

# PART 4

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

## Introduction

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

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

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

### **Acknowledging and addressing the costs of RPL**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **Monitoring what happens to prior learning after it has been recognised**

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

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

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

### **Developing the relationship between RPL and QA**

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

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

### **Encouraging debate on the recognition of prior learning and its purposes**

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

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

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

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

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

### **Policy can lead as well as follow practice**

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

### **RPL: Principles for policy & practice in higher education**

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

#### **Principles for institutional policy**

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

## Principles for practice

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