

Credit Transfer for Open/Online Graduate Programs: Annex 9 Ireland

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3.9 Other countries (and institutions)

This report contains over double the number of case studies initially envisaged (24 not 10). However, if TRU wishes to go deeper into PLAR issues at master’s level, there are three additional countries (Ireland, South Africa and Sweden) and seven mini-case studies which could be studied in more detail and which even at an overview level have yielded particularly useful results. The mini-case studies are:

1. **Cork Institute of Technology, Ireland**
2. **University of Limerick, Ireland**
3. **Dublin City University, Ireland**
4. **IT Sligo, Ireland**
5. UNISA, South Africa
6. Uppsala University, Sweden
7. University of Gävle, Sweden.

3.9.1 Ireland (Cork, Limerick, Dublin City and Sligo)

The 2015 overview report on PLAR in Irish Higher Education¹ is a comprehensive document of 77 pages but contains only six mentions of master’s-level activity. The use of PLAR varies between institution, level and discipline (our italics):

While all respondents reported that *RPL is theoretically possible* across all disciplines; several reported restrictions that apply in practice, such as:

- Limits applied in response to external professional body requirements
- Limitations in capacity and capability for assessment of evidence of prior learning

¹ <http://www.teachingandlearning.ie/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Project-2.pdf>

- Limitations due to collaboration with another international provider on an award
- Specific exclusion of RPL in relation to elements of programmes (e.g. RPL is not allowed for practical placement elements of some programmes)
- Specific exclusion of RPL entirely from some courses (e.g. *Masters course for which no RPL claims will be considered*)

When considering the application of RPL at various levels on the NFQ there was a considerable diversity in the responses. In general, it emerged that RPL is rarely facilitated in award stages and, while in some institutions RPL is theoretically possible up to Level 10 (doctoral: ISCED 8) on the NFQ,² it has seldom, if ever, been used to this extent. (p.33)

There are several examples of good practice listed, but only one at Master's level: "A cloud technologies Master's programme developed by CIT in collaboration with EMC and other industry partners – a response to industry demand". See below for more details.

On staff development, the picture is of a system in its early stages: "A number of Postgraduate Diploma and Master's courses are now available for higher education staff and while they do not all include specific modules on RPL, they include consideration of learning outcomes evidence of learning attainment and assessment methodologies" (p.12). At an unnamed institution, "Staff development on RPL is supported through regular workshops and a module on a Masters in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education". (p. 31)

3.9.1a PLAR in Cork Institute of Technology Masters in Cloud Computing

The CEDEFOP report for Ireland in the series *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2014* mentions this case study:³

In 2011, Cork Institute of Technology launched two online programmes, the BSc and MSc in Cloud Computing. These customised programmes were developed in consultation with employer organisations in a response to the growing need for skills in cloud and associated technologies. The consultative development process integrated the emerging workplace competences, informal and non-formal learning into the content and learning outcomes of the programme. The partnership approach extends to the delivery of elements of the programmes by industry subject matter experts as appropriate. To date, 270 individuals have participated in the programmes from countries such as Ireland, Russia, United States, Egypt and India.

In addition to widen participation in these programmes, the institute with their workplace partners are continually identifying pathways for workplace learners to gain access to these programmes building on their appropriate work place learning, which incorporates informal and non-formal learning.

² <http://www.nfq-qqi.com/index.html>

³ https://cumulus.cedefop.europa.eu/files/vetelib/2014/87062_IE.pdf page 17

No further details are available in the CEDEFOP report. However, on the main CIT site for the programme the admissions requirements appear strict:⁴

Entry to the MSc in Cloud Computing will require a minimum of a Level 8 honours degree in Computer Science or in a cognate discipline. As this programme is designed specifically for computing professionals working in the IT industry *only graduates with experience will gain direct entry into this programme.* [our italics]

On the other hand, on the Computer Science departmental site things are a little more optimistic.⁵ Furthermore, the Department has a specific page on Recommended Prior Learning⁶ with specific mention of the Master's programme:

For the BSc/Master's Programmes RPL can be used to gain:

- An exemption or grade for a module or for a number of modules on a programme;
- Entry to a programme in first year where an applicant may not meet the standard entry requirements;
- Advanced entry to a programme at a stage other than first year based on learning equivalent to the prior stage of entry.

...

For Non-Certified Learning

You may present a prior learning case which demonstrates how you meet the learning outcomes of a module in a learning portfolio. This material will be assessed and graded. You must present against each learning outcome backing up your claim with appropriate evidence. Assistance is available with this task.

...

THE RPL SERVICE:

- Recognises certified learning and learning gained at work formally.
- Offers an alternative route to those with appropriate experience.
- Compares your learning directly with the learning outcomes of a module.
- Provides assistance with preparing the portfolio.
- Frees up study time for other topics.
- Ensures your case is formally assessed by the academic lecturer responsible for the module.

⁴ <http://www.cit.ie/course/CRKCLDC9>

⁵ <http://cs.cit.ie/postgraduate.msc-in-cloud-computing.programme-overview2>

⁶ <http://cs.cit.ie/undergraduate/current-students/rpl>

3.9.1b PLAR at University of Limerick

The same document as above mentions:⁷

Case Study 3 examines the RPL process in place for entry into the Master of Business Studies in International Entrepreneurship Management⁸ (NFQ Level 9) offered by the Kemmy Business School in the University of Limerick.

This programme has clearly implied PLAR-like entry⁹

Applicants will possess a minimum of a 2:2 honours primary degree. An interview may form part of the application process. Applicants who cannot satisfy the minimum 2:2 honours primary degree requirement may be accepted on the basis of relevant professional experience (e.g., small business related experience as entrepreneurs or as an employee in a small or medium sized firm).

In the case of international students, applicants must hold a qualification that is equivalent to an Irish or UK honours bachelor's degree (NQAI level 8). The degree must be in a discipline relevant to the postgraduate degree sought. To find out if you have the correct qualifications to apply for a programme at UL check the specific requirements for your home country.

However, as usual the devil in the detail of how such guidance is interpreted.

3.9.1c PLAR at Dublin City University

Dublin City University is the heir to the former OSCAIL/NDEC, the Republic of Ireland national distance learning provider, and as such it would be assumed that it would have a forward-looking PLAR policy – in particular “Recognition of prior learning can be used to access both undergraduate and post graduate awards”.¹⁰ Its online master's programmes are offered under the *DCU Connected* brand, and include:¹¹

- Graduate Diploma/MSc in Management of Operations (MOPS)
- Graduate Diploma/MSc in Management of Internet Enterprise Systems (MSIS)
- Graduate Diploma/MSc in Management of Information Systems Strategy (MISS)
- Graduate Diploma/MSc in Management for Sustainable Development (MSD)
- Graduate Diploma/MSc in the Management of Clean Technologies (MCT)
- Masters in Special Educational Needs (MSEN)
- MSc in Public Relations & Strategic Communications

As an example the Management of Information Systems Strategy programme¹² is a 90-ECTS programme with a 15,000 word dissertation of 30 ECTS (the standard credit value). Entry

⁷ https://cumulus.cedefop.europa.eu/files/vetelib/2014/87062_IE.pdf page

⁸ http://www.ul.ie/business/postgraduate/full-time/ma_international_entrepreneurship_management

⁹ http://www.ul.ie/business/postgraduate/full-time/ma_international_entrepreneurship_management 0- click the **Entry Requirements** tab

¹⁰ https://www4.dcu.ie/sites/default/files/policy/97%20-%20recognition_prior_learning_ovpaa_v1.pdf

¹¹ <http://www.dcu.ie/connected/Postgraduate-Courses.shtml>

¹² <https://www4.dcu.ie/courses/Postgraduate/openeducation/Management-Information-Systems-Strategy.shtml>

requirements are flexible, comprising four non-standard routes as well as one standard route:¹³

- A Level 8 [honours bachelor degree] or higher degree in a *relevant discipline* (Engineering, Science, Business or Information Technology) from a recognised higher education institution.
- A level 8 qualification in a *non-relevant discipline* along with at least three years relevant managerial work experience
- *Chartered membership* of an institution such as the Institute of Engineers of Ireland or a professional body such as the Institute of Chartered Accountants.
- A Level 7 qualification [*ordinary bachelor degree*] in a subject in a relevant discipline or non-chartered membership of a professional body, along with at least three years relevant managerial work experience.
- Evidence of *substantial relevant managerial work experience*. Such applicants will be required to submit a CV and Personal Statement in support of their application and may be required to attend for interview.

This is one of the best and most openly documented set of admissions routes that we have seen.

3.9.1d PLAR at IT Sligo – MSc in Marketing

The Institute of Technology Sligo is a small but innovative higher education institution, with 6000 students, of whom 2000 are studying online.¹⁴ It is a member of OERu.

It has 10 master's-level courses of which one is blended and two online:

- MSc in Marketing (online/blended)
- Certificate in Strategic Construction Management (Online)
- MSc in Environmental, Health and Safety Management (Online)

The MSc in Marketing is a 90 ECTS course (equivalent to 180 CATS in UK), spread over 3 semesters, and includes a dissertation. Entry requirements are summarised as:¹⁵

A Level 8 Honours Degree (2.2) or equivalent professional qualification in a business related area or Higher Diploma in Business (Level 8) with a minimum of three specialist marketing modules at Level 7 and/ or 8.

Applicants who do not have a relevant Level 8 qualification may be considered for admission *where they have minimum of seven years relevant business/marketing experience* through IT Sligo's RPL process.

IT Sligo is working with nearby institutions on a common RPL toolkit.¹⁶

¹³ <https://www4.dcu.ie/courses/Postgraduate/openeducation/Management-Information-Systems-Strategy.shtml#tab5>

¹⁴ <https://www.itsligo.ie/about-it-sligo/about-it-sligo/>

¹⁵ <https://www.itsligo.ie/courses/msc-in-marketing-onlineblended/>

¹⁶ <https://www.itsligo.ie/2016/03/14/myexperiencecua14032016/>

3.9.1e Other institutions in Ireland – Hibernia College

Hibernia College is a private provider active in online learning at university level and offers an online PhD programme¹⁷ but no online Master's programmes.

¹⁷ <https://hiberniacollege.com/course/phd-in-education/>