

# **HETAC POLICY DOCUMENT**

## **PRIOR EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING**

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## INTRODUCTION

**From its inception the NCEA vigorously pursued the concept of providing, within its accreditation system, opportunities to enable and encourage people to undertake courses leading to awards at National Certificate, Diploma and Degree level. HETAC will continue to explore and develop further opportunities within its "ladder" system. The current system can form part of the foundation stone for the creation of the national qualification framework.**

**The concept of “Credit for Prior Experiential Learning” is another rung in HETAC’s ladder of educational opportunities.**

**This particular concept is aimed primarily at people, who may not have had the opportunity, the time, the encouragement or the finance to pursue or to finalise third level education. But they may have extensive work/life experiences, which allied to their own natural learning ability and commitment, would merit access to the third level system and credit within it for the learning already gained through their work/life experience.**

**The implementation of the scheme is possible only if all the parties – Institutions, Institution staff, employers (where appropriate) and participating students – commit themselves fully to the assessment and evaluation process.**

- Existing courses should have well-defined learning outcomes within each subject area.**
- Institutions should commit selected staff to the Assessment and Evaluation panels.**
- Selected staff should undertake specialised training in these processes and should assist students in the preparation of their portfolios and in the selection of courses.**
- It is expected that employers will assist Institution staff in the Assessment/Evaluation processes and in the validation of portfolios.**
- Learners will require to be assisted by all involved, in articulating what they have learned - theory and practice – from their life/work experience and in clarifying their claims for creditable achievement.**

1. DEFINITION

Prior Experiential Learning or learning gained prior to enrolment on a course is defined as knowledge and skills acquired through life, work experience and study, not formally attested through formal certification. Experience is an input and learning outcomes are the result of a successful learning process. Therefore, academic credit can be awarded only for achievement of learning outcomes, not for experience per se. The achievement of these learning outcomes is dependent on the learner and the quality and duration of the experience; this can include experience gained as a result of involvement in employment, community activity, home duties, sport and other life/work experience.

2. THOSE FOR WHOM THE SCHEME IS INTENDED

**Credit for Prior Experiential Learning is intended for mature students who may or may not have had structured formal education but who have learned from their involvement in employment, community activities, home duties, sport etc. This learning when evaluated both qualitatively and quantitatively might entitle them to credits or exemptions from a course of study. Such individuals might be in employment (including self-employed), unemployed, currently retired from employment or never have been in employment.**

**In general, the persons who might benefit and the learning which they may have gained can be classified into the following categories:**

(a) Credit for learning gained in employment

A person, as a result of experience gained in employment might have achieved learning which can be equated to learning outcomes listed for subjects on an approved course. Broad examples of this might be:-

- **a salesperson who may have a thorough understanding of marketing techniques, book-keeping etc.; credit/exemption might be possible on courses in the area of business studies or marketing.**

NOTE: *Prior Experiential Learning is not to be confused with Concurrent Experiential Learning which is learning planned and structured into a course as a way of achieving certain of the learning outcomes for that course. A common form of Concurrent Experiential Learning would consist of a student being placed in employment in industry for a fixed number of weeks.*

- a person who has worked in a bank might be exempt from some of the learning outcomes on a course in banking or business studies.

- **a fitter or electrician who, as a result of learning gained while working in industry, might be exempted from certain subjects in engineering.**
- **a builder might be exempt from certain subjects in construction studies, related to his/her experience in this area.**

(b) Learning gained from voluntary/community activities

Individuals may have been carrying out duties in associations, sporting organisations, political organisations or charities which might entitle them to exemptions from the learning outcomes on courses in politics, leisure/recreation, communications, administration etc.

(c) Learning gained from experience working in the home

Individuals, who have had substantial experience of managing a household and rearing children may have gained learning in the area of caring, budgeting, time management, inter-personal skills etc. This might merit exemptions from learning outcomes on courses in business studies, health care, childcare, catering etc.

### 3. QUALITY OF LEARNING

- 3.1 The criteria to be employed by academic staff in institutions when assessing prior experiential learning are of paramount importance in ensuring that adequacy and consistency of standards are maintained.**
- 3.2 The learning should imply a conceptual as well as a practical grasp of the knowledge or competence required and be applicable outside the environment in which it was acquired. It must be emphasised that experience is not what is being evaluated but learning.**
- 3.3 In order to facilitate the granting of credit for prior learning, subjects should be described in terms of learning outcomes\*. If credit is to be given to an applicant for prior experiential learning gained outside the institution environment, the institution concerned must be satisfied that the applicant has already mastered learning outcomes of a subject or module on a particular course. Only those approved courses which have their individual subjects or modules described in terms of learning outcomes will be suitable for participation in this scheme.**

*\* A learning outcome is that which a learner should know and/or be able to do, as a result of his/her involvement in a learning process.*

#### 4. QUANTITY OF LEARNING

It will be necessary in order to avoid fragmentation, that applicants gain exemption from entire subjects on courses as a result of assessed prior learning. The decision in relation to an applicant's eligibility for exemption from an entire subject on the basis of Prior Experiential Learning, lies with the assessor(s). However, assessors should use the guideline that an applicant must meet a minimum of half the learning outcomes of a particular subject in order to gain exemption from that subject.

**Normally applicants may not be exempted from more than half the subjects on a course. However, if an institution wishes to exceed this limit, the Council must be consulted on this matter in advance.**

#### 5. APPLICATIONS PROCESS

**5.1 Applicants for admission to, and/or exemption from subjects/courses on the grounds of experiential learning should make their applications in the first instance to a HETAC higher education institution, in accordance with the administrative and financial procedures of that institution. The application should contain the reasons why the applicant feels the case merits consideration.**

**5.2 Institutions should take account of the time needed for the evaluation of prior learning and for guidance for applicants in the applications process, bearing in mind that in the context of the CAO/CAS application system, such applicants are deemed "non-standard".**

**5.3 All applicants seeking credit for Prior Experiential Learning should be interviewed by staff\* in the institution. This process has three main objectives:**

- (i) To ensure that the applicant has selected the most suitable course for his/her needs.**
- (ii) To review the experience gained by the applicant so as to identify potentially creditable learning.**
- (iii) To advise the applicant on the preparation of a portfolio.**

**5.4 The applicant should then be requested to produce, within an agreed period of time (typically four/five weeks), the portfolio describing the prior experience in the context of potentially creditable learning. Experience cited as undertaken while in employment should, where possible, be certified by the employer concerned.**

*\*See Section 7*

## 6. THE PROCESS OF EVALUATION OF PRIOR LEARNING

- 6.1 **The portfolio, when received by the institution, should be scrutinised by the assessor(s). This involves the identification and evaluation of prior learning encompassed in the portfolio. Tests or other assessment instruments appropriate to the applicant's needs may be used as required.**
- 6.2 **Having evaluated the learning gained, the assessors must now match this learning with the learning outcomes of the subject(s) from which the applicant may be exempted. No grade or mark should be allocated to the exempted subjects as the applicant's performance in examinations will be determined only on the basis of marks gained in other subjects which are examined in the normal way.**

## 7. ASSESSORS

**The Council is anxious to ensure that appropriate standards are maintained throughout the process of the assessment of prior learning. In order to assist the institutions in achieving such standards, the Council will organise workshops on the assessment of Prior Experiential Learning and it is expected that only those academic staff who have participated in these workshops will be involved in the assessment process within the institution. The workshops will be discipline-related to ensure that those assessing students in engineering, business studies, etc. come from those disciplines.**

## 8. CRITERIA FOR DETERMINING QUALITY OF LEARNING

**In assessing whether learning gained from experience matches learning outcomes for a particular subject, attention should be paid by assessors to the following quality criteria:**

- 8.1 **The appropriate balance between theory and practical application**

**A common complaint about traditional learners is that, although they may have scored highly on examinations which concentrate on the theoretical principles of a subject, they are weak when it comes to the application of these principles.**

**On the other hand, the common complaint about experiential learners is that they can 'do' but because they have not really mastered the general principles that underlie a subject they cannot discuss the concepts embodying those principles in an analytical way. For example, an individual working in a mechanical engineering workshop for some years might have high levels of practical skills in operating particular machines. However, it is essential that this**

**individual also has an understanding of the Materials Science and Machine Tool Technology which underlie these processes if credit is to be given for such prior learning.**

**Therefore, assessors should ensure that applicants being considered for credit or exemption on the basis of their prior learning have achieved the appropriate balance between applied and theoretical learning that is appropriate to the subject.**

## **8.2 Transferability of learning**

**Learning acquired through prior experience must be transferable to contexts other than that of the learning environment within which it was acquired. For example, the subject Accountancy on a particular course might list learning outcomes requiring a student to understand a range of accounting methods using different computing applications. However, an employee in an accounting firm might know how to complete the accounts in that firm only, or when a particular software package is being used. In such a situation this individual would be required to acquire further knowledge and skills before exemption from the subject could be granted.**

## **8.3 Academic level of learning**

**When assessing learning gained from prior experience care should be taken to ensure that this learning is at the appropriate academic level. For example, a laboratory technician might have a limited understanding of the theory underlying the techniques being used in the laboratory in which he has been employed but might not have this understanding to the level required in stage 1 or stage 2 of a National Certificate in Food Science.**

**The rigorous application of the principles described in this document is essential in achieving this objective.**

## APPENDIX

### EXAMPLES OF PROCESS OF ASSESSMENT OF PRIOR EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

#### EXAMPLE 1

1. **An individual who completed his Leaving Certificate five years ago and who has since been working in a laboratory in a Milk Processing Plant has enquired at a Regional Technical Institution in his area as to how he might continue his education. Following discussion with an assessor in experiential learning, it is agreed between the applicant and the assessor that the most appropriate course for him is a part-time course leading to the National Certificate in Food Science.**
2. **The assessor interviews the applicant in relation to the generality of his experience. It is clear from this interview that any learning which may be present in the experience relates only to the subjects Food Science 1, in Stage 1 and Food Science II in Stage II. The assessor advises the applicant to prepare a detailed portfolio in relation to his experience so that an evaluation in terms of learning gained can be made.**
3. **One month later, the applicant produces the portfolio and it is evaluated by the assessor. On the basis of this evaluation, the assessor decides that the applicant can be exempted from all of Food Science I and certain learning outcomes from Food Science II. The learning outcomes from Food Science II are as follows:**
  - (a) **to be able to carry out a range of routine food analytical procedures;**
  - (b) **to understand and interpret laboratory results and advise and make decisions arising from these results;**
  - (c) **to understand a range of food production processes;**
  - (d) **to assist in fault-finding and diagnosis when quality parameters fall outside specifications;**
  - (e) **to communicate effectively with fellow technical personnel and non-technical personnel regarding technical matters.**

The above learning outcomes relate to the processing of a variety of foods, including milk. It is clear from the portfolio that the applicant has met some of the learning outcomes insofar as they relate to the milk processing industry. In the context of milk processing the student can be exempted from (a) and (b) above. Therefore the applicant is advised by the assessor to study some text books and to investigate further methods associated with fault finding and diagnosis in relation to particular food processing industries. The purpose of this is to enable the applicant to further develop his learning so that it is transferable to the processing of other foods. The result of this work should be the production of a report by the applicant.

**The assessor would decide on exemption following an evaluation of the report produced and a further interview.**

## **EXAMPLE 2**

- 1. An individual applies to a Regional Technical Institution to enrol in the National Diploma in Production Engineering. The applicant holds a National Certificate in Mechanical Engineering. Since receiving this award he has been working for two years as a design draughtsman and one year in the technical sales area in a medium sized Irish company designing and making special purpose machinery.**
- 2. Provided his industrial experience is considered relevant, the applicant is already qualified for entry to the National Diploma in Production Engineering. The institution, which also offers a National Diploma in Mechanical Engineering, invites him to discuss his application. While the applicant is being interviewed it becomes apparent that his experience may be more appropriate to the National Diploma in Mechanical Engineering.**
- 3. He is advised that he may be entitled to credit for learning gained during his period at work. The assessor decides that this learning might relate to some of the learning outcomes of the subjects Mechanical Engineering Design, Stress Analysis and Mechanics of Machines. There are seven subjects on this stage of the course.**
- 4. The applicant is advised to prepare a portfolio for assessment. This portfolio when completed, consists of drawings which were executed by the applicant (and certified as such by the company) together with details of a sales presentation he has made (also certified). The assessor decides that he has met three learning outcomes on each of the subjects Mechanical Engineering Design and Stress Analysis. He meets only two of five learning outcomes of Mechanics of Machines. The applicant is advised that if he can**

**demonstrate that he can meet any one of the remaining three outcomes of that subject he will be considered for exemption for all three subjects. He feels that he is proficient in “layout of complex gearing systems”. The assessor prepares a short written test which the applicant takes on the spot.**

If the assessor can be satisfied in relation to the test and to the other matters above, the applicant may be exempted from the subjects in question.

### **EXAMPLE 3**

- 1. The applicant completed her Leaving Certificate and began employment in the accounts section of a large retail business five years ago. She has been Office Manager for the past two years.**
- 2. The applicant applies to a Regional Technical Institution for a course in Business Studies.**
- 3. She meets with the appropriate member of staff to discuss the options available. Following this discussion, the applicant decides to apply for admission to the BBS degree course.**
- 4. In reviewing the experience gained by the applicant institution staff identify potentially creditable learning.**
- 5. The applicant is advised to prepare a portfolio which will enable the institution to assess her experiential learning against selected learning outcomes for individual subjects.**
- 6. The following sets out the learning outcomes specified for the subject – Business Management in the course leading to the Bachelor of Business Studies – Stage 1.**
  - (a) An understanding of management organisational structures.**
  - (b) An awareness of the significance and breakdown of the marketing function.**
  - (c) An understanding of the organisation of production planning and the role of stock control and quality control.**
  - (d) An ability to analyse financial statements of a typical business.**
  - (e) An appreciation of the role of human resource management within a business.**

- 7. The assessor in the business school undertakes an assessment of experiential learning based on the portfolio submitted.**
- 8. It would be expected that given the applicant's experience to date she would have met the learning outcomes for the subject Business Management.**