

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 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 education, 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.

Nuala Hunt

Head of Continuing Education in Art and Design (NCAD)
BA, MA, MSc, Grad.Dip.UTL