

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)
in the University Sector:
Policies, case studies and issues arising

FIN

*The University Sector
Framework
Implementation
Network (FIN)*

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CONTENTS

Preface		5
Introduction		6
PART 1:	LIFELONG LEARNING: POLICY AND CONTEXT	11
PART 2:	RPL: NATIONAL POLICIES AND PRINCIPLES and THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT	25
PART 3:	RPL IN THE IRISH UNIVERSITY SECTOR: CASE STUDIES	31
	• Trinity College Dublin: Diploma in Addiction Studies, Special Purpose Award, NFQ Level 7	33
	• National University of Ireland, Galway: The School of Nursing and Midwifery	38
	• University of Limerick: Master of Business Studies in International Entrepreneurship Management, NFQ Level 9	44
	• Reflection on RPL Experience in the National College of Art and Design	50
PART 4:	ISSUES ARISING IN RPL: POLICY AND PRACTICE, AND SOME PRINCIPLES FOR CONSIDERATION	53
PART 5:	RESOURCES	59
PART 6:	APPENDICES	65
	Appendix 1: Case Study 1: Diploma in Addiction Studies – Course Aims	66
	Appendix 2: National University of Ireland, Galway Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Policy and Practice	67
	Appendix 3: Case Study Participants	72
	Appendix 4: University-Sector Framework Implementation Network Members	73
PART 7:	GLOSSARY OF TERMS	75

P R E F A C E

The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) was launched in October 2003. It is designed to accommodate school, further and higher education and training awards across its ten levels. The breadth of its scope results in a central point of reference, nationally and internationally, for the comparison, contrast and recognition of qualifications. Its ultimate purpose is to place the learner at the centre of education and training.

The implementation of the NFQ provides a series of challenges for, amongst others, programme designers, lecturers, education providers, and awarding bodies. The university sector Framework Implementation Network (FIN) was established so that practitioners in higher education could discuss and propose some approaches to these challenges, and communicate these to their colleagues across higher education for consideration. The following report represents the outcomes from this collaborative exercise. It focuses on the recognition of prior learning (RPL); an increasingly important aspect of lifelong learning in the university sector in Ireland and abroad.

The Irish Universities Association (IUA) and the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQA) would like to take this opportunity to thank the members of FIN, nominated by the universities and their linked colleges, for their contribution to this project and their commitment to the purpose and activities of FIN.

On behalf of the network, we would like to acknowledge again the role of Professor John Scattergood, Trinity College Dublin. Professor Scattergood has sustained his high level of commitment to the network's activities since becoming Chair in 2007. His enthusiasm for the subject of this document has extended to all network members.

Electronic versions of this report and other FIN outputs, as well as details on the network's membership and activities, are all available at www.nfqnetwork.ie



INTRODUCTION

Contemplating the rapidly changing face of international education in recent years, an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) team of investigators writes as follows:

Many countries in the world are investigating or developing ways to raise awareness to the fact that people learn always and everywhere and formal education is only one of the many learning pathways available. While formal education has formed the backbone of what are becoming known as knowledge societies, the importance of harnessing the full range of available skills and knowledge is being increasingly appreciated. Evidence suggests that countries see advantages for individuals, communities, enterprises and the economy in recognizing this informal and non-formal learning (2008, 208).

This is an accurate observation: lifelong learning is high on everybody's agenda and the recognition of prior learning (RPL), including the recognition of prior experiential learning (RPL) has come to the fore as a relevant and contingent contemporary issue, particularly in relation to the enhancement of the capabilities of the workforce. Another OECD team, in a 'Country Note' referring specifically to Ireland recommends attention be given, in the context of RPL, to the raising of educational standards at all levels, up-skilling the workforce in general, but particularly the low-skilled and low-educated, increasing participation rates in the workforce by groups such as immigrants, older people and women, and redirecting the workforce to greater employment opportunities by diversifying skills.¹

Though these ideas are narrowly focused and appropriately geared to the economic brief of those who set them out, they do, nevertheless, represent a version of what is becoming part of the conventional wisdom, part of the upgrading and enhancement of RPL in the educational world. But, as the OECD team recognised, there are barriers to the provision and implementation of RPL. Some are systemic. Higher education institutions value the integrity of their programmes, the coherent intellectual training they provide, the way in which courses account for subjects in holistic ways, and the conceptualisation of this knowledge in larger academic, social and cultural paradigms. Higher education providers are mainly geared to dealing with certified learning, which is easily understandable and quantifiable, and informal and non-formal learning, which tends to be fragmented and random, is unlikely to enjoy the same parity of esteem either for access to, or for credit towards, course abridgement. There is also a high cost in terms of time and money involved in the assessment of candidates who present informal or non-formal profiles for entry to courses.² Other barriers relate to the individual applicants themselves who may not recognise the potential value or the potential benefits of the knowledge and skills gained through informal or non-formal routes. Or they may not know how to access recognition systems. Or they may have had negative experiences in relation to formal education and be diffident or reluctant to re-engage with such systems because of fear of failure. Those who can negotiate their way easily and confidently through qualifications frameworks and admissions processes are usually in the system already. For those outside the formal systems, accessing what may be beneficial to them can be a daunting prospect, unless they receive advice and guidance.³

And yet, as is demonstrated copiously in the pages of this FIN Handbook which follow, there are numerous courses, at a variety of institutions, which are accessible to students presenting with prior informal or non-formal learning as an acceptable entry route to a qualification or sometimes for credit towards a recognised award. There is no reason, theoretically, why RPL should not apply in relation to any course, but the courses which are most welcoming tend to be practical or vocational, whereby the recognition of prior experiential learning is more congenial and easier to assess. These courses do not

¹ See Harold, A., Taguma, M. and Hagens, K. (2008) *Thematic Review and Collaborative Policy Analysis: Recognition of Non-Formal and Informal Learning. Ireland, Country Note*. Paris: OECD, p. 64-65: www.nqai.ie/documents/finalcountrynote1.pdf. (Accessed 24 August 2011)

² This theme is repeated throughout the case studies set out in Section 3 of this Handbook: RPL in the Irish University Sector, p.53

³ For a discussion on issues around, and barriers to, RPL, please see Section 4 of this Handbook: Issues Arising, p.53

always take their origins from nationwide or governmental initiatives, but are often rooted in local communities, local organisations, specific professions or industries. These courses usually develop where a particular need has been identified and where local educational providers have been prepared to modify their structures or devise something new to address that need. There is a considerable degree of local or regional self-help involved here, and the education provided is none the worse for that. As our case studies show, these courses are often sustained by a massive personal commitment on the part of many individuals and a justifiable local pride.

Of course, European and national educational bodies have, quite properly, involved themselves in the whole issue of lifelong learning and RPL– issuing guidelines and making suggestions for best practice, usually in an enabling and non-coercive manner. And some of these suggestions are described and discussed in what follows.⁴ Particularly important for Ireland was the publication in 2005 of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI)'s *Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning in Further and Higher Education and Training*⁵ – a forbidding and literalistic title which somewhat belies the nature of some of its content. Behind the spare, official language there is a vibrant commitment to the enhancement of the lifelong learning process:

Learning occurs in many contexts which include work, involvement in social and community activities, or learning through life experience generally. In order to enable the individual to learn throughout life, equal value should be given to all these forms of learning regardless of source, how it is achieved and when in life it is achieved (NQAI, 2005; 2).⁶

The document goes on to commit itself to “supporting the development of alternative pathways to qualifications (or awards)” and to “a process by which prior learning is given a value”. (p. 2)

The recognition of prior learning, informal or non-formal, involves identifying its nature and range, assessing it, acknowledging it and giving it a value in relation to formal learning. Critical to this exercise in Ireland was the establishment in 2003 of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) with its precise and detailed definition of ten levels, with their accompanying descriptors in terms of knowledge, skills and competences. But equally important is the system of learning outcomes, at programme and module level, which is being put in place throughout the higher education sector. Learning outcomes, definitions of what a student will know or be able to do after a specified period of learning, can enable individuals to measure their informal or non-formal learning against more formal qualifications. Learning outcomes provide ways of talking about what learning means and how it is valued, without an automatic recourse to certification. It is clear, from some of the testimonies which follow, that learning outcomes, on which the FIN group reported in an earlier document,⁷ are crucial to the assessment of prior learning: where the learning is not certified they are the appropriate medium through which it can be assessed.

There is fairly general agreement as to what areas the assessment of informal and non-formal learning applies:

- access, or entry to a programme which leads to a formally certified award;
- credit towards an award, or exemption from some course requirements, or abridgement of a course; and
- eligibility for a full award without additional coursework or assessment.

⁴ See in particular Catherine Maunsell's presentation in Section 1, Lifelong Learning: Policy and Context (p 13-15) and Section 2, RPL: National Policies and Principles and the International Context (p. 3)

⁵ For a fuller discussion of the *Principles and Operational Guidelines*, please see Section 2 pp 13-15

⁶ Available from: www.nqai.ie/publication_jun2005.html (Accessed 24 August 2011)

⁷ University-sector Framework Implementation Network (2010) *University Awards and the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ): Issues around the Design of Programmes and the Use and Assessment of Learning Outcomes* NQAI and IUA: www.nfqnetwork.ie/A_Guide_to_designing_UNiversity_Awards_for_Inclusion_in_the_National_Framework_of_Qualifications/Default.132.html (Accessed 24 August 2011)

By far the most frequent situation in which RPL applies is the first, for access or entry to a course. This has been the traditional route into formal learning for generations of mature students, or 'second-chance' applicants, though some more formal entry paths, such as the Trinity College Dublin Access Programme, have been instituted. Often, in these cases, a mixture of [formal and non-formal] qualifications and learning experiences are presented, but the formal qualifications would not in themselves be adequate for entry. This area is relatively unproblematic: interviews are often used to ascertain the suitability of applicants and to provide advice in an open and individual way. Conversely, educational providers sometimes react with some caution to applications for credits, exemptions or course abridgement.⁸ This is understandable: individual programmes and the modules of which they are comprised are usually quite distinctive and exemptions, if awarded, might disadvantage a student in future years. There is also a tendency to limit the number of exemptions, and the extent of course abridgement allowed is usually not more than 50%: quite understandably if institutions make an award they want to be certain that the recipient has done a substantial amount of their own distinctive courses. It is difficult to imagine that the third category – a full award – would occur very often: one can, however, imagine, for example, a local amateur historian publishing significant research over several years which might cumulatively qualify him or her for a postgraduate award. But, rare though its occurrence may be, the possibility of this sort of award for non-formal or informal learning is a salutary reminder that not all learning takes place in higher education institutions, and that significant learning can flow inwards towards the academy, as well as outwards from it.

Whatever the level, though, there is general agreement that there has to be a process – transparent and clear, impartial, stringent but enabling – by which applicants offering informal or non-formal learning for entry to courses or for awards can be assessed. The NQAI (2005) has suggested a set of principles which educational providers should observe when dealing with the recognition of prior and experiential learning. These include a commitment to value all learning, no matter how it is achieved, to recognise that this learning may provide opportunities for access, transfer and progression towards the achievement of an educational award, and a principle that prior learning procedures should be fully integrated within the quality assurance procedures of educational providers. It is also suggested that clear statements of the policies, processes and operational practices of the educational providers for RPL should be available to applicants and assessors, that the assessment criteria should be explicit and applied consistently and fairly, and that guidance and support should be available to all applicants. A number of institutions have responded to this and devised codes of practice: as an example, that developed at the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) is particularly detailed and comprehensive.⁹

But it is clear, from the example given in this report from the National University of Ireland, Galway, (NUIG),¹⁰ that local practice within a particular institution is likely to have considerable influence on the general institutional criteria which evolve. And this is perhaps inevitable, because applicants offering prior learning, whether formal, non-formal, informal or experiential, either for entry to courses or for credit, are likely to be highly individual in their profiles and so ought to be assessed in areas where there is a high degree of subject-based expertise, that is at the level of schools or departments.¹¹

In the political, social and economic conditions prevailing at the present time – which are particularly challenging and volatile – the recognition of prior and experiential learning and all that goes with it can confer some important tangible benefits. It can support and enhance the social inclusivity for which higher education should stand, because it can facilitate entry to programmes, provide credit and course exemptions and contribute to the achievement of an award. It can meet some of the needs of disadvantaged groups, part-time students, mature students, 'second-chance' learners. It can contribute to the up-skilling of individuals so they may better meet changing workforce needs and enhance their employability. It can assist with staff development within organisations. Or it can simply enhance

⁸ For example, see case studies 1 (Diploma in Addition Studies, Level 7, TCD) and 3 (Master of Business Studies in International Entrepreneurship Management, Level 9, UL), pp 36-37 and pp 44-49.

⁹ See Murphy, A. (2010) *RPL Matters in the DIT: Policy and Practice Guide for Staff*. Dublin Institute of Technology: Dublin. I am grateful to the author for giving me a copy of this valuable institutional document.

¹⁰ Please see p. 38

¹¹ For a set of proposed principles for the policy and practice of RPL in the university sector, please see Section 4 pp 53-58

personal development and individual fulfillment. Much hard work, at both a theoretical and a practical level, has been done on the issues surrounding the recognition of prior learning, but it is still something of a hidden subject: those involved, in their dedicated and unobtrusively modest ways, simply get on with things and let the results, which are impressive, speak for themselves.

It is the purpose of the following pages to bring to light some of the considerable achievements in the university sector, at both a national and a local level, in the area of RPL and to raise general awareness of the issues surrounding them. This Handbook of the university-sector Framework Implementation Network has had particular cognisance of the recent and important work of the CIT-led Education in Employment RPL project [since followed up by the Roadmap for Employment – Academic Partnerships (REAP)]¹² and has addressed issues to support, rather than duplicate it.

Professor John Scattergood

Chair of University Sector
Framework Implementation Network (FIN)

September 2011

¹² Linehan, M. and Sheridan, I. (2009) *Recognition of Prior Learning: A Focus on Practice*. Cork: <http://eine.ie/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/recognition-of-prior-learning-a-focus-on-practice.pdf> (Accessed 24 August 2011). Please also see: <http://eine.ie/>



PART I

LIFELONG LEARNING: POLICY AND CONTEXT

At the outset of 2010, the university-sector Framework Implementation Network initiated a project around the theme of 'lifelong learning', with a particular focus on the recognition of prior learning (RPL). The purpose of the network, which meets approximately four times a year, is to provide a forum for representatives across the universities and from the linked colleges to exchange experience and practice in the implementation of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). As such, the network focused on developing an understanding of current developments in the recognition of prior learning (RPL) as a route to granting admission to, or exemptions from programmes in the university sector in Ireland. This work involved an examination of how lifelong learning has featured in national and European policy and an identification and exploration of the elements that make it a meaningful concept.

At a meeting of the network held on 24 February 2010, a number of speakers made presentations setting out the policy background to lifelong learning, the contexts in which this applies, and the tools that can be used to improve lifelong learning opportunities in these contexts:

- **Dr. Catherine Maunsell, Lecturer in Psychology, St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra:**
Lifelong learning and associated policy objectives (European, national, and institutional);
- **Dr. Jim Murray, National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI):**
How the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) contributes to realising lifelong learning objectives;
- **Tony Donohoe, Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC):**
Lifelong learning and labour-market activation;
- **Declan Courell, Registrar, St. Angela's College, Sligo:**
Lifelong learning and continuing professional development (CPD);
- **Seamus Fox, Dublin City University:**
Lifelong learning and distance education; and
- **Irene Sheridan, Strategic Projects Unit, Cork Institute of Technology (CIT):** Lifelong Learning and the recognition of prior learning (RPL).

These presentations, which combined set out the policy and context for lifelong learning, are set out in an abbreviated form below. Unabbreviated presentations are available from the website of the network.¹³

¹³ Unabbreviated presentations are available at: www.nfqnetwork.ie/Resources/Default.171.html (Accessed 24 August 2011)

DR. CATHERINE MAUNSELL (St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra):

Lifelong learning and associated policy objectives (European, national, and institutional)

Catherine's presentation drew predominantly on the *National Report on Lifelong Learning in Ireland (2008)*,¹⁴ produced as part of the European Commission 6th Framework Research Programme: *Towards a Lifelong Learning Society in Europe: The Contribution of the Education System (LLL2010)*.¹⁵

Catherine provided a broad overview of the emergence of lifelong learning as a concept and policy driver. She outlined some current policy objectives at both a European and national level and identified some persistent challenges within Irish lifelong learning policy and practice:

Introduction to EU Policy Context

- European Council Meeting, Lisbon, March 2000
- Lisbon Objectives/Strategy/Process:
- 'Making Europe the most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion, and respect for the environment by 2010'.
- Invitation to "Member States, the Council and the Commission ... within their areas of competence, to identify coherent strategies and practical measures with a view to fostering lifelong learning for all".
- European Commission's Memorandum on Lifelong Learning (November, 2000).

Implementation of Lisbon Strategy

- Work Programme, "Education and Training 2010" – organised around quality, efficiency, access and openness of education and training systems.
- Annual Reporting Structure – promotes the exchange of information and experiences on good policy practice.
- The Reporting structures allow for analyses of performance and progress of education systems in EU member states (27), candidate countries (3) and associated countries (3) and how they contribute towards meeting Lisbon objectives– based on an agreed set of 16 core indicators and benchmarks.

Lifelong learning is no longer just one aspect of education and training; it must become the guiding principle for provision and participation across the full continuum of learning contexts.

All those living in Europe, without exception, should have equal opportunities to adjust to the demands of social and economic change and to participate actively in the shaping of Europe's future. (European Commission's Memorandum of Lifelong Learning, (November, 2000, p.3).

Some EU benchmarks for 2010

- No more than 10% early school leavers;
- Decrease of at least 20% in the percentage of low-achieving pupils in reading literacy;
- At least 85% of young people should have completed upper secondary education;
- 12.5% of the adult population should participate in lifelong learning.
- The benchmark of an increase in the number of mathematics, science and technology graduates by at least 15% by 2010, while at the same time reducing the gender imbalance (Council, 2003a).
- The objective of investing 2% (up 30%) of GDP in higher education put forward by the Commission (European Commission, 2006c).
- The goal of 3 million Erasmus students by 2012 (Council, 2006c).

The Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training (2009) EU 2020 Strategy

- The four strategic objectives of the framework
- 1. Making lifelong learning and mobility a reality;
- 2. Improving the quality and efficiency of education and training;
- 3. Promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship;
- 4. Enhancing creativity and innovation, including entrepreneurship, at all levels of education and training.

¹⁴ Maunsell, C., Downes, P. & McLoughlin, V. (2008) *National Report on Lifelong Learning Policies in Ireland*. LLL2010 Towards a Lifelong Learning Society: The Contribution of the Education System. Funded by the European Union 6th Framework Programme. Dublin.

¹⁵ For further information, please see: www.LLL2010.tlu.ee (Accessed 24 August 2011)

Working definition of LLL: Consensus around four broad and mutually supporting objectives: personal fulfillment, active citizenship, social inclusion and employability/ adaptability.

"all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective".

- Draws attention to the full range of formal, nonformal and informal learning activity. Member States must fundamentally transform learning systems, with a view to making quality learning opportunities accessible to all on an ongoing basis.

5 EU benchmarks for 2020

- at least 95% of children between 4 years old and the age for starting compulsory primary education should participate in early childhood education
- the share of early leavers from education and training should be less than 10%
- the share of low-achieving 15-years olds in reading, mathematics and science should be less than 15%.
- the share of 30-34 year olds with tertiary educational attainment should be at least 40%
- an average of at least 15 % of adults should participate in lifelong learning

Lifelong Learning in Higher Education Context: The Bologna Process

- Europe has around 4,000 higher education institutions, with over 19 million students and 1.5 million staff.
- Bologna Declaration 1999 – establishing a European area of higher education – part of the broader EU strategy on knowledge economy – curricular, governance and funding reform.
- April 2009 Ministers responsible for higher education met in Leuven/Louvain to establish the priorities for European Higher Education until 2020.
- The importance of lifelong learning, widening access and mobility reiterated.
- Objectives set out by the Bologna Declaration considered still valid today and that the full and proper implementation of the objectives at European, national and institutional level required increased momentum and commitment beyond 2010.
- Bologna Scorecard – Ireland at 4.8/5 – Scoring positively across the three dimensions of degree system, quality and recognition.

Key Competences for Lifelong Learning December 2006 (European Council, 2006a)

- Each citizen will need a wide range of key competences to be able to adapt in a changing and interconnected world.
- Proposed framework consisting of eight competences:
 - (i) communication in the mother tongue;
 - (ii) communication in foreign languages;
 - (iii) mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology;
 - (iv) digital competence;
 - (v) learning to learn;
 - (vi) social and civic competences;
 - (vii) sense of initiative and entrepreneurship; and
 - (viii) cultural awareness and expression.

Lifelong Learning Programme 2007–2013

- European Commission has recently integrated its various educational and training initiatives under a single umbrella.
- Comenius
- Erasmus
- Leonardo Da Vinci
- Grundtvig

LLL within an Irish context

- Historically: strong community-based adult education sector underpinned by high levels of volunteerism.
- A particular characteristic of the Irish context in relation to lifelong learning is the promotion of the interdependence of the objectives of economic development and social inclusion. Thus social forces have always been viewed as key drivers, alongside the economic forces at play, in the promotion of lifelong learning agenda in Ireland.
- The Green Paper on Adult Education (1998) *Education in an Era of Lifelong Learning*: The rationale for investment in adult and community education, as explicated in the Green Paper, was not based '...entirely on economic considerations and issues of disadvantage, but also on the role of learning in creating a more democratic and civilised society by promoting culture, identity and well-being and by strengthening individuals, families and communities' (1998, p16).

White Paper on Adult Education *Learning for Life* (2000).

- The White Paper represents our most significant policy development in adult education/lifelong learning, to date.
- Significantly, the White Paper marks the adoption of lifelong learning as the 'governing principle' of education policy in the Republic of Ireland.
- The lifelong learning agenda has come to be based on three fundamental attributes:
 - It is **lifelong** and therefore concerns everything from the cradle to the grave
 - It is **life-wide** recognising that learning occurs in many different settings
 - It focuses on **learning** rather than limits itself to education (White Paper, *Learning for Life* 2000).

3 core principles of LLL in an Irish context (Learning for Life, 2000, p13)

- A systematic approach requiring that '...educational policies must be designed to embrace the lifecycle, reflect the multiplicity of sites, both formal and informal, in which learning can take place, provide for appropriate supports such as guidance, counselling and childcare and for mechanisms to assess learning...'
- Equality '... of access, participation and outcome for participants in adult education, with proactive strategies to counteract barriers arising from differences of socio-economic status, gender, ethnicity and disability...'
- 'Inter-culturalism inviting the need to frame educational policy and practice in the context of serving a diverse population as opposed to a uniform one, and the development of curricula, materials, training and in-service, modes of assessment and delivery methods which accept such diversity as the norm...'

Influence of Conceptualisations and Drivers on LLL Policy and Practice

- Addressing Social and Educational Inequality: Access and Widening Participation – The needs of marginalized groups are to be addressed explicitly and the role of community education providers in the field of adult education is to be strengthened – acknowledgement of the importance of the community sector (predominantly through non-formal routes) in capacity building of disadvantaged communities.
- Active Citizenship/Social Inclusion/Personal and Community Development Dimensions – core themes are highlighted, namely, that lifelong learning should embrace personal, cultural and social goals as well as economic ones and be seen as promoting collective as well as personal advancement.

The Interface of LLL and Formal Education:

- There is greater recognition that the formal education system in Ireland is fundamental to lifelong learning, rather than a separate set of provisions that precedes it.
- Despite this, there is as yet little evidence of a more fundamental rethinking of this distinct role of formal educational settings which there should be to meet the challenge posed by lifelong and life-wide learning.

Some of the Key National LLL Policy Developments Since Lisbon 2000

- Publication of the White Paper on Adult Education *Learning for Life* (2000)
- Report of the Taskforce on Lifelong Learning (2002)
- Institution of the National Qualifications Framework (2003)
- Establishment of the National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education (2003)
- Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Science Report in Adult Literacy (2006)
- Social Partnership Agreements (*Towards 2016*)
- National Development Plan NDP (2007–2013) *Transforming Ireland- A Better Quality of Life for All*
- Development and Implementation of Tomorrow's Skills: Towards a National Skills Strategy (2007)

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National Report on Lifelong Learning in Ireland Maunsell, Downes and McLoughlin (2008)



- European Commission 6th Framework Research Programme: *Towards a Lifelong Learning Society in Europe: The Contribution of the Education System* (LLL2010) www.LLL2010.tlu.ee
- 'The contribution of the education system to the process of making lifelong learning a reality for all and its role as a potential agent for social integration within Europe'.

DR. JIM MURRAY (National Qualifications Authority of Ireland):

How the NFQ contributes to realising lifelong learning objectives

Speaking on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), Jim remarked that the designation of the NFQ as a *national* framework is a real concept. The ownership of the framework does not lie with the National Qualifications Authority or with any other bodies. It is an instrument designed to help all learners map out their individual learning pathways throughout their lives, and to aid education providers in designing programmes that are accessible and allow for progression amongst a diverse learner community. The topic of lifelong learning is broad, and higher education institutions are in a position to set out their own visions for lifelong learning in the context of their particular missions.

There is an opportunity for higher education institutions to engage creatively with the topics of lifelong learning, but there will also be a number of stumbling blocks to overcome, particularly in relation to developing progression routes and using the different award-types of the NFQ. In doing this the major challenge will be to look beyond narrow institutional concerns, and to seek to contribute to national lifelong learning needs in a collaborative manner.

The NFQ can play a very significant role assisting in this work. The Framework maps our existing education and training awards system. The concept of minor, special purpose or supplemental awards can be further developed and interpreted as a mechanism to offer a wide range of learning opportunities, whether these relate to professional development or adult education. The NFQ envisages a system of automatic progression routes, which are not all in place at the moment. The different sectors of the education and training system, including the university sector, will need to challenge each other to resolve why progression routes are not operating fully, and work specifically to create a common currency of learning outcomes which can facilitate these routes. Traditionally, curriculum has been the driving force behind teaching and learning: to engage with learning outcomes, we need to also engage with curriculum, linking both of these concepts. The necessary move to learning outcomes, will also require a broader community of academics to engage with the topic of learning outcomes at a national level, but also across and within disciplines.

TONY DONOHOE Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC):

Lifelong learning and labour-market activation

Tony commented on the changed context in which the network is discussing lifelong learning: a changed economic perspective has put activation at the top of the political agenda and the education sector needs to develop a flexible supply response to labour-market opportunities. Enhanced links between business and education will be key to delivering learning and producing graduates that can contribute to economic growth areas. He described the IBEC Gradlink pilot scheme¹⁶ as an example of the type of programme that is required to keep graduates connected to employment opportunities. He suggested that government should introduce a scaled-up national graduate work placement scheme which is accredited and underpinned by the architecture of the NFQ.

¹⁶ For further information on the IBEC Gradlink scheme please see: www.ibec.ie/gradlink (Accessed 24 August 2011)

Employment & Skills Outlook

www.ibec.ie IBEC

- Pharma, medical devices, ICT services, globally traded services, environmental industries expected to hold up.
- Particular pressures on construction, print and packaging, primary food, retail, local services, traditional manufacturing, financial services, tourism & leisure
- Multinationals
 - Consolidating, repositioning and evaluating global operations.
 - Success will be measured by job creation and job retention
- Indigenous enterprises
 - Strategic management skills and experience are essential.
 - Niche sectors will perform strongly (life sciences, software, environmental goods & services)
 - May be an increased interest in start-ups
- The need for upgrading skills has not changed – industries still moving on same paths, though maybe not as quickly

Generic skills

www.ibec.ie IBEC

- **Basic skills**
 - literacy, using numbers, using technology, digital skills
- **People-related skills**
 - communication, interpersonal, team working, customer-service skills, languages
- **Conceptual & organisational skills**
 - Learning-to learn, collecting & organising information, problem –solving, planning & organising, learning-to-learn skills, innovation & creativity, systems thinking

Science/Technology, Engineering & Mathematics

www.ibec.ie IBEC

- Demand for certain high-skilled and 'experienced' people exists even in a less buoyant labour market
- There is and will be significant future demand for a wide range of STEM occupations – drivers of economic growth
- From an enterprise perspective, 'education and skills' is a key part of Ireland's enterprise value proposition to foreign direct investors
- High level mathematical skills are required in several key occupations in both manufacturing and services
- Engineering skills critical

Arts, Humanities, Business and Social Sciences

www.ibec.ie IBEC

- Underpin sectors such as finance, business, legal, communications, cultural, tourist & education & social services
- Knowledge of foreign languages & understanding of world cultures can be an asset to any exporting enterprise
- Understanding of consumer and natural behaviours
- Hybrid and Blended Skills
- Linking with the Natural Sciences
- Entrepreneurship

Key areas for discussion

www.ibec.ie IBEC

- Accredited National Graduate Internship Scheme
- Systematic and coordinated interaction between business and education
- Need for continuous alignment of education with skills needs
- Business involvement in development and revision of course curricula
- Using the Framework to stimulate cross-disciplinary work
- Stimulate creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship
 - project work
 - problem and inquiry based learning

Key areas for discussion – upskilling/reskilling


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- Timing of course delivery
- Introduction of modularisation, distance learning and CPD programmes
- Modules that require specific learning (e.g. software engineers that require entrepreneurial skills)
- Availability of part-time and evening learning
- Recognition of Prior Learning

DECLAN COURELL (St. Angela's College, Sligo):

Lifelong learning and continuing professional development

Declan spoke with reference to Kelly (2003)¹⁷, and what she says about the lifelong learning landscape i.e. that students no longer exclusively study full-time or are solely focused on education; lifelong learning is not necessarily based in a particular location at a particular time and that flexible and modular approaches are necessary; and it is recognised that learners themselves bring knowledge and competencies to education and training. He discussed the factors - political, economic social, technological, environmental and legal - influencing lifelong learning policies and practices within institutions, with particular reference to the experience of St. Angela's College.




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Coláiste San Angael


Dr. Diana K. Kelly (2003): **Lifelong Learning: A New Learning Paradigm**. In: **NITL News**: National Institute of Transport and Logistics, Spring, 2003 DIT

This paradigm recognises that today's higher education students are rarely full-time students who are completely focused only on education.

Both younger students and adults are now more likely to have blended life patterns and multiple life roles. They must fit education into their busy lives, and higher education must be structured to facilitate this.



www.stangelas.nuigalway.ie




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Coláiste San Angael

Second, this model uses an andragogical approach to learning and teaching (Knowles, 1984) to encourage learners to become more self-directed in their learning.


This is an approach which is quite different from traditional pedagogical approaches in which the teacher is in the role of "expert," lecturing to students who are assumed to have little or no prior knowledge of the subject. Constructivist learning methods, including Experiential Learning and Problem Based Learning, form the foundation for an andragogical approach to curriculum design and the learning and teaching process.

Third, a traditional model of higher education is classroom based, and a Lifelong Learning Model is "anytime - anywhere," based on multiple locations and multiple modes of learning which conveniently meet the needs and learning preferences of potential students.

Online learning, face-to face learning, individual tutorial sessions, work-based learning, self-paced learning, computer-based learning, and combinations of these are used to provide a variety of modes which enhance learning.



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Fourth, this model acknowledges a variety of skills and competencies that learners bring, in addition to the traditional formal qualifications earned upon completion of secondary school.


Assessment of Prior (Experiential) Learning takes into account the life experiences and other educational experiences that are valuable to the background of incoming learners.

Fifth, the Lifelong Learning Model recognises that each person has individual learning goals and needs, and offers ways for the learner to design a course or programme to suit these needs.

A traditional institution has a more highly structured approach in which learners must complete the course or programme without any choices or areas which may be emphasised.



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Sixth, the Lifelong Learning Model is flexible, with a modular approach and year-round scheduling so that entry to a course or module is possible at many points throughout the year.


Multiple options for scheduling, location, and modes of learning are provided for greater flexibility. This is very different from the traditional model in which there is typically one entry point in September, and often one timetable and location for the course.

Finally the Lifelong Learning Model provides services needed by adults, including career and academic advisement prior to enrolment, assistance with financing education, assistance with childcare and transportation, opportunities to brush up on academic skills as needed prior to the course, and learning support while participating in higher education.



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Influences on Engagement with Lifelong Learning




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Political Factors

- Funding Student Assistance Fund
- Small colleges – students disadvantage
- Academics Staff willingness to be flexible and to engage in e-learning
- APL and APEL
- "World has become a small place" - Competition from larger institutions that can have "loss leaders"


Economic factors

- Free fees Undergraduate programmes – not postgraduate
- Student Welfare Issues
- No "tax relief" for standalone modules
- Flexible payment methods
- Reduction in funding for professional development of 'Civil Servants'



Department name

Influences on Engagement with Lifelong Learning




St. Angela's College, Sligo
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Social Factors

- Unemployment
- Retirement Age
- Gender
- Learning Support
- Education background

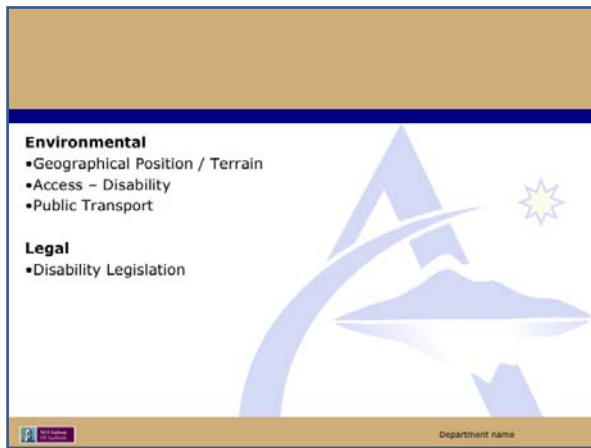
Technological factors

- Blended Learning – Authenticity
- Broadband Availability
- Students ICT competence
- Tracking Students – MIS Move towards lifelong learning within institutions and between institutions
- Tracking of APEL – Cashing in multiple APL



Department name

¹⁷ Kelly, D. (2003) Lifelong Learning: A New Learning Paradigm. IN: *NITL News*: National Institute of Transport and Logistics, Spring, 2003, Dublin Institute of Technology, Dublin.



“Under the “Learning Paradigm,” the emphasis is on learning rather than instruction. Greater flexibility, more individualisation (rather than institutionalisation), and a focus on learners and learning (rather than teachers and teaching) are the main attributes of the Learning Paradigm”.

Diana K. Kelly. ***Lifelong Learning: A New Learning Paradigm***. In: ***NITL News***: National Institute of Transport and Logistics, Spring, 2003, DIT.


SEAMUS FOX (DUBLIN CITY UNIVERSITY):

Lifelong learning and distance education

Seamus began his presentation by outlining a range of technologies which are greatly improving the quality and versatility of distance learning. Within the context of lifelong learning, the use of online technologies means learning can be accessed by a large range of learners and be tailored to specific needs. There has been an exponential growth in online programmes especially in North America and Australia.

The same level of growth has not yet been seen in Ireland despite the quantifiable pent-up demand. He posited that the main reason for this is that higher education funding mechanisms discriminate against part-time learners, in general, and distance learners, in particular. Another reason, he argued, is the institutional structure of Irish higher education. In terms of undergraduate study, Irish higher education is currently focused primarily on the secondary school leaving cohort. Seamus detailed a number of organisational and cultural changes which would be required to ensure Irish higher education fully embraces lifelong learning.


Lifelong Learning



- Portmanteau Term
- Education and Training
- Education
 - Educational Disadvantaged
 - Personal interest/'Folk' Colleges
 - People with Disabilities
 - Upskilling of workforce
 - Mature Students/'Second Chance'

FIN -24Feb2010 1


Technologies



- Distance Education & Technologies**
 - Correspondence
 - Broadcast
 - Multimedia (Text, Video, Audio, CBL)
 - Telelearning (Audio & Video Conf)
 - Resources & Asynchronous CMC
 - Synchronous & Asynchronous CMC
 - [Immersive?]
- Online Technologies**
 - Paper - The eLearning Technologies
 - Large Number of Technologies & Growing
 - History of Technology in Education
 - Beware Hype of 'Latest Fad'
 - Three Key Technologies
 - Online Journal Databases
 - Virtual Learning Environments
 - Synchronous Web Conferencing
 - Online Administration

FIN -24Feb2010 2

Growth of Online Education




- United States
 - Over 800 colleges offering at least one fully online UG programmes
 - Almost 600 colleges offering at least one fully online PG programme
 - Almost 4m students taking at least one fully online course
- Australia - dual mode embedded?
- Canada - Athabasca & large providers

Reasons for Growth

- Rising Cost of Higher Education
- Traditional HE Highly Inflexible ("Corralled Education")
- Online/Distance Education
 - Time
 - Place
 - Workload/Credits
 - Equivalence of Awards
- Fits Adult Work/Family Commitments

FIN -24Feb2010 3


Rhetoric



- OECD (2006): Equity of Access, Lifelong Learning
- HEA's Strategic Plan(2008): Flexibility, P/T, Distance Learning
- National Access Plan (2008): Mature Students
- Smart Economy (2009): Flexible Learning for Upskilling

FIN -24Feb2010 4

Ireland



- Population (Total) – 4,239,848 Population (15+) – 3,375,399
- F/T Education Ceased – 2,850,333
- No Third-level Qualification – 1,890,994
- Upper 2ndry Highest – 803,498
- Upper 2ndry (20 to 44) – 477,841
- At University/3rd Level – 349,596
- Policy Anomaly (Source: CSO 2006)


Who are they?

- Highest Upper Secondary (2006)
 - Employers/Managers/Professionals – 22%
 - Non-manual & Manual Workers – 63%
- Entrants Higher Education (2004)
 - Employers/Managers/Professionals – 41%
 - Non-manual & Manual Workers – 30%

Sources: CSO 2006 & O'Connell et al 2006

FIN -24Feb2010 5

Government Funding of Students on Level 8 Courses – Universities




	Core 'RGAM'	Pay Fees
Full/Time	Y	Y
Part/Time	Y [FTE]	N
Distance Education	N	N

"Socialism for the rich, capitalism for the poor" G Vidal

FIN -24Feb2010 6


University Sector



	Full Time U/G	Part Time U/G
2008/9 (P)	70,802	6,705
2007/8	70,464	8,016
2006/7	68,039	8,506
2005/6	66,834	8,742
2004/5	65,300	9,727

FIN -24Feb2010 7

Barriers



Funding mechanisms are undermining (rhetorical?) policy objective of promoting lifelong learning.


Exception – Labour Market Activation Scheme

Other Barriers

- Institutional structure of Irish Universities
- Incentive systems
- Scepticism about fully online & reluctance to move/change face to face model
- Academic cultures which adapt online T&L technologies to replicate/support existing pedagogies, not to disrupt them
- Requires policy drivers

FIN -24Feb2010 8


Cultural Change



- Status of Teaching
- Move of Full-time Staff to Academic Manager role
- Focus on Assessment & Quality Assurance
- Highly Trained 'Adjunct' Staff
- Incorporation of eLearning (Admin, Library, etc as well as Teaching)

FIN -24Feb2010 9

Conclusions



- Lifelong Learning – Portmanteau
- Focus on 'nearly readies' & high-level upskilling
- Online education highly appropriate for these groups
- Need to (1) Change funding policies and (2) Change culture of HEIs

FIN -24Feb2010 10

IRENE SHERIDAN (CORK INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY):

Lifelong learning and the recognition of prior learning

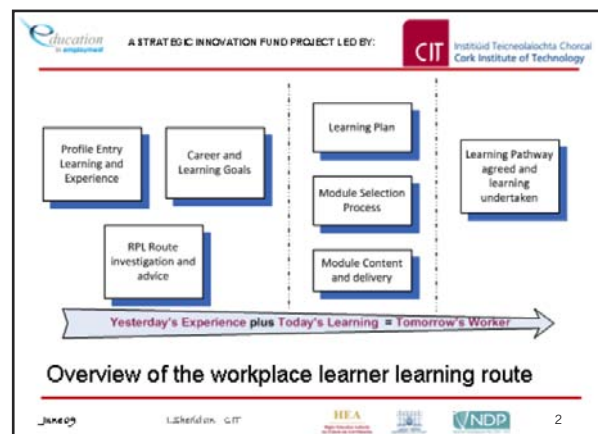
Irene's presentation was framed by the work completed by CIT and partner organisations¹⁸ in compiling a practice focused RPL report in 2009¹⁹ as part of the Education in Employment initiative. Irene's presentation offered an overview of the development of the concept of RPL and a representation of its constituent parts, as well as the uses for RPL for progression, entry and granting an award, and considerations for each use. The presentation detailed a range of considerations in using RPL for workplace learners, for institutions and for stakeholders. She posited that the future direction of RPL will be driven by changed economic circumstances and the return of many workplace-based learners to some form of education. Irene gave special mention to the importance of data collection in RPL processes, so that precedent and knowledge is accumulated.

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Education in Employment Project

- Led by CIT: 2007 – 2010 Total value €5.2m
- 7 Institutes of Technology and 2 Universities
- Focused on making the third level institution more relevant to the workplace learner in partnership with the employer through:
 - ❑ Work-based and Blended Learning
 - ❑ Recognition of Prior Learning (including NQAI and HETAC)
 - ❑ Progression opportunities for Craftspersons
 - ❑ Migrant workers and third level

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Background to RPL

- Long tradition of Mature Student entry to third level based on review of experience (RPL for entry)
- A number of EU projects contributed to developments in the Institute of Technology Sector in mid-1990's
- Some partner Institutes of Technology involved in developing institute-wide policy and practice from 1996
- A regional (Lionra) project on RPL in 2006

What it means
Useful definition: RPL – A process by which relevant **learning** which has taken place prior to enrolment on a **programme of study** is given a **value**

Notes:
Learning encompasses ALL learning – wherever and however gained – study, work, voluntary experiences
It is important to note that the learning is recognised only in the context of a **programme of study**
The learning is **given a value** through an assessment process

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Types of Learning

Formal, Non-formal and Informal

For RPL:
Certified: learning for which certification has been awarded through a Higher Education Provider

Experiential: learning which has not previously been accredited or recognised, can include workplace training activities as well as unintentional learning through work and life experiences

How RPL is generally used
Entry: The learner seeks to gain entry to a programme without the formal pre-requisite qualification. In some cases learners can seek to be admitted to an **advanced stage** of the programme.
Exemption: The learner seeks exemption from parts of a programme and will provide evidence that the appropriate learning outcomes have been met.
Award: The learner seeks to have their prior learning recognised for a full award on the framework.

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Main users of the RPL process

Target Groups:

- Mature students returning to education
- Employees with significant experiential learning
- Those seeking to improve their existing qualification
- Those seeking to retrain or change careers
- Those in occupations requiring formal qualification



Levels:

- Many applications for exemptions from stage 1 or 2 modules at levels 6 or 7
- Progression by craft workers to cognate disciplines at third level, granting block exemptions from stage 1 modules
- Applications for entry to level 9 Masters programmes
- Very few institutions have granted full awards based on RPL – (PhD by Published Works)

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¹⁸ The partner organisations were: Athlone Institute of Technology, Dublin Institute of Technology, Dundalk Institute of Technology, Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology, Institute of Technology Sligo, Letterkenny Institute of Technology, NUI Galway and University College Cork.



¹⁹ Sheridan, I. and Linehan, M. (Ed) (2009), *Recognition of Prior Learning: Focus on Practice* (Education in Employment, Cork: CIT, : <http://eine.ie/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/recognition-of-prior-learning-a-focus-on-practice.pdf> (Accessed 24 August 2011).

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Building Blocks of RPL




- Framework of Qualifications
- Modular Programmes
- Learning Outcomes
- Institute-wide Policy
- Robust quality assurance systems
- Assessment methodologies – building capability and capacity
- Partnerships with Employers
- Bologna process and learner mobility



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The RPL Process for entry




- Applicant in consultation with Higher Education provider completes a portfolio of learning providing evidence of relevant learning and ability to complete the programme to which entry is sought
- Usually an interview is held
- Academic Assessor considers evidence and makes judgement
- The process can be more or less formal depending on the system
- Often this is not recorded as 'RPL' within systems



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The RPL Process for exemption




- Applicant in consultation with Higher Education provider completes a portfolio of learning providing evidence of attainment of the learning outcomes of the module
- Academic Mentor assists in the interpretation of the learning outcomes
- Academic Assessor considers evidence and makes judgement
- Results of the assessment process entered into Quality Assurance and Records processes



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Assessment and Validation Considerations




- If Learning is certified...
 - to grade or not...
- If Learning is experiential...
 - 'new' learning
 - not previously awarded credits or grades
 - grades or 'x'
 - award stage or not
 - assessment capability
 - validation and examination board and records
- Limits on Attainable Credits for RPL
- Implications for classification of award



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Other Considerations



- Cost to learner
 - Certified or experiential
 - Full-time or part-time (does FT become PT?)
- Resource implications within the institution
 - Mentoring
 - Assessment – pay per portfolio?
 - Administration
- Timelines in the process
 - Apply prior to semester start?
 - Portfolio preparation time
 - Assessment time – timing of validation boards and response to student



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Various Stakeholders

- Government and NQAI, Awards Councils etc.
 - Policy, funding mechanisms
- Higher Education Providers
 - Support for learners, assessment capability, robust quality assurance methods
- Employers
 - Support and understanding of the process
- Learners

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Barriers to RPL

- Costs
- Time involved in portfolio preparation and assessment
- Inflexibility of students records systems
- Academic language and jargon
- Mistrust

Enablers of RPL




- Informed Policy and practice
- Institutional capability and capacity
- Identifiable points of contact
- Visibly robust QA systems

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Future Directions for RPL

- Collaborative approach to development of policy and practice has yielded benefits
- Broader knowledge and understanding will increase demand and alleviate fears
- Changing economic circumstances will see increased numbers of experienced workers returning to education on a full or part time basis
- Higher Education providers will need to improve engagement with workplaces and workplace learners
- Improved visibility and data collection will yield a better understanding of resource requirements and improved QA

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PART 2

RPL: NATIONAL PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICE and THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

National Policy and Practice

This section of the Handbook outlines the key national and international policy documents and reports on RPL. There is no separate or dedicated infrastructure for RPL in Ireland. Instead, it is practiced and largely understood in the context of education and training. Practice in higher education and training is long-standing in some areas, for example, in some institutes of technology, and more recent in others as documented in the 2007 Country Background Report on the Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning²⁰.

Awarding bodies and institutions use RPL in relation to accessing programmes and qualifications. They evaluate prior certified, as well as prior experiential learning. Given the different understandings and uses of RPL, both in Ireland and internationally, Table 1 below defines RPL and what it is used for in the Irish context.

TABLE 1: A definition of RPL

In the principles and operational guidelines for the recognition of prior learning in further and higher education in Ireland (NQAI, 2005), RPL is defined as: “the process by which prior learning is given a value. It is a means by which prior learning is formally identified, assessed and acknowledged”. (p. 2)

The key terms associated with RPL are a) ‘prior’, i.e., learning already achieved; and b) ‘process’ i.e., the distinct stages of identification, assessment and certification. RPL encompasses all forms of prior learning, including learning acquired by following a course of study (i.e., formal learning), learning acquired outside of the formal education system which may not lead to certification (i.e., non-formal learning) and learning acquired through experience.

RPL is used to gain:

- admission to courses where a person may not have obtained the standard entry requirements;
- exemptions from course components which duplicate the learning an individual has already acquired;
- credit towards a qualification; and
- a qualification solely on the basis of prior learning.

There are different means of assessment in place for RPL depending on the type of RPL an individual wishes to gain, i.e., it can be dealt with by an admission officer who reviews previous certification and experience, or (in the case of experiential learning) it can involve an assessment of the individual against the learning outcomes associated with the relevant unit, module, programme or qualification.

To date, policy attention in Ireland has focused on RPL in relation to qualifications. It is clear from national and international practice that it can be used for broader purposes, including social inclusion and equality of opportunity. In recent years, key national education and training reports and strategies have emphasised the importance of RPL in contributing to upskilling, meeting national skills targets

²⁰ OECD (2007) *Country Background Report on the Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning, Ireland*: www.nqai.ie/publication_aug2007.html (Accessed 24 August 2011)

and sectoral skills needs²¹, and supporting wider participation in education and in lifelong learning. The RPL strand of the Strategic Innovation Fund project on Education in Employment (2007-09) highlighted the uses of RPL in *inter alia* accessing and designing programmes for the workplace.

A number of actions for RPL recommended in the White Paper on Adult Education (2000) have been, or are being, implemented. These include the development of infrastructure to enable the operation of RPL: credit systems, modularisation, flexible delivery and new forms of assessment. The development of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) facilitates RPL, as outlined in Table 2 below.

TABLE 2: The National Framework of Qualifications and RPL

The National Framework of Qualifications and the related policies on access, transfer and progression have, since 2003, been the main vehicles through which RPL has been promoted in Ireland. The Framework explicitly aims to recognise all learning achievements, including prior learning. It does so by establishing a single national point of reference for RPL - learning outcomes -, alternative pathways to qualifications and a more flexible and integrated system of qualifications.

The Framework and the new architecture of awards - major, minor, supplemental and special purpose awards - are also more conducive to RPL. They extend the number and size of reference points for recognising prior learning. Modularisation/unitisation, which is now a main feature of higher education and training, also supports RPL.

The National Qualifications Authority's (NQAI) policies on access, transfer and progression set out a range of policies and procedures which are designed to improve learner mobility. These address entry requirements, the development of transfer and progression routes, credit and information provision. They state that RPL can be used for the purpose of programme entry, credit, exemptions or eligibility for a whole award. The NQAI, awarding bodies and providers all have responsibilities in the implementation of RPL procedures.

The following bodies play a role in developing and operating RPL - the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (the Authority); awarding bodies including the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC), the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC), the universities and the Dublin Institute of Technology; and providers of education and training. Their roles are set out in the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 and in the Authority's policies in access, transfer and progression (2003).²²

In 2005, a set of principles and operational guidelines for RPL in further and higher education were developed to encourage RPL practice and broad acceptance of the outcomes of recognition²³. These principles and guidelines identified key areas to be addressed in designing RPL systems - quality, communication/documentation, assessment and process. They also noted that the roles of assessor, mentor, applicant and any other persons engaged in the RPL process should be clearly identified and defined.

²¹ See the workforce plan for the early Childcare and Education (ECCE) sector, consultation paper and report available from: <http://www.omc.gov.ie/viewdoc.asp?DocID=1232&ad=1&mn=eary&nID=3> (Accessed 24 August 2011), and Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (2010) *Future skills needs for the wholesale and retail sector*, Dublin: EGFSN: <http://www.egfsn.ie/publications/2010/title,6230,en.php> (Accessed 24 August 2011).

²² NQAI (2003) *Policies, actions and procedures for Access, Transfer and Progression for Learners*, Dublin: http://www.nqai.ie/publication_oct2003a.html (Accessed 24 August 2011).

²³ *Ibid.*

TABLE 3: Focus of Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning in Further and Higher Education and Training (2005)

<i>Issue</i>	<i>Actions</i>
Quality	– embed RPL in quality systems
Assessment	– learning outcomes-based, transparent, fair, consistent
Communication	– statements of arrangements, documentation, awareness
Process	– clarity of roles, support for applicant, appeals mechanism
Applicant	– information, guidance, support

RPL practice has been driven by workplace needs (upskilling, professionalisation, new regulatory requirements, continuing professional development), funding opportunities (EU and national), and, in the context of higher education and training, access policies. What emerges from the various reports in RPL practice in higher education and training in Ireland is that institutions take different approaches to RPL in terms of institutional policy, support structures, staff training and scope of practice.

A number of collaborative projects and reports provide evidence of practice and steps that need to be taken to further develop and improve RPL in higher education and training. The Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF) supported Education in Employment Project Strand on RPL²⁴ shows that the focus, scale and organisation of RPL vary across higher education institutions.²⁵ In addition to setting out the main outcomes of the project, and barriers and enablers for RPL, the project report includes process maps for exemptions and for entry, elaborates on the roles of the learner, mentor and assessor, and addresses quality, grading, resourcing and external engagement. The report underlines the value of inter-institutional exchange and collaboration to develop and embed RPL in institutional arrangements, including in quality assurance, and recommends specific actions to enhance the organisation and practice of RPL. The work of the RPL project now feeds into the Roadmap for Academic Partnerships (REAP) project, also supported by the SIF.²⁶

The Framework Implementation and Impact Study (FIIS), (2009), found that action was needed in further and higher education and training to advance RPL.

Specifically, it recommended that:

- The Qualifications Authority, awarding bodies and providers should work to improve transparency and consistency in the interpretation and application of prior learning and in the communication of pathways other than the Leaving Certificate into higher education and training.
- Inconsistencies in the operation and application of RPL that present barriers to progression should be addressed. Action should be taken by the Qualifications Authority and awarding bodies to:
 - encourage institutions and providers in further and higher education and training to clarify the contexts and circumstances in which RPL is available;

²⁴ See <http://eine.ie/> (Accessed 24 August 2011)

²⁵ This project built on a collaboration between higher education institutions in the Lionra project (2007) Country Background Report, (p.68).

²⁶ See <http://reap.ie> (Accessed 24 August 2011)

- promote awareness and knowledge of institutional and sectoral arrangements for RPL amongst users;
- explore the potential to develop cross-sectoral and cross-institutional brokerage services for RPL for learners; and
- develop and implement transparent sector-wide approaches to RPL (p. 53).

The OECD team which reviewed RPL in Ireland in 2008 recommended that key strategic policy decisions needed to be taken to set out the role of RPL in relation to national socio-economic objectives and in education and training policy. It raised the question of whether RPL should be a discrete activity or be mainstreamed (and the implications that would follow for resourcing).²⁷

In follow-up to the OECD and the FISS reports, and informed by national and international developments, the NQAI explored strategic options for RPL. This led to collaboration with the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (2010) to explore the potential of RPL to contribute to the National Skills Strategy. In January 2011, the Expert Group submitted a policy paper and recommendations for action to the Department of Education and Skills.²⁸ This paper, drawing on international evidence, outlined current practice and issues, the potential of RPL to address unemployment and the objectives of the national skills strategy; and costs and funding. It identified actions to make RPL available to specific target groups, in particular those most vulnerable to long-term unemployment. In relation to higher education and training, i.e. NFQ Levels 6-10, the paper found that there was no requirement or desire (from within higher education) for additional national structures to support RPL. Instead, action should be focused on the level of individual institutions, departments and units. The paper recommends that higher education institutions share practice, network and increase the visibility and availability of RPL. Specifically, it recommends:

- (a) that the Irish Universities Association, Institute of Technologies Ireland and the Dublin Institute of Technology support and coordinate RPL activity, and
- (b) that the Higher Education Authority and the Department of Education and Skills should facilitate RPL through their funding activities. (p.9)

In relation to the National Skills Strategy and labour market activation, the Higher Education Authority, (January 2011) issued a call for proposals in relation to Springboard,²⁹ a multi-annual fund of €20m for higher education and training institutions to provide education opportunities to unemployed people. This also provides funding for RPL activities.

The National Strategy for Higher Education (Hunt Report)³⁰, launched by the Minister for Education and Skills in January 2011, recommends that “a national framework for the recognition of prior learning (RPL) must be developed and recognised by all higher education institutions” (p.61).

It also recommends that higher education institutions formally acknowledge undergraduate work/service experience through accreditation or inclusion in the student’s Diploma Supplement (p.61). Other aspects of the strategy which could support or impact on RPL include recommendations (to higher education institutions) for greater flexibility and responsiveness in meeting continuing professional development needs and wider community engagement in programme design and revision (p.79), and accreditation of students’ civic engagement (p.79). It is also possible that the recommended shift to parity in the funding model for higher education (i.e. full-time, part-time students, on- and off-campus) (p.122) could also support RPL.

²⁷ The report is available in full at: www.nqai.ie/documents/finalcountrynote1.pdf. (Accessed 24 August 2011)

²⁸ Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (2011), *Developing recognition of Prior Learning in the context of the national Skills Strategy Upskilling Objectives*, Dublin: EGFSN: www.egfsn.ie/media/egfsn110411-developing_recognition_of_prior_learning.pdf (Accessed 24 August 2011).

²⁹ For information on Springboard, please see: www.heai.ie/springboard (Accessed 24 August 2011)

³⁰ Department of Education and Skills (2011) *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*. Government Publications Sales Office: Dublin: www.heai.ie/en/node/1303 (Accessed 24 August 2011)

The European and International Context

A wide variety of RPL models and practice exist across Europe and internationally. As in the case of Ireland, in general, it is difficult to obtain a fully comprehensive picture of RPL activity. Detailed country reports were produced in the OECD activity on RPL (2006-2008).³¹ Overviews of non-formal and informal learning in 32 countries are contained in the European Inventory (2007).³² A Bologna Seminar on RPL in higher education, December 2008, Amsterdam, also presented cases of practice in higher education.

There are significant differences in understandings of RPL and in national priorities and approaches (centralised, bottom-up etc.) to supporting it. Within Europe, these range from little engagement (e.g., Germany) to significant engagement (e.g., France, where individual entitlement to RPL is based in legislation). In some countries, the *formative* dimension is emphasised whilst in others, such as Ireland, the *summative* dimension is emphasised.

RPL activity is also promoted within the context of the Bologna process in which it is seen as a way to enhance lifelong learning and widen participation in higher education. The European Universities Charter on Lifelong Learning (2008)³³ states that “it is essential for universities to develop systems to access and recognise all forms of prior learning” (p.6) and that “governments have the responsibility to support and motivate institutions in the recognition of prior learning. This can be facilitated through the provision of appropriate incentives to institutions and by ensuring the full integration of prior learning in qualification frameworks” (p.9). The Leuven Communiqué, April 2009³⁴, states that successful policies for lifelong learning will include basic principles and procedures for the recognition of prior learning on the basis of learning outcomes, regardless of pathways (p.3).

The 2009 Stocktaking report on the implementation of the Bologna process³⁵ concluded that “while a small number of countries have put in place quite advanced systems for recognition of prior learning, in most countries there is little or no recognition of learning undertaken outside the formal education system” (p.10). It also found that non-university higher education institutions are more engaged in RPL than universities. The report of the Scottish government/Quality Assurance Agency Scotland seminar on RPL, February 2010, suggested that the RPL could be articulated in ways which bring together the skills, employability, lifelong learning and equality agenda.³⁶ In follow-up to that seminar, a European network of RPL practitioners was set up, led by QAA Scotland.³⁷

In 2011, the activity on RPL at EU level is focused on updating the European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning³⁸ and the preparation of a Council Recommendation to further develop and promote RPL.

³¹ OECD (2010) *Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning: Country Practices*, Paris: OECD: www.oecd.org/document/25/0,3343,en_2649_39263238_37136921_1_1_1_1,00.html (Accessed 24 August 2011)

³² European Inventory – Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning: www.ecotec.com/europeaninventory/ (Accessed 24 August 2011)

³³ European Universities Association (2008), *European Universities Charter on Lifelong Learning*, Brussels: EUA: www.eua.be/eua-work-and-policy-area/eua-policy-position-and-declarations.aspx (Accessed 24 August 2011)

³⁴ Communiqué of the Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve, 28-29 April 2009: http://ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/conference/documents/Leuven_Louvain-la-Neuve_Communique_April_2009.pdf (Accessed 24 August 2011)

³⁵ European Commission (2009) *Bologna Process Stocktaking Report*. Brussels: www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/conference/documents/Stocktaking_report_2009_FINAL.pdf (Accessed 24 August 2011)

³⁶ The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) for Scotland (2010), *Recognition of Prior Learning – sharing European Principles and Practices – Final Report*, Scotland: QAA: www.qaa.ac.uk/Newsroom/Events/Pages/Recognition-of-prior-learning-sharing-European-principles-and-guidance.aspx (Accessed 24 August 2011)

³⁷ For information on the European RPL network please see: www.qaa.ac.uk/Scotland/DevelopmentAndEnhancement/Pages/Recognition-of-prior-learning.aspx (Accessed 24 August 2011)

³⁸ CEDEFOP (2009) *European Guidelines for Validating Non-formal and Informal Learning*, Luxembourg: CEDEFOP: www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/publications/5059.aspx (Accessed 24 August 2011).

PART 3

RPL IN THE IRISH UNIVERSITY SECTOR: CASE STUDIES

The following section comprises three case studies examining RPL policy and practice within the context of specific programmes on offer in three universities: Trinity College Dublin (TCD), the National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG) and the University of Limerick (UL). A fourth contribution describes RPL activities in the National College of Art and Design (NCAD).

In undertaking this project, to serve as a useful resource and embrace the spirit of the network initiative in sharing information, it was agreed that it would be useful to bring together a number of case studies which capture the experiences of RPL practitioners in the university sector in Ireland. The case studies which follow explore and expand upon the range of issues which emerged during the initial discussions of network members on RPL,³⁹ (it is worth noting that different terms are used by institutions to describe RPL activity), and also serve to address a gap in the documented practice of RPL activities in the university sector.

Each case study examines the development of institutional (where applicable) and local policies, the practical implications faced by staff in devising and administering RPL processes and concludes with reflections on the experience of RPL by institution staff. The case studies are drawn from institutions which have established RPL activities, but can offer relevant insight to those at any stage of implementation. They acknowledge the disparate approaches and attitudes to RPL within and across institutions. A number of common themes and issues emerge in the case studies and these are addressed in Section 4 of this Handbook.

In order to present a comprehensive picture of RPL practice, a range of programmes from varying disciplines were chosen for the case studies, each concerning a different award type at a different level on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), as follows:

- Case Study 1 examines the Diploma in Addiction Studies offered by the School of Social Work and Social Policy at Trinity College, Dublin. The Diploma is a Special Purpose award at Level 7 on the NFQ and entry to the programme is based solely on the recognition of an applicant's prior certified and/or experiential learning.
- Case Study 2 examines practices within the School of Nursing and Midwifery at NUI Galway. The School has engaged with the recognition of prior learning since its establishment in 1993; its practices and the expertise developed by its staff came to influence the institution-wide policy since adopted by NUI Galway in 2009. The discipline lends itself to discussions on the currency of learning and the requirements placed by professional regulatory bodies on an RPL process.
- Case Study 3 examines the RPL process in place for entry into the Master of Business Studies in International Entrepreneurship Management (NFQ Level 9) offered by the Kemmy Business School in the University of Limerick.

The case studies were compiled on the basis on interviews with programme and institution staff and materials supplied by each institution.

The fourth contribution offers a perspective from a discipline-specific institution and the unique profile of learners which may apply for recognition of prior learning at National College of Art and Design (NCAD). The reflection describes how the institution has adapted to the changing demands of the learner and the lessons learned in this process.

³⁹ For minutes of the network meetings, please see: www.nfqnetwork.ie/Agendas__Minutes/Default.9.html (Accessed 24 August 2011).

CASE STUDY 1

Institution: Trinity College Dublin

Programme/Award Title: Diploma in Addiction Studies⁴⁰

Class of Award: Special Purpose Award

NFQ Level: Level 7 NFQ

Introduction

The Diploma in Addiction Studies resides within the School of Social Work and Social Policy in Trinity College Dublin (TCD). The Diploma is a 60 credit, full-time Special Purpose award, included at Level 7 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).

The purpose of the programme is to offer training and education to participants in the context of problematic alcohol and drug use. As per the Diploma in Addiction Studies Course Handbook (2009-2010), the course aims to:

...view, examine and explore the theoretical and conceptual bases underpinning alcohol and drugs problems and to facilitate the acquisitions of skills and competencies in responding to these problems (p. 4).

The programme is typically taken by those already working, or hoping to work, with individuals, families and communities affected by alcohol and drug use. Participants return to their workplaces, or seek work, equipped with relevant learning and experience, including skills in at least one of the major addiction counseling models. A complete list of course aims, as set out in the Diploma in Addiction Studies Course Handbook (2009-2010) is available in Appendix 1. The programme comprises two semesters of academic work, together with a ten-week fieldwork placement.

Admission to the programme is based solely on the recognition of the applicant's prior experiential and/or certified learning. Exemptions from programme components are not available. The programme admits a relatively small number of participants from a variety of backgrounds and experiences. Accordingly, the teaching and learning experience is intensive and adapted to deal with the diversity of learners entering the programme.

The first semester of the programme is of eight weeks duration and is followed by a work placement. The third semester is used to assimilate experience and complete an end of year project. From 2010/11 the programme will follow a twelve week, ten week and four week schedule consisting of the same components. This is to reduce time allocated to the completion of the end of year project which has the potential to dominate learners' priorities for a significant portion of the final semester as opposed to using this time to reflect on their work experience. The project and continuous assessment examines the development of learners' knowledge base, new skills acquired and professional and personal development.

There is a high level of retention and successful completion associated with the programme.

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Policy

Institution-Level Policy

TCD has flexible and largely decentralised admission policies where possible. It is considered that this approach allows for RPL policy and practice to be devised and managed within individual schools and

⁴⁰ The Diploma in Addiction Studies programme recently had its external funding withdrawn. The programme has been paused and therefore the Diploma in Addiction Studies 2010/2011 was the last year for the programme. For a further discussion on the Diploma, please see Woods, M. and Butler, S. (2011), "A victim of its own success? The Diploma in Addiction Studies at Trinity College Dublin". IN: *Drugs: education, prevention and policy*, August 2011; 18(4): 243-250

ensures that decisions regarding admissions reside with the individuals closest to the programme and, importantly in the case of the addiction studies programme, allows for interaction with applicants from an early stage. A range of institutional support services such as the Trinity Access Programme (TAP)⁴³, counselling and health services and teaching and learning services are in place to support learners.

Each school returns a list of accepted applicants to the admissions office. The admissions office is responsible for issuing the offer of a place to an applicant and is also responsible for organising any associated Garda vetting.

Programme-Level Policy

As noted previously, admission to the Addiction Studies programme is exclusively through RPL. Exemptions from components of the Addiction Studies programme are not available: by its nature, a special purpose award represents a specific and focused remit of learning achievement. As described throughout, the aim of the programme is to develop the learner's knowledge of addiction, to ensure the learner has relevant skills in line with current practice and also to assure the personal suitability of participants to work in this environment. The programme aims to deliver these outcomes in their entirety and the programme managers deem it necessary to do so to in all cases, even to learners with extensive experience. The programme is tailored to its learners' needs, so that irrespective of background each learner develops and is assessed to meet the programmes learning outcomes. The programme aims to immerse its participants in experiential learning; accordingly, staff feel it would not make sense to exempt a learner from the reflection, growth and skills development offered by the Diploma in Addiction Studies.

Communication

The Diploma in Addiction Studies programme is promoted through a mail shot to as many as 800 social care and drug treatment agencies. The School is also in regular contact with a range of agencies to co-ordinate work placements and this serves to develop awareness of the programme. The programme prospectus is widely circulated and information on the programme is available on the TCD website. The programme is well known in the field and learners may be referred to it from agencies.

Data Collection

The School of Social Work and Social Policy maintains a database of learners who have graduated from the programme. Information on learners' backgrounds and progression is recorded in this database and made available to the TCD careers office.

TCD admissions office keeps statistics of admissions through non-traditional routes or admission through specific schemes such as the Access programme. It is also institutional policy that a record of all interviews must be maintained for feedback purposes. Such feedback has been offered to individuals to advice of areas for development and a number of subsequent repeat applications to the Diploma in Addiction Studies have been successful.

Recognition of Prior Learning Process

Since its establishment, twenty-eight cohorts of students have been admitted to the Diploma in Addiction Studies with a typical class having approximately twenty-four students. The programme is not available for application through the CAO; entry to the programme is based entirely on the recognition of the applicant's prior learning and applicants are dealt with on a case-by-case basis. Each group of learners is drawn from varied backgrounds; learners may have a combination of prior certified learning, professional experience, work-related experience or personal experiences which have led to their interest in the Diploma programme. The majority of applicants to the programme are Irish, with experience obtained in Ireland.

Applicants may pay for the programme independently, they may be sponsored by employers, or funding or financial assistance may be sought through the National Drugs Task Force or local authorities.

TABLE 4: RPL Application Process

Application Process

1. Initial enquiries are referred to programme staff. On receiving such enquiries, applicants are advised that relevant experience is essential. Where it is clear that the applicant may not have sufficient relevant experience, staff will refer individuals to social care and drug treatment agencies who may offer further experience and opportunities to develop their learning.
2. Enquiries may progress to initial meetings and a formal application to join the programme. Applicants are asked to submit the following:
 - A completed application form (including contact details for two referees);
 - A full Curriculum Vitae (CV); and
 - A 1,000 word essay discussing a relevant experience of the applicant.
3. The previous experience which is detailed in these documents may be verified with follow-up phone calls and referees are also contacted.
4. Applicants are then shortlisted and are called for individual interviews on a single day. A number of interview boards are drawn together comprising both TCD and external staff. Importantly, certain questions regarding prior experience cannot be asked for legal reasons.

Sample discussion areas at applicant interviews include:

- Why have you applied to this programme at this time?
 - Discussion of relevant experiences
 - Knowledge of drug and alcohol policy, established by the government and Health Service Executive
 - Experience of previous education
 - Awareness of drug rehabilitation assessments
5. Applicants' writing ability is examined through a written exercise completed by the shortlisted group on the morning of the interview. Applicants are asked to write on a given topic for 40 minutes as a means of determining the writing ability of each applicant and their capacity to participate in and complete the programme.

Unsuccessful Applications

Applications may be turned down where the applicant has insufficient experience or where it is clear the applicant will be unable to meet the academic challenges of the programme. In some cases a decision to turn down an application may be due to a lack of availability of spaces on the programme. As noted, a sufficient level of literacy skills is necessary to be admitted to the programme; where the applicant is unsuccessful on account of issues with reading and writing they will be referred to adult literacy supports.

Appeals

Appeals fall within the remit of the TCD institutional appeals process:

- In the first instance an appeal is made directly to the Senior Lecturer;
- Normally those who are not admitted are placed on a waiting list and may be admitted depending on the availability of places on the Diploma programme at a future date;
- Applicants who have been deemed ineligible for the programme (without the offer of being placed on a waiting list) may be offered further guidance as to alternative avenues.

The School has not received any formal appeals to date.

Time Line

- The closing date for applications normally falls within the last two weeks of April.
- Short listing occurs and interviews are held by the last week of May.
- Places are offered by the end of June.

There are typically forty to forty five applications to join the programme.

Teaching and Learning

The teaching and learning strategy for the Diploma in Addiction Studies has been designed to cater for the diverse backgrounds from which the group of learners may be drawn. The intellectual development of learners is only one aspect of the programme. The programme focuses on developing the learner's knowledge base, and personal and professional development. The learning styles of each learner are explored early in the programme as part of orientation, guided by input from the TCD School of Education. This exploration examines the learning objectives and learning outcomes to be attained by the learner and assessment will be structured mindful of differing skills and abilities. For instance, learners may speak of their fear of coping with the academic aspect of the programme. The School, however, aims to educate experienced, well-rounded people with a level of maturity and will provide tutorials to address areas where learners struggle with academic elements.

The teaching philosophy of the programme is based on William Perry's model of intellectual development, which identifies four broad stages of intellectual progress and the interventions that educators can offer at each stage to assist students.⁴² A high level of energy and investment is required from staff and learners when engaging in a teaching and learning strategy of this nature. In the first semester of the programme, particular encouragement is offered to learners through personal awareness group discussions. Tutorials are provided to support and assist the students in terms of their learning needs, struggles with any academic element of the programme, their personal learning agenda and also the development of the major project to be submitted at the end of the programme. Classes and tutorials can be quite interactive and discussion focused, fostering a collaborative environment.

A high level of facilitation is also required and lecturers more accustomed to a traditional lecture-based mode of delivery of learning have commented on the different, but positive experiences of teaching to the Diploma in Addiction Studies cohorts. The level of personal interaction with learners is contained however; students may on occasion need to be referred to the University counselling services in order to address issues which emerge outside of the remit of the classroom.

TABLE 5: Programme Assessment

Assessment

A high standard of work and performance is expected of learners. There are five pieces of work to be completed as part of the programme including:

1. Three essays;
 - a. A general project essay (1,500-2,000 words, submitted in November);
 - b. A social research essay (1,500-2,000 words submitted in December); and
 - c. A criminology essay (1,500-2,000 words, submitted in January).
2. A placement report (3,000-3,500 words, submitted at the beginning of the third term on completion of placement); and
3. A final project (7,000-7,500 words): The final project may comprise a literature review or piece of research examining a range of ideas or topic of interest. Ideas may emerge from work placement or previous experiences.

There is also a range of non-assessed work and activities such as presentations, agency visits and group work. Attendance at lectures and tutorials is compulsory.

⁴² Perry, W. (1970). *Forms of intellectual and ethical development in the college years: A scheme*. New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Reflections

Staff suggested that responding to an external drive to increase the numbers of individuals participating in programmes and to have prior learning recognised will not be successful if learners are not prepared or able to meet the demands of study and formal learning. The experience of the School of Social Work and Social Policy has been that learners are very motivated and that there have been high retention rates. Key to this is the high level of personal contact with learners right from receipt of an initial enquiry to provide learners with the best opportunity to gain admission. Once enrolled, high standards are expected of participants. Accordingly, the School gives encouragement and support to ensure learners are prepared for and realistic about the demands of the programme.

As described, the School admits applicants who are often already in employment in the treatment of problematic alcohol and drug use, or seeking employment in this sector having had relevant life experience. One of the objectives of the programme is to move learners into a professional, or more professional sphere. Importantly, prior learning may be both positive and negative - in some cases there may be aspects of prior learning, which emerge through the interview, essay or indeed during the programme, that need to be 'unlearned' as part of a learner's professional development. A decision to admit an applicant may be influenced by a wish to reconcile an individual's prior learning with current learning, and subsequent teaching practice and interaction with learners may seek to redress attitudes or practices which have developed through prior learning.

Staff emphasised the benefit of having the RPL process within the control of the School of Social Work and Social Policy, owing to the decentralised admission policies within TCD. This policy approach allows for subject experts to make admission decisions and interact with learners from an early stage. TCD infrastructure and teaching and learning services ensure there are outlets to address any issues the School may encounter, such as the literacy issue addressed above, including a range of undergraduate departmental committees and department staff.

Admitting learners through an RPL process ensures staff are realistic as to the demands placed on learners. In some cases, recognising prior learning is not enough and other basic requirements, such as student support structures, must be in place. Learners will not remain with a programme when other difficulties have not been resolved. Staff must be mindful of the range of backgrounds from which learners may come and consequently the issues that may need to be resolved. Any issues which arise may require significant investment in each learner. Such investment may not always be possible in every programme, particularly where significant demands are placed on staff in programmes which have high numbers of learners.

Discretion in making admission decisions is essential. The experience of the School is that applicants who have not completed the Junior Certificate or Leaving Certificate may excel in all aspects of the programme. Some graduates of the programme have progressed to social studies programmes at primary degree level or to further addiction, counselling, education or social care programmes at MA / MSc level and others have progressed in their employment with some now running drug treatment centres.

CASE STUDY 2

Institution: National University of Ireland, Galway: The School of Nursing and Midwifery

Introduction

This case study examines the development and implementation of a recognition of prior learning policy and associated processes within the School of Nursing and Midwifery in the National University of Ireland, Galway (NUI Galway). The School of Nursing and Midwifery was established in 1993. The School offers five Honours Bachelor Degree programmes (NFQ Level 8) in General Nursing, Psychiatric Nursing and Midwifery, as well as a Higher Diploma in Midwifery (NFQ Level 8). The School also offers a range of postgraduate programmes delivered through blended learning,⁴³ including thirteen Postgraduate Diplomas (NFQ Level 9) in a range of specialty areas, five Masters Degree programmes (NFQ Level 9) and four Doctoral Degree (NFQ Level 10) options. Recognition of prior certified and prior experiential learning is offered for the purposes of entry, or advanced entry to a programme.

Recognition of Prior Learning Policy

Institution-Level Policy

NUI Galway has a single institutional-level RPL policy in place since February 2009. The policy is designed to ensure consistency and transparency in the application of the principles of RPL throughout the university. The policy sets out a range of definitions for terms such as the recognition of prior learning, prior experiential learning, prior certified learning, credit, learning routes and learning outcomes. The policy also includes a set of guiding principles, details of the RPL process, as well as guidance on assessment and on how RPL should be communicated to prospective applicants and enrolled students.⁴⁴ The policy seeks to provide a coherent framework and principles which can be used by all academic units to guide them in the operation of RPL within their programmes at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The policy does not seek to be prescriptive; it allows for a range of assessment mechanisms to be used, appropriate to the module content, and sets out broad criteria to guide assessors. The policy also sets out that assessors and other persons involved in the recognition process will be given training and support as appropriate. The policy is available at Appendix 2. A range of supporting documents have been also developed, including a student information guide and a model assessment form designed to instill the principle that a systematic validation process is required for RPL applications.

Within NUI Galway, prior learning, whether certified or experiential, may be assessed for the purposes of granting entry or advanced entry to a programme or granting exemptions from modules within a programme. It is felt that it is best not to grade prior learning, particularly a combination of experiential and certified learning so as to avoid complicating the assessment process. It is university policy that a learner may be exempted from no more than 50% of a programme. It is felt that setting such a limit ensures that the learner undertakes a substantial volume of learning within NUI Galway and that the limit can act as a 'safety-net' for staff who may be new or uncertain of the RPL process and its outcomes. A school or discipline may determine that learners cannot be exempted from a certain module or number of modules, or indeed may determine that no advanced entry can be offered to a programme. This will vary from department to department and is at the discretion of programme staff and those assessing learning. The university does not offer full awards on the basis of RPL. As long as RPL activity operates within these parameters there is a degree of discretion afforded to individual colleges and disciplines in terms of policy application.

⁴³ Blended learning refers to a learning experience that combines classroom and online forms of learning (mixing traditional and distance learning). Participants have access to course details and content at all times, from any location in Ireland.

TABLE 6: Development of Institution-Level RPL Policy at NUIG

The NUIG institution-level RPL policy was developed following an examination of existing local policies and the perspective of staff. The development of an institutional policy highlighted the work of departments such as the School of Nursing and Midwifery and showed that RPL had particular application in determining eligibility for admission or advanced entry and granting admission to part-time and postgraduate programmes.

The development of the policy was also informed by insights into practice in other institutions gained through NUI Galway's involvement in the SIF Education in Employment (EIE) Scheme.⁴⁴ Based on this work, a draft policy was circulated widely within the university and feedback sought. The policy was then approved by Academic Council and subsequently published in February 2009.

RPL and Programme Design

Programme design in NUI Galway is informed by the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). This allows smaller units of learning, through the use of non-major awards types, to be recognised for credit and exemption purposes (this applies equally to learners who have completed these awards in NUIG and elsewhere). Such flexible programme structures facilitate the recognition of prior learning and have proved a marketable aspect of programmes.

Learning outcomes form the basis for the assessment of prior learning. A statement of learning outcomes is necessary for programme approval within NUI Galway. All new programmes, which have commenced in the last five years have learning outcomes set out at both programme and module level. In NUI Galway, part-time programme development often comes about through an initiative of the Adult and Continuing Education Office and its approach to the relevant college. Adult and Continuing Education is aware of the requirement for learning outcomes and the possibility of RPL applications, so these elements are considered from the initial design phase. Adult Education must give consideration to the marketing aspect of their work and allowing for learners to join at various stages of a programme. It was noted that the Department of Adult and Continuing Education must have regard to business as well as academic considerations and seek to draw in new learners in a competitive market.

A number of adult and continuing education programmes comprising core and elective streams facilitate the recognition of prior learning by allowing applicants to seek exemptions from specific elective modules, or demonstrate that prior learning meets the learning outcomes of a general component of the programme. The NUI Galway RPL application form asks whether applicants are seeking a general module exemption or specialist module exemption. Importantly, such exemption can only be sought from elective modules; core modules must be completed.

Specific credit may be offered for a specific module where the learning outcomes achieved are deemed equivalent to the learning outcomes of a specific programme module. General credit may be offered for a programme, where prior learning is not directly relevant but is deemed equivalent in level and credit weighting to modules in the proposed programme of study. The facility to offer general credit is considered a generous one, however such credit cannot be used where there is an impact on the specialisation required to complete the programme. Accordingly, general credit is more readily granted for a programme such as an Arts programme, rather than one with a specialty in science and technology.

Data Collection

While the various schools within the university maintain a record of local RPL decisions and rationale, data on RPL applications is not collected centrally within the university. Where exemptions from elements of a programme are granted, these will be denoted by an 'Exempt' remark on student transcripts; it will not be indicated that the exemption was gained through an RPL process. The 'Exempt'

⁴⁴ For further information please see: <http://eine.ie/> (Accessed 24 August 2011)

remark can be used in a number of scenarios, such as where a student is repeating a year, but is exempt from repeating certain modules. The student records system does not currently have the capability of distinguishing how exemptions have been gained, although it was acknowledged that the university may be asked to collect such data at some point in the future. Currently all records, including details of validation processes, are held locally, and most likely stored in different formats within schools and departments.

There has been no discussion to date of centralising RPL data collection within the institution; such discussions may be required as the university addresses any increases in the number of RPL applications in the future. Any such process would require significant involvement from each of the disciplines.

NUI Galway offers Access Courses for school leavers and mature students and is a partner institution in the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) scheme. These schemes offer opportunities to access NUI Galway programmes to learners who would otherwise be unable to enroll in a university-level programme due to economic or social reasons. Data on the number of students accessing programmes through these routes and completion rates is recorded centrally.

Communication

The availability and details of the NUI Galway's RPL process is promoted through a range of promotional materials, such as prospectuses and the university website, as well as at promotional and recruitment events attended by staff. Additionally, admissions staff receive training on RPL so they can respond effectively to queries from the public. Staff described how Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF)/Education in Employment (EIE) funding allowed for increased promotion of RPL and the opportunity to develop a RPL policy, and offer training and generally respond to any resulting demand. With dedicated funding now finished, the institution is conscious that continued promotion of RPL will generate demand and draw on resources and staff.

Programme-Level Policy within the School of Nursing and Midwifery

The School of Nursing and Midwifery, NUI Galway was established in 1993. The School began to develop a credit-exemption policy in 1998 on foot of changes to the types of qualifications required to work in the nursing profession, and also to the range of applicants approaching the School seeking entry to programmes and add-on programmes. In 1994, nurse training changed from an apprenticeship model (Certificate/ Apprenticeship Programme) to a three-year National Diploma Programme. NUI Galway was the first institution nationally to offer the Nursing Diploma and be confronted with the issue of recognising the existing clinical and academic qualifications of those seeking entry to the programme. The National Diploma programme was superseded in 2002 by the current An Bord Altranais professional registration requirement of a Level 8 Honours Bachelor Degree.

The School developed an approach to admitting learners to the programmes of study or add-on programmes on the basis of their existing certified learning in the main, in some cases combined with an element of experiential learning. Applicants were asked to make an application for entry or advanced entry to a programme and supply relevant evidence to support their application. The necessary new elements of learning undertaken to obtain new awards were largely not competence based – applicants were already practitioners with many years of experience, and, instead, may have needed to study topics in the field of research, critical thought and nursing theory.

Initially, the language used was that of 'exemptions' as RPL was not a widely used concept in NUI Galway at the time. The development and implementation of this approach proved a struggle in its first year as there was a lack of experience and information on the assessment of previous learning. Only with the recording of decisions and rationale has a body of experience developed surrounding the assessment of prior learning and the School has developed confidence in its processes.

The demand for recognition of prior learning continued to grow as the suite of programmes within the School expanded to include postgraduate programmes. Currently, the majority of RPL applicants are mature students applying to postgraduate programmes. Applications have mostly been concerned with the recognition of prior certified learning. Where experiential learning is presented, this has been for the purpose of 'topping-up' certified learning. As learners complete newer academic qualifications and seek entry to postgraduate programmes, it is expected that exemptions will be sought based on the recognition of prior experiential learning. To date, however, there has only been one application

submitted to the School seeking recognition of experiential learning solely. It is expected that the processing of any such applications received in the future will be quite time consuming.

The School's policy approach was formally ratified by the NUI Galway Academic Council in 2004. According to that policy, recognition will be given for no more than 50% of the total credits for an academic programme. It is felt that given the pace of change in nursing and midwifery, prior learning must have been completed within the previous five years. It was put forward that implementing a strict time limit on the currency of learning is a product of the responsibility of producing graduates, suitably educated and trained to work in a regulated profession, such as nursing and midwifery. An Bord Altranais, the regulatory body for the nursing and midwifery professions in Ireland, has set out requirements as to how learners may access a programme which leads to registration as a nurse and how an education institution is granted approval to offer a programme leading to registration;⁴⁵ this limits the discretion of institutions to grant exemptions to undergraduate applicants. Accordingly, the majority of the School's RPL applications are for exemptions from postgraduate programmes.

RPL Application Process

TABLE 7: RPL Application Process for the School of Nursing and Midwifery

Application Process

- Applicants are made aware, on the application form for admission, of the option of applying for a module exemption through an RPL process. The form states that learners must make a case setting out evidence as to why they should be exempted from a specific module.
- Applicants must:
 - Demonstrate that they have attained the necessary learning outcomes through some other form of learning;
 - Provide evidence of the assessment of this learning; and
 - Provide evidence of the credit given for this learning.

The onus is placed on the applicant to provide this information; they may often need to contact institutions they have previously attended to source information for inclusion in their application.

- The application is then sent to the programme director who will in turn identify the relevant module leader to assess the application.
- The module leader will review all the evidence, comparing the previous learning with the learning outcomes of the relevant module, and will also discuss the application with the module team.
- A decision, including a clear rationale, is then returned to the programme director.
- The decision is submitted to the School board for final sign off at School level before being forwarded to the Academic Affairs Office and Admissions Office. All applications are reviewed by the Student Affairs Committee which has responsibility for ensuring equity in decision making in regard RPL.
- The learner then receives notification of the decision.

Applicants are given comprehensive advice and support from the outset of an application.

Timelines

The time frame within which an application is assessed will depend on the quality of the application submitted, whether additional information must be sought and how much guidance the applicant may require. This may be an issue especially where applicants present foreign qualifications and there is difficulty in sourcing documentation and additional information. Additionally, information and detail may be lost through the translation of documents. Applications may be received after the deadline for submission which will be accepted and may lead to a processing backlog.

⁴⁵ Irish Nursing Board, An Bord Altranais (2010) *Nurse Rules* 2010. Dublin: www.nursingboard.ie/en/publications_current.aspx (Accessed 24 August 2011).

Staff commented on how the infrastructure of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) assists with the processing of applications; in particular the development of award and level descriptors assists with the matching of learning outcomes, while the Framework structure provides a tool for the comparison of international qualifications, in particular those from the United Kingdom.

Applications to date have been entirely paper-based, and have not included interviews. Applications are mostly made by mature students, who may be in full-time employment, applying for exemptions from postgraduate programmes – the bulk of their previous learning will be certified and evidenced through paperwork. To date, the largest number of applications received in a given year has been 24. Staff offered that should there be an exponential increase in the number of applications they do not think they could cope with the workload involved. There have been no instances of an appeal of the outcome of an application. Staff feel the support and guidance offered to applicants avoids such situations.

Assessment of RPL Applications

As described, learning outcomes form the basis upon which prior learning is assessed, both in the School of Nursing and Midwifery and across NUI Galway. Staff feel that it is crucial that learning outcomes are written clearly, as this will allow RPL assessors to provide advice to the learner on how to demonstrate that they have attained the necessary learning outcomes for entry or advanced entry. As part of the EIE-funded project, a designated RPL officer provided this support and advice to learners; where questions specific to a discipline arise, these are dealt with by the relevant college.

Staff generally do not often have to rely on advice or draw in resources from outside of the School of Nursing and Midwifery in assessing applications. Staff that are inexperienced or new to assessing RPL applications will be mentored by colleagues. The School has developed a bank of experience and a record of decisions and there are a number of qualifications which are repeatedly submitted for assessment. Additionally, the majority of staff in the School hold qualifications in the field of education, which assists this work. Staff may on occasion need to refer to colleagues in other departments where they are presented with learning from another discipline, though this is quite uncommon. The newest challenge faced in assessing applications is the increased number of applications for the recognition of qualifications and learning from countries outside the EU. In these cases, Schools may seek advice from the Admissions Office or the International Office.

Reflections

Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF) seed-funding provided through the Education in Employment (EIE) project has allowed resources to be dedicated to RPL policy and practice within NUI Galway in the last number of years. This has allowed the University to respond to the growing profile of RPL nationally and the increased awareness of RPL amongst learners. The funding allowed for the appointment of a dedicated RPL officer within NUI Galway who led discussions on the use and implementation of RPL, queried staff views and experiences, which ultimately led to the development of the institutional policy. The NUI Galway Council of Deans acknowledged the growing profile of RPL, within the institution and nationally, at a meeting in autumn 2010 and also the discussion and planning which will be required around RPL as demand grows. Now that SIF funding has ceased, such planning will need to consider where responsibility lies for the implementation of RPL and the best means to manage the demands of RPL policy and practice on staff.

Staff within the School of Nursing of Midwifery spoke of the necessity of RPL and their willingness to continue to embrace and develop the process so that learners may have their prior learning and skills acquired acknowledged. The School seeks to be flexible, and makes it a priority to grant credit where appropriate and not require students to repeat learning. Some of the staff in the School have personal experiences of a time when such options were not available and learners were asked to 'start from scratch' each time they began a new phase of learning. Where once the School operated in near isolation from this perspective, there has been a move towards a lifelong learning culture institutionally and nationally. Administrative and policy supports are in place centrally in NUI Galway and staff are glad of these structures which can offer guidance and clarity to new and existing staff and students where needed. Equally, the professional body, An Bord Altranais, now supports the development of procedures to allow access, transfer and progression in its guidance for education providers. It remains

that staff must be conscious of the requirements established by An Bord Altranais for entry to nursing programmes.

At institutional level there is a similar high regard for RPL and the flexible learning it facilitates. NUI Galway is partner to a project with Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT) and the University of Limerick (UL) which hopes to develop relationships with regional industry and seek to respond to their education and training needs and offer RPL where appropriate. The link between employers and institutions may allow credit be offered for existing training, and open up opportunities for learning and training to employees. It is hoped that where this project stimulates demand, the institutions involved will be able to pool resources to respond accordingly. At the time of writing, this project is still in a planning phase; however, it is envisaged that this will prove a major area for the development of RPL in the future. Contact to date has shown enthusiasm from industry, provided the requirements placed upon it are manageable and beneficial, so this will require significant planning on the part of the institutions. This activity is ongoing, although there remain unanswered questions as to how this work will be co-ordinated and resourced and importantly ensure the continued good-will of staff towards RPL. In terms of current ongoing processing of applications, staff offered that the next element of RPL to be developed is guidance on assessment of applications. Staff suggested that there are a limited number of practitioners and examples of relevant practice which could be used to develop guidance and policy in the area of assessment.

Those involved in the promotion and implementation of RPL offered a range of perspectives. Their experiences have shown that RPL can serve to boost a learner's confidence; the reflective element in particular can affirm for a learner that they have already achieved a recognisable substantial bank of learning. Individual stories, such as the granting of an award following admission or advanced entry based on RPL or the motivation learners demonstrate in the class room offer inarguable evidence of the benefits of RPL to staff. Additionally, teachers and tutors have spoken of the value of peer to peer learning in the class room and the invaluable comments and feedback shared by professionals who have returned to learning.

No evidence has arisen to date within NUI Galway to suggest that RPL has a negative impact on the quality of learning, nor have suggestions that RPL may offer unfair advantage to certain learners, whereby mature students take the place of learners who would be accessing programmes through more traditional routes. Staff interviewed were positive and enthusiastic towards RPL, offering specific examples of learners and their experiences which showed the value of RPL.

Such good will is tempered by the very real demands already generated by RPL. Staff from the School of Adult and Continuing Education offered that RPL applications constitute only 20% of the applications received for admission from adult learners; however these applications demand a majority of staff time. Processing an application is time-consuming. This can be dependent on the quality of the application received by the School in question, the additional information which must be sought and the support required by the applicant. The recognition of experiential learning or a combination of experiential and certified learning can be even more time consuming as it requires the examination and verification of a portfolio of learning. Staff in the School of Nursing and Midwifery suggested that, should there be a significant jump in the number of RPL applications received, they do not think they could cope with the workload. This expectation is based on their experiences in recognising prior certified learning, though staff offered that there will most likely be an increase in the demand for the recognition of experiential learning received in the future.

CASE STUDY 3

Institution: University of Limerick

Programme/Award Title: Master of Business Studies in International Entrepreneurship Management

NFQ Level: Level 9 NFQ

Introduction

This case study examines the development and implementation of a recognition of prior learning (RPL) policy and associated processes for the Master of Business Studies in International Entrepreneurship Management (NFQ Level 9), offered by the Kemmy Business School (KBS) in the University of Limerick (UL). The Master of Business Studies in International Entrepreneurship Management is designed to provide recent graduates, owner/managers of small businesses or individuals who work with small firms the primary theoretical and practical knowledge and skills required to start and manage a small business internationally.

As per the prospectus,⁴⁶ the objectives of the programme are as follows:

- To provide participants with an insight into the characteristics, role and functions of the entrepreneur and owner/manager that are needed to grow a small business internationally;
- To provide students with an understanding of the functional disciplines of a business and how they change as the small business grows and becomes international in its focus;
- To provide participants with the knowledge and competencies to develop an international business strategy for a small business; and
- To develop useful skills and perspectives such as creative problem solving, diagnostic skills, communication and project management skills that are needed to grow a small business internationally.

The programme is offered on a one-year full-time or a two-year part-time basis. Cohorts typically comprise 22-23 full-time students and 3-4 part-time students.

The recognition of prior certified and prior experiential learning is one component of the entry procedures used to determine the suitability of applicants who do not meet the prescribed entry requirements of a 2.2 honours degree for the programme. The Kemmy Business School does not grant advanced entry or exemptions from elements of programmes to RPL applicants.

Recognition of Prior Learning Policy

Institution-Level Policy

The University of Limerick institutional RPL policy has been in place since 2003. Staff described the process by which the policy was developed as a very organic one with its genesis in the process of transfers from institute of technology programmes, which were well established in the university. The university identified the need to formalise this process, making it more broadly available and understood and part of the academic process. Key tenets of the terms for formalising the process were

⁴⁶ A full programme description is available at: www2.ul.ie/web/WWW/Services/Research/Graduate_School/Prospective_Students/Graduate_Programmes/Taught_Programmes/Kemmy_Business_School/International_Entrepreneurship_Management (Accessed 24 August 2011).

that it would be flexible and that RPL would be considered by programme designers from the initial stages of programme design. The reforms, which stemmed from the Bologna process and also the development of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), proved to be the drivers behind the move to formalise the process. Key to its success and implementation was the parallel development of learning outcomes at programme and module level. The RPL policy does not allow for the granting of full awards on the basis of RPL. The policy also requires that a learner may be exempted from no more than 50% of a programme. There is a degree of discretion afforded to staff considering applications in the implementation of this requirement, as there are differing perspectives when admitting applicants to a four-year undergraduate award and to a shorter postgraduate programme.

Currently, the Office of Lifelong Learning (OLL) acts as a central resource for staff and learners regarding RPL. Staff affirmed that the office serves as a source of advice, information and encouragement. The OLL actively encourages the implementation of RPL within schools and faculties. Where RPL is in place, the Office seeks to address any inconsistencies and ensure rationales are clearly documented, and that individual RPL processes are quality assured. Overall, the OLL is of the opinion that RPL is administered well and professionally.

There are genuine concerns as to how demand for RPL will grow and the strain it will place on university resources. The Director of Lifelong Learning believes that this growth will be best managed through a devolved process and that it is not necessary to develop an institution-wide system. Some programmes will experience small jumps in the number of applications with minimal impact, while others will experience a significant jump in numbers. This will be an issue, especially if RPL applications are received in large numbers for standard undergraduate programmes, which staff suggested would create a significant draw on resources in the future and result a need for a changed financial model for the university.

However, it is felt that the most effective means of managing any increase in applications is through a devolved process where experts in the relevant discipline can manage the process within the faculty. This approach will add to the number of staff involved and developing experience in the assessment of applications. It may become necessary to appoint a designated RPL officer who would be able to respond to general queries and then refer issues related to a discipline or programme to the relevant faculty or school. Any such moves will be in response to the changing demands and the needs of learners within the institution as a whole, and changes to policy and practice are continually discussed accordingly.

The Office of Lifelong Learning is considering the development of a module on RPL as part of the formal Diploma in Teaching which is offered to UL staff. The Office considers it crucial that staff are trained and aware of the RPL process and what it means. Such a module may be developed in conjunction with the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) and the work done to date by DIT in developing staff guidelines and policy on RPL.⁴⁷ The university has also formed links with The National Academy for the Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning (NAIRTL)⁴⁸ and the Springboard Fund,⁴⁹ so that a range of resources and knowledge is available to support the universities' ongoing development of its RPL policy and practice.

The Director of Lifelong Learning reported that confidence has grown in the RPL system within the university and that it is now viewed as part of the academic process. It is hoped to develop an e-portfolio template so that applications may be submitted online, which can be adapted locally as per the requirements of individual programmes.

Programme-Level RPL Policy within Kemmy Business School

The Kemmy Business School does not grant exemptions from Masters level programmes, as per School policy. The School considers full commitment from the learner and class participation to be crucial to learning at this level and on that basis will not consider applications for exemptions. Staff of the MBS in International Entrepreneurship Management programme explained that granting exemptions may

⁴⁷ For information on RPL activities in DIT please see: www.dit.ie/services/academicaffairsandregistrar/recognitionofpriorlearning/ (Accessed 24 August 2011).

⁴⁸ For information on NAIRTL please see: www.nairtl.ie/ (Accessed 24 August 2011).

⁴⁹ For information on the Springboard Fund please see: www.bluebrick.ie/Springboard/ (Accessed 24 August 2011).

actually have a negative effect in that learners would not gain the full benefit of learning a subject in a different context and perhaps with a different emphasis to that which was experienced by the student when they first studied the module elsewhere. This may create some tensions where learners are expected to undertake modules in subject areas where they are professionally qualified (e.g. a solicitor may be required to complete a law module or a finance officer may be required to undertake an accounting module). The programme is designed to bring new insight to learners, filtering existing learning through the perspective of a small business. Equally important is the peer learning aspect of the programme. It is felt that the full participation of learners and the sharing of experiences and knowledge is a key element of the programme which would be undermined by offering exemptions. This approach is not applied across the university; a more flexible approach is applied in the schools of Science and Engineering for instance. Additionally, a number of programmes within the Business School have integrated modules whereby learning from a variety of modules may be drawn upon in completing projects or assignments.

Staff highlighted that the programme does not operate in isolation within the university; there are a number of learning supports in place which facilitate those students who have been out of formal education for some time. A range of student supports are provided by the university, such as study skills support, maths support, a writing centre and also personal and online support on the use of the university library. The Director of Lifelong Learning works to ensure that students are aware of these services and that they are freely available to learners who enter through non-traditional routes.

Data Collection

The university does not maintain data on RPL applications centrally (although information could be gathered if necessary by liaising with programme leaders). Staff offered that there is a sociological imperative for recording the manner of students' admission, whether through RPL or Access programmes, and subsequent progression. Staff stated that should such data be collected, it should be done in an ethical way. Staff suggested that any number of factors can impact on how a learner performs, including age, maturity and ability to manage time and they are cautious of labeling learners on the basis of how they accessed a programme. It was also proposed that to 'tag' people may instill a bias and may set an artificially high standard for students who access learning through the RPL route. Staff have had consistently positive experiences with learners admitted through RPL and they feel that for applicants to pursue an application through RPL demonstrates significant motivation and this motivation often carries through to their participation in the programme. To 'tag' learners and any bias this might instill would be inappropriate.

Recognition of Prior Learning Process

The typical entry requirement for the programme is a Second Class Honours (Grade 2) Bachelor Degree (NFQ Level 8). However applicants who do not meet this academic criteria, but who have a 3rd class Honours Bachelor Degree with substantial small business experience as founders or owner/managers, may be considered for entry into the programme. The School has not admitted any applicants without a degree onto this programme. This approach has been discussed, and staff acknowledged that it is likely that people who do not hold a degree may seek admission to the programme in the future and that the School will need to consider these applications. To do so would require the School to review the application process and the role of RPL in the selection process of candidates.

TABLE 8: RPL Application Process

Application Process

- Staff may receive a query directly from a member of the public or have queries referred from the admissions office and these are then forwarded to the Programme Director of the MBS in International Entrepreneurship Management programme. Queries regarding the programme come from a number of sources e.g. via phone, email or directed from the postgraduate

admissions office; knowledge of the programme has spread through word of mouth and the programme is also promoted at careers fairs.

- Initial discussions take place between the Programme Director and the applicant. Staff will get a sense of the level of interest of an applicant, what they hope to achieve through the programme and also the perspective and experiences they can share during the programme to the benefit of other learners.
- With this information established, and if the applicant does not meet the established academic entry requirements, the applicant will be invited to complete a standard application form and a specially designed RPL application form. Both application forms are submitted online.
- Applicants who have met the entry requirements for RPL are then invited to interview. The interview may also include a short written exercise on some element of the applicant's prior learning. Applicants are also required to provide a supporting statement as to why they should be accepted on to the programme and where they think they can add value to the programme. Applicants will be informed prior to the interview if they will be asked to complete this exercise.
- Where candidates are non-native English language speakers, certified demonstrable achievement in a Standard English Language Competency Test will be required, which is a university requirement.
- An Assessment Board will meet as required to review each application. The Assessment Board is comprised of the Director of the MBS in International Entrepreneurship Management programme, the Assistant Dean of Academic Affairs; a representative from the Admissions Office and the Director of Postgraduate Programmes in the Kemmy Business School.
- Applicants will then be informed of the outcome of the Assessment Boards decision. There are three possible outcomes – the application may be successful, the application may not be successful or further action may be required. Where further action is required, the School may ask the applicant to provide further information or elaboration on a particular area of their previous learning mentioned in the application, or to provide names of referees that can be contacted to substantiate and further endorse their application.

An applicant may realise he/she is not suited to the programme or the Programme Director may feel from initial conversations or following assessment that an applicant would not benefit from the programme. This can apply equally to applicants who meet the academic criteria and those who do not. In some of these cases, the applicant may be referred to the Management Development Unit within the Kemmy Business School where a more appropriate programme may be identified. These applicants are dealt with personally and are provided with feedback on the decision and advised on how they can best progress their academic career.

The following items are requested in the RPL application form:

- Personal details of the applicant;
- A Curriculum Vitae describing educational background; background in starting and managing a business; training, advising and mentoring experience and any other relevant experience;
- Details of continuing professional development programmes, whether accredited or non-accredited;
- Examples of a challenge faced in the workplace, how it was managed and reflections upon this example;
- Outlines of a Continuing Professional Development Plan;
- References and Testimonials (a character reference and a reference from the principal of an educational institution authenticating the academic evidence in the portfolio); and
- A supporting statement indicating why they should be accepted onto the MBS in International Entrepreneurship Management.

Applicants are not charged any additional fees for the assessment of their RPL applications (fees are charged for the assessment of applications in other faculties and schools, including programmes where full fees are charged for admission).

Staff of the KBS School feel they could cope with an exponential increase in the number of RPL applications. The number of applications is increasing, as are the number of queries and the School will continue to manage the scaling and review of its process to meet demand. Staff of the School are grateful of the Office for Lifelong Learning, which acts as a central resource to turn to if necessary and also the range of learner supports in place in the university.

Assessment of RPL Applications

The Kemmy Business School has developed general assessment criteria for processing applications as follows:

- **Relevance/Validity:** evidence presented is directly relevant to the standard for entry to, credit towards, or exemption from, parts of the award in question;
- **Equivalency:** evidence presented demonstrates that the standards for entry to, credit towards, or exemption from, parts of the award in question have been met;
- **Currency:** evidence is current within the last 5 years. Evidence provided may be older, but must still show that it is current to the skill, knowledge and competency requirements of the award;
- **Authenticity:** evidence is endorsed by an educational institution where appropriate and/or by a current employer, referee/appropriate person; and
- **Sufficiency:** the evidence provided is adequate to meet the application for entry to credit towards, or exemption from, parts of the award in question.

The Programme Director adopts an open and flexible approach to the type of previous learning which can be presented. The programme is targeted at learners who may not have specific knowledge of an area, such as accounting, but their prior learning demonstrates an aptitude for such elements of the programme. However, there are a high number of deliverables associated with the programme so that staff will need to be satisfied that the volume and level of prior learning completed is relevant and has adequately prepared the learner to undertake the programme. Staff do not wish to admit people who will struggle with the programme or fail.

There is some element of a self-selection process for such a specific programme. Applicants seek out the programme or choose it because of its specific outcomes and will often have prior learning which can be more easily matched to the learning outcomes of the programme than to a more general programme of study.

Reflections

It was stated that for UL to be successful in broadening participation to a more diverse student body, the university will need to admit two or three times as many students through non-traditional routes, such as RPL, in the future. Staff suggested that universities will be called upon to become more flexible in how they deliver learning and in particular address the needs of those in unemployment.

The Director of Lifelong Learning stated that the institution-level policy will be reviewed and spoke of a number of developments which would enhance the RPL process. A number of these have been mentioned throughout and are included in the list below:

- The development of an online e-portfolio application process/form which can be adapted by each discipline;
- The development of an RPL module as part of the Diploma in Teaching offered to staff;
- To offer seminars/ instruction leaflets on completion of the RPL application form for learners; and
- The development of a national forum for sharing experiences and knowledge on RPL.

Staff from the Kemmy Business School are conscious that the nature of queries regarding the MBS in International Entrepreneurship Management programme are changing and applicants are presenting from more varied backgrounds and that the application process will need to be adapted accordingly.

Staff advised that it is essential that those involved in designing and managing an RPL process understand the programme outcomes fully, that they have previous experience in the discipline and that an RPL process allows for flexibility. Any policy needs to be thought through, mindful that it is previous learning which must be assessed, not experience *per se*.

Effective guidance for applicants can be crucial for applicants and the assessor. The Director of Lifelong Learning offered an example of guidance from the UL School of Nursing which offers a seminar on how to complete the application form for those considering making an RPL application. Evidence shows that 90% of those who attend the seminar and subsequently apply are successful, and conversely 90% of those who do not attend will not be successful. Such seminars are advertised in local press in advance of admission deadlines. For staff, a significant amount of time can be dedicated to advising applicants and explaining basic concepts, so these seminars can also offer an important time saving measure.

Staff acknowledged that there may be perceptions that a move to RPL can be seen to lead to a compromise on standards; however, their experience is that RPL applications are demanding and test the standards of applicants fully. It should not be seen as an easy option. Learners may often have spent some time outside of education and struggle initially with the demands of the programme. However the structure of the MBS in International Entrepreneurship Management offers support to learners throughout; learners may look to support from personnel within the School and come to form good relationships with staff. Also, the programme is examined in a very practical way which allows learners to draw on their own experiences in completing assessments. The experiences of the School have shown that learners admitted through the RPL process have ultimately done extremely well. Staff feel that applicants admitted through RPL in some ways feel the need to prove themselves more and work hard to re-commit to the demands of education.

RPL AND THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN – A REFLECTION

Introduction

The National College of Art and Design (NCAD) offers full-time and part-time programmes at undergraduate and postgraduate level in art and design. At NCAD a range of policies, practices and procedures exist to facilitate students who are seeking access, or wanting transfer and progression options into undergraduate and postgraduate art and design programmes. At this time there is no stated college RPL policy, however it is implicit within established practices for access and transfer at undergraduate and postgraduate level. In 2010, NCAD produced a resource document '*Guidelines for Programme preparation and design*' for all teaching staff, which included a section on RPL. As NCAD embarks on a period of major curriculum reform (adopting Bologna 3+2+3), a college approach to RPL is likely to be introduced and will feature within programme design stages.

Both the undergraduate and postgraduate college prospectuses include details of entry requirements to all programmes. The college literature contains guidelines for students who may not fulfil standard college entry requirements. Generally, staff in admissions and in student support services, as well as teaching staff are involved in the selection, reviewing and interviewing of students applications, portfolios and other forms of visual presentation, all of which feature when accessing or transferring into higher education in art and design programmes. However, there is no dedicated RPL office or staff member with recognising prior learning responsibilities at NCAD. The following sections provide an overview of some of the practices occurring in relation to RPL across departments and at an institutional level.

Local Response: Centre for Continuing Education

The Centre for Continuing Education in Art and Design has reconfigured part-time provision and NCAD now offers an extensive programme for mature students, as well as school-going students intending to apply to further or higher education. The part-time evening programme includes a range of Certificate and Diploma undergraduate courses. Entry to the part-time programme is on the basis of mature student status (23+) generally, students are required to have either Leaving Certificate or FETAC Level 6 equivalent to access the part-time undergraduate programmes. All mature students should be able to demonstrate a commitment to developing an art and design practice. The Continuing Education programme is constructed to encourage mature students with limited prior art and design experience, to take preparatory non-credit courses or audit modules prior to commencing an accredited option in order to build skill, knowledge and confidence in a discipline area. Students who can demonstrate prior certified learning can seek exemption from modules and or transfer within and across programmes offered by the Centre.

Access to all part-time programmes requires students to complete a written application form; however, in some cases students present a portfolio of visual images, sketches and notebooks which are constructed in response to a project brief which has been prepared by programme tutors. The move from a non-accredited to an accredited part-time programme required building, credibility, and transparency into curriculum design and communicating this to staff and students across the college.

For part-time mature students, having access to clear, transparent information about programmes that offer progression, transfer and credit accumulation is important. Institutionally, this requires a multiplicity of approaches, including dedicated open days, brochures and web-based resources that are accessible and relevant to the cohort.

Mature student profile

Mature students who take part-time options at NCAD include those individuals who come to art and design higher education with limited art and design knowledge or experience, those who may have some experience, are self-taught but have not participated in structured courses and, or, have

completed their second-level education some time ago. Continuing education also attracts part-time students from related areas, including architecture, as well as graduates of art and design who have been at a distance from the subject for some time and want to renew their practice.

The Certificate programmes offer students a range of choices in terms of what they want to study, when and for how long. The Certificate in Visual Art Practice is the most flexible part-time programme, it is made up of twelve modules, and students can audit the programme or take credits.

Institutional Approach: Postgraduate programmes and RPL

NCAD offers a range of taught postgraduate courses including: MA, M Litt, MSc., PG Diplomas and Phd. Access to postgraduate Level 9 programmes at NCAD includes the standard requirement of completing a Level 8 Degree programme, having a minimum 2nd class honours or equivalent. Furthermore, the NCAD will also consider applications from (1) individuals who hold Diplomas in Art and Design (the primary undergraduate qualification in this area until the Degree became the norm in the mid 1980s), as well as (2) applications on the basis of proven relevant work experience. With respect to the two categories of applicants outlined above, they may be required to complete a qualifying exam or audit a designated series of modules in order to fulfil particular programme requirements.

Applications for postgraduate programmes are initially sent to admissions and then to Faculty staff for review and selection. All postgraduate applications are processed through the Higher Awards Committee. Where applicants do not meet the standard requirements and the recommendation of the programme team is that they be offered a place, the basis for making the recommendation is outlined; furthermore, a qualifier may be proposed and the matter is adjudicated by the Higher Awards Committee.

The Higher Awards Committee is the main forum for discussing issues relating to policy, guidelines and procedures for postgraduate programmes and is chaired by the Head of Research. Some postgraduate programmes require applicants to attend for interview. Aside from qualifications, the quality of a students' research proposal, importance of prior experience, and work-related experience relevant to art and design, is critical in establishing the applicants' motivation and capacity to sustain their research project at postgraduate level.

Graduate Diploma in Teaching Art Design Education

Increasing numbers of students are seeking access to the postgraduate Diploma in art and design teaching. This full-time programme involves traditional academic components, as well as art and design practice modules. While standard entry requirements to the graduate programme exist, (the minimum entry requirement is an NFQ Level 8 Honours Bachelor Degree) there is also a means of recognising work-based and informal learning as a contributory factor to the students' application.

The application process involves clearly established selection criteria, also, students' prior informal and work-based experience, knowledge of education policy and practice is recognised as an important factor, contributing to student motivation for learning. All students applying to the postgraduate programme complete an application form, which includes a personal statement. Potential students should present a visual portfolio of recent work, undertake a drawing test and attend a group interview.

Lessons for RPL at NCAD

- 1) In the past, practices which supported RPL have developed locally or organically within higher education. The impetus from a range of external drivers such as the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) requires colleges to develop explicit procedures that are communicated to different cohorts of students;
- 2) RPL is a way of recognising prior learning including certified or experiential learning and framing institutional policies and practices in this area requires the input of both academic and administrative staff;

- 3) RPL is not about bending rules, or lowering standards, therefore communicating RPL positively within higher education institutions is important;
- 4) Visual portfolios are an established and recognised means of assessing individual learning and competency over time; and
- 5) Transparency and consistency in approach when implementing RPL policies within NCAD and higher education generally is important.

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PART 4

ISSUES ARISING IN RPL POLICY AND PRACTICE, AND SOME PRINCIPLES FOR CONSIDERATION

Introduction

As reflected in the introduction to this report by the Chair of the network, and reinforced within the document by the overview provided of developments at national and European levels, the concept of recognising prior learning has in recent years been increasingly linked to benefits associated with workforce development, economic regeneration and social inclusion. There is much of interest in the preceding pages regarding RPL in the university sector and the contribution of this sector to the realisation of RPL in Ireland. Some sections are factual and for information purposes, while other sections, such as the case studies, are somewhat more analytical and provide a critical insight into what is happening in practice within a number of institutions.

Perhaps the most important insight to be gained is that something is happening and that RPL is not a figment of the imagination of policy makers who wish to redefine traditional views of what learning is and how it can be achieved and recognised. Equally highlighted within these pages, however, is evidence that the design, planning and implementation of RPL policies and practices are not uniform, straightforward, or unproblematic processes.

The purpose of this final section of the report is twofold: it attempts to represent some of the issues that have arisen in the collective experience of network members in their design and implementation of RPL policy and practice. These issues arose through the case studies and the discussion of network members. It also puts forward a number of principles for consideration, which may support higher education institutions as they seek to make further strides in the often difficult, but rewarding, terrain of RPL.

Acknowledging and addressing the costs of RPL

The resource implications of putting an infrastructure in place to recognise prior learning span a continuum of low to high and are based on the nature of the prior learning for which recognition is being sought (i.e., formal, informal and non-formal) and for what purpose (i.e., admission, exemption or award). Recognising certified prior learning is not always straightforward and will most likely require a review of the curriculum and learning outcomes acquired against those of the programme the learner wishes to pursue. Notwithstanding this, it is likely to be a far less intensive process than addressing a request from an individual for his or her experiential learning to be recognised for access, and particularly for exemption and/or a full award. The emphasis in the RPL process on the individual learner dictates that a much higher level of individual interaction and analysis is likely to be required. This is necessary to ensure that the learner is afforded the appropriate opportunities to demonstrate his or her prior learning and to identify how this relates to the curriculum and associated learning outcomes of a given programme of interest to the learner.

The resources required in all forms of recognition are primarily of a human nature, crossing several administrative and academic functions. Costs often unaccounted for by institutions include the provision of advice to individuals considering applying for the recognition of their prior learning and, more intensely, the support that may be required for individuals to present their prior learning in a format which allows for it to be fully considered. It should also be noted that this investment of time does not always lead to the learner deciding to pursue a formal application to have his or her prior learning recognised.

While the human resource costs associated with properly administering an RPL process are widely recognised, what is perhaps less acknowledged is the loss of institutional revenue that may result from a successful application. For instance, a learner may be deemed exempt from a year or more of an Honours Bachelor Degree, leading to the higher education institution enrolling them for perhaps as little as a year. When this is extended to the concept that an awarding body can recognise prior learning for the purposes of making a full award, the incentive for doing so on the part of the awarding body, when it is a higher education institution, should not go unquestioned. This may be one of the reasons for the cap placed by some institutions on the level of exemption that can be attained; an issue

(not always consistent across all institutions) worthy of attention in its own right. Institutions apply differing levels of fees, from none to an amount equivalent to the unit of exemption. The investment of resources and accompanying loss of revenue are not insurmountable barriers to a more widespread implementation of the recognition of prior learning, but it is important to acknowledge that the institution's responsibility to the learner and his or her welfare cannot be the only driving force behind widespread implementation of RPL. National education and training policy, and associated funding policy, also need to encourage and enable practice, ensuring that the benefits which RPL can present for the learner are not disproportionately disadvantaging the institution.

Increasing the availability of information on prior learning recognised within an institution

For an institution to recognise prior learning, certain structures - of both an academic and an administrative nature - need to be in place. In terms of the former, the division of programmes into modules and the assignment of credit are two such elements that cater well for the parcelling of recognised prior learning against modular outcomes; these are generally features of programmes across the higher education sector. The availability of a suitable administrative infrastructure, supported by information technology, can often be more problematic. The result is a lack of central data within an institution regarding the various bases on which prior learning has been recognised. The lack of systematic data in this regard means that it is difficult to establish the level of RPL activity in overall institutional terms; this in turn means that often monitoring, developing and recognising practices is more difficult. If institutions can address this issue, it will provide a much better picture not only of RPL activity, but also areas where little activity is taking place, which may be due to individual resistance, lack of demand on the part of learners, or perceived/actual inappropriateness of the programme for the recognition of prior learning. Better quality information at an institutional level would in turn inform and assist in the benchmarking of institutional activity against national, as well as European and international trends. The case study on the School of Nursing and Midwifery in NUI Galway showed the benefits to staff of having data on RPL applications and outcomes in place.

Teaching, learning and support services need to reflect the diversity of learners

Learners that have acquired their learning outside of formal education and training systems may require additional support from an institution to ensure that they can successfully participate in a given programme. Meeting this responsibility involves due consideration by an institution of the range of services available to individuals and the interconnected nature of these services. Improved information systems within an institution, as referenced above, should aid such communication and information exchange among those involved in the provision of these supports, for the benefit of learners.

Improved consistency between programme design, learning outcomes, teaching and assessment methods, is equally relevant. A diverse population of learners seeking to demonstrate the outcomes of their learning is likely to benefit from teaching and assessment methods that are more in keeping with those intended learning outcomes, and that are willing to go beyond a traditional reliance on lecturer-focused teaching and examination-based assessment. In this regard, funding for academic staff development and training in innovative student-centred pedagogical methods and practice, and of alternative assessment systems, is of equal importance to those supports required by learners.

Monitoring what happens to prior learning after it has been recognised

While the principle of recognising prior learning is becoming embedded within institutional cultures, and the implementation of all aspects of the National Framework of Qualifications continues, the Framework Implementation Network considers that there is a high degree of complementarity between these concepts, but also a potential conflict in their functions as recognition tools. A central notion of the NFQ is that a qualification can be gained through a number of different routes. It promotes the policy that an individual should be given the opportunity to demonstrate his or her learning against learning outcomes and that this shall form the basis of the recognition of successful achievement. The Framework also considers that learning should only be recognised for an award once.

The difficulty that can arise with the recognition of prior learning is that the holder of an award can move between institutions and seek exemption, on the basis of this recognised prior learning, towards a second award. This arises in particular where, for instance, the individual holds an Ordinary Bachelor Degree from one institution and wishes to undertake an Honours Bachelor Degree in another by completing a final year, or where the individual holds a Postgraduate Diploma from one institution and goes to the second to obtain a Master's Degree, using the former award as exemption against the latter. While some institutions are concerned by the potential 'double counting' of credit, one institution cannot of course rescind an award made by another. National policy direction (or agreement) in this regard may be required in order to support the continued recognition of prior learning, the mobility of the learner, and the principles underpinning the Framework.

There is also a value in sharing RPL data across institutions on the recognition given to prior certified learning to support fairness and equity in recognition practices for learners and to increase efficiency i.e. to avoid duplication of assessment.

Developing the relationship between RPL and QA

Quality assurance/enhancement policy and practice in higher education is the subject of on-going development, both in terms of internal and external review, at both national and European levels. In these contexts, it is essential that the relationship between quality assurance and all aspects of RPL is not overlooked. For example, the appropriateness of RPL to a given programme should be evaluated and documented at the time of validation, and quality assurance processes should seek and question this information. Equally, the institution should be able to set out what the quality assurance requirements are or would look like e.g. that RPL assessment criteria are clear and transparent and applied fairly; that all entrants are treated equitably (similarly robust entry criteria apply to all entry routes).

The application of quality assurance and enhancement processes which take into account the specific characteristics and challenges of recognising prior learning could assist in reinforcing and streamlining good RPL practice; provide the institution with a solid grounding on which to interrogate the effectiveness of its internal quality assurance processes; and support a wider and more consistent implementation of RPL across an institution, and between institutions.

Encouraging debate on the recognition of prior learning and its purposes

RPL is a relatively new concept in terms of education and training policy, and its value has not yet been universally accepted. Particularly, the use of the recognition of prior learning for the purposes of exemption from higher education programmes and as the basis for the conferring of a full award is often contentious. To ignore this contention would be to do a disservice to the potential of RPL, and to the overall development of education policy and practice. The Framework Implementation Network would prefer to see RPL become the subject of more active local, regional and national debate, reaching to the core of our understanding and perceptions of where learning is situated and how it is achieved. The Network would also encourage higher education and training institutions to position themselves within a learning development process which recognises learning, but without always requiring that it be formed by the institution itself.

The fact that the case studies on RPL practice provided by network members for this document do not include the recognition of prior learning for the purposes of exemption may reflect, in broad terms, some underlying concerns around the use of prior learning for this purpose. More precise reasoning however has also been identified and is important to highlight. The case studies show, for instance, that careful consideration needs to be given to the issue of whether or not all prior learning is relevant or good prior learning. While an institution may recognise prior learning for admission purposes, it may in fact wish to undo what it considers to be negative prior learning over the course of a programme.

In the same vein, questions have been raised by the Network regarding whether or not programmes leading to all classes of Framework awards are suitable for exemption. The argument is made in the case study from TCD that the nature of the Special Purpose award does not lend itself to exemption, as

programmes leading to it are designed to provide a coherent experience, the logic of which is reliant on all elements being undertaken by the learner. The recognition of prior learning against externally regulated programmes may also be difficult to do. A number of network member institutions considered that they were not in a position to consider RPL for the purposes of externally regulated programmes, partly due to the constraints placed on them by legislation and professional regulation requirements, and partly because of a general perception that these programmes in their nature and purpose are unsuited to the provision of exemption.

All of these issues go to the core of what prior learning is; the extent to which we value it; the circumstances in which we think it is more appropriate; and the reasons why we believe, openly or otherwise, that it cannot replace the new learning acquired in a formal learning setting. These are important matters worthy of further collective interrogation as practice of RPL begins to overtake policy.

Policy can lead as well as follow practice

The level of implementation of both RPL policy and practice differs significantly across institutions. This is to be expected and reflects the complexity of assessing and using the outcomes of RPL processes for admission, exemption and award, as well as learner demand in particular academic and professional areas. It also calls into question how policy can support higher education institutions as a whole, whilst acknowledging their individual stages of development. This document attempts to provide an insight into national and European RPL policy directions. The Network suggests that while policy can provide support for RPL and overall guidance and direction for its increased use, it must also look to practitioners to inform it of how best to realise its objectives. The Network considers that policy, including funding policy, should primarily be seeking to create an enabling environment which supports innovation and proven good practice; reinforces the principles that are embedded in the notion of lifelong learning and qualifications frameworks; and encourages the development of robust quality assurance and enhancement initiatives. Such an environment will also enable more widespread and effective RPL practice across a broader range of academic and professional areas.

RPL: Principles for policy & practice in higher education

The university sector Framework Implementation Network first began its discussions regarding lifelong learning in January 2010. After its first session on this topic, and its exposure to the array of elements which contribute to this concept, the Network decided that the recognition of prior learning should form the basis of the tangible output of its activities for that year. Its motivation for choosing RPL was to focus on an aspect of lifelong learning which was of particular current relevance, and to which it felt it could make a practical contribution; by both exploring current practice in this area and identifying issues arising from this practice. In addition, the Network considered that it would be useful to identify for colleagues in Ireland, and indeed in European and international networks, its conclusions regarding principles which could underpin the ongoing development of practice in this area across higher education institutions. It suggests that these principles are largely consistent with the 2005 document *Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of RPL in further and higher education*, and could be read in conjunction with these 2005 principles and guidelines.

Principles for institutional policy

- It is important that when a higher education institution is devising policies around RPL, that it informs itself of local and wider national and international higher education sector practice in this field, and engages with this practice in order to understand how policy can most usefully be shaped;
- Institutional commitment to RPL is essential, it needs to be emphasised and clearly stated in policy formulation and communication;
- Policies designed to facilitate the recognition of prior learning should be incorporated into the mainstream business of an institution e.g., into its programme validation, admission, registration, student records, and assessment policies and procedures.

Principles for practice

- Information on RPL options for programme entry and exemptions should be readily available to prospective learners explaining *inter alia*:
 - the related terminology;
 - what is required from the learner;
 - anticipated timeframes;
 - contact points;
 - any associated costs; and
 - mentoring and support.
- Where feasible, there should be a centralised contact and information point for initial queries on RPL within an institution. Any (additional) decentralised points of contact would need to be closely coordinated with this central point;
- The assessment of RPL applications should normally be decentralised to the academic unit to which an application applies, assuming that this is where the most informed assessment can take place;
- Training and appropriate guidance should be provided for both the RPL assessor and for the learner, particularly in relation to the recognition of prior experiential learning;
- The assessment of prior learning for the purposes of entry and / or exemption from elements of a programme should be conducted with reference to the learning outcomes stated in the programme documentation for these elements;
- The person(s) responsible for a final decision on the success or otherwise of an application for RPL should be clearly identifiable by colleagues within the institution and externally to the applicant;
- Institutions should seek to collect RPL data on:
 - the overall number of applications made and whether these are for the recognition of prior certified and/or prior experiential learning;
 - the fields of learning to which applications for RPL are made;
 - the number of successful applications;
 - the rates of successful participation of learners who have entered a programme via RPL; and
 - programmes, modules, units against which prior certified learning has been recognized; this may be shared with other institutions.
- Opportunities should be taken to utilise the NFQ learning outcomes as a valuable means through which to measure an institution's management of RPL, particular with regards to the lifelong learning, and access, transfer and progression objectives of the Framework.

PART 5



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PART 6

APPENDICES

A P P E N D I X 1

Case Study 1: TCD Diploma in Addiction Studies – Course Aims⁵⁰

The Diploma in Addiction Studies is a level 7 special purpose award, characteristically taken by people already in service, which leads to enhanced professional competencies and specialised knowledge across a variety of areas. It attracts 60 ECTS. The successful completion of the course enables students to achieve the following learning objectives and outcomes:

Through a series of modules focusing on Theory and Practice of Addiction Counselling, Addiction Policy, Addiction Research, Contemporary Issues – Disciplines and Addiction Practice and Fieldwork Placement the course enables students to achieve the following learning objectives and outcomes:

- (a) To examine in depth the theoretical and practical aspects of problem drug use and problem drinking;
- (b) To develop critical awareness at a theoretical level in a range of addiction counselling models and approaches;
- (c) To acquire skills and competency in practical training in a range of addiction counselling models and approaches;
- (d) To acquire breadth of knowledge in the theory and practice of ethics, underlying principles, practice issues, knowledge and critical awareness of counselling, group work, outreach and client engagement;
- (e) To develop skills and competency working in different environmental and agency contexts and with diverse client groups;
- (f) To show clear, critical assessment and planning and demonstrate competent intervention and management of caseload;
- (g) To acquire broadened in-depth knowledge base, both theoretical and practical, about contemporary issues pertaining to addiction and addiction counselling practice (HIV, Homelessness, Hepatitis C, Child Welfare and Protection, Addiction and Youth Justice, Street drinking, anti-discriminatory practice, prostitution, low threshold work, outreach work);
- (h) To acquire broadened basic knowledge base of disciplines relating to addiction – sociology, criminology, psychology, microbiology, pharmacology, family law and criminal law;
- (i) To develop a critical awareness of evaluative research;
- (j) To develop basic skills and competency at both a theoretical and practical level through a small qualitative or quantitative research project;
- (k) To examine public policy in relation to alcohol and drug problems with a detailed focus on how Irish and international public policy has evolved to acquire broadened knowledge base about the social, political, cultural and historical impacts on the development of public policy;
- (l) To develop a critical awareness of alcohol and drug policy and service provision;
- (m) To acquire skills and competencies in the effective and convincing planning, preparation and presentation of material in public.

⁵⁰ Taken from the Diploma in Addiction Studies Course Handbook (2009-2010)

A P P E N D I X 2

National University of Ireland, Galway Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Policy and Practice⁵¹

1. Introduction

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is a process that allows students to gain admission to a programme of study or to gain exemptions/credit from some parts of a programme, based on demonstrated learning achieved prior to admission. NUI Galway recognises that knowledge and skills can be acquired from a range of learning experiences, including formal, non-formal and informal. This is in line with the National Qualifications Framework goals which aim to recognise all learning achievements by supporting the development of alternative pathways to qualifications (or awards) and by facilitating the recognition of prior learning.

This policy document aims to support the development of RPL in NUI Galway by providing a coherent framework and principles which can be used by all academic units to guide them in the operation of RPL within their programmes at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. It is designed to ensure consistency and transparency in the application of the principles of RPL throughout the University.

2. Context

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is an important element of EU policy for widening access to qualifications and supporting lifelong learning. The Irish Government has made a commitment to support RPL.⁵² The purpose of RPL is to expand access to educational programmes and qualifications for people previously lacking formal qualifications and to reduce the time and cost of programmes for people who already possess some of the *knowledge, skills and competences* which a programme seeks to develop in learners.

3. Definitions

Recognition of Prior Learning

Prior Learning is learning which has taken place prior to admission to a programme. The learning can be certified or experiential.

For the purpose of this policy document the generic term RPL will be used and will incorporate the terms Recognition of Prior *Certified* Learning (RPCL) and Recognition of Prior *Experiential* Learning (RPEL). RPCL and RPEL will be used in this policy document where precise clarification between the two terms is required.

Recognition of Prior *Certified* Learning (RPCL): Where an applicant has already been awarded certification for a formal programme taken at another institution or training organisation, this prior learning can be **recognised** and may entitle the applicant to **admission** to a programme, **exemptions** from some parts of a programme or **advanced academic standing** within a programme.

Recognition of Prior *Experiential* Learning (RPEL): This involves the awarding of **credit** for learning from experience, i.e. learning which has not previously been academically accredited. In this case, the candidate must prove that the required learning outcomes have been achieved. This proof can then be used to support a claim for **admission, exemption or credit**. As a general principle, credit is **given for learning**, not for experience *per se*.

⁵¹ Further information on RPL in NUI Galway is available from: nuigalway.ie/adulteducation/RPL/welcomeorpl.html

⁵² Government of Ireland, 1998, 2000; Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999

Learning Routes

Prior Learning may have been acquired through **formal, non-formal or informal**⁵³ routes. For the purposes of this policy document these learning routes are defined as follows:

Formal learning is programme-based learning which takes place in an organised formal way. It is specifically designated as learning, with specific programme content, learning objectives, stated duration for the programme and learning support. It typically leads to certification.

Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner's point of view. It takes place through planned, organised learning activities but typically does not receive certification. Examples of non-formal learning are: learning and training activities undertaken in the workplace, voluntary sector or trade union and in community-based settings.

Informal learning is not organised or structured (in terms of objectives, time or learning support). Informal learning is in most cases unintentional from the learner's point of view. It takes place through life and work experience – and is sometimes referred to as experiential learning. It typically does not lead to certification.

Learning Outcomes

For RPL, the learning outcomes refers to learner's knowledge, understanding, skills and/or competences - what the learner knows and can do to the required standard as a result of prior learning.

Types of Credit

Specific Credit is granted where the learning outcomes achieved are deemed equivalent to the learning outcomes of a specific programme module

General Credit is granted when prior learning is not directly relevant but is deemed equivalent in level and credit weighting to modules in the proposed programme of study.

4. Policy Principles

The following principles will apply to the implementation of RPL within the University.

- Through the recognition of prior learning, the University commits to give value to all relevant learning, irrespective of mode or place of learning.
- RPL recognises learning which has occurred before admission to a course or to the relevant stage of a course.
- In seeking recognition under RPL, prior learning must be evidenced in writing or through whatever medium is appropriate to the particular learning outcomes and authenticated at the appropriate level(s).
- The focus of the University's RPL process will be on the achievement of learning, or the outcome of learning, rather than the experience of learning.
- Prior *certified* learning may entitle the candidate to exemptions on a programme, not credits. Learning which has been previously accredited is not ascribed credit on a second occasion.
- Exemptions or credits for prior *experiential* (non-certified) learning may be awarded on the basis of demonstrated learning which shows that a candidate has achieved specified learning outcomes for the programme.

⁵³ These definitions are widely accepted by EU, OECD, Cedefop, NCVA, HETAC, FETAC, etc.

- Time limits may be applied in assessing/evaluating the currency of prior learning.
- Recognition will normally be given :
 - For complete modules only;
 - Where all of the learning outcomes of a module have been achieved;
 - Up to a maximum of 50% of the total credits for an academic programme;

Candidates will normally be allowed exemption for entire modules only, not parts of them. Exceptions may be made when the module is composed of clearly distinguishable and distinct parts, for example theory + practicals.
- The University will ensure that academic standards comparable to those attained on programmes by traditional mode will be maintained and applied throughout the RPL process.
- Participation in the RPL process is voluntary for applicants and will be facilitated by the University.
- Processes and practices for RPL will be clearly stated and documented and available to all potential applicants.
- In the RPL process candidates will demonstrate the appropriate academic level of learning as determined by the academic unit involved.
- During assessment for RPL, candidates must demonstrate that they understand the theory as well as the practical learning elements of a module.
- The University will ensure that the RPL process shall be consistent, fair and transparent. It will be conducted within a reasonable timeframe for each applicant.

5. The Practice

Presentation of Learning for Evaluation: The Learning Portfolio

Responsibility for submitting claims for the recognition of prior learning rests with individual applicants. Applicants will normally have an initial consultation with a dedicated RPL Advisor who will provide information and advice about the process and who will explain the steps involved in making an application.

The mechanism proposed by the University for the presentation of learning is that of the Learning Portfolio in which the applicant presents evidence of learning. Each Learning Portfolio will be accompanied by an RPL Application Form.

(A) Prior Certified Learning

In the Certified Learning Portfolio, evidence of learning will be presented by the applicant in the form of official transcripts of results and formal syllabi accompanied by relevant support documents.

(B) Prior Experiential Learning

In the Experiential Learning Portfolio, the applicant will present evidence of learning, arranged to demonstrate the achievement of learning outcomes of the relevant programme module. Where experiential learning is concerned a number of methods can be used to demonstrate the achievement of learning outcomes. These may include: written evidence, a formal presentation, an interview, performance of set tasks or combinations of these. Experiential Learning may include both informal and non-formal learning.

Evaluation of Prior Certified Learning by the University

Evaluation of prior certified learning will be carried out by persons who are trained and competent. Recognition of prior certified learning is subject to evaluation of the following: student's academic record; course/programme of study; syllabus, course description, learning outcomes, number of contact hours, forms of assessment(s); NQAI level of qualification awarded and awarding institution.

Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning by the University

Assessment of prior experiential learning will be carried out by persons who are trained and competent – ideally those who are or have been involved in the conventional assessment process for the subject(s)/module(s) in question.

The use of a range of assessment mechanisms will be facilitated. These will be appropriate to the module content and comparable to other assessment processes used to determine whether learning outcomes have been achieved. Assessment may be based on the portfolio submitted or other methods such as written exams, essays, assignments, multiple choice questionnaires, oral presentations etc, which may be used as appropriate. In general, the assessment will be based on an evaluation of the prior learning presented. Evidence submitted by an applicant will be available for review by the External Examiner.

Assessors and other persons involved in the recognition process will be given training and support as appropriate.

Criteria for Assessment

The following key criteria will be used by staff to help them to determine if the evidence of learning presented is appropriate and sufficient.

- | | |
|---------------------|--|
| Validity | Does the prior learning presented match the learning outcomes required by the relevant academic unit? Is the prior learning being presented by the applicant at the academic level required by the relevant academic unit? |
| Sufficiency | Is there enough evidence to demonstrate that the learning outcomes have been achieved? |
| Authenticity | Is it clear that the prior learning is that of the applicant? |
| Reliability | Is the evidence of prior learning presented reliable? |
| Currency | Is the prior learning achieved and being assessed current? Is it up to date with current knowledge and practice? |

Outcome of Assessment Process

The outcome of the assessment process can be one or more of the following; the granting of admission to a specific academic programme within the University; advanced academic standing within a programme of study; exemptions or credits if the required standards of learning have been met.

Validation

All RPL decisions must be validated by the appropriate Academic Unit and signed off by the relevant College which will advise the Admissions Office of all RPL recommendations and decisions.

Communication

All prospective applicants and enrolled students will be made aware of RPL opportunities in programme literature and on the University's website. Applicants will be fully informed of the

application process, the stages within it and the nature and range of evidence that is considered appropriate to support a claim for recognition of prior learning, including the learning outcomes against which prior learning will be assessed. All applicants will be advised, in writing, by the University, of the outcome of the RPL assessment process.

6. The RPL Process in Summary

1. Information regarding the RPL process will be made available to applicants.
2. The applicant initiates the process by providing appropriate outline information in support of their application. An RPL Application Form may be used by the applicant to provide this information.
3. Consultation with an RPL advisor will be arranged. Applicants receive advice and support for preparation of evidence and verification of prior learning in the required format.
4. The learning evidence plus the completed RPL Application form will be presented to the University for assessment by the relevant academic unit.
5. The outcome of the assessment process will be verified by the relevant University Board/Committee and communicated to the Admissions Office and any other relevant administrative units.
6. The outcome of the assessment process will be transmitted to the applicant within a reasonable period of time.

7. Review and Updating

These RPL policies and practices will be subject to regular review and updating in line with emerging good practice.

A P P E N D I X 3

Case Study Participants

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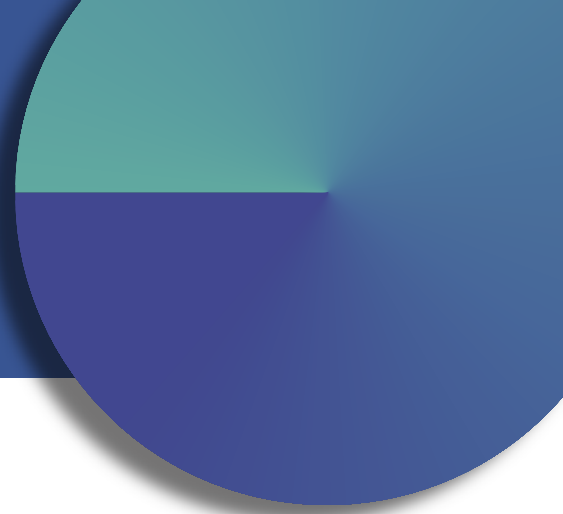
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A P P E N D I X 4

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PART 7



GLOSSARY OF TERMS

This glossary is based on the (most) common usage of terms in policies, procedures and practice concerning RPL and the Irish National Framework of Qualifications.

Access

Access concerns entry to and participation in education and training institutions or programmes. In certain circumstances before admittance is granted certain criteria may need to be fulfilled. Some examples include a requirement for a particular qualification (award), attainment of a particular level of education, skills or work experience. There may be a distinction between eligibility criteria (e.g. prior learning achievement) and selection criteria (e.g. to allocate limited places, equality criteria).

Alignment

Qualifications (awards) of professional bodies and awarding bodies that are based in other countries may be “aligned” with the NFQ (a similar, but less specific, term is “recognised through the Framework”) and in accordance with quality assurance criteria. For example, some awards made in Ireland by awarding bodies from the UK are aligned with the NFQ. Such qualifications can then be better understood in an Irish context and compared to other qualifications in the Framework. For further information please see the following link: www.nqai.ie/AlignmentReports.html

Assessment

The sum of methods and processes used to evaluate learning attainments (knowledge, skill and competences) of an individual against the standards of the unit of assessment (e.g. module, unit, programme, qualification). *Formative* assessment is used to support the learner. *Summative* assessment is used to certify whether learning outcomes have been achieved and whether the learner is therefore entitled to gain entry, credit etc. for his/her learning.

Award

An award or qualification is conferred by the awarding body and indicates that an individual has acquired certain standards of learning, usually through having successfully completed a programme of study and attained the relevant standards. An example of an award is an Honours Bachelor Degree.

Award- type

An award-type is a category of named awards which have common features and the same level in the Irish NFQ. Examples of award-types include: Junior Certificate (NFQ level 3), Advanced Certificate (NFQ Level 6), and Honours Bachelor Degree (NFQ Level 8). There are 16 major award-types in the NFQ. Award-types can reflect a mix of standards of knowledge, skill and competence which is independent of any specific field of learning.

Bologna Process

The Bologna process, inaugurated in 1999, is a voluntary process currently involving 47 countries (both EU and non-EU). Within the EU, the Bologna Process aims to create a European Higher Education Area by 2010. To achieve this, the Framework for the European Higher Education Area or the ‘Bologna Framework’ (2005) was developed to build on the three cycle system for higher education. It introduced qualifications descriptors and associated credit range guidelines (bachelor/master/doctorate). This Framework aims to make the recognition of qualifications (awards) easier, thus allowing citizens to travel more easily between countries for employment purposes or to pursue additional studies. The compatibility of National Qualifications Frameworks or systems to the Bologna Framework will eventually be verified by each participating state. Ireland completed this verification process in 2006.

Credit

A credit system is a systematic way of measuring notional student workload associated with an educational programme, qualification, module or unit. Credit systems are based on a common currency which can be used to support accumulation and transfer of credit within and between programmes and institutions. The definition of credit in higher education systems varies, depending on the parameters used. A specific volume or range of credit is assigned to a qualification or programme. A student must accumulate a certain volume of credit in order to achieve a qualification. Credit is achieved following a verification or assessment that the relevant learning outcomes or standards have been achieved.

European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)

The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) is a tool which enables students to transfer and accumulate credits for learning achieved through higher education and is the basis for credit systems in Irish higher education. In ECTS *60 ECTS credits* are attached to the workload of a typical full-time academic year.

European Qualifications Framework (EQF)

The European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning, 2008, is an overarching 8 level qualifications framework linking countries' qualifications systems, acting as a translation device to make qualifications more readable and understandable across 33 countries and systems in Europe. The Irish NFQ, formally referenced to the EQF in 2006, remains the most significant reference for individuals gaining qualifications in Ireland.

Formal learning

Formal learning takes place through programmes of education or training that are delivered by education and training providers. It is assessed and can lead to awards.

Informal Learning

Learning that takes place through life and work experience, which may also be referred to as experiential learning. Often it is learning that is unintentional and the learner may not recognise at the time of the experience that it contributed to his or her knowledge, skills and competence.

Institutes of Technology (IOTs)

The institutes of technology (IOTs) are designated under State legislation. They provide programmes leading to HETAC awards at NFQ Levels 6-10. The institutes of technology may also make their own awards at specified NFQ levels under delegated authority from HETAC.

Learning outcomes

Learning outcomes describe what a learner is expected to know, to understand and / or be able to do following successful completion of a period of learning. Awards in the NFQ are based on learning outcomes. These are set out in level indicators and in award-type descriptors

Level

There are 10 levels in the NFQ. Each level sets out a range of standards of knowledge, skill and competence. For example, FETAC awards at NFQ Levels 1 and 2 recognise basic learning; the Leaving Certificate is placed at NFQ levels 4 and 5; an Honours Bachelor Degree is placed at NFQ Level 8; a Master Degree at NFQ Level 9.

Lifelong Learning

Lifelong learning includes all learning activities undertaken throughout life. The term recognises that learning is not confined to childhood or the classroom, but takes place throughout life and in a range of situations. As such it not only enhances social inclusion, active citizenship and personal development, but also competitiveness and employability.

National Awarding Bodies

For the purposes of the Framework, an awarding body is a national body that has the power to give an individual a qualification (award) for his/her learning. The national awarding bodies which have their awards included in the Framework are: the State Examinations Commission, FETAC, HETAC, the universities, DIT and institutes of technology with delegated authority to make awards. However many other awarding bodies such as professional bodies or UK awarding bodies may also have their awards included in or aligned with the NFQ.

Non-formal Learning

Learning that takes place alongside the mainstream systems of education and training. It may be assessed but does not normally lead to formal certification. Examples of non-formal learning are: learning and training activities undertaken in the workplace, voluntary sector or trade union and in community-based learning

Programme of Education and Training

Programme (of education and training) means any process by which learners may acquire knowledge, skill or competence and includes courses of study or instruction, apprenticeships, training and employment.

Progression

The process by which learners may move from one programme of education and training to another where each programme is of a higher level than the preceding programme.

Qualification

No distinction is made between an award and a qualification.

Recognition

Recognition of learning outcomes achieved or of qualifications can be done through a variety of processes:

- the award of qualifications, credit or exemptions
- comparison with existing qualifications or with a level on the NQF
- acknowledgment of the value of learning achieved or of qualifications by stakeholders in society e.g. employers

Awarding bodies, the NQAI (with respect to individual applications for recognition of foreign qualifications or for Irish qualifications abroad) and providers can be involved in recognition.

Recognition of Prior Learning

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is defined as 'a process by which prior learning is given a value'. It concerns learning that has taken place, but has not necessarily been assessed or measured. Such prior learning may have been acquired through formal, non-formal, or informal routes.

Transfer

Transfer refers to the process by which learners may transfer from one programme of education and training to another programme, having received recognition for knowledge, skill or competence acquired.

Validation

In the European context, the term 'validation' is used to refer to 'confirmation by a competent body that learning outcomes (knowledge, skills and/or competences) acquired by an individual in a formal, non-formal or informal setting have been assessed against predefined criteria and are compliant with the requirements of a validation standard. Validation typically leads to certification.

FIN

The University Sector
Framework
Implementation
Network (FIN)

All Hallows College

Dublin City University (DCU)

Froebel College of Education

Institution of Public Administration (IPA)

Marino Institute of Education

Mary Immaculate College

Mater Dei Institute of Education

Milltown Institute of Theology and Philosophy

National College of Art and Design (NCAD)

National University of Ireland (NUI)

National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG)

National University of Ireland, Maynooth (NUIM)

Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI)

Royal Irish Academy of Music (RIAM)

St. Angela's College

St. Patrick's College of Education

Trinity College Dublin (TCD)

University College Cork (UCC)

University College Dublin (UCD)

University of Limerick (UL)