

# What's the equivalent?

Recognition of prior learning for maritime degree course entry and awards

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STCW qualifications such as Officer of the Watch (OOW), Chief Mate, Master Unlimited and engineering qualifications are recognised widely in the shipping industry ashore, and actively sought after for positions such as harbour masters, marine surveyors and lecturers. Increasingly, however, employers require those working ashore to have a degree qualification. Many employers not engaged directly in the maritime industries are not aware of the value of STCW certificates of competency and the time, study and experience required to obtain them. One means of obtaining equivalency to an academic standard and gaining entry to degree courses is to adopt a procedure known as recognition of prior learning (RPL) which is acceptable in many institutes and universities.

RPL is a generic term that describes a system for awarding academic accreditation to students on the basis that learning has occurred prior to admission to a course.

RPL can be obtained in two ways:


- i. Recognition of prior certified learning
- ii. Recognition of prior experiential learning.

The first category is more applicable to marine professionals. If students have completed and passed professional examinations, they may apply for RPL to join a degree course at an advanced stage, provided appropriate learning outcomes are achieved satisfactorily. It is not possible for students to use prior qualifications twice, and if a previous academic qualification was obtained it cannot be used for exemptions.

What might this look like in practice? In Cork Institute of Technology's National Maritime College of Ireland (NMCI), the OOW (Deck) course is delivered in parallel with a Bachelor's degree in Nautical Science (Ordinary) course. Students who have already obtained an OOW qualification may apply to complete the BSc (Ordinary) course and obtain exemptions from the modules already obtained when studying for the OOW. To obtain the BSc (Ord), students must complete additional modules in mathematics, physics, and principles of navigation. Similarly, the STCW Chief Mate course is delivered in parallel with the Bachelor's degree in Nautical Science (Honours) course. Those who have already qualified as a Chief Mate may join the degree course and obtain exemptions from modules already completed. They will obtain a BSc (Hons) degree in Nautical Science when they complete a dissertation proposal and research dissertation. They must also have obtained all the necessary modules required for the BSc (Ord) degree prior to application. Single module exemptions are also allowed. For example, if students have achieved the learning outcomes of the module Ship Stability (Management) they will obtain an exemption in an aligned degree module that includes the same learning outcomes. The process is rigorous and ensures that only up to date knowledge and competencies are accepted and high standards are maintained.

The second category, recognition of prior experiential learning, applies to those who have considerable work experience and can show that through that experience, they can claim exemptions from certain learning outcomes and modules. For example, harbour masters in major ports would have experience in management, accountancy, logistics and law. They could apply to join a management degree course and seek module exemptions for their proven experience. This process is lengthy as the applicant must collate a significant portfolio of work experience with associated evidence.

The Nautical Institute's Continuing Professional Development (CPD) portfolio system allows maritime professionals to record achievements throughout their career; from attending conferences to obtaining qualifications. NI portfolios may be used as evidence in applications for RPL and assist in obtaining exemptions in relevant degree modules. Substantial portfolios may be accepted for advanced entry to degree courses.

Professionals who hold both STCW and degree qualifications will increase their employability and widen their opportunities. Transferability to shore employment will be improved and seafarers will also be able to gain entry to Masters' degree programmes. Although STCW related qualifications are valuable, they are more appropriate for a seagoing career that may be less than 10 years' duration. A degree qualification will give seafarers moving ashore an edge in interviews and enable professionals to engage in lifelong careers. 

Bill Kavanagh prepared the above paper for The Nautical Institute's Professional Development Committee, of which he is a member. Whether you are seeking academic accreditation from an institute or university based on prior certified learning or on prior experiential learning, The Nautical Institute CPD Online scheme is an excellent way to document your course work or experiences. We encourage all our members to use the scheme to its full potential – submitting your plan, record and reflective statement each year and receiving feedback and a verification certificate for your efforts. As this article makes clear, a record of what you are learning and experiencing now may be of great value to you at some point in the future, saving you time and money in pursuing degree qualifications. If you begin with keeping a record it may help focus your thoughts so that creating a plan no longer seems too big a challenge. And once you've made a plan it isn't too difficult to reflect on how well the plan went. So, if you've been putting off using CPD Online, consider the benefits that can come from having a thorough record of your experiences and start keeping a record today! As always, write to me at CPD@nautinst.org if you have any questions.  
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