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An Exploration of Recognition of Prior Learning in Irish Higher Education: Social Responsibility and Lifelong Learning

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Abstract

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is a process whereby evidence of learning that has taken place prior to enrolment on a programme of study is recognised and given value in the context of a destination award. In general terms, this includes the identification, recognition, evidencing and valuing of formal, non-formal and informal learning. RPL is used as a mechanism to facilitate participation in higher education. RPL is also of relevance to the workplace and those seeking to re-enter work as it supports the inclusion of work based and situated learning in formal academic programmes.

In establishing the current landscape relating to Recognition of Prior Learning in Irish Higher Education, this paper will initially consider working definitions of RPL and follow with an exploration of the drivers and benefits of RPL. The literature review will outline RPL policy developments from an international and national perspective and follow with a review of RPL practice with respect to the Irish Higher Education landscape.

The paper addresses the national and European contexts as the backdrop within which institutions develop policy and practice for RPL. Social responsibility is considered in terms of access and inclusion as well as provision of information and management of expectations through quality assurance mechanisms.   Considerations include the concept of social justice. Following Hamer, the paper will seek to link social justice to Axel Honneth's theory of recognition, exploring issues as perceived by practitioners within higher education (Hamer, 2013).

Introduction

Higher education in Ireland encompasses three primary groupings of institution types namely the Universities, Institutes of Technology and other providers. The third grouping tends to include private colleges and specialised education provision, for the purposes of this paper, the Higher Education Colleges Association (HECA) and others are included as the third grouping. In 2013/14 there were 211,633 enrolments on higher education programmes in Ireland. The seven Universities accounting for 52% of the higher education student population, 42% of students are registered in the 14 Institutes of Technology and 5% in other colleges. (HEA, 2014b)

RPL is defined as a process whereby prior learning is given a value (European Commission, 2008; NQAI, 2005; OECD, 2004). RPL can operate to provide recognition for advanced entry and non-standard admissions to the learning system and is also used to award credit for specific modules within programmes. Cooper & Harris refer to RPL as *"a specialised pedagogic practice that provides tools for navigating access to new learning opportunities"* (p. 447, Cooper and Harris, 2013). RPL encourages lifelong learning and the return to education throughout life depending on an individual's needs. It may be formative (supporting a learning process but not leading to a qualification) or summative, leading to a qualification or to the award of credit (Duvekot, 2010).

For the purposes of this paper the following definition of RPL as detailed in the European Inventory on validation of informal and non-formal learning, country report Ireland 2014 is used by the authors;

"RPL incorporates prior formal, informal and non-formal learning and that which is validated within the context of a specified destination award from level one to ten on the national framework of qualifications" (p. 3, European Commission, Cedefop, ICF International; 2014).

On assessment, RPL can result in admission to a programme, advanced entry to a programme or the award of exemption(s) from module(s) on a programme, assessment of experiential learning can be awarded credits and or grades (Werquin, 2010a, NQAI, 2005).

Drivers and benefits of RPL in Irish context

RPL plays a significant role in the context of lifelong learning where an individual can expect to have many roles over a lifetime, accumulating knowledge, skills and competence through involvement in the workplace, through professional training or as a result of participation in a

formal learning setting. As society aspires to the knowledge economy, the way we live, work and learn is constantly evolving, with renewed emphasis on activating the learner's own responsibility within the context of lifelong and life-wide learning (European Commission, 2000; Duvekot *et al.*, 2007; Su, 2011). As noted by Hamer 2011 ' The formal recognition of prior learning (RPL) has long been lauded and even…doggedly pursued as a tool of social justice and equity within education sectors across the world' (Hamer 2011, Harris 1999, Wheelahan, Miller & Newton 2002, Castle & Attwood 2001, Cleary et al 2002). Sursock and Smidt report on the far reaching changes in attitudes and values that are occurring in higher education across Europe including the diversity of locations where learning can take place (Sursock & Smitdt, 2010).

According to Feutrie, Ireland has a tradition of RPL and operational principles in place, but only dispersed initiatives and practices realised on the ground (Feutrie, 2007). The challenge therefore, is how to provide for RPL in a more coherent, consistent approach which will bring reassurance in terms of Quality Assurance processes, transparency for providers, efficiencies in the learning processes, and a sense of agency for the candidates where they are central to the process and that RPL is not an activity at the margins of higher education.

According to Werquin RPL benefits society generally (Werquin, 2010a). Taking a global perspective, RPL benefits individuals, employers, the education system, governments and trade unions (Werquin, 2010a). Within each perspective drivers can be identified which have been significant in promoting RPL and generally raising its profile. Figure 1 below outlines benefits and drivers of RPL which will be explored in turn.
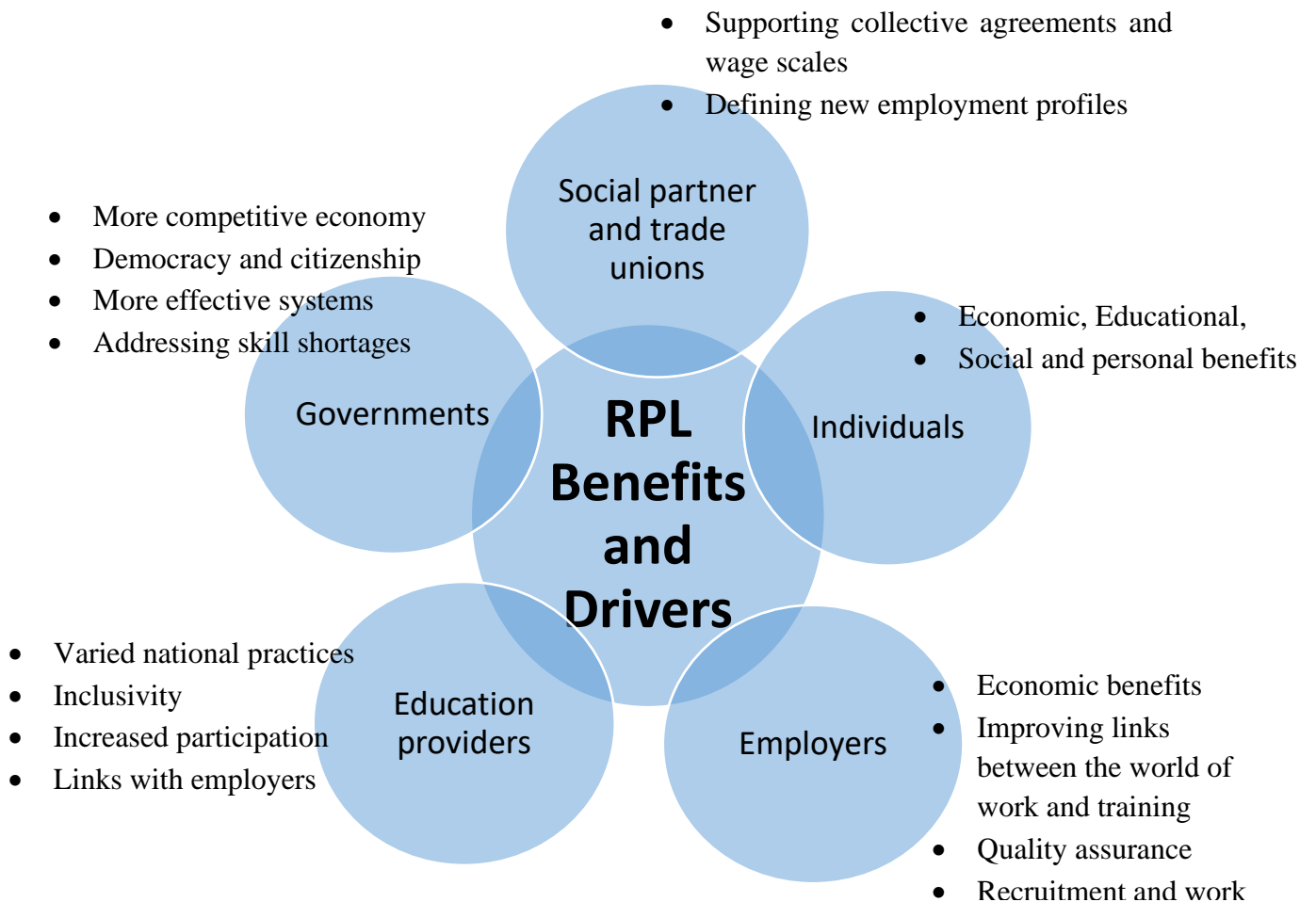
- Supporting collective agreements and wage scales
- Defining new employment profiles

Social partner and trade unions

- More competitive economy
- Democracy and citizenship
- More effective systems
- Addressing skill shortages

Governments

RPL Benefits and Drivers

- Economic, Educational,
- Social and personal benefits

Individuals

- Varied national practices
- Inclusivity
- Increased participation
- Links with employers

Education providers

Employers

- Economic benefits
- Improving links between the world of work and training
- Quality assurance
- Recruitment and work

Fig 1. Benefits and drivers of RPL (from Werquin 2010a)

Individuals

For the individual, RPL can provide economic, educational, social and personal benefits (Werquin, 2010a). Availing of an RPL process allows an individual to attain a qualification in a shorter time frame, and this may result in a cost saving yielding economic benefit to the candidate, often in the form of reduction in fees, but also a reduction in their potential loss of earnings while in engaged with further studies. In terms of educational benefits, the candidate profits from gaining access to the formal learning system and from having their non-formal and informal learning formally valued, often allowing for a "second-chance" to avail of another qualification, and hence into the lifelong learning system. In terms of social benefits, RPL

makes a positive contribution towards social cohesion in terms of equal access to qualifications and broadening participation generally.

On an individual level, the formal acknowledgement of a candidate's learning acts as a powerful catalyst to motivate and support the development of increased self-esteem and confidence (Honneth 1995, 2007, Conrad & Wardrop, 2010; Hamer, 2012). According to Hamer, RPL may provide a mechanism to secure ontological security, stating; *"candidates' seek a sense of social place and value, including an acknowledgement of their abilities and ongoing contribution to their community,"* within which RPL has a role (Hamer, 2013). This is also in keeping with Honneth's recognition theory of self-realisation and identity formation (Sandberg & Kubiak, 2013).

Employers
From the employer's perspective the benefits to be achieved from the recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes are, on the whole, economic. Employers are motivated by the potential cost savings inherent in reducing the timeframe towards employees attaining a qualification; they also benefit from enhanced retention rates.

RPL is a critical element linking the workplace and the formal learning system. Numerous government reports highlight the key role played by the formal learning system and in doing so focus on the importance of its engagement with industry and the wider community in order to better meet the changing needs of employers (Department of Education & Skills, 2011; EGFSN, 2011).

In the workplace, employers must meet relevant specific regulatory requirements as set down from time to time by regulatory bodies and professional associations. For example within engineering, shipping, construction, or within the healthcare sectors minimum qualification standards prevail and continue to emerge. RPL can play a key role in ensuring that experiential and other forms of learning can be harvested in meeting these changing regulations. In addition to regulated professions, RPL can be used to motivate employees interested in returning for reskilling or upskilling and for continuing professional development purposes. Interestingly, RPL can be used to assist the entry of migrants into the workforce through such mechanisms, and generally support mobility and the globalization of workers (Guo, 2013).

RPL has a role in making visible the knowledge, skills and competences required within the workplace setting. Such approaches are used by human resource management systems in Europe to support organisational management during times of rapid development or change.

RPL is used to support recruitment processes in Europe and South America, lowering recruitment costs and assessing the capacity of new employees for adapting to change and problem solve in practice (Werquin, 2010). In making visible knowledge, skills and competences, employers can organise employees around the various roles an example of these arrangements is the Competency-based Training Framework (Bristol-Aerospace, Manitoba, Canada) (Werquin, 2010).

Education providers
The knowledge economy and has been underpinned with key policy developments supporting innovation and lifelong learning. The Bologna agreement, signed on 19th June 1999, had the express aim of developing "*A Europe of knowledge*" (Bologna, 1999). This was followed in 2000, with the publication of the Memorandum on Lifelong Learning, embedding European commitment to the knowledge age. The commission defined learning as:

"all purposeful learning activity, undertaken on an ongoing basis with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence" (European Commission, 2000).

The Memorandum stated that lifelong learning must become the core principle behind which all education and training provision is delivered (European Commission, 2000). The challenge, then, is to provide for this reality and to allow for individuals to access the formal learning system as and when the need arises over a lifetime.

Certain traditional institutions have incorporated the recognition of non-formal and informal learning as a way to increase participation of non-traditional learners or to increase numbers. According to Pitman and Vidovich (2013), incorporating RPL is used to enhance the standing of institutions in Australia who carefully position RPL amongst other measures to broaden their appeal to a more diverse student group.

RPL can also play an important role in developing meaningful partnerships between higher education institutions and employers through the recognition of the workplace itself as a valid and valuable centre of learning and the co-creation of contextualised learning pathways incorporating work-based learning, RPL and appropriate learning supports in the workplace.

Governments
For governments, a more competitive economy is tied to streamlining or upgrading systems to develop human capital or mechanisms to support lifelong learning. For Ireland, RPL provides the mechanism to support upskilling and reskilling needs of the workforce. In 2011 the Expert Group on Future Skill Needs (EGFSN) published, *"Developing Recognition of Prior Learning*

(RPL); the role of RPL in the context of the nationals skills strategy upskilling objectives," strategically linking RPL to labour market activation and up-skilling of the workforce (Expert Group on Future Skill Needs, 2011). The main finding of the 2011 report notes the availability of significant expertise on RPL in Ireland, however finds that a cohesive national approach for RPL is required to optimise provision. The report calls for *"leadership and sustained commitment to implementing a fully-fledged RPL system"* (p. 44, Expert Group on Future Skill Needs, 2011).

RPL plays a central role in terms of its impact on democracy and citizenship, by increasing an individual's opportunities to access the lifelong learning system. In 2014, the HEA launched a new action plan for equity of access to higher education. This consultation paper informed the Department of Education & Skills Higher Education System Performance Framework 2014-2016 (Higher Education Authority, 2014b). Reports from previous years show that access to higher education is a continuing strategic theme within HEA policy. In the period 2008-2010 the HEA summarised the main achievements as, *"Institution wide approaches to access ...enhancing access through lifelong learning ...investment in widening participation in higher education,"* within which RPL could have relevance (Higher Education Authority, 2011).

As reported by the OECD, *"Ireland's workers suffered badly in the economic and financial crisis"* with unemployment going from 4% in 2007 to 15% in 2011 (p. 1, OECD, 2014a). In response the Irish government launched a number of initiatives aimed at reskilling and up-skilling both the labour force and those currently facing unemployment. RPL is a key aspect of many of the initiatives. The National Employment Action Plan is Ireland's main activation policy for supporting those who are unemployed to return to the workplace.

Current Government initiatives such as Springboard and ICT conversion programmes incorporate RPL and offer free third level places to those without work in areas where there are employment opportunities. Launched in 25th May 2011, the Springboard initiative was created to provide 6000 new places in higher education for the unemployed. The highly successful initiative has resulted in over 10,000 people having taken up places, of whom some 40% have achieved employment as a direct result of the programme. The HEA manages the programme for the Department of Education and Skills. As stated, " *The Springboard initiative in higher education offers free courses at certificate, degree and masters level leading to*

qualifications in areas where there are employment opportunities in the economy," (Springboard, 2015).

Trade unions and social partners

The trade unions support RPL as a mechanism for their members to achieve certain levels of qualifications and to reap the benefits from having acquired same. Commonly wage agreements and pay scales are linked to levels of qualification obtained by employees.

In other countries the recognition of non-formal and informal learning is used to define new employment profiles and support the re-organisation of employees in periods of rapid change (Werquin, 2010a). Within the student union movement, there is broad support for RPL to capture the broader range of knowledge, skills and competencies acquired in the course of college life.

Europe has seen significant restructuring and updating of education policies, structures and systems in the last twenty years, within which RPL plays an increasingly important role.

Policy Development Context

RPL policy nationally is informed from a number of perspectives as indicated in the diagram below. These will be discussed in more detail in the following sections.
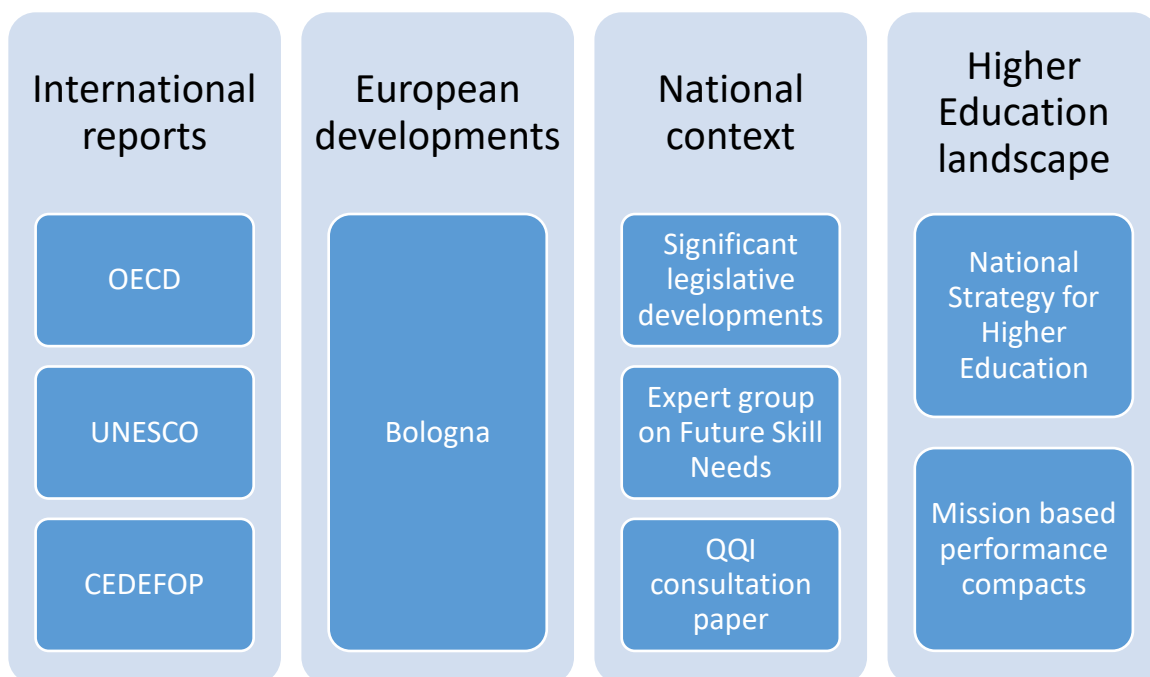
International reports	European developments	National context	Higher Education landscape
OECD	Bologna	Significant legislative developments	National Strategy for Higher Education
UNESCO		Expert group on Future Skill Needs	Mission based performance compacts
CEDEFOP		QQI consultation paper	

Fig 2. Developments in supporting and developing RPL policy

Significant international reports

Various international organisations have contributed to the literature on RPL. Notable are the inventories delivered by the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO).

In 2012 CEDEFOP noted a strengthening of the links between the validation of non-formal and informal learning and the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) systems in a report entitled *Development of National Qualifications Frameworks in Europe* (Bjørnåvold & Pevec-Grm, 2012). This report and the numerous inventories produced on an ongoing basis by CEDEFOP provide a strong knowledge base on which to reference European practice. Focusing on the challenges for RPL delivery, the 2014 report highlights the issue of access, awareness and social recognition. Fragmentation of RPL and financial sustainability, coherence and professionalization of staff along with data collection were also explored (European Commission; CEDEFOP ; ICF International; 2014).

Reporting on issues and challenges in the Irish landscape, the report focused on gaps in information and communication on RPL, dearth of information on the costs of RPL and little evaluation of practice, ambiguity as to the role of practitioners and a lack of dedicated funding for resources to deliver RPL (European Commission; CEDEFOP ; ICF International; 2014). These provide valuable insight as to the current state of play with RPL practice in Ireland and valuable insights into opportunities for targeted initiatives to improve practices on the ground.

The OECD delivers research and analysis of economically relevant information to inform policy decisions amongst member states. In 2010, the OECD published Recognising Non-Formal and Informal Learning; Outcomes, Policies and Practices (Werquin, 2010a). This publication set out the context and main concepts for RPL, the significance of RPL for individuals and employers and RPL and public policy. The OECD's *Recognition of Non-Formal and Informal Learning: Country Practices Report 2010,* made specific reference to the Irish National Skills strategy which notes particular competencies such as problem solving, innovation, communication, literacy and team-work as key competencies that may be acquired informally (Werquin, 2010b; Expert Group on Future Skills, 2007).

In 2012 *UNESCO Guidelines for the Recognition, Validation and Accreditation of the Outcomes of Non-formal and Informal Learning* were published (UNESCO, 2012). Outlining the purpose and principles for RPL, this publication provides information on key areas of action

at national level underlining the growing importance of RPL for society and further underlining UNESCO's commitment to lifelong learning for all. The six key areas of action outlined in the UNESCO guidelines are particularly insightful; positioning RPL as a key component of national lifelong learning strategy, accessible to all, integral to education and training systems, involving a co-ordinated national structure involving all stakeholders, supporting the capacity building of RPL personnel and ensuring sustainable systems.

European Developments

Recognition of prior formal, non-formal and informal learning is a key policy area across Europe relating directly to the establishment of the two European Frameworks and the associated national frameworks. The establishment of the *European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning* (EQF - LLL) and the *Bologna Framework for the European Higher Education Area* (EHEA) both include RPL as a central theme , and have served to highlight RPL as a critical element (Council of the European Union, 2009; European Commission, 2010; 2015).

The most recent significant recommendation from the Council of the European Union, namely, *The Council recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the Validation of non-formal and informal learning* recommends that all countries have RPL procedures in place by 2018 (Council of European Union, 2012). This Council recommendation underlines the strength of the commitment to RPL at a European level. The imposition of this particular timeframe encourages all higher education institutions to have arrangements in place which will support the realities of individuals seeking and attaining RPL for all forms of learning. It follows that higher education has a key responsibility to put effective arrangements in place, and will benefit from a coherent sector-wide approach to guide the provision of effective procedures and processes in the immediate future. In this context, a national strategy for RPL may provide a comprehensive macro reference point, guiding future arrangements for the higher education sector, further building confidence and capacity for RPL delivery.

National context

Ireland is within the European Qualifications Framework and is subject to the European Council recommendation of 20th December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning, recommending all countries to have RPL procedures in place by 2018 (Council of the European Union, 2012).

In Ireland, RPL incorporates prior non-formal, formal and informal learning which is to be validated in the context of a particular destination award on the National Framework of Qualifications. The Irish Government has initiated structural reform programmes to drive economic recovery in recent years. 2012 saw legislative changes introduced in addition to Labour Market Activation (LMA) policies such as the 'Pathways to Work' programme (Department of Social Protection, 2015). This was coupled to some restructuring of the education and training sector.

Recent economic recession has impacted on the demand for RPL in very real terms, resulting in its increasing importance as an aspect of higher education provision (Collins, 2011). RPL is specifically mentioned as significant "*in a time of scarce resources*" providing for the individual pathway of the learner, while avoiding unnecessary duplication of learning (p. 1, Expert Group of Future Skill Needs, 2011). The 2011 report of the EGFSN recommends a cohesive national approach for RPL to optimise provision (Expert Group on Future Skill Needs, 2011). Of interest also were comments made in section 5 of that report. 'RPL Infrastructure and practice in Ireland,' which noted that while it is, "*very difficult to estimate the demand for RPL,*" arrangements for its provision should be in place (p. 30, Expert Group on Future Skill Needs, 2011). Noteworthy also were the comments calling for specific funding for RPL provision, the implications for managing workflow for large numbers of RPL cases, the lack of systematic gathering of data on RPL cases across colleges and uncertainty as to responsibility for providing RPL for specific roles in the workplace.

The Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education & Training) Act of 2012 established the national education agency, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI). QQI is currently revising RPL policy and has consulted broadly with stakeholders in order to achieve more cohesive approach to delivering RPL nationally (Quality & Qualifications Authority of Ireland, 2013). This welcome initiative will provide new impetus to support alignment with the European Council 2012 recommendation. The "Green paper on the RPL for consultation" (Quality & Qualifications Ireland, 2013), has provided an important opportunity for stakeholders to have input to the national framework supporting RPL. This document provides a comprehensive picture of the policy and legislative framework (national and European) and invited consultations on six issues from various stakeholders across the education spectrum. The issues were:

- RPL and Access Transfer and Progression,
- National strategy on RPL

- Direct application to QQI for awards
- RPL for access to FETAC awards
- Data on RPL
- RPL and credit

(Quality & Qualifications Ireland, 2013)

This consultative approach to capturing the viewpoint of the range of stakeholders involved in RPL allowed for broad inclusion while providing some signposts for enhanced practice.

Higher education landscape

The higher education landscape is undergoing a period of rapid change reflective of the broader general significant socio-economic changes in Ireland and Europe over the past ten years (Department of Education & Skills, 2011). A number of factors have contributed to these changes; the notable increase in the numbers entering higher education; the drive to broaden participation; labour market activation initiatives such as Springboard and ICT Skills; the impact of economic recession; the restructuring of the broader policy landscape and the emergence of initiatives to restructure higher education provision. In 2010, mindful of this changing environment, the Higher Education Authority adopted a new approach to supporting system performance in higher education, with the publication of the Performance Evaluation Framework for 2010-11. The overall profile of higher education and the institutional profiles provide detail as to participation rates, fields of study, research, knowledge transfer and also information on the financial and staffing basis underpinning institutions (Higher Education Authority, 2014b).

Underpinning the changing higher education landscape and signposting the opportunities for development is the National Strategy Document published in 2011. The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030, emphasises the key role that Ireland's higher education system has to play in building an innovative knowledge-age economy. The report stressed the huge changes that the education sector is undergoing and called for the sector to *"innovate and develop if it is to provide flexible opportunities for larger and more diverse student cohorts,"* (p. 10, Department of Education & Skills, 2011). Significantly, the report calls for clear pathways for progression and transfer, as well as non-traditional entry routes. Significantly this report has called for a national framework for RPL to be developed and called for input from existing expertise within in higher education institutions to contribute to the development of this RPL National Framework.

The report emphasised the importance of open and flexible learning, workplace provision and creative delivery mechanisms of programmes to enable a broader cohort of learners participate. Within the Higher Education Authority's (HEA) national systems performance framework the development of institutional performance compacts is a novel undertaking, wherein each higher education institution through a strategic high level dialogue process, agrees a compact, which is publically available (O'Connor *et al.,* 2013). Compacts must include an element detailing provision for 'Increased participation, equality of access and lifelong learning' and make specific reference to arrangements for clear access pathways for access transfer and progression. (O'Connor *et al.,* 2013).

Quality assurance and social responsibility in higher education

Social responsibility and quality assurance in higher education are linked. The process of facilitating access, transfer and progression for all learners regardless of background implies that relevant associated policies and procedures are in place to support such a transition without compromising the integrity of the institution or disadvantaging any learner along the way. As reported in this paper there are substantial initiatives nationally that emphasise and support the transitions from society to higher education, education to the workplace and vice versa. The role of RPL within these transitions is varied and as noted by Hamer 'for an individual to present their skills and knowledge, they must be aware of what they know and have additional ability to 'translate their professional or vocational practice discourse into the academic' (Hamer 2010, Wheelahan, Miller & Newton 2002:13). Another challenge higher education puts to those currently not engaged, is the requirement to present evidence of their learning in a particular way. This approach as identified by Hamer 'exclude the very individuals targeted by access and equity policies' (Hamer, 2010) . So it therefore, could be argued that RPL largely benefits those who are already or have been engaged with education rather than the purported target audience. Regardless, there appears to be a 'level of optimism for the potential of RPL to enhance social inclusion, providing the process can be appropriately refined and certain populations targeted more effectively' (Hamer, 2010). This optimism was outlined by O'Connor and Sheridan (2012) who noted that the 'multidisciplinary scope of higher education institutions renders them 'uniquely well placed' to address the multidimensional challenges facing society'. However, nationally the increased 'marketisation of higher education' has resulted in higher education becoming less focused on its social role and more consumed with sources of funding and income (Oireachtas, 2014).

In determining how embedded social responsibility is, within an institution, the quality assurance mechanisms provide some insight into how access to education is being facilitated. Massaro considers 'the introduction of quality assurance systems is a measure of accountability… can succeed only if it is acknowledged to measure what is important to society in a manner that it can be understood.' (Massaro, 2010) . The challenge for higher education is that traditionally, higher education institutions have relied on their 'autonomy and the concept of intellectual freedom' (Massaro, 2010). The further challenge as identified by ENQA in 2006 is that 'there is no globally agreed definition of quality in higher education and that it does not have a single purpose, a single method or a single operational definition' (Massaro, 2010)

Responding to this imperative, general guidelines for internal and external processes and quality assurance mechanisms in higher education are developed in the ENQA report on standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European higher education area. The publication specifies a number of considerations for higher education institutions in developing quality assurance procedures that are in keeping with good practice. These are not exclusively intended for RPL but apply in a more general sense to internal and external policy and procedural developments of higher education institutions. As RPL is broadly taken as an alternative way of achieving elements of a programme, then it is clear that it must also be considered in the internal and external quality assurance mechanisms of an institution.

The key points from the ENQA Bergen report are summarised as follows;

- The need for policy and procedures for the assurance of the quality and standards of the programmes and awards that are offered by the institution.
- The internal QA procedures should be linked to a strategy for the enhancement of quality within the institution and this should be publicly available.
- Emphasis on who has responsibility for ensuring Quality Assurance within the institution which should incorporate all staff. The outcomes of programmes should be explicit and clear. The assessment of students should be conducted in a professional manner and the methods used should be capable of measuring the achievement of particular learning outcomes and programme objectives. The methods selected should also be appropriate for purpose and the criteria for marking work should also be available. Students should be advised of the assessment strategy applicable to their programme.
- The importance of the availability of supports of students learning.

- The availability of public information about the institution and what they offer.
- In reviewing these guidelines and the legislative requirements the Irish Higher Education Quality Network developed their own 'Principles of Good Practice in Quality Assurance/ Quality Improvement for Irish Higher Education and Training' in 2005 (IHEQN, 2005). There are a number of elements as part of their principles that are of particular interest to this paper. These are outlined in the principles as follows;
- The goal of quality assurance is quality improvement including the enhancement of the student experience, and quality assurance procedures reflect this.
- All providers are responsible for the establishment of quality assurance procedures that are clear and transparent to all their stakeholders, including staff, students, external stakeholders and the general public …
- Quality assurance procedures include appropriate measures to protect the integrity of the overall quality assurance process.

It can be concluded from the content of these good practice guidelines that key elements such as policy, procedures, linkages to strategy, staff roles and responsibilities and student supports are required for a robust quality assurance system within a higher education socially responsible organisation .

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. Since 2004, common European principles for RPL have been available as a reference for national developments. The common European principles include the agreement that the process, procedures and criteria for validation of prior learning must be fair, transparent and underpinned by quality assurance (European Commission , 2004). These principles provided an important backdrop for the development of national and institutional responses to RPL. In developing a national approach the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland in their Policies, Actions and Procedures for Access, Transfer and Progression for Learners (NQAI, 2005)stressed that RPL should be embedded within the quality assurance procedures of the institution and that the same learning outcomes should be used to assess the learning attainment of all learners.

In evaluating or assessing prior learning one of the complexities for the assessor is that the role of the academic or educator is not introduced until after the learning has occurred (Hoffmann & Michel, 2010). The learning may have occurred intentionally or unintentionally, but in any

case, it happened prior to the assessment process and outside of the learning structure for the desired award. Learning which occurred in an informal or non-formal setting, raises many questions for the assessment process and indeed, more broadly, for the process of learning design. For example, it may be appropriate to consider potential claims for RPL at time of design and development of a programme and the programme approval and validation processes might seek and question this information. Consideration of the coherence and consistency between programme design and development, the stated learning outcomes and the assessment methods may contribute to the opportunities for learners to demonstrate their learning outside of the conventional pathways (FIN, 2011).

Ensuring quality and equity in the process, while recognising that the nature of prior learning and the many contexts in which it may have been attained are very diverse and individual, is not an insignificant challenge. From a quality perspective the objective is to ensure that the learners demonstrably attain the same learning outcomes regardless of route taken. As Boilard states…'It ignores (to some extent) where and how the learning occurred and instead focuses on whether what needed to be learned was, in fact, learned' (Boilard, 2011). The assessment of the evidence of learning presented by a student seeking to have their prior learning considered can be diverse and complex including documentation and artefacts from a number of sources depending on the student experience. Reports from research on the practice of assessment of prior learning indicate that the assessment process for a complex portfolio can require considerable time to complete and to document and may include the need to interview the student (Hoffmann & Michel, 2010). For assessment systems the alignment of this complex means of arriving at the learning outcomes with the more conventional teaching-assessment continuum requires careful consideration.

According to Stenlund (2010) the literature lacks a particular focus or perspective on the quality aspects associated with the assessment of prior learning and can tend to be descriptive or prescriptive (Stenlund, 2010). Stenlund suggests that, in terms of validity and reliability, it is preferable that the assessment methodology is aligned to an accepted goal or set of learning outcomes. In order to ensure the integrity of the final awards, the prior learning assessment processes must assess and certify evidence of learning which meets agreed standards (Boilard, 2011). In Ireland where RPL is applied, it is generally considered within the context of the framework of qualifications and agreed award standards.

In higher education in Ireland the award standards and the process for validation of programmes of education and training leading to awards are the responsibility of the Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) organisation. The QA mechanisms employed by providers tend to address curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment, resources, services, finance etc. They also include the externality principle and the involvement of appropriate external experts on independent programme evaluation panels and in external examination processes.

Research Findings to Date

In order to explore how higher education institutions operate the RPL process in practice within the quality assurance mechanisms of their institutions and to provide an insight into institutional perspectives on the importance and the future of RPL processes a desk review of two publically available sources of information was undertaken in the first instance. The individual institutions mission-led performance compacts which are available on the Higher Education Authority website were analysed and policy documentation in relation to RPL was identified on individual institution websites. These two sources provide an initial insight on which the later empirical research phases were based.

Mission-based performance compacts

As part of the national systems performance framework the Higher Education Authority (HEA) in Ireland has developed a system of mission-based performance compacts or agreements for the individual higher education institutions. In these early stages of this system each publically-funded institution has entered into an agreement with the HEA, outlining its current performance in a number of key areas and its objectives from the position of its particular mission and strengths. The resulting compacts, which are an outcome of a process of strategic dialogue between the HEA and the individual institutions, in addition to providing benchmarks and measurement instruments, provide a valuable insight and institutional perspective on performance, priorities and aspirations for the institution.

The development process and the resulting compact recognises that the organisation is itself an autonomous institution with a distinctive mission, operating within a regional, national and international higher education environment.

By requiring the institution itself to propose the qualitative and quantitative indicators against which their performance should be assessed by the Higher Education Authority, the compact strengthens the role of the institution and institutional strategy in direction setting and ensures the transparency of the process. The purpose of this process is to provide a strategic framework

for the relationship between the Higher Education Authority and the individual institutions. The overall compilation of the compacts allows the HEA to develop an overview of the system itself and to ensure that the missions and goals align with national goals for higher education – the compacts and institutional profiles are also made publically available through the HEA website providing a valuable initial insight into the institutional performance and priorities (HEA, 2014a).

In total, twenty-six compact agreements were developed by Irish Higher Education Institutions outlining their strategic focus and direction for the period 2014- 2016. Of these, thirteen institutions have made specific reference to the development and use of RPL for existing and potential students within their institutions.

The following chart Fig.3indicates the breakdown as per sector of those with RPL specifically included in the terms of their published compact agreement. In total, thirteen of the twenty six compacts contained a reference to RPL.
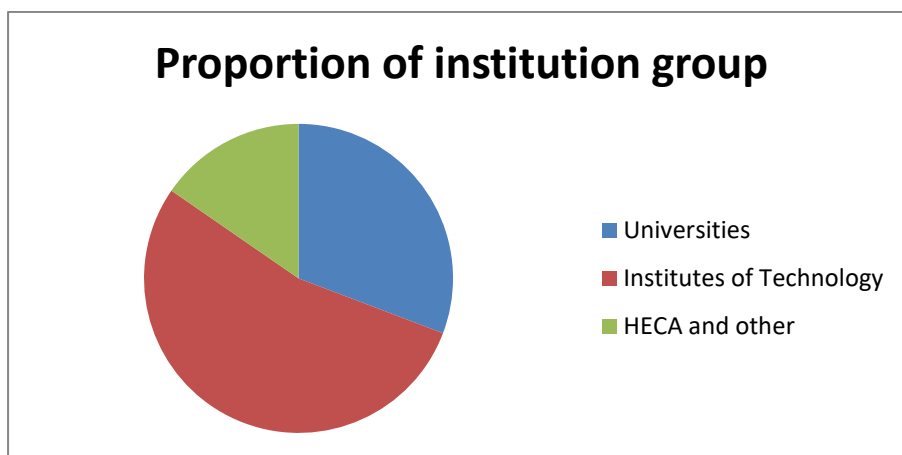

Fig.3 Inclusion of RPL in Institutional compacts per Institution group

Another aspect of the analysis of the compacts included consideration of the contexts in which RPL was included. It has emerged from the desk research that some commonalities exist with nine of the institutions including a reference to RPL under their 'participation and lifelong learning' performance indicator, four institutions referring to its importance in the development of 'regional clusters', three institutions in 'institutional consolidation' and one institution in its 'retention and progression rates'. One institution did not include it in its main objectives but within the section of how the objectives would be verified which they believed through 'excellent teaching and learning and quality of the student experience'. The review of the

compacts identified the intended role of RPL in the context of the institution strategies within the timeframe of the compact agreements. The following table summarises the findings

	Number of Institutions	University	Institute of Technology	HECA and other
Entry (advanced or non standard)	11	4	6	1
Exemptions	3	1	2	
Full academic award	1		1	
Increase RPL activity	2		1	1
Policy	7	2	5	
Procedures, policy , staff development , information sources	2		1	1

Table 1: Role of RPL in Higher Education institutional strategies within HEA compact agreements

These indications of intended use of RPL provide an insight into the implications for the quality assurance systems of the institutions, given their association with areas such as assessment, entry, information sources, procedures and policies which are traditionally underpinned by robust quality assurance. They also signpost the institutions' commitment to broadening the participation of those currently outside of the institution and the relative importance underlined by inclusion in the strategy for the period 2014 – 2016.

Review of Institutional Policies
A desk review was also conducted on the outward facing RPL policies and information sources available from Irish higher education institutions to explore the implications for maintaining academic standards and rigour within their processes.

Fifteen policies were reviewed which uncovered common focuses or themes which can be linked to the principles of good practice of Quality Assurance discussed earlier in the paper.

- Explicit procedures and/or process and scope of how RPL can be incorporated into programmes, modules, assessment within a higher education institution without compromising the integrity of programmes
- Policy requirements which is explicit in its language as to how RPL fits within the general operations of the institution and how it is to be managed within such a system.
- The use of equal standards (learning and programme outcomes, National framework level descriptors)
- Role division, responsibilities of the institution, staff and the learner
- Academic rigour through quality assurance procedures which are clear and transparent to all stakeholders.
- Embedded within existing structures including student supports
- Linked with national and local policy and procedures through references to published position papers.
- Limitation and exceptions of the system within the individual institutions in keeping with their education principles

In some of the policies and information sources the importance of maintaining the autonomy of the colleges and schools was emphasised. Placing limitations on RPL learning claims due to external or programme requirements was also identified as important in maintaining the academic standards of programmes and the students learning.

In keeping with the standards as set out by ENQA (ENQA, 2005)regular policy reviews every two to three years was seen as necessary to ensure that the content of policies were relevant and in keeping with the direction of the institution. It is argued by the authors that this review also assists in ensuring that current thinking and national and international policy developments are incorporated into policy evolution.

One key finding from the review of the external facing policies and information sources is that there is no clear or consistent standard approach adopted by all institutions which presents a difficulty for the potential learner. Thus far, the analysis suggests that not all institutions are at an advanced stage in their development of RPL which has implications for the resulting quality assurance systems and the expectations of the learner.

Conclusions

There is general agreement that the inclusion of opportunities for learners to have evidence of their prior learning considered and assessed in the context of new destination awards supports policies of inclusion and efficiencies in higher education systems. Though not an explicit intention of RPL, the systems developed also support Honneth's recognition theory through the development of oneself and identity formation. Learners bringing evidence of prior non-formal and informal learning tend to be outside of the school-leaving cohort, who make up the majority of learners at third level. The learners and their individual learning pathways tend to be diverse and complex and the resulting evidence of their prior learning presents an interesting challenge for higher education assessment methods which are more commonly linked to classroom-teaching.

As part of a larger review of RPL practices in higher education in Ireland and an aspiration to contribute to a more coherent and consistent practice, this initial research phase sought to explore, at an individual institutional level, the apparent emphasis on RPL within current published mission-based performance compacts and available information on their webpages. This work seeks to identify the position of RPL and in particular RPL assessment within the higher education quality assurance systems by focusing on evidence of structures which may indicate implications for procedure, practice, rigour and relationship to standards. This work will be followed by a primary research phase of exploration through semi-structured interviews with staff within each institution.

Thus far the research has identified the prevalence of RPL within the higher education systems and the existence of policies and practices at institutional level. The importance of robust structures addressing standards, roles and responsibilities, academic rigour, exceptions and limitations is evident within the policy documents. Also evident is the variation in practice between institutions. Given the variety of missions and the autonomy of the institutions within the system, this variation is not unexpected.

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