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AN EXPLORATION OF RPL IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN IRELAND WITH PARTICULAR FOCUS ON QUALITY ASSURANCE

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Abstract

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is considered for the purposes of this research as a process whereby evidence of learning that has taken place prior to enrolment on a programme of study is explored, recognised and given value in the context of a destination award. The process which traditionally is adopted, is that evidence of past and current formal, informal and non formal learning is compared against the learning outcomes of the current destination award. The intention is to give formal recognition for learning which has already been acquired which meets the intended outcomes of the current learning path.

This paper focuses on examining the practice of RPL in Ireland with a particular focus on the underpinning quality assurance systems. Through an exploration of current assessment policies and practices, with a particular focus on the structural realities required to deliver good practice with RPL provision for summative purposes, it seeks to identify how aligned the assessment of prior learning is with the more conventional formal systems of assessment and the resulting implications for QA systems.

Early findings of research into RPL practice in higher education in Ireland will be presented herein, providing an insight into the diversity of extant policies and their application within higher education institutions. By illustrating the range of assessment methods and practicalities of RPL within the broader context of Quality Assurance, implications for practitioners and enhanced practice will be uncovered.

Beyond the scope of this paper the findings of the research will provide an overall picture of how assessment methods are considered whilst not compromising quality standards. It will outline the enablers and challenges in current practice in responding to the area of RPL within a dynamic economic climate within which higher education plays a key role in supporting the reskilling and up-skilling needs of the workplace.

Keywords: Recognition of Prior Learning, Higher education, Quality systems.

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1 QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The purpose of Quality Assurance in Higher Education was noted by Massaro (2010) as something which 'exists to assure society that higher education standards are adequate...there is an increasing demand for accountability.... and the introduction of quality assurance systems is a measure of accountability'. [1] 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 [2]. 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 [3]. 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 organisation.

2 RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING WITHIN INSTITUTIONAL QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCESSES

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 [4]. 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 [5] 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 [6]. 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 [7].

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' [8]. 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 [6]. 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 [9]. 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 [8]. 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.

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 two publically available sources of information were explored 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 will be based.

3 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 [10].

4 INITIAL FINDINGS

4.1 Review of Compacts

A desk review of the compact agreements and outward facing policies and information was conducted in terms of their impact on quality assurance within the individual institutions. Particular attention was given to the inclusion of RPL within such literature.

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.

Higher education in Ireland consists of three primary groupings of institution types namely the Universities, the Institutes of Technology and, for the purposes of this research, the Higher Education Colleges Association and others are included as the third grouping.

Irish Higher Education providers include 7 Universities, 14 Institutes of Technology, and 7 Colleges of Education. A number of other third level institutions and other colleges of higher education provide specialist education. In 2013/14 there were 211,633 enrolments on higher education programmes in Ireland. This figure can be further broken down into the 7 Universities accounting for 52% of the higher education student population, 14 Institutes of Technology 42% students in total and 5% in other colleges. [11]

The following chart Fig.1 indicates 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.

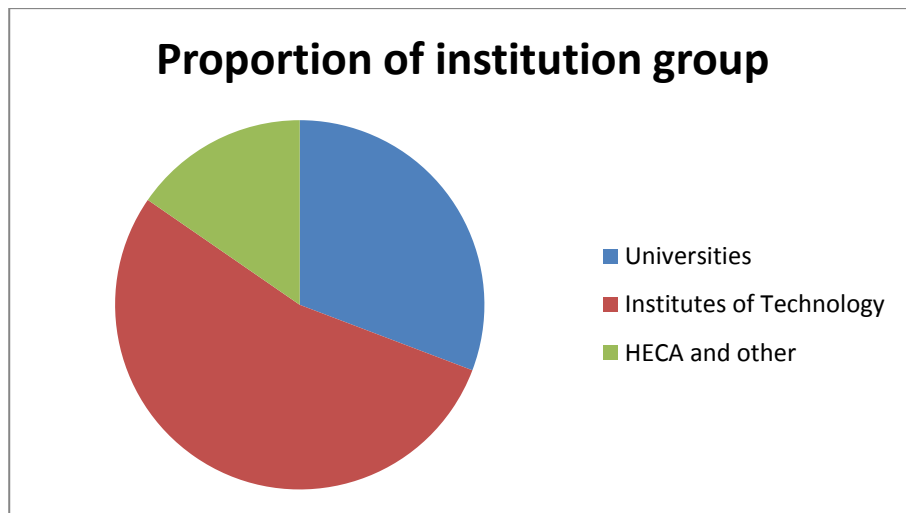


Fig. 1 Inclusion of RPL in Institutional compacts per Institution group

As can be seen from the above diagram the largest institutional group specifying the strategic importance of RPL was the Institute of Technology sector. The underlying reason for this is outside the confines of the research but may arise in the primary research phase.

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 Fig.2 summarises the findings

Method	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

Fig. 2 Role of RPL in Higher Education institutional strategies within HEA compact agreements

These indications of intended use of RPL may 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.

4.2 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.

The key findings of the review of eighteen available policies

Eighteen 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 possible 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 [2] 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 evolvments.

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.

5 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. 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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