



## **RPL – Recognition of Prior Learning**

**A GUIDE FOR APPLICANTS**

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## INTRODUCTION

This publication (the Guide) is intended for everyone interested in RPL – recognition of prior learning. RPL can benefit many people interested in further education, especially if they have had to interrupt their studies and wish to restart them or wish to continue their education but change their programme or educational institution, or acquire a professional certificate.

The Guide will show what RPL is, how it works and where to find further help.

This Guide can be used in several different ways. Those not yet familiar with the topic and principles of RPL will find it worthwhile to read the material from beginning to end. However, if this topic is already familiar to you, you can go straight to the sections that are of interest.

Several people have assisted in compiling this material by reading, commenting and improving it – Ragne Kalamees, Marge Kõrvits, Mirjam Lindpere and Kadri Orula, as well as the RPL advisers of the University of Tartu. Anu Lepik, Sirje Murre, Hanna-Hulda Reinkort, Katrin Tammjärv, Anne Urbla and Inga Vau have helped update and supplement the Guide.



## 1. What is RPL?

The recognition of prior learning (RPL)<sup>1</sup> is a process that helps a recognised institution assess the competence of an applicant based on specific criteria. The key criteria are designed to assess how the applicant's knowledge, skills and aptitudes match the entry requirements of the educational institution, the learning outcomes of the programme or sections of it or the competency requirements of professional standards. If the applicant meets the requirements, their competences will be taken into account when considering the enrolment criteria and completion of the programme or upon awarding a professional qualification.

### The goal of RPL is

- to value the competence of a person and provide equal opportunities for assessing and acknowledging it, regardless of the time, place and manner of acquiring the knowledge and skills;
- to support lifelong learning and flexibility between and within the education system and the labour market;
- to improve access to education for people who are socially disadvantaged; to broaden their opportunities to acquire an education and compete in the labour market, and so support making individuals a useful resource for society.

RPL makes it possible to develop the relationship between lifelong learning and different levels of study. It also connects the world of education with the world of work by making people's knowledge, skills and competences more visible and making it possible to put a value on them, regardless of how they were acquired. In principle, it means that a person entering further education or applying for a professional qualification can have their earlier studies or experience (for example, formal education courses completed or previous on-the-job training, vocational courses, or just their experience) recognised when applying for or in the course of a study programme. Study courses can be completed faster and they can be more target-oriented because there is no need to repeat what has already been learned, meaning courses can focus on passing on important new knowledge and skills.

### RPL can be used when

- restarting interrupted studies;
- meeting enrolment criteria;
- changing programme (also within an educational institution);
- awarding a professional qualification;
- planning a career.

<sup>1</sup> In Estonian: *Varasemate õpingute ja töökogemuse arvestamine, VÕTA*

### **RPL makes it possible to consider, as part of a programme or when awarding a professional qualification**

- prior studies in educational institutions;
- knowledge and skills acquired through in-service training or independent studies;
- knowledge and skills acquired through professional and other experience.

For instance, with RPL you can be awarded a pass in a subject or module on a programme based on earlier studies if you have passed a similar course in another educational institution or as part of in-service training. RPL enables people to meet admission requirements they might otherwise not meet. For example, if a Master's degree programme requires its applicants to have passed exams in certain subjects, RPL would allow the admissions department to treat knowledge gained in the course of professional activities as the equivalent of exam passes.

What is most important is the way that the prior knowledge or skill corresponds to a programme or professional standard. The learner has to be able to describe and analyse what they have learned by experience and to demonstrate that it is compatible with the learning outcomes of the course they are applying for. There are assessors to make the decision of whether RPL can be used to meet admission or learning outcomes standards.

### **The role of RPL in obtaining an education**

RPL provides more flexible opportunities for obtaining an education, makes it possible to complete studies faster, saves the resources of the educational institution, the employer and the student and gives them an opportunity for self-realisation. Crucially, it also enables students to improve their position on the labour market. The gain is mutual as while RPL makes it possible to study based on prior professional experience, institutions utilising RPL gain well-motivated learners who bring practical experience to theoretical studies and are able to complete their studies in a shorter time.

### **RPL and the award of professional qualifications**

RPL plays a significant role in assessing the level of competence required for a professional qualification. The aim of the professional qualification system is to help employees working in Estonia be more competitive, act as a support structure for the education system and help in assessing and acknowledging people's skills, regardless of where and how they acquired them.

All professional qualifications have requirements set by a professional body to ensure that people completing the qualification and being awarded a certificate are competent in the area concerned. That requires a standardised assessment system to maintain professional standards.

The applicant's actual competence is assessed, regardless of the way it was acquired (formal learning, non-formal learning, i.e. skills and knowledge

acquired by training, courses, professional experience, and informal learning). If a person has prior experience and knowledge that meets the professional standard, they will have an opportunity to prove it.

It is important to stress that each skill claimed does not have to be re-examined. Applicants can support their claim through documents establishing that they have completed an academic course, or that they have relevant practical experience and a certificate from a professional body could support an application for a professional qualification.

### **Who and what is RPL for?**

People who could benefit from RPL include those who:

- wish to begin studies but lack the required qualification to get on to a course or programme;
- wish to study abroad but cannot easily establish that their education is adequate to meet the requirements of the educational institution in the foreign country (for example, there are many institutions that will allow study for a Master's degree without a corresponding Bachelor's degree, as long as the applicant can show that they have relevant experience to contribute);
- have already obtained a higher education but want to extend it or start working in another field: RPL can help avoid repeating modules or courses that have already been passed;
- wish to continue interrupted studies;
- wish to provide evidence of existing skills and knowledge when working towards a professional qualification;
- wish to have skills acquired informally through work or leisure activities recognised.

**What is most significant is how the content of prior knowledge or skills corresponds to the objectives of the programme or to the professional body's standards.**

### **On the national level, RPL is governed by the following documents:**

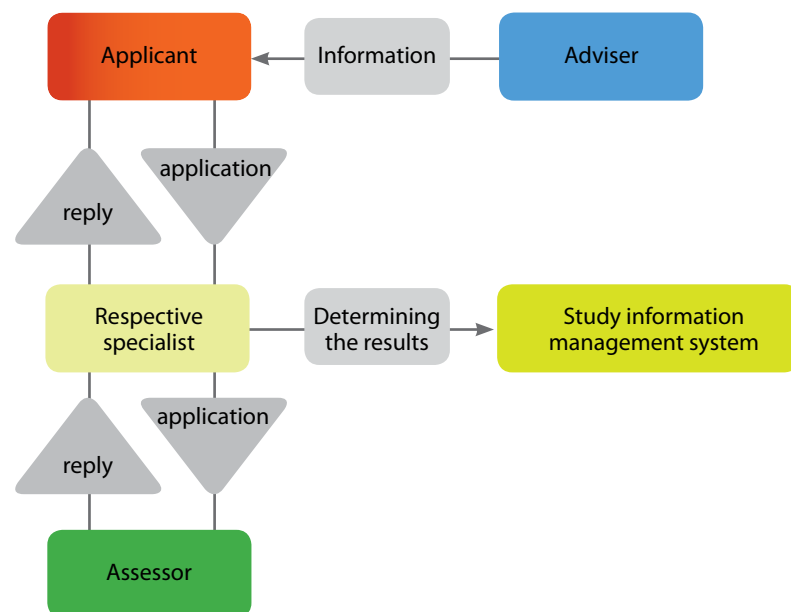
- The Universities Act;
- The Institutions of Professional Higher Education Act;
- The Vocational Educational Institutions Act;
- The Standard of Higher Education;
- The Professions Act.

In addition, RPL regulations have been established in educational institutions and with professional bodies who award professional qualifications.

## 2. The process of RPL

The process of RPL consists of the following stages:

- advising the applicant and self-assessment;
- submission of an application;
- assessment of the application;
- decision making and feedback;
- contesting the decision (if necessary).



**Figure 1.** Processing an RPL application

### Who is involved in the RPL process? What are their roles?

There are usually three parties in the RPL application process: an applicant, an adviser and an assessor. Each of these parties has different tasks and responsibilities.

#### When applying for RPL, the **applicant**

- checks the rules on RPL established by the educational institution;
- checks the requirements of the programme they want to do, to find out which knowledge and skills may be suitable for recognition;
- submits a standard application along with necessary evidence;
- is liable for the information submitted being correct;
- submits additional evidence, if requested to.

#### The RPL **adviser**

- informs the applicant of valid requirements and procedure;
- assists the applicant in preparing the application (but will not write it for the applicant);
- verifies that the application is filled in correctly and all necessary information and documents are included;
- offers advice and support to the applicant;
- checks the process complies with the rules.

#### The RPL **assessor**

- has experience in the area or activity being assessed;
- has good knowledge of the contents and structure of the programme;
- is responsible for ensuring that the prior learning to be recognised meets the requirements of the programme;
- makes a decision in the context of the whole study programme;
- should treat the applicant appropriately;
- assesses the skills and knowledge acquired through prior learning and/or professional experience in an equivalent manner to the learning outcomes obtained in the form provided for by the programme;
- gives feedback regardless of the decision to include recommendations for a future application, if appropriate.

### 3. RPL and the completion of a programme

#### Activities of the applicant upon recognition of prior learning

##### 1. Examining the process and rules of RPL and self-assessment

As a first step, it is worth examining the RPL regulations of the educational institution you want to study with. Different educational institutions have different rules and there may be specific limitations on the implementation of RPL. RPL regulations give an overview of the time and financial factors related to the application, contact information and other issues that you need to be aware of before starting the application process.

A self-assessment has to be carried out. For some people, self-assessment may be a very simple and familiar task, while for others, it may be difficult. You should consider what experience you have gained in your life and write a summary of your past roles and tasks completed and point out the skills you have learned from them. You might want to use a career counsellor to help you map out your skills and knowledge.

Another alternative is to focus on the programme you want to take. Does it specify skills required either for entry or on completion of modules? Try to judge whether the knowledge and skills you acquired in the past suit the programme. The RPL advisor of the educational institution can give advice on that and explain how the application process works. It is advisable to bring along evidence of prior learning when meeting the adviser for the first time. In more complicated cases, the RPL adviser may consult the RPL assessor (programme manager, RPL Committee, etc.) of the relevant programme.

You can also start “from both ends” at the same time, that is you can think both of your existing skills and which programme you wish to complete, as well as what is achievable. In this respect, it is not important that what has been learned corresponds exactly to the contents of a specific subject, but you should assess how it meets the learning outcomes of the programme, RPL only applies when it suits the context of the relevant programme.

Questions that should be answered during self-analysis:

- What kind of skills and knowledge do I have that could be recognised through RPL in the context of the programme I want to do?
- Does my learning correspond with the learning outcomes of the subject/module?
- Is what I have learned at a good enough level to utilise RPL or would it be useful for me to learn something else?

What is important is not the existence of an experience but what has been learned from it. The key to learning from experience is in the ability to analyse your own experiences.

#### An example of describing the learning process

- Kati works for a rural municipality who want to inform the local people of study opportunities for adults. Kati wrote an article for the local newspaper, showing how learning experience can be expressed in writing.

Activity	What did I do to achieve the end result?	Used knowledge and skills	What did I learn?
Writing an overview article on training opportunities for adults	I worked through relevant legislation, previous articles concerning adult education and communication theories, and identified the institutions providing adult education.	Computer skills; Writing skills; Analytical skills; Ability to collect information.	I can collect, analyse and generalise information, use modern information technology equipment, and write an article based on theoretical knowledge.

#### 2. Preparation and submission of the application

If the knowledge and skills acquired during prior learning and professional experience can be recognised, an application may be submitted. The educational institution can provide the appropriate form, which will set out how to report prior learning and /or additional professional training and/ or specific professional experience. The application form may vary slightly in each educational institution, but the basic idea is the same everywhere: it is intended to allow the applicant to show the range of their knowledge and skills.

Someone wishing to have their prior higher education studies recognised, should simply list the subjects they have taken, so they can be compared against the requirements of the new programme. Be aware that programmes change over time, so a programme from 2004 may be very different from a programme of the same name in 2010. In addition, programmes with the same



name may have slightly different contents in different institutions of higher education. There is less concern in vocational education as the national programme facilitates harmonisation.

An applicant who wishes to have their professional experience recognised should perform a self-analysis. The aim is to demonstrate what they have learned from their professional experience and how that corresponds to the learning outcomes of their chosen study programme. As such, it is quite similar to examinations that serve to show the level of knowledge and skills achieved.

It is the applicant's job to fill in the application form and to compile the required evidence. No-one else can collect the necessary evidence or analyse what has been learned from professional experience. The time required for filling in the application will vary depending on the person and their experience: the more training or professional experience corresponding to the learning outcomes of the study programme the applicant has had, the more thorough and the longer the application will be. The application helps the applicant to reflect on their knowledge, and make that knowledge visible for other people on paper. Therefore, you should allow plenty of time to complete the application, perhaps even days, but remember that RPL can save months or even years of study.

It must be remembered that RPL is a process, so it takes time from the submission of the application until the decision is made. The regulations of educational institutions usually specify the time period for review of the application. The subjects/modules recognised on the basis of RPL have an impact on the grade average and, thus, also on whether a study allowance is available, and how much it might be.

RPL influences academic study progress, so a part-time student might be able to use RPL to become a full time student. RPL can have a dramatic influence on your life. It is important to think carefully about the application and when to submit it – be especially wary of deadlines. There is usually no limit to the number of applications that may be made, so there is an option to try again, if necessary.

Although the process might seem a little frightening and complicated at first, the fact that the applicant is not left alone with the application should offer some confidence. RPL advisers work in most higher educational institutions and are there to provide information and assistance when filling in the application. In addition to this Guide, information can be found on the home page of RPL (VÖTA) at <http://vota.archimedes.ee/>. This web page also includes links to e-learning courses, which explain both the RPL application process and teach the skills of self-analysis.

Documents and materials that can be used as evidence and attached to the application form include:

- Academic report;
- Training certificate;
- Diploma;
- Contract on student exchange;
- Job description;
- Curriculum vitae;
- Analysis of what has been learned from professional experience;
- Study portfolio;
- Internship report;
- Subject syllabus or study programme;
- Professional certificate;
- Articles (written by the applicant or reflecting their activities);
- Projects prepared, documents evidencing participation in a project;
- Character assessment from employer;
- Examples of work performed (e.g. study materials, guides, etc. prepared);
- Europass Language Passport.

Evidence should show that:

- the work was performed and the knowledge/skills acquired by the applicants themselves;
- the knowledge/skills acquired meet the required level (e.g. an earthworm can be studied together with friends when playing in the kindergarten yard, in a biology class in school and while doing research at a university – in the first case, however, the knowledge acquired does generally not comply with the knowledge required in a higher educational institution);
- a connection between theoretical knowledge and practical skills;
- the knowledge and skills acquired are up-to-date;
- it is directly relevant to what is being applied for.

Self-assessment, checking the programme and collecting evidence as well as preparation of the application form before the application process are of great importance.

Sample application (application forms may be different in different schools).

## APPLICATION

### for recognition of prior learning for completion of a programme

#### PERSONAL DATA OF APPLICANT

<b>First name</b> (in block letters) MARION			
<b>Surname</b> (in block letters) METS			
<b>Personal identification code</b>  1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 1 0			
<b>Address</b> street, house, apartment / name of the farm, rural municipality, village / postal code, city / county Metsasihi 123-4			
<b>Contact phone number(s)</b> (372) 12345678			
<b>E-mail address</b> marion.mets@meiliaaddress.ee			
<b>Level of study:</b> (mark as appropriate)		Vocational education	Professional higher education
		Diploma study	Master's degree study
	x	Bachelor's degree study	Doctoral degree study
<b>Matriculation certificate / student's record book / student code No.:</b> 1234567			
<b>Programme / Main field of study / Number of group</b>		<b>Minor field of study / Year of admission</b> 2010	

#### GENERAL DATA OF APPLICATION

<b>I apply for the recognition of subjects for completion of the programme</b>			
on the basis of prior learning in the volume of:	8	ECTS	
Level of study of prior learning:	Bachelor's degree studies (Please specify; for example, professional higher education, Bachelor's degree, vocational education, etc.)		
Studies abroad under a learning agreement in the volume of:		ECTS	
On the basis of professional experience in the volume of:		ECTS	
On the basis of in-service training in the volume of:		ECTS	
<b>Total:</b>		<b>ECTS</b>	
(leave blank if not applicable)		(volume in numbers)	
<b>according to Appendix:</b> (mark as appropriate)	x	<b>Appendix 1</b> (recognition of a subject)	<b>Appendix 2</b> (recognition of professional experience)
		<b>Appendix 3</b> (recognition of in-service training)	<b>Appendix 4</b> (other mandatory annexe)
<b>Attached documents:</b> Extract from study information system, subject syllabuses.			
(Please specify; for example, academic report, certificate, results report, syllabus, programme, job description, self-analysis, portfolio, creative work, etc.)			

**I confirm that the data submitted is correct.**

**Date:** 10.08.2010

**Signature of applicant:** .....

**Decision delivered:** .....

(Signature, date)

(To be filled in by the person receiving the documents)

Notes (e.g. the number of documents attached)

Documents received by .....

RECOGNITION OF SUBJECTS				DECISION (To be filled in by the RPL Committee / assessor)								
				Type of subj.*	Type of mod.*	Decision	Subject, subject code, module recognised	Study load (ECTS)	Grade			
<b>Subject / module of the programme</b> Subject, subject code, study load, module applied for	<b>Subject / module passed</b>			Name of the educational institution in Estonian and English / Lecturer	Date	Grade	Study load	Code	Name of the subject / module in Estonian and English	Reasons (to be filled in by the RPL Committee / assessor):		
	Sissejuhatus sotsiaal-kultuurilise psühholoogiase (Introduction to Socio- Cultural Psychology), SOPH.00.280, 4 ECTS; basic module	Ülevaade psühholoogiast Introduction to Psychology	SOPH. 00.029									
Sissejuhatus sotsioloogiasse (Introduction to Sociology), SOS.01.001, 3 ECTS narrow field module	Sissejuhatus sotsioloogiasse Introduction to Sociology	RAS 6001	28.01.2010	A	4 ECTS	Tallinna Ülikool University of Tallinn Airi-Alina Allaste, Jüri Kruusvall	Reasons (to be filled in by the RPL Committee / assessor):					
Reasons (to be filled in by the RPL Committee / assessor):				Assessor (name, signature):			Assessor (name, signature):					

\* Types of subjects: 1 – obligatory subject in the main field of study; 2 – elective subject in the main field of study; 3 – obligatory subject in the minor field of study; 4 – elective subject in the minor field of study; 5 – optional course  
(Please specify; for example, results report, academic report, diploma, certificate, syllabus, programme, etc.)

**Attached documents certifying studies:**

**I confirm that the data submitted is correct:**

Date: 01.09.2010

Signature of applicant:

CONFIRMATION OF DECISION

Date:

Chairman of the RPL Committee / RPL assessor / assistant (name, signature):



### 3. Assessment of the application

The application will be assessed by an expert or an assessment committee. Assessors are usually teachers, lecturers and experts who are very familiar with the programme. The assessors verify whether the evidence submitted with the application meets the requirements and is sufficient. During assessment, additional evidence or performance of additional tasks may be requested.

Assessment is based on the following principles:

- It is what has been learned from an experience that is assessed, not the (professional) experience itself.
- The contents of prior learning must correspond to the programme/professional standard (the learning outcomes of the programme or the competences of the professional body's standards).
- Knowledge and skills acquired must correspond to the level of education for which recognition is sought.
- Integrity: The learner's performance is seen in the combination of theoretical and experiential learning.

*For example, if Mart has passed an academic writing course, feedback on his skills will reflect the way he has applied the competences acquired in writing a research text.*

- Assessment is based on assessment criteria, which the applicant will be informed of. If an assessment criterion requires the learner to analyse what they have learned from prior professional experience, then a piece of writing detailing what the learner has done rather than what they have learned will not be suitable.

*For example, if Marju has taught primary school children as a substitute teacher then an analysis describing the activities she performed while teaching will not meet the assessment criterion. An analysis of what Marju learned is what would be required. That might include how to establish ground rules for discipline in the class and should be supported by a description of how she later applied what she had learned.*

- Assessment mainly uses a pass or fail assessment. The assessment committee does not give a mark but considers the subjects passed. An exception is the recognition of prior formal education that resulted in a grade being awarded if a comparable assessment system is used as a basis.

*For example, if Maria interrupted her studies some years ago and recommences her studies on the same or a similar course, it is possible to recognise the elements of the course she passed previously, using the same grade that she received. However, if Maria wanted her subsequent work experience to be recognised as part of her studies, that would not be graded, but marked as a pass (or fail).*

### Means of assessing prior learning

#### • The application form and its appendices

Educational institutions have developed application forms for the recognition of prior learning. Often, the form also has appendices with more specific content that require a more thorough self-analysis in order to recognise, for example, what has been learned during in-service training, by self-instruction or from professional experience. It is also required to submit evidence (a training certificate, an academic report, a job description, a study portfolio, etc.) along with the application and its appendices.

#### • Study portfolio

A study portfolio is a set of materials that displays the strengths, skills and experiences of the person and may contain a variety of material. The study portfolio describes the knowledge obtained by experience. The evidence must be submitted so that it can be assessed, and in most cases institutions will ask for hard copies in a folder. The study portfolio is often considered as the most flexible form of assessment, but compiling it does take time.

#### • Interview

An interview gives the opportunity to present earlier achievements, and to explain more about the material submitted and to answer questions in conversation.

#### • Internship report

As professional experience is often used to recognise internship, an internship report prepared according to the requirements of the educational institution may be used for the purpose of recognition.

#### • Observation of practical work or simulation

If it is possible to observe the applicant's work directly, the applicant may be asked to demonstrate certain technical methods or skills in a given situation. This may be especially appropriate to demonstrate mastery of technical skills (e.g. working with certain machinery) or communication skills (e.g. in social work). Most often, this method is used when recognising an element required for a professional qualification or teacher training, and is also used for assessing applicants to technical fields of vocational educational institutions.

The items listed above can also be used in combination.

#### 4. Decision and feedback

The applicant has the right to get feedback and information on each decision from the assessor (whether negative or positive).

If the decision is positive, the result will be entered in the study information system of the school and the subjects recognised on the basis of RPL will later be noted in the academic report, the results report, and on the certificate.

#### 5. Contesting a decision pursuant to the procedure of the educational institution

The applicant has the right to contest the decision of recognition of the RPL application. The procedure for contesting the decision may vary in different educational institutions.

#### Limitations of using RPL

Each educational institution has different rules, which can limit the opportunity to use RPL. Dependent on individual regulations, RPL may also have an impact on the study allowance awarded, the calculation of study workload, and other factors.

Possible limitations:

- Reduced relevance of contents – for example, subjects in the field of information technology can lose their relevance quite quickly whereas areas of philosophy have the same content even after a long period.
- The sum of the credit points gained from the first and second level of higher education must be at least 300 according to the Standard of Higher Education. For example, if Mari has passed a subject in Bachelor's studies that is part of the Master's programme and has it later recognised as part of her Master's studies, she would still need enough credit points to ensure that the total amount of credit points reaches at least 300.
- According to the Standard of Higher Education, it is not permitted to use the recognition of prior learning when defending a final paper or taking final examinations in higher education. The Standard of Higher Education does not limit the volume of subjects, professional experience, etc. that may be recognised. The extent to which RPL may be used on a course varies in different educational institutions.
- A fee may be charged for the application of RPL. This fee may vary – in some educational institutions, the fee is charged for the submission of the application; in others, for the credit points recognised or applied for. In some cases, the fee is established for part-time students or external students. All limitations specified may differ in different educational institutions. For detailed information, contact the educational institution you wish to apply to.

## 4. RPL and applying for a professional certificate

### 1. Examining the professional standard and the process of awarding a professional qualification

If you are advised to use RPL when applying for a professional qualification, the first step is to work out the skills and knowledge you have that you might want to be certified. The next step is to get the details of the standards required by the professional body and then to compare your skills and knowledge to the professional standard.

Then you should check who awards the professional qualification and how the assessment of professional competence is organised (e.g. via professional examination).

Further information on applying for a professional qualification through RPL (application forms required, procedure, etc.) will be available from the professional qualifications committee of the body awarding the professional qualification.

Professional standards and information on bodies awarding professional qualifications and the requirements of professional examinations can be found in the state register of professions [www.kutsekoda.ee](http://www.kutsekoda.ee).

### 2. Self-assessment, preparation of the application and evidence and submission to the professional qualifications committee

When preparing a self-assessment, it is important to relate what has been learned to the competence requirements specified in the professional standard; so knowledge and skills obtained from experience must be matched to the competences set out in the professional standard.

When someone wants to use RPL, there is no need to present learning from professional experience, non-formal and formal education separately, as they can all be noted in one application.

**Evidence** should be attached to the application, and may, for example, be:

- Products, drawings, computer software, articles, reports and learning materials prepared by the applicant;
- Documents issued by a third person on the learning performance of the applicant (an academic report, certificates of in-service training, etc.), proof of professional experience and duties (an employment contract, a job description, etc.).

### Example of the way the description of skills and knowledge acquired can be presented

Jaak has been working as a stage technician for a community centre drama group for over two years and wants to be a light designer. In order to be allowed to take a professional examination, he submits an application describing his existing skills and knowledge.

Activity	What did I do to achieve the end result?	Used knowledge and skills	What did I learn?
Assembly, setting up and operation of lighting equipment at county music days	I read a complicated lighting drawing, prepared technical solutions and set up the equipment according to the drawing. I worked in close cooperation with organisers and performers of the event.	Knowledge of electrical systems and safety requirements, application of different properties and possibilities of lighting equipment, reading of drawings, communication skills.	Development and application of a technical solution necessary for conducting a complicated event by communication with different parties.

The application is prepared according to the requirements of the professional qualifications committee and on the form provided.

The application and the evidence are submitted to the professional qualifications committee.

### 3. Assessment of the application

The application will go to an assessor (a member of a professional qualifications committee or assessment committee). The assessors will verify whether the evidence submitted along with the application meets the requirements. If the evidence is not sufficient, additional evidence may be required or an additional assessment may be carried out in case of an RPL application. It is especially important if there are any doubts about the competence of the applicant or the truthfulness of the evidence submitted.

If the assessment is positive, skills and knowledge acquired will be recognised as permitting entrance to the professional examination stage or may exempt the applicant from part of the professional examination.

A body awarding professional qualifications can use the following methods when recognising prior learning:

- A study portfolio;
- An interview;
- Character reference from an employer and description of job duties;
- Observation in the workplace;
- A certificate of in-service or other training.

### 4. Decision making and giving feedback

The applicant has the right to get feedback from the professional qualifications committee on each decision (whether negative or positive).

### 5. Contesting the decision

The applicant has the right to contest the decision. The appeal procedure will be determined by the body awarding the respective professional qualification.

### Limitations of using RPL

Many professions involving an element of risk or that deal with the public (for example, electricians or masseurs) will often require additional certificates or licences (e.g. a first aid course certificate) or the nature of the work may add several requirements: for example, a construction worker should not be afraid of heights, working as a career counsellor requires very good communication skills.

## 5. Frequently Asked Questions

1. *I studied in another educational institution, where the subject had a different name. Does it mean that I cannot apply for the recognition of that subject?*

It is important that two subjects/modules correspond in their content, not that they are called exactly the same thing. If the knowledge and skills acquired in one subject correspond to the learning outcomes of another subject, recognition is completely possible.

2. *How many credit points can be recognised for completion of a programme?*

No limitation has been set on the volume of subjects allowed for the completion of a programme by RPL. According to the Standard of Higher Education, however, it is not allowed to use prior learning for defence of a final paper or to gain exemption from final examinations.

3. *Can an educational institution also establish subjects/modules that can certainly not be recognised?*

Educational institutions may determine subjects or modules that cannot be recognised by RPL. It is good practice to ensure that there are not too many such subjects.

4. *Is there a time limit on the recognition of prior learning? That is, can the credit points I have gained become invalid at some point in time?*

Credit points gained will not become invalid and no specific time limit has been set in this respect. In certain cases, however, the content of some courses could become outdated. Applications will then be assessed on a case by case basis.

5. *Do you have to pay for the submission of an RPL application?*

A fee may be charged for an RPL application but the fee varies across educational institutions. In a similar manner, a fee may be charged for the application of a professional qualification. The general principle applied in charging a fee is that it should not exceed the amount paid for the same number of credit points gained in studies. The fee also varies due to the fact that, in some educational institutions, the price is determined by the credit points applied for, while in others, the price is for the application as a whole.

6. *What kind of additional documents should be attached to the RPL application?*

Documents attached to the application depend on what you are applying for.

- In the case of prior learning – an academic report, a results report, a description of the subject content, etc.
- In the case of in-service training – course diplomas and certificates, agendas, etc.

- In the case of professional experience – a copy of an employment contract, a job description, a certificate from an institution, an analysis of what has been learned from the experience, etc.

7. *If I have completed studies in an institution of professional higher education or vocational education, can I have these subjects/modules recognised in a university?*

The strengths of the institutions of professional higher education and vocational education are in their practical approach whereas a university puts more emphasis on theory. Therefore, the decision is made based on the nature and the learning outcomes of the subject/module to be recognised. However, recognition is possible if what has been learned has been acquired at an appropriate level and corresponds with the learning outcomes of the university course.

8. *I took some Master's level subjects in my Bachelor's studies. Can I have these subjects recognised when I start Master's studies and could I graduate, for example, in one year?*

According to the Standard of Higher Education, the volume of studies determined for Bachelor's and Master's degree studies as well as in the programme of professional higher education must amount to a total of at least 300 credit points. If the required amount of credit points has been achieved and the obligatory subjects provided by the programme have been passed, it is possible to graduate earlier.

9. *How can RPL be applied to help get onto a programme?*

If, when applying for entry onto a course, the past education of a candidate does not meet the enrolment criteria established, but the requirements have been met in another way (e.g. by working in the corresponding area of specialisation, doing scientific research, completing additional professional studies, by voluntary service, etc.), it is possible to apply for their recognition in order to meet enrolment requirements when applying for the desired course. For example, when enrolling in a Master's degree program that requires a Bachelor's degree from a certain field, a candidate holding a different Bachelor's degree who has worked in the required area of specialisation, can submit an RPL application.

10. *How should you act in a situation where an application has been turned down because as the assessor of the application questions the competence of another lecturer?*

Recognition of prior learning must be based on knowledge and skills acquired and how they correspond with the learning outcomes on the programme. If you are not satisfied with the decision of the assessor, you have the right to contest it.

## 6. Important definitions

**Formal learning** occurs in an organised and structured context (in a school / a training centre or at a work place) and is clearly defined as learning (in the meaning of goals, time or learning support). From the learner's perspective, formal learning is intentional. It usually culminates with the award of a diploma or certificate.

**Non-formal learning** occurs in the form of planned activities that are not clearly defined as learning (in the meaning of goals, learning time or learning support) but do contain important learning elements. From the learner's perspective, non-formal learning is intentional. It does not usually culminate with the award of a diploma or certificate.

**Informal learning** results from daily activities at work, with the family or during leisure time. It is not organised or structured (with respect to goals, time or learning support). From the learner's perspective, informal learning is mostly unintentional. It does not usually culminate with the award of a diploma or certificate.

**Competence** is an integrated set of knowledge, skills and attitudes, the existence or level of achievement of which can be certified and assessed. Competences acquired during studies are described by learning outcomes.

### Higher education

**Credit point (ECTS)** ECTS credits are based on the workload students need in order to achieve expected learning outcomes. 60 ECTS credits are attached to the workload of a full-time year of formal learning (academic year) and the associated learning outcomes. In most cases, student workload ranges from 1,500 to 1,800 hours for an academic year, whereby one credit corresponds to 25 to 30 hours of work.

**A minor field of study** means specialisation in the same or another field of study as the main field of study, as a result of which the student acquires knowledge and skills in addition to the main field of study in order to commence work in the minor field of study and continue their studies at the next level of study. The minor field of study contributes at least 45 credit points to the study workload specified in the programme or, if the minor field of study is acquired over several levels of study, at least 45 credit points of the study workload specified in the curricula.

**Module** means a learning outcome based content structuring unit of a programme, which unites different subjects or consists of one subject. The study workload of a module in credit points is determined by the educational institution.

**In part-time study**, the student fulfils less than 75 per cent of the study workload to be achieved by the end of each academic year according to the programme. The university council may establish a minimum limit of the study load to be completed according to the programme in part-time study.

**Main field of study** means a specialisation, as a result of which the student acquires knowledge, skills and attitudes and which is a prerequisite for commencing work in a certain area of specialisation and for continuing studies at the next level of study. The main field of study comprises at least 50 per cent of the study workload (including the examination or paper required for graduation) provided for the student by the programme.

**In full time study**, the student fulfils at least 75 per cent of the study workload to be achieved by the end of each academic year according to the programme. The university council may specify curricula, which can be used for full time study only, and curricula where higher requirements are set for full time studies.

**Programme** means a plan for designing the contents, time and organisation of study activities, which defines the objectives of the studies conducted, including expected learning outcomes, the nominal period of study and the study workload, the requirements for commencing studies, the list, study load and description of subjects, the options and conditions for choosing subjects, opportunities for specialisation, and the conditions of completing studies. The programme provides for specialisation in one area (main field of study) or several areas of specialisation (main and minor fields of study).

**Learning outcomes** describe what a learner is expected to know, understand and be able to do after successful completion of a process of learning, their existence or level of achievement can be certified and assessed. Learning outcomes have been described as the minimum level required to pass the module or subject.

### Vocational education and awarding of a professional qualification

**School programme** means the source document of vocational education prepared by a school for each profession or area of specialisation and type of vocational education, taking the Standard of Vocational Education and the national curriculum as a basis and considering different forms of study.

**Professional qualification** means the official result of an assessment achieved when the body awarding professional qualifications decides that a person has the competence required. Its level will be defined in the relevant professional standard.

**Professional qualifications committee** means a committee formed by the body awarding professional qualifications of representatives of employers, employees, professional associations and trainers in order to guarantee impartiality in awarding professional qualifications. The professional qualifications committee develops the procedure for awarding professional qualifications and for conducting professional examinations, and an assessment guide for assessors.

**Body awarding professional qualification (kutsekvalifikatsiooni andev organ, KAO)** means a central organisation awarding professional qualifications. It is the responsibility of a professional body to communicate with people apply-



ing for a professional qualification, to assess their actual competency and to issue professional certificates. A legal person, state or governmental authority selected by the professional council at a public competition and holding a corresponding registration in the register of professions for a period of up to five years can operate as a professional body. Upon registration, names and levels of the profession arising from the professional standard are defined, with respect to which the body has the right to award professional qualifications.

**Register of professions** means a state register containing information on professional councils, professional standards, bodies awarding professional qualifications and valid professional certificates.

**Professional standard** means a document determining the requirements set for knowledge, skills, proficiency, experiences, values and personal characteristics arising from the professional qualification.

**Qualification** means the competence recognised as the official result of assessment that entails independence and responsibility.

**Module** means an integral unit of content of a course targeted at learning outcomes that defines the knowledge, skills and attitudes that meet with professional skills requirements. A module consists of one or several subjects or topics. The study workload determined by a module is calculated in whole weeks of study and must be a minimum of one week. Modules are divided into general, basic and elective subject modules.

**The module of basic subjects** defines the set of knowledge and skills required to work in a vocation, speciality or profession. The module of basic subjects includes details of the subjects of general education necessary to acquire the respective profession or speciality.

**National curriculum** means a document that defines the objectives and tasks of vocational education, the requirements for commencing and completing studies, curriculum modules and their study load along with their short descriptions, the options for and requirements of selecting modules and the options for specialisation.

**The module of elective subjects** defines the knowledge and skills that support and extend professional skills or are related to an additional qualification. Elective modules may make up 5—30% of the volume of the programme.

**A week of study** corresponds to 40 hours of student workload.

**The module of general subjects** defines a set of knowledge and skills, covering several broad groups of studies and several specialities. The module of general subjects includes details of general subjects necessary to acquire the relevant profession or speciality.

## 7. Contact information

General information on RPL, electronic guides and links to e-learning courses can be found at <http://vota.archimedes.ee/>.

Feedback on the RPL experience can be sent to [vota@archimedes.ee](mailto:vota@archimedes.ee).

Further information on commencing or continuing studies in a higher educational institution or vocational educational institution can be found on the home page of the relevant educational institution.

**Estonian Academy of Arts** – <http://www.artun.ee/vota>

**Estonian Aviation Academy** – <http://www.eava.ee/uliopilasele/vota/>

**Estonian University of Life Sciences** – <http://www.emu.ee/oppijale/vota/>

**Estonian Maritime Academy** – <http://www.emara.ee/vota>

**Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre** – <http://www.ema.edu.ee/>

**Estonian Business School** – <http://www.ebs.ee/vota>

**Estonian IT College** – <http://www.itcollege.ee/vota>

**Lääne-Viru College** – <http://www.lvrkk.ee/>

**Mainor Business School** – <http://www.mk.ee/vota>

**Estonian Academy of Security Sciences** – <http://www.sisekaitse.ee/vota>

**Tallinn Pedagogical College** – <http://www.tps.edu.ee/vota>

**Tallinn University of Applied Sciences** – <http://www.tktk.ee/vota>

**Tallinn University of Technology** – <http://www.ttu.ee/vota>

**Tallinn Health Care College** – <http://www.ttk.ee/>

**Tallinn University** – <http://www.tlu.ee/vota>

**Tartu Art College** – <http://www.artcol.ee/oppimine/vota/>

**Tartu Health Care College** – <http://www.nooruse.ee/vota>

**University of Tartu** – <http://www.ut.ee/vota>

**Further information on awarding a professional qualification can be obtained from the Estonian Qualifications Authority (Kutsekoda):** <http://www.kutsekoda.ee>

Further information on **adult education** can be obtained from the Association of Estonian Adult Educators ANDRAS: <http://www.andras.ee>

Information on and assistance in **career planning** and self-analysis can be obtained from the portal Rajaleidja: <http://www.rajaleidja.ee>

**Further information on RPL in vocational education** can be found on the home page of the National Examination and Qualification Centre at <http://www.ekk.edu.ee/valdkonnad/kutseharidus/vota>.

<http://vota.archimedes.ee>



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Eesti tuleviku heaks



Primus

ELLU VIIB SIHTASUTUS  
**ARCHIMEDES**

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