



Implementation of RPL in Higher Education

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Research questions:

- How RPL is **implemented** in higher education (case study of Tallinn University)?
- How key agents (applicants, assessors, councilors) experience RPL implementation?



Recognition of prior learning (RPL)

- **Recognition of prior learning (RPL)** is a process through which learning achieved **outside** formal education systems is assessed and recognized for academic purposes.
- The concept of **RPL** values learning despite the place or time learning has been acquired.



RPL aim

- **Social justice**
 - Individual opportunities, widening access to education
- **Economic development and labor market**
 - Using existing competencies more effectively
- **Social change**
 - Making the competence of the population visible



RPL models

- **RPL adapted to the system**
 - Focuses on the demands of the educational system or the labor market
 - Individuals competencies are measured and assessed according to the prescribed criteria that determine which specific competence and knowledge are useful
 - Knowledge and competencies are regarded as products or goods
 - the individuals whose competence satisfies formal demands are the only group that can take advantage of this kind of RPL

- **RPL changing the system**
 - All knowledge is valuable in itself and therefore the individual's knowledge and competence could be accepted, even if the formal merits are lacking
 - Untraditional groups enter the system as a result of RPL. These groups gain access to the system not just because their competence meets the demands of the system but because the system recognizes the individuals' experience and competence on their own merits
 - The individuals enter the system with their knowledge, experiences and perspectives, they are able to bring about changes in the system from inside



Recognition of prior learning (RPL)

- The concept of **RPL** is problematic in the higher education context because the predominant perception of an institution of higher education is as a place where people come to learn or to be taught, rather than one where people bring their existing knowledge for recognition or sharing.



Key challenges for implementing RPL

- The shift from an input to an outcome model of learning
- Curriculum structure and examinations
- What makes a university diploma if the learning has taken place elsewhere?
- Tools and procedures – lack of confidence and currency
- New skills and competences for assessors and counselors
- Quality and legitimacy – social value as well as individual added value
- Cost and payment



RPL as a tool for power

- The power of recognizing knowledge rests with the university
- In order for knowledge or learning to be recognized by the university it must be presented according to norms and regulations laid down by the institution.
- RPL could become a powerful tool of **control** and **exclusion** as applicant has to learn RPL discourse rather than RPL being something that recognizes what they already know.
- RPL can be seen as a technique of governing learners



Challenging

- RPL – the standardized trading within educational marketplace
- Enterprise culture where education products can be purchased, moved, compared and traded with ease.
- Who sets the price and the terms of trading?



Data and sample

COUNCELLORS

- Focus group interview
- 10 councellors (total nr of councellors 27)

ASSESSORS

- In depth interviews
- 3 assessors, members of experts council for RPL

APPLICANTS

- Online questionnaire
- Applicants feedback to the RPL process
- 26 applicants

STUDENTS

- Online questionnaire
- Awareness of RPL process
- 366 students (total nr of students 8962)

ACADEMICS

- Online questionnaire
- 41 academics (total approx. 600)

ADMINISTRATORS

Online questionnaire
19 administrators



How is RPL understood?

- 57% of the students don't know what RPL is. Only 12% of the students had any knowledge about RPL process.
- The applicants see RPL as an easier and faster way to go thru studies. They don't fully understand the process of RPL.
- Counselors comprehend RPL as technical tool for students to gain credit points.
- Assesors view RPL as process of assessing learning outcomes.
- Academics are divided in two groups: RPL as an opportunity for the learner; RPL as HE quality risk



RPL as a problematic tool

- Councillors see RPL counselling as a very problematic part of their everyday work.
 - Applicants are not aware of the RPL process nor their own learning
 - Lack of skills for supporting applicants and understanding their prior learning
- Assessors see applicants problematic as well.
 - Applicants have lack of knowledge about the curriculum, their own knowledge, reflective writing is poor and supportive documents are often not enough
 - Quality assurance
- Applicants find RPL process too complex and don't understand various parts of the process (eg counselling, assessment).
- Academics have great worry about HE quality.



RPL as an opportunity?

- Applicants, assessors, councilors and academics say that RPL brings flexibility and more individual opportunities to the university.
- Applicants say that different sources of knowledge might be recognized in university if you as an applicant can put that knowledge in the form that university expects it.
- Councilors and assessors mention new knowledge and skills they need for the new RPL related job assignments.



Anything positive in RPL?

- Applicants who have succeeded in RPL see it as great opportunity.
- Councillors see as positive the feedback they get for their job once applicant has succeeded.
- Academics mention flexibility and individual opportunities for the students.



Some remarks...

- Overall lack of awareness of RPL process.
- RPL is seen as a fast track thru the system. The views of RPL are over simplified.
- Attitudes towards RPL are mostly positive but there is a lot of scepticism.
- Applicant is seen as a “problem” in RPL process by counsellors and assessors.
- Learning that is not presented as the university prescribes will not be recognised in RPL process.



Some remarks...

- RPL is seen as a technicality and the full potential of the process is not used in the university.
- RPL implementation is university led and thus is concerned with quality assurance issues and fitting the RPL to the existing systems (RPL adapted to the system).
- Learning and learners as central for RPL process are not present in implementation and are rather seen problematic.



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