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## White Paper on the recognizability of VET diplomas (R13)

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LEONARDO DA VINCI Transfer of Innovation Project  
“RELATE – PROMOTING THE RECOGNIZABILITY OF LEARNING OUTCOMES FROM VOCATIONAL EDUCATION TO HIGHER  
EDUCATION”

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For more information on the project “RELATE” go to our website  
[www.relate-project.eu](http://www.relate-project.eu)

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## 1 Introduction

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) helps individuals to assess their competences, to facilitate the continuation of studies and to provide information on learning-promotion. The identification, recognition and validation of prior learning opens opportunity for further studies. This in turn improves the quality of the workforces and the chances for employability of graduates. Furthermore, a well-functioning RPL enhances the educational system.

RPL procedures have started at European universities of applied sciences, but there is not a unified way for validation of prior learning and the evaluation can be context-sensitive. Educators, students or employers do not always have the same understanding about the RPL concepts and thereby it may seem difficult to be fully understand or its benefits considered questionable. There is a need to clarify RPL in a way in which the fluency and equity of the process can be easily determined and implemented.

There is a common European need to clarify the RPL process and foster more the understanding, that competence, not merely studying, is the base for the recognition. In the Recognition of Prior Learning (Relate) project, the participants (three universities and three vocational colleges in Germany, Estonia and Finland) collected data about current national RPL processes and practices. They developed new methods and described possibilities to enhance RPL. These good practices and innovations are here summarized to help administrators, HE and VET teachers, other staff members and students in European countries to create their personal and effective learning pathways.

## 2 Benefits of RPL

Though the introduction of RPL requires a change of organisation and thinking in the higher educational system, by the students and by the employers, it offers different benefits to all parties involved in the system:

### Students

- encourages pursuit of formal education
- eliminates duplication of learning
- increases access
- may reduce the cost of VET
- may shorten the time to complete a VET program
- increases self-esteem and self-confidence
- validates learning outcomes gained through work and life experience

- identifies program areas requiring further studies
- assists with career development and education planning

## Higher education institutions

- increases institutional efficiency by avoiding the need for unnecessary training
- increases student recruitment and retention
- helps to ensure a certain degree of flexibility and responsiveness to changes and challenges of the labour market according to the lifelong learning approach
- allows for more appropriate learner placement in programs
- increases accessibility for a broad range of learners
- provides an important service for business, community and industry

## Workplace and society...

- recognizes lifelong learning and the need for a productive and capable workforce
- encourages workplace partnerships with educational institutions

## 3 Ways of RPL

In general, there are three different ways for the recognition of prior learning, the blanked RPL, the individual RPL by paper and the individual RPL by examination or testing. The three ways can be combined also, but have certain advantages and disadvantages:

- **Blanked RPL:** here the competences of a certain VET-education are compared with the competences, which are part of a certain study-programme. Competences, which are similar, may be recognised for all holders of the VET-diploma, who apply to the specific study-programme. Once the comparison of competences is done, it is very easy to recognise them and can be applied for many students at once. On the other side, this is only working with programmes, which have been compared and it does not take into account the individual competences, learning outcomes and specific interests (for example a scientific approach).
- **Paper-based Individual RPL:** here the applicant has to hand in documents, which prove the previous learning, such as transcript of records, describing what he or she has learned in the previous education. This description will be compared with the content of the study-programme individually and lead to the recognition of all competences, which are equal. This requires more paper work by both applicants and the institutions, assuring the

individual recognition of singular programmes. The decision is made also on the base of the certificate whereas individual competences, learning outcomes and interests are not taken into account.

- Individual RPL by examination or test: In this third way, the competences of the applicants are confirmed by a written or oral examination, or in a simulation. The advantage of this way is that the actual competences can be proved, not depending on a certificate. This helps on one side, to find out which competences still remain after the certificate was achieved or even to acknowledge competences, which have been learned in an informal way, i.e. learning by doing. This is the most reliable, but also expensive way of recognition.

All these methods are used by European higher education institutions and by the partners of this project; in some cases also a combination of blanked or paper-based RPL with forms of examination is possible, even though at the moment no scientific research on the effects of these methods has been produced.

## 4 Challenges of RPL

The discussion about RPL in Europe has started in the 1990s and the topic is well known by experts of education in all the states, but there are differences how it is carried out in the national educational system. Nearly all European countries have law and regulations, which give opportunity to RPL, but in some countries it is already well known by all members of the educational system and most of the learners (for example in Estonia) and in other countries only a group of experts and some students are informed about RPL (as in Germany). Especially employers are not well informed about the opportunities of RPL and they would have the chance to encourage the employees to any further learning. Thus the first challenge to RPL consists in spreading the idea and the knowledge of RPL to more experts, employers and students in Europe, especially on the regional and local level.

Secondly we found out great differences in the organisation of RPL in the institutions of higher education. While some have well-structured processes, offices and counselling-staff, in others the recognition is an unstructured additional task of administrative and academic staff and thus not emphasised as much as possible. Also the process differs between the countries and even between single organisations, thus it is very complicate for students to understand what they have to do. The second challenge is the development of a clear and structured process at all higher education institutions.

The third challenge is the ongoing financing of the idea of RPL. In all countries, the development of RPL is supported by national or European project funding; now it would be important to include the costs of RPL in the general financing system. RPL-offices should be part of any higher education institution such as regular student-offices and RPL could also be part of the indicator-based financing.

## 5 What we suggest to do

The next steps for the promotion of the recognisability of learning outcomes from VET to HE are addressed to stakeholders on different levels:

### 1. Political level:

- Though RPL is well known in the European context, it is important to develop more clear and unified understanding.
- National offices for RPL should coordinate the process in each country and establish international cooperation.
- On national level, RPL should become a part of the regular system of financing in higher education (indicator systems).
- Still a national and international campaign about the advantages of RPL should raise the awareness.
- Further research on the effects of different forms of RPL and development of a clear structure should be conducted.

### 2. Regional stakeholder

- On the regional level, the information about RPL should be intensified among stakeholders like job centres and chambers of commerce.
- All institutions, which have candidates for RPL should be included in the process: Schools, VET-Institutions and companies.
- A clear understanding of RPL should be promoted with regards to the value of lifelong learning and the process which to lead to it.

### 3. Institutional level

- In the institutions of higher education, clear processes and responsibilities should be established, a contact person or office is fundamental.

- The process of RPL should be clearly described on website and there should be information-material.
- All members of the academic staff should be informed about the process of RPL and its consequences on teaching and learning programs, i.e. the requirements for students with different personal and educational background.

## 6 Conclusions

The idea of RPL is well developed in Europe and well known by experts of higher education. Now it should be transferred to a wider range of educational institutions and become a common idea and an opportunity for all European citizens. The RELATE project has created clear steps toward this goal and produced results which can be downloaded from the project webpage or from the European project platform.

## List of abbreviations

RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
VET	Vocational Education and Training
HE	Higher Education
LO	Learning Outcomes
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
LA	Learning Agreement
ECVET	European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training
ECTS	European Credit Transferable System
CEDEFOP	European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training