European Inventory on Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning 2010
Country Report: Ireland

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# Update to the European Inventory on Validation of Non-formal and informal learning

## Country Report: Ireland

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1 NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

In giving a national perspective, context is also important and consequently the initial paragraphs of this report attempt to place the work in an overarching position, taking into account many factors which have an impact on the topic under review.

The economic climate in Ireland has changed significantly. For instance in November 2007, the year when the previous European Inventory report was compiled, news reports were highlighting that Ireland’s unemployment rate was at 4.8% and worries were being expressed as this was a four-year high. The most recent release from the Irish Central Statistics Office in October 2010 reports that the standardised unemployment rate is 13.6%. The reason that unemployment is important is because of the emphasis that this issue places on national initiatives to up-skill and re-skill those made redundant. One of the most interesting issues behind this figure is the large increase in graduate unemployment. In 2007 Forfás (Ireland’s policy advisory board for enterprise and science) in its report ‘Tomorrow’s Skills: Towards a National Skills Strategy’ noted that an additional 500,000 individuals within the workforce will need to be upskilled and to progress by at least one NFQ level over and above their current level of education and training. Today, while the overall figure might not have changed in terms of upskilling there will be a significant change in the numbers requiring re-skilling.

The over-reliance on the property market has resulted in significant numbers of graduates in fields such as architecture, law and accounting being currently unemployed. These are all highly skilled individuals but they will in the short term require re-skilling if they are to avoid becoming long term unemployed or take the alternative strategy of emigration. The size of the problem cannot be underestimated. The global figures are enormous and show little sign of abating. The figure for the national debt for instance has moved progressively upwards. This is relevant to the issue of informal and non-formal learning because in many of its responses to the current economic woes the Irish Government has indicated that education will play a vital role in attempts to revive the economy and within the broader field of education the Recognition of Prior Learning will have the opportunity to play a vital role.

The term ‘recognition of non-formal and informal learning (RNFIL)’ is not widely used in Ireland and is usually taken to be included in the wider term ‘recognition of prior learning (RPL)’. The term RPL is used for this report, except in cases where documents or publications which specifically use the nomenclature ‘recognition of non-formal and informal learning (RNFIL)’ are referred to.

Since the publication of the 2007 update of the European Inventory, the Irish legislative framework has not altered. However, this is not to say that national policy has remained static since 2007, in fact the opposite is the case. There have been significant developments, not due to new legislation, but rather because of the impact of the legislative changes noted in 2007.

In order to provide some background information, it is worth revisiting some of the developments noted by Davidson and Nevala in the 2007 country update. More detail on the historical background to validation in Ireland can be found in their report.

In the 2007 update, the Qualifications (Education & training) Act of 1999 was identified as a major development. In the context of RPL this Act must also be viewed alongside the Universities Act of 1997. It is not that there was one seminal clause or section in these acts that was the catalyst, but rather it was the cumulative effect of a number of developments.

which has resulted in these acts being so important. The passing of the Qualifications Act did indeed give individual citizens the right to have prior learning validated but other key developments would ensure that these rights became a reality. These principal actions were the establishment of the following statutory bodies: the Further Education & Training Awards Council (FETAC), the Higher Education & Training Awards Council (HETAC) and the National Qualifications Authority (NQAI). The Irish Universities Quality Board (IQUB) was established in 2002 to support and promote a culture of quality in Irish higher education and independently evaluate the effectiveness of quality processes in Irish universities, as required by the Universities Act (1997). This latter body does not as of yet play a major role in RPL but, in its role pertaining to quality in the university sector, it will have the right to review the quality system in place within the sector regarding the operation of RPL policies and systems.

In a more recent report published in 2008, entitled *Building Ireland’s Smart Economy*, advocated that priority be given to flexible learning initiatives that can be targeted at up-skilling people in the workforce, which indirectly supports the greater use of RPL. Additionally, the National Skills Strategy Implementation update issued in March 2010 makes specific reference to RPL. The Skills Strategy recognised that if Ireland is to be successful in tackling the challenge of unemployment and see a return to sustainable export-led economic growth, it is critical that we continue to concentrate on developing the skills base of the labour force. Both *Building Ireland’s Smart Economy* and the Report of the Task Force on Innovation reaffirmed the central role that the skills and creativity of the labour force will play in the recovery and development of the Irish economy.

Amongst the most important developments which emerged as a result of these reports was the development of the Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF) for higher education and training. SIF, when launched, was a multi-annual fund, amounting to EUR 510 million over the period from 2006 to 2013, which was directed towards support for innovation in higher education institutions. Thus, despite the severe financial constraints placed on the Government, significant funding flowed to the education sector. While this figure was reduced somewhat later, it does not take from the significant funding that was made available for innovative projects. The fund supported many projects which were aimed at enhancing collaboration between higher education institutions, improving teaching and learning, supporting institutional reform, promoting access and lifelong learning and supporting the development of fourth level education. The most important of these from the point of view of this update was the funding which resulted in the establishment of the Education in Employment Project (which is described in more detail below, under section 1.1).

According to Dr. Margaret Linehan the focus of this project is:

*on offering relevant education and progression opportunities to those already “in employment” rather than those preparing “for employment” and to provide access routes for the non-traditional student. The growth in “non-traditional” student numbers and in particular the desire of companies, industry sectors and individuals to upgrade qualifications and skills is increasing the demands on the third-level education sector to provide efficient, flexible and user-friendly routes to these qualifications. This must be achieved in a manner which retains the confidence of the individual learners, employers and awarding institutions. The Education in Employment Consortium is focused on a model of education development, delivery, support and assessment designed to meet the learner needs in a way that is sympathetic to their circumstances.*

The Education in Employment project report, entitled *Recognition of Prior Learning – a Focus on Practice*, contains much that contributes to the content of this European Inventory

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3 www.eine.ie
update. It is noted that RPL in Ireland has come in from the fringe of the educational debate and is now very much centre stage. Commenting on the issue generally, it correctly notes the major influence that the NQAI has had and continues to have in the field. Additionally, however, it states that the importance of RPL and its increased centrality is not the result of one single event but rather a combination of many. The report cites issues such as increased migration rates, ICT and technological change, globalisation, the demise of the concept of a job for life and the need for individuals to continually up-skill and re-skill as drivers of the RPL agenda, the reason being that all of these issues require greater flexibility, inclusiveness and transparency in our qualifications system. On the general issues the report concludes that while great strides have been made in Ireland, there is still some distance to go before RPL is truly accepted and practiced to its optimum. This summary position is endorsed by the NQAI in its report, Framework Implementation and Impact Study⁴, published in 2009, which states that:

The adoption of RPL policies is dependent on an acceptance amongst providers and professional accreditation bodies of Framework learning outcomes and a deeper embedding of the Framework. There continues to be considerable scope for the acceptance and use of RPL across the education and training system. This overall position is typical of the general state of play regarding RPL in other OECD countries (NQAI 2009).

In other developments the Galway Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT) is involved in some interesting work associated with RPL. It has developed and approved a five credit module entitled “Making Experience Count” which is targeted at informing and mentoring potential RPL applicants. According to GMIT a key learning outcome of this module is that candidates will have developed their experiential portfolio for tendering for consideration for access or progression. GMIT is also actively promoting a regional approach to RPL and is currently developing strategies with the National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG) under the banner of “Leap Forward” which will disseminate the greater use of RPL with employers and the general public.

The Dublin Institute of Technology, whose work is detailed elsewhere in this report, has developed a similar module entitled “Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in Higher Education (HE): policies, procedures, practices and pedagogies which carries 5 ECTS Credits at level 9 within the National Qualifications Framework. The major difference is that this module is aimed at the academic community and not the applicants but the result is that it is now possible for both applicants and assessors to pursue an accredited programme in RPL. While the programmes are on offer in different institutions it is hoped that other institutions will follow the lead of GMIT and DIT and over time all institutions will have both options available. A task that could be undertaken through the establishment of a genuine national network to deal with the discipline that RPL is now becoming.

1.1 National legal framework, system or policy on validation

As already mentioned, the legal framework for all matters including validation (RNFIL) is the Qualifications (Education & Training) Act, 1999. The Act itself, while referring to RPL, does not legislate specifically for a detailed RPL system but rather brought into being a range of institutions which through their policies and procedures has ensured that RPL is now a key issue and one which is being addressed by all sectors of the educational system. The Qualifications Act allows for RNFIL to be used for access, transfer/progression and the awarding of full awards.

The enacting of this legislation established entities that have had a significant impact on the educational landscape in Ireland. These include the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) and the awards bodies for higher and further education, the Higher

Education & Training Awards Council (HETAC) and the Further Education & Training Awards Council (FETAC).

The work of the NQAI, which was established as a result of this act, has been the single biggest contributor to the development of policies and practices in the field of RNFIL. In addition to the work that the Authority undertakes itself - and this is significant both in terms of quantity and impact - equally work has emanated from other sources, in particular at awarding body provider/institutional level and through collaboration (see Education in Employment project). Notwithstanding the importance that the NQAI has assumed, it would be remiss not to mention that HETAC, and indeed its predecessor the National Council for Educational Awards (NCEA), were instrumental in sowing the seeds of much of the work on RPL throughout the 1990’s.

The work and resources of the NQAI are available through their website (www.nqai.ie). Some developments pioneered by the NQAI since the publication of the last inventory update, however, merit consideration in this report. The first major piece of work is a very complete and detailed thematic review of RNFIL, which was published in July 2007 as part of the OECD activity on RNFIL in Ireland. A key finding of this review is that the development of the practice has increased significantly with the continued importance that is being placed on the issue of lifelong learning. It was also noted that its development has been significantly enhanced through the continued work being undertaken pertaining to the development of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF).

The role and responsibilities of the NQAI and others in the area of access transfer and progression are well documented in the NQAI’s policies in this area, which were published in 2003, and in the domain of RPL, which was published in 2005. In summary the NQAI has a responsibility to develop the use of RNFIL throughout the Irish System and to ensure as far as possible that the developments take place in a coherent manner, and that there is a degree of harmonisation, if not full compatibility, across the systems devised for the different educational sectors. FETAC agreed and implemented its policy for the Further Education system in 2005. This was followed by the publication of HETAC’s policy in 2006. As a group or sector the universities were, up to recently, less cohesive in their approach to RPL. The advent of the Framework Implementation Network and its recent work in the area of RPL will possibly change this.

The role of government\(^{5}\), apart from enacting legislation, is equally important and a number of initiatives introduced by the Irish Government have significantly impacted on the development of RNFIL in Ireland.

1.2 Relationship with the existing/developing qualifications framework and information on standards used for validation

The development of the practice has been significantly enhanced through the continued work being undertaken pertaining to the development of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF).

In developing its NQF, Ireland has been a leader amongst EU Member States. As a result of the major developments, which have seen the Irish Framework fully referenced to the EQF, RPL issues have emerged as important developments and as they have arisen they have been addressed, albeit not in great detail. In addition the publication of national principles and guidelines by the NQAI has acted as a major enabling factor for increased awareness and involvement in RNFIL and related areas. Murphy summarises this very well in the 2007 thematic review of RNFIL:

\(^5\) ‘Government’ is taken to refer to central government and also all major related agencies or bodies funded either in part or in full through exchequer funding
“The implementation of the Framework and associated policies on access, transfer and progression support RPL by providing a common reference point for the assessment of prior informal and non-formal learning and by introducing a broader, integrated range of qualifications against which prior learning can be assessed.”

In the European context and because of the ever increasing need for transparency, the Irish NQF and the EQF are of immense importance. In the national referencing report of 2009⁶, it was demonstrated that there is a very definite correlation between the levels in the Irish NQF and the level descriptors of the EQF.

What is more important, from the perspective of this update, is the fact that validation of non-formal and informal learning was considered as part of the referencing exercises associated with the NQF and the EQF. The conclusion reached was that the referencing exercise verified that the NQF and attendant awards and qualifications are first of all based on learning outcomes, and in turn are linked to credit systems and arrangements for RPL.

Learning outcomes form one of the bedrocks of the NQF and can also be a basis for RPL. The NQF from the outset has supported the development of credit systems and their linkage to Framework learning outcomes. There have been very significant developments associated with this issue. The implementation of the Bologna Process has been attained to a large degree in the Higher Education sector. Significant progress has also been achieved in the University sector – for the distinction between these two sections see the next section of this report. Yet the extent of this work has often been understated in terms of the quantity and quality of the work produced; individual institutions have had to rewrite significant numbers of modules in a mode consistent with the principles of learning outcomes. This linking of validation to learning outcomes has very significant benefits and is generally a system and concept understood by educational providers and individual teachers or lecturers.

1.3 National institutional framework

In relation to the institutional framework, it is again important to note the current context resulting from the economic crisis. Following the work of the Special Group on Public Service Numbers and Expenditure Programmes, Government has announced that the NQAI will be merged with the awards bodies, the Higher Education & Training Awards Council (HETAC), the Further Education & Training Awards Council (FETAC) and the Irish Universities Quality Board. This change, in the view of the author of this report, is likely to have an impact on the implementation of validation in Ireland. The work undertaken and the results achieved by the NQAI in the development of the NQF and attendant policies, in particular those pertaining to RNFIL, seem to show the need for a dedicated agency. The Irish Educational system is in general terms very centralised. That is to say that the National Government Department of Education & Skills plays a central role in all matters pertaining to education at all levels. It should be noted however that due to the differing ways in which institutions are established, the direct role of the central government department varies. Each university, for instance, is an autonomous body in its own right, which affords them significant independence. The level of autonomy which the institutes of technology have is significantly lower, and indeed the range of powers devolved to the institutes differs from one to the other. The further education sector has the least autonomy, with the majority of this activity coming under the control of the Vocational Education Committees. There are, however, a large number of providers of education at the various levels which, for the purpose of this report, are the three broad sectors of further, higher and university sectors. The further education system, in keeping with the provision internationally, is very diverse and is in some ways difficult to account for in terms of the number of providers. These range from state agencies, such as the national training and

employment authority (FÁS), through to individual employers and private training companies, and providers in the community and voluntary sectors. The number may be difficult to state but there is no doubt that despite the very large number of providers, the establishment of FETAC has ensured that there is a very strong level of cohesion, as all providers must register with FETAC. As a consequence of this stamp of approval, the individual providers must adhere to strict quality assurance systems and in the case of RPL to the guidelines and policy issued by FETAC.

In the case of RPL, the objective of FETAC's RPL policy, agreed in 2005, is to facilitate access, transfer and progression of learners through the recognition of prior learning within the National Framework of Qualifications. It is FETAC’s policy to ensure that the recognition of prior learning is facilitated by registered providers in the context of their programmes and for FETAC awards as appropriate.

On the issue of quality systems RPL, for the purposes of achieving an award, requires providers to put in place a rigorous quality process to ensure the achievement of standards and maintain the credibility of FETAC awards. Not all providers will have the capacity or the resources to do so.

The higher education sector is less diverse but still has a significant number of bodies which offer programmes within the higher education levels of the NQF, including no fewer than 14 Institutes of Technology and at least 30 other providers whose programmes are validated by HETAC. The unifying factor again is that they are all subject to the rules and rigour of HETAC in terms of quality assurance and Policies & Procedures associated with RPL, which must be adhered to rigorously.

There are seven universities in the Republic of Ireland, all of which are autonomous in terms of degree awarding status and the validation of awards. Technically the universities are not governed by the NQAI or the decisions this body makes but in reality the universities are now fully committed to the NQF. Recent developments include the establishment of the universities’ Framework Implementation Network (FIN), which aims to promote NQF implementation. As part of its work programme the network will explore current developments in RPL as a route to granting admission to programmes, and an examination of the award-types within the NFQ (i.e. major, minor, supplemental and special purpose) and how these can be utilised to recognise and support continuous learning. While it does not have as a goal improved or enhanced coherence between the universities, this may well emerge as an outcome.

The three sectors, though they are separate and possess varying degrees of autonomy, are brought together by their commitment to and referencing to the NQF. In essence, therefore, the national institutional framework for RNFIL is the NQF, as all three sectors have in different ways committed themselves and their respective constituents to the NQF and, in particular, to the National Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning.7

1.4 Division of responsibilities (national, regional, local, provider level) according to the different aspects of validation

The division of responsibilities is in some instances very easy to outline and in other instances less so. As mentioned earlier, the Irish Educational System is quite centralised and consequently the division of responsibility for validation will have a central element to it. The use of the learning outcomes' principles is the main tool for validation. The role of the NQAI, therefore, is pivotal, possessing as it does the remit to ensure that the NQF is implemented across all sectors and, as RNFIL is an important feature, its role in the area is

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7 Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in Further and Higher Education and Training. NQAI 2006
very much that of driver. The ongoing work of the NQAI continues to be very important, as is that of FETAC.

While the Qualifications Act provides the framework for validation, responsibilities do cascade to the local and individual provider level. The issue of validation is one that often becomes confused, along with its reference to standards, programmes and the issue of RPL generally. It is the latter element which is dealt with at this juncture. It is in many instances governed by national guidelines, policies and procedures. For instance, while individual Institutes of Technology have their own policies for RPL, the HETAC guidelines as a central reference source for them. Similarly within the further educational system, individual providers do have a certain degree of freedom but again the individual application must conform to the general guidelines as published by FETAC.

The university sector is possibly where most freedom exists but there are still central bodies such as the IUQB, whose role in the area of RPL could be significant in the future. Thus, with national guidelines set, each individual institution has responsibility for issues such as the design of their individual schemes and the development of the support material associated with their system. Needless to say the progress that has been made through the Education in Employment project and recent work at DIT and other institutions will result in a certain amount of replication and standardisation which will be of benefit to the individual learner.

An important issue which is emerging from work associated with the different projects is the importance of educational guidance. While practitioners working in the field of RPL are well aware of this, the manner in which some initiatives are introduced do not take this vital matter into consideration.

A cautionary note has to be highlighted in that as there is little evidence of the scale of activity, it would be wrong to assume that having all the systems in place is ensuring uptake of RPL or that it can be proven that it is being implemented in a uniformed manner. On the positive side, there is clear evidence that institutions across all sectors of the educational cycle outlined in the NQF are using RPL.

1.5 Examples of regional, local or EU funded initiatives

While the approach in Ireland is generally nationally based, it is worth making some comments regarding some of the issues under this heading.

There is significant work being undertaken currently in the field of RPL and this work is in the main funded through national schemes and EU Projects, with a small amount funded from what might be termed local sources. The most significant in terms of impact in recent times has been the work of the Education in Employment initiative, which is funded through central government via the Higher Education Authority (HEA). This project was a progression from the Líonra project. Líonra initiated a pilot project to develop a standard model accrediting prior learning of employees in the workplace in the area of Information Technology (IT) for organisations in the Border, Midlands and Western region and was rolled out across its member institutions. The project was designed to meet a need which had been identified across the region for improved IT skills amongst the workforce, particularly in small and medium enterprises. Many employees in these enterprises had acquired some knowledge and skills relating to IT. However these skills are often uncertified and these gaps can be identified and remedied.

The goal of the National Academy for Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning is to develop research-based teaching and learning practices and to generate knowledge which is constructed and negotiated in partnership. It calls for more inclusive relationships between students and staff and the pursuit of academic professionalism by both students and academics. In pursuit of these aims the Academy encourages research across all facets of education, including RPL. An example of this is the co-hosting this year of a

Youthreach is one of the biggest educational initiatives in Ireland and is specifically aimed at those who have not managed to properly engage with the formal education system. The role of RNFIL for this group is in the main related to progression. Those individuals who successfully complete the programme, which is accredited by FETAC, can apply to progress to further and higher education opportunities where their learning at Youthreach may be recognised. The National Youth Council of Ireland works with a number of individual providers and FETAC to provide a range of specialist youth programmes.

Irish organisations and educational institutions play an active part in many EU Funded projects. One of the more recent of these is the OBSERVAL Project. The European Observatory on validation practices of non formal and informal learning in European countries is the key product of the OBSERVAL project. (Further details are available at: http://www.observal.org/observal/homepage). As this is an Observatory-based project, its usefulness to each partner country will depend on the level of the input the partner is prepared to commit to the project.

Local initiatives are less easy to identify as they often proceed between an individual educational institution and an employer or group of employers. Equally important is that there is a growing body of research being undertaken in the field at a local level. An example of this would be the work of Kate Collins and Anne Murphy of the Dublin Institute of Technology. In March 2010, Collins published a report entitled, “Is there a return on investment from the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) to companies and organisations?”

1.6 Link between validation and the existing/developing credit system, unit-based or modularised structure of qualifications

The Irish higher education and training system is pretty well in line with the Bologna Process. As a result, the vast bulk of programmes are now fully modularised and in general each module is rewritten using learning outcomes. Work is still underway in relation to rewriting the programme overviews.

The NQAI has published a study of the implementation and impact of the NQF entitled, “Framework Implementation and Impact Study”, which was published in September 2009 and is available on the NQAI website (http://www.nqai.ie). The report notes that the Irish qualifications framework is based on learning outcomes which are in turn structured under the three principal headings: knowledge; skills; and competence. From this emerged the ten levels, all of which have descriptors. In some instances modularisation was in place prior to this taking place but modules were not written in the format using learning outcomes, but this has now been achieved in the majority of institutions. While the report notes that significant progress has been made in all sectors in implementing the Framework, progress has been a little slower in the further education sector, a finding which is not at all surprising given the range of programmes covered by the further education sector.

The issue of validation is enhanced by two factors. One is that the existence and availability of learning outcomes gives a credible system for validation. The second factor is the growing awareness of the NQF amongst employers and, as a consequence, the increased ability of those responsible for training and development within companies to structure their internal training in a manner that will assist the process of validation should they or individual employees choose to go that route.

The advent of the Bologna process and its adoption on a national basis by the national awarding bodies and the university sector ensures that there is a reasonably harmonious approach to issues such as credits and the modularisation of programmes. The linkage
from these to validation is again through the principle of learning outcomes which are accepted and applied across the sectors. This position regarding credits and their use is summarised very well by the OECD:

**Following the establishment of the National Framework of Qualifications, the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland – in partnership with education and training stakeholders, through its Technical Advisory Group on Credit – has been working towards the development of a national approach to credit. A twin track approach has been pursued (one for further education and training, and one for higher education and training). The way forward on credit is currently more clearly signposted for higher education and training within the context of the Bologna process. There is a general acceptance and use of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) in higher education institutions.** (OECD 2008)

1.7 *Funding framework*

The funding of RNFIL and the questions posed in relation to this heading are difficult to address from a number of perspectives. Notwithstanding these difficulties, the expenditure associated with RPL is not insignificant and has been increasing in recent times. The allocation is being done in a defused manner but the source in the main is central government funding, with additional resources secured from the European Commission and minor amounts from industry and the professions. One of the difficulties faced in assessing this area is the fact that up to recently, RPL initiatives could emerge from at least two principal Government Departments: the Department of Enterprise, Trade & Employment and the Department of Education and Science. In turn, the two major sub-units of these that had decision making authority in relation to RPL were FÁS, the national training authority for Enterprise, Trade & Employment, and the Higher Education Authority in respect of Education and Science. At the time of writing this report, a major policy initiative was commenced by Government, which saw Education & Science becoming Education & Skills, thus assuming responsibility for a huge proportion of FÁS’s activity. The second element of this policy is less certain, with the possibility of closure of the HEA and its functions re-integrated into the central Government Department of Education and Skills.

Investment in RPL nevertheless continues. The extent of the funding made available through central government can be gauged by an outline of the funding made available as part of the Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF). EUR139 million was made available through the two rounds of SIF. Of this EUR 35.2m was allocated to areas related to Lifelong Learning and Teaching and Learning. Not all of this was directly related to RPL but from it emerged very significant work in this area. Principal amongst these was the Education in Employment project, which was a dedicated RPL project, and whose output is referred to elsewhere in this report. Further detail is available at the Education in Employment website (http://www.eine.ie).

Whether this level of funding is sustainable or not is difficult to assess. While the overall economic climate is not good in Ireland, there is clear evidence emerging from the actions of central government that education and the re-skilling & up-skilling of the labour force are seen as key drivers for economic recovery. The most recent announcement saw the Government announce the allocation of EUR 20 million, which is aimed at unemployed people with low levels of education to afford them the opportunity to get to at least level five within the NQF. The second element of the programme recognises that those with higher-level qualifications need to be assisted to re-skill and prepare themselves for what is now regularly referred to as the Smart Economy. While the Government’s Policy in this area does not specifically refer to RPL, through its reference to other key policy documents, such as *Towards 2016*, RPL will have a role to play in the development of the smart economy.

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It can be observed that much progress has been made on the basis that the money to support RPL was found within individual institutions to ensure that money, or the lack of it, did not either block an individual from applying for RPL or institutions from putting systems in place to ensure that the policy was implemented. The problem with this approach is that much of the costs are absorbed into the general budgets of those involved and a true costing is then never calculated. This, coupled with the fact that detailed data on the level of RPL activity is not collated in any meaningful way, means that a genuine costing is impossible. Finally, there is not accurate information collected regarding the time spent by advisors and guidance professionals.

As noted by the OECD, generally RPL is financed by public providers of education and training from within their overall budgets. In recent years, the vast majority of the funding for RPL initiatives has come from specific projects such as the SIF funding which was used to develop a number of RPL-related projects. To date the practice of charging the individual learner a fee has not been universally applied but as the budgets of educational institutions continue to be eroded it is possible that the practice will become more widespread. This is a situation which will have to change, particularly in cases where initiatives are put in place on an industry-wide basis and where employers should be required to make a contribution. Again this does happen but, as data is not collected, the extent of the income cannot be calculated.

1.8 Data on flows of beneficiaries

As is noted by other reports on this topic, the collection of data is perhaps one of the most serious weaknesses in the work being undertaken in Ireland. The material that is available is by no means complete.

It is possible to get some statistics from pilot studies and other ‘one off’ initiatives but an overall picture is hard to develop. For instance, in the nine institutions involved in the Education in Employment Project referred to previously, the figures range from 10 - 500 per annum. The Líonra Project has published some material indicating that their APL initiative was very successful and a total of 356 participants had their portfolios assessed. The Cork Institute of Technology also publish some detail and, as reported by Murphy in 2007, 1060 portfolios of prior experiential learning were submitted over the period 2000- April, 2006. At the University of Limerick some detail is also available. For instance, the National Council for Exercise and Fitness (NCEF), which is an academic affiliate of the University of Limerick, has processed 421 applications for RPL from September 2007 to May 2010. The vast majority of these applications were for access and were successful. In the case of those seeking exemptions or credits the majority were granted exemptions from the level 6 certificate and entered the level 7 Diploma programme.

The OECD has provided some interesting details pertaining to the individual educational sectors. Perhaps the most interesting figure reproduced in the report is that pertaining to Ireland’s National Training Authority (FÁS). What is interesting about these figures, apart from the large numbers quoted, is the sectoral approach that has been adopted. In particular the sections on craft training are worth outlining:

FÁS, in cooperation with CIF, has developed the Construction Skills Certification Scheme. This was done to help the construction sector meet government regulations on minimum standards of knowledge, skills and competence. Project activities are training, assessment,
certification and registration. In total 82,000 experienced workers were certified. In 2006 16,000 certificates were issued.

These awards were not based entirely on RPL but the programme did have an RPL option. FÁS introduced a mechanism for 26 craft areas to recognise the prior informal learning of individuals who had completed a time served apprenticeship (the Standards Based Apprenticeship scheme) introduced in 1991 to replace the time-served (informal learning) apprenticeship model. Applicants submit a portfolio of evidence which is then evaluated by RPL assessors. Statistics: FÁS Apprenticeship Services processed 266 RPL applications seeking the full FETAC Advanced Certificate award in the period January 2007 – April 2008. Following an examination of the applications against the qualifying criteria FÁS requested FETAC to award the Advanced Certificate to 233 of the applicants. However, 33 applicants did not meet the qualifying criteria for full award recognition and further information was requested. (OECD 2008)

2 ORGANISATIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON VALIDATION

2.1 Role of the formal education and training sector, including providers

As mentioned previously, there have been no major legislative changes which impact on the recognition of non-formal and informal learning but there have been some significant advances to tangible outputs across many sectors of education within Ireland\textsuperscript{14, 15}.

The role of the formal sector in validation is, to coin the phrase, “mainstreamed” at this stage. Their role is very much defined by the interaction that the formal providers have with the other key players, such as the NQAI and the Awarding bodies. The formal sector has, in effect, through the development of the NQF and the implementation of the Bologna process, facilitated the process of validation – as outlined above.

The role of providers within all of the sectors has been defined by overarching policies. At the apex is the NQAI and its guidelines and principles which, in turn, have been adopted and converted to separate sector policies for further and higher education. This has then been translated into institutional policies by each individual organisation which opts to operate an RPL system. Similarly, within the university sector the policies have emerged from the work of the NQAI and been adapted to meet the needs of the sector.

Output in terms of involvement is difficult to assess. FETAC, acting on the global issues associated with the sector, has, for instance, revisited its policy and guidelines and instituted pilot projects and other actions. The revised policy for instance outlines sample evaluation criteria, an RPL process and implementation model and a template for providers seeking to have an RPL scheme. Sectorally HETAC might be less active in the field but the 14 Institutes of Technology have been hugely influential in developing both the strategy and operational mechanisms, which has seen a large level of activity emerge. The work of Cork Institute of Technology and Dublin Institute of Technology are particularly important in this regard. Work-based learning is also a feature of the activities of many Institutes of Technology, such as Letterkenny and Sligo Institutes of Technology. Additionally, consortia within the sector have also been key to the development of the activity in the area, for example through projects such as Lionra (http://www.lionra.ie) and Education in Employment (http://www.eine.ie). While the consortium does have the involvement of two universities, University College Cork and the National University of Ireland, Galway, the project is very much driven and led by the Institutes of Technology partners. The Shannon Consortium (http://www.ul.ie/shannonconsortium/index.php) and NAIRTL

\textsuperscript{14} Murphy, A. (2007)
\textsuperscript{15} Sheridan, I. & Linehan, I. (Eds)
(http://www.nairtl.ie) are evidence of this activity. It should be noted that within these consortia key roles are being played by a number of universities.

The role of the university sector is more difficult to quantify. The advent of the FIN group and their recent decision to develop the field will help enormously as the work develops. It may not have as an objective the development of a single or even coherent approach to RPL, but it is the view of the author that FIN\textsuperscript{16} will have a significant impact on the development of RPL within the university sector.

Nevertheless the aforementioned ‘Education in Employment Project’\textsuperscript{17}, which was implemented in the Higher Education sector, funded through the Strategic Innovation Fund, led to a major body of work in relation to recognition of prior learning (RPL). One strand of the project focused on Work Based Learning (WBL). The project aimed to address the lack of standardisation in the existing practices and procedures in HE Institutions. One of the aims of the project’s work programme was the development and publication of agreed guidelines and documentation covering these activities. The project thus set out to provide a useful toolkit for learners, employers, mentors and assessors.

The project report, Recognition of Prior Learning – A Focus on Practice\textsuperscript{18}, gives a very detailed review of RPL in the HE sector in Ireland, particularly as it applies to and operates within the higher education sector, and shows how the project aims were met. The project had nine partners from the third level sector and two adjunct member organisations and the publication which emanated from the work, an exploration of the policies and practices within the partner institutions, is a very important piece of work in the field of RPL and RNFIL.

Precise information regarding the number of individual institutions with a policy on RNFIL is not available. What can be reported is that the level of activity in the field has increased significantly since the last update in 2007. The role of the NQAI continues to be the key driving force behind its development. Allied to this is the work of the awards councils, HETAC and FETAC, who have well developed policies on RPL and related matters. The latter point has led to several institutions developing their own individual policies. In relation to the aforementioned Education in Employment project, for instance, at the beginning of the project in 2006 only five of the partners had a policy in place. By 2009 all of the partner institutions had an RPL policy/practice in place. In another SIF funded project operated by the Shannon Consortium, the issue of RPL formed a small part of a bigger project and this has resulted in policies being now in place in the four partner institutions that make up this consortium.

A further university sector wide approach was the establishment of the universities’ Framework Implementation Network\textsuperscript{19} (FIN) in 2007. This was established to support the implementation of the NQF and has recently decided to address the issue of RPL under three specific headings:

- RPL: Case Studies and Practice,
- RPL: Programme Design, Assessment and Quality Assurance and
- RPL: Managing, Organising and Communicating.

It will take some time for the results of this initiative to come to fruition but it should result in support for developing practice in all the universities and associated colleges.

\textsuperscript{16} http://www.nfqnetwork.ie/
\textsuperscript{17} www.eine.ie
\textsuperscript{18} Sheridan
\textsuperscript{19} http://www.nfqnetwork.ie/
2.2 Role of existing information, advice and guidance networks/institutions

The 2008 OECD noted that the awareness of RNFIL was low. The report highlighted a “Catch 22” scenario, in that there was little point in raising awareness levels if the availability is limited. The position has now changed and all of the principal players have assisted in this shift. The NQAI, HETAC, FETAC the Universities and others have upped a gear both in terms of the availability of RNFIL and the advice that is available to individuals and organisations. This has been effected through the hosting of conferences and symposia on the issue, an increased presence of matters pertaining to the field on websites and, perhaps more importantly, the emergence of wider availability of educational guidance for individuals.

A key development in the area of educational guidance and, in particular as it relates to RPL, is the establishment of a number of dedicated RPL professionals and offices in a number of Institutes of Technology such as Cork, Dublin and Letterkenny. A further example of this type of development exists in Limerick where a dedicated educational guidance service for those wishing to pursue higher education has been established in a downtown location. Details of this are available at http://www.downtowncentre.ie/. This service is in turn linked to the broader based Limerick Education Guidance network, which covers all sectors of education and training. In recent times this consortium, which consists of the University of Limerick, Limerick Institute of Technology, Tralee Institute of Technology and Mary Immaculate College, has extended their educational guidance service regionally to neighbouring counties Clare and Kerry. In addition to offering information and advice on RPL, the consortium has hosted specific evening seminars on the issue of RPL.

The issue of guidance and information is nonetheless a key area which needs to be addressed. The lack of guidance in the area of RNFIL, however, reflects the overall emphasis that is placed on guidance in general in the Irish system, for instance, the recent OECD report Learning for Jobs – OECD Review of Vocational Education and Training, shows that Ireland is performing poorly when it comes to the provision of guidance at secondary level, with only 55% of pupils having guidance formally included in their school timetable.

Nevertheless, the role of existing information, advice and guidance networks is beginning to improve. Many initiatives have been introduced to raise awareness but the most noteworthy is the national media campaign, which included primetime television advertising slots urging the general public to have their learning accredited. This had two impacts; firstly, it highlighted the role of the awarding bodies, and secondly, the existence of the NQF.

2.3 Validation in the private sector and the role of private sector actors

Private learning providers do have a role in this area but are governed by the same set of guiding principles if they wish to have their programmes formally accredited- they have to use FETAC, HETAC, an Institute of Technology or a University for this purpose. They can choose to go through the process of becoming a FETAC accredited centre or enter into an agreement with such a centre. Additionally, they can negotiate agreements with formal education providers.

There are many sectoral approaches which are generally funded under the Skillnets programme. It commenced in 1999 and since then has assisted in excess of 50 000 Irish companies through the setting up of over 300 networks. The result to date has seen close on a quarter of a million individuals up-skill. Due to the very significant change in the economy of Ireland, the Network has also had to focus on assisting the ever-increasing number of unemployed people to re-skill.

The primary outcome of Skillnets in the area of RPL has been in awareness-raising and dissemination of information. The creation of an RPL Forum is an example of this work.
According to Skillnets, since its inception the Forum has created a range of products that are currently available to networks and their members. The purpose of these products are to help develop understanding of the RPL process and the opportunities it represents. The products include an FAQ sheet, brochure and case study documents aimed at learners, companies/HR managers and trainers and would-be mentors. The Forum has also developed a comprehensive mentor’s guide to be used by trained mentors to bring participants through an RPL process.

According to the latest report from Skillnets:

Great strides were made in the areas of certification, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), Low Basic Skills (LBS) and Impact Measurement. A number of groups and partnerships examining these areas were developed and extended throughout the programme. A number of networks also paved the way for enterprise with the creation and development of new industry-led, accredited courses and innovative modes of training delivery.20

The role of the social partners in the area of RNFIL has many facets. In essence, however, the key developments have been through the concept of social partnership. Since the 1970s, Ireland has had a series of what began as national pay agreements but which, beginning in the 1980s, developed to become agreements on a broader range of social issues, including education and training. Employers and Trade Unions, through their central role in these agreements, have driven many of the education and training reforms and special initiatives such as Skillnets, SIF and LMA to name a few. In the most recent agreement Towards 2016, education is a key factor in the Government’s strategy for re-energising the economy and pertinent quotes from the agreement relate to the area of RNFIL:

Drive the lifelong learning agenda by enhancing access to training, the development of new skills, the acquisition of recognised qualifications and progression to higher-level qualifications;

Learning opportunities for adults targeted at vulnerable groups and those in disadvantaged communities with low levels of educational attainment. (Towards 2016)

Fáilte Ireland, the national tourist board, has been a leader in the field of RNFIL for the hospitality industry on a national basis. The Irish Aviation Authority, which provides tailored business and management programmes for those employed in the aviation and allied industries, together with the Institute of Technology Carlow, which accredits their programmes, have a RPL system in place generally, but specifically for this programme. According to the brochure for the programme, this is a four-stage honours degree for aviation, transport and fire & emergency sectors. The possibility of advanced entry into stage 2 (or maybe even stage 3) is dependent on prior learning. Where this is necessary, support will be provided.

In the area of the professions, Engineers Ireland is very much a leader, having a policy pertaining to RNFIL for several years. Latest figures show that 109 applications were submitted and of these 78 were processed. Of these 78, 36 were granted the title they sought. Since the nursing profession moved from a hospital-based training system to a higher education institute, a system of RNFIL has been put in place to cover a broad range of transfer and progression. This allows nurses with older qualifications such as State Registered Nurse (SRN) to upgrade this to that of Bachelors degree. Systems are also in place for those with practice based qualifications to gain entry to postgraduate programmes.

2.4 Validation in the third sector and the role of third sector actors

The third sector is quite active in the field of education across all sectors. The full extent of its involvement in RNFIL is again hard to evaluate as there are no verifiable statistics available on a national basis. The voluntary sector is extremely active in accessing FETAC and consequently those undertaking these programmes are covered by the FETAC policy. Similarly, but to a lesser extent, there is involvement by the community-based groups with HETAC and individual educational institutions.

There is also a very high level of participation by not-for-profit organisations in the field of education and training. Bodies and support groups such as the Samaritans, rape crisis centres, citizens information centres and a myriad of other such bodies are increasingly involved in developing their paid employees and volunteers and as a consequence are regularly in contact with the concepts of RNFIL.

While there are mechanisms in place in Ireland to enable accreditation and recognition of volunteers' skills and competences, not all volunteering organisations follow this approach. ‘Tipping the Balance’, the report of the National Committee on Volunteering published in 2002, emphasised the need to develop a flexible and responsive system that will allow for the development of accreditation for the training of volunteers. The report also emphasised the need to develop systems to recognise the work done by volunteers through informal recognition at organisational, community and state levels. In its recommendations, the report stated:

We recommend that a key programme area within the National Centre for Volunteering will put in place the structures and resources necessary to enable volunteer-involving organisations to nominate individuals or teams to be formally recognised by the State for their voluntary work.

2.5 Costs to organisations

Costs, like funding, are almost impossible to calculate - a fact borne out by the conclusions of the OECD report of 2008. Many of the costs are, in fact, hidden. The Education in Employment Report did examine the issue of costs and reported that:

An analysis of RPL processes and roles would not be complete without discussing the issue of costs associated with RPL. There are a number of perspectives on the issue of costs. From an institutional perspective a clear picture of the cost of providing an RPL service is difficult to arrive at for a number of reasons. First, many of the costs associated with the process are hidden or absorbed into other cost centres. Second, most institutions do not gather information on RPL activities centrally and where this information is gathered centrally it is generally only the number of processed applications for exemption that are counted and not the number of enquiries or engagements that do not yield a completed application. Third, an exact measure of the administration processing, guidance, mentoring, and assessment associated with each learner is not captured in any institution within the partnership. In the case of RPL for entry there is even less information available. From the perspective of the learner and costs associated with the RPL process, the learner usually pays less for an application based on certified learning than for an application based on experiential learning. The learner applying for entry based on RPL usually does not pay a separate RPL fee. The fee for certified learning is of the order of the examination fee for the module from which exemption is sought, and the fee for exemption based on experiential learning can range up to the full module tuition fee. In some cases there is a separate ‘processing’ fee charged. These fees generally apply to part-time learners only, with no fees

applied in most cases for full-time learners who apply for exemptions. The full-time student, however, is liable for the full registration fee.

In the case of some of the partner institutions, a fee is paid to assessors for appraising portfolios. This practice would reflect practices developed by institutions previously involved in the Lionra project. In other institutions there is no separate fee for assessment. In discussions on payment for portfolio assessment, the working group proposed that the assessment of experiential learning should be viewed in line with the assessment of project material at the appropriate level, and be remunerated accordingly. The working group agreed that, ideally, RPL processes should generally be aligned between the various institutions. Any future reintroduction of fees for full-time students might also have implications for the costing of RPL processes within institutions.

EINE Report (2009)

A programme provided by the University of Limerick in the area of drug and alcohol studies in three different locations throughout Ireland serves as an example of how difficult it often is to estimate the costs associated with RPL. The majority of applicants for this Diploma will have formal qualifications and be professionals in fields such as the health profession, social care, teaching, guidance counselling and youth and child care, or hold positions as prison officers, police, probation officers and community workers, among others. In addition, however, many local community groups will support non-professional personnel working in the community and nominate to have these “advisors” and “counsellors” trained in this area. In such instances, those undertaking this work may have no formal education or, at best perhaps, will have a poor secondary educational attainment which would not normally get them access to formal programmes in counselling or addiction studies. Providers, however, are usually sympathetic to such applicants, as they are aware that it is these people who are often closest to those with addiction problems, and will advise them as to how to best approach making an application to pursue the programme. This will involve the development of a portfolio, perhaps, and will definitely involve an interview. The full-time employees of the centre where these individuals work will devote significant time to their “counsellors” in preparing them for such an interview or on the construction of their portfolio. The academics involved in the selection process will also often give significant time to advising such applicants. None of this is ever included in a question of the cost of the programme. The only available information will be the fee payable for the course.

Nevertheless, anecdotal evidence from institutions and employers regarding their RPL activities suggests that RPL is a resource-intensive activity. The majority of the costs are those required to provide advice and guidance to candidates and to structure and carry out the assessment of the candidate. Some costs decline over time or as activity expands, e.g. administrative and certification costs. In addition, it can be noted that costs differ according to the particular kind of RNFIL intervention, e.g. costs are generally lower for access to programmes and higher for access to full awards/qualifications.

As indicated previously, the issues of developing some system to capture this information is urgently needed in order to give a genuine answer in the future to the actual costs associated with RNFIL.

3 INDIVIDUAL PERSPECTIVE

3.1 Awareness-raising and recruitment

In some ways it can be said that the involvement of the individual in many cases can be accidental. For example, the individual may apply for a place on a programme without the knowledge that RNFIL is available to them. In some instances they will be aware that it is available but get very little guidance as to what they might be able to claim for or how they
should make their application for consideration. In some cases there is a very detailed briefing and/or induction process.

In instances where the programme is being planned in association with an employer or voluntary body or other such grouping, there will be significantly more assistance available to the individuals.

Many institutions will claim that there is a policy and indeed a specific set of processes and procedures available. However, the support to ensure that the learner can take full advantage of the system is not always available. The advent of the appointment of RPL specialist in a number of institutions and the increased availability of RPL advice through educational advisory services is improving this situation.

3.2 Provision of guidance and support

Guidance is an issue which is difficult to give an overview of as the information and guidance available is very disparate and there is a significant gap in the level of advice and guidance available to the learner, depending on which route they take to have their experience or previous learning validated. What is encouraging in this area, however, is the emergence of regional networks and greater linkages between guidance providers. Examples of this are the Limerick Educational Guidance Network and the Regional Educational Guidance Service for Adults in Waterford. There is still a need to make progress specifically in guidance in relation to the recognition of prior learning.

The Limerick example outlined above is an excellent case of where many providers have come together to develop a coordinated approach to guidance. The guidance practitioners at all levels from both the state funded bodies such as the local Vocational Education Committees, the National Training Authority (FÁS), the Higher Education Providers and NGOs operating in the education area have formed the Limerick Guidance Service. While each body has retained its role and identity through regular meetings of the group there now is a very coherent approach to guidance in the Limerick region. Other exemplars of this practice are emerging throughout Ireland.

A key issue to be mentioned at this juncture is the major revamping of some of the key players which have just been mentioned. For instance the 33 Vocational Education Committees are being integrated and amalgamated and this will result in the establishment of 16 larger entities. This has not been welcomed by all but it is my personal view that in time and with continued dialogue this development will yield a good result in the long term.

The national training authority FÁS is also undergoing a major revamp. This will see much of its skills division moving from the control of the Department of Trade & Enterprise to the Department of Education & Skills. This again has not won universal approval or support but it is the view of the author that in the long term this will again yield significant gains as the possibility for a greater overall educational strategy can be developed in the new framework.

Guidance in terms of both quality and quantity is improving but as the base was very low there is still much to be done. The support will range from a simple direction to consult a policy document on a website, to a group information session right through to individual counselling and advice, with the latter being the least often offered.

The provider of the advice will also differ. In many instances the advice will come from the course leader, who will be very well informed on the programme. They will again be reasonably well-informed in what previous certified learning might qualify for either access or exemption, but in terms of experiential learning or using and interpreting tools such as portfolios they are usually not that well-informed.

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22 www.regsa.org
The use of e-portfolios is beginning to emerge but in general ICT is not used in assessment for the purposes of RNFIL.

3.3 Costs to individuals

The cost of the validation process varies greatly and it is therefore very difficult to give a definitive cost. Costs will differ from institution to institution and may well differ within institutions based on the discipline. Applications for the consideration of certified learning are usually cheaper than the assessment of experiential learning. Again it must be stressed that these are the financial costs and do not include the significant opportunity costs incurred by the individual.

A further issue which masks or limits the availability of information is the fact that in the case where RNFIL is being sought or developed at a sectoral level, employers will often fund this element in full or at least partially.

3.4 Initiatives focused on specific target groups

The Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN) advises the Irish Government on current and future skills needs of the economy and on other labour market issues that impact on Ireland’s enterprise and employment growth. It has a central role in ensuring that labour market needs for skilled workers are anticipated and met. Established in 1997, the EGFSN reports to the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Innovation and the Minister for Education and Skills.23

The (EGFSN) has issued several reports over the past few years. In its most significant report it is indicated that more than 500 000 workers need to be up-skilled. The group indicated that this up-skilling should be based on the NQF and that the up-skilling referred to was at least one level up on the framework. In its most recent report of its activities in 2009, published in April 2010, it stresses that the recent downturn in the economy did not diminish this need. It noted that while the downturn did result in skills needs being less, it highlighted two issues. One was the huge increase in unemployment and the need to re-skill these workers, and the second was the requirement to shift our focus in terms of skills development to newer ones such as those associated with the creative arts. RNFIL can aid in these processes.

With regard specifically to RPL, the EGFSN’s main contribution came in its report on the retail sector.24 In this report the group had this to say on RPL:

“Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) presents a key opportunity to develop learning in the wholesale and retail sector, particularly but not exclusively among retail assistants and distribution centre workers. Many retail assistants may already have developed the skills and competencies they would require to attain existing awards (major, minor, special purpose) at levels 3, 4 and 5 as currently provided by FAS, IBEC Retail Skillnets and the VECs. Many distribution centre workers have most of the competencies they would require to receive similar distribution-centre related qualifications. Benefits of widespread use of RPL would include:

Recognising workers’ skills in a way that has educational and ideally job market currency; Encouraging employees and employers to round out existing skills to justify the award of a full qualification; Getting people onto the NFQ’s with scope to move up the ladder through further study; Reinforcing the position of the NFQ and of the proposed sectoral qualifications framework.

23 http://www.skillsireland.ie/
Properly done, with good quality assurance, RPL is far from being a trivial process. However, there will be scope as assessment bodies gain experience, to make the process more efficient than it has been in the sector to date.

Widespread adoption of RPL will require the commitment and active involvement of both industry and bodies responsible for further education qualifications in the sector (currently FÁS, VECs and IBEC Retail Skillnet). While acknowledging there may be significant resource requirements, RPL can reduce elements of unnecessary training where participants already meet the required standards.”

The Labour Market Activation Fund (LMA) is the key initiative to address these issues. The 2009 LMA call was not limited in its target audience, except that it was for those who were unemployed, but covered educational and up-skilling opportunities right through the full spectrum of the NQF from 1 to 10. The 2010 call is more targeted and is specifically aimed at the lower skilled who are currently unemployed. In both calls, specific reference was made to the issue of RPL. It was an issue of weighting rather than funding in that if RPL was included as part of a proposal it was likely to score higher. The overall funding was significant and very welcome but in reality the eventual funding per place fell short of the full economic costing model.

3.5 Evidence of benefits to individuals

The benefits of validation have not been reported upon other than in general terms. Learners have been clearly enthused by the fact that their experience cannot just be recognised but that values can be attributed to it and consequently their educational journey is less fraught with difficulty and barriers.

There is also broad acceptance that the special targeted programmes such as the LMA have had a positive impact in raising the esteem and self-worth of individuals, but all of this evidence is anecdotal and prompts the need for further examination of this issue. In terms of RPL, it will be worthwhile in due course to examine how many of the funded projects had included it as part of their offerings and if it was successful. Measuring success is always a subjective issue but perhaps simple indicators might be examined such as completion rates and evidence of progression.

4 QUALITY ASSURANCE AND EVALUATION

4.1 Quality Assurance Framework

Quality assurance is a key element of the ongoing acceptance and development of RNFIL. This issue has not been lost on those involved in the process in Ireland. The national principles and guidelines on RPL in further and higher education and training (2005)\textsuperscript{25} address quality. In essence the Authority states that RPL should be treated just like any other element of the educational provision, in that quality assurance procedures should apply to it. Advocating that systems be based on the principles of learning outcomes it maintained would ensure broad acceptance amongst the academic community as well as employers.

In addition to the NQAI, the awards bodies have also ensured that their systems of quality assurance embrace their RNFIL practices as well. Currently this is not the case within the university sector but the advent of the FIN group may well change this position.

Therefore, it can be argued that the NQAI has set the national guidelines and the other stakeholders have followed this lead at a sectoral and individual institution level.

\textsuperscript{25}http://www.nqai.ie/publication_jun2005.html
4.2 Quality assurance systems / procedures

It could be suggested that the existence of proper support mechanisms for applicants, advisors and individual academics such as the recent publication of Murphy\(^{26}\), will be the single most important aspect of ensuring the quality of an RPL system. To date such systems are not uniformly in place or structured in a manner that would assure quality. Sheridan & Linehan\(^{27}\) have produced a concise outline of what information needs to be given to the learner and employers or employers’ bodies. They have taken these elements and outlined them in very useful process maps. Information and guidance for those evaluating applications or mentors advising students is equally sketchy. Educational institutions have concentrated on the development of the policy for RPL but there is a real lack of practices pertaining to the training of those staff that will be involved in the process of advising students on how to use and apply for RPL and those that will ultimately assess the application.

4.3 Evaluation framework

The role of external evaluation is an issue for each individual organisation or institution. The fact that the system of quality assurance for RNFIL is embedded in the overall institution ensures the validity of the process and the probity of the decisions taken regarding RNFIL.

Institutional practices regarding guidance and assessment would be addressed in the normal course of the assessment process, where external examiners are a core element of institutional systems.

The issue of evaluation is very much left to each institution but in general reviews would be undertaken every five years.

5 ASSESSMENT METHODS

5.1 Methods used

The most comprehensive overview of the methods used is contained in the OECD Country Report. The author, Anna Murphy, notes that in the higher education sector systems differ somewhat and what is or is not included in the system will depend on the particular use RPL is being applied, i.e. access, exemption or full award. The process will involve one or more of the elements pre-assessment consultation and guidance. If this is followed by an application the candidate will generally be interviewed and at this stage will be requested to submit a portfolio, which is then assessed and a decision taken.

For the further education system Murphy notes that each provider has the facility to develop their own system but that it must conform to the general guidelines of FETAC. It must have at its centre the principles of learning outcomes. The outcome eventually results in a portfolio being prepared and assessed.

The systems used within the university sector are designed and implemented by each of the universities. Currently there is no agreed sectoral approach but in general the methods used include the preparation of a portfolio and may also include an interview. The work of the FIN previously referred to may result in greater harmonisation of the approach in universities.

The provision of a written examination or practical test in some cases is provided for at all levels.

\(^{26}\) Murphy, A. (2010)
\(^{27}\) IBID
5.2 Advantages and disadvantages of the methods used

The most commonly used tool is a portfolio. In many instances this is complemented by an interview. The advantages associated with this method are that it can be designed based on the learning outcomes principles, which should result in a consistent evaluation of the candidates. The inclusion of the interview does of course, like all interviews, introduce a number of other factors. As in recruitment interviewing, the key to success is to ensure that all those who are involved in the interviewing of candidates for RPL are fully trained. Such interviews are very different from employment style interviews and being trained in one must not be seen as giving people competence in the other.

The major disadvantage in this system without the use of ICT is the time it takes to complete the process. The subjective nature of the interview must also be included as there is no evidence to suggest that those undertaking the interviews are trained to do so. The work that Murphy has completed in respect of DIT, which was referred to previously, is a significant development in the area of the training of academics expected to operate RPL schemes. Another version of this work, which might address the issue for all those operating schemes, would be a logical extension of this excellent publication.

6 VALIDATION PRACTITIONERS

6.1 Profile of validation practitioners

The practitioners within the higher education sector and the universities are generally academic staff. Other staff may be involved at the initial stage in terms of the provision of advice and guidance. In the further education sector it is the provider who undertakes the work and they in turn are usually the deliverers of the subsequent academic or training programme. The issue of quality assurance arises here and while FETAC specifically state that those undertaking the work must be “qualified” in the subject being assessed, the other sectors apply the same principal.

6.2 Provision of training and support to practitioners

Up to recently, the evidence that any formal training is provided to those undertaking the work was limited. In recent times, however, this has changed somewhat and the work of the Institutes of Technology is particularly useful, especially the work of DIT, Letterkenny IT and Waterford IT.

6.2.1 Qualifications requirements

Apart from the specification in the FETAC guidelines that the individual must be “qualified” in the field there is no stipulation as to qualifications for those engaged in the process. Where individuals seek educational guidance of a general nature prior to making an application, it is likely that this guidance will be provided by a qualified guidance counsellor.

7 CONCLUSION

The recognition of prior learning within Ireland has developed significantly since the Davidson & Nevala review of 2007. These developments have taken place at both the macro and micro levels. In terms of the macro view there is a clear Government commitment to its continued development as is outlined in a number of major reports but most particularly those from the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs. In turning such reports to positive actions the Government’s Labour Market Activation Programme now in its second year clear indicates that funding of initiatives which includes the provision for the Recognition of Prior Learning will receive and in fact did receive priority. Equally in
programmes such as the Strategic Innovation Fund lifelong learning and the Recognition of Prior Learning were targeted under the terms of this programme.

In addition national bodies such as the National Qualifications Authority, the Higher Education & training Awards Council and the Further Education & Training Awards all have well established policies and attendant procedures. These have in turn cascaded down to individual providers and individual Institutes of Technology. The university sector as also moved significantly in recent times to developing their systems and practices.

Just as the finishing touches were being put to this report an extremely interesting and important development has just emerged from the National Skills Strategy Upskilling Objectives. The draft discussion document has been requested by the Department of Education & Skills. The paper which is still in draft format was developed with significant input and advice from the National Qualifications Authority (NQAI). The work is not yet widely available as it is still a Draft Discussion Document but should be available early in 2011 through Forfás (www.forfas.ie).

The key strategy which needs further elaboration and development is the dissemination of these policies and procedures to the individual learner and the learner support services such as the educational guidance networks and the individual organisations within these networks. In summary significant work has been completed and much more is in train. Rhetoric is gradually developing to reality for the learner but there is still much work to be done before recognition of prior learning becomes part of the fabric and the landscape of education in Ireland. It is interesting that the draft discussion document referred to above has been requested by the Department of Education & Skills and consequently it is my opinion that this report will play an important role in the future development of RPL across all sectors of the educational system.
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Useful Web Resources


