A STUDY ON THE RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING IN DISTANCE HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

Many people are forced to go back to college to align their bachelor's degree with their job in order to meet the academic qualifications for their profession. One way to do so is to earn a bachelor's degree through the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) pathway, which recognizes previous education and shortens the time it takes to complete studies. Teachers, including early childhood education (ECE) teachers, must align their qualifications with the ECE field to comply with regulations stipulating that professional teacher must have qualifications aligned with their work. This alignment meets the requirements for professional teacher certification and obtaining an educator certificate. Early childhood education teachers must attend college while continuing to work to pay tuition. Distance learning is the solution. Universitas Terbuka is one of the distance learning institutions in Indonesia that offers this opportunity. To recognize teachers' previous work experience and studies, UT uses RPL for prospective students. The RPL process is conducted through the RPL application on srs5G. This study aims to describe the RPL recognition process in distance higher education, particularly within the Early Childhood Education Teacher Education program at UT. This ex post facto study used a survey technique to collect data. Data were collected through document analysis and an online survey distributed to prospective students applying for RPL. The research period was from March to July of 2025. The data were analyzed using descriptive qualitative methods. The findings indicate that the RPL system in distance learning should be simple, practical, and transparent. Prospective students at UT feel greatly assisted by the RPL system. However, challenges and issues related to the application and perception of RPL by staff or assessors were identified. Recommendations include allowing sufficient time for the RPL process to be completed on schedule. The application should be thoroughly tested before implementation to minimize potential issues.

Keywords: RPL, distance higher education, application, early childhood education teacher study programme

1 INTRODUCTION

In the world of education, there is a term known as Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). Universities widely use RPL to recognize a person's prior study experience before they enroll in an intended program of study. Conceptually, RPL recognizes a person's experience or competence gained from previous education or work. These competencies, or learning outcomes, can be from formal, non-formal, or informal education and/or work experience. The purpose of RPL recognition is twofold: 1) to reduce the length of study so students can graduate faster than expected and 2) to reduce the number of credits or courses required by equating the

weight of certain courses (Heinonen & Tuomainen, 2020; Raciti et al., 2024). Many universities in many countries have widely implemented the RPL program with the aim of providing higher education opportunities to the entire community and the nation's children (Demir & Güleç, 2024; Nakata et al., 2021). Why do many countries implement RPL? It provides citizens and the nation's children with the widest possible opportunities to study at university in a fair, inclusive, and equal manner. Additionally, the RPL program opens up opportunities, possibilities, and challenges for social mobility and lifelong learning (Raciti et al., 2024). The RPL programs implemented by many universities demonstrate the government's commitment to increasing the gross enrollment rate and reducing the likelihood of students dropping out for various reasons. Through RPL, the concept of "lifelong learning," open to anyone with the will and determination, regardless of age, can be realized in practice (Alfriehat et al., 2024; Gonzales, 2016; Heinonen & Tuomainen, 2020). Therefore, many countries have created and implemented RPL regulations that cover its definition, administration, implementation, implications, and evaluation. These regulations provide a foundation for universities to apply RPL to prospective students. (Kovtunets et al., 2024; Masoabi, 2023; Raciti et al., 2024).

Universitas Terbuka (UT) or The Open University of Indonesia is one of the universities that implements RPL. This is highly relevant because the UT uses an open and distance learning system. "Open" means that UT allows anyone with a high school diploma or equivalent to obtain a bachelor's degree by studying at UT. Regarding RPL, UT recognizes prospective students' previous education and experience through the RPL pathway during the admissions process.(Darojat et al., 2019). All of UT's study programs implement RPL for prospective students, including the Early Childhood Education Teacher (ECET) program. The ECET program has used RPL since its opening in 2007 (Katalog_FKIP_Pendas, 2022). Initially, RPL was implemented by accepting students who had graduated from the Diploma Two (D2) Kindergarten Teacher Education Program into the bachelor's program, exempting them from five semesters (75 credits). Consequently, prospective students only had to complete four semesters of the nine-semester bachelor's program.

A total of 2,905 people applied for the RPL program for the ECET-UT study program in the odd semester of 2025 (semester 2025.1). This number increased from the previous semester when 1,400 people applied. The RPL application process at UT is conducted through an application accessible via the following link: https://srs5g.ut.ac.id/auth/login. The application

process involves several stages. The final stage of RPL recognition involves the exemption of courses or semesters and is conducted by assessors from the study program who have received training and been granted special assessor accounts.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The implementation of RPL is one of the government's efforts to increase the gross enrollment rate (GER) and the human development index (HDI) in higher education. The GER and HDI are often used to measure the success of an area's educational resources and processes (Rahmad Nasir, 2022). In the RPL implementation process, assessors play a crucial role because they must decide on the number of exemptions and course equivalencies based on files and data submitted by RPL applicants. Therefore, an RPL assessor must be an individual with extensive knowledge who is trained according to established standards and is competent, objective, open-minded, and meticulous (Raciti et al., 2024).

The RPL program at Universitas Terbuka is conducted through the admisi.ut.ac.id application, which prospective students can access through MyUT Mahasiswa. Prospective students who wish to apply for RPL must fill out the application and submit the required documents. Starting in the 20241, the ECET study program consists of an in-service program for prospective students who are teachers or early childhood educators, and a pre-service program for those who are not (Pedoman RPL Jurusan Pendidikan Dasar, 2023).

UT facilitates two types of RPL: RPL Acquisition and RPL Transfer. RPL Acquisition recognizes a person's certificate or diploma obtained after completing higher education. Evidence used to obtain recognition includes a legal diploma or certificate issued by a university, educational institution, or training institution. RPL Transfer recognizes the knowledge or experience of individuals who have participated in a higher education institution's program but have not completed it. Evidence is a list of grades for each course or subject taken. The minimum recognized grade is B (Mendikbudristek Republik Indonesia, 2021; Trapsilawati et al., 2019).

3 METHOD

This research process applied ex post facto research. Data was collected through documentation studies obtained via the registrasi.ut.ac.id application, as well as through WhatsApp messages sent by prospective RPL applicants to the ECET-UT study program coordinator. The collected information included the number of applications, the application process, the number of objections, objection materials, and the most frequently asked questions or complaints.

Additionally, data was collected by distributing questionnaires with open-ended questions to twenty RPL applicants whose applications had been approved. The questionnaire contained questions to obtain information about the implementation of RPL at UT. In addition to asking about the respondents' identities, the questionnaire asked: 1) How is the RPL application process at UT? Did you encounter any difficulties when applying for RPL? Please explain! What advantages have you experienced in the RPL process? The research was conducted from March to July 2025. The population consisted of ECET-UT study program students who applied for RPL. Twenty respondents had completed the RPL process and registered for the 2025.2 semester. The collected data was analyzed descriptively and presented in various forms, such as tables and narratives. The interview data were transcribed and processed based on similarities in the answers. Then, it was tabulated and described narratively..

4   FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The research results are presented in two parts: the results of the documentation study and the survey results. The documentation study, conducted through the registrasi.ut.ac.id website, obtained data related to RPL submissions to the ECET-UT study program. These results are presented in Table 1 dan 2.

4.1   Results of the documentation study

4.1.1 *Results of documentation review on the UT Registration Application*

The results of the documentation study conducted through the registrasi.ut.ac.id website are presented in Table 1 and include data related to RPL submissions to the ECET-UT study program. The results of the documentation study conducted through the WhatsApp application are presented in Table 2.

Table 1 Data on the RPL Application Process for the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education at UT

No	Code/ Name of Study Program	Processes in the Directorate of Academic Administration and Graduation (DAAK)					Processes in the Faculty/Study Program		
		Total Applicants	Failed Validation	Processing	In Process	Rejected	Further Assessment	Number ∑	Percentage
1.	118/Elementary Teacher Ed in Service	5510	88	0	0	0	0	5422	0,98
2.	11A/ Elementary Teacher Ed Preservice	147	12	0	2	0	0	133	0,9
3.	122/ECET In service	2903	45	0	1	0	0	2857	0,98
4.	12A/ECET Preservice	29	3	0	0	1	0	25	0,86
5.	163/ Educational Technology	86	6	0	0	5	0	75	0,87
6.	57/ Indonesian Language and Literature Ed	220	5	0	0	0	0	215	0,98

No	Code/ Name of Study Program	Processes in the Directorate of Academic Administration and Graduation (DAAK)					Processes in the Faculty/Study Program		
		Total Applicants	Failed Validation	Processing	In Process	Rejected	Further Assessment	Number ∑	Percentage
7.	57A/ Indonesian Language and Literature Ed	28	3	0	0	0	0	25	0,89
8.	58/ English Language Education	127	5	0	0	0	0	122	0,96
9.	58A/ English Language Education	58	0	0	0	1	0	57	0,98
10.	59/ Biology Education	79	0	0	0	0	0	79	1
11.	59A/ Biology Education	18	2	0	0	0	0	16	0,89
12.	60/ Physics Education	30	2	0	0	0	0	28	0,93
13.	60A/ Physics Education	5	0	0	0	0	0	5	1
14.	61/ Chemistry education	19	0	0	0	0	0	19	1
15.	61A/ Chemistry education	20	2	0	0	0	0	18	0,9
16.	62/ Mathematics education	118	3	0	0	0	0	115	0,97
17.	62A/ Mathematics education	22	0	0	0	0	0	22	1
18.	73/ Pancasila and Civic Education	275	5	0	0	0	0	270	0,98
19.	73A/ Pancasila and Civic Education	28	3	0	0	0	0	25	0,89
20.	76/ Economic education	120	1	0	0	0	0	119	0,99
21.	76A/ Economic education	18	1	0	0	0	0	17	0,94
	TOTAL	9860	186	0	3	7	0	9664	0,98

Table 1 shows that the Elementary School Teacher Education program had the highest number of RPL applicants, with 5,657. Meanwhile, 2,932 prospective students applied for RPL in the ECET program for in-service and pre-service students. A total of 45 applicants failed validation at the Directorate of Academic Administration and Graduation UT (DAAK UT). Failure to validate in the DAAK process means that the RPL applicant submitted incomplete files. At the end of the RPL process, 288 applicants were approved. There was one rejected application in the ECET study program. The applicant was rejected because they failed to meet the requirements for the courses they applied for and did not attach a transcript or diploma.

4.1.2 Results of documentation study on WhatsApp

Table 2 below presents the results of data searches related to RPL submissions to the ECET UT Study Program received via WhatsApp chat on the department head's number from March to July 2025.

Table 2 Results of documentation study on WA

No	Component	Indicator	∑
1.	Questions about the RPL process	a. How does the process work?	12
		b. What documents are required?	23
		c. How long does the process take?	6
		d. When is the submission deadline?	4
		e. How is the exemption calculated?	1
2.	Complaints	a. Time	5
		b. Exemption results	14
		c. Equivalency value	1
		d. Not appearing in the application	23
		e. Application error	23
		f. The exemption semester is incompatible.	67
3.	Others	a. Satisfaction	7
		b. Expressions of gratitude	2
		c. Submission of suggestions	1
		d. Cancellation of submission	1
			123

Table 2 shows that the WhatsApp messages contained three types of data: questions about RPL, complaints, and miscellaneous. Of the 46 WhatsApp messages about RPL, five common questions were identified. The most frequently asked questions were about the documents required for an RPL application at UT (23 people) and the RPL process at UT (12 people). In the complaint component, 66 WhatsApp senders complained about five issues most frequently. Meanwhile, the other component had four indicators conveyed by WhatsApp senders. Table 2 also shows that the highest number of complaints, 23, were about application errors and exemptions not appearing in the application viewed by students. Seven students expressed satisfaction in the other component.

4.2 Survey Results

The survey was sent to twenty prospective students who had applied for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and passed the exemption. The survey contained identity questions and three open-ended questions. Respondent identity data are presented in Table 3, and RPL process survey data are presented descriptively in narrative form.

4.2.1 *Respondent Identity*

Table 3 below presents the identities of the 20 respondents.

Table 3 Respondent identity

No	Aspect and Indicators	Frequency	%
1.	Gender		
	Men	1	5%
	Women	19	95%
2.	Incorporated in		
	a. Kindergarden	12	60%
	b. Play Group	2	10%
	c. Similar Early Childhood Education Units	3	15%
	d. Others	3	15%
3.	Age		
	b. 17 – 25 years	2	10%
	c. 26 – 35 years	14	70%
	d. 36 – 50 years	4	20%
4.	Occupation		
	a. Early childhood Teacher	10	50%
	b. EC Headmaster	4	20%
	c. school administrator	2	10%
	c. Others	4	20%

As shown in Table 3, 95% of the respondents are female. This is reasonable, as most UT students are early childhood teachers, who tend to be female. Similarly, most RPL applicants are female. Overall, only six RPL applicants are male. This aligns with previous research on RPL, which yielded similar results (Tatminingsih et al., 2024)

4.2.2 *Survey results on the RPL process*

The results of a survey of 20 respondents on three open-ended questions sent via the g-form application are presented descriptively. The collected data was processed and analyzed based on similarities in the answers. The results are then presented in the following description.

How is the RPL application at UT?

Based on respondents' answers to these questions, it can be concluded that the RPL application at UT, particularly the version used in the early childhood education teacher training program, is straightforward and user-friendly. The process and instructions for each feature guide respondents seamlessly through each stage. Through this application, the submission process can be completed quickly. Respondents also stated that, in the ECET

Program RPL, prospective students will receive a notification to take a further assessment after filling out and completing the files. This assessment consists of multiple-choice questions. The assessment questions cover basic ECE concepts, child development, strategies, and the The questions summarize the important courses in the ECET program. After completing the assessment, respondents will receive the results of their RPL application within 3-7 days. There is sufficient file upload space so that respondents have no difficulty uploading the required files in either PDF or JPG format. Before starting the application process, respondents can access guidelines and instructions for submitting an RPL application. This guide is very helpful. Therefore, it must be read carefully. However, some parts are confusing, particularly those related to file uploads. This is because I am applying for an RPL Acquisition, such as a certificate for the Young Teacher Assistant Program from UT. There is no place for certificates in the application.

Did you encounter any difficulties when submitting your RPL application??

Of the 20 respondents, only four stated that they had difficulty submitting their RPL. The difficulties were: 1) The waiting time for RPL results was long, and no notifications were sent. The application stated that the process would take seven business days, but the respondents said it took more than a month. This made them quite discouraged, as they thought their RPL had failed. Second, the files they uploaded repeatedly failed to upload. These respondents faced an obstacle when trying to upload the required documents or files. The uploads always failed and returned empty. It turned out that documents were easier to upload in PDF format than JPG. This was quite disturbing. It should be noted that only PDF files can be uploaded. Third, there was no place to upload certificates. Respondents submitted RPL in the form of tiered training certificates issued by the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture. However, the RPL application does not provide a place to upload certificates. It only provides space for transcripts, diplomas, teaching certificates, ID cards, and résumés. Therefore, respondents were confused and did not know where to upload their certificates. After inquiring with the Regional UT, we learned that certificates can be uploaded in the transcript section. 4) The assessment questions are quite difficult. Respondents stated that the advanced assessment required of RPL applicants for the acquisition and in-service schemes was challenging. This is because the questions are multiple choice, and the material consists of concepts or theories that must be memorized rather than applied.

What are the advantages of the RPL process that you have experienced?

ost respondents found the application process simple and fast. Twenty respondents said that

they found the RPL application process really easy. Their answers are presented in Table 5.

<div align="center">Table 5 Respondents' perception of the ease of applying for RPL</div>

Respondent	Answer
1	Simple application
2	Easy to apply
3	Provides fast, transparent results in accordance with applicable regulations.
4	Quick and concise process.
5	There is no need to prepare hard copy files.
6	Documents are in soft file format and can be photographed with a cell phone.
7	There is no need to come to the UT campus.
8	Can be done anywhere and from anywhere.
9	It's easy to get information from UT. When you call, you will receive an immediate response and assistance.
10	The application is user-friendly, even for those who are not tech-savvy.
11	There is an appeal process if you are not satisfied.
12	Exemption is granted as expected.
13	All processes are done with one click on the computer.
14	It is easy to use because the application is simple and the instructions are clear.
15	The application is user-friendly. If you need to stop the process, you can resume it the next day without starting over from the beginning.
16	After each process is finished, a notification is sent to the registered email address. This allows the applicant to continue the process immediately.
17	Ultimately, I was disappointed because the exemption I received was not as expected. However, after I called the study program, my complaint was addressed and corrected, and I received the expected exemption. I was granted an exemption for six semesters.
18	The UT regional office staff assisted me, so the process was very easy.
19	If your documents are complete, applying for RPL at UT is straightforward.
20	I contacted the program because I was unsure about one step. I was pleased to receive a prompt and friendly response, which ensured that my RPL application went smoothly.

As shown in Table 5, almost all of the respondents' answers were related to simple, easy-to-

use applications and fast, friendly service from the officers they contacted, both within the

study program and at the Regional UT. Respondents also stated that the provided solutions

and assistance were convenient. Some respondents stated that they could complete the

application and RPL process from anywhere at any time without leaving their homes. They

also said that the documents they uploaded were easy to prepare and did not require complicated procedures; they could simply be in a soft file format, such as PDF or JPG.

4.3 Discussion

The results of the study show that the RPL program in the ECET study ranks second in the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education in terms of submissions, with a total of 2,932. This figure has increased from the previous semester, when there were only around 1,400 submissions (Tatminingsih, et al., 2024). The growing number of RPL applicants suggests that many individuals are employed in roles that do not align with their qualifications, necessitating the alignment of their academic credentials with their professional field (Gonzales, 2016). The results of the WhatsApp documentation study show that the most common complaint was about inconsistent exemptions, with 67 chats received. After analyzing these chats more intensively, it was found that RPL applicants were not concerned about the size of the equivalence value they obtained. They were more concerned with the amount of exemption they received. This is reasonable because the number of credits exempted determines which semester, They start college and how long it will take them to complete the ECET UT Study Program, affecting the costs they incur during their undergraduate studies. Meanwhile, the survey results show that RPL applicants commonly experience difficulties opening the application, uploading documents, waiting for results, and finding the tests/assessments quite difficult. These issues affect the entire RPL application process. UT should immediately improve the application to make it easier, simpler, faster, more transparent, and increase its storage capacity. This aligns with the fundamental logic of RPL: the use of an application can simplifies and shorten the RPL process within an institution.

5 CONCLUSION

The RPL process in distance learning, particularly at the Open University, is conducted through an integrated RPL and student admission/registration system. This integration makes it easier for prospective students to apply for RPL. The RPL application and process can be accessed anytime, anywhere, and offers a transparent, fast, and simple process that complies with applicable regulations. Staff involved in the RPL process must be responsive and solution-oriented when assisting RPL applicants. It is recommended that UT maintain an RPL process with a system that is simple, easily accessible, and user-friendly, while maintaining high credibility and accuracy. This will ensure that RPL applications run smoothly and that the results can be accounted for administratively and academically. Another recommendation is to

conduct broader and more in-depth research to obtain more accurate results and provide recommendations for implementing RPL at UT as a distance higher education provider.

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