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A Review of Irish Projects on the Added Value of Recognition of Prior Learning Initiatives between Higher Education and the Workforce

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Abstract

One increasingly popular area of research in the workplace is the concept of the recognition of prior learning (RPL). RPL can be defined as the recognition of learning that has taken place, but has not necessarily been assessed or measured and which may have been acquired through formal, non-formal and informal routes. In this paper I will attempt to use the European concept of Valorisation as a means to examine four RPL projects that were undertaken in Ireland in recent years between higher education institutes and workforce sectors. This analysis was done by way of desk research and interviews with key stakeholders within each project. It was discovered that despite primarily positive participant reviews of the RPL process, the aspects of value, sustainability, visibility and policy are still lacking. The most promising added value of RPL was in the potential of its impact and transferability, which are areas that should be researched further when focusing on education and training between the workplace and higher education institutes.

Keywords: Recognition of prior learning, accreditation of prior learning, valorisation, work-based learning, training.

Introduction

Valorisation is a French term now used to describe the process of disseminating (a planned process of providing information about the results of a project to end users and key actors) and exploiting (comprising mainstreaming and multiplication activities) the results of projects in the European education and training arenas (European Commission, 2008). Valorisation is not strictly defined, but pertains to the transfer of something of value (project output/results) from one party to another, where value is the degree of usefulness or desirability of something (Andriessen, 2005). In European terms this transfer definition is elaborated on to encompass the processes of both dissemination, as a means to inform potential target groups of project results, and exploitation, as a means to transfer the successful results of a project to appropriate decision-makers (mainstreaming) as well as to convince end-users to apply these results by way of imitation, adaptation, or modification (multiplication). The European Commission has now deemed Valorisation an essential component of all Leonardo da Vinci projects. It is put forward as a means to improve or insure the sustainability of project results, to enhance the impact of EU funded projects, to capitalise on investments, to avoid repetition of project work, and to feed the policy process (European Commission, 2008).

The analysis presented here forms one strand of a larger project that asks if there is a return on investment for companies or organisations that use, or have used, recognition of prior learning (RPL) as an element of their staff development or training. The strand presented here looks at previous, funded RPL projects that involved higher education and different workforce sectors in Ireland from the perspective of valorisation or the dissemination and sustainability of the ideas or models that resulted. Four projects have been selected for analysis based on their inclusion of an RPL component, their higher education-workplace interface, and their

age, providing a long-term perspective. The first is the National Rehabilitation Board (NRB) and National University of Ireland Maynooth (NUIM) project for the Certificate in Training (Special Needs). The second is the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) and Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) project for the Higher Certificate in Arts in Literacy Development. The third is the OMNA-DIT/NOW (Dublin Institute of Technology/New Opportunities for Women) Early Childhood project and the fourth is the VaLEx project on valuing learning from experience.

Recognition of Prior Learning

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) refers to the recognition (process by which prior learning is given value) of non-formal and informal learning where prior learning is learning that has taken place, but may not have been formally assessed or measured, where informal learning is experiential learning that takes place through life and work experience, and where non-formal learning is learning that takes place alongside mainstream formal systems (and may include assessment), but does not lead to nationally recognised qualifications (OECD, 2007). The Higher Education Authority (HEA) in Ireland defines RPL as "prior learning that is given a value, by having it affirmed, acknowledged, assessed or certified" (Cox and Green, 2001, p. 4). The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) defines RPL as the "recognition of learning that has taken place, but not necessarily been assessed or measured, prior to entering a programme. Such prior learning may have been acquired through formal, non-formal and informal routes" (OECD/DES, 2005, paragraph 19). They therefore determine the purposes of RPL as being for entry to a programme leading to an award, credit towards an award or exemption from some programme requirements, and eligibility for a full award (Harold et al., 2008).

Following on from the Education and Training 2010 process and further impetus at European level; Lisbon Strategy, Bologna Process, Copenhagen Declaration, European Qualification Framework, European Credit Transfer System for higher education, European Credit Transfer System for vocational education and training, and Europass, has focused both practice and policy on education, training and skills for the workplace. RPL is viewed as a key contributing factor here because it is said to act as a means to improve access to, and efficiency in, the formal education system, it can address the needs of the knowledge economy, it can provide opportunities for disadvantaged or excluded people including migrants and the ageing population, and it can appreciate an individual's technical skills gained through informal and non-formal means (Cedefop, 2008b). RPL is suggested as a means of overcoming the skills shortages in industry and helping to match skills demand with supply. Furthermore it is an opportunity to improve the overall skill level and work performance in an industry, enhance employability, labour mobility and an individual's career prospects (FETAC, 2005). It is also viewed as a means of social inclusion, widening access to education, and responding to rapidly changing economic needs by fostering a learning society where the acquisition of knowledge is the key to economic success (Merrill and Hill, 2001). It is a means to promote flexibility in terms of access, entry, assessment and accreditation in higher education. This means of human capital development has professed the benefits of increased employability, lifelong learning, workforce renewal, and, in gaining formal recognition for their skills, people can use it as a basis for further education and training and to assist them in their employment and occupational mobility (FETAC, 2005).

RPL in the workplace

Brennan and Little (1996), with regard to work based learning, discuss the most common institutional use of RPL models as those that are for developmental purposes (as used in Waterford Institute of Technology) or those for credit exchange; primarily it is the latter model that receives most attention, especially within the context of higher education. The University of Ulster identified six typologies of RPL, for: accreditation, assessment, access, awards, diagnosis, and as a social vision (Murphy, 2008a). Furthermore, there exists the competencies and standards model (as in FÁS and FETAC), and the human resources model (within organisations). Irrespective of the model employed, the theoretical and pedagogical implications of RPL within the context of traditional higher educational paradigms of knowledge, teaching and learning are far reaching requiring institution-wide change in policy, procedure and practice if it is to be a sustainable component within higher education.

Assessment in RPL can take a variety of forms such as direct observation in the work place, inspection of the work setting, oral questioning, cross examination, reflective accounts, simulation, case study, authenticated written materials, diary, mentor/co-worker/supervisor accounts, accredited prior achievement, written work, other pre-formatted evidence, letters of validation (OMNA DIT/NOW, 2000e). This list is not exhaustive and the choice is dependent on the particular theoretical and pedagogical approach that is taken. The RPL model chosen should be aligned with the outcomes, goals and objectives of the qualification

Method

The valorisation potential of a project is, by concept, determined by its results and their measured impact in relation to cost and other required resources. It is within this framework of valorisation activities that the abovementioned projects will be analysed. Therefore, the questions guiding this research are: How does the RPL element of the projects outlined
- Optimise the value of the project?
- Improve the sustainability of the results?
- Strengthen the impact of the project?
- Transfer the project's results?
- Enhance the impact and visibility of programmes?
- Feed policy-processes and programming with results?

I will first present a brief outline of each project, starting with the NUI Maynooth-NRB project, followed by NALA-WIT, OMNA-DIT/NOW and finally VaLEx. In the final section I will discuss these and reflect on the six aspects of sustainability above. This research has been conducted by way of desk research, using primary source material such as project documents as well as semi-structured face to face interviews with key figures within each project. I will look only at the RPL component of each project, as its sustainability is a key factor in an investigation of the added value of these projects and the added value of RPL overall. Value, in the sense of valorisation, refers to added value, which builds on agreed usefulness or desirability of, in this case, RPL.

Additionally, to explore the current visibility of RPL information in NUI Maynooth, WIT and DIT that was available electronically, a brief keyword search was run on 07/04/2009. The search facility of each website (www.dit.ie; www.nuim.ie;

) was utilised using keyword searches for the following: RPL, APL, APEL, prior learning, experiential learning, accreditation, exemptions. The purpose of this brief online search was to investigate, if only superficially, the sustainability, impact, and visibility of RPL in those institutes where the RPL projects under investigation here took place. These results are presented in table 2 below.

Limitations of the research
The research presented here is limited in a number of ways. The framework for analysis is based on subjective determinants of value, not necessarily withstanding scientific rigour in terms of validity and reliability. The choice of projects was based on proximity or ease of access to information, with the provision that there was a higher education-workforce sector interface. A more quantitative cost-benefit ratio is difficult due to the nature of the projects where it is difficult to establish tangible and intangible inputs and outputs and their associated costs. As such, triangulation of several data sources was used in terms of original source material, interviews and a brief website review.

The Projects
The four projects took place in Ireland between 1995 and 2005, one under the auspices of the Employment NOW programme, another under Socrates-Grundtvig, a third funded by the European Social Fund, and the final one in partnership with the provider/awarding institutes in response to sectoral body initiatives. Table 1 below provides a brief outline of the four projects in terms of RPL.

NUI Maynooth and NRB
In 1998 the National Training and Development Institute (NTDI-now the National Learning Network) and NUI Maynooth undertook the exploration of accreditation of the Certificate in Training (Special Needs) by way of RPL (AP(E)L-Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning in this case). It was aimed at those who had a track record of effective work in rehabilitation training (regulated by the National Rehabilitation Board-NRB), but had no general training qualification. Therefore, it was addressing the professional accreditation needs of trainers working with people with disabilities. The taught version of the Certificate course had been delivered since 1992 by way of open learning and was facilitated and accredited by NUI Maynooth (Murphy, 2008a). The taught course was itself initiated by the disability sector whose trainers had access to a myriad of training opportunities, but whose currency often expired shortly after completion. Therefore, the demand emerged for a reliable qualification that would be both nationally and internationally recognised; a common qualification that they could have confidence in (A. Ryan, Personal communication, January 28, 2009).

The Pilot for the RPL route to the Certificate was launched in 1998, by which time the Certificate had been established in its own right. Initially, the programme relied on a FÁS (Foras Áiseanna Saothair - Training and Employment Authority) general training course (FÁS Foundation Course in Training and Continuing Education) for both validity and reliability, which it incorporated into the syllabus in the early years. The taught Certificate was amenable to the RPL route because it was already for experienced professionals (minimum of 100 hours experience in training people with disabilities, 200 hours for the RPL route). The process consisted of five workshops over four months during which time participants had to prepare a portfolio of evidence to compile their learning in relation to the normal course module learning outcomes, for which exemptions could be given. Included also in the portfolio was

evidence of a fieldwork research project, a case-study presentation, learning journal and a model training programme written according to the NRB Guidelines for writing a Training Programme Specification; thereby fulfilling the assessment criteria for the taught route. These latter components were non-exempted elements of the programme, with the exception of the fieldwork research project. Applicants went through an initial screening before entering into the programme, and if accepted they underwent systems of mentoring and group-based workshop learning facilitation over an accelerated delivery time scale to meet the assessment criteria. In contrast to the taught route, there were no grades awarded at certification by RPL.

Participant evaluations from the Pilot revealed a general level of satisfaction with the process overall. Primary objections related to the scheduling and duration of workshop days. Of note is the emphasis on the difficulty in relation to the paperwork required, which would have been eased by providing examples, but that being the Pilot, there were none available. There was also a general level of difficulty with compiling evidence of learning; what constitutes evidence and how to put skills down in writing. This may be where the approach was limited in that the model used was not amenable to more abstract concepts of learning and knowledge, which, according to one participant, would offer a better framework for the application of concepts and personal/professional development. The ability to meet at workshops was cited as an invaluable mechanism to share experience and learn from each other, this was especially relevant for a sector that had not had the platform for such interaction previously.

In 1999 the Diploma in Arts (Training in Special Needs) was introduced, building on the Certificate in Training (Special Needs), providing a professional qualification for trainers working with people with disabilities, this has since been replaced. Further off-shoots of the original Certificate in Training (Special Needs) were the Certificate in Training and Continuing Education and Certificate in Equality Studies in Training and Development that now replace it. However, the RPL element is limited.

NALA and WIT
In 1996 the National Adult Literacy Association (NALA) responded to the demand from literacy workers for an accredited programme that would recognise their expertise as adult educators by creating the National Certificate in Training and Development in Adult Basic Education in conjunction with Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT). The RPL (AP(E)L-Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning in this case) option was offered to all participants from the beginning because of the nature of those involved; very experienced practitioners who wanted access to third level qualifications which would recognise their level of experience and practice. By design, the Certificate in Training and Development (Adult Basic Education-Management) offered a two-track route, either RPL or taught, but the course modules themselves were written to be taught because the expertise was not yet developed in RPL as it was still so new. However, it was the intention, from the beginning, to have a mechanism for accrediting prior learning (G. Mernagh, Personal communication, February 18, 2009).

Therefore, the RPL element was initially a means of assessing learning that had been gained either experientially or through certification. However, the reflexivity that the RPL element entailed, with a take-up of approximately 80% of course participants achieving 50% of the higher certificate by way of RPL, was transferred into the teaching and delivery of the course and became more a pedagogical tool in

reflexivity (G. Mernagh, personal communication, February 18, 2009). The original certificate has been developed further to BA Ordinary and Honours level, but at this stage the RPL is a very small component of the programme and is not offered at all for the BA Honours. The scope of an accredited programme for literacy workers was easily extended into other contexts because of the role that literacy plays in a range of settings, such as Youth Reach (education and training for early school leavers aged 15-20) and other community and training settings. As RPL was embedded in the programme, it too was extended accordingly. In addition, the Literacy Development Centre, established in WIT has continued the provision for adult literacy training but the RPL aspect has not greatly altered from its original form and is applicable to a small number of modules within the literacy qualification.

OMNA/NOW

The OMNA project ran in two phases: the DIT/NOW Childcare Project 1995-1997 and the DIT/NOW Early Childhood Project 1997-1999. The first phase (OMNA I) was about establishing an identity for Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). OMNA I saw the production of a common quality standard for training and assessment of those working in ECCE by way of essential skills and knowledge at different levels of qualification and responsibility; these essential skills and knowledge were worked into the mainstream via OMNA II. The RPL (APL-Accreditation of Prior Learning, in this instance) component was initiated in OMNA I to offer accreditation against a national standard. The majority of workers in the area had a diverse range of training and experience, but no specific national certification in ECCE. RPL accreditation was measured against the common national standard developed through the project rather than the learning outcomes of a particular learning programme (OMNA, 2000). Portfolios of evidence were put together by each candidate, under the guidance of a mentor. Candidates were deemed either competent or not yet competent against the common standards. An additional RPL mechanism in this project was Signposting (indicators to further learning), a flexible learning tool to aid candidates in the process of self-analysis and to fill in their own learning gaps.

There were two RPL pilot groups set up and further evaluation was carried out in 1998 with APL cluster groups. The experiences of RPL proved difficult with low completion rates, primarily because of the amount of work that portfolio development involved, this was seen as a major obstacle to greater take-up (OMNA Evaluation Report, 2000). RPL was a means to promote flexibility and accessibility to qualifications within the ECCE project. It had the greatest impact on those geographically marginalised, but the cost in monetary terms as well as time and relatively high level skill required to compile evidence of learning proved problematic. Therefore, for adult learners, the RPL model used was not the most flexible of learning trajectories that RPL itself is so often cited to be.

Initial problems with standard "college" RPL models were tackled in this project. The emphasis was on gaining qualifications against an established standard without recourse to further extensive training, this is where RPL was to come in, but while the extant models were able to identify learning gaps they were not in the position to offer solutions to overcoming these gaps. Here the "signposting" option was developed, which suggested learning resources for each required skill or criteria, thereby indicating a starting point to bridge the gaps in learning. Ultimately the OMNA/DIT NOW project brought a model and system of RPL to light, based on standard equivalence, applicable to professional areas beyond ECCE. The BA (Hons) in Early Childhood Education was initiated in 2005 at DIT, an advance on the BA

(Ordinary) in Early Childhood Care and Education that began in 1999, and which has now been followed by the Progression to BA (Hons) Early Childhood Education.

VaLEx

The VaLEx AP(E)L Research Project was an EU Socrates-Grundtvig 2003-2005 research project to develop an RPL pedagogic tool as well as an assessment/accreditation mechanism (Murphy, 2008a). The model developed was to be based on the transformative potential of RPL with a focus on the holism of learning and the presumption of learning achievement (Murphy, 2008a). It took a life history or biographical rather than a competence approach. The model was piloted in two degree programmes for advanced standing with the possibility of exemptions in up to two named modules from the first year programmes; the BA(Ordinary) in Social Care Practice at DIT and the Bachelor of Arts in Applied Social Studies (disability) at the Open Training College. Assessment was approached in three ways: provide evidence against the original module learning outcomes; arrange to challenge the given module assessment assignments; or the candidate was to carry out a set of assignment tasks in the context of their professional practice (learning outcomes are combined into assessment tasks for completion). Furthermore, module learning could be tackled in two ways by: completing a written challenge task based on synthesised learning outcomes; or engage in a critically reflective activity, based on the module learning outcomes in the form of a learning contract at their place of work and write a report on their conclusions (Murphy, 2008a). The traditional presentation of evidence in portfolio was considered too time-consuming, individual and technical.

The VaLEx model was, in fact, a response to the criticisms levelled at its predecessors, including the previous three RPL initiatives outlined above. It was preceded by an audit of RPL practices in Ireland in higher education that highlighted the main challenges and obstacles to RPL up to that point and which were to be taken into consideration in future models (see Murphy, 2008a, p117). It is underpinned by existentialism, hermeneutic natural phenomenology and capability theory with an emphasis on future as well as current competence.

Table1. Classification of projects

PROJECT	Product/Process	Description	Target Group	Output
NUIM-NRB	.Sectoral qualification and accreditation	Addition of AP(E)L element to extant programme	Personnel with a track record in rehabilitation training but no general training qualification	AP(E)L route for accreditation of modules in Certificate in Training (Special Needs)
WIT-NALA	Sectoral qualification and accreditation	AP(E)L route embedded in programme from conception	- Initially literacy scheme organisers. - NCEA (National Council for Educational	AP(E)L route for accreditation of modules in National Certificate in Training and

			Awards, now HETAC) - Other universities.	Development in Adult Basic Education
OMNA/NOW	Sectoral qualification and accreditation	APL tool for both professional and self development to facilitate flexible and accessible pathways to qualification measured against a national standard.	- Those working with young children. - Young children and their parents - ECCE organisations, trainers, and assessors.	APL model and system for ECCE practitioners and wider professional bodies using common standards.
VaLEx	AP(E)L pedagogical model and toolkit for sectoral qualification and accreditation	A sustainable model of AP(E)L in higher education	-Experienced practitioners who do not have a professional qualification in their field of practice. -Learners likely to suffer from social exclusion.	-Pedagogical model transferable across diverse European realities -AP(E)L toolkit -Professional guidelines for teaching, advising, and support staff

Discussion

The drivers for RPL, as evidenced here, were the professional sector itself; from experienced practitioners who had little or no recourse to professional qualification, certification or formal institutional/third-level training. In all cases the process was referred to as AP(E)L, Accreditation of Prior (Experiential) Learning. The tendency within Higher Education in Ireland now is to refer to RPL (in line with the NQAI-National Qualifications Authority and the HEA-Higher Education Authority) rather than APEL. RPL use within Higher Education is stated as a means of access, transfer, and progression (Qualification (Education and Training) Act 1999); therefore it is not easily transferable to a workplace context in the form currently used by higher education institutions. Learning that takes place in the RPL process of examining expected learning outcomes or standards to be achieved; self-controlled learning, study skills, organisational skills, and self-confidence building do not tend to apply to stated programme learning outcomes within Higher Education Institutes. Table 3 below outlines the six aspects of valorisation for each project, which are now discussed in greater detail.

How did RPL optimise value?

The RPL initiatives described here were mechanisms to add value, to increase the usefulness of the project/programme/curriculum developed. In the case of the NUI

Maynooth model, RPL was a later addition to an already established programme of study. But in a context where experience was clearly more advanced than certain stages of programmes offered, it was a definitive answer to the call from many practitioners for access to a programme of study or for entry at an advanced stage or for a full award or professional qualification. In the case of the Certificate in Training (special needs) it counted toward the full award and in the OMNA APL system it counted for a professional qualification at a level measured against the national standard. The WIT model provided for exemptions from certain modules of a programme and VaLEx is an APEL tool for specific modules or stages. In other words, the value was to open up a training route based on professional rather than educational status because it reconceptualised the context for education and training, distinct from the traditional model of higher education, but still legitimate to that model. This was the balance that had to be maintained throughout the process because to give credibility of the recognised achievement rested on its fit with the traditional or standard route to education and training. To that end RPL was a valuable addition to each project. However, because it had to be moulded to extant models of assessment and quality assurance it struggled, the failure of RPL to extend or even adapt is limited. It continues to be ad hoc, based in the adult education departments of the respective universities or within its traditional pioneers such as faculties of nursing and business, "other like-minded departments who would have had practitioner students, you know like nurses, and the community education programmes, they benefited enormously. The business school would have drawn on the knowledge as well, but it was always informal" (G. Mernagh, personal communication, February 18, 2009). This is clearly evident in table 2 below.

Table 2 RPL in NUI-Maynooth, Waterford Institute of Technology and Dublin Institute of Technology

RPL Visibility Mapping Exercise	
NUIM	-Accredited prior learning for BA (Local and Community Studies) -Competence test in computer based information technology for BA(Local and Community Studies) Part-time.
WIT	-Accredited prior learning for BA(Hons) in Nursing Studies -Recognition of Prior Learning (APCL and APEL) for Postgrad Diploma/MSc in Nursing (Part-time) -Previous certified learning for BSc (Hons) in Nursing Studies. -APEL for Higher Certificate in Community Education and Development -APEL for Higher Certificate in Arts in Literacy Development (Literacy methodology 1 and 2 modules) -Literacy Development Centre -FAQ on in Adult Education page "What if I know some of the course material already from work or other courses?" (Accreditation of prior learning)
DIT	-APL for BA (Hons) for Early Childhood Education (OMNA) -RPL Policy Officer -RPL FAQs -RPL (within Academic Affairs)

Keyword search using: RPL, APL, APEL, prior learning, experiential learning, accreditation, exemptions

How did RPL improve the sustainability of the results?

The question of sustainability is more difficult to address because in all cases, with the exception of VaLEx, the RPL element has remained on the periphery of the overall accreditation or qualification process. In the case of the OMNA project the RPL option appealed on the grounds that it catered for those geographically marginalised. It did not increase the appeal of the qualification overall, rather was another facet of it. While it should be considered that in the cases of the literacy tutors, the special needs trainers and the ECCE practitioners the qualification itself was a mile-stone, what is promising is that once established, the Certificate in Training (Special Needs) sought the provision of APEL. The concept appeals but the practice is lacking. Since VaLEx, positions have been changing and models for practice have emerged that consider the work context and higher education context. For example, the cumbersome portfolio of paper evidence is a very difficult option for those working full time or who may not have the study skills necessary to compile such a piece of work. The lack of information available (especially regarding programme and module learning outcomes) to potential students or companies about RPL is still lacking. As a route to flexible learning, RPL has a role to play, especially within the context of work-based learning where it can act as a starting point for training programmes as well as identifying the levels or volume of training that has already taken place (Brennan, 2008). The RPL option continues to be offered in all of the original programmes mentioned but often not explicitly; this became clear in the exercise carried out in table 2 above. Partnerships with sectoral or training bodies (National Learning Network, National Adult Literacy Association) are also important for the longevity of RPL.

How did RPL strengthen the impact of the project?

One of the strengths of RPL lies in its ability to open the doors to education, providing pathways to further learning routes. The Certificate in Training (Special Needs) went onto Diploma and Bachelor levels at NUI-Maynooth, as did the National Certificate in Training and Development at WIT. RPL for the ECCE sector allowed for the candidates to establish their levels of competence against the levels set by the National Standard and the participants in the VaLEx Pilot Project. In all cases the reflexive exercise involved in RPL where candidates had to look at their work practices in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes and assess their existing knowledge and skills proved most resilient in the projects analysed here, considered to be a learning process in itself (NUIM Evaluation Questionnaire, personal communication, 1998). From participant evaluations of the NUIM and WIT projects as well as VaLEx and OMNA, participants found they developed new learning skills, self-confidence, self-evaluation, and self-esteem. A further impact point is the Adult Literacy Centre at Waterford Institute of Technology where RPL remains a key element of training courses offered.

How did RPL transfer the results of the project?

Transfer is an important part of the dissemination and exploitation of RPL. In the case of WIT there was a demand for RPL from other schools within the Institute. The resources were not there to carry this on, but the demand was there (G. Mernagh, personal communication, February 18, 2009). Furthermore it was adapted, in that instance, by the Regional Educational Guidance Service as an access tool rather than for exemptions. In the case of VaLEx it is cited within the context of recognising knowledge and skills for non-Irish students and workers. Within company training providers it is perceived as having the potential as a systematic diagnostic tool on a

company-wide basis, to establish employee potential (future perspective) as well as current skills levels (M. O'Grady, Personal communication, March 23, 2009).

How did RPL strengthen the visibility of the project?

In terms of visibility, the RPL element has not proved very successful. As evidenced in Table 2 above while RPL is available, it is not easily located in programme documents or programme web sites. In the case of Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) it appeared in various guises as Accredited Prior Learning, Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning, Accreditation of Prior Certified Learning, and Recognition of Prior Learning depending on the faculty and programme. For students investigating the possibility of RPL they would have to be intentionally pursuing it as an option rather than stumbling upon it when investigating possibilities for further education or training. It is clear that in most cases RPL in higher education institutes is not explicit, but it is practiced, in a variety of forms. "it was all very much personality and collegiate collaboration, you know, people, who knew each other, who passed around this information, who used it" (G. Mernagh, personal communication, February 18, 2009).

How did RPL feed or influence policy or programmes?

RPL has grown, primarily because of the impact and transferability options it offers. It is perceived as key in the lifelong learning processes espoused at European levels. The three higher education institutes examined here: NUIM, WIT and DIT have all been involved in RPL projects at European level and increasingly RPL policy guidelines per institute are underway. While RPL was spearheaded by the NCEA (National Council for Educational Awards- now HETAC) it has been taken forward by the NQAI (National Qualifications Authority of Ireland) who published their "Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning in Further and Higher Education and Training" in June 2005. These guidelines were put together with various stakeholders and built on the knowledge and know-how that emerged from the various RPL initiatives, including those described in this paper. The DIT now has a dedicated RPL Officer, while Athlone Institute of Technology has an RPL Development Officer and Letterkenny Institute of Technology has an RPL Facilitator. The WIT-NALA, NUIM-NRB, OMNA-DIT/NOW and VaLEx models are all cited in their own right as legitimate tried and tested tools for RPL in Ireland within the context of higher education and based on the needs of adult learners in the workforce who may not have been able to access certified or accredited training and qualifications without a means of access, exemption, and self and professional analysis and reflection.

Table 3 Valorisation Matrix

VALORISATION	NUIM-NRB	WIT-NALA	OMNA/NOW	VaLEx
Value	Alternate route and fast-track to accreditation in disability sector	Alternate route and fast-track to accreditation in literacy sector	Wider approach to flexible learning and accreditation in ECCE.	-A higher education model of AP(E)L -Irish HEI survey of practice of RPL
Sustainability	Partner with NTDI (now national	Continues to be offered up to BA(Ord) in	Mechanism for establishing equivalence of	www.valex-apel.com

	learning network)	Adult Education	training for other professions/sectors	
Impact	Increased access to further NUI courses, certification, and professional qualification.	-Increased access to further NUI courses, certification, and professional qualification -Creation of Literacy Development Centre at WIT	Increased access and flexible learning in ECCE sector	Frame for which universities might put "learning from experience" into coherent policy and practice
Transfer	General training certification under National Learning Network, FETAC and FÁS.	Youth Reach, other community and training settings	To other standards based professional areas	Various contexts eg. Social care, social work, nursing, ECCE, teacher training, management, foundation degrees, support transition to formal learning, personal development planning, career guidance, continuing professional development.
Visibility	-Accredited prior learning for BA (Local and Community Studies)	Mentioned within programmes across WIT variously as: -Accredited prior learning -Recognition of Prior Learning (APCL and APEL) -Previous certified	-APL for BA (Hons) for Early Childhood Education -Institution wide RPL in DIT	Institution wide RPL in DIT with RPL officer.

		learning -APEL		
Feed/Influence	NUIM involvement in Refine 2005 and Reaction 2007 Projects -Irish AP(E)L Network	-Irish AP(E)L Network -AP(E)L as a pedagogical tool in reflexivity	-APL as a tool for both professional and self development. -National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education in Ireland 2006	-Irish AP(E)L Network -Mentions in various Irish and European university RPL policy statements and documents

Conclusion

From this cursory glance at RPL, within the framework of valorisation, it has emerged that the areas with the most potential are in its impact on, and transferability to different education and training contexts, which includes those working in companies/sectors who may or may not already have a great deal of higher education experience. The greatest potential for the workforce, as evidenced here, has emerged from RPL as a pedagogical tool in reflexivity or a tool for personal and professional development. It is cemented now in policy by way of European and National directives. In practice, it has proved time-consuming and paper heavy when applied to the workforce sectors described above, especially when certain higher-level study skills are required of candidates. However, from the analysis carried out here, there is a future for it in companies/enterprises, in terms of impact; to present an alternate route and way of tackling training and education and in terms of transfer; to adapt to any professional context be it for access, progression, professional development, recognition of skills, accreditation of skills; simply a means to transfer learning into recognised codes which can then be applied for different purposes. Therefore higher education has a role to play in RPL in the workplace. Sectoral qualifications and awards were sought in the cases above as a means to further career prospects or establish levels of skill and knowledge. A problematic obstacle to this in RPL was the expectation of participants that it was an easier option than pursuing a full-time higher education programme, this was not the case. Outside of the higher education context, but by way of higher education institutes, RPL also has a role to play, in the workplace or for the workforce, as a means to start workers/learners on the route to further learning and training as well as being a flexible tool to convert work and life experience into more tangible and therefore recognisable forms.

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