University Students Consultative Forum

Consultation on Recognition of Prior Learning
26 August–8 September 2014: Summary

The complete record of the discussion can be viewed on the Forum.

Note: There were 223 posts. 23 forum members made at least 1 post and 5 students made 10 or more posts.
1. What do you see as the advantages and disadvantages of recognising prior learning within higher educational qualifications?

- It was noted that these depend on what the outcome is of that learning being recognised e.g. in allowing students to study less modules or to remove requirements for Level 1 study or pre-requisites.
- The general view appeared to be that prior learning should be recognised in particular to allow students the flexibility not to have to study at level 1, however appropriate safeguards were needed to ensure students were aware of the implications of this.

**Potential advantages**
- Reduces the cost of a degree for a student (if it can be counted as credit).
- Reduces the time taken to gain a qualification (if it can be counted as credit).
- Acknowledges that many students will have prior learning, which can boost self-esteem.
- Students will engage more (if it means greater flexibility to study at a higher level).
- Encourages responsibility for own learning by encouraging reflection on current skill and knowledge level.
- Makes the OU more attractive to potential students, particularly dropouts from other universities, and employers.
- Attracting those who have previously studied elsewhere may be of benefit to a cohort of students.
- May remove more experienced/knowledgeable students from modules they don’t want/need to study, improving the experience for others.

**Potential disadvantages**
- If prior learning is used to skip modules or jump to study at a certain level it can be difficult to assess and may make the rest of the student journey more difficult both in terms of knowledge and skills in numerous different ways.
- Recognition of prior learning being used as an alternative to direct open entry was strongly opposed.
- Accreditation of Prior Learning can limit choice of pathways.
- Resource cost to University in checking individuals’ prior learning.
- Students may have unrealistic assessments of the value of their prior learning, which can be hard to quantify.
1. What do you see as the advantages and disadvantages of recognising prior learning within higher educational qualifications? (continued)

Suggestions to mitigate disadvantages

- Advise students of the potential risks of missing modules or not starting study at level one, ensuring a robust system of ‘informed consent’ if modules or study at a certain level are being missed.
- Advise students of the advantages of studying an introductory module that would acclimatise them to OU study.
- Make it easier to switch module if a mistake has been made.
- Facilitate the availability of module materials for any module missed (for a fee).
- Provide more information about the link between modules in a pathway and how skills/knowledge are developed from one to the next to facilitate better judgement about skipping modules.
- Ensure good information is offered to student about what is recognised.
- Improve module descriptions so that it is clear what level of skills and knowledge are required (if any).
- Provide an induction pack for students starting at level 2 to cover induction items delivered at L1 only. (Students were reassured that this was being looked at as part of another project)
2. What kinds of prior learning should be allowed to be included in higher education qualifications?

Points made:

• Greater evidence would be required for awarding points towards a qualification than if the prior learning was simply to enable the student to begin their study at level 2 or avoid a pre-requisite.

• Prior certificated learning from another higher education provider should be used to enable credit transfer that reduces the number of modules needed to complete a chosen degree. For named degrees/where external benchmarking applies this matching will necessarily be more stringent.

• Greater flexibility would be welcomed in being able to use certificated prior learning (even school level qualifications) to be granted exemption from certain modules. This probably applies mostly to level 1 and again would be less flexible for named degrees.

• There was wariness of using certificates from MOOCs due to possible cheating but a feeling they could help induct or orientate students to distance learning.

• The time limit on using previous qualifications to gain exemption from certain modules as requirements should be re-considered in certain cases.

• Tests could be used for certain skills or knowledge to see if a student needs to study a particular module or indeed are ready for a higher level module.

• There was general support for work-based experience to be valid, but limited suggestions as to how this could be measured e.g. by reference from a manager.

• Students general research/essay-writing/study skills gained not only from previous study but also from the workplace should be considered with regard to exemption from pre-requisites.

• Professional body qualifications should be included.

• Students could do just the final assessment from modules for a reduced fee to prove their eligibility for future modules, or indeed to allow credit exemptions.
3. What evidence should be required to show prior learning?

This topic was addressed in part under thread 2. Suggestions included:

- Certificates from valid institutions (professional or HEI)
- Paid for online assessment: To avoid pre-requisites, an enhanced ‘are you ready for’ test; for something to count as points, an assessment-by-portfolio/EMA/exam.
- Accreditation of MOOCs was not thought to be a suitable substitute for credit.
- Time limits should be reconsidered in certain subject areas.
- Work-related evidence could be provided to allow exemption from certain ‘skills’ if these were taught separately from modules e.g. ICT, presentation skills etc.
- Undertaking short courses was seen as an indicator of ability to study online.
- Employer reference (or from other authoritative persons)
4. Before starting your study with the OU were you aware of opportunities to use your prior learning towards your qualification? If yes, how did you find out about it?

- Most students were aware of credit transfer early on but a few took longer.
- Most had found out about it by reading the information available from the OU, in particular on the website but others had been informed by an advisor or someone they knew who had previously studied with the OU.
- One student commented that the credit transfer process had been disappointing in that, whilst credits were awarded for study elsewhere, they did not allow exemption from a core module, which when studied suggested that prior knowledge should have been sufficient. Information available (OU website, degree guidelines and speaking to an OU representative over the phone) had implied that existing credits would easily gain exemption from that module.

5. What impact would further recognition of prior learning opportunities have on your choice of qualification and institution?

- Only two students responded to this thread.
- It was suggested that recognition of prior learning to allow greater flexibility in choice of modules available would encourage further study for Continuing Professional Development or enjoyment.
- Similarly it was suggested that recognition of prior learning could be a decisive factor in choosing which institution to study with.
6. What do you think would be the best ways to find out about opportunities to use your prior learning?

Suggestions:

• Information should be all be in one easy to access place on the website, possibly in .pdf format.
• If appropriate, information could be included in degree and module descriptions and in prospectuses.
• Include prior learning as a step in the registration process so students can include it as part of their application.
• Information could be included on the information panel on the right hand side of each module description.
• Module descriptions could include:
  - A simple list of the skills required to start the module
  - A list of topics and level of knowledge required to undertake the module
  - A list of additional skills a student successfully completing the module might expect to gain
  - An explanation of the level of understanding that the successful student could expect to attain

This would help students decide whether it was an appropriate module for them in relation to their prior learning.
7. If you used the University’s credit transfer process in order to gain credit towards your qualification, what do you think of its effectiveness? Is there anything we can do to improve it?

- Only three students responded to this question, with two positive experiences and no negative ones, however several students had reported on their experience of credit transfer under question four.
- This included the student who had been disappointed with the process as she was led to believe her previous credits would exempt her from a core module, which they didn’t. However having completed the module she felt an exemption would have been appropriate.
- It was suggested the process should be used to allow students entry at level 2 rather than level 1 (a point echoed in several different threads).

8. Is there anything else you feel we should consider?

- It was suggested that whether/how prior learning should be considered part-way through a qualification needed further consideration, specifically with regard to students who need to transfer to a ‘Q’ qualification or wish to study a new module without studying its pre-requisite.
- Earlier points objecting to the rigidity of requiring 120 points at Level 1 were re-emphasised.

Next steps

- We will come back to the Forum in early 2015 to show how the University has taken your input into account.