The Open University of the Netherlands (OUNL) is known from time immemorial the university for academic and professional learning of adults. In contrast with other Dutch universities, the age and the work experience of the students is characteristic. OUNL-students have required a substantial amount of work experience in the domain of the academic study they want to attend.

Therefore, the OUNL has started with a procedure to assess and credit prior experiential learning (Recognition of Prior Learning; RPL), besides existing procedures on prior certificated learning. The objective of RPL is to assess and recognize prior learning, independent the way of prior learning.

RPL is still in her infancy in university education. In professional education RPL has grown fastly in the last decade. The OUNL wants to create possibilities for their students to recognize prior learning based on experiences and wants to be a model for others in higher education. The opportunity to recognize one’s prior learning is in line with the objective of the Open University, to be the lifelong learning university.

In 2006, a first version of a RPL-procedure is developed. The domain for was academic computer science in distance education.

With respect to the quality criteria of competency assessment programs, two content specialists, members of the support department, a member of the examination committee, a legal advisor and a researcher on RPL developed a RPL-procedure for academic computer science.

The RPL-procedure starts with a general information session, in which all necessary procedural information is given. Subsequently, if candidates are still interested in RPL, they can request an advisory consult with a tutor. In this consult, the tutor and candidate analyze the final attainment levels in relation to the capabilities of the candidates and discuss the possibilities for evidence delivery.

After the advisory consult, the candidate starts with the composition of the portfolio. The first part of this portfolio includes evidence for certified learning; the second part includes evidence for the informal and non-formal learning. Candidates are required to deliver the following information: (a) curriculum vitae, (b) descriptions of evidence in relation to the final attainment levels, (c) a workplace scan, and (d) products that serve as evidence. In this stage of the procedure, the tutor supports the candidate by answering questions and in helping to decide what information is useful as evidence for the final attainment levels.

The support department for the exemption based on diplomas and certificates receives the portfolio for a check on completeness. Consecutively, one of the four available trained assessors gets the portfolio. The assessors assess the portfolio by means of a scoring rubric and compose questions about the content of the portfolio for the assessment conversation. After this, all candidates are invited for one assessment conversation in which
two assessors are involved. The objective of the assessment conversation is to examine some subjects in the portfolio in depth. In the assessment conversation the assessors have the possibility to ask for additional evidence. Assessors may require conducting additional assignments, like an essay or a program analysis. All this information serves as input for the assessor to define an advice for the examination committee. Finally, this committee examines the advice and decides which part of the study remains for the candidate to obtain a bachelor diploma. Finally, the validated result will be committed in a disposition and each candidate receives a study plan with a remaining study path.

With regard to this these developments, the Open University has been nominated for an incentive prize of the Dutch RPL Knowledge Centre. The reason for this nomination was ‘the Open University of the Netherlands is the first university testing RPL as one of the new types of learning and education to realize high-quality lifelong learning. In view of the target group of the OUNL, RPL is a logical and welcome addition to the high-quality distance education (on a university level). RPL reduce barriers to start an educational program. The OUNL has not only the intention to be a pioneer, but is also willing to use her expertise in motivating and supporting other educational institutes’.

Now, the ambition of the Open University is to have an implementation of RPL for all of the educational programs in 2007/2008. The main goal here is to maintain the high quality of the academic educational programs of the Open University. Therefore, RPL at the Open University should fit with the requirements of assessment in general and is based on the quality code of the Dutch RPL Knowledge Centre. The following are the main points of the code:

1. The goal of RPL is to define, evaluate and accredit individual competencies. The recognition of prior learning has a value in and of itself and contributes to employability;
2. RPL answers to the need of the individual;
3. Procedure and instruments are reliable and based on solid standards;
4. Assessors and supervisors are competent, independent and impartial;
5. The quality of APL procedures is guaranteed and is being improved on an ongoing basis.

Also, the legal framework of the Examination Committee has to approve the RPL procedure on the statutory aspects.

The evaluation of the quality of RPL is part of a scientific research project of the Open University. The central goal of this research project is to investigate how to design a procedure to assess and credit prior learning for reasons of admittance to formal university education. Sub questions are related with the student support and the assessment methods. Two studies are carried out. The first study is a retrospective research and investigates the sources for evidence of competences acquired from prior learning. The second study is set up according to case studies.
These case studies are the instruments to provide answers on questions about the procedure, the assessment types, the differences between content domains, the possibilities to raise filters or barriers for efficiency reasons and the overall quality.

There are seven case studies carried out: Active Learning, Law, Economics and Business and Public administration, Engineering, Environmental science, Cultural studies and Psychology. The focus of each case study differs: Active Learning aims to develop a RPL for admission to a master; Law, Psychology and Environmental science aim to develop RPL to give course credits; Economics, Business and Public administration, Cultural studies and Engineering aim to develop RPL to give students a personal study path. All these aims should be covered in one overall procedure. All the participants (assessors, tutors, learners, developers) evaluate the RPL-procedure. Adjustments are made on the assessment instruments, the additional assignments and the administration.

With RPL, the Open University of the Netherlands, as the prime university for lifelong learning, addresses the wide-ranging learning needs of people during their course of life.