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).

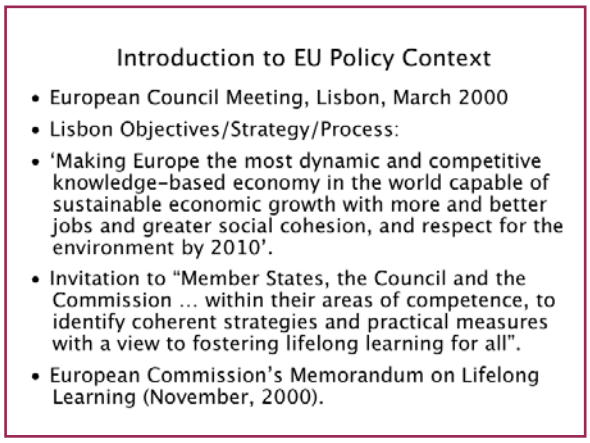
These presentations, which combined set out the policy and context for lifelong learning, are set out in an abbreviated form below. Unabbreviated presentations are available from the website of the network.[13]

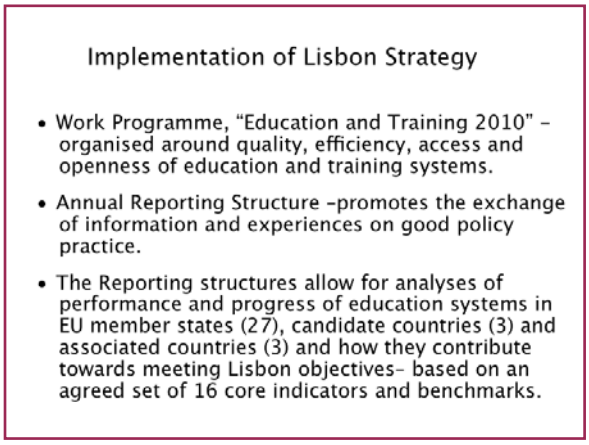
[13] Unabbreviated presentations are available at: www.nfqnetwork.ie/Resources/Default.171.html (Accessed 24 August 2011)

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]

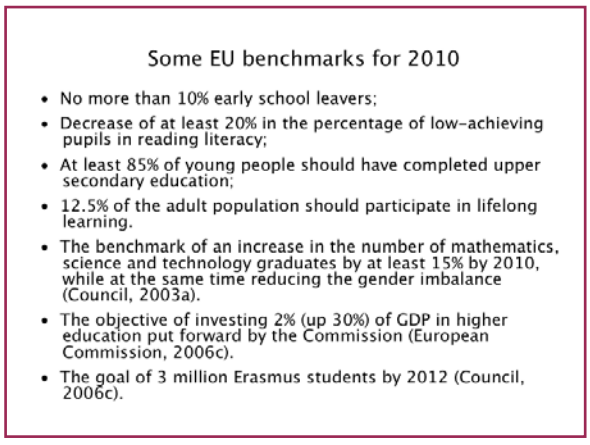
Catherine provided a broad overview of the emergence of lifelong learning as a concept and policy driver. She outlined some current policy objectives at both a European and national level and identified some persistent challenges within Irish lifelong learning policy and practice:





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).



[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.

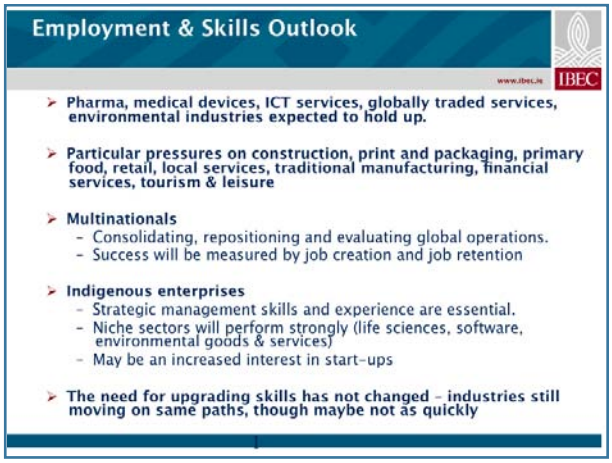
The NFQ can play a very significant role assisting in this work. The Framework maps our existing education and training awards system. The concept of minor, special purpose or supplemental awards can be further developed and interpreted as a mechanism to offer a wide range of learning opportunities, 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.

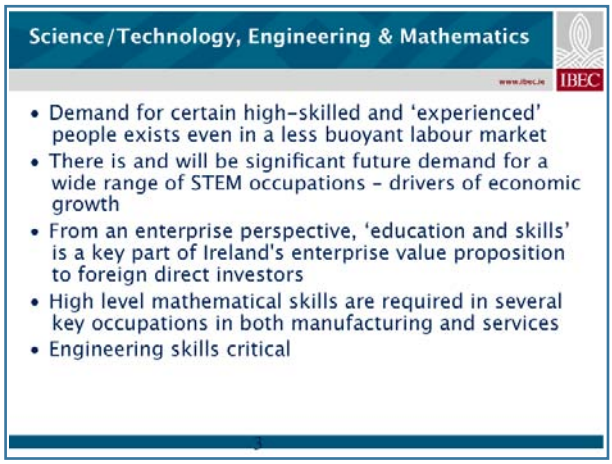
TONY DONOHOE Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC): Lifelong learning and labour-market activation

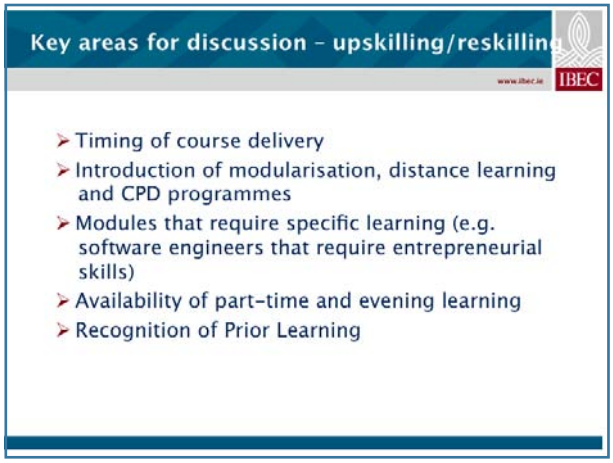
Tony commented on the changed context in which the network is discussing lifelong learning: a changed economic perspective has put activation at the top of the political agenda and the education sector needs to develop a flexible supply response to labour-market opportunities. Enhanced links between 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 scheme[16] 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)

Tony Donoghue's Presentation Slides:

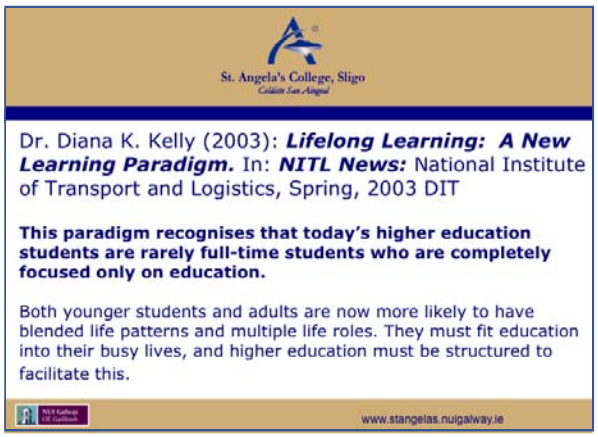


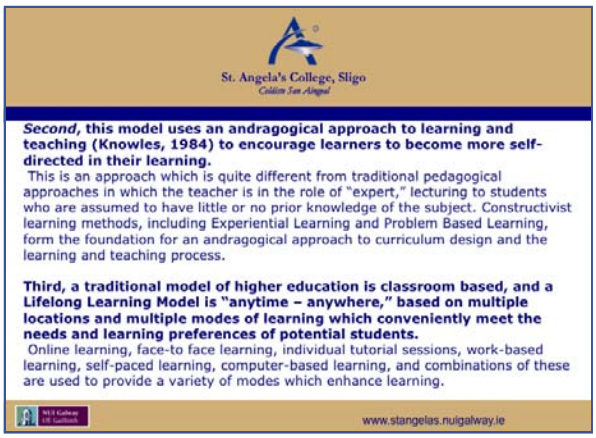


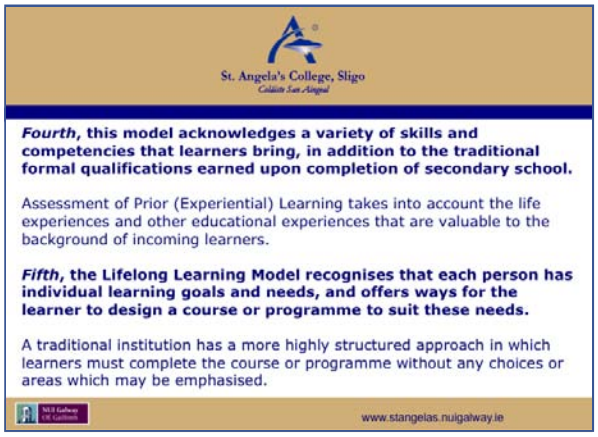


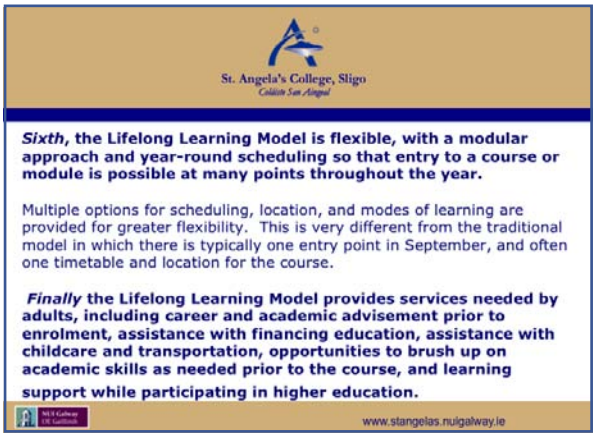
DECLAN COURELL (St. Angela's College, Sligo):
Lifelong learning and continuing professional development

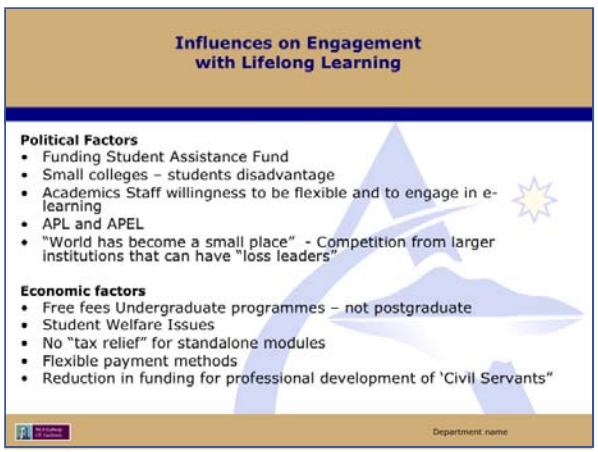
Declan spoke with reference to Kelly (2003)[17], and what she says about the lifelong learning landscape i.e. that students no longer exclusively study full-time or are solely focused on education; lifelong learning is not necessarily based in a particular location at a particular time and that flexible 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.

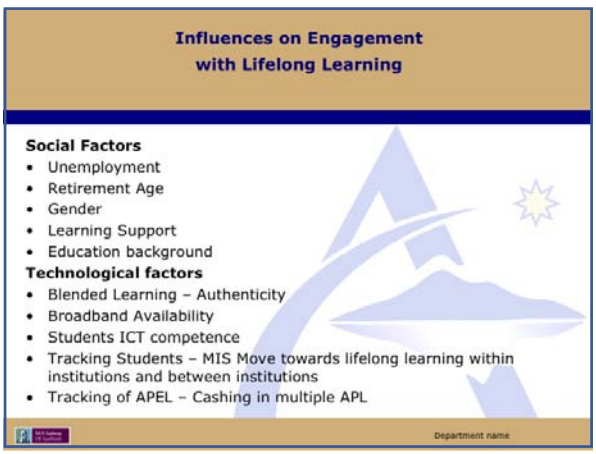




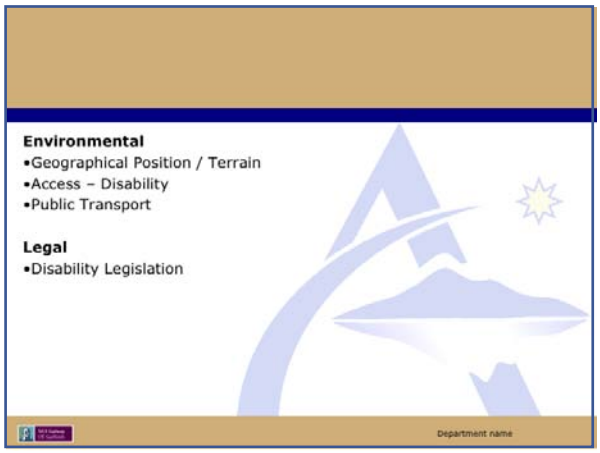








[17] Kelly, D. (2003) Lifelong Learning: A New Learning Paradigm. IN: *NITL News:* National Institute of Transport and Logistics, Spring, 2003, Dublin Institute of Technology, Dublin.



"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".

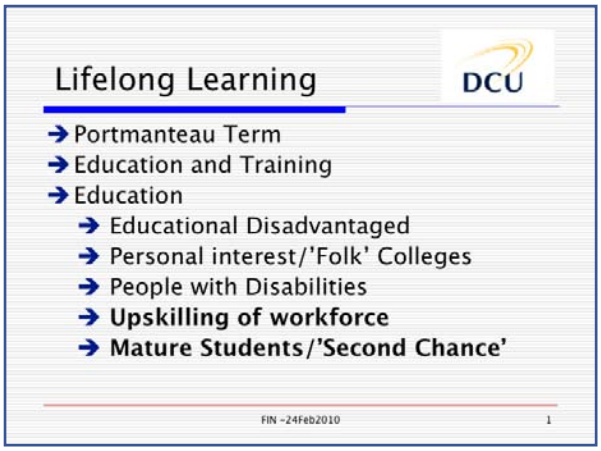
Diana K. Kelly. ***Lifelong Learning: A New Learning Paradigm***. In: ***NITL News:*** National Institute of Transport and Logistics, Spring, 2003, DIT.

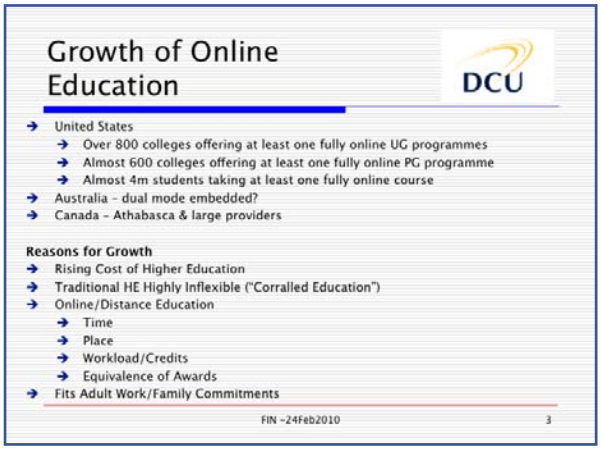
SEAMUS FOX (DUBLIN CITY UNIVERSITY):

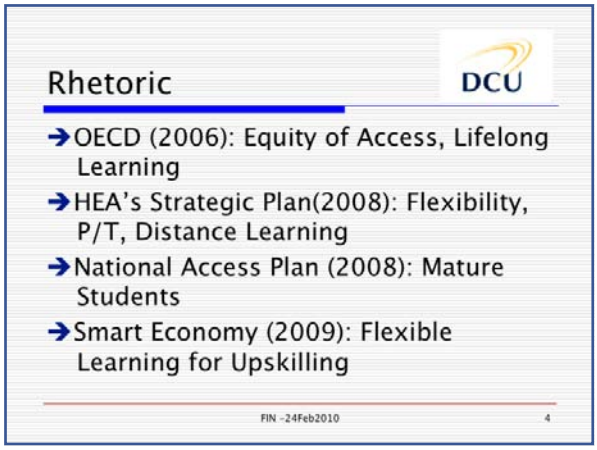
Lifelong learning and distance education

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.







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

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

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

Barriers

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

Exception – Labour Market Activisation 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

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)

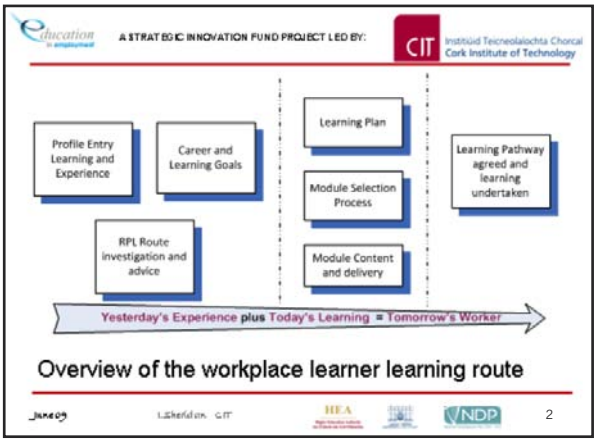
Conclusions

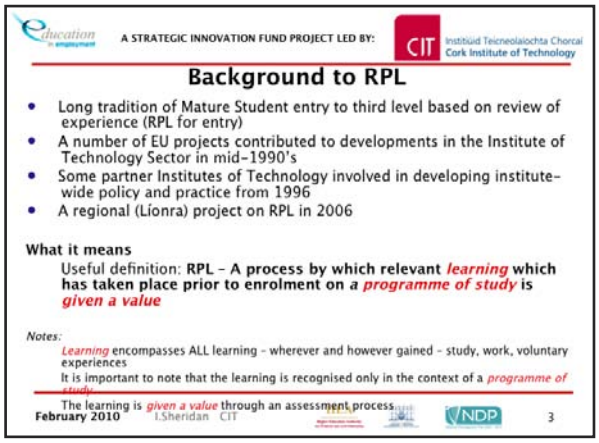
- Lifelong Learning – Portmanteau
- Focus on 'nearly readies' & high-level upskilling
- Online education highly appropriate for these groups
- Need to (1) Change funding policies and (2) Change culture of HEIs

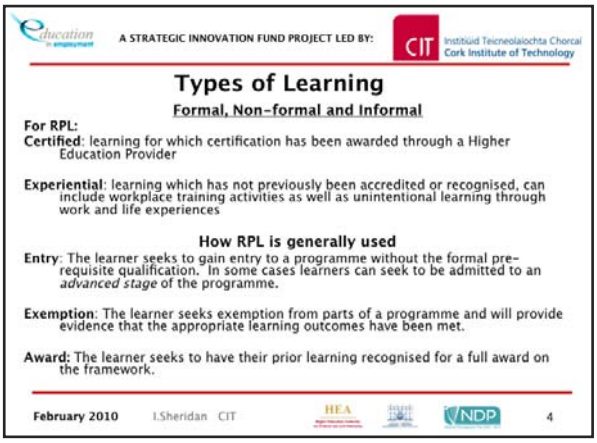
IRENE SHERIDAN (CORK INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY):

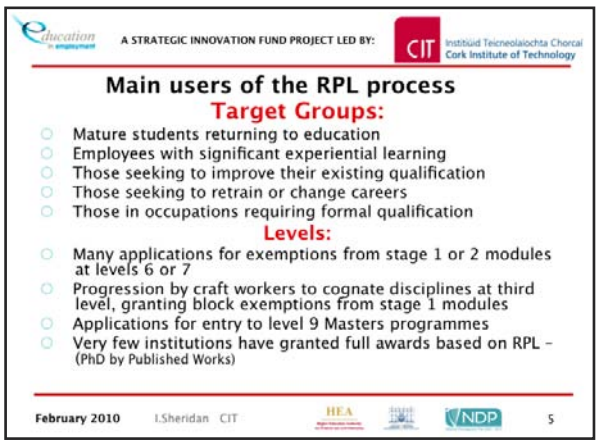
Lifelong learning and the recognition of prior learning

Irene's presentation was framed by the work completed by CIT and partner organisations[18] in compiling a practice focused RPL report in 2009[19] 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.









[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