

RECOGNITION OF PREVIOUSLY ACQUIRED COMPETENCIES

RPAC-Guide
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1 Introduction

Flemish Higher Education has become more flexible over the last decades. Students are able to plan their study trajectory more individually and make use of their relevant experiences, the *Previously Acquired Competencies* (PAC), to optimise that trajectory. University colleges and universities can take into consideration skills and knowledge which were learned or developed at the workplace, during social activities, or through volunteer work. A procedure was designed for the recognition of these competencies (RPAC). If you consider yourself eligible for a recognition of your skills, then this Guide will provide you with the necessary information.

The RPAC procedure is the responsibility (of the Accrediting Body) of the Ghent University Association (AUGent). For the implementation, AUGent also relies on the experience of its partner institutions: Arteveldehogeschool (Artevelde University College Ghent), Hogeschool Gent (University College Ghent - HoGent), Hogeschool West-Vlaanderen (University College West-Flanders - Howest) and Universiteit Gent (Ghent University - UGent). Each institution is a mandated Body and assigns one or several mandated persons. The procedure applies to all institutions within the AUGent.

This guide is intended as an aid for presenting your competencies clearly and transparently in a format which allows the assessors to make a fair evaluation of your file. The basis for any assessment are the competencies (knowledge, skills and attitudes) which you already possess.

Most students consider applying for the RPAC procedure with the aim of receiving an exemption for a course or a part of the study programme. It is important to note here that the RPAC procedure can only lead to an exemption indirectly. Granting exemptions is not part of the RPAC procedure, and is entirely in the hands of the faculties or departments.

The approach towards recognising skills and granting exemptions depends to some extent on how study programmes are organised. This accounts for differences between or within institutions or faculties. To receive an exemption on the basis of practical experience, however, it is always necessary to go through the RPAC procedure.

It is also possible to receive exemptions if you have already taken a similar course in another training programme and/or in another accredited educational institution. In these cases the RPAC procedure is not necessary and you can apply directly through the *Recognition of Acquired Qualifications* (RPAQ) procedure. The difference between the RPAC and RPAQ procedures is explained in chapter 3.

The different institutions of AUGent will gladly assist you in the design of a study programme. This Guide can help to determine whether the recognition of your previously acquired competencies can be part of it.

2 The Purpose of RPAC

The knowledge and the skills required to function in society are changing fast. It is therefore necessary that everyone continues to learn, also long after leaving formal education. Higher education wants to be accessible for students with several years of experience in the field as well as students who decide to continue studies in the same, a related, or even a completely

different field. The intention of the RPAC is to recognise the value of prior learning and use this to optimise (i.e. usually shorten) the study duration. RPAC can thereby lower the threshold to continued Higher Education.

Through the RPAC procedure, relevant experience can be recognised as one or more competencies which are specified in a Certificate of Competency. Competencies can be interpreted differently depending on the programme for which an RPAC procedure is started. Especially the extent to which knowledge is part of these competencies varies widely. For example, in academic courses knowledge will be a more important element than in professional training.

It should be kept in mind that these competencies can be achieved in different ways. First, there are competencies which are developed in a real learning environment, for example, training followed at a labour counselling service centre (e.g. Flemish VDAB), an entrepreneurial training (e.g. the SYNTRA network), or a training at a socio-cultural organisation. Second, there are competencies which can also be acquired in a more spontaneous manner. This includes experience acquired in the workplace, as a volunteer, or by means of other activities in daily life. That could include for example, a thorough knowledge of a foreign language due to several years of living abroad, or experience in working with different computer programs. Skills acquired in an official learning environment have the best chance to be recognised, especially if their practical application can be demonstrated.

The RPAC procedure is not an alternative form of examination. If you have acquired certain skills only through self-study without any concrete application, we recommend that you consider an exam contract for this specific part of your course. RPAC is only intended for competencies which you have acquired in practice, or which offer significant application possibilities in a practical situation, and for which you also have the necessary supporting documents.

When selecting the competencies which you wish to have recognised by the Accrediting Body of AUGent, it is recommended to take into account which competencies are relevant for the module for which you would like to get an exemption. Alternatively, these can also be competencies which relate to the entire programme.

The RPAC file must therefore be drawn up on the basis of competencies required for the module and/or competencies required for the whole training programme.

The final result of the RPAC procedure is a certificate confirming these competencies. This document will only be effective for your studies if you request the university (college) to be exempted for all or part of a module or course unit. It is therefore advisable to be selective about the competencies you want to have recognised, and to base your selection on the training objectives.

3 RPAC or RPAQ

As an applicant, you usually have a clear idea of the experience you possess, but the intention is to make this transparent for the assessors. In order to do so, when mapping your skills, i.e. listing your experiences and relating documents, you will need to consider carefully whether the collected information relates to RPAC (Recognition of Previously

Acquired Competencies) or rather to RPAQ (Recognition of Previously Acquired Qualifications).

This is important as the procedure for RPAC differs from that for RPAQ. In practice, this means that all documents (for instance certificates of courses, diplomas from a foreign university, and reports of employers) must be classified according to this subdivision. If you decide that certain documents are suitable for RPAQ, then you must first contact the relevant institution.

3.1 Previously Acquired Competencies (PAC)

According to the Decree on Flexibility in Higher Education, PAC must be understood as 'the entirety of knowledge, insight, skills, and attitudes acquired through learning processes, that are not ratified by study certificates'.

This can involve any number of things: the experience you gained in a company, a computer program you learned to use, a report from your employer which demonstrates that you are very competent in performing statistical analysis, or a course that you have taken at an industrial training centre, to give a few examples.

All these competencies can be recognised via the RPAC procedure if you are able to collect sufficient information to convince the assessors that you have indeed mastered these skills.

3.2 Previously Acquired Qualifications (PAQ)

PAQ is often defined as a 'domestic or foreign study certificate indicating that a formal learning trajectory, whether or not in education, was followed with a positive outcome (this certificate cannot be achieved within the institution and study programme for which the applicant wishes to use the qualification)'.

This includes, for example, diplomas or certificates obtained at a domestic or foreign educational institution or a centre for adult education, at home or abroad. These institutions must be formally recognised as such.

With PAQ, you can directly apply for exemptions. Evidence obtained from non-approved organisations can be included in an RPAC-file.

Summary - the Distinction between RPAC and RPAQ

Answer the following question: 'Was this evidence obtained from a recognised institution (i.e. recognised by the department of education or accrediting body)?'

The following rule of thumb applies:

- The evidence was obtained from a recognised institution: submit as RPAQ;
- The evidence was not obtained from a recognised institution: submit as RPAC.

If you find that certain evidence does not relate to RPAQ, please proceed to the RPAC procedure.

In case of doubt whether or not a certain study programme or training is classified as RPAC or RPAQ, please contact your RPAC counsellor.

4 Do I Qualify?

The RPAC procedure does not impose any requirements regarding the number of years of work experience that you must have, the number of courses attended, or the scope of additional training followed. However, as with regular enrolment in higher education, you will have to comply with the general admission conditions for higher education. These can be found in the education and examination regulations of the specific institution of Ghent University Association in which you hope to enrol.

If you do not comply with these terms and conditions, access to higher education is still possible through the alternative admission procedure. See the brochures *AUGent Alternative Admission Procedure for English Bachelor Programmes of AUGent Institutions*; *Alternative Admission Procedure for Dutch unaware candidates for the School of Arts academic Bachelor Programmes*; or the more general version *Toelatingsonderzoek: Gids voor de Kandidaat* (available only in Dutch).

5 Outcome of an RPAC Procedure

When you have successfully completed an RPAC procedure, you will receive a Certificate of Competency, but not yet an exemption. Possible exemption(s) for certain modules or course units can only be obtained later, on the basis of this certificate of competency. The final approval of an exemption is at the discretion of the department or faculty.

5.1 Certificate of Competency

The Certificate of Competency is the result of a successful completion of the RPAC procedure and is the official proof of your ability in certain areas. It clearly states which competencies are attested by the Accrediting Body of AUGent. Competencies which were not recognised by the competence validation will not be listed on the Certificate.

Validity of the Certificate of Competency

The RPAC regulation refers to validity within an entire association. This means that a Certificate of Competency issued by AUGent will be valid at institutions which are part of the Association: Ghent University, University College Ghent, Artevelde University College Ghent and University College West Flanders. It cannot be guaranteed that institutions outside of the Association will recognise the AUGent Certificate.

Within the context of the AUGent you will be able to use your Certificate of Competency only for the study programme for which the procedure or research is carried out. Competencies are often related to a specific study programme. For example, a competency which was recognised in the context of programme A, does not necessarily result in the same recognition for programme B. If you wish to follow another study programme, you may be able to use your certificate, but often you will have to submit a new application.

In principle, your Certificate of Competency has an unlimited validity within the AUGent.

5.2 Exemption through RPAC

The application for an exemption is not part of the RPAC procedure. You can apply for an exemption on the basis of PAC, but only after completing the RPAC procedure, i.e. after a Certificate of Competency has been issued.

It is the department or faculty that decides which exemption(s) you are granted on the basis of one or more Certificates of Competency. An exemption means that (part of) a module or course unit from your study programme will be deleted from your personal study track. As a result, your study load is reduced. Moreover, no fees are required for the exempted module(s) or course unit(s).

The procedure for obtaining an exemption may vary by institution and sometimes even by study programme. Please consult the institution at which you wish to enrol.

6 Components of the Procedure

The RPAC procedure consists of five components. Completing the procedure will hopefully lead to a partial or full recognition of your competencies.

The components are the following:

1. Guidance
2. Registration
3. Competency assessment
4. Recognition
5. Follow-up.

7 Guidance

This component is strongly recommended, but it is not obligatory.

The central person with whom you will establish contact during this phase is the RPAC counsellor who is connected to the relevant institution or study programme.

Role of the Counsellor

The counsellor can support you by:

- Clarifying the procedure, based on the information from the RPAC-Guide.
Which steps will you have to go through? Which information will you need to collect? What is the result of the procedure? How long will it take?
- Informing you about the procedure.
*The counsellor will inform you about the various methods that can be used during the competencies assessment.
The mandated person has a list of which technique(s) must be applied to each competency: for certain competencies the portfolio must be supplemented by a reflection file, practical test, and/or competence-based interview.*
- Helping you to determine if an RPAQ procedure is possible.
Can I use my study certificate to start an RPAQ procedure?
- Giving advice on the composition of a portfolio.
A manual is available for the composition of the portfolio. Any additional questions can be answered by the counsellor.
- Providing information on the procedure for the entrance examination in case of deviating or additional conditions of admission.
- Providing information on the procedure for obtaining exemptions, or referring you to the appropriate office.
If you still want to start an RPAQ procedure, or if you have obtained your certificate of competency and you wish to apply for an exemption, then the counsellor can help you.

Guidance can be especially relevant at the beginning of the procedure, but it can also play an important role later on. During the procedure, however, the counsellor will only be able to tell you in which stage the file is.

Remember, you are solely responsible for your portfolio:

- The counsellor will not take any decisions in your place.
The counsellor gives advice which you may or may not follow. You remain personally responsible. The advice of the counsellor is not in itself a sufficient argument in a possible appeal.
- Do not expect the counsellor to compose your portfolio.
The counsellor is not a tutor or teacher who guides you through a learning process. The counsellor only assists you to map the competencies you already have so that the assessors can make a proper judgement. Do not expect the counsellor to gather evidence for you.
- It is not the duty of the counsellor to edit your texts (regarding form or content).
- Do not expect the counsellor to predict whether the competencies will be recognised or not.
The conversations with the counsellor will be mostly of an advisory nature. The

counsellor may indicate whether your learning and working experiences are relevant in the light of the assessment standards of a particular module, but this should not be interpreted as part of the decision.

The counsellor will help you as much as possible to have your skills competencies recognised, but will not make the final decision and will not be contacted by the assessors.

A counsellor is generally well informed about past RPAC files, but cannot influence the assessors' decision.

8 Registration

Registration is mandatory. Please proceed in accordance with the practical arrangements of the relevant institution. Usually, you must register in person. Further information can be found on the website of the institution.

At the first meeting, you will be given all information on the procedure; if necessary an RPAC guide and/or format for the portfolio will be provided. You will have to submit an application file consisting of two pre-structured documents:

- *An RPAC application form (RPAC/CAND/2)* to be completed with
 - Personal information;
 - The study programme for which you want to start the procedure;
 - The documents which prove that you meet the admission conditions;
 - The competencies which you want to have recognised.

- *Your portfolio (RPAC/CAND/3).*

The registration becomes official only after payment of the fees has been confirmed.

From the moment you register, you enter into a contractual obligation or agreement with the Association, and your application will be included in a registry.

Next the procedure is started. Within six weeks of the registration or the first deadline (if applicable) following your registration,¹ you will receive a message the competencies for which you will receive a Certificate of Competency.

You can submit your application on any working day during the academic year.

¹ Academic year 2016-2017:

- **Howest:** 2 deadlines on 30 April and 30 November;
- **HoGent:** 3 deadlines on each first Wednesday following resp. Easter holiday, the 15th of August and Christmas holiday;
- **Artevelde HS** and **UGent:** no deadlines.

Starting from the academic year 2017-2018 all institutions will have deadlines on 1 April and 1 November.

9 Competency Assessment

The competency assessment is a mandatory part of the procedure which follows the registration phase.

This assessment forms the core of the RPAC procedure. The competencies which have been indicated on the registration form are examined to establish whether they can be recognised. The assessors will decide if the documents and evidence in your portfolio sufficiently demonstrate that you have mastered the relevant competencies.

9.1 Methods

To investigate your application the assessors will examine your portfolio based on the requested competencies and possibly apply one or more of the following methods: reflection file, competency-based interview, or capability test.

9.1.1 The Portfolio

The portfolio is the main document of your application. It is the opportunity for you to provide evidence of your competencies. For every competency you claim, you are asked to give an overview of your learning and working experiences: which skills have you effectively mastered? In short, you must compile a folder of evidence (for instance evaluation reports, models, papers, training certificates not related to RPAQ) which will demonstrate that you have sufficient relevant experience regarding the different competences.

How to Create a Portfolio

A template is available for the portfolio, and also for a possible additional reflection file (see 9.1.2).

In RPAC/CAND/3 you can find the list of documents you need for the composition of your portfolio, as well as instructions and tips. Please contact the institutional counsellor (see list at the end of this document) to request this document.

Transfer

The portfolio is to be transferred to the department or faculty either

- in three hard copies, one including the original documents, delivered directly to the institution in person or by post; or
- electronically (if allowed by the department or faculty).

The method depends on the institution of your choice.

Portfolio Assessment

At least two assessors will give their independent opinion on each of your competencies. The assessors are experts on the contents of the study programme. They work either in the

professional field or at the department. They will determine the value of the documents which you have submitted.

Several assessors may be involved in the process, especially if you have applied for the recognition of multiple competencies.

During the assessment of the portfolio, the assessors do not exchange information. They each make a report of the analysis they have conducted. Only in case of doubt or differences in conclusions will there be a consultation to establish consensus.

First, the evidence will be checked for authenticity and relevance. Documents that do not meet the standards will no longer be included in the procedure and will not be considered by the assessors. Two other criteria, variety and quantity, apply to the whole set of evidence. More information about the criteria can be found in the document RPAC/CAND/3.

9.1.2 The Reflection File

You may be asked to add a reflection file to the portfolio to prove certain competencies. In this reflection file you must demonstrate that you are able to connect what you have learned through (work) experience with the requirements of the study programme for that competency.

A template of the reflection file is available.

9.1.3 The Competency-based Interview

Certain skills cannot be judged on the basis of a portfolio as it is difficult to demonstrate them solely on the basis of a document, description, report, or artistic object. These competencies need to be demonstrated in a different way.

The competency-based interview is should be viewed as an addition to and/or elaboration of the portfolio.

During the interview, the assessor will question you about your skills in a structured way, based on the information you provided in the portfolio. You are not meant to add any new arguments or evidence. Although it is possible to expand on your skills, the basic information should be present in the portfolio.

You will be asked for concrete examples to illustrate you have mastered the skills. The intention is to create a specific and accurate picture of the nature of your competencies.

You can only prepare for the competency-based interview by rereading the portfolio and by thinking about possible questions the assessors may ask to determine whether you really have mastered the skills you indicated. The interview will be conducted by at least two assessors.

9.1.4 The Capability Test

The Capability Test may take a variety of formats, depending on your competency: for example, it may be a simulation assignment, a case study, or a knowledge test.

For some modules it is more likely that you will be required to take such a test, for example to demonstrate that you have mastered the skills required to run an experiment or to perform a medical act.

The capability test is not an examination on the objectives of a module or course unit. It is intended to investigate to what extent you can effectively perform the competencies described in your portfolio (if possible in a realistic situation).

Be aware that regardless of the possibility of a test, the portfolio should still include some evidence for each of the competencies for which you need to pass a capacity test. A capability test will only be organised if the portfolio demonstrate that you may possess the required competency.

9.2 Course of the Competency Analysis

The competence analysis can be subdivided into two steps:

- Portfolio
Within the context of the AUGent procedures, all candidates submit a portfolio.
- The portfolio can be supplemented by one of the following techniques: a reflection file, a competency-based interview, or a capability test. The mandated body or person (MIP) determines which assessment method should be applied for every competence and then informs the counsellor. If different forms of assessment are suggested and the assessors do not come to an agreement, an additional form of assessment will be put forward. Usually this additional assessment is determined in advance by the MIP, independent of the individual file.

9.3 Result of the Competency Assessment

On the basis of the performed assessment, one of the following decisions is made:

- It is sufficiently demonstrated that the applicant has mastered the competency: the competence is recognised.
- It is not sufficiently demonstrated: the competency is not recognised.

The mandated body or person (MIP presents a report that provides an overview of all examined competencies with the indication whether they are recognised. In case of a negative result, brief feedback will be provided. Additionally, this report will state the assessment method(s) for every competency.

10 Recognition

Recognition of your competencies consists of the issue of a certificate on behalf of the relevant recognised institution.

This means that the formal Certificate of Competency and the report of the MIP are not the same. The report is a list of all competencies for which you started the RPAC-procedure, and states whether they have been recognised. The Certificate of Competency is an official document: it is the final document of the RPAC procedure and includes a list of the recognised competencies.

Within six weeks of the start of the process, you will receive a message stating which competencies have been recognised and a copy of the report from the MIP. If applicable, you will be invited to collect the Certificate of Competency in person.

After obtaining a Certificate of Competency, you can contact the institution at which you have enrolled, and apply for exemptions.

11 Costs

The following table shows the cost of an RPAC procedure in a number of different situations. In most cases, the cost amounts to €155 euro: €55 in administrative costs and €100 for the competency assessment. This amount must be paid in the registration phase. Be advised that payment of the fee does not guarantee recognition of the competencies for which you have applied.

RPAC-procedure	Fee
1. Recognition of a number of competencies for a Bachelor's and/or a Master's programme	€155
2. Recognition of all competences for a Bachelor's programme	€590
3. Recognition of all competences for a Master's programme (without underlying Bachelor's degree)	€770
4. Recognition of all competences of a Master's programme with a relevant Bachelor's degree (leading to immediate access to the Master's programme)	€350

12 Appealing the RPAC Procedure

If you do not agree with the decision regarding the recognition of your competencies and you think you have justifiable grounds, you can appeal to the Accrediting Body.

Please first contact the RPAC counsellor. They will be able to give you more detailed information on the content of the Certificate of Competency, the report, and the progress of your RPAC procedure.

If after a consultation with your RPAC counsellor you are still convinced that the procedure was not carried out properly, you can consider lodging an appeal. It is important to note here that there is a strict deadline for this action. Your letter of appeal to the Secretary of the Accrediting Body of AUGent must be sent no later than seven calendar days after your receipt of the results. Please address this letter to AUGent, Jozef Kluyskensstraat 29, 9000 Ghent. The letter must be sent by registered mail, or submitted in person.

The Secretary of the Accrediting Body examines the admissibility/validity of the appeal. They can contact the appellant if the motivation for the appeal is insufficiently clear. If appropriate, they can also contact the counsellor, the assessors and/or other relevant persons.

Within two weeks you will receive a written confirmation (usually by email), stating whether your appeal meets the requirements. If this is the case, then action will be taken by the higher education institution.

If the appeal is granted, the Secretary will request the assessors to deliberate again, taking into account any additional information provided by the appellant.

The assessors may decide to:

- Revise their earlier decision and recognise the competencies;
- Reject the application for recognition;
- In case of doubt, invite the applicant to perform certain parts of the competency assessment for a second time. In this case, a second deliberation of the assessors is necessary to reach a final verdict. As a result, the decision deadline will be suspended.

All registered internal appeals lead either to a confirmation of the original decision or to a revision.

The decision is executed by the institution to which the RPAC-application has been submitted.

The entire appeal procedure must be completed within twenty-one calendar days after the appeal is granted. This period may be extended if there is a reasonable cause. In that event you will be notified.

It is not allowed to submit an adapted portfolio in case of an appeal procedure. The appeal is treated on the basis of the original portfolio.

Each candidate can request that an observer be present at one of the stages of the appeal procedure. It is up to the Validating Body to determine whom it appoints. Usually this is one of the members of the Accrediting Body or the Secretary, and always someone who can act independently.

If you do not agree with the way your complaint was handled, you can submit the file to the Council for Disputes Concerning Decisions on Study Progress ('Raad voor Betwistingen inzake Studievoortgangsbeslissingen').²

Further information: <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/raad/default.htm>

As exemptions on the basis of RPAC are not part of this procedure, an appeal against the decision of the department or faculty regarding exemptions should not be addressed to this body.

² Raad voor Betwistingen inzake Studievoortgangsbeslissingen, Hendrik Consciencegebouw 7 A, Koning Albert II-laan 15, 1210 Brussel

13 Final Considerations

The concept of 'Recognition of Previously Acquired Competencies' has a wide range of applications. In Flanders, there are RPAC initiatives aimed at specific professional groups and other RPAC procedures will undoubtedly emerge in the future. RPAC as described in this Guide only relates to the competencies and objectives that are common to Flemish higher education at the university colleges and universities. This Guide is primarily intended for applicants who have already enrolled as a student or plan to do so.

RPAC in higher education is the responsibility of the associations, but the assessment is carried out by the departments or faculties. The Accrediting Body, however, strives to guarantee a uniform standard of quality for the procedures.

The RPAC regulations are constantly evolving. This RPAC Guide can therefore only be used for a limited period. The RPAC counsellors, however, are well-informed about the most recent developments and will therefore be able to advise you.

The partner institutions of the AUGent are looking forward to welcoming you as a student. We are convinced that your experience can be a valuable asset to our learning community.

14 Contact

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