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A CURRENT OVERVIEW OF RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING (RPL) IN IRISH HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is a process whereby 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. In general terms this includes the recognition, evidencing and valuing of relevant and current formal, non-formal and informal learning. A broad aim of RPL is to encourage people to enter or re-enter formal education and to achieve qualifications through sensitive and accessible pathways. This is very much in keeping with the concept of lifelong learning as defined by Behringer and Coles (2003), as 'learning activity that is undertaken throughout life and improves knowledge, skills and competences within personal, civic, social and /or employment related perspectives. Thus the whole spectrum of learning- formal, non-formal and informal is included as are active citizenship, personal fulfilment, social inclusions and professional, vocational and employment related aspects'[1].

The aim of this research is to establish current policies, processes, practices and aspirations of Irish Higher Education Institutions with regard to lifelong learning but more specifically recognition of prior learning; to contextualise this practice with particular reference to European policy framework; and to make informed recommendations for policy development which will promote a more consistent and coherent approach to RPL across Irish HE practice. The research will incorporate, the policy frameworks, as well as views from practitioners including academic assessors, students, academic and career advisory services, employers, professional bodies and social partners.

This paper will present the early findings of research into Recognition of Prior Learning practice in higher education in Ireland. It will provide insight into the diversity of the extant policies and their application within higher education institutions. It will illustrate the range of practicalities of RPL within the broader context of lifelong learning.

It is anticipated that exploring practice and experiences, and analysis of the research findings in an internationally informed context, will yield implications for practice within the higher education system as well as at the interface with further education and the workplace. This in turn will assist in a more informed national higher education perspective of lifelong learning.

Keywords: Recognition of Prior Learning, Higher education

1. BACKGROUND TO RESEARCH

1.1 Lifelong learning

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development lifelong learning should encompass the whole spectrum of formal, non-formal, and informal learning [2]. Lifelong learning is defined as all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competencies [3].

Individuals learn in many contexts throughout their lives, including work, involvement in social and community activities, or learning through their life experiences. Appropriate value should be given to all these contexts for learning. For an individual competencies acquired in all aspects of life are essential parts of the overall learning experience.

Learning that takes place outside the formal systems for education and training, can, however, be difficult to identify and value. The focus on lifelong learning policy has slowly shifted from the traditional approach of 'learning in the classroom' to incorporate the diversity and richness of other learning environments. One of the distinguishing features of non-formal and informal learning is that the experience of the learner occupies a central place in all considerations of teaching and learning. This experience may comprise earlier events, current life events, or those arising from the learner's participation in the workplace or as a result of activities implemented by teachers and facilitators. It supports a more participative, learner-centred approach, which places an emphasis on direct engagement, diverse, rich learning events and the construction of meaning by learners within their individual contexts.

The Education & Training Monitor, 2014 Ireland, finds Ireland preforming below the European average in participating in lifelong learning [4]. Only 7.6% of respondents aged 25 to 64 enrolled in formal education. This remains below the Lisbon target of 12.5%, and the EU-15 average of 12% [4].
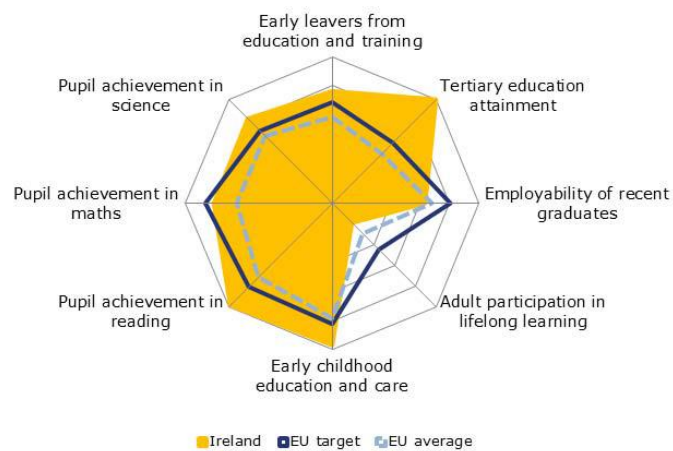

Fig. 1 DG Education and Culture calculations, based on data from Eurostat (LFS 2013 and UOE 2012) and OECD (PISA 2012). *Note:* all scores are set between a maximum (the highest performers visualised by the outer ring) and a minimum (the lowest performers visualised by the centre of the chart).

The current economic downturn underscores the need for everyone, particularly those with low skill levels and those in vulnerable positions, to upgrade their skills. The aim is to significantly improve access for unemployed persons to job search, training and education, community and employment programmes, and to maximise opportunities so that people are better placed to avail of new job opportunities, including emerging sectors. The Government's Action Plan for Jobs points to the importance of competitiveness and the alignment of worker skills with current and emerging enterprise needs [5].

1.2 Irish policy developments

The Irish Government have 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 'Pathway's to Work' programme [6]. This was coupled to some restructuring of the education and training sector.

In Ireland, RPL incorporates prior non-formal, formal and informal learning which is to be validated towards a particular destination award on the National Framework of Qualifications. 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, requiring all countries to have RPL procedures in place by 2018 [7]. The Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education & Training) Act of 2012 established the National Qualifications and Quality Assurance Authority (QQI) in Ireland. The QQI incorporates the former National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI), the Higher Education & Training Awards Council (HETAC) and the Further Education & Training Awards Council (FETAC). Other structural changes saw the establishment of SOLAS a new Further Education & Training Authority and also 16 new education and training boards (ETBs) which have replaced earlier entities. These updates will impact on the structures that deliver RPL.

While the 2012 Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education & Training) Act requires RPL to be provided for within the Access, Transfer and Progression policies of the QQI, current practice is based on the 2005 NQAI Principles and Operational Guidelines for RPL, which is tied to the legacy providers HETAC and FETAC [8]. QQI is currently revising RPL policy and has consulted with stakeholders in order to achieve more cohesive approach to delivering RPL nationally [9].

As stated in the European Commission's European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2014; country report Ireland, RPL is regularly noted as a key element within Labour Market Activation initiatives by Government [10]. The Expert Group on Future Skill Needs (EGFSN) were invited to report on RPL and its potential for up-skilling and reskilling of the labour force by the Department of Education and Skills in 2011 [11]. This report outlined how RPL is useful in Labour Market Activation; for using resources within education and training efficiently; for lifelong learning; for flexible provision and to contribute to government targets on social inclusion and equity of access [11].

Another significant report, The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 focused on the higher education sector called for clear pathways for access, transfer and progression to be developed and in particular for non-traditional students [12]. Significantly, this report called for a national framework for RPL to be developed and in place for all higher education institutions.

The Higher Education Authority (HEA) noted, "widening access and participation, including through the recognition of prior learning," as one of the indicators on their performance framework, to which all HEI's must report with performance compacts [10].

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. These initiatives have been successful in re-skilling and up-skilling over 10,000 people [13].

These significant changes in policy result in an environment where education and training must respond to meet these new demands. Across the higher education sector targeted initiatives linked to the Labour Market Activation programme have allowed for timely research.

This current research builds on findings from previous research conducted by members of the Education in Employment project on RPL policies and practices in selected third-level institutions in Ireland. This Strategic Innovation Funded (SIF) project was a consortium led by Cork Institute of Technology and eight other Higher Education Institutes (HEIs). Through a collaborative approach, members of the Education in Employment project explored practice and produced useable generic RPL guidelines [14].

This research piece updates the review of policy, practice and aspirations of the higher education sector in Ireland and contextualises this with reference to European policy frameworks.

2. RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is a process by which learning that has taken place prior to enrolment on a programme of study is given a value. This learning process may have taken place formally through a further or higher education provider or informally or non-formally through work/life experiences. Ensuring that this prior learning is recognised and given appropriate value is an important step in ensuring that lifelong learning pathways are meaningful and accessible for those with a variety of experiences. The European Commission (2001), suggest that for the purposes of developing a national approach to the recognition of prior learning, prior learning encompasses:

(i) Formal learning takes place through programmes of study or training and is delivered by education or training providers, and which attract awards,

(ii) Non-formal learning takes place alongside the mainstream systems of education and training. It may be assessed but does not normally lead to formal certification. Examples of non-formal learning include learning and training activities undertaken in the workplace, in the voluntary sector, or in communities,

(iii) Informal learning takes place through life and work experience (experiential learning). It is learning that is quite unintentional and the learner may not recognize at the time of the experience that it contributed to his or her knowledge, skills and competences.

[15], [16]

UNESCO defines RPL as, "The formal acknowledgement of skills, knowledge, and competencies that are gained through work experience, informal training, and life experience," [p. 55, 17]. An effective RPL pathway enables and encourages learners, to enter or re-enter formal education, leading to qualifications, by awarding or recognising credit for what is already known towards a destination award.

Commonly RPL candidates experience doubt and uncertainty when applying for RPL and benefit from support as they prepare. There is merit in taking a comprehensive, standardised approach to RPL delivery [10]. Leiste and Jensen claim that RPL case preparation can be difficult for candidates who take a leap of faith before opting for the RPL route [18]. They take a comprehensive, systemised approach for Capella University in Minneapolis, USA where the RPL team fosters a positive experience for the candidate according to Keller's ARCS model [19]. Their approach focuses on removing hurdles which might impact on the candidate successfully completing the RPL process and learning portfolio. They put resources in place at key points using the criteria of, "motivation, enabling success and efficiency," to inform their RPL provision [p. 63, 10]. Using Keller's, "Attention, Relevance, Confidence and Satisfaction (ARCS)," model to motivate the candidate [p. 62, 19].

Leiste and Jensen combine this ARCS model, with additional online information at key points in the process including mentoring support in a laboratory style workshop. The third criteria, that of encouraging efficiency, entails making the best use of the mentoring resources available for as many RPL candidates as possible. Efficiency also relates to efficiency in learning for the RPL candidate who will not have to revisit modules on programmes where they already have the learning.

Day (2011), proposes the use of benchmarks for RPL to clarify the purpose and activities of the RPL mentor and academic assessor roles [20]. He maintains that such benchmarks support RPL provision which is still "characterized by inconsistency and lack of coherence," [p. 53, 20].

Sweygers et al., maintain that while common principles and criteria for RPL provision are desirable, it must be tempered with the reality that RPL inherently raises debate as to the diverse nature of non-formal and informal learning and its assessment in higher education [21].

The RPL candidate benefits from clear information and signposting, along with support when preparing their RPL case. This desk-based research investigates what public facing information is available on RPL.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Desk review of public-facing information on RPL

A desk review was undertaken on RPL information presented on public-facing webpages and prospectuses of 43 HEIs to capture the current picture of RPL provision in Ireland in 2015. This research seeks to investigate how RPL policies and practice are integrated across the sector. How information on RPL is presented publically lends significant insight as to the availability and readiness of any college to support and provide for RPL.

The 43 HEI's comprise of seven Universities, fourteen Institutes of Technology and twenty two members of the Higher Education Colleges Association (HECA). Each of the HEI's websites were reviewed under five questions. These questions are set out in Table 1.

Table 1. Research questions for desk review of HEI websites and prospectus.

1	Is RPL on the website?
2	Is the RPL policy available?
3	Is RPL mentioned in the prospectus?
4	Is there signposting for where to go for initial information on RPL?
5	Are there student supports for RPL?

It is intended that this review will form the basis for a more in-depth research stage to follow, which will include structured interviews with representatives of each of the providers.

4 RESULTS

4.1 Desk review of public-facing information on RPL

The initial review of HEI websites has yielded the following results:

Table 2.

Sector	RPL on website?	RPL Policy available?	RPL in prospectus?	Signposting for initial information on RPL?	Student supports?
Universities N=7	5/7	5/7	1/7	2/7	no
Institutes of Technology N=14	10/14	10/14	3/14	6/14	4/14*
Higher Education Colleges Association N=22	5/22	no	2/22	2/22	1/22

*one of these websites had out of date contacts

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Desk review of public-facing information on RPL

Each of the results will be discussed in turn.

Q1. Is RPL on the college website?

RPL appeared on HEI websites for 5 out of 7 (71%) of university websites; for 10 out of 14 (71%) of Institute of Technology websites and for 5 out of 22 (22%) of HECA colleges. Overall, 54% of HEIs had no material available on their college websites. For those that had RPL available, there was no uniformity as to where on the sites information on RPL might be found.

Q2. Is the RPL policy available?

The RPL policy is available for 5 out of 7 (71%) of university websites; for 10 out of 14 (71%) of Institute of Technology websites but not for any of HECA colleges (0%). Overall 66% of the HEIs had no RPL policy available online. Again, for those colleges that have an RPL policy available, its location varied.

Q3. Is RPL mentioned on the prospectus?

RPL is mentioned in 1 out of 7 (14%) of university websites; in 3 out of 14 (21%) of Institute of Technology websites and in 2 out of 22 (9%) of HECA colleges. Overall 87% of the prospectuses did not have an entry signposting where to find information for RPL. Of the colleges that did include information on RPL, the amount of information varied from comprehensive to brief. Again the researchers found that location of the entry varied.

Q4. Is there signposting for initial information on RPL?

RPL is signposted for in 2 out of 7 (28%) of university websites; in 6 out of 14 (42%) of Institute of Technology websites and in 2 out of 22 (9%) of HECA colleges. Overall 77% of the HEIs did not have signposting for initial information on RPL on their websites. Of those colleges that had, two colleges gave the admissions office as the initial contact point and three colleges gave the specific name of an RPL Co-ordinator or mentor. One of these contact points was out of date. In another college the signposting was to the course co-ordinator. Again findings show a variety of approaches to RPL.

Q5. Are student supports provided for RPL?

Student supports are not provided for in 100% of the universities according to the information available on the websites and prospectus. For the Institute of Technology websites student supports for RPL are available for 4 out of 22 (18%); in HECA colleges student supports for RPL are available for only 1 out of 22 (4%) colleges. Overall 89% of the HEIs did not make public any student supports available for RPL case preparation. This is a significant number and indicates that there is some work to be done to meet the European Council recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning, requiring all countries to have RPL procedures in place by 2018 (Council of European Union, 2012).

6. CONCLUSION

This research finds the approach to presenting information on RPL is varied and inconsistent. Overall the public facing information on RPL as presented by the HEIs in Ireland is not aligned in terms of language, the amount of information provided and its location or visibility. While the research team note the variety of practices and approaches with RPL across the HEIs, it concludes a more uniform approach to RPL provision is needed to strengthen its delivery across the sector.

At this point in time, this research finds 54% of the websites across all the HEI's have no information available on RPL and 66% have no RPL policy publically visible. Higher education provision intends to respond to the requirement of the European Council recommendation of 20 December 2012, however these initial findings illustrate the scale of the task which must be completed by this date.

Only 13% of the websites were found to have comprehensive information on RPL and in some instances this information is linked to particular programmes. This research finds there is no universally applied location for presenting information on RPL on the HEI websites and where such information is present it is often obscurely located, such as admissions, mature students, future students, and under direct applications. As noted by Harris [22], this diversity in approach augments the notion that RPL is somehow added on or additional to normal provision.

This research finds 87% of the prospectuses have no entry on RPL in 2015. A significant cohort of the population of prospective adult learners will instinctively reach for a prospectus in preference to a website for information as to a course or programme. It could be argued that the HEI sector could benefit from including brief signposting on RPL in all prospectuses.

Finally 77% of websites have no signposting for initial information on RPL and 89% have not made public, student supports for RPL case preparation. As noted earlier in this paper, RPL provision when well supported leads to a quality systemized approach including outputs and assessment [18].

This research concludes that while these are the early findings of desk-based research on RPL practice in Irish higher education, the research team will follow with in-depth interviews with practitioners which could yield a rich source of data on RPL practices and issues on the ground which is outside the focus of this paper.

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