

Credit Transfer for Open/Online Graduate Programs: Annex 12 Methodology and Reflections

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[This Annex 12 consists of Chapters 2 and 4 of the Consolidated Annex, with the addition of most of Chapter 0 in order to provide some context.]

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0. Client Brief

This document is part of the Consolidated Annex to a Benchmarking Report for key aspects of open/online graduate programs including master's, graduate certificate and graduate diploma programmes, with a focus on the following elements:

PLAR

- Amount permitted for graduate credit
- Used/not used for "residency" and how much
- For theses, capstones, other graduation projects
- Practica where relevant

Entrance requirements

- Admissions tests
- PLAR use for resumes, letters of intent, letters of reference
- Degrees/ equivalents.

The Report is based on a sample of relevant and credible comparator open and/or distance higher education institutions internationally, both single mode and dual mode.

Comparator institutions are proposed to include the following ten:

<i>Institution</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>Institution</i>	<i>Country</i>
TÉLUQ	Canada	FernUniversität	Germany
Athabasca University	Canada	Open Universiteit	The Netherlands
Penn State University	US	OU Catalonia	Spain
Central Florida State U	US	Massey University	New Zealand
UK Open University	UK	Charles Sturt University	Australia

2. The current situation: a meta-analysis

Personal reflections

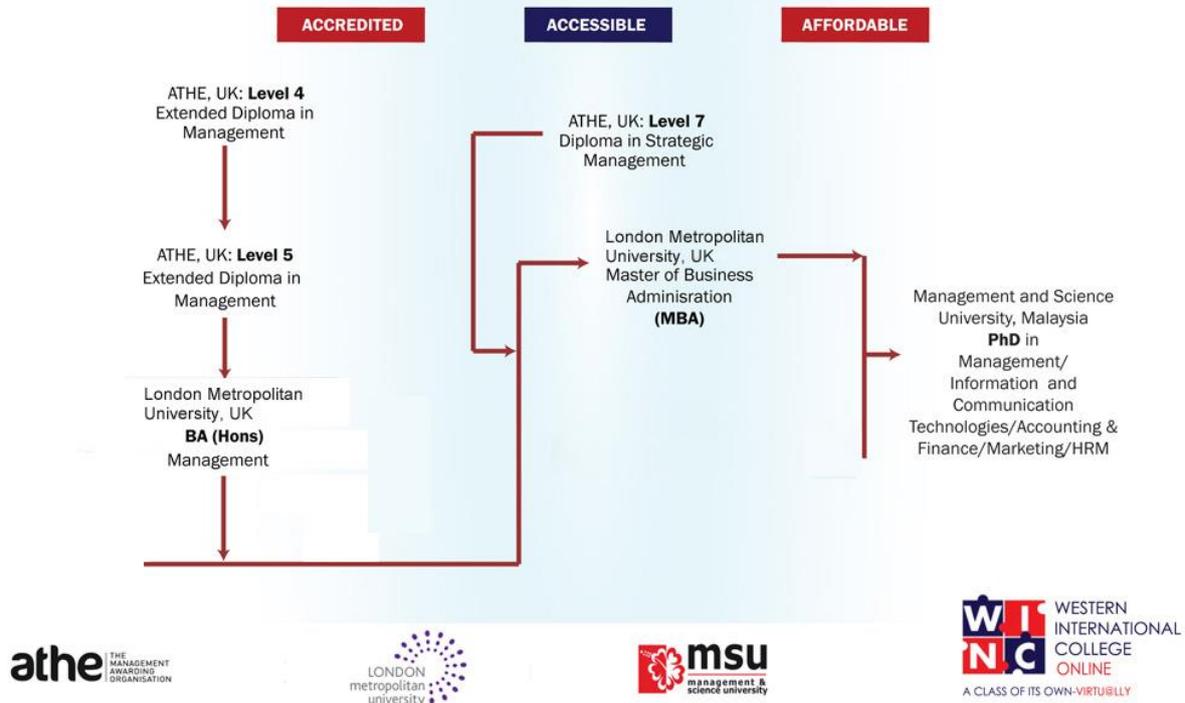
My own initial observation when contracted to carry out this study, based on seven years at a vocationally-oriented university where I taught only graduate programmes, and backed up by wider experience as an external examiner at other institutions, is that entry in the UK to graduate programmes was considerably more flexible than generally believed. In particular the requirement for a first degree was not mandatory and the degree (where it exists) does not have to be from any particular kind or location of university, beyond the requirement that the university (whether public or private) should be accredited under the local regime and appear on the international lists of universities with which admissions officers deal. It was interesting to see these themes being repeated in this study.

More recently my work has taken me into the area of transfer into graduate programmes at an intermediate point, not at the start. This most commonly in the UK seems to occur with students who either study an initial graduate diploma at a less prestigious university (often outside the UK) or study a vocational diploma which is "deemed" to have an academic credit equivalent.

An interesting example of a progression route which is increasingly used is below:

World Class Qualifications by Flexible Online Learning

Certificates ... Diplomas... Degrees



The ATHE qualifications are vocational but give a student PLAR-type access to an intermediate point in the graduate programme. (ATHE, as just one example, is discussed later in the report.)

2.1 General background

The approach to qualifications in higher education is in theory supposed to fit into a hierarchy of qualifications, the International Standard Classification of Education. This approach, from UNESCO, is described as follows:¹

1. The International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) is a framework for assembling, compiling, and analysing cross-nationally comparable statistics on education. ISCED is a member of the United Nations International Family of Economic and Social Classifications and is the reference classification for organizing education programmes and related qualifications by levels and fields of education. First developed in the mid-1970s by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the ISCED has been revised twice – most recently in 2011. The ISCED is a product of international agreement and is adopted formally by the General Conference of UNESCO Member States.

¹ <http://www.uis.unesco.org/Education/Documents/isced-37c-fos-review-222729e.pdf> page 3

Until recently the ISCED system used was the 1997 version with 7 levels. The current version, from 2011, has 9 levels, as follows:²

0	Early childhood education ('less than primary' for educational attainment)
1	Primary education
2	Lower secondary education
3	Upper secondary education
4	Post-secondary non-tertiary education
5	Short-cycle tertiary education
6	Bachelor's or equivalent level
7	Master's or equivalent level
8	Doctoral or equivalent level

In this report we are dealing with level 7.

Despite this appealing simplicity there is in fact a limited degree of comparability across the world between how the systems are applied. This is why in 2011 ISCED introduced, for the first time, a classification of *levels* of educational attainment based on qualifications (ISCED-A) and decided that the *fields* of education should be examined in a separate process with the view to establishing an "independent but related classification which could be updated according to a different frequency, if appropriate, from any future revision to the levels of education and educational attainment".³ This new scheme has become known as the ISCED Fields of Education and Training (ISCED-F).

Even within Europe where there has been a long tradition of the Bologna process introducing a degree of harmonisation between national systems of higher education, in reality this has focussed mostly on the structure of the process and the "amount" of education delivered, and to some extent on the length of first and graduate degrees, but little if at all on the content of degrees and the depth to which they are studied.

Thus all our conclusions have to be taken in this context.

2.2 The literature

After initial investigations, it was agreed that a full literature search was not useful. The preliminary searches yielded rather limited information.

Mendeley

As an experienced user of Mendeley, I turned first to this. A search on my Mendeley account for "PLAR graduate" (choosing search terms and their order is as usual crucial), potentially relevant papers surfaced from the last 10 years included:

² [http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/International_Standard_Classification_of_Education_\(ISCED\)](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/International_Standard_Classification_of_Education_(ISCED))

³ <http://www.uis.unesco.org/Education/Documents/isced-37c-fos-review-222729e.pdf> page 3 again

- *Advancing PLAR in Alberta: An Action Plan* (Book, 2008)⁴
- *From OER to PLAR: Credentialing for open education* (Paper, 2013)⁵
- *Governing through non/recognition: the missing 'R' in the PLAR for immigrant professionals in Canada and Sweden* (Paper, 2009)⁶

These were the only ones of apparent relevance in the first 100 matches. The first two had no specific information on PLAR for master's programmes; nor did the last, which also painted a depressing picture of international PLAR for refugees.

A similar search on "accreditation of prior learning master's" yielded not much more, within relevant dates and from relevant countries. There was a relentless focus on the undergraduate degree as the target. However, a few articles were intriguing and relevant:

- *Introducing research on recognition of prior learning* (Paper, 2013) – this was too general but linked to another paper which came up later – see next
- *Recognition of prior learning: exploring the 'knowledge question'* – this described an interview survey, where "academics in a South African higher education institution were asked their views on the feasibility of RPL in relation to postgraduate study in their discipline"⁷
- *A framework for recognition of prior learning within a Postgraduate Diploma of Nursing Management in South Africa* (Paper, 2010)⁸
- **Let the Doors of Learning Be Open to All – A Case for Recognition of Prior Learning** (Paper, 2011) – a gem of a paper which described the consequences of a decision when "in 2007, the Graduate School of Business of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, admitted seven students onto the MBA programme on the basis of RPL".⁹

Google Scholar

Google Scholar generated slightly better results, probably because it has better coverage of the education sector than Mendeley does (whose strength is more in science and medicine).

A search for "PLAR graduate" with relevant results later than 2014 yielded:

- *Conceptualising Recognition of Prior Learning Processes in the Age of Open Learning*, by Elizabeth Ruinard and Judith McNamara, on a "case study relating to e-portfolio-

⁴ <https://open.alberta.ca/publications/9780778575160>

⁵ <http://openpraxis.org/index.php/OpenPraxis/article/view/22> – One author is Christine Wihak of TRU

⁶ See <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02601370903031264?journalCode=tled20> for the journal article and <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/155132.htm> for a conference paper. Immigrant professionals are likely to be graduates in their own countries.

⁷ "Recognition of prior learning: exploring the 'knowledge question'", Linda Cooper and Judy Harris. *International Journal Of Lifelong Education*, Vol. 32, Iss. 4, 2013

⁸ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20840365>

⁹ Singh, M. a. (2011). "Let the Doors of Learning Be Open to All--A Case for Recognition of Prior Learning". *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 25(4), 803–818

style RPL for entry into a Graduate Certificate in Policy and Governance at a metropolitan university in Queensland” (easily identified as QUT) ¹⁰

- *Case Study of the Innovative M.Ed. in Higher Education Leadership Cohort initiative Introduced at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education University of Toronto*, by Katharine Janzen, 2014: “The most risky innovation was the admission of some very experienced professionals – “middle management” staff in colleges and universities – into the program for a Master’s in Higher Education degree – even though they had not earned the normally required four-year or honours undergraduate degree. Students were admitted by one of three routes: standard admission, non-standard case consideration, or the certificate route, depending on their past academic achievements and professional experience.”¹¹

However, by the 49th hit, the gold dust was obscured by irrelevant dross.

The search “accreditation of prior learning” AND “master’s” (2013 or later, no patents or citations) produced just 130 results. These revealed two gems among several overview reports:

- *Recognition of prior learning: opportunities and challenges for higher education* (Paper, 2015) – a gem describing “the extensive and innovative use of RPL by Middlesex University [at and the developing RPL work at the Australian Institute of Business”].¹²

In particular this led to consideration of Middlesex University as a case study, especially when the article described the situation:

As a result of the RPL process, Ben was awarded academic credit at postgraduate level. **Upon this basis the University gave Ben the opportunity to negotiate a work-based programme of study at Masters level.** The Middlesex University WBL Framework allowed Ben to build upon the learning from experience and achieve a customised Masters in WBL Studies (Construction Management) following the successful completion of modules in programme planning, work-based research and developments methods, and a major project. The project resulted in the creation of a handbook for project managers engaged in design and build projects that was taken into use across the organisation. Without the combination of RPL and negotiated WBL Middlesex University would not have been able to contribute to Ben’s CPD nor would Ben have had the opportunity to gain a Masters qualification. **The University has extended this approach to qualifications at undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral level.**

A second gem was:

¹⁰ <http://www.igi-global.com/chapter/conceptualising-recognition-of-prior-learning-processes-in-the-age-of-open-learning/135637>

¹¹ <https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/handle/1807/66925>

¹² <http://www.emeraldinsight.com/doi/full/10.1108/JWAM-10-2015-001>

- *A current overview of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in Irish Higher Education* (Paper, 2015) – also on ResearchGate – which makes some crucial observations:¹³

While all respondents reported that RPL is theoretically possible across all disciplines; several reported restrictions that apply in practice, such as:

- Limits applied in response to external professional body requirements
- Limitations in capacity and capability for assessment of evidence of prior learning
- Limitations due to collaboration with another international provider on an award
- Specific exclusion of RPL in relation to elements of programmes (e.g. RPL is not allowed for practical placement elements of some programmes)
- Specific exclusion of RPL entirely from some courses (e.g. Masters course for which no RPL claims will be considered)

When considering the application of RPL at various levels on the NFQ there was a considerable diversity in the responses. In general, it emerged that RPL is rarely facilitated in award stages and, while in some institutions RPL is theoretically possible up to Level 10 on the NFQ,¹⁴ it has seldom, if ever, been used to this extent.

Several others were also relevant including:

- *The Masters of Sustainable Practice: A Review of a Program for Working Professionals*, by R Edirisinghe and K Fraser – Australian Journal of Environmental Education Volume 30, Issue 2 December 2014, pp. 239-253 – this reported on a study which “sought to distil recommendations and curriculum design principles that could underpin the re-imagination of the RMIT University coursework Masters of Sustainable Practice (MSP)”¹⁵
- *Masters Level Teaching, Learning and Assessment: Issues in Design and Delivery* (Book, 2015)
- *Flexible Pedagogies: part-time learners and learning in higher education* (Report, 2013) by Michael McLinden, University of Birmingham¹⁶ – a report for the Higher Education Academy in the UK
- *Review of credit accumulation and transfer policy and practice in UK higher education* (Report, 2013), which I knew from EU policy work¹⁷
- *Credit Transfer in Higher Education: A review of the literature* (Report, March 2017)¹⁸

¹³ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/301623790_Recognition_of_Prior_Learning_in_higher_education_in_Ireland

¹⁴ Doctoral degree – <http://www.nfq-qqi.com> – level 9 is Masters

¹⁵ <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/australian-journal-of-environmental-education/article/masters-of-sustainable-practice-a-review-of-a-program-for-working-professionals/9D51294DBD0B9C3099E7DDC22DD3D1B2#>

¹⁶ <http://acp.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Flexible-Pedagogies-part-time-learners-and-learning-in-higher-education.pdf>

¹⁷ https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/resources/review_of_transfer_of_credit_report.pdf

¹⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/credit-transfer-in-higher-education>

- *International comparisons in postgraduate education: quality, access and employment outcomes – Report to HEFCE* by Gillian Clarke and Ingrid Lunt, University of Oxford (Report, 2014) – rather general but useful for context.¹⁹

By about search hit number 80 (of 130) the useful hits were few and far between and were on the whole general reports.

2.3 Policy overview

It was also thought to be useful to check the overall policy environment for graduate-level PLAR; but from my own many years of experience with EU entities and policies I did not expect that much specific would be found.

European Union

The *Renewed European Agenda for adult learning* (2011)²⁰ outlines a vision of how adult learning should develop in Europe by 2020. Specific priorities for the period 2015–2020 are:

- Governance: ensuring the coherence of adult learning with other policy areas, improving coordination, effectiveness and relevance to the needs of society, the economy and the environment; increasing, where appropriate, both private and public investment.
- Supply and take up: significantly increasing the supply of high-quality adult learning provision, especially in literacy, numeracy and digital skills, and increasing take-up through effective outreach, guidance and motivation strategies which target the groups most in need.
- Flexibility and access: widening access by increasing the availability of workplace-based learning and making effective use of ICT; putting in place procedures to identify and assess the skills of low qualified adults, and providing sufficient second-chance opportunities leading to a recognised EQF qualification for those without EQF level 4 qualifications.²¹
- Quality: improving quality assurance, including monitoring and impact assessment, improving initial and continuing education of adult educators, and collecting the necessary data on needs to effectively target and design provision.

As one can see, any focus on PLAR (APL) is at pre-HE level.

More recent work, from the *ET 2020 Working Group on Adult Learning*, which convened from 2014 to 2015, produced some more detailed guidance:

- improving the effectiveness of AL policies and provision...
- making better use of digital media for adult learning.... and
- improving the literacy, numeracy and digital skills of low-skilled adults....

¹⁹ <http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/20949/1/International%20comparisons%20in%20postgraduate%20education%20-%20quality,%20access%20and%20employment%20outcomes.pdf>

²⁰ http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv:OJ.C_.2011.372.01.0001.01.ENG

²¹ This is at the level of university entrance examinations (A level, Highers, Abitur, Matura etc), not at HE level – https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_Qualifications_Framework

Needless to say, it produced several reports on the topic – as has the European Parliament, one of which I wrote. There are so many reports, but few relevant to graduate programmes.

However, it must be pointed out that in the area of education the European Commission can produce only *recommendations* – not directives or laws – and in many topic areas, such as ECTS and quality issues, it has to work with many other European countries outside the EU but within the European Higher Education Area (48 countries including Russia) – so progress tends to be slow, moving not much faster than the speed of the slowest.

Moreover, there is a long tradition among Member States, long preceding the Brexit process, of not paying much attention to EU recommendations on higher education.

European Higher Education Area (EHEA)

The EHEA is not, as is often believed, part of the European Commission – nor is its coverage restricted to the EU. On the other hand it is very much influenced by EU activities and policies. The Area, of 48 countries, in fact covers all of Europe, Russia, Turkey and Transcaucasia (Armenia etc).

Other continents and UNESCO

We are not aware of general documents on PLAR at graduate programme level from other continents or regions. UNESCO pays some attention to PLAR – see for example the UNEVOC page on Recognition of Prior Learning²² – but we are not aware of material relevant to graduate programmes.

4. Further work

Given the confused and minimal state of many graduate programme sites when it comes to detailed issues of admission, credit transfer and recognition of prior learning, this study has got near the boundaries of what is feasible purely with desk research on web sites.

One possible route forward, discussed mid-way in the research but deemed unrealistic, would be to use speakers of French, Dutch, German and Spanish, and similar language-specific experts, to detect and then translate such material as is public but not in English. However, we do have suspicions that there is not that much material. Furthermore, the structure of the university sector in many Member States, with its rigid binary split, often exacerbated by a public-private split and lack of challenger providers (such as online universities), may suggest that conclusions from such studies are not relevant to Canada in general and TRU in particular.

The other, in our view more fruitful route, is to open up discussions with some of the providers identified in this study, possibly on a reciprocal basis (as with benchmarking) to share (a) what internal documentation is available to guide admissions and PLAR procedures and (b) what informal (but not documented) guidelines are emerging to handle such issues.

To demonstrate the feasibility of that approach we note that a large but confidential study done in 2014 by the author for the UK Higher Education Academy got “behind the scenes of PLAR” by carrying out 12 such confidential and anonymised interviews. This report never

²² <http://www.unevoc.unesco.org/go.php?q=Recognition+of+Prior+Learning&context=>

saw the public light of day but some related activity fed into the study *Adult Education and Open Educational Resources*²³ for the European Parliament in 2015. This led to a strong recommendation for “proceduralisation” of PLAR.

It may be helpful to just give the two key recommendations of that report as they impact on PLAR:

Member States should more strongly encourage (not excluding financial measures) HE and VET providers (especially large state-funded providers) to improve and proceduralise their activity on APL (Accreditation of Prior Learning) including the ability to accredit knowledge and competences developed through online study and informal learning, including but not restricted to OER and MOOCs

Larger Member States should set up an Open Accrutor to accredit students for HE studies which could accrue to a full undergraduate degree and a parallel model, perhaps via ‘one stop shops’, to accredit vocational competences

It would be a very foolhardy analyst who would glibly replace “Member State” by “province” in the above two recommendations, but at the least it could suggest a direction to investigate.

²³ [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2015/563397/IPOL_STU\(2015\)563397_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2015/563397/IPOL_STU(2015)563397_EN.pdf)