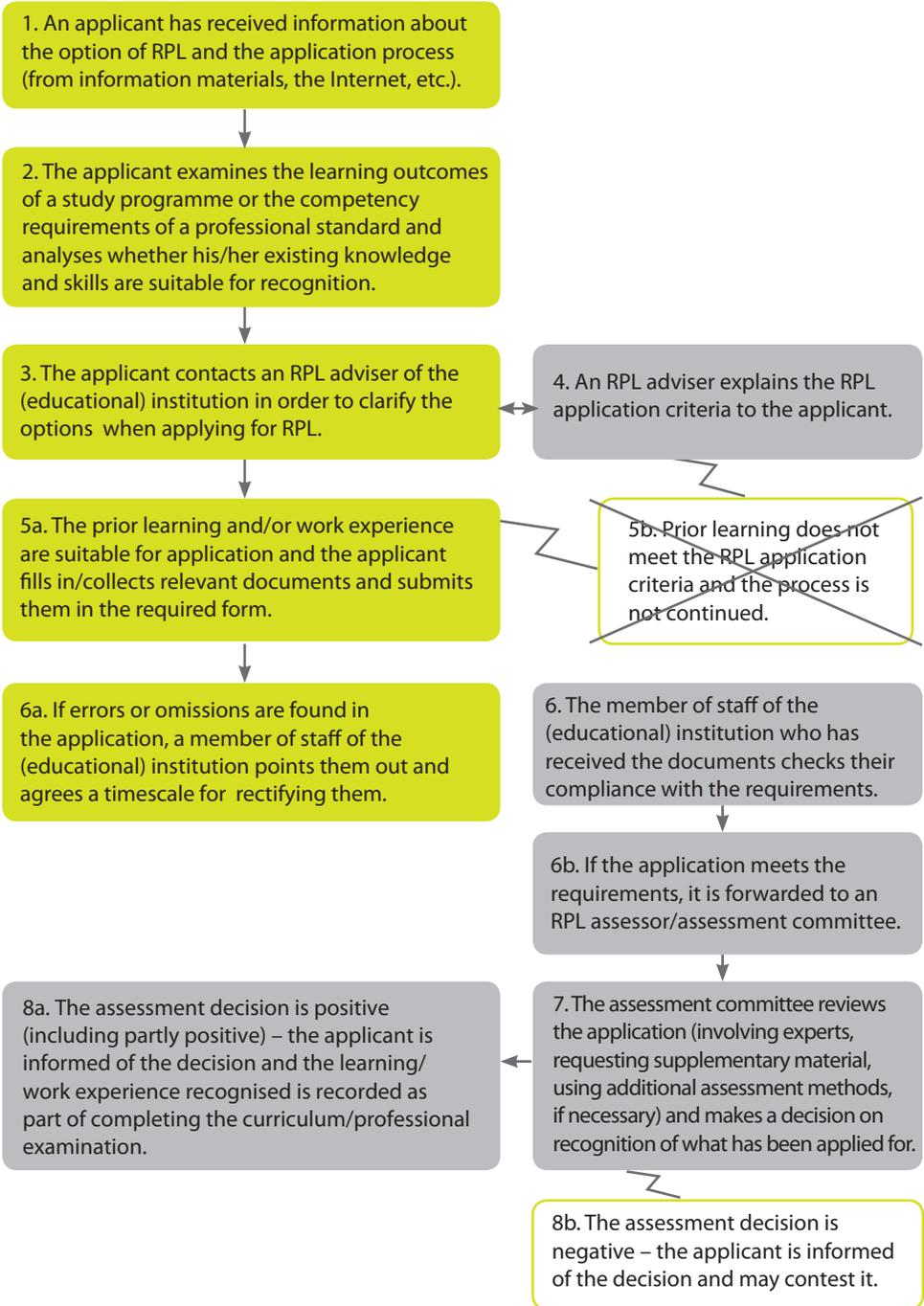
Is there a need for establishing exceptions, based on the specific character of your (educational) institution? Are these exceptions in accordance with the principles of RPL and are they objectively justified?

Is a periodic review and, if necessary, specification of regulations related to RPL organised in your (educational) institution? If so, how?

Drawing an *RPL process flow diagram* will help the (educational) institution create and review the procedures of RPL, as well as describe the rights and obligations of parties in guides or specify them in regulations. It can help define the roles and activities of different parties and locate potential hindrances (such as conflicting deadlines, unnecessary complexity of operations, the need to develop information system(s)). With the help of the process flow diagram, it is also easy to compile or review other guides and regulations of the (educational) institution.

Figure 1 shows a possible process flow diagram of an educational institution along with explanations of how each stage of the process could be described in guides, information systems, forms and regulations. Based on the national legislation and the principles of RPL, the RPL process should, in general, be quite similar; nevertheless, the specific character of each (educational) institution can bring certain differences.

### RPL process flow diagram



**Figure 1.** A possible RPL process flow diagram of an educational institution

**Please note!** Educational institutions have reported some apparently insignificant factors which in fact may hinder the smooth implementation of RPL. Therefore, the following should be considered when planning/reviewing the process of RPL:

- That the whole process is **logical and feasible**, including whether activities required from different parties are consistent, document flow is well planned and effective, and all parties are aware of the progress of the process;
- Processing of RPL applications, including the submission of applications and evidence, formalisation of assessment decisions and preservation of necessary documentation, can **rely on compatible information systems**, and it is possible to **process and archive documents electronically**;
- In case of processing RPL applications on paper, **archiving of necessary documents on paper and data protection** has been carried out correctly (see below pg. 33 for details on data protection);
- In the case of international RPL, the rights and obligations of parties are clearly communicated with respect to **submitting information and applying for RPL in a foreign language**;
- **The collection of RPL statistics** is as simple as possible (including electronically) and the results are reliable;
- Courses recognised through RPL are recorded in the **academic report** issued by the higher education institution in the form prescribed by the Government of the Republic Regulation No. 76 "Statute and Form of Diploma and Academic Report".

(See <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/988084?leiaKehtiv>).

**Please note!** In order for the RPL process to proceed swiftly and systematically, it is recommended that one person in the educational institution (e.g. the RPL co-ordinator) be designated to manage the issue as a whole and be the contact point for all the parties to the RPL process.

- In your opinion, have the rights and obligations of different RPL parties been defined clearly in your institution?
- Is there a staff member in your institution who acts as an RPL coordinator? If not, do you think there is a need for such a person? If not, why not?
- In your opinion, has the RPL process been described clearly in your institution and/or is an RPL process flow diagram available?

## Application of RPL

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*2. RPL is based on the needs of the applicant and is voluntary for the applicant.*

*2.1. The time frame of RPL is sufficient and other conditions required from the applicant can be fulfilled.*

*2.2. The institution assessing and recognising prior learning ensures the availability of necessary information and instruction and consulting services for the applicant.*

*2.3. The applicant has the right to appeal in accordance with the regulation of the educational institution or the procedure of awarding professional qualifications.*

*2.4. The applicant shall receive feedback at the end of the assessment process.*

The **initiator** of the process of RPL is **the applicant for RPL**. There may be different reasons for applying for RPL, among them: to continue interrupted studies, to change a study programme or school, to acquire a new speciality, to formalise skills acquired by work experience or independently as a document evidencing these skills, to obtain some requirements (e.g. of formal education) not previously met when applying for a professional qualification.

**The applicant is responsible for** being aware of the competences acquired, their critical assessment and relating them to the learning outcomes of the study programme or the competency requirements of the professional standard. The applicant is also responsible for collecting and submitting evidence to the (educational) institution in the required/agreed form (e.g. filling in necessary documents/forms with correct and complete data, collecting/asking for additional information if necessary).

**example** *If the name of the course on the application form must be submitted in English, it is the applicant's responsibility to write it correctly. In addition, it is the applicant's responsibility to provide translations of any information provided in a foreign language.*

**The applicant has the right** to all relevant information and advice, to impartial and equal treatment, to constructive and understandable feedback and to an optimal use of resources.

This requires easy access to necessary information (including curricula along with course descriptions (learning outcomes), professional standards along with competency requirements, the procedure for RPL, RPL assessment criteria, etc.).

### example

*The applicant is responsible for assessing the level and adequacy of their knowledge and skills, comparing them to the learning outcomes of the course. However, this can only be done if learning outcomes are (comprehensibly) described and accessible.*

### example

*It is important to avoid a situation where an applicant is informed of errors or omissions singly where there are more than one. All issues with the application must be identified simultaneously and communicated to the applicant at the same time.*

**If a fee is charged** for the application, it is good practice to specify individual amounts payable, whenever feasible to do so.

**Please note!** One option worth considering is to include information related to RPL in the description of the course or the professional standard (in the syllabus, course description, etc.).

## **2. RPL is based on the needs of the applicant and is voluntary for the applicant**

Planning the process of RPL must be **based on applicant's needs**. For this purpose, different stages of RPL and the rights and obligations of parties have to be defined as precisely and unambiguously as possible. On the other hand, an over-regulation of the process could harm the interests of applicants. It is therefore important to find a balance between simplicity and flexibility on the one hand and a reasonable and purposeful regulation on the other hand when planning and regulating the process.

### example

*When an attempt is made to reduce bureaucracy, there is the risk of lowering the level of requirements for application documents and evidence, in which case the quality of RPL can suffer as the adequacy of the application and the evidence is one of the most important criteria of the quality of RPL and, consequently, of the reliability of the competent authority.*

The process of RPL should be planned in a manner that compels nobody to apply for it, even if it would be sensible.

At first glance, it might seem strange if a student/a person applying for a professional qualification does not wish to apply for RPL even if it is possible and seems expedient from the student's perspective. There may be very different reasons for that. That is why an (educational) institution may inform people of the possibility of RPL but cannot require them to apply for recognition.

**example** *A student may have previously completed a course that could be used to apply for RPL in their current study programme. However, they might wish to update their knowledge and repeat the same course. The student may also wish to study the same course under a different teacher.*

### **2.1. The time frame of RPL is sufficient and other conditions required from the applicant are feasible**

On the one hand, the **time frame** of the RPL process should be sufficient for the applicant; on the other hand, it should follow the work schedule of the (educational) institution (e.g. summer and winter holidays, the academic calendar, the deadlines of confirmation of assessment results in the study information system, etc.). People usually plan to submit their applications in time, but there may be circumstances beyond the control of the applicant that prevent that.

**example** *If the RPL Committee asks for additional evidence (additional documents, expert assessments, etc.), requiring the applicant to contact a former employer or an educational institution in a foreign country, the arrival of the evidence may take more time regardless of the applicant's efforts.*

*It must also be considered that each application may require a different amount of time. More time has to be allocated for example to assessing complex RPL applications or for the recognition of work experience when applicants complete a self-analysis or are interviewed.*

Since a time-consuming recognition of work experience is often a big part of RPL applications of people who have interrupted their studies, the whole process can become very intensive for both the applicants and the assessors.

Naturally, it is the RPL applicant who is responsible for the timely submission of his/her application and the evidence and the (educational) institution is not obliged to change its workflow if the applicant is unable to meet the deadlines. Based on the examples shown above, additional time should be allocated if the process of RPL is extended due to reasons independent of the applicant. Thus, educational institutions could, for example, provide RPL applicants or those contending an RPL decision with the opportunity to participate in studies when the RPL decision is delayed because of the need to submit additional evidence (e.g. from a foreign country) or when the appeal is being reviewed.

**Please note!** When planning the time frame for RPL, **all legislation and guides regulating studies or the process of awarding a professional qualification should be reviewed** so that there are no conflicts between the deadlines established by different regulations.

Have a look at the deadlines related to RPL in the regulations of your (educational) institution. In your opinion, are they realistic and can they be met by the applicant?

Do the dates fit the overall time frame of the study process and allow for special cases (e.g. obtaining additional documents, contesting the decisions, etc.)?

## ***2.2. The institution assessing and recognising prior learning ensures the availability of necessary information and instruction and consulting services for the applicant***

As RPL applicants are often connected to different educational institutions or to a workplace and an educational institution at the same time, differences in regulations can cause confusion. Therefore, it is important that comprehensible and comprehensive information about the possibilities and conditions of RPL and the obligations of the applicant (including the requirement to submit documentary evidence) is available to all parties, especially to entrants, students and persons applying for a professional qualification.

When planning the exchange of information and consultation, it is important to consider their content and format with respect to the different needs of the parties involved.

Today, the most important information exchange environment is probably the Internet, which also includes the websites of (educational) institutions.

Thus, the (educational) institution must ensure that RPL-related information (including learning outcomes of study programmes/courses and their assessment criteria, competency requirements of professional standards and their assessment criteria, guides, regulations, advisers' contacts, etc.) can, first and foremost, be easily found on its home page. Whereas the home page of the (educational) institution may be familiar to its students and employees and they can easily find the information, finding the right link can sometimes be quite difficult for people coming from outside the (educational) institution. It is therefore advisable to collect information on RPL under one link using the format: [www.asutuseniimi.ee/vota](http://www.asutuseniimi.ee/vota) ([www.nameofinstitution.ee/rpl](http://www.nameofinstitution.ee/rpl)).

A good example is the RPL website of Tallinn University of Technology (see the page in Estonian at <http://www.ttu.ee/vota/avaleht/>, in English at <http://www.ttu.ee/apel/home/>).

**Please note!** Up-to-date **information giving an overview of RPL** can be found in the RPL portal managed by Archimedes Foundation <http://vota.archimedes.ee>.

**Please note!** When asking for feedback from RPL parties, an (educational) institution **could also ask for an assessment of the availability and adequacy of information**.

Despite the dominance of the Internet as the main environment for information exchange, it is especially important to take account of differences in the preference for sources of information with respect to RPL.

**example** *The Internet is not always an information channel that is easily accessible and understandable for elderly or socially disadvantaged people. It is probably still necessary and reasonable to make necessary contact information and deadlines available, for instance, in information leaflets.*

However, when it comes to RPL, general written information alone is not enough, whether it is online or on paper. The learning and work experiences of each applicant are very different. Therefore, the (educational) institution must ensure competent consultation with respect to both the submission procedure and the content of the application (see pg.36-41 for details).

**Please note!** Among other things, good information and consultation should explain to the applicant that one should **not underestimate the complexity of the RPL process**, including the time needed for filling in the application document or for obtaining evidence.

**Guides** for RPL assessors, advisers and applicants have been compiled within the framework of the ESF project LÜKKA and the ESF programme Primus, see <http://vota.archimedes.ee>. In addition to the above, simple, easily accessible and specific guides may be necessary in (educational) institutions.

**Please note!** Given that an increasing number of Estonian students and employees have international experience, each (educational) institution involved in the assessment and recognition of RPL should take into account the specifics of its target groups, based on whether there is also a need for RPL-related **information and consultation in English or another foreign language**. See RPL guides and information leaflets in English and Russian at <http://primus.archimedes.ee/node/15>.

When disseminating RPL-related information, one should not forget internal parties of the (educational) institution. Members of staff change, regulations and procedures evolve, and there is a large quantity of information, so it can happen that in the overall information flow, the staff working on RPL fail to notice significant changes, which, in turn, may cause errors in counselling or assessing the applicant.

### example

*The sectoral RPL Committee has updated RPL assessment criteria and cancelled the criterion of expiry of results if the applicant demonstrates regular application of relevant competences. An RPL adviser who has not been informed of this change may advise an applicant wrongly, arguing that the results of the course "Business Russian" have expired and, thus, cannot be recognised. Instead, he/she should inform the applicant of the need for additional evidence (where, to what extent, etc., has the applicant used business Russian, e.g. in job-related situations, etc.).*

**Actively informing** both the applicants and the employees of the (educational) institution about RPL should be planned. It is also useful to facilitate regular exchanges of experience of people related to RPL in different institutions because it is in the interest of uniform implementation of the principles of RPL. A good example of such activities is the RPL weeks carried out within the framework of the ESF Primus programme, in which higher education institutions throughout Estonia organised joint seminars and lectures on the possibilities of and developments to RPL for different target groups (e.g. people who had interrupted their studies, upper secondary school students, employees, employers, etc.).

Who are the main target groups (students, adult learners, employed persons, unemployed people, people who have interrupted their studies) who could use RPL in your (educational) institution?

Where and how is information on RPL presented in your (educational) institution? Do you think it is easy to find and adequate for all target groups?

What could be done to improve access to RPL information in your (educational) institution?

### **2.3. The applicant has the right to contest the decision of RPL**

Just as there are certain procedures to contest decisions on study and work organisation, an RPL applicant must be made aware of how to contest the decision of an RPL assessor/assessment committee. This is usually done at the level of the person who made the decision (usually a lecturer or an RPL Committee) or a competent head of unit (e.g. the Dean of the Faculty, the Director for Academic Affairs or a committee formed by him/her). If the person seeking review does not agree with the decision of the reviewer they are entitled to file an appeal with the central dispute committee of the (educational) institution (if there is such) or a court. However, only the RPL application and procedural circumstances related to the decision will be reviewed there.

A parallel can be drawn to appealing against examination results.

**example** *In one of its decisions, the court explains: "The court considers it necessary to note that decisions made at examinations are subject to limited judicial review. The court is not competent to review the contents of examination results, that is, the pedagogical assessment of the student's knowledge and skills. The court can assess whether the examination has been organised in accordance with the rules of organisation of an examination. In case of violation of the rules of organisation of an examination, the court cancels the results of the examination only if the violations identified could have affected the result of the examination." (<http://ee.vlex.com/vid/-59415184>)*

**Please note!** There is nothing wrong with appealing in itself. However, as the appeal process is inconvenient and time-consuming for all parties, it is reasonable to try to **prevent the need to appeal**. This can be done, among other things, by making clear and comprehensive information available, by competent counselling of applicants and by responsible and correct work of RPL advisers and assessors, which includes giving clear and adequate feedback.

Where and how is the procedure of contesting RPL decisions regulated in your (educational) institution? Do you think it is clear and adequate?

#### **2.4. The applicant shall receive feedback at the end of the assessment process**

Since RPL is a means for becoming aware and associating what has been learned in different times and ways, the applicant should have the opportunity to not only apply for RPL, but also to **learn from the process of RPL**.

While preparing an RPL application, the applicant learns to give meaning to and express what has been learned from his/her previous experiences and to assess the range and level of knowledge, skills and competences acquired. The decision made by the assessor(s) of the application gives feedback to the applicant on whether and to what extent their competences meet the requirements. Therefore, it is important that the preparation of an RPL application and formalisation of the assessment decision are not merely understood as bureaucratic paper pushing. If the applicant does not take the preparation of application documents and submission of evidence seriously or does not know how to do it, it is very difficult for other people to assess or recognise the level of his/her knowledge and skills. If an RPL assessment committee does not give the applicant clear, constructive and relevant feedback, it is very difficult for them to plan a systematic and successful learning process in order to eliminate gaps.

#### **example**

*It is necessary that the RPL assessor identify those areas of weakness in the applicant's competences where such competences are considered essential to coping with further studies. Those weaknesses must be communicated to the applicant so that they can decide whether or not to take account of the recommendation of the RPL assessor (e.g. to participate in an appropriate course as a non-enrolled student, read additional literature himself/herself, etc.).*

**Please note!** From the perspective of learning, it is very useful for the RPL applicant to receive **feedback from RPL assessor(s) even when the decision is positive**. See detailed guidelines for giving feedback to RPL applicants at <http://vota.archimedes.ee>.

How has your (educational) institution organised giving feedback to RPL applicants about (partial) recognition/rejection of their application?

In your opinion, is the feedback given to RPL applicants sufficient? If not, what could be hindering it and how could it be improved?

## Organisation of RPL

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*3. The organisation and methods of RPL are reliable and based on the standards of education, professional standards and good practices. Trust plays a central role and results from social recognition, precisely defined standards and clear information regarding the process and criteria of assessment.*

*3.1 The tasks and limits of responsibilities of all parties in the process of RPL are known and adhered to.*

*3.2 The methods and procedures of assessment are purposeful and unambiguous.*

*3.3 The assessment of prior learning is based on evidence. Appropriate assessment methods and clear assessment criteria are used for assessment.*

*3.4. The parties of RPL ensure the protection of data submitted for the recognition of prior learning.*

**3. The organisation and methods of RPL are reliable and based on the standards of education, professional standards and good practices. Trust plays a central role and results from social recognition, precisely defined standards and clear information regarding the process and criteria of assessment**

When assessing and recognising prior learning, the (educational) institution assumes a large responsibility in respect to applicants, employers and other (educational) institutions and for its own reputation. Thus, **reliability** is one of the central principles of RPL.

RPL applicants must be able to believe in the objectivity, competence and confidentiality of the assessors of their application. The employer must be able to trust the objectivity and impartiality of the assessment procedure of RPL applications. Other educational institutions must be able to be sure that assessment of applications is based on agreed principles, including specific learning outcomes. Society must understand that RPL does not reduce the value of higher education, but open up an alternative learning process. The reputation of an (educational) institution relies, to a significant extent, on transparency and on the confidence that assessment and recognition of learning performed elsewhere is based on certain principles.

**example**

*If an educational institution has established the criterion of expiry of results with regard to RPL in one course (e.g. in the course Labour Law, it has been established that any results dating back more than five years cannot be recognised through RPL), the institution is obliged to use this criterion for all RPL applicants, regardless of whether and to what extent other assessment criteria have been met.*

**Please note!** If the expiry criterion of prior learning is established, it has to be taken into consideration that RPL applicants have different backgrounds and that setting a limitation period is not always justified (e.g. particularly if a combined application for prior learning and work experience is submitted). What is more important than the time of learning or work experience is whether applicants can demonstrate that they have been regularly using previously acquired competences and thus kept them “fresh”.

**example**

*The results of a foreign language course taken ten years ago may be expired if the person has not used this language since then. However, if they can prove that they have been using their language skills regularly and in the context of relevant learning outcomes/competency requirements, setting a limitation period is not justified.*

### **3.1. The tasks and limits of responsibilities of all parties in the process of RPL are known and adhered to**

Obstacles may arise in the RPL process if the parties (applicants, advisers, assessors) do not know their rights and obligations or do not respect them. The work organisation in different institutions may be quite different, resulting in somewhat different requirements for employees involved in RPL and RPL applicants.

**example**

*The RPL assessor and adviser may be one and the same person in one (educational) institution, but not in another. The application of RPL may be free of charge for persons whose studies are not financed by the state in one educational institution, but not in another.*

Regardless of the specifics of the work organisation of an (educational) institution, it is necessary to clearly and comprehensibly define the activities, rights and obligations of parties of the process of RPL and to ensure that these are adhered to and reviewed, if necessary.

### **3.2. The methods and procedures of assessment are specific and unambiguous**

RPL assesses how an applicant's knowledge, skills and attitudes comply with the learning outcomes of a course/study programme or the competency requirements of a professional standard. The assessment of compliance should be based on the same principles as an ordinary assessment (e.g. when students take examinations and tests or when people applying for a professional qualification take the professional examination). However, the methods of ordinary assessment cannot, as a rule, be applied to RPL, and evidence of the level of the applicant's knowledge and skills may be indirect. In addition, the assessment of prior learning and work experience is made more complicated by the principle of comprehensive assessment (see pg. 44-47 for details).

**example** *Unlike students who demonstrate their skills to assessors by solving a practical task at an examination, RPL applicants do generally not perform a practical task but submit evidence about being able to do it. In addition, an RPL assessor making a decision must rely on the decisions of other assessors, considering, for instance, the results achieved by the applicant in another educational institution.*

Thus, in the process of RPL, assessment is one of the most relevant aspects for the applicant and one of the most onerous stages for the (educational) institution in terms of its duties.

**Please note!** A clear definition of the assessment methods and criteria of RPL

- simplifies the work of advisers;
- reduces the workload of assessors, including the need for further consultation;
- helps applicants develop the skill of self-analysis and define their learning needs;
- supports active inclusion of applicants in the process of assessment of their knowledge and skills.

### **3.3. The assessment of prior learning is based on evidence. Appropriate assessment methods and clear assessment criteria are used for assessment**

In most cases, there are no problems with assessing an RPL application provided that detailed course descriptions, a character reference from the

employer, the applicant's self-analysis, and any other documentary requirements are attached to the application. However, current RPL practice shows that applications often do not provide sufficient information for an objective and competent assessment.

Although the applicants are responsible for providing adequate evidence, it must be clear for them beforehand which requirements must be met. Therefore, the RPL adviser plays an important role in correct preparation of the evidence (see pg. 37-41 for details).

**Please note!** As the requirements for evidence can also vary in different educational and professional fields, preparation of **help materials specific to the field** (both for applicants and assessors) should be considered; these materials could be prepared by lecturers/a group of specialists of the relevant field. The help material can more specifically describe what kind of learning outcomes or competences can be assessed on the basis of which evidence and under which criteria. Although the preparation of any kind of help materials generally means extra work, these materials significantly simplify the work of RPL applicants, advisers and assessors.

**example** *An (educational) institution might prepare a sample application for RPL applicants helping them understand how much and what kinds of information they must submit (see e.g. <http://www.tlu.ee/files/arts/6031/N%C3%A4id4ac214936e99f69f4517566f5c55cdb4.pdf>). It is certainly very informative to ask for feedback from RPL applicants with respect to the need for and content of guides (see e.g. the analysis of a questionnaire for RPL applicants by Tartu Health Care College [www.nooruse.ee/?id=304&lang=est&file=1813](http://www.nooruse.ee/?id=304&lang=est&file=1813)).*

*See also examples at <http://primus.archimedes.ee/sites/default/files/oppejoud/Hindamisraamat.pdf>, pp. 23 ff.*

### **3.4. The parties of RPL ensure the protection of data submitted for the recognition of prior learning**

The issue of protecting personal data (e.g. disclosing assessment results of students to other students, displaying the list of students on the home page of the educational institution, etc.) raises issues occasionally. As data may be provided during RPL (especially when applying for the recognition of learning through work experience and leisure activities) that are essentially subject to the rules of personal data protection, the RPL process must also take into account the general principles of personal data protection.

According to Subsection 4(2) of the Personal Data Protection Act (<https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/12909389?leiaKehtiv>), sensitive personal data are:

- data revealing political opinions or religious or philosophical beliefs, except data relating to being a member of a legal person in private law registered pursuant to the procedure provided by law;
- data revealing ethnic or racial origin;
- data on the state of health or disability;
- data on genetic information;
- biometric data (above all fingerprints, palm prints, eye iris images and genetic data);
- information on sex life;
- information on trade union membership;
- information concerning commission of an offence or falling victim to an offence before a public court hearing, making of a decision in the matter of the offence or termination of the court proceeding in the matter.

Any act performed with personal data is considered as processing of personal data: the collection, recording, organisation, storage, alteration, disclosure, granting of access to personal data, consultation and retrieval, use of personal data, communication, cross-usage, combination, closure, erasure or destruction of personal data, regardless of the manner in which the operations are carried out or the means used.

Estonian educational institutions involved in processing some of the data listed above are registered as data processors by the Data Protection Inspectorate and have, consequently, assumed a responsibility for responsible and lawful handling of these data.

The list of sensitive personal data may be quite surprising in the context of an (educational) institution because, at first glance, most of the data do not seem necessary in the daily process of studies and awarding of professional qualifications. People are often unaware of the fact that the information exchanged could be sensitive personal data.

**example** *An RPL applicant applies for the recognition of the course "Intercultural Communication" on the basis of what he has learned in the framework of recreational activities and describes, among other things, his experience as a representative of a different race in the context of Estonia. In this case, it is sensitive data (data revealing ethnic or racial origin), the processing of which should be based on the Personal Data Protection Act.*

## example

*If a student applies for the recognition of the course, Business Planning, on the basis of work experience and, among other things, submits an actual company business plan as evidence, it is confidential information, the disclosure of which without the company's consent could cause real damage to the applicant and the company concerned.*

Regardless of whether the personal data are sensitive or not, RPL – as well as the wider process of study activities and awarding professional qualifications – must be based on the principle of confidentiality of data. According to this principle, the information exchanged in the process of an RPL application must be accessible only to a limited number of persons (e.g. the RPL applicant, adviser, assessor, document manager, the employee responsible for archiving, the reviewer of an appeal). This means that neither the content of the application and evidence submitted nor the reasons for recognition/rejection are to be communicated to third parties or disclosed in any other way.

## example

*The professional qualifications committee shall ensure the protection of data not subject to disclosure that they have obtained in the course of awarding professional qualifications (Statute of the Professional Qualifications Committee of the Society of Estonian Career Counsellors, [www.kny.ee/uploads/statuut.doc](http://www.kny.ee/uploads/statuut.doc)).*

**Please note!** Sensitive personal data are not requested **when RPL statistics are collected in Estonia** (e.g. in the framework of the Primus programme). For example, see the forms for RPL statistics at <http://primus.archimedes.ee/node/15>.

Have the responsibilities and duties of RPL parties been defined in your (educational) institution?

Would it be reasonable or necessary to prepare additional help material, specific to a field, for assessors and advisers in your (educational) institution?

Is the protection of sensitive personal data submitted in the process of RPL ensured in your (educational) institution? If so, how?

## RPL advisers and assessors

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*4. The assessors and advisers are competent, independent and impartial. Independence and impartiality are key factors in the assessment process and are based on the responsibility of assessors. The roles of assessors and advisers are clear and separate.*

*4.1 The adviser introduces the RPL procedure to the applicant and instructs the applicant, if necessary.*

*4.2 The assessors are impartial and independent in their decisions.*

*4.3 The assessor knows and follows the principles of RPL assessment. The assessor is a professional in the field assessed.*

*4.4 The assessors and advisers are constantly developing their professional skills.*

**4. The assessors and advisers are competent, independent and impartial. Independence and impartiality are key factors in the assessment process and are based on the responsibility of assessors. The roles of assessors and advisers are clear and separate.**

As assuring of the quality of RPL is the responsibility of the (educational) institution, the institution also has to define clear responsibilities of RPL advisers and assessors and ensure their professionalism (for details, see...).

It is useful to define the duties and responsibilities related to RPL in the employee's job description. This helps determine the roles of employees and minimise the "grey areas" that leave room for different interpretations. The risk of different interpretations can be reduced if the (educational) institution unambiguously formulates the differences in implementing RPL, arising from its specific character, work organisation or other factors and makes that information accessible to all parties.

**4.1 The adviser introduces the RPL procedure to the applicant and instructs the applicant, if necessary**

**The RPL adviser**, above all, acts as a support person in the RPL process.

Advisers are traditionally employees of the (educational) institution (e.g. an

Academic Affairs Specialist, the Director for Academic Affairs) whose main duties are

- to explain the rules established by the (educational) institution to applicants, including the requirements set for application and evidence, and to instruct them during the whole RPL process;
- to explain the learning outcomes of the study programme/the competency requirements of the professional standard to applicants and to guide them in the process of describing their knowledge and skills and assessing their compliance;
- to advise on how to prepare the application and collect evidence and to check the compliance of the material with the requirements before submission to assessment.

Depending on the specific character of the (educational) institution, the adviser can also be responsible for monitoring the progress of the process, for exchanging information on organisational issues between the applicant and the assessor and, if necessary and possible, for supporting the applicant's self-esteem and motivation to learn in case of a negative assessment result.

## RPL adviser's competences

The RPL adviser

<p>Understands the principles and process of RPL and is familiar with the relevant regulations.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can name the main principles of RPL.</li> <li>• Can explain the importance of those principles.</li> <li>• Can describe the main components of the process.</li> <li>• Can describe the process of RPL in his/her organisation.</li> <li>• Can name regulations affecting RPL.</li> <li>• Can explain which regulation(s) have most impact on the adviser role.</li> </ul>
<p>Is familiar with the main components of an outcome-based curriculum and/or professional standard.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can describe the structural logic of a curriculum and a professional standard.</li> <li>• Can name components of the study programme at the educational level assessed or of the relevant professional standard.</li> </ul>

Is familiar with the principles of assessing experience-based learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can name the principles of assessing experience-based learning.</li> <li>• Can name and explain the main methods of assessing experience-based learning.</li> <li>• Can relate learning outcomes or competencies with evidence.</li> </ul>
Knows and respects the limits of his/her role.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can explain the nature of the role of an adviser in the context of RPL.</li> <li>• Can distinguish the roles of an adviser and an assessor.</li> <li>• Stays within the limits of the adviser's role.</li> </ul>
Can advise the applicant with respect to carrying out a self-analysis, selecting evidence and preparing an analysis of what has been learned from experience.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Asks the applicant questions that facilitate self-analysis.</li> <li>• Uses active listening techniques.</li> <li>• Helps find relevant evidence.</li> <li>• Gives feedback to the applicant that supports development.</li> <li>• Gives advice to the applicant on finding and filling in the right application form.</li> </ul>
Co-operates with different parties to the RPL process.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communicates with the applicant, the assessor and the supporting personnel involved with the process</li> </ul>
Expresses points clearly and specifically, and produces accurate documentation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presents information in a way that is comprehensible to all parties.</li> <li>• Fills in documentation related to consultation according to the regulations of the competent authority.</li> </ul>

It is not within the remit of an adviser to author an application.

### example

*An applicant shows an adviser a substantial amount of diverse evidence concerning prior learning or work experience (diplomas, content descriptions, certificates, job descriptions, etc.). The applicant asks the adviser to assess which parts of the material shown could be used in the RPL application and how they might be used. In this case, the adviser must guide the applicant to carry out a self-analysis and not start compiling the application on the basis of the material shown.*

In the same manner, the adviser **must not** give an assessment of the content of the application or pre-empt the result of the assessment, for example, by saying “Don’t worry, it will be recognised” (thereby giving rise to false hopes about the assessment decision). The adviser may only refer to earlier practice, that is, share experiences concerning previous assessment results of similar applications.

**example** *The RPL adviser can communicate information about a certain pattern that has developed concerning the recognition of formal learning: perhaps if certain courses taught have always to date been considered suitable for recognition, or there is an ex-ante assessment of similar curricula in some educational institutions, which is continuously being updated (e.g. comparisons of curricula in the Estonian Information Technology College and Lääne-Viru College with similar curricula in other institutions of vocational education).*

It is unlikely that such “patterns” develop in cases of (“combined”) applications for the recognition of work experience and for the recognition of learning and work experience, but the possibility cannot be excluded that a certain position (e.g. in “regulated” fields of activity) or an existing profession defines with sufficient accuracy the competences of the person working in the position/having the qualification. In this case, a pattern may also develop with respect to evidence: certain competences can be demonstrated with the same type of evidence for the same position.

**example** *Such obligatory training courses as for example The Basics of Fire Fighting and Self-Rescue Techniques in shipping, the content of which overlaps with the outcomes of courses related to fire safety and rescue equipment in the study programme, are suitable for recognition regardless of the applicant.*

**Please note!** The role of the RPL adviser is not to read out the regulations concerning RPL or the learning outcomes of the curriculum or the competency requirements of the professional standard to the applicant. **It is the applicant’s responsibility to examine all necessary information.** The adviser can only guide and assist the applicant on issues that remain unclear.

Advisers must be **impartial** in their activities, that is, they should not express their subjective opinion of the applicant’s personality or competence.

**example**

*Although the adviser has information about the applicant's poor academic work and considers that the applicant would be unable to learn from experience, personal opinion must not disqualify the application.*

The task of advisers is to communicate feedback given by the assessors without adding personal emotions. They do not express their agreement or disagreement with the decision the assessors have made; they guide applicants who wish to contest the decision and explain to the applicant possible further actions on the basis of the assessors' feedback.

**Please note!** As a rule, RPL counselling is conducted individually. If there are several applicants who need similar information, it is useful to **organise group consultation or information sessions** before the term of submission of applications. It is particularly important that such consultation or information events be conducted regularly, so that potential applicants can count on that option.

In general, advising on RPL can be divided into two parts: advising on the process and formatting requirements, and advising on the content of applications.

Advising on the **process and format requirements in RPL** includes introducing the RPL procedure of the (educational) institution, including the process in general (terms for submitting and processing of applications, where and using which channels the applications can be submitted, who is giving feedback, etc.) and explaining the procedure of assessment (who the assessors are, how applicants are informed of assessment methods that have been added/specified during assessment, how to contest the result, etc.).

**example**

*It is very important for a student who has submitted an RPL application to know whether and under what conditions they can participate in studies until the RPL decision is made.*

Advising on the **content of applications** depends on the applicant and is based on issues related to a specific case. The adviser can first ask applicants to examine information materials available and then answer their questions. If necessary, advisers can ask RPL applicants supporting questions, but they should not express their opinion; nor are they responsible for the applicant's success or otherwise.

**example**

*A person who has worked as a secretary, cannot be assumed to know, for example, how to use a certain kind of document management software. Instead of making such arbitrary (and often unjustified) generalisations and conclusions, the right thing to do would be to ask specifying questions, such as, "Have you used document management software in your work?"*

**Please note!** For details, see **Guide for RPL Advisers** at <http://vota.archi-medes.ee>

Do the knowledge and skills of RPL advisers working in your (educational) institution comply with the adviser's competence profile?

Are the RPL advisers working in your (educational) institution aware of their tasks and do they fulfil these tasks according to the criteria established?

Would any changes be necessary in your (educational) institution in order to ensure better availability of consultation to RPL applicants? If so, what kind of changes?

**4.2 The assessors are impartial and independent in their decisions.**

**4.3 The assessor knows and follows the principles of RPL assessment. The assessor is a professional in the field assessed.**

**An RPL assessor** is usually the same person who is also the assessor in ordinary studies or in the process of awarding professional qualifications, so probably a lecturer, a teacher, the head of curriculum, a specialist in the field, a member of the professional qualifications committee.

The main tasks of the assessor are

- to assess the adequacy and relevance of evidence and to give relevant feedback to the applicant,
- to assess whether the applicant's competences comply with specific learning outcomes/competency requirements and to give feedback to the applicant.

## RPL assessor's competences

### The RPL assessor

<p>Understands the principles and process of RPL and is familiar with relevant regulations.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can name the main principles of RPL.</li> <li>• Can explain the importance of those principles.</li> <li>• Can describe the main components of the process.</li> <li>• Can describe the process of RPL in their organisation.</li> <li>• Can name regulations concerning RPL.</li> <li>• Can explain which regulation(s) are critical to their work.</li> </ul>
<p>Is familiar with the main components of an outcome-based curriculum or professional standard.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can describe the structural logic of a curriculum or a professional standard.</li> <li>• Can name components of the study programme at the educational level assessed or of the relevant professional standard.</li> </ul>
<p>Knows and follows the principles of RPL assessment.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is independent and impartial in assessment.</li> <li>• Applies comprehensive assessment, which includes considering general (transferable) competences.</li> <li>• Uses relevant methods of assessment.</li> <li>• Compiles assessment criteria that are consistent with learning outcomes or competency requirements.</li> <li>• In assessment, relies on suitable evidence and asks for additional evidence, if necessary.</li> <li>• Uses threshold criteria in assessment.</li> <li>• Gives feedback to the applicant that will support further studies.</li> </ul>
<p>Knows the field assessed at least at the level of the compliance to which it is being assessed in the RPL application.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Complies with the qualification requirements of the competent authority where he/she acts as an assessor.</li> </ul>
<p>Co-operates with different parties of the RPL process.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communicates with applicants, advisers and, if necessary, with external parties.</li> <li>• Co-operates with other assessors in order to reach a joint assessment decision.</li> </ul>

Expresses themselves clearly, produces accurate documentation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presents information in a way that is comprehensible to all parties.</li> <li>• Fills in documentation related to assessment according to the regulations of the competent authority.</li> </ul>
Can identify and mitigate risks that might affect the quality of assessment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can specify the risks to the quality of assessment.</li> <li>• Can identify those risks in the assessment process.</li> <li>• Can mitigate the risks whenever feasible.</li> </ul>

The **competence of assessors** can be divided into professional competences and competences related to methods of assessment. The existence of both areas of competence helps ensure that the analysis of learning and evidence submitted by the applicant are assessed objectively and with appropriate professional care and criticism.

### example

*If the assessor is competent in the relevant field, it will protect against such attitudes as: "There is much written here, so it seems that this person knows enough". The possibility of such an attitude may seem strange but can occur if the assessor is a person who is familiar with the field but whose knowledge is not detailed enough, or a person who is not competent in the principles of assessment of RPL.*

In addition to professional competence, the assessor has to be aware of the learning outcomes of different educational levels and/or levels of competency requirements of professional standards, as well as to be able to fit the skills and knowledge assessed into the study programme/professional standard.

**Competence in assessment methods** means that the assessor is able to select suitable methods for assessing the RPL application and apply them appropriately and to a relevant extent. An integral part of the competence in assessment methods is the knowledge and application of **general principles of assessment**.

Do the knowledge and skills of RPL assessors working in your (educational) institution fit with the assessor's competence profile?

Are the RPL assessors working in your (educational) institution aware of their tasks and do they fulfil those tasks according to the criteria established?

## RPL assessment principles

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*5. RPL assessment follows precise and unambiguous assessment principles:*

*5.1 It is not the existence of experience, but what has been learned from it that is being assessed.*

*5.2 What is most important in the assessment of prior learning, is its compliance with the learning outcomes of the study programme or the competency requirements of the professional standard.*

*5.3 The assessment of prior learning is based on the principle of comprehensive assessment.*

*5.4 The applicant is not assessed more strictly in RPL than full-time students.*

*5.5 Assessment of prior learning mainly uses pass or fail assessment. An exception is the recognition of prior formal education that ended with grading if a comparable assessment system is used as a basis.*

To sum up, the above-mentioned assessment principles imply that it does not matter where and how the applicant has acquired the competences being reviewed. From the perspective of learning, it is more important to have the necessary knowledge and skills at the required level of understanding. In order to assess the result of learning as a whole and not individual ways of learning and the principle of comprehensive assessment is of key importance in the assessment of RPL applications. **Comprehensive assessment** means that the results of both formal and informal learning (including learning through work experience) are assessed together as a whole, where one way of learning can partially or fully complement the other.

### example

*If an RPL applicant wishes to obtain recognition for certain courses, the assessment should not only consider the applicant's prior learning, but also (if existing and evidenced) work experience and what has been learned from it.*

**Please note!** For details, see **Guide for RPL Assessors** at <http://vota.archi-medes.ee>

In general, the assessors' **impartiality and independence** means that

- They have no direct conflict of interests with respect to the applicant;

**example** *The RPL assessor is not the applicant's employer, and so is not interested in the applicant's attendance record as an indicator of diligence or rectitude; nor is the assessor a competitor of the applicant, and so should not think of the application as in any way threatening the assessor's position. They do not use any knowledge of the applicant's competences that have not been described in the application. This aspect is particularly relevant owing to the small size of Estonia, which might mean that the assessor and the applicant could have had earlier professional contact or the assessor might have received background information on the applicant's competences from other people. It is also possible that a specialist in a certain field could use the knowledge held of a specific job or educational role to attribute learning to the applicant without inspecting evidence of that learning.;*

**example** *The assessor must remain impartial also if more information is known about the applicant than there is in the documents, that is, the assessor does not add his/her knowledge of the adequacy or inadequacy of the applicant's competences to the evidence and does not take this information into account when making the decision. The assessor can naturally use this knowledge when choosing the methods of assessment but must still rely on the principle that the RPL applicant should not be assessed more strictly than any other student.*

- They are not influenced by their personal attitude to what the applicant does;

**example** *The assessor must not deem the applicant's competences to be lower because of the school or college the applicant has attended or because of any lifestyle choices the applicant has made.*

If the assessment is made by an RPL Committee, the opinion of one single member with authority (whether based on their profession or position) must not influence the decision of the whole committee.

## example

*If necessary, voting can be carried out in secret, or such an individual should be required to express their opinion last.*

**Please note! The RPL assessor is responsible** for impartial assessment, for relying on appropriate assessment methods, on learning outcomes/competency requirements and the corresponding assessment criteria.

An (educational) institution is responsible for enabling and ensuring the independence of assessors.

Organisational culture and an incentive scheme for assessors also play an important role in the independence of assessors. RPL assessment may constitute a significant part of an assessor's duties and may also turn out to be more labour-intensive than in ordinary studies in case of more complex cases. For this reason, compensation paid to assessors for this work should be dealt with seriously by (educational) institutions. The compensation may vary in different institutions but it should be agreed with and accepted by the assessors because it affects their motivation and, consequently, the quality of the whole assessment process to a significant extent.

The **incentive scheme** for assessors must support independent decisions. If the assessors' duties are an integral part of wider duties and remunerated as such, or whether they are compensated for separately, the results of assessment (e.g. on the volume of credit points awarded) should never form any basis of remuneration. Nor should the results of RPL assessment be connected with the budget of the structural unit or be altered to reflect the interests of the structural unit/institution, etc.

## example

*An educational institution should not introduce a scheme in which positive RPL results are used as the basis of financial allocations to the faculty and, consequently, assessors are influenced to make positive decisions, or vice versa – if too many credit points (ECTS) are awarded through RPL, the accrual of tuition fees will affect the budget of the structural unit/institution, for which reason the assessors are urged to make more negative decisions.*

Moreover, when results indicators are defined for RPL, it must be borne in mind that these should not put pressure on the independence of the assessor.

**example**

*It is not reasonable for an (educational) institution to set the following as targets in the development of the RPL process: an increased number of credit points recognised through RPL, an increase in the percentage of positive RPL decisions or any related targets.*

Meeting the criterion of independence of an assessor is also supported by a transparent and effective management of appeals against RPL decisions (see ...).

**Please note!** If desired, the quality of advising can be assessed by the ratio of the number of credit points applied for and recognised – provided that RPL advising takes place in the (educational) institution and that the advisers and assessors are not the same persons.

The **independence** and **impartiality** of assessors will also be ensured by the existence of a sufficient number of competent assessors, in order to avoid work overload and a situation where the interests of the applicant and the assessor might conflict.

**Please note!** In the context of impartiality and independence of the assessor, **the question often arises as to whether the assessor and the adviser could be one and the same person.** There are no official requirements or prohibitions in this issue. From the perspective of time resources, it is not practicable to use assessors as advisers. However, neither is it justified to avoid relevant consultation by a specific assessor (e.g. the teacher of the course) on principle, if the assessor is able to successfully resolve an issue.

The roles of the assessor and the adviser are certainly completely different, but it is not always necessary to avoid their (partial) execution by the same person. It is, therefore, necessary to consider the specifics and resources of the (educational) institution when it comes to the division of tasks.

Considering the issue of whether an assessor may give advice, one has to remember that even if the assessor advises an applicant, it does not mean that an ex-ante assessment has been conducted during consultation that must therefore prompt a positive decision on the application.

## The RPL Committee

The RPL assessment is usually made by a committee established by the institution whose members are motivated and competent to assess RPL applications and meet the competency requirements of an RPL assessor (see above pg. 42).

In a situation where decision making extends beyond the competence of the members of the RPL Committee because of the specific character/complexity of the application, it may be necessary to include additional experts who may be either internal or external resources.

**example** *If the application deals with competences related to cyber-security, a specialist should be involved from the field, whereas if it deals with database administration, a representative of that area should be involved. In either case, general competence in IT would not be specific enough.*

**An internal expert of an (educational) institution** is usually the teacher of a specific course or another staff member who is familiar with the specific study programme and/or professional standard (e.g. the head of the profiling chair, the head of curriculum, a member of the professional qualifications committee). The latter could be a permanent member of the committee, if the RPL Committee is curriculum based or curriculum group based.

Experts may vary with respect to committees as well as applications; the main criterion of their selection is competence in the specific field being assessed.

**example** *If an application submitted to the RPL Committee working in the field of natural sciences includes courses from another field (e.g. education, foreign languages,), experts in that field should be included in their assessment. In addition, when the application concerns recognition of courses from another field as, for example, optional subjects, it is necessary to assess whether they meet the level of education, which assessment criteria should be applied, whether the evidence is sufficient for a comprehensive assessment, etc.*

Involving **external experts** in the assessment process is primarily justified in the case of larger (and combination) applications for the recognition of learning from work experience.

The opinion of an external expert can guide and support the decision of

the committee, but it is not binding. The committee must consider that an expert, while being a (top) specialist in a particular field, may lack the capacity to see the whole picture of a curriculum/professional standard, which would be essential for cross-curricular RPL applications.

**example** *What the applicant has learned from his/her work experience might be sufficient in the context of one course. However, such knowledge and skills might be insufficient if one takes a broader look at the curriculum and the courses for which the course applied for is a prerequisite.*

Whereas it may be generally presumed that teachers acting in the role of an expert are familiar with the topic of RPL, the understanding of external experts involved in the assessment is mostly modest with respect to learning outcomes, assessment criteria and principles of RPL, unless they have received prior preparation. Their opinion is unarguably reliable as regards how alleged learning from experience fits into the specific experience described from the perspective of the employer, but in order for external experts to assess the required depth and extent of learning outcomes, they first need to understand the context within which they should give their assessment and what they should take into account when doing so. Otherwise, their opinion can be too subjective and other members of the committee will not be able to rely upon it to the extent necessary.

**Please note!** When involving external experts, a good principle to follow is to vary external experts as much as necessary but as little as possible, in order to achieve an optimal implementation of knowledge acquired through experience.

**example** *Comprehensive assessment in the context of a curriculum or a professional standard can be achieved by involving as external RPL experts people who are engaged in the daily practice of their profession but are also involved in the development of a curriculum/professional standard (e.g. visiting lecturers who can be presumed to have some knowledge of RPL, a representative of employers in the Curriculum Council, a member of a working group developing a professional standard).*

Inasmuch as the RPL process can differ in different (educational) institutions, it is essential that the assessor be familiar with both the documents concerning the procedure of RPL in the (educational) institution and substantive

principles and requirements of assessment, and has preferably taken relevant training (sessions).

**Please note!** In order to make the work of the RPL Committee members more efficient it would be wise to have someone taking **minutes in meetings**. The latter could be a person who has a good grasp of organisational matters of RPL and who could be utilised by several committees to ensure continuity in the committees' work style.

Is the independence and impartiality of assessors ensured in your (educational) institution? If so, how?

Are the RPL applications assessed by one assessor or an assessment committee in your (educational) institution? What are the pros and cons of both options?

Could there be such cases of RPL in your (educational) institution for which it would be expedient to involve external experts? How could their involvement be better organised?

## The role of an employer in the RPL process

The main interest **of employers** in the implementation of RPL is as follows:

- RPL can be used to reduce the employee's need for leave from work during the period of studies;
- RPL makes official recognition of existing competences of employees as an educational or professional qualification possible.

**example** *A specialist who has excellent experience and skills but no documents certifying education may have problems with competing in the labour market in situations where a particular qualification is required from employees (e.g. when participating in public procurements, applying for finances from various funds of the European Union, etc.). For this reason, formalising existing competences as a document evidencing formal education gives a competitive advantage to the employer as well as the employee.*

- Employees can get feedback through RPL about the level and extent of their competences, which might make them aware of and help to explain to the employer their needs for further training.

The employer can give the applicant an opportunity to acquire missing competences that were identified in the RPL assessment process, as well as to collect evidence that the applicant needs (job descriptions, certificates of length of employment, characterisations, assessments of coping with work, extracts of feedback gathered from third parties, certificates of various training courses).

**example** *The assessment of an RPL application has identified that the applicant is missing a part of the learning outcomes, but instead of entering the process of formal education, the applicant returns to the work environment and the employer varies tasks assigned to the employee according to the missing competence(s) and the insufficient range or depth of their knowledge/skills. In this way, the employer gives the applicant an opportunity to develop their missing competences.*

*The employer can also help the applicant collect evidence required for the RPL application (job descriptions, certificates of length of employment, characterisations, assessments of coping with work, extracts of feedback gathered from third parties, certificates of various training courses).*

In both cases, it is important for employers to know the principles of RPL, the structure of the process in general and the details important to them (e.g. the requirements for secondary evidence, especially for the contents of documents certifying in-service training).

**Educational institutions** are mainly interested in including employers in the process of RPL because it makes sense to involve them as experts in their field and, in some cases, because it is necessary to engage them as RPL assessors. This is expedient when recognition of learning through work experience is applied for. In this case, substantive qualification requirements established for the employer do not significantly differ from those established for the internal assessor (if at all, then with respect to their awareness of procedural details and formalisation).

In which cases would it be reasonable for your (educational) institution to involve employers in the process of RPL? How could this be better organised?

#### **4.4 The assessors and advisers are constantly developing their professional skills**

It would be perfect if RPL assessors and advisers were aware of the need for continuous self-development arising from their role and would plan training courses accordingly. This can probably be most easily achieved in an organisation with an internal ethos that facilitates learning and development. It can be said with relative confidence that lack of time resulting from work overload is the main reason for giving up in-service training and other activities supporting self-development. However, this also means that individual development of both RPL assessors and advisers has to be consciously directed, allocating time for it and recognising individual development.

**Please note!** The professional skills of RPL assessors and advisers, as well as the need for their development, can also be dealt with during development interviews or accreditation as part of the motivation scheme.

#### **example**

*In the context of a development interview/accreditation, employees can use self-assessment as a learning method, providing them with an opportunity to think through and formulate clearly the roles of particular individuals in the assessment/advising process, and to identify best practices and significant issues.*

In a situation where time resources are critical, the way the opportunities offered for self-development meet the expectations of participants is of central importance. They should not feel that they have wasted their time. It is difficult to apply the principle that every training course provides something useful if there is a lack of time, and the motivation to participate in subsequent training may suffer.

In addition to external in-service training and seminars, it would be wise to provide RPL assessors and advisers with a variety of means of self-development; for example, opportunities for independent self-development ("study days"), internal training for selective sharing of the knowledge acquired (only focusing on the essential), exchange of written memos, round table discussions to share best practices with colleagues from their own and other educational institutions.

## example

*When planning training courses for RPL advisers, it would be expedient to focus separately on counselling techniques and career counselling and on the content of the RPL process. In the context of the latter, the adviser basically needs to know the same things as the assessor in order to give the applicant the most relevant and constructive advice.*

*In addition to (internal) training courses, self-development of assessors may also take the form of participation in the meetings of another (educational) institution (operating in a similar field); new assessors might participate in some assessment processes before getting their powers (using mentoring in the context of RPL), or experiences are shared in a guided/moderated informal discussion group.*

**Please note!** It is very important to allow and facilitate the exchange of experience between RPL assessors and advisers, particularly internally, but certainly also between different (educational) institutions. This helps strengthen the principles of RPL, harmonise the principles for choosing assessment methods and the requirements established for the material submitted by the applicant and the exchange practices for giving feedback.

Has your (educational) institution arranged in-service training for RPL advisers and assessors? If so, how?

Is learning from colleagues practised in your (educational) institution? If so, how?

## RPL quality assurance

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*6. Assuring the quality of RPL is a systematic process based on the principle of continuous improvement.*

*6.1 Assuring the quality of RPL is a part of the study process in educational institutions or the system of quality assurance of bodies awarding professional qualifications.*

*6.2 Educational institutions or bodies awarding professional qualifications regularly review the principles of RPL, the competence of assessors and advisers, and the organisation of RPL.*

**5. Assuring the quality of RPL is a systematic process based on the principle of continuous improvement.**

**5.1 Assuring the quality of RPL is a part of the study process in educational institutions or the system of quality assurance of bodies awarding professional qualifications.**

The quality of RPL is not an isolated phenomenon but an integral part of the framework of quality regulations and management of an (educational) institution. The RPL principles described in this Manual are also used as the RPL quality criteria (see above pg. 5). Relying on these principles, each (educational) institution assures the quality of RPL depending on its specific character, traditions, quality management system, etc.

**Please note! The responsibility for the quality of RPL rests with the (educational) institution.** As a rule, there are a number of different people involved in RPL in any one (educational) institution. They can broadly be divided by their area of responsibility into people who are responsible for the content of RPL (advisers, assessors) and people who are responsible for organisational matters (usually members of the supporting staff).

**Please note!** From the perspectives of transparency and reliability of RPL, **entering information about the RPL in official graduation certificates** is of central importance but it is often overlooked. In principle, all cases where RPL has been implemented must be identifiable in graduation certificates. This helps avoid aggregation of competences.

### example

*A person has passed a course in Investment Management in one educational institution and applies for its recognition as Financial Management in another educational institution, using both of them to apply for their recognition as Financial Analysis in a third educational institution. Considered separately, the course on Investment Management can be used to substitute for the course on Financial Management, provided that certain learning outcomes are covered; these two courses taken together could also be recognised as equating to a course on Financial Analysis. However, it is possible that only the course on Investment Management has been passed and that alone does not cover the learning outcomes of the course on Financial Analysis.*

Collecting **feedback from the parties to RPL** can be organised in different ways, depending on the traditions of the (educational) institution. For example, the applicant can give feedback on RPL using a regular feedback questionnaire. If the aim is also to disseminate information or if it is important to highlight RPL for some other reason, a separate survey on the process of RPL or focus group interviews (depending on the number of people) can be conducted. With respect to assessors, an alternative to the questionnaire worth considering is a self-assessment form or a work report with comments. The feedback collected through questionnaires is of a qualitative nature and suitable for use as a basis for improvement activities after being analysed.

**Please note!** It makes sense to conduct surveys only if the survey is followed by an **analysis of results** and **actual improvement activities**.

**Collecting RPL statistics** gives an opportunity to assess the achievement of objectives of the (educational) institution. However, the value of this information fully depends on the definition of objectives and the related outcome indicators.

### example

*Changes in the number of RPL applicants may be a sign of the level of awareness of RPL as a measure. Here, the objective can be maintaining or increasing the level of awareness. The average volume of RPL applications may refer to a more or less comprehensive approach to the curriculum by the applicants and help determine the focus of counselling. The ratio of the total volume of RPL applications and applications granted can be linked to the quality of counselling, etc.*

It is also useful to collect statistics about the contents of applications (formal, non-formal and informal learning); this makes it possible, where necessary, to separate the recognition of formal learning and assessment. Such separation of the content and form of RPL may be necessary, for example, when calculating the workload and creating an incentive scheme for RPL assessors.

**External assessment of the quality of RPL** is a new issue, but in principle it does not differ from the external assessment of other fields or processes, the aim of which is to get an external view of the (educational) institution and constructive proposals. The positive aspect of external assessment is that the (educational) institution analyses the strengths and weaknesses of one process consciously and in a focused manner in order to submit a self-analysis report to an external assessor, which is often not possible due to lack of time or resources.

**Please note!** External assessment can also be conducted in such a way that the assessor first adopts the perspective of an RPL applicant to understand the process as a whole and then focuses on the organisation of counselling and assessment (though not actually conducting the latter, but examining documents and interviewing persons in these roles). This requires significantly less time from the institution and can be initiated by the institution itself, for example, with the aim of preparing for an “official” external assessment.

**When assessing the quality of RPL, an (educational) institution can use the following check list:**

- Is the procedure of RPL in line with the principles of RPL and does it enable assessment of different competences?
- Is the information on RPL unambiguous, including explanations of necessary activities, presumed duration and important deadlines, the obligations and rights of applicants, and the principles, methods and criteria of assessment, and can it be easily found (is it freely available)?
- Are the parties to the RPL process aware of their roles? Have their duties and responsibilities been defined? Are the parties following what has been defined?
- Is assessment based on the evidence submitted by the applicant? Have the general requirements established for the evidence, such as diversity, relevance, authenticity and volume, been defined? Are the assessors following these requirements?

- Are the methods and criteria of assessment adequate and justified? Are the assessors impartial and independent? Is the assessment process reliable and transparent?
- Are the opinions and assessments that decisions are based on being recorded? Is the material the decision is based on archived pursuant to the procedure established in the institution?
- Does a decision (even in case of a fully positive decision) always prompt feedback to the applicant?
- Do the RPL advisers and assessors meet the competency requirements?
- Are the RPL advisers and assessors developing their professional skills?
- Is feedback on the procedure of RPL being collected from different parties on a regular basis? Is the information received analysed and are there any improvement activities planned?
- Are statistics on RPL being collected? Is it based on the objectives of the institution in the field of RPL? Is the achievement of results indicators being monitored and are there any improvement activities planned?
- Is the effectiveness of implemented improvement activities being monitored?

Do you think that the structure of the RPL system in your (educational) institution complies with the principles of RPL?

How is the assurance of the quality of RPL defined in your (educational) institution?

Has the collection and analysis of feedback on RPL been organised in your (educational) institution? If so, how?



## Summary

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This RPL Manual is the first attempt to give a systematic overview of what should constitute high quality RPL that meets the needs of all parties and guides parties on how to reach the requisite standard at different levels of education. The solutions and examples, reviews and proposals, reflection questions, competency requirements and role descriptions are an integral part of the process of RPL.

Although RPL is no longer a very new issue, everyone dealing with this topic still encounters questions and problems. RPL is a complex process and a fertile ground for misunderstandings, myths and misjudgements by virtue of its very nature.

This manual sets out the principles of RPL rather than listing the rules. Applying the principles of RPL means not stalling at the first hurdle or merely judging that rules applied in one institution do not necessarily apply in another. Indeed, there can be minor differences in the organisation of RPL based on the specific character of the institution, but the principles are constant. Implementing these principles requires a systematic and long-term effort, and certainly interaction with different parties. It can be a process that is long and difficult, but is ultimately rewarding.

You should never forget the reason we are doing all this. The nature of RPL is much more than just converting experience into credit points in the field of education. It is a system supporting and recognising the integral development of a personality. This system has many other areas of application than just the education system and the system of awarding professional qualifications, such as planning in-service training by employers, comprehensive mapping of a person's skills and bringing the unemployed back to the labour market. A high quality implementation of RPL in the education system is just a first step towards a better application of human resources in our society and to realising the ideas of lifelong learning, as a result of which we all win.

Good luck with implementing the principles of RPL!

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