2026 European Quality Assurance Forum

Quality Assurance for Skills, Entrepreneurship and Innovation:
Partnering with the World of Work

Hosted by National Polytechnic University of Armenia, Yerevan
18-20 November 2026

ISSN: 1375-3797

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Paper

Recognition of Prior Learning as a Bridge Between the World of Work and Higher Education

Abstract

As labour markets undergo rapid transformation, higher education institutions are increasingly expected to support lifelong learning through flexible pathways trusted by learners, institutions, and employers. At the same time, much valuable learning takes place outside formal higher education, especially through professional experience and continuing education. The challenge for higher education is therefore not only to offer new learning opportunities, but also to recognize learners' existing competences and skills in quality-assured ways.

This paper examines Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) as a quality-assured mechanism for connecting higher education and the labour market. RPL is used to translate competences and skills acquired in different learning contexts into higher education achievements. It supports permeability at multiple stages of the learner journey: by enabling access to higher education and by recognizing prior learning for credits.

The paper combines the perspective of AQ Austria as a quality assurance agency with a case study of the University of Applied Sciences for Business and Society BFI Vienna. The Austrian universities of applied sciences sector provides a particularly relevant context because its orientation towards professional practice and close engagement with labour market stakeholders offers a distinctive model of how higher education can respond to diverse learner biographies and labour market needs without weakening academic standards. Within this context, University of Applied Sciences BFI Vienna has developed extensive experience with recognizing prior learning within degree programs and, uniquely in Austria, for admission to higher education.

The case study discusses how learning outcome-oriented curriculum design and recognition processes interact at University of Applied Sciences for Business and Society BFI Vienna to balance academic standards, permeability and flexibility. Quality assurance plays a major role in securing academic standards in recognition. The paper concludes by reflecting the success factors for fostering permeability between the learning spaces of the world of work and higher education through RPL in a strategic and quality-assured way.

1 Introduction and Context

Lifelong learning is a central principle of European policy, reflecting demographic change, evolving occupational profiles and the need to develop knowledge, skills and competences throughout life (European Commission, 2020, 2025). As labour markets change, policy increasingly expects higher education institutions (HEIs) to enable flexible pathways that connect formal academic learning with competences acquired through professional experience and in other non-formal and informal settings.

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) is the bridge that makes this goal of permeability between higher education (HE) and the world of work operational. Through validation, the outcomes of non-formal and informal learning become visible and transferable to the higher education context. The Council of the European Union (2012) sets out four phases (identification, documentation, assessment and certification), which are widely accepted as the basis of validation.

European policy has long recognised that validating prior learning can facilitate access to and progression through higher education (Council of the European Union, 2012). Validation also benefits the world of work by enhancing employability and mobility, making competences portable across employers and sectors, and helping employers match skills to tasks (Cedefop, 2023). Validation thus increases permeability between the world of work and higher education: professional experience and academic learning are brought closer together, and pathways into, through and within higher education become more flexible.

In practice, RPL takes two forms. First, RPL for credits (or course recognition) recognises prior learning as equivalent to specific learning outcomes or modules of a degree programme, so that students avoid repeating content and can progress more efficiently. Second, RPL for access offers an alternative route into higher education by assessing whether an applicant's prior learning demonstrates the capacity for higher education study, even where conventional entry requirements are not met. Both forms contribute to more flexible and inclusive learning pathways, yet raise distinct institutional, legal and quality-related questions.

The Austrian context illustrates these differences. RPL for credits is legally possible across all higher education sectors, subject to limits on the number of ECTS that may be recognised. Yet, despite these provisions, not all HEIs implement RPL for credits in practice. RPL for access remains underdeveloped: applicants without a traditional school-leaving certificate mostly enter higher education through prescribed examinations or vocational qualifications rather than individual competence assessment (Witzani et al., 2026). This imbalance makes transparent, evidence-based and quality-assured RPL procedures even more important. Institutions need clear criteria and a demonstrable alignment between competences and intended programme learning outcomes, so that greater permeability between the world of work and higher education does not come at the expense of academic standards (see Section 2). How such procedures can work in practice is shown by the case of the University of Applied Sciences (UAS) for Business & Society BFI Vienna, presented in Section 3.

2 Quality-assured Implementation of RPL in Higher Education

Despite the policy support for RPL and its clear benefits for learners, HEIs and the world of work, key institutional barriers to recognising work experience and competences acquired through non-formal or informal learning are a lack of institutional trust in RPL and concerns about maintaining academic standards. Quality assurance (QA) plays a key role in building that trust and establishing alternative pathways without compromising academic standards: It ensures that prior learning is assessed transparently, consistently and against clearly defined academic standards, through reliable procedures and established principles. While external quality assurance does not systematically address RPL in reviews, its role is to check that internal quality assurance is fit for purpose. Rigorous internal quality assurance can provide academic decision-makers with transparent evidence that validated competences meet the relevant academic requirements. This section therefore first outlines what external QA of recognition offers (Section 2.1) and then highlights recommendations for implementing RPL through internal QA (Section 2.2).

2.1 RPL and External Quality Assurance

Recognition in a broader sense is included in the overarching framework for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area. The European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) (ENQA et al., 2015, currently being revised), include recognition in Standard 1.4 on student admission, progression, recognition and certification, and refer to the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC).

Recent analyses within the Erasmus+ co-funded DIGI-REQA project show that external QA agencies include recognition according to ESG 1.4 in their methodologies. An analysis of 446 review reports from DEQAR found that recognition is a recurring topic in the external review reports. However, the extent to which recognition is addressed and the depth of analysis vary considerably across agencies, depending on national legislation and agency methodology. The aspects of recognition most frequently examined by review panels were the consistency and transparency of recognition procedures. Surprisingly, RPL received considerably more attention than other topics in recognition. Together with recommendations for improved cooperation between stakeholders, fair and transparent recognition and LRC-alignment, RPL was identified as a thematic priority in external QA reports. One possible explanation is that reports by QA agencies reflect institutional priorities, existing challenges and emerging current developments in recognition practice (Witzani & Zhivkovikj, 2026). Overall, these findings support the integration of recognition into internal quality assurance frameworks. To ensure that recognition of all types is fair, transparent, consistent and systematically applied, HEIs should embed their recognition practices directly into their broader internal quality assurance framework including mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation.

2.2 Recommendations for RPL Implementation

Recently, the RPL Network Austria (2025) has developed recommendations for institutional frameworks designed to embed fair, quality-assured RPL within higher education institutions. The central recommendations focus on strategic governance, structural quality assurance principles, and the four distinct operational phases of validation. Strategic governance explicitly includes institution-wide and target-group-specific communication that makes RPL visible and ensures that students are informed and advised about it. Key recommendations include the following principles with specific relevance for transferring competences from the learning context of work to higher education:

Learning outcome-orientation: Precise, pre-defined learning outcomes provide the basis for comparing prior learning with curriculum standards. To evaluate heterogeneous work experience against academic requirements, QA principles call for explicit learning outcomes anchored in national and international reference frameworks such as the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) or National Qualifications Framework (NQF) as a common reference point for aligning professional practice with higher education level.

Fit-for-purpose procedures: Validation procedures must be appropriate to their purpose, avoiding administrative over-regulation while remaining fully integrated into internal quality management systems. This includes comprehensive documentation and systematic monitoring (e.g., tracking rejection rationales), which are required for continuous quality enhancement.

Transparency and objectivity: Institutional structures should separate administrative coordination from academic assessment and incorporate a four-eyes principle and/or multi-step process to prevent arbitrary decisions. Competences are assessed according to transparent criteria, regardless of where or how the learning was acquired. Recognition decisions are based on appropriate evidence and valid, reliable assessment methods.

Information and guidance: Guidance for both (prospective) students and university staff is central to the functioning of recognition procedures. It should take place at least before an application is submitted and accompany the procedure thereafter. Proper counselling along the student life cycle improves the quality of the recognition applications submitted and reduces the effort required for assessment.

The following case study examines how those principles translate into practice.

3 Case study: University of Applied Sciences for Business & Society BFI Vienna – Institutional Approach to RPL

This section presents a case study of one Austrian HEI to show how the recommendations in Section 2.2 can be put into practice and adapted to an institutional context. The University of Applied Sciences (UAS) for Business & Society was chosen for three reasons: it was the first UAS in Austria to use RPL for access to degree programmes, it applies a single quality-assured procedure to both forms of RPL distinguished in Section 1, and it established a Recognition Office early on (RPL Network Austria, 2025).

Permeability between vocational education, professional practice and higher education is a strategic priority for the UAS for Business & Society. It is anchored in the institution's Strategy 2030 (n.d.-a), which emphasises lifelong learning and permeability and repeatedly refers to recognition and RPL specifically. After several years of planning and process development, the current RPL procedures were introduced in 2024.

The UAS for Business & Society distinguishes two forms of RPL: RPL for access to bachelor and master degree programmes, and RPL for the recognition of individual courses. In both, competences acquired through formal, non-formal and informal learning are recognised if they demonstrably meet defined requirements. The guiding principle is to value applicants' prior competences while safeguarding quality.

3.1 Examining Recognition Practices

RPL for Access to Bachelor Degree Programmes

In Austria, applicants without a general university entrance qualification can be admitted to a bachelor degree programme at a UAS on the basis of a relevant vocational qualification (Universities of Applied Sciences Act [FHG], 1993, § 4(4)) and supplementary examinations. The UAS for Business & Society was the first Austrian HEI to use RPL in this context. RPL replaces neither the supplementary examinations nor the formal prerequisite of a relevant vocational qualification; instead, it enables applicants to demonstrate, through non-formally or informally acquired competences – often professional experience – that their vocational qualification is relevant to the entry competence profile of the chosen programme.

As with course learning outcomes, the entry competences of each bachelor degree programme are defined in an entry competence profile, against which applicants document their professional and other learning experiences in a portfolio.

RPL for Access to Master Degree Programmes

Admission to master degree programmes requires a relevant bachelor degree and a minimum number of ECTS credits in particular subject areas, as specified by each programme. Applicants lacking some of these credits may demonstrate the corresponding competences through RPL. These competences are validated against the subject-specific admission requirements. Alternatively, the UAS offers bridging courses in selected subject areas.

RPL for Course Recognition

RPL for the recognition of individual courses relies on curricula with competence-oriented learning outcomes (see Section 2.2). The UAS examines whether applicants' existing competences correspond to these learning outcomes in terms of content, scope and level, rather than whether they have performed similar activities.

For formally acquired competences, established recognition procedures apply. A shortened procedure applies only to certificates that a degree programme has identified and published in advance as eligible for recognition. All other certificates are treated as non-formal qualifications and must be validated. Informally acquired competences, such as those from professional experience, require a structured competence portfolio.

The UAS draws on Anderson and Krathwohl's (2001) taxonomy of learning objectives to describe and assess competences at the appropriate cognitive level. For instance, evidence that an applicant has performed a task does not necessarily demonstrate the ability to analyse or evaluate it, or to develop independent solutions. Recognition thus depends on demonstrated equivalence with the learning outcomes, not on the duration of professional experience or seniority.

3.2 QA in RPL Practice

In practice, the validation procedure at the UAS comprises the four phases of RPL. In the identification and documentation phases, applicants identify their competences, compare them with the admission requirements or course learning outcomes and provide evidence such as employer confirmations, job descriptions and certificates. In the assessment phase, experts evaluate whether the competences meet the required standards in terms of scope, level, completeness and reliability of evidence, if necessary, in a specialist interview. In the recognition phase, which corresponds to certification in the Council Recommendation (see Section 1), the decision is formally recorded and communicated to the applicant.

The Recognition Office supports applicants in the first two phases, while the heads of the relevant subject areas in the degree programmes act as experts responsible for assessment and recognition (n.d.-b). This division of responsibility is the core of the QA framework. The Recognition Office's guidance helps ensure that applications address the applicable requirements and rest on verifiable evidence before they reach assessment, while the academic experts assess and decide independently of that guidance, which safeguards the objectivity of recognition decisions (see Section 2.2). A multi-person review of each decision, as envisaged by the four-eyes principle, is not mandatory. The same framework applies to all three areas of application: access to bachelor degree programmes, access to master degree programmes and course recognition.

Individual guidance is a central element of quality assurance: every RPL applicant receives a consultation at the Recognition Office to identify relevant competences, interpret the applicable requirements and understand how to document them. Participation in the university's e-learning course, which explains how to prepare the portfolio and select verifiable evidence, is also mandatory. Applicants receive feedback on their portfolio and may submit a revised version. Academic assessment and applicant support are kept distinct, ensuring that guidance facilitates access to the procedure without predetermining its outcome.

Awareness of RPL is built at several stages. The Admission Office informs applicants about RPL-based admission routes. All first-year students are informed about the RPL option before their studies begin, and are reminded at the first onboarding event.

Two evaluations of the Recognition Office's work and of applicant satisfaction, conducted in the summer semester 2026 and the winter semester 2026/27, yielded consistently very positive results. Although response rates were low, the results provide initial indications that applicants perceive the procedure as supportive; continued monitoring will be needed to substantiate them.

Taken together, these arrangements reflect the internal QA principles set out in Section 2.2. Competences are assessed against pre-defined entry competence profiles and course learning outcomes (learning outcome-orientation). Mandatory guidance by the Recognition Office, the e-learning course and portfolio feedback ensure that applications are complete and based on appropriate, verifiable evidence. Guidance is thus a quality assurance measure in its own right rather than merely a service. Because assessment and decision remain with the academic experts, independent of guidance, objectivity is preserved. Formally recorded decisions and regular evaluation of the Recognition Office's work keep the procedure transparent and proportionate (fit-for-purpose procedures).

4 Conclusions

The case of the UAS for Business & Society highlights the practices that support effective RPL implementation, the challenges that remain, and the conditions under which these experiences may be transferable to other higher education institutions and contexts.

Firstly, learning outcome-orientation requires a benchmark against which prior learning can be validated. In addition to designing learning outcome-oriented curricula, the UAS for Business & Society has also defined its entry requirements as competences. This is what makes RPL for admission possible in the first place, and it provides the common objective metric called for in Section 2.2. Should applicants struggle to articulate competences gained through professional experience, they can access guidance as outlined in Section 3.2. At the same time, RPL demands time and reflection from applicants, as well as institutional resources. Procedures must therefore be fit for purpose: rigorous enough to be credible, but proportionate enough not to become a bureaucratic barrier themselves.

Secondly, transparent competence profiles and learning outcomes, together with formally documented recognition decisions, make the process traceable and verifiable. Trust nevertheless depends on consistent implementation and on the willingness of academic staff to recognise learning acquired outside conventional educational settings.

Thirdly, awareness of RPL needs to be raised among prospective students, employees and employers. This is a matter of strategic governance: RPL only works as a bridge if institutions make it visible and accessible. The UAS of this case study does so at several stages (see Section 3.2), while employers

can contribute detailed job descriptions and qualified references, which make workplace learning more visible and verifiable.

Transferability is conditional rather than automatic. Other HEIs can adapt this approach where they can define programme-specific competence profiles and learning outcomes, distinguish applicant guidance from independent academic assessment, and provide resources and applicant support required for portfolio-based validation. Procedures must also be aligned with each institution's legal framework, admission rules and programme structures. The case therefore offers adaptable design principles that can inform the development of RPL procedures in other settings.

Overall, the case illustrates how RPL can bridge the world of work and higher education by translating a strategic commitment to permeability into structured, quality-assured practice. It demonstrates that RPL can enable higher education institutions to recognise learning acquired beyond formal education while maintaining academic standards and creating meaningful pathways from professional experience into higher education.

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