

Making Experience Count for Entry to B.A. Management with Advanced Standing: A Case Study in RPL

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The Context:

The University of the West of Scotland (UWS) has a strong commitment to the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and has a process embedded within the regulatory framework of the university whereby learning which has taken place in a variety of contexts both formal (within a classroom or by following a structured course) and informal (through work or leisure activities) can be recognized either for entry to a program of study or where the learning is at the right level for credit toward a specific program.

Recognizing and/or awarding credit for prior learning is of increasing importance in Scotland with the development and implementation of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF). An increasing number of Scottish qualifications, including those delivered within universities, have been brought into the framework, which defines qualifications and learning in terms of level and credit. The aim is to implement and embed this within Scotland's education and training provision to:

- Assist people of all ages and circumstances to access appropriate education and training over their lifetime to fulfill their personal, social and economic potential.
- Enable employers, learners and the public in general to understand the full range of Scottish qualifications, how they relate to each other and how different types of qualifications can contribute to improving the skills of the workforce.
- Support the development of routes to progress from qualification to qualification, and maximize the opportunities to transfer credit between qualifications by making qualifications and relevant programs of learning easier to understand.

RPL offers a wide range of benefits and opportunities to students, employers and universities. Students benefit, as gaining credit and/or recognition for learning enhances confidence, motivation and self-esteem. Further learning is encouraged, as there is no need to duplicate learning that the student already has. Gaining a recognized qualification can increase employment opportunities.

Employers benefit, as work-based learning and training can contribute to a recognized qualification saving time and money, making more efficient use of training budgets, avoiding duplication of learning and identifying the best way to meet skills gaps. RPL can form an important element of a framework for skills development and CPD (Continuing Professional Development), thus enabling employers to show a commitment to workforce development and improve staff retention.

Learning providers including universities benefit as participation in learning programs is made more attractive with students coming into programs with recognition for learning they already have. There is a distinct widening of access to those who would or could otherwise not consider further study due to time and financial

constraints. Retention of learners is enhanced as students have given careful thought to their academic aspirations and goals and are strongly committed to meeting them.

The Case:

The above can be illustrated through the following case study, which was a collaboration between the Lifelong Learning Academy (LLA) and the Business School at UWS. The aim was to award credit for 120 credit points SCQF levels seven (equivalent to first year of a degree program) and eight (equivalent to second year of a degree program) through RPL including both certificated and/or experiential learning for part-time students who had considerable work-related experience to allow entry to SCQF level nine (equivalent to final year of an unclassified degree program) of a B.A. Management program. The project was coordinated by LLA staff who worked in conjunction with academic staff from the Business School who supervised and assessed the credit submissions. The RPL procedure involved the construction of statements of learning pertaining to the individual student's experiential or work-based learning linked to the award sought and to the SCQF level descriptors evidenced through a written submission and portfolio.

Nine students were identified as candidates for RPL to bring their specific credit up to 240 points (equivalent to years one and two of a full-time study program). These students were enrolled in a "Making Experience Count" module. Students attended workshop sessions facilitated by LLA staff. UWS RPL procedures were explained and students participated in a number of exercises to enable them to begin to construct statements of learning and develop a portfolio of evidence in support of their RPL claim. Credit searches of all certificated learning held by students were carried out by LLA staff, and where credit ratings could be established, this was incorporated into the claim for credit. Therefore, all claims were for 240 credit points covering levels SCQF seven and eight, and included both Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL; certificated learning) and Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL; experiential learning).

An academic supervisor was identified by the Business School. LLA staff met with the supervisor and academic colleagues from the Business School to explain the process and what would be involved in supporting the students. The supervisor met with LLA staff and the students on a regular basis. Individual statements of learning were developed and approved for all students undertaking an RPL claim. Students met with their supervisor regularly and were offered additional telephone and email guidance by LLA staff on portfolio construction.

Some students found it difficult to understand the RPL process and to comprehend that there are three elements to this irrespective of the volume and/or level of credit, namely:

- statements of learning
- 5,000 word written submissions
- portfolios of supporting evidence

While recognizing the need for a robust procedure to assess RPL, some students were surprised at the amount of work required and needed a considerable amount of encouragement and support. One student was unwilling to undertake the RPL claim and withdrew from the program.

Students who completed and were awarded 240 credit points found the reflective nature of the exercise to be a positive experience and felt they had benefited enormously from the learning experience, becoming more reflective in their learning styles and professional practice. They also have become more confident professionally and in some cases questioned practices within the workplace and made suggestions for improvement, which have been adopted by their employers. All were highly motivated to succeed and graduated in November 2011.