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## Pre-enrolment RPL guidance for candidates at HEIs

The paper addresses the concept and practice of guidance as associated with recognition of prior learning (RPL) at HEIs. The RPL-related issues are a particularly pertinent theme in Poland as RPL regulations were officially put in effect at Polish universities only in 2015. The article draws on findings from several projects involved in the higher education reform in Poland and training the academic RPL staff as well as on experiences of the Polish Bologna Experts' Team to outline a theoretical and practical approach to RPL guidance as viewed from an LLL perspective.

**Keywords:** RPL guidance, recognition of prior learning, learning outcomes, lifelong learning

Both the Polish governmental policy document *Perspektywa uczenia się przez całe życie* [Lifelong learning perspective] and the amended Law on Higher Education<sup>1</sup> promote the continuation in Poland of pursuits and activities defined in the 2008 European Universities' Charter on Lifelong Learning (European University Association, 2009). The Charter endorses the model of *University for Lifelong Learning* (ULLL) or *Lifelong Learning University* (LLLU) and insists on broadening access to higher education. The attainment of these goals is to be furthered by an array of systemic solutions geared towards identification and validation of learning outcomes acquired in a variety of ways outside the formal education system, collectively referred to as *RPL procedures*. Authorised by their Senates, such solutions were adopted by Polish HEIs in 2015.

In Poland, as in other EU countries, RPL systems are supposed to encourage enrolment of new students by helping them complete and/or update their qualifications building on their earlier learning outcomes from informal and non-formal settings (e.g. achieved, respectively, at home or at the workplace). Such students are sometimes referred to as non-traditional since, as a result of their specific situation in life, age, family commitments, work engagements, disability and the like, they follow untypical learning paths. Invariably individual, some of such paths are compressed, others uncommonly extended in time while still others split into distinct

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<sup>1</sup> See *Perspektywa uczenia się przez całe życie* [Lifelong Learning Perspective] annexed to the Resolution 160/2013 of the Council of Ministers of 10 September 2013; and the Act of 11 July 2014 Amending the Law on Higher Education and Some Other Laws.

modules and phases depending on individuals' particular needs. Given this, practically all issues inherent to and formally inscribed in procedures of recognising prior learning acquired outside the HE system must absolutely be addressed in the context of lifelong learning and never dissociated from the work of universities, which are prompted by their current missions and strategies to seek in various ways to become institutions of lifelong learning. One of such *ways* is guidance that universities offer in connection with procedures of recognition of prior learning, a key element in fostering lifelong learning. Throughout this text I will refer to such guidance as *RPL guidance*. My argument and conclusions in the following are underpinned by recent research findings and personal experience in working on the reform of higher education as informed by the lifelong learning concept.<sup>2</sup>

Alicja Kargulowa, who has developed influential theoretical frameworks of guidance in the educational perspective, insists that guidance differs conceptually from counselling. In her view, guidance is an ad-hoc process unlike counselling, which requires considerably more time and structured organisation involving repeated re-explorations of the addressed issues (Kargulowa, 2005, pp. 36-46). Kargulowa defines guidance as "a social event that consists in improving behaviours of individuals or groups of people through a short-term intervention of a guidance-provider participating in the resolution of the problems of guidance-seekers" (Kargulowa, 2005, p. 197). Guidance-seekers are, as a rule, resourceful and capable of solving their problems. They use the counsellor's help to more efficiently achieve their objectives and broad goals of their not infrequently long-term actions (Kargulowa, 2005, p. 197; see also Leszczyńska-Rejchert, 2005, p. 132). On this model, guidance is an information- and instruction-providing intervention launched in response to more or less precisely articulated needs of guidance-seekers (Kozdrowicz, 2003, pp. 319-320). All these remarks apply also to RPL guidance provided by universities.

In more specific terms, RPL guidance, invariably addressed in the context of lifelong learning, can be defined as located, so to speak, *between* vocational guidance (i.e. assisting people at any age in making educational, training and occupational decisions and in managing their individual life paths in learning, work and

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<sup>2</sup> In this article I draw on, among others, my experience in co-organising annual Academic Education Development conferences at the University of Gdańsk in 2008-2015 (promoting international exchange of ULLL/LLLU expertise) and on my involvement in the European Universities Continuing Education Network projects (e.g. the Observable-Net: Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning). Recently, I have participated in the ERASMUS+ project coordinated by the University of Lower Silesia (Professor Ewa Kurantowicz) and focused on *Promoting LLL at HEIs by implementing innovative practices in RPL (EDUPRO)* (2014-1-PL01-KA203-003629). I was also a member of the Polish Bologna Experts' Team and worked on a Warsaw's Educational Research Institute project focused on the higher education reform in Poland titled "Budowa krajowego systemu kwalifikacji – pilotażowe wdrożenie krajowego systemu kwalifikacji oraz kampania informacyjna dotycząca jego funkcjonowania" [Developing the national qualification system: Pilot implementation of the national qualification system and its promotional campaign], co-financed from the EU budget under the European Social Fund.

other settings, as the EU resolution on lifelong guidance stipulates<sup>3</sup>) and educational guidance (i.e. support in choosing an educational path, a degree programme, training schemes, etc., as the Minister of National Education's Regulation of 17 November 2010 on provision of psychological and pedagogical help has it<sup>4</sup>).

If considered in its narrower meaning related only to the RPL processes at HEIs, RPL guidance can be said to designate the assistance offered to the candidate by the university during the RPL procedures at this university before the candidate's enrolment as well as support in choosing the suitable study programme (level, degree course, full or partial qualification, etc.) and in obtaining the validation of these outcomes. If considered in its broader meaning related to the implementation of the LLL idea at HEIs, RPL guidance can be defined as assisting the candidate – the prospective student – in the independent construction of educational and vocational career unfolding with the participation of the university as part of lifelong learning, inscribed in the university's essentially humanistic mission (see Mendel, 2013).<sup>5</sup>

When aptly conceived and efficiently implemented, RPL guidance perfectly contributes to the performance of such functions of the *university for lifelong learning* as:

- ◆ Adjustment of the university's learning offer to the growing and increasingly diversified group of users;
- ◆ Building an inventive and innovative inclusive institution that responds to the needs of the population, regards LLL as an integral element of its missions (*education, research, service*) and acts upon it for the good of the local community;
- ◆ Double-layered integration: 1/integration of the university's and other institutions' educational offer; and 2/ integration as regards the learner, i.e. development and implementation of individual LLL strategies.<sup>6</sup>

Relevant experiences of HEIs in other EU countries imply that RPL guidance can be approached in two ways:

1. Broadly, i.e. as an element of LLL guidance. Such guidance is executed both within the university and outside it, i.e. in the local community. In EU countries, it is developed mainly by and within LLL centres established at HEIs. The centres are involved in RPL, but their work, rather than being a separate line of

<sup>3</sup> The resolution was adopted by the Council of the European Union on 27-28 May 2004 as *Guidance Throughout Life in Europe*.

<sup>4</sup> The Regulation with amendments (in Polish) is available at <http://isap.sejm.gov.pl/DetailsServlet?id=WDU20102281487>.

<sup>5</sup> Consistent with the *Perspektywa* [Perspective] mentioned above, each Polish HEI takes into account the LLL idea when formulating its mission statement.

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g. *European Universities' Charter on Lifelong Learning* (EUA, 2009); *EU Council conclusions on the modernisation of higher education* (2011); and the community project *Strategia rozwoju SzW: 2010-2020* [Higher education development strategy 2010-2020].

activity, is geared to the needs of particular candidates who have their distinct situations analysed and individual study paths designed in as far as the university's capacities allow. Such centres specialise in mutually complementary types of guidance, including guidance targeting the local community and supporting integration of the university's own learning offer with learning opportunities provided by other institutions, NGO's, etc. Such guidance practice enables the university to work intersectorally, to expand its educational offer and, at the same time, to fulfil its social mission effectively. LLL centres sometimes rely on such guidance in developing their own study offer for *lifelong-learners*, combining a range of courses, modules and degree programmes attended "in town" and "at the uni."

Another type of guidance provided by LLL centres focuses on the other dimension of LLL integration at HEI, i.e. on learner integration.<sup>7</sup> It involves developing individual lifelong learning strategies and supporting students in executing them. It targets both candidates and students, the latter often admitted via advisors' mediation. Among the staff providing such guidance are tutors who support candidates upon enrolment and in further study processes, when they have already got into their degree programmes. Interestingly, the types of guidance offered by LLL centres are flexible, often overlapping and not infrequently differentiated, depending on specific qualifications of particular advisors. Advisors employed in the centres are academics, and their duties involve guidance, consultancy, teaching and research.

2. Narrowly, i.e. as guidance associated with RPL procedures at HEIs. In very general terms, the procedure tends to involve four stages: IDENTIFICATION in a dialogue of the person's specific experiences; DOCUMENTATION to present the person's experiences; a formal ASSESSMENT of these experiences; and CERTIFICATION of the assessment results leading to a full or partial qualification.<sup>8</sup> The Polish law (Law on Higher Education) makes it mandatory for University Senates to adopt regulations on the organisation of RPL, including 1/RPL rules, requirements and modes; 2/ appointment and responsibilities of committees verifying learning outcomes (Article 170f). The law provides also that RPL can be implemented by Faculties that have obtained an at least positive accreditation for degree programmes chosen by the candidates (or, if the accreditation procedure has not been carried out, by Faculties authorised to confer doctoral degrees, as stipulated in Article 170e, point 1).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> On the dimensions of universities' integrative function, see *European Universities' Charter on Lifelong Learning* (EUA, 2009); *EU Council conclusions on the modernisation of higher education* (2011); and the community project *Strategia rozwoju SzW: 2010-2020* [Higher education development strategy 2010-2020].

<sup>8</sup> See, the *Council recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning* (Official Journal of the European Union, C398 of 22 December 2012, Annex: *Definitions*).

<sup>9</sup> See, Act of 11 July 2014 Amending the Law on Higher Education and Some Other Laws.

Box 1 below contains a guidance-oriented interpretation of and a commentary expanding somewhat on the RPL legislation in Poland. It can be understood as articulating the fundamental guidance content and also, given the directly related advisor interventions, the basic guidance forms.

Box 1

**Guidance content and forms as stipulated in Poland's RPL legislation**

**RULES** (basic information and explanations for candidates)

- I. Learning outcomes are validated in the extent corresponding to the curricular requirements defined for degree programmes offered by particular faculties (legal basis: Article 170e, point 2).

Consistent with their LLL mission and strategy, HEIs become “integrators of lifelong learning” and, in developing individual learning paths for students, combine their own educational offer with that of other institutions, whereby they are receptive to the resources of the local community. This determines the scope of advisor interventions and, within it, detailed guidance content and forms that, while forming a basis and underpinnings for direct work with candidates, go beyond such work.

- II. HEIs charge fees for RPL-related procedures (legal provision: Article 98, paragraph 1, point 3a) based on contracts concluded with individuals admitted to degree programmes (Article 160a). The advisor not only informs candidates about this but also points out the potentially available funding sources. Following the more experienced EU HEIs, Polish universities will probably engage in promoting the development of such funding opportunities offered by banks (*non-traditional* study loans covering RPL procedures), associations, student organisations, etc.

- III. RPL at HEs can cover up to 50% of ECTS points ascribed to a given degree programme (legal basis: Article 170g, point 3). The advisor informs the candidates about this and explains the rule in detail, resorting to paraphrases, examples, etc., if need be.

- IV. The number of candidates admitted to a HEI based on top RPL results must not exceed 20% of the total number of students in a given degree programme (legal basis: Article 170g, point 4). The advisor informs the candidates about this and explains that, requesting RPL, candidates find themselves in a competition situation (this is repeated after the RPL procedure is completed, whereby the advisor helps the candidate identify available options, further application opportunities, etc.).

V. The RPL procedure at HEIs involves the staff prepared in special training (to provide which should be the university's concern) and performing their ascribed responsibilities. Generally, the responsibilities include guidance as such, but they can be executed within more specifically defined capacities of an RPL advisor, a lifelong educational counsellor, an LLL mentor, an LLL/RPL tutor, a biographical counsellor, a faculty educational advisor, a member of the RPL committee, etc.

Guidance does not include the duties of assessors sometimes appointed by HEIs (e.g. in France) to issue the final version of the validation of candidates' prior learning outcomes.

VI. As a rule, RPL procedures consist of four stages defined in the recommendation (identification, documentation, assessment, certification). However, these broad stages can be subdivided into more detailed phases that can differ across universities as HEIs autonomously devise original, internal systemic solutions crucially inclusive of guidance.<sup>10</sup>

#### **REQUIREMENTS** (applying for RPL)

To be eligible for the RPL procedure, candidates must meet the following criteria:

- ◆ have completed high school and passed final high school exams (so-called maturity exams, broadly equivalent to British A-Levels and American SAT's) (legal basis: Article 170g, point 1).
- ◆ have work experience (at least five years for BA programmes and long-cycle MA programmes; three years for MA programmes; and two years for post-graduate programmes) as stipulated in Article 170g, points 1, 2. The condition does not apply to social-services or teacher-training college graduates (Article 170g, point 2).
- ◆ have applied to a HEI for RP and submitted documents in conformity with specific instructions and requirements defined by the HEI as regards the structure of the application, the candidate's *portfolio*, etc.

<sup>10</sup> To illustrate this, RPL at a Polish university could proceed as follows: 1/**Consulting a lifelong educational counsellor** – the first element of the application, i.e. compiling a portfolio as a documented account of the candidate's educational biography and needs – defining further learning perspectives (a general educational path), therein the potential study field and type (general options of studying at the university's faculties and departments); 2/**Consulting an educational advisor**, i.e. a faculty-based expert – the second element of the application: description of the candidate's prior learning as based on his/her educational biography supplemented with documentation and translated into learning outcomes and ECTS credits ascribed to the faculty's given study programme; 3/**Developing the final application version** supported by the faculty-based expert/advisor; 4/**Assessment of the application** by a faculty-based assessor; 5/**Decision about the application** issued by the university's RPL committee.

The advisor informs candidates about these requirements and explains them in detail, supporting the candidates as they prepare their applications and develop portfolios containing their individually compiled documentation and personal commentaries that enhance success chances. In these interventions, advisors can utilise Internet-based solutions (e.g. an electronic portfolio), whereby guidance takes place via e-mail correspondence and other forms of electronic communication.

#### **MODE** (opening LLL perspectives)

Pursuant to the law, RPL is an administrative procedure grounded on the resolutions of the university's RPL committee. The advisor helps candidates by "piloting" them until the RPL procedure at the university is completed. However, as RPL must not be isolated from LLL, the end of the procedure does not, nor should, entail the termination of the guidance process. The decision on recognition of prior learning determines the further content and forms of advisor interventions, ranging from referring candidates to relevant university units to suggesting what requests to make next (e.g. for *traditional* admission or for a shortened study track in another programme), to facilitating further learning based on learning opportunities provided by other institutions which, though unaffiliated directly with the university, are viewed as a valuable element of the community's educational offer or collaborate with the university through various non-formal education schemes in which credits can be accumulated and later counted towards degree courses if candidates enter them.

#### **RESPONSIBILITIES OF RPL COMMITTEES** (arranging individual shortened study paths)

Pursuant to the law, HEI's appoint committees that verify learning outcomes. The committees can include advisors, assessors and individuals holding executive positions across the university structure (deans, deputy deans, deputy rectors, rectors). Managed by Chairpersons and based on relevant regulations, the committees' work fundamentally consists in pronouncing on the recognition of the candidate's prior learning, which entails also defining the candidate's study track at the HEI (study level and type, degree course, curriculum) and deciding which semester of the cycle s/he is to enter.

In terms of guidance content, it is important that, as the law provides (Article 171, paragraph 2), the study programme can be fully individualised. Before and after the RPL procedure is completed, the advisor (or various advisors, first in the RPL/LLL centre and then at the faculty) helps devise and, subsequently, develop such an individual study path in collaboration with the faculty authorities, lecturers, tutors, etc.

Polish HEIs are autonomous to implement different guidance organisations and solutions. Generally, two types of advisors can be distinguished: “first contact” advisors (A) and faculty-based advisors (B). Advisors A assist the candidates through the first two stages of the RPL procedure, providing information about options and opportunities offered by the university and helping choose a suitable degree course, compile relevant documents (portfolio) and work out a preliminary transposition of prior learning onto learning outcomes defined by the university for the chosen degree programme. Therein advisors tend to act as researchers who use in-depth biographical interviews (for individuals) and/or biographical workshops (for groups) to support candidates in analysing their lives and educational paths as well as in identifying outcomes predictive of successful enrolment in or continuation of university studies. As recommended for stages one and two of the RPL procedure, advisors A interact directly with candidates while faculty-based advisors B tend to be more detached. The latter advise on formal requirements concerning stages three and four, that is, they assess candidates’ experience, suggest additions to the portfolios, recommend particular courses or exams mandatory for a given degree programme or practical tests relevant to the candidate’s skills in case they raise doubts, etc. Advisors B, basically, help translate the RPL application (and the portfolio) into the language of learning outcomes defined for the degree programmes chosen by candidates.

This paper seeks to acquaint readers with both guidance patterns so that, given the autonomy of Polish HEIs and their original RPL solutions together with the related guidance practice, they could devise and develop guidance as required by specific local conditions.

Social sensibility and awareness that RPL guidance-users are distinct individuals are two key factors in advisor training and interventions. Crucially, the LLL-related systemic developments mentioned above are part of the European Union’s strategic response to challenges of the economic crisis, demographic changes and technological progress.<sup>11</sup> Given this, HEIs that put in place frameworks for recognition of prior learning to enable candidates to pursue “shortened” study tracks should take into account their individual needs and problems (see Box 2 below).

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<sup>11</sup> The Council recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning (OJoEU, C398 of 22 December 2012, pp. 1-5).

## Box 2

**From the Council recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning** (Official Journal of the European Union, C398 of 22 December 2012, p. 1):

- (1) The validation of learning outcomes, namely knowledge, skills and competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning can play an important role in enhancing employability and mobility, as well as in the case of the socio-economically disadvantaged or the low-qualified.
- (2) At a time when the European Union is confronted with a serious economic crisis which has caused a surge in unemployment, especially among young people, and in the context of an ageing population, the validation of relevant knowledge, skills and competences has an even more valuable contribution to make in improving the functioning of the labour market, in promoting mobility and in enhancing competitiveness and economic growth.

To encourage new candidates to enrol, HEIs seeking to attract non-traditional students should provide and guarantee support in articulating their learning outcomes, developing portfolios etc. as well as emphatically advertise such options in the media. In case of all RPL applicants, a sensible approach involves the university's dedication to really *see* the person behind the application. RPL procedures should be highly individualised and adjusted to candidates' current situations and the biographical contexts that have shaped their prior learning (see e.g. Alheit, 1994), their ideas of their own educational needs, as viewed by Pierre Dominicé (2000; 2006), and, finally, their reflection on the study process as such.

This by no means entails giving unfair advantage to *non-traditional* students but expresses endeavours to shape the university's culture as pervaded by the idea of education as public good. This culture promotes rather than impedes university study experiences and is committed to making the educational offer accessible to all those who desire and are eligible to study, with their eligibility confirmed by documented qualifications and/or facilitated by the support the university provides in identifying and completing them and increased by flexible credit accumulation options.<sup>12</sup>

As emphasised by the EU policies outlined above, HEIs should particularly eagerly target people coping with exclusion (planning or forced to change jobs; temporarily or permanently out of job; unsuccessful job-seekers; 50-plussers and retirees; women willing to re-enter the labour market after childbirth; people with disabilities, etc.). Research suggests that university enrolment in late adulthood produces strong *empowerment* effects, increasing individuals' self-confidence and strength. The very fact of studying at university, despite the complications it involves, turns out to be profoundly formative by enhancing students' subjective

<sup>12</sup> Guidance is understood here in its broad sense of LLL guidance (as described above).

identities. Adults who take up degree courses when their peers graduate or focus on grandchildren are, as a rule, happy people, often excellent students and a credit to their universities (some of them go on to become successful researchers themselves) (Merrill, 2014).<sup>13</sup>

The English term – *Recognition of Prior Learning* – captures better than its Polish equivalents the emphasis on identifying earlier learning experiences and results, that is, on diagnosing both achievements (learning outcomes) and individual educational needs of candidates that make them eligible to enter university programmes (i.e. to pursue the main goal in which the efforts of both parties – the HEI and the candidate – are united). Consistent with experiences of countries with long histories of RPL practice (e.g. France and the UK) and with the EU recommendations,<sup>14</sup> RPL – translated into Polish as *uznawanie wcześniejszego uczenia się* – designates confirmation of learning outcomes achieved in all (formal, non-formal and informal) settings before applying for their validation (e.g. Box 3 below). This definition entails the university’s investment in individually provided support (e.g. in articulating the grounds for requesting the “shortened” study track) and focus on candidates’ individual, invariably exceptional learning paths, which facilitates a successful matching of their needs and the programmes offered by the university.

Box 3

**From the Council recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of informal and non-formal learning** (OJoEU C398 of 22 December 2012, Annex: **Definitions**):

- i) *validation* means a process of confirmation by an authorised body that an individual has acquired learning outcomes measured against a relevant standard and consists of the following four distinct phases:
  - 1) IDENTIFICATION through dialogue of particular experiences of an individual;
  - 2) DOCUMENTATION to make visible the individual’s experiences;
  - 3) a formal ASSESSMENT of these experiences; and
  - 4) CERTIFICATION of the results of the assessment which may lead to a full or partial qualification;
- j) *recognition of prior learning* means the validation of learning outcomes, whether from formal education or non-formal or informal learning, before requesting validation.

<sup>13</sup> See also the research findings of the referenced EDUPRO project carried out in Poland, the UK and Portugal under the ERASMUS+ programme (*Promoting LLL at HEIs by implementing innovative practices in RPL [EDUPRO]*, 2014-1-PL01-KA203-003629).

<sup>14</sup> The Council recommendation of 20 December 2012, *op. cit.*

In this sense, RPL involves first of all, so to speak, educational guidance which, given the context in which it takes place, concerns learning across various stages of life (throughout the lifetime – *life-long learning*) and in a variety of learning settings, roles and social or work functions (*life-wide learning*). Consequently, RPL guidance of this type can also be referred to as *lifelong educational guidance*, the term echoing the English *counselling for/in lifelong learning*.<sup>15</sup> In the optics of reflection on the essence of RPL guidance at HEIs, which this text has sought to outline, it is highly recommendable that Polish universities rely on this broad formula.

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<sup>15</sup> See, e.g. <http://cilllprogramme.blogspot.com/>. The notion of lifelong educational guidance is described in M. Mendel, *Całozyciowe doradztwo edukacyjne. Rola uczelni w lokalnych rozwiązaniach dotyczących uczenia się przez całe życie* [Lifelong educational guidance: The role of HEIs in local LLL solutions], an expert opinion commissioned by the Marshal of the Pomerania Province in 2014.

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