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## An Exploration of RPL (Recognition of Prior Learning) in Companies and Organisations in Ireland Valorisation, Return on Investment, and Emerging Trends

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# **An exploration of RPL (Recognition of Prior Learning) in companies and organisations in Ireland**

*Valorisation, return on investment, and emerging trends*

By

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A thesis submitted to the Dublin Institute of Technology in fulfilment  
of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

Supervisors: Dr Anne Murphy and Dr Nóirín Hayes

June 2011



# *Abstract*

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This thesis explored the topic of recognition of prior learning (RPL) in companies and organisations in Ireland against a backdrop of global, European, and national policy initiatives on the recognition of all forms of formal, non-formal and informal learning. The immediate context was coloured by shifts in employment, in labour markets, and in education and training policies because of increasing economic difficulties globally, and the greater levels of attention being paid to the role of education and training in the economic and social development of a country. The primary research question for the thesis was: Is there a return on investment from the recognition of prior learning (RPL) to companies and organisations that use RPL in their learning and development strategies? Return on investment in this research was conceived as achievement of impact at a societal, organisational, and individual level.

The research approach was broadly social constructionist and interpretative. It took a multi-perspective approach to explore past, current, and future perspectives of RPL in companies and organisations. There were three methodological strands of inquiry employed in the thesis. The first was an historical study to analyse previous RPL projects using a framework of valorisation. The second was a comparative analysis of RPL case studies in sixteen companies, professional bodies, training bodies, and community organisations. The third and final was a Delphi Future-Oriented Survey with experts in the areas of higher education, further education, workplace learning, vocational education, educational policy, and industry.

The research findings indicated that initially RPL suffered from efforts to reconcile perceptions of 'traditional' learning as the sole route to achieve a qualification with the RPL route. In current practice RPL in companies and organisations is concerned with engaging with, rewarding and recognising the services of its employees. RPL is also considered a means to address continuing professional development needs without recourse to 'training'. Finally, RPL is a means to link national, sectoral, and organisational training and qualifications systems to validate and professionalise company training and provide the potential for occupational mobility. From a policy perspective return on investment from RPL is concerned with labour mobility, social inclusion, improved individual career prospects, employee morale, and alternate pathways to qualifications. In practice labour mobility and social inclusion were not high on company or organisational agendas.

This thesis finds that drives for economic competitiveness and up-skilling of the labour force in conjunction with economic difficulties have prioritised accredited employee development initiatives which are tied to national and sectoral qualifications frameworks. RPL development in companies and organisations is linked to these drives particularly as a means of employee engagement within the context of continuing professional development (CPD) rather than the annual evaluation process. It is therefore suggested, on the basis of the research findings, that companies and organisations should consider re-conceptualising CPD using RPL to achieve employee engagement.

# *Declaration*

---

I certify that this thesis which I now submit for examination for the award of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD), is entirely my own work and has not been taken from the work of others, save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

This thesis was prepared according to the regulations for postgraduate study by research of the Dublin Institute of Technology and has not been submitted in whole or in part for another award in any other institution.

The work reported on in this thesis conforms to the principles and requirements of the Institute's guidelines for ethics in research.

The Institute has permission to keep, lend or copy this thesis in whole or in part, on condition that any such use of the material of the thesis be duly acknowledged.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

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# Table of Contents

---

<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>II</b>
<b>Declaration.....</b>	<b>III</b>
<b>Acknowledgements.....</b>	<b>IV</b>
<b>List of Tables and Figures.....</b>	<b>XIV</b>
<b>Glossary of Terms and Abbreviations as used in this Research Study.....</b>	<b>XVIII</b>

## **CHAPTER ONE** **1**

---

1.1 Purpose of the research and problems addressed.....	2
1.1.1 The immediate national labour market context.....	2
1.1.2 The international labour market context.....	4
1.1.3 Research questions and study audience.....	6
1.1.4 Changes to the economic environment during the research.....	8
1.1.5 Perspective shifts during the research.....	10
1.2 Research positionality.....	12
1.2.1 From ‘value’ to ‘valorisation’.....	13
1.2.2 Return on Training Investment (ROTI).....	14
1.3 Research Design.....	15
1.3.1 Research paradigm.....	15
1.3.2 Research Methodology.....	17
1.3.2.1 Historical analysis of previous industry-academic RPL projects.....	19
1.3.2.2 Comparative analysis of company case studies in RPL practice.....	19
1.3.2.3 Delphi future-oriented survey.....	21
1.4 Unexpected dimensions and changes.....	22
1.5 Organisation of Chapters.....	23
1.6 Chapter Summary.....	25

## **CHAPTER TWO RESEARCH DESIGN** **26**

---

2.1 Genesis of the research approach.....	26
2.2 Epistemology and theoretical perspective.....	29
2.2.1 Postmodernism, complexity, and poststructuralism.....	29
2.2.1.1 Development of Postmodernism.....	30

2.2.1.2 Antifoundationalism, postmodernism and grand-narratives .....	30
2.2.1.3 The neo-liberal grand narrative.....	31
2.2.1.4 Complexity and chaos.....	32
2.2.1.5 Structuralism and poststructuralism .....	33
2.2.2 Constructionism .....	34
2.2.2.1 Constructionism versus Constructivism .....	35
2.2.2.2 Guba and Lincoln’s Constructivism .....	35
2.2.2.3 Constructivism and the rise of social constructionism.....	36
2.2.3 Social Constructionism .....	38
2.2.3.1 Moderate social constructionism .....	40
2.2.3.2 Relativist and subjectivist criticisms .....	41
2.3 Methodology.....	43
2.3.1 Abductive research logic .....	45
2.3.2 Historical analysis of previous industry-academic RPL projects .....	47
2.3.2.1 Justification of the methodology.....	47
2.3.2.2 The Sample .....	48
2.3.2.3 Methods of the Historical Analysis.....	50
2.4.2 Comparative Analysis of Company Case Studies in RPL Practice.....	52
2.4.2.1 Justification of the methodology.....	52
2.4.2.2 The Sample .....	53
2.4.2.3 Methods of the study .....	57
2.4.3 Delphi Future Oriented Survey .....	59
2.4.3.1 Justification of the Study .....	59
2.4.3.2 The sample.....	62
2.4.3.3 Methods of the Delphi Survey.....	63
2.5 Ethical Considerations.....	64
2.5.1 Consent, confidentiality, anonymity .....	64
2.5.2 Accuracy and transparency .....	65
2.5.3 Validity of the thesis research.....	65
2.6 Challenges and Limitations .....	66
2.6.1 Privilege .....	66
2.6.2 Validity.....	67

2.6.3 Generalisation .....	68
2.6.4 Concept of return on investment.....	69
2.6.5 Trustworthiness and authenticity of the data .....	70
2.7 Chapter Summary .....	72
<b><u>CHAPTER THREE ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORKS</u></b>	<b>73</b>
3.1 Introduction .....	73
3.2 Return on Investment .....	73
3.2.1 Social return on investment.....	74
3.2.2 Social accounting.....	75
3.2.3 Social accounting and social return on investment in this research .....	75
3.2.3.1 J. Phillips’ Systematic Evaluation Model.....	76
3.2.3.2 Kaufman’s Five Levels of Evaluation of Human Performance Improvement Interventions .....	79
3.3 Historical analysis of previous RPL projects using Valorisation.....	81
3.4 Comparative analysis of company case studies in RPL practice using D. Phillips’ Model of Case Study Comparison and Grounded Theory .....	84
3.4.1 Conceptualisation.....	87
3.4.2 Contextualisation .....	87
3.4.3 Isolation of differences.....	88
3.4.4 Explanation.....	89
3.4.5 Reconceptualisation, generalisation and thematic coding.....	90
3.5 Delphi future-oriented survey and descriptive statistics .....	90
3.6 Chapter Summary .....	92
<b><u>CHAPTER FOUR THE CONCEPTS AND THEORIES OF RPL</u></b>	<b>94</b>
4.1 Work-based learning.....	94
4.1.1 Defining work-based learning .....	94
4.1.2 Metaphors of learning.....	96
4.1.3 Individual and social perspectives on learning .....	97
4.1.4 The nature of knowledge in work-based learning .....	100
4.1.5 Human resource development (HRD).....	102
4.2 Experiential Learning .....	105
4.2.1 Problematising experience.....	105



4.2.2 Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL).....	107
4.2.2.1 Public and private learning.....	108
4.2.2.2 Hybrid discourses of APEL .....	109
4.2.2.3 APEL binaries .....	110
4.2.3 Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) .....	111
4.2.3.1 Purpose of RPL.....	112
4.2.3.2 Benefits of RPL.....	113
4.2.3.3 Relevance of RPL.....	114
4.2.3.4 RPL Conceptual assumptions.....	116
4.3 Informal and non-formal learning for lifelong learning.....	118
4.3.1 Lifelong learning agenda .....	118
4.3.2 Validation of informal and non-formal learning (VINFL) .....	120
4.3.3 Recognition of non-formal and informal learning (RNFIL).....	120
4.3.4 Research in non-formal and informal learning .....	121
4.3.5 Non-formal and informal learning policy focus .....	122
4.3.6 Defining formal, non-formal and informal learning.....	124
4.3.7 Discourses of non-formal and informal learning .....	125
4.3.8 Problematising of non-formal and informal learning .....	126
4.3.9 Competence and learning outcomes .....	127
4.4 Chapter Summary .....	130
<b><u>CHAPTER FIVE INTERSECTING POLICY DISCOURSES</u></b>	<b>131</b>
5.1 Introduction .....	131
5.2 A Neo-Liberal Frame for RPL Policy Development .....	132
5.2.1 Neo-liberal approach to learning and development .....	133
5.2.2 Global neo-liberalism in learning and development.....	134
5.2.3 Human capital approach to learning and development .....	136
5.3 Global and International RPL Policy Perspectives .....	139
5.3.1 GATS and the WTO.....	140
5.3.2 UNESCO .....	143
5.3.3 OECD.....	146
5.4 European RPL Policy Perspectives .....	150

5.4.1 NARIC and ENIC .....	150
5.4.2 The Lisbon Strategy (Education and Training 2010 and 2020) .....	151
5.4.3 The Council of Europe .....	153
5.4.4 The Bologna Declaration .....	154
5.4.5 EQF-LLL .....	160
5.4.6 Copenhagen Process and ECVET (European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training) .....	163
5.5 National RPL Policy Perspectives .....	165
5.5.1 Irish RPL Policy Development.....	166
5.5.2 National Qualifications Frameworks.....	168
5.6 Professional and sectoral RPL Policy Perspectives .....	173
5.7 Local practice impacting on RPL policy development .....	176
5.8 Chapter Summary .....	181
<b>CHAPTER SIX HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF PREVIOUS INDUSTRY-ACADEMIC RPL PROJECTS</b> .....	<b>182</b>
6.1 Introduction .....	182
6.2 Overview of Projects.....	182
6.2.1 National University of Ireland Maynooth and National Rehabilitation Board .....	183
6.2.2 Waterford Institute of Technology and National Adult Literacy Agency.....	186
6.2.3 OMNA-DIT/NOW Early Childhood Project .....	188
6.2.4 Valuing Learning from Experience (VaLEx) .....	190
6.3 Discussion of results of the Valorisation analysis .....	193
6.3.1 Optimise value.....	194
6.3.2 Sustainability .....	196
6.3.3 Impact.....	200
6.3.4 Transfer .....	201
6.3.5 Visibility .....	202
6.3.6 Feeding Policy.....	203
6.4 Themes Emerging.....	205
6.4.1 Pedagogy .....	206
6.4.2 Professional identity.....	207
6.4.3 Uncertainty.....	208
6.5 Chapter Summary .....	208

## **CHAPTER SEVEN COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF COMPANY CASE STUDIES IN RPL**

### **PRACTICE 210**

7.1 Introduction .....	210
7.2 Discussion of the results of the case study analysis .....	210
7.2.1 Conceptualisation of RPL in the cases .....	212
7.2.2 Contextualisation of RPL in the cases .....	213
7.2.3 Isolation of differences – presentation of open code categories .....	218
7.2.3.1 RPL Systems .....	219
7.2.3.2 RPL Process .....	223
7.2.3.3 RPL for individuals .....	226
7.2.3.4 RPL Resources .....	227
7.2.3.5 Learning in RPL .....	229
7.2.3.6 RPL in the Labour Market .....	230
7.2.3.7 Organisational Strategy .....	231
7.2.3.8 Sustainability .....	232
7.2.3.9 Evaluation .....	235
7.2.3.10 Added Value .....	237
7.2.3.11 Progression .....	240
7.2.4 Explanation of differences and similarities – axial coding .....	241
7.2.4.1 Circumstances leading to RPL in Company or Organisation .....	244
7.2.4.2 Change in perception of learning – a systems level reaction to RPL in the company or organisation .....	245
7.2.4.3 Change in perception of personal and professional self – individual level reaction to RPL in the company or organisation .....	248
7.2.4.4 Meet stakeholder needs – Reaction to entire RPL process in the company or organisation .....	249
7.2.4.5 Sustainability – Outcome of reaction to entire RPL process in companies and organisations .....	253
7.2.5 Reconceptualisation and generalisation and thematic coding .....	255
7.3 Chapter Summary .....	259

### **CHAPTER EIGHT A DELPHI-FUTURE ORIENTED SURVEY 261**

8.1 Introduction .....	261
8.2 Data from Round One .....	262

8.2.1 About RPL purpose and context.....	263
8.2.1.1 RPL for Training Needs Analysis .....	263
8.2.1.2 RPL for Access to Qualifications and Credit.....	264
8.2.1.3 RPL to up-skill and re-skill.....	265
8.2.1.4 RPL to meet legal requirements .....	266
8.2.1.5 RPL for mobility .....	266
8.2.1.6 RPL in the context of higher education .....	267
8.2.2 RPL tools and methods.....	268
8.2.2.1 Tools.....	268
8.2.2.2 Methods.....	269
8.2.3 Return on Investment .....	271
8.2.3.1 The Labour Market .....	271
8.2.3.2 The Individual Worker .....	272
8.2.3.3 The Employing Organisation.....	273
8.2.3.4 Further and Higher Education .....	275
8.2.3.4 Future of RPL in Companies and Organisations .....	277
8.3. Data from Round Two.....	278
8.3.1 Introduction.....	278
8.3.2 RPL and Mobility .....	280
8.3.3 RPL and Qualifications.....	283
8.3.4 RPL and Re-skilling and Up-skilling.....	284
8.3.5 RPL and Social Inclusion .....	286
8.3.6 RPL and External Consultants, Training Needs Analysis and Personal Development Plans .....	287
8.4 Data from Round Three .....	287
8.4.1 Policy Energy and Support Funding for RPL.....	288
8.4.2 RPL and Redundancy Re-skilling.....	289
8.4.3 Promoting RPL as a means to Up-skill.....	290
8.4.4 RPL in the economic crisis .....	290
8.4.4.1 Access .....	291
8.4.4.2 Small-scale policy.....	291
8.4.4.3 Potential .....	291

8.4.4.4 Policy and Funding.....	292
8.4.4.5 Recognition.....	292
8.4.4.6 Employability.....	292
8.4.4.7 Skills.....	292
8.4.4.8 Demand.....	293
8.4.5 Policy Statements.....	293
8.4.5.1 UNESCO.....	294
8.4.5.2 Council of Europe.....	295
8.4.5.3 OECD.....	295
8.4.5.4 World Bank.....	296
8.4.5.5 WTO and GATS.....	297
8.4.5.6 ILO.....	298
8.4.5.7 European Commission.....	299
8.4.5.8 EQF.....	299
8.4.5.9 ECVET.....	300
8.4.5.10 NCVER.....	301
8.4.5.11 SAQA.....	302
8.4.5.12 NQAI.....	303
8.5. Emerging Themes.....	304
8.5.1 Policy versus practice.....	304
8.5.2 Up-skilling and re-skilling.....	305
8.5.3 Mobility.....	306
8.5.4 Social inclusion.....	306
8.6 Chapter Summary.....	307
<b>CHAPTER NINE IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS FOR RPL POLICY AND PRACTICE</b>	<b>309</b>
9.1 Findings for RPL Policy.....	310
9.2 Findings for RPL practice.....	313
9.3 Findings for Companies and Organisations.....	316
9.4 Chapter Summary.....	319
<b>REFERENCES</b>	<b>320</b>

<b>APPENDIX A:</b> NUIM/NRB Certificate in Training (Special Needs) Documents for Historical Analysis of Previous RPL Industry-Academic Projects .....	375
<b>APPENDIX B:</b> WIT/NALA Accreditation Project Documents for Historical Historical Analysis of Previous RPL Industry-Academic Projects .....	377
<b>APPENDIX C:</b> OMNA-DIT/NOW Early Childhood Project Documents for Historical Historical Analysis of Previous RPL Industry-Academic Projects .....	381
<b>APPENDIX D:</b> Valuing Learning from Experience (VaLEx) Project Documents for Historical Historical Analysis of Previous RPL Industry-Academic Projects .....	383
<b>APPENDIX E:</b> Interview Schedule for Historical Analysis of Previous RPL Industry-Academic Projects.....	385
<b>APPENDIX F:</b> Participant Consent Form as used in the three research strands.....	388
<b>APPENDIX G:</b> Statement of Ethics governing the research study.....	390
<b>APPENDIX H:</b> Information Sheet distributed to potential case study interviewees.....	392
<b>APPENDIX I:</b> Interview Schedule for Comparative Analysis of Company Case Studies in RPL Practice.....	395
<b>APPENDIX J:</b> Table of Parallel Descriptions of company case studies.....	398
<b>APPENDIX K:</b> Delphi Survey Questionnaire Round One.....	412
<b>APPENDIX L:</b> Delphi Survey Questionnaire Round Two.....	428
<b>APPENDIX M:</b> Delphi Survey Questionnaire Round Three.....	433
<b>APPENDIX N:</b> Presentations and Publications.....	442

# *List of Figures and Tables*

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		<b>Page</b>
Figure 1.1	Catalysts for change in the research context during the timeline of the research (Nov 2008-June 2011)	9
Figure 1.2	Interaction of RPL policy and practice in this research	11
Figure 1.3	Theoretical and methodological framework for the thesis	18
Figure 1.4	Overview of chapters in this thesis	24
Figure 2.1	Social constructionism and constructivism as conceived in this thesis	38
Figure 2.2	The Delphi process	61
Figure 3.1	J. Phillips' ROI Model	78
Figure 3.2	Valorisation Framework of Analysis	83
Figure 7.1	Linking core category and sub-categories in analysis	257
Figure 8.1	Contexts for which respondents find RPL used for training needs analysis	264
Figure 8.2	Contexts for which respondents find RPL used for credits	265
Figure 8.3	Contexts for which respondents find RPL used for mobility	267
Figure 8.5	RPL use in the context of higher education in companies and organisations	268
Figure 8.6	RPL tools currently used in companies and organisations	269
Figure 8.7	RPL methods used in companies and organisations by choice of " <i>high</i> " on a five point Likert scale	270
Figure 8.8	ROI to the Labour Market from RPL	272
Figure 8.9	ROI to the Individual Worker from RPL	273
Figure 8.10	ROI to the Employing Organisation from RPL	274

Figure 8.11	For what is RPL mostly used in companies and organisations?	298
Figure 8.12	ROI to further and higher education from RPL	275
Figure 8.13	RPL for mobility is really part of the lifelong learning policy discourse rather than an actual lived practice and likely to remain so.	281
Figure 8.14	Without global recognition of qualifications RPL for mobility has limited value to companies and organisations	282
Figure 8.15	Without global RPL principles for non-formal and informal learning it is likely that only certified learning will facilitate mobility of workers	283
Figure 8.16	RPL for up-skilling will be more valuable to companies and organisations than RPL for re-skilling	285
Figure 8.17	RPL for up-skilling will more frequently be used in the contexts of state supported VET and Higher Education than in commercial companies and organisations.	285
Figure 8.18	The Social Inclusion agenda of lifelong learning discourses is of direct returns relevance to companies and organisations	286
Figure 8.19	How much policy and support funding is now being allocated to re-skill workers made redundant or in danger of such?	288
Figure 8.20	To what extent is RPL a factor in re-skilling redundant workers in your country/state/region?	289
Figure 8.21	To what extent have policy makers begun to promote RPL as a means of up-skilling redundant workers in your state/country/region?	290
Figure 8.22	Relevance of UNESCO RPL policy statements to practice	294
Figure 8.23	Relevance of Council of Europe RPL policy statements to practice	295
Figure 8.24	Relevance of OECD RPL policy statements to practice	296
Figure 8.25	Relevance of World Bank RPL policy statements to practice	297
Figure 8.26	Relevance of WTO and GATS RPL policy statements to practice	297
Figure 8.27	Relevance of ILO RPL policy statements to practice	298



Figure 8.28	Relevance of European Commission RPL policy statements to Practice	299
Figure 8.29	Relevance of EQF RPL policy statements to practice	300
Figure 8.30	Relevance of ECVET RPL policy statements to practice	301
Figure 8.31	Relevance of NCVER RPL policy statements to practice	302
Figure 8.32	Relevance of SAQA RPL policy statements to practice	303
Figure 8.33	Relevance of NQAI RPL policy statements to practice	304
Table 1.1	D. Phillips' adapted model of case study comparison Including Bereday's model	20
Table 2.1	Ontological, Epistemological and Methodological Overview of the thesis	28
Table 2.2	Differing strands of constructivism	37
Table 2.3	Different strands of social constructivism	39
Table 2.4	Methodological and analytical considerations in the thesis	46
Table 3.1	Kaufman's Five Levels of Evaluation	80
Table 3.2	Comparison of ROI models as used in this research	81
Table 3.3	D. Phillips' adapted model of case study comparison including Bereday's framework	85
Table 5.1	RPL Policy Context	132
Table 6.1	Overview of project examined in historical study	183
Table 7.1	Overview of cases of RPL	211
Table 7.2	Sub-codes in Round One – Open Coding	216
Table 7.3	Categories and sub-categories after second round of coding	218
Table 7.4	Summary of the analysis at axial coding stage	244
Table 7.5	Using RPL to meet stakeholder needs	250
Table 7.6	How RPL does not meet stakeholder needs	252

Table 8.1	Respondent agreement with statements on the future of RPL	278
Table 8.2	Statements with highest level of agreement in descending order	280
Table 8.3	Responses to RPL policy statements from European and International organisations	294

# *Glossary of Terms and Abbreviations:* As Used in this Research Study

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## **Accreditation**

The official authorisation of a programme by the state or territory accrediting body (Hawker, 1995)

## **Accrediting authority**

An organisation with the authority and responsibility for accrediting courses and training programmes

## **Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL)**

Accreditation of prior learning is a process that enables an individual to achieve formal recognition for formal and experiential learning (Cedefop, 2008c)

## **ACCS**

Accumulation of Credits and Certification of Subjects

## **APCL**

Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning

## **Accreditation of Prior (Experiential) Learning [AP(E)L]**

Accreditation of prior (experiential) learning is a process used to grant formal recognition for knowledge or experience previously gained non-formally or informally (Cedefop, 2008c)

## **APL & A**

Accreditation of Prior Learning & Assessment

## **Adult education**

Education of adults; education programmes designed for adults, often incorporating approaches to education which draw on the learner's life or work experiences, involve learners in planning the learning activities, and encourage learning in groups

## **Adult basic education (or ABE)**

Remedial or school-level education for adults, usually with emphasis on the literacy, numeracy, and social skills needed to function within the community or to gain employment

## **Assessment**

The process of judging evidence in order to decide whether a person has achieved a standard or objective

## **Bologna Declaration**

A Joint Declaration signed by the European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education from 29 European countries in July 1999 in Bologna to work towards a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010. This process included the introduction of the three cycle

system (bachelor/master/doctorate), quality assurance and recognition of qualifications and periods of study. The Council of Europe, a pan-European organisation established in 1949 to promote democracy, human rights and the rule of law, was a key consultative member of the Bologna process from its inception, particularly with regard to the recognition of qualifications and the Council of Europe/UNESCO Lisbon Recognition Convention 1997 (Benelux Bologna Secretariat, 2009)

### **CAPLA**

Canadian Association of Prior Learning Assessment

### **Case Study**

The in-depth study of one or more cases using large amounts of data (Scott & Morrison, 2007)

### **CEDEFOP**

European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training

### **Certification**

The process of formally validating knowledge, know-how and/or competences acquired by an individual, following a standard assessment procedure. Certificates or diplomas are issued by accredited awarding bodies (Cedefop, 2011)

### **Company**

A business organisation, a business enterprise or firm (Hawker, 1995)

### **Competence**

Ability to apply knowledge, know-how and skills in an habitual and/or changing work situation (Cedefop, 2011)

### **Constructivism**

Epistemological position in which an individual constructs meaning through interaction between the individual and his/her social world (Crotty, 2009)

### **Continuing education and training**

Educational or training programmes after initial education and training, usually at the post-secondary level and offered as part-time or short courses in personal, academic or occupational subject areas (Cedefop, 2008c)

### **Continuing Professional Development (CPD)**

Study designed to upgrade the knowledge and skills of practitioners in professions (Cedefop, 2008c)

### **Copenhagen Declaration**

Declaration by the European Ministers of Vocational Education and Training and the European Commission in November 2002 on enhanced European co-operation in VET (European Commission, 2010d)

### **Cost Benefit Analysis**

A process to measure the benefits of a proposed or existing programme or project in monetary terms and compare them with the costs. A cost-benefit ratio is determined by dividing the projected or resultant benefits by the projected or resultant costs (Barker, 2001)

### **Council of Europe**

A pan-European organisation founded in 1949 with 47 member countries to develop throughout Europe common and democratic principles based on the European Convention on Human Rights and other reference texts on the protection of individuals. The Council of Europe also developed the European Language Portfolio, one of the Europass documents and established the ENIC network with UNESCO in 1994. The Council of Europe/UNESCO established the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region in 1997 (Council of Europe, 2011a)

### **Credit System**

An instrument designed to enable accumulation of learning outcomes gained in formal, non-formal and/or informal settings, and facilitate their transfer from one setting to another for validation and recognition (Cedefop, 2008c)

### **Delphi Technique**

A future-oriented research methodology for structuring a group communication process so that the process is effective in allowing a group of individuals, as a whole, to deal with a complex problem (Murray & Turoff, 2002). In this thesis the Delphi was structured in three survey rounds

### **Dissemination and Exploitation**

Dissemination is a planned process of providing information on the quality, relevance and effectiveness of the results of a project to end-users and key actors. Exploitation comprises mainstreaming (a planned process of transferring the successful results of programmes and initiatives or projects to appropriate decision-makers) and multiplication (a planned process of convincing individual end-users to adopt and/or apply the results of programmes and initiatives or projects) activities (European Commission, 2006)

### **DIT**

Dublin Institute of Technology

### **EC**

European Commission

### **ECTS**

European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System

### **ECVET**

European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training

### **Education and Training 2010 Work Programme**

A strategy document launched in 2001 following from the Lisbon Strategy (2000) to strengthen co-operation in European education and training for economic competitiveness (European Commission, 2010a)

### **EGFSN**

Expert Group on Future Skills Needs

### **Employability**

The combination of factors which enable individuals to progress towards, or get into, employment, to stay in employment and to progress during career (Cedefop, 2008c)

### **ENIC Network**

European Network of Information Centres (ENIC) founded by the Council of Europe and UNESCO in 1994 to develop joint policy and practice in all European countries for the recognition of qualifications. The network subsequently played a key role to implement the Council of Europe/UNESCO Lisbon Recognition Convention (Council of Europe, 2011b). The network works closely with the NARIC network of the European Commission

### **Enterprise**

A structure through which individuals co-operate systematically to conduct business (Hawker, 1995)

### **EQF-LLL**

European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning

### **ET 2020 (Strategic Framework for European Co-operation in Education and Training)**

A follow-up to the Education and Training 2010 work programme (European Commission, 2010a)

### **Europass**

A device which aims to help people make their skills and qualifications clearly and easily understood in Europe, thus facilitating the mobility of both learners and workers. Europass consists of a portfolio of five documents as follows: Europass Curriculum Vitae (CV), Europass Language Passport (developed by Council of Europe), Europass Mobility, Europass Certificate Supplement, and Europass Diploma Supplement (developed by European Commission, Council of Europe and UNESCO)(European Union, 2011)

### **Eurostat**

Statistical office of the European Union

### **Experiential learning**

Learning through life and work experience that has not been formally structured, assessed or accredited (Cedefop, 2008c)

### **FÁS**

Foras Áiseanna Saothair, Irish Training and Employment Authority

**FETAC**

Further Education and Training Awards Council

**Fórfas**

Ireland's policy advisory board for enterprise, trade, science, technology and innovation.

**Formal education** also formal training

Learning that occurs in an organised and structured context (in a school/training centre or on-the-job) and is explicitly designated as learning (in terms of objectives, time or learning support). Formal learning is intentional from the learner's point of view. It typically leads to certification (Cedefop, 2011)

**Formative Recognition**

Recognition of prior learning for personal or career development (Whittaker, 2009b)

**Further education (FE)**

Post-secondary education, including higher education, adult education, and vocational education and training

**HEA**

Higher Education Authority

**HEQ Bridges**

An EU funded project concerned with building bridges between EQF and EHEA- A project developing and correlating national and sectoral qualifications frameworks and systems in relation to the EQF and strengthening the links with EHEA.

**HETAC**

Higher Education and Training Awards Council

**Higher education**

Post-secondary education offered by a university or other recognised higher education institution (Cedefop, 2008c)

**Human Capital**

Knowledge, skills, competences and attributes embodied in individuals which facilitate personal, social and economic well-being (Cedefop, 2008c)

**Informal learning**

Learning that takes place through life and work experience (sometimes referred to as experiential learning). Often, it is learning that is unintentional and the individual may not recognise at the time of the experience that it contributed to his or her knowledge, skills and competences (Cedefop, 2008c)

**IoTs**

Institutes of Technology

**Knowledge**

The outcome of the assimilation of information through learning. Knowledge is the body of facts, principles, theories and practices that is related to a field of study or work (Cedefop, 2008c)

**Labour market**

The system of relationships between the supply of people available for employment and the available jobs (Cedefop, 2008c)

**Labour Market Activation (LMA) Schemes**

Government supported initiatives for up-skilling and re-skilling of jobseekers through funded programmes for various levels of qualifications.

**Léargas**

Irish national agency for the management of national and international exchange and co-operation programmes in education, youth and community work and vocational education and training.

**Learning**

A process by which an individual assimilates information, ideas and values and thus acquires knowledge, know-how, skills and/or competences (Cedefop, 2008c)

**Learning Outcomes**

The set of knowledge, skills and/or competences an individual has acquired and/or is able to demonstrate after completion of a learning process, either formal, non-formal or informal (Cedefop, 2008c)

**Leonardo da Vinci Programme**

Part of the European Commission's Lifelong Learning Programme, which provides funding for projects in the field of vocational education and training

**Lifelong learning**

All learning activity undertaken throughout life, which results in improving knowledge, know-how, skills, competences and/or qualifications for personal, social and/or professional reasons (Cedefop, 2008c)

**Líonra**

APL project in the border-midlands-western (BMW) region between 2005 and 2007 to develop and apply a standard model to recognise and accredit prior learning in companies in the BMW region (Keher, 2007)

**Lisbon Convention (1997)**

Council of Europe/UNESCO Convention on the recognition of qualifications concerning higher education in the European region, ratified in 1999.



**Lisbon Strategy (2000)**

Strategy to make Europe the most competitive knowledge-based economy capable of enabling sustainable economic growth, more and better jobs, and greater social cohesion (European Commission, 2010a)

**NAFTA**

North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement

**NALA**

National Adult Literacy Agency

**NARIC Network**

National Academic Recognition Information Centres (NARIC) founded in 1984 by the European Commission to improve academic recognition of diplomas and periods of study in the EU. In many countries the ENIC centres are also the NARIC centres (Council of Europe, 2011b)

**NCEA**

National Council for Educational Awards

**NCVER**

National Council for Vocational Education Research

**NFQ**

National Framework of Qualifications

**Non-formal learning**

Learning that takes place alongside the mainstream systems of education and training. It may be structured and assessed but does not normally lead to formal certification. Examples of non-formal learning are: learning and training activities undertaken in the workplace, voluntary sector or trade union and in community-based learning (Cedefop, 2008c)

**NQAI**

National Qualifications Authority of Ireland

**NUIM**

National University of Ireland, Maynooth

**OEM**

Organizational Elements Model (Kaufman, 2005)

**On-site training**

Training conducted at the work site (e.g. in a training room) but not on the job (Cedefop, 2008c)

**On-the-job training**

Training undertaken in the workplace as part of the productive work of the learner (Cedefop, 2008c)

**Organisation**

In this thesis an organisation is defined as a social unit of people, systematically structured and managed to meet a need or to pursue collective goals on a continuing basis. All organisations have a management structure that determines relationships between functions and positions, and subdivides and delegates roles, responsibilities, and authority to carry out defined tasks. Organisations are open systems in that they affect and are affected by the environment beyond their boundaries

**PLIRC**

Prior Learning International Research Centre

**QF-EHEA**

Qualifications Framework – European Higher Education Area

**Qualification**

An official record (certificate, diploma) of achievement which recognises successful completion of education or training, or satisfactory performance in a test or examination; and/or the requirements for an individual to enter, or progress within an occupation (Cedefop, 2011)

**RCC**

Recognition of Current Competence

**Recognition**

The process by which prior learning is given a value (NQAI, 2005)

**Recognition of Prior Learning**

Recognition of Prior Learning is described as ‘prior learning that is given a value, by having it affirmed, acknowledged, assessed or certified’. The acknowledgement of a person’s skills and knowledge acquired through previous training, work or life experience, which may be used to grant status or credit in a subject or module (FETAC, 2005; NQAI, 2005).

**Return on Investment (ROI)**

A performance measure used to evaluate the efficiency of an investment or to compare the efficiency of a number of different investments. To calculate ROI, the benefit (return) of an investment is divided by the cost of the investment; the result is expressed as a percentage or a ratio. In finance, rate of return (ROR), also known as return on investment (ROI), rate of profit or sometimes just return, is the ratio of money gained or lost (realised or unrealised) on an investment relative to the amount of money invested (Barker, 2001).

**Return on Training Investment**

Measurement of training ROI starts with defining the reasons and goals for the training, determining how much the training costs, and verifying the amount of return. Improvement factors include increased productivity, reduction of waste, and improved employee retention (J. Phillips, 1997).

**RNFIL**

Recognition of non-formal and informal learning

**SAQA**

South African Qualifications Authority

**SCQF**

Scottish Credit Qualification Framework

**SIF EinE Project**

The Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF), supported innovation in higher education between 2006 and 2013 which included the Education in Employment Project.

**Skill**

An ability to perform a particular mental or physical activity which may be developed by training or practice (Cedefop, 2008c)

**Social constructionism**

Epistemological position which assumes a social origin of meaning (Crotty, 2009)

**Socrates-Grundtvig**

European Commission funding for projects to promote innovation and the improved availability, accessibility and quality of educational provision for adults, by means of European co-operation

**SROI**

Social Return on Investment

**Summative Recognition**

Evidence of formal and informal learning that might contribute toward credit or an award

**Training**

The development of skills, knowledge, attitudes, competencies, through instruction or practice (Cedefop, 2008c)

**UNESCO**

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

**UVAC**

University Vocational Awards Council (in the United Kingdom)

**VaLEx**

Valuing Learning from Experience, a Socrates-Grundtvig APEL research project

**VET**

Vocational Education and Training

**WIT**

Waterford Institute of Technology

**Work-based Learning**

Work-based learning programs for both secondary and third level students which provide opportunities to achieve employment-related competencies in the workplace. Work-based learning is often undertaken in conjunction with classroom or related learning, and may take the form of work placements, work experience, workplace mentoring, instruction in general workplace competencies, and broad instruction in all aspects of industry

**Workplace Learning (also workplace training)**

Learning or training undertaken in the workplace, usually on the job, including on-the-job training under normal operational conditions, and on-site training which is conducted away from the work process (e.g. in a training room)

**WTO-GATS**

World Trade Organization – General Agreement on Trade in Services

# Chapter One

## Introduction

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This research study set out from November 2008 to explore the impact of the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in companies and organisations in Ireland. For the purposes of the research a 'company' refers to a commercial business, and an 'organisation' refers to a social unit of people, systematically structured and managed to meet a need or to pursue collective goals on a continuing basis, which includes businesses, professional bodies, trade unions, community, youth and voluntary bodies, and training and education institutes. Essentially, the research explored the perceived impact of RPL to Irish companies and organisations which used it in their training models since 1993 when the NCEA (National Council for Educational Awards) in Ireland launched an AP(E)L (Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning) system.

There were three research methodologies used in this thesis:

1. an historical analysis of previous industry-academic RPL projects,
2. a comparative analysis of sixteen company case studies in RPL practice,
3. a Delphi future-oriented survey.

This chapter presents the purpose of the research and problems addressed which include the immediate national and international labour market dislocation that emerged as the research progressed. The chapter also discusses the research questions and sub-questions in which the perspective shifted because of the changing research context from one of the *value* of RPL to the *valorisation* of RPL. The chapter then goes on to a discussion of the research design including methodological and analytical considerations. The chapter summarises some of the consequences of the unexpected changes that occurred during the research study, concluding with an overview of the chapters to follow in the thesis.

## **1.1 Purpose of the research and problems addressed**

### **1.1.1 The immediate national labour market context**

This research study aimed to contribute to the deficit in knowledge surrounding the impact of, and potential return on investment from, RPL to companies and organisations, within the local context of the Irish labour market. The year before this research began, the '*National Skills Strategy*' (Behan, Condon, McNaboe, Milicevic, & Rodriguez, 2007) by the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN) in Ireland, found that working life had become more knowledge-intensive, therefore requiring a commensurate rise in worker skills and qualifications. The result was an increasing focus on education, training and skills for the workplace. The EGFSN in 2007 also found that in order to sustain a knowledge economy 45% of the workforce would need to hold a third level qualification and that further up-skilling of the current workforce was essential (Behan, et al., 2007). Despite the economic downturn since 2008 the EGFSN reports for 2009 (Behan, Condon, Hogan, McGrath, McNaboe, Milicevic, & Shally, 2009) and 2010 (Behan, Condon, Hogan, McGrath, McNaboe, Milicevic, & Shally, 2010) found that there was still a need for up-skilling and even more so for re-skilling those facing redundancy, or to address the still significant shortages in certain, often high skill areas.

The '*National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*' (Hunt Report) report by the Strategy Group (Hunt, 2011), whose work was framed in the context of the Government Framework '*Building Ireland's Smart Economy*' (Government of Ireland, 2008) called for the transformation of the higher education landscape in Ireland. By 2011 policy documents were recommending that higher education transformation should facilitate the growing numbers and changing profile of students in higher education, and reflect the emphasis now

placed on lifelong learning and up-skilling as a result of unemployment and changed work patterns (Hunt, 2011). The Hunt Report stressed the role higher education should play in future economic development, particularly with regard to widening participation.

The *'Labour Market Activation (LMA) Fund'* initiative, since 2009, made available by the Government, with further iterations in 2010 and 2011, is a prime example of the role of higher education in national up-skilling re-skilling strategies for the unemployed (Higher Education Authority, 2009; Department of Education and Skills, 2010). Through this fund, places on third-level programmes were made available to job seekers in designated programmes on the national framework of qualifications (NFQ) in higher education institutes throughout Ireland. The Forfás report by the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN) entitled, *'Developing Recognition of Prior Learning: The Role of RPL in the Context of the National Skills Strategy Upskilling Objectives'* (Expert Group on Future Skills Needs [EGFSN], 2011) formally recognises the role RPL could have as part of the national skills strategy in partnership with further and higher education. RPL was specifically prioritised for its relevance to initiatives designed to reduce unemployment, to utilise education and training resources more efficiently, and to provide individuals and enterprises with access to flexible and relevant education and training systems (EGFSN, 2011).

During the economic crisis it was found that unemployment rates were highest amongst those with lower secondary education or below (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions [Eurofound], 2011) in the 25-34 year old age cohort, as well as older lower-skilled workers, and younger age cohorts (under 25s) (Forfás, 2010). In Quarter 1 [Q1] 2011 there were 2,099,900 persons in the labour force in Ireland (CSO,

2011b), which was a decrease of 32,800 over the year and was preceded by a decrease of 55,700 in Q1 2010 (CSO, 2011b). Some of this decrease has been attributed to the decline in inward migration. In Quarter 1 (Jan-March) 2011 there were 1,804,200 people employed, of which 202,900 were non-Irish nationals, and there were 295,700 people unemployed in Ireland (CSO, 2011b). There was a decrease of 53,400 employed persons in the year to Q1 2011. This was a decrease of 2.9%, compared to an annual decrease of 3.4% in Q4 of 2010 and 5.5% in Q1 of 2010 (CSO, 2011b). In terms of employees there were 1,498,800 employees in Q1 2011, which was the lowest level since 2004 (CSO, 2011b). Over the year from Quarter 1 2010 to Quarter 1 2011, there was also an increase in long-term unemployment to 162,800 people (CSO, 2011b.) Long-term unemployment, as a percentage of total unemployment, had increased from 22% in Quarter 1 2009 to 55.1% by Quarter 1 2011 (CSO, 2011b). With the diversity of unemployed persons in Ireland, different labour market activation measures have been put forward, increasingly including RPL (EGFSN, 2011; Forfás, 2010). In addition to the immediate national labour market context, international and European RPL policy has also been moving to address the demands for greater levels of skills and qualifications on the global and European labour market.

### **1.1.2 The international labour market context**

The severity of the financial crisis was acknowledged in the second half of 2008 when the European Commission issued its communication '*New Skills for New Jobs: Anticipating and matching labour market and skills needs*', arguing that for economic recovery it was essential to enhance human capital and employability by upgrading skills (Commission of the European Communities, 2008b). The 2008 Communication built on the Communication '*A European Economic Recovery Plan*' issued by the European Commission in November 2008. The Recovery Plan underlined the importance of maintaining the priorities outlined in



the Lisbon Strategy based on 'flexicurity' measures which included labour activation schemes, re-training, and skills upgrading to avoid long-term unemployment (Commission of the European Communities, 2008a). Flexicurity entailed ensuring the social protection of workers and the unemployed in their pursuit of up-skilling and re-skilling endeavours.

The importance of the recognition of prior learning (RPL) has been laid down in European policy such as the Education and Training 2010 Work Programme to build on the Lisbon Strategy (from 2001) where RPL was considered a means to facilitate the access of all to education and training (Council of the European Union, 2001). The 2010 Work Programme was superseded by the '*Strategic Framework for European Co-operation in Education and Training*' (ET2020) where RPL formed part of realising lifelong learning (The Council of the European Union, 2009). Within the Bologna process (from 1999) RPL for access to, and as an element of, higher education and to create flexible learning paths, was explicitly mentioned in the Bergen Communiqué (Council of European Minister responsible for Higher Education, 2005). The Copenhagen Process (since 2002) looked to RPL for the recognition of competences and qualifications across vocational education and training in Europe (European Ministers of Vocational Education and Training & European Commission, 2002). The European Qualification Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF-LLL) was formulated with the purpose to encourage lifelong learning by promoting the validation of non-formal and informal learning (European Commission, 2010b).

In addition to RPL being firmly located in European lifelong learning policy, one of the prime drivers behind the growth in European policies for RPL in companies and organisations was the increasing recognition that a significant amount of learning took place outside of the

formal education and training system (Cedefop, 2008b). It was accepted that this learning could be recognised, assessed and validated in relation to formal awards through an RPL process (Cedefop, 2008a).

RPL was said to have the potential to act as a means to improve access to, and efficiency in, the formal education system, to address the needs of the knowledge economy, to provide opportunities for disadvantaged or excluded people including migrants and the ageing population, and to provide a medium through which to appreciate an individual's technical skills gained through informal and non-formal means (Cedefop, 2008b). RPL was further suggested as a means of overcoming the skills shortages in industry and helping to match skills demand with supply (Cedefop, 2008a). Additionally, RPL was considered an opportunity to improve the overall skill level and work performance in an industry, to enhance employability, labour mobility and an individual's career prospects (EGFSN, 2011; Further Education and Training Awards Council [FETAC], 2005; 2007; 2009). RPL was also put forward as a means to facilitate social inclusion, widen access to education, and respond to rapidly changing economic needs by fostering a learning society where the acquisition of knowledge was the key to economic success (European Commission, 2010e; Merrill & Hill, 2001). RPL was suggested as a means to promote flexibility in terms of access, entry, assessment and accreditation in higher education (Duvekot, 2010; Gibson, 2011; National Qualifications Authority of Ireland [NQAI], 2005; 2008). This research study took a step toward discovering whether these aspirations for RPL were actually achieved in practice.

### **1.1.3 Research questions and study audience**

The main research question and sub-questions were formulated as follows:

***Is there a return on investment from the recognition of prior learning (RPL) to companies and organisations that use RPL in their learning and development strategies?***

From this main question, a number of sub-questions were articulated to structure the enquiry in relation to Roger Kaufman's (2005) 'Organisational Elements Model' of return on investment. Kaufman's model provides the overall analytical framework for the research study and is presented in chapter three. The model evaluates an organisation on five elemental-levels which each contribute to the critical success of human performance improvement interventions. The five levels are mega-, macro-, micro-, process-, and input-levels. Therefore the sub-set of questions used to guide this research was as follows:

- What is the impact of RPL in companies and organisations at the **mega**-level (to those external to the organisation and society)?
- What is the impact of RPL in companies and organisations at the **macro**-level (to the outside of the organisation)?
- What is the impact of RPL in companies and organisations at the **micro**-level (within the organisation)?
- What is the impact of RPL in companies and organisations at the **process**-level (internal procedures, methods)?
- What is the impact of RPL in companies and organisations at the **input**-level (resources an organisation can or does use)?

The model is fully presented in chapter three on the analytical frameworks for this research study and was used further in the concluding chapter nine to guide the discussion.

The research outcomes are intended for the following potential readership:

- RPL practitioners in further and higher education – to inform their interaction with the labour market
- Human Resource/Learning & Development/Training/Education officers in companies and organisations – to present the business case for RPL.
- Policy makers in further (FE) and higher education (HE) who are currently focused on RPL for up-skilling and re-skilling of the labour market as well as strategies for lifelong learning and RPL for access, transfer and progression within both the FE and HE sectors.

These stakeholders are addressed in chapter nine on the discussion and conclusions drawn from the data.

### **1.1.4 Changes to the economic environment during the research**

As this fieldwork progressed and economic difficulties increased from 2008, labour market policies, particularly in relation to up-skilling and re-skilling of recently redundant and of medium and long-term unemployed workers, became linked to higher and further education policy for more flexible provision of education with greater levels of access, transfer and progression (EGFSN, 2011; Hunt, 2011). Strengthening human capital through measures for lifelong learning (or perhaps even working-life learning) had re-directed social inclusion towards up-skilling and re-skilling those in danger of long-term unemployment (Commission of the European Communities, 2008; 2008b; EGFSN, 2011; Hunt, 2011).

This changing context for RPL that emerged in tandem with the fieldwork for this project saw the research move from its starting point of a cost-benefit analysis of a range of then-existing RPL practices to discussions about how RPL could be used as a mechanism for re-skilling of a labour market which in Ireland had moved from one with an unemployment rate of 5.4% in the second quarter of 2008 to 13.8% by the second quarter of 2010 (Eurofound, 2011) and had increased to 14.1% by May 2011 (Central Statistics Office, 2011b). Spain had reached 20.2% unemployment by the second quarter of 2010 (Eurofound, 2011). Consequently, when in May 2011 ‘Springboard’ was launched as an element of the Government Jobs Initiative to provide 15,900 third level education and training places, RPL was a requirement for education providers (Bluebrick.ie, 2011). Figure 1.1 below provides a timeline for the changing context of the research, from the research start point of November 2008 to its endpoint of June 2011, highlighting the main factors that impacted on the research fieldwork.

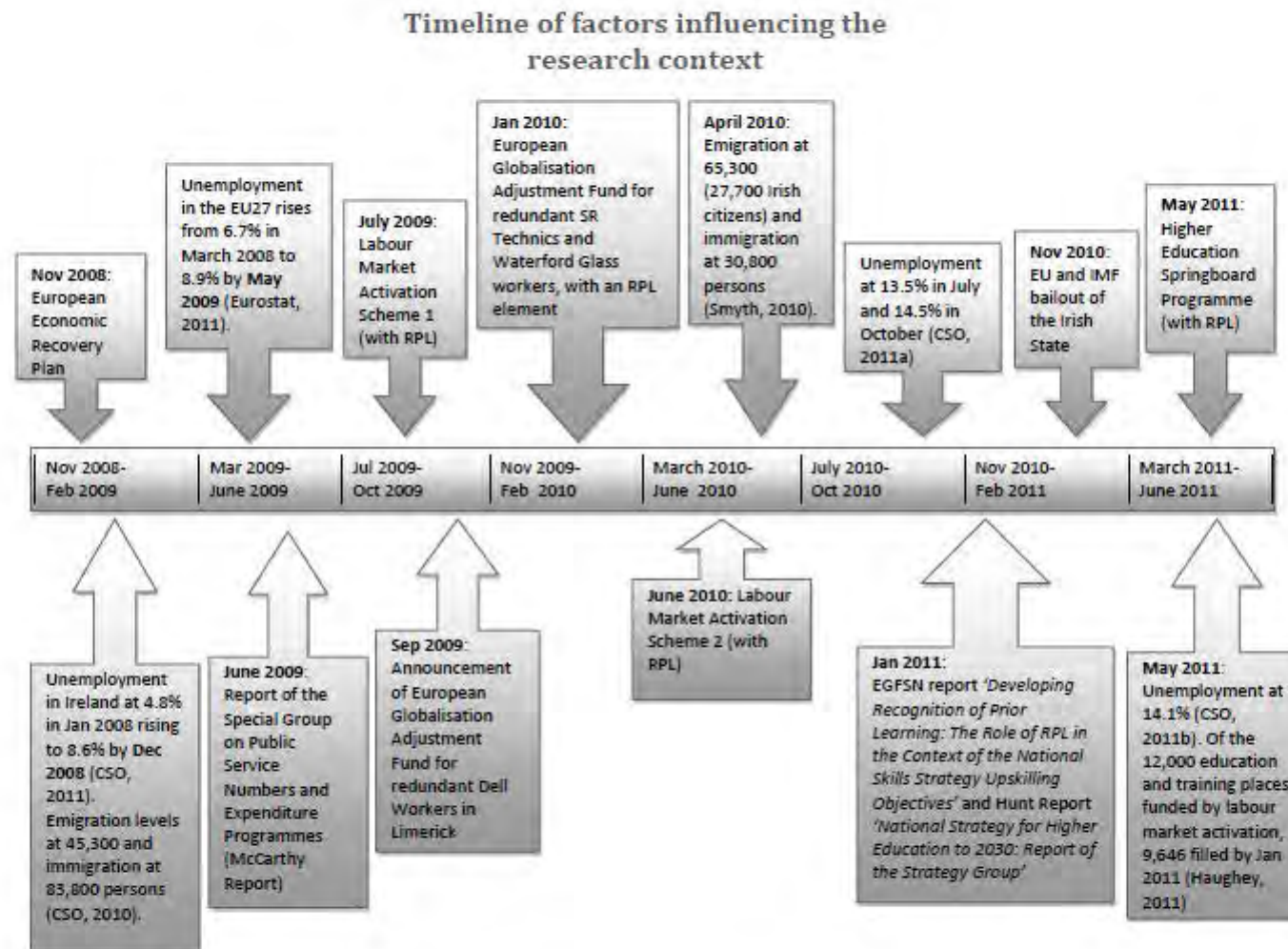


Figure 1.1 Catalysts for change in the research context during the timeline of the research (Nov 2008-June 2011)

### **1.1.5 Perspective shifts during the research**

From the original framing of the research question to the sub-questions which emerged two years later the research study was subject to the changed economic, labour market, and higher education environments as described above. The research was compelled to ask:

- What direction had the philosophical drive for RPL now taken?
- What was the use-value and exchange-value of knowledge in this radically changed economic context?
- How did this impact on the public role of higher education in relation to the needs of the state and citizenry as well as the company and individuals within it?

The change of economic, labour market, and higher education environments did not significantly alter the underlying ontology or epistemology of the research, but raised ontological and epistemological issues that would be involved in any study of RPL regardless of the context. The research study therefore moved from a relatively modernist perspective on education and learning with an emphasis on liberalism, humanism and human capital where education was marketed to meet economic needs, to more postmodern perceptions of blurred boundaries between education and the immediate needs of the economy and society. Blurred boundaries between RPL policy and RPL practice provide a broad conceptual frame for this research.

A broad conception of this research is illustrated in figure 1.2 below which shows how the varying levels of RPL policy are influenced by, and have an influence on, the RPL practices that were examined in this thesis research. Local, national, European and global RPL policies, some of which have already been mentioned, and which are elaborated in chapter five of the thesis have structured the way RPL was practised at different levels.

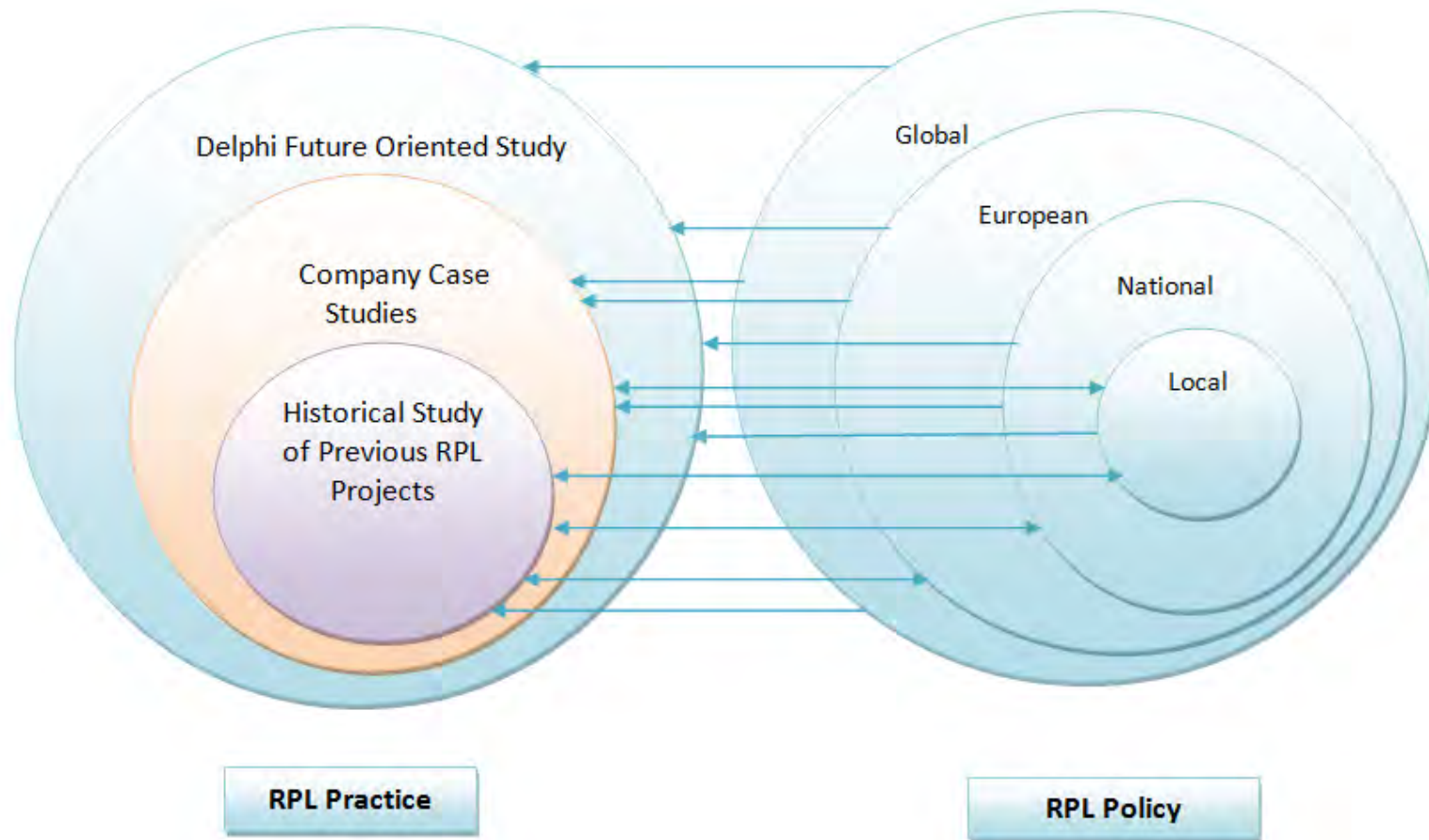


Figure 1.2 Interaction of RPL policy and practice in this research

For example, RPL practice such as that examined in the research study through the historical analysis of previous RPL projects and company and organisational RPL case studies, has given rise to RPL policy discourse at local, national, European and global levels. Instances of RPL in Ireland formed part of the OECD study on the recognition of non-formal and informal learning (OECD, 2007c) and the outputs of that study have informed RPL policy in Ireland (EGFSN, 2011).

## **1.2 Research positionality**

I came to the topic of RPL as a result of an analysis I was conducting of a large-scale European survey on competence development in organisations in the period 2006-2007 at Wageningen University, the Netherlands. That study was focused on competence in relation to organisational development and organisational performance, particularly influenced by literature on the learning organisation (Senge, 1990; Nyhan, 1998; Dreijer, 2000), core competence (Prahalad & Hamel, 1990), competence development (Mulder, 2000; 2001; Mulder & Bruin-Mosch, 2005), professional development (Eraut, 1994), the competence concept (Norris, 1991; Ellström, 1997; Mansfield, 2004; Delamare le Deist & Winterton (2005) and competence-based vocational education (Biemans, et al, 2004; Mulder, Weigel, & Collins, 2006).

That particular background had a significant influence on the research objectives and research design for the project. Therefore, it is not surprising that this research began within the context of the evaluation of training. Discussions of evaluation of training are tied to learning, and therefore the research proposal initially looked to Bloom's taxonomy of learning domains (1956), Kirkpatrick's (1994) four levels of learning evaluation to evaluate training programmes, and learning styles theory such as the model of Kolb (1984). The most



commonly used model of training evaluation in firms was the Kirkpatrick model, which ultimately led to return on investment, or return on training investment (ROTI), primarily building on Kirkpatrick to J. Phillips'<sup>1</sup> Five Levels of Evaluation (1997) and Kaufman's (2005) Five Levels of Evaluation based on his 'Organizational Elements Model'. That focus was sustained as the central tacit theme throughout the research fieldwork and analysis.

### **1.2.1 From 'value' to 'valorisation'**

However, it is necessary to emphasise at this point the distinction between how RPL is valued in this research and how RPL would be valued if this were a pure ROTI study. This research is informed by concerns central to value for the organisation, which are fundamentally linked to issues of value for the individuals involved, and value for society. However, there is a broader conception of 'value' in this research than simple return on training investment (ROTI) as outlined by J. Phillips. This conception of value is 'valorisation'; optimising the value of RPL, strengthening the impact of RPL, transferring RPL to other contexts or target groups, integrating RPL in a sustainable way and using RPL actively in systems and practices at local, regional, national and European levels (European Commission [EC], 2007). In ROTI studies, there are four primary stakeholders; these are the organisation or business, the individual, the HR/training practitioner, and finally society (Barker, 2001). This research adds several other stakeholders to that process, namely higher and further education, and global, European, national and regional education and labour market policies.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the chapters the two authors Jack Phillips and David Phillips are distinguished by the use of their first initial.

### **1.2.2 Return on Training Investment (ROTI)**

From a business perspective training is regarded as an investment that should provide a beneficial return (Barker, 2001). The ever increasing economic pressure means that firms are concerned with the effectiveness of their training to increase the financial worth of their employees for improved job or organisational performance. ROTI can be used strategically in the sense of linking training to business strategy, and showing the costs or benefits of certain human resource management practices (Barker, 2001). From an individual perspective, the prospect of training should increase one's financial worth to their employer. Training is often cited as the bridge to greater job satisfaction, the provision of more portable skills and job mobility, improved morale, and greater job security. Studies have shown that a worker's wage is positively related to past investments in training (Barker, 2001). However, employer-provided training can have low participation levels and high levels of absenteeism. The return is often opaque, and the full effect of training can take as long as two years to manifest itself. The bottom-line focus on training for HR or training practitioners means that the expenditure on training must be justified in terms of effective training; this can be achieved by evaluating ROTI. It is also a means of streamlining training so that the maximum benefits are felt while costs are controlled; showing which aspects of courses are effective and which are not.

Training is increasingly linked to specific business needs and to address specific business objectives such as measuring the contribution of programmes to corporate objectives, enabling the setting of priorities based on a programme's contribution to meeting corporate objectives, enabling a focus on results, and altering management perceptions that training is an investment rather than an expense (Mitchell et al., 2005). The social benefits associated

with training are, according to the OECD (Healy, 1998, as cited in Barker, 2001, p.10), better public health, lower crime rate, community participation and social cohesion.

Therefore, in the research study an extended version of ROTI which drew on the societal as well as organisational returns on investment underpinned the research design. A brief synopsis of the research design is presented below and is expanded on in chapter two.

## **1.3 Research Design**

### **1.3.1 Research paradigm**

Any research design should, according to Creswell (2003), be viewed as a framework composed of three elements: the researcher's philosophical assumptions about what constitutes knowledge claims; the general procedures of research or strategies of inquiry; and the detailed procedures of data collection, analysis and writing (methods). Crotty (2009, p.3) breaks this down into four elements:

- *Methods*: the techniques or procedures to gather and analyse data related to some research question or hypothesis.
- *Methodology*: the strategy, plan of action, process, or design lying behind the choice and use of particular methods and linking the choice and use of methods of the desired outcomes.
- *Theoretical perspective*: the philosophical stance informing the methodology and thus providing a context for the process and grounding its logic and criteria.
- *Epistemology*: the theory of knowledge embedded in the theoretical perspective and thereby in the methodology.

McNeill and Chapman (2005) further introduce the concepts of reliability (the same results are achieved every time when using this method), validity (the data represents a true picture of what is being studied), representativeness (the group of people or situation being studied is typical of others), and ethics (impact of the research on others), which will also influence choice of theories on knowledge, strategy, and method.

At an epistemological level this research is grounded in *constructionism*. In constructionism, truth or meaning exist because of people's engagement with the world, therefore meaning is not discovered, but constructed (Creswell, 2003; Crotty, 2009). This constructionism is tied to theoretical perspectives of interpretivism such as phenomenology and the concept of intentionality (objectivity and subjectivity are indissoluble). Therefore there are no true or valid interpretations but rather useful interpretations (Burr, 1995; 1998; Crotty, 2009). Added to this is the stance taken in *social constructionism* because we are born into a world of meaning which we engage with, and make sense of, therefore it is not a simple matter of people interacting with the world around them to make meaning, but people interacting with a world full of meaning already, which they use in the generation of their own meaning (Cromby & Nightingale, 1999; Larkin, 2004a; 2004b). This aspect of social constructionism is particularly relevant for this research which is based on different perspectives and interpretations of the impact of RPL. However, post-modern and post-structuralist thought are increasingly impacting on research in general and have therefore also impacted on this research (Baronov, 2004; Giddens, 1990; Grbich, 2004; McGuigan, 2006). In place of objectivity, certainty, legitimation, predictability, rationalism and hierarchy, the world is now more wont to doubt, chaotic possibilities, complex, interconnected systems, multiple selves, multiple critiques of findings in the transformative process as well as an unravelling of the power of language, and notions of complexity and chaos (Grbich, 2004). As this research is located where both policy and practice intersect, multiple issues and perspectives emerged through social constructionism, but whose complexity, non-linearity and dynamism have moved the research away from simply how others 'measure' RPL to how others have 'engaged' with RPL. This complexity became evident during the analysis

and writing up phases when it was clear that RPL did not emerge from within a vacuum, but rather in response to a real world problem.

### **1.3.2 Research Methodology**

Methodologically this research took a multi-perspective approach to deal with the complexity of issues that arose from the main research question and the sub-questions presented earlier. Three primary strands for the inquiry emerged which structured the research design. The three strands were as follows:

1. The first was an historical analysis of previous research projects in the area of RPL in Ireland using the framework of valorisation to estimate their added value and sustainability. Four RPL projects were examined using document analysis and semi-structured interviews, all of which had an industry–academic partnership component.
2. The second was a comparative analysis of sixteen company case studies of RPL practice in companies, professional bodies, training bodies, and community organisations.
3. The third and final was a Delphi Future-Oriented Survey with twenty-two global RPL experts in the areas of higher education, further education, workplace learning, vocational education, educational policy and industry to gauge the likely future direction and purposes of RPL.

Figure 1.3 below is an overview of the theoretical and methodological frame for the research study. It highlights the multi-perspective approach taken in the study with an emphasis on crystallisation to cross-check results by passing the data through an infinite number of analytical frames and perspectives. The three methodologies, which are further elaborated hereafter, are each linked with a specific perspective: valorisation, D. Phillips framework for case study comparison, and a future perspective. Each perspective and specific method develops a return on investment impact perspective through an abductive research logic. Abduction concerns the ability to understand a phenomenon in a new way by observing and interpreting it in a new conceptual framework (Danermark, Ekström, Jakobsen, & Karlsson, 1997).

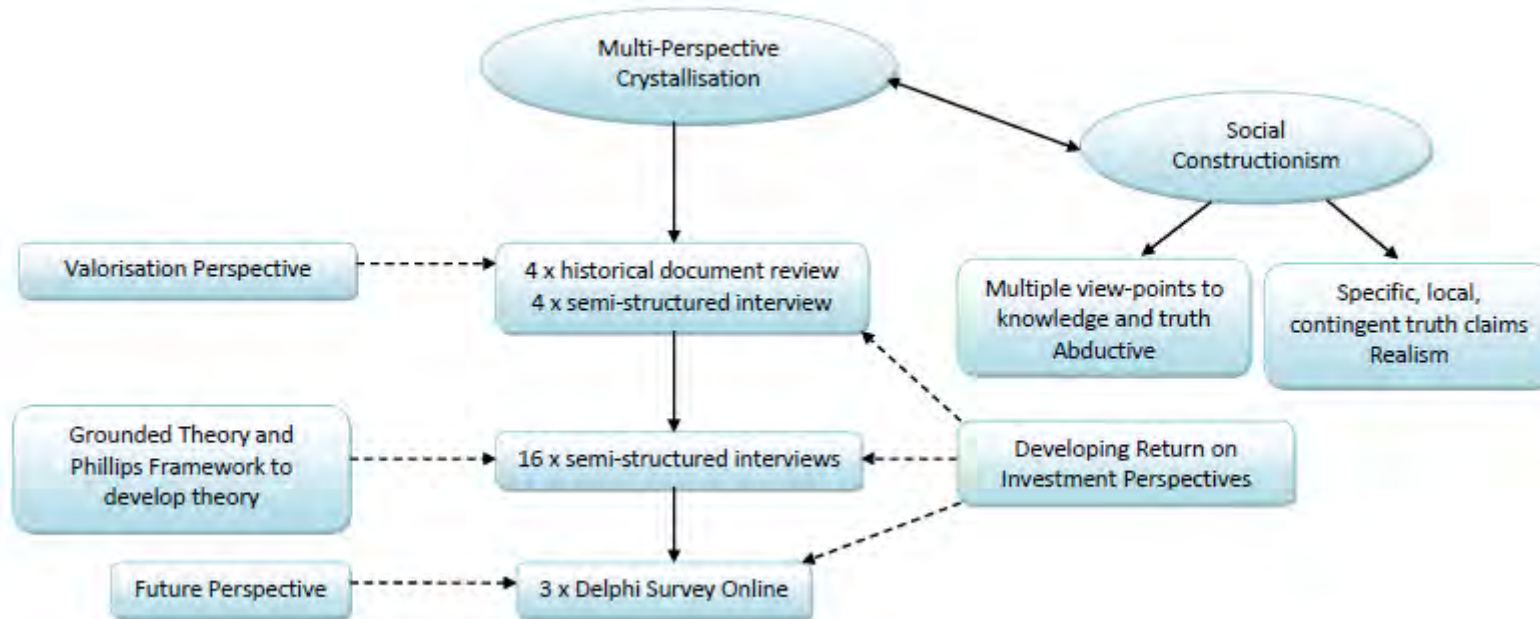


Figure 1.3 Theoretical and methodological framework for the research study

Each of the three strands of the research is further explained immediately hereafter.

### ***1.3.2.1 Historical analysis of previous industry-academic RPL projects***

This first methodological strand used the European concept of 'Valorisation' as a means to examine the sustainability and added value of RPL projects that were undertaken in Ireland since 1993. 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 (DGEAC, 2008). The dissemination and exploitation of project results is with a view to optimising their value, strengthening their impact, transferring them, and using them actively in systems and practices at local, regional, national and European levels (EC, 2006). A full explanation of valorisation is given in chapter three and is utilised in chapter six to present the data.

### ***1.3.2.2 Comparative analysis of company case studies in RPL practice***

The second strand was comparative case studies of RPL usage in companies and organisations. The purpose of the case studies was to investigate if there was a return on investment from the recognition of prior learning to companies and organisations which had used RPL in their learning and development at that time. The decision to use multiple case studies was on the basis that case research is superior to survey methods at answering the 'why' and 'how' questions because the case analysis can delve more deeply into motivations and actions than structured surveys (Westgren & Zering, 1998). The benefits of case studies include: the results are easily understood by a wide audience; they can catch unique features that may otherwise be lost in larger scale data; they are strong on reliability; they provide insights into other similar situations and cases thereby assisting interpretation; they can be undertaken by an individual researcher; they can embrace or build on unanticipated events and uncontrolled variables (Nisbet & Watt, 1984).

Table 1.1 D. Phillips' adapted model of case study comparison including Bereday's model

<b>Conceptualisation (neutralisation of question)</b>					
<b>Contextualisation</b>	<b>Contextualisation</b>	<b>Contextualisation</b>	<b>Contextualisation</b>	<b>Contextualisation</b>	<b>Contextualisation</b>
<b>Case Study 1</b>	<b>Case Study 2</b>	<b>Case Study 3</b>	<b>Case Study 4</b>	<b>Case Study 5</b>	<b>Case Study 6</b>
<b>Description</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>(Bereday)</b>	<b>(Bereday)</b>	<b>(Bereday)</b>	<b>(Bereday)</b>	<b>(Bereday)</b>	<b>(Bereday)</b>
<b>Isolation of differences (analysis of variables)</b>					
<b>Juxtaposition (Bereday)</b>					
<b>Explanation (development of synthesis)</b>					
<b>Interpretation (Bereday)</b>					
<b>Re-conceptualisation (contextualisation of findings)</b>					
<b>Comparison (Bereday)</b>					
<b>Application (generalisability of findings)</b>					

Analysis of the case studies used an adapted framework of Bereday's (1964) Model of case study comparison as posited by D. Phillips (2006a; 2006b) and illustrated in table 1.1 above. The model began with conceptualisation of the phenomenon, followed by contextualisation of the phenomenon in each case in order to present parallel case descriptions so that it was possible to isolate differences in each case and use these as the basis for explaining the findings so that the phenomenon could be re-conceptualised in order to come to some generalisations.

Yin (1994) presented two strategies for case study analysis. The first was to rely on theoretical propositions of the study and to analyse the evidence based on those propositions. The second technique was to develop a case description which would be a framework for organising the case study (Tellis, 1997). This latter technique is more akin to the D. Phillips (2006a; 2006b) Model to develop parallel descriptions of cases for comparison at the analysis stage. However, the use of theory is also relevant here to categorise the data in terms of cost and benefits. Elements from a grounded theory approach were also incorporated into the D. Phillips' model, drawing on the work of Strauss



and Corbin (1998 as cited in Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2000) and Yin (1994) in his strategy to analyse explanatory case studies, although it differs from pure grounded theory since analysis is still based on theoretical explanation. This process includes open coding, which is described (Saunders et al., 2000) as the disaggregation of data into units, followed by axial coding to recognise relationships between categories and finally selective coding to integrate the categories to produce a theory. The analytical framework for the case studies is dealt with further in chapters three and seven.

### ***1.3.2.3 Delphi future-oriented survey***

The third and final strand of the research approach, the Delphi future-oriented survey was used as an iterative data gathering tool. In research, the Delphi process is a means of anonymous expert surveying without undue influence of individual opinion (Day, 2002). It is regarded as a highly effective way to elicit, collate and focus expert judgement toward a consensus, and to identify areas of convergence and divergence in that opinion (Farmer, 1998; Skumolski, Hartman, & Krahn, 2007; Turoff & Hiltz, 1995; Watson, 2008). The Delphi method was chosen for this particular research because it is regarded as an ideal methodology for the rigorous consultation of experts and stakeholders on a global level (Scapolo & Miles, 2006). A key advantage of a Delphi Survey is that it avoids the direct confrontation of experts. Additionally, it does not require them to meet physically - which would be impractical for international experts in any case (Okoli & Powlowski, 2004; Watson, 2008). Another benefit of the Delphi survey method is that it is less likely to suffer from a low non-response rate, perhaps due to its brevity and to its curiosity value among experts. The Delphi method is also flexible in its design (Mitroff & Turoff, 2002), which is a key requirement for my particular research, as my overall research design is both iterative -

to respond to the constant changing structures of organisations - and inductive in its approach.

## **1.4 Unexpected dimensions and changes**

As explained earlier, this research diverges from Return on Investment (ROI) proper because of the nature of the research question and the changing contextual circumstances that emerged as the research progressed as outlined in figure 1.1. The labour market has undergone considerable dislocation with up to 20% unemployment in some European countries by the second quarter of 2010, such as Estonia-19.2%, Spain-20.2%, and Latvia-19.8%, which had previously had levels of 4.1%, 10.5%, and 6.6% respectively in the second quarter of 2008 (Eurostat, 2011). In the United Kingdom unemployment rose between quarter two of 2008 and quarter two of 2010 from 5.3% to 7.8% (Eurofound, 2011). As already mentioned, in Ireland unemployment was, in May 2011, 14.1% (CSO, 2011) which had risen from 4.8% in January 2008. This considerably changed training paradigms and allocation of resources. An additional context change was the acceleration of professional sector qualification pathways and an emphasis on qualifications frameworks and learning outcomes. Both these recent trends impacted considerably on how RPL was perceived and used. A further local contextual change was the focus by Forfás EGFSN (Expert Group on Future Skill Needs) on the strategic target of increasing the general skills level of the national workforce and the possibility of using RPL in that strategy. This is especially evident in the Labour Market Activation Schemes 1 and 2 in Ireland in 2009 and 2010, in which RPL was included for entry, accreditation and progression. It is also worth mentioning the progression and influence of the EQF-LLL (European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning) on the way RPL is viewed, which is specifically aimed at promoting the validation of non-formal and informal learning (EC, 2010b).

## **1.5 Organisation of Chapters**

This research project is organised into nine chapters. This introductory chapter sets out the purpose of the research and the problems addressed, the positionality of the researcher, and how the research will be conducted within the specified research paradigm. Chapter Two describes the research design employed in this research study including the genesis of the theoretical and epistemological perspectives taken, specifically social constructionism. It also presents the three methodological strands of the research and their associated methods. Chapter Three outlines the three analytical frameworks for the three methodological strands of the research study within the overall frame of return on investment. Chapter Four is the first of two literature review chapters and is focused on concepts and theories in RPL including work-based learning, experiential learning, accreditation of prior learning, and the validation of informal and non-formal learning. Chapter Five is a review of RPL policy discourses at global, European, national and local levels. Chapter Six presents a discussion of the historical analysis of previous industry-academic RPL projects. Chapter Seven is a discussion of the analysis of the company case studies. Chapter Eight presents the results of the Delphi future oriented survey. Finally Chapter Nine draws conclusions from the three studies on the impact of RPL in companies and organisations. Figure 1.4 gives an overview of the chapters of the research study which will follow. The concluding section of this chapter will briefly summarise chapter one.

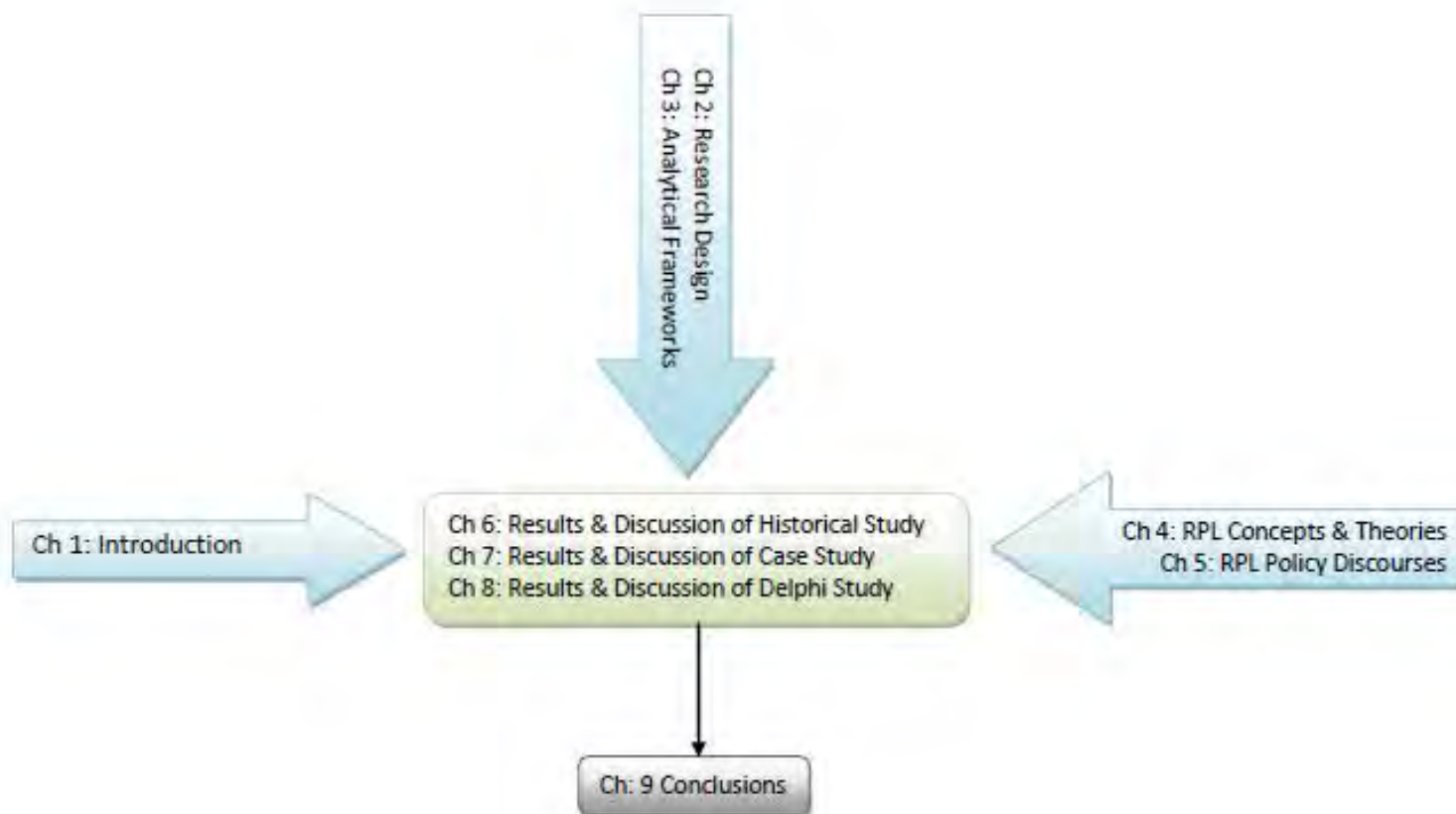


Figure 1.4 Overview of chapters in this research study

## **1.6 Chapter Summary**

This chapter summarised the background to the research and stated the broad research purpose and problems to be addressed. The research emerged in November 2008 in the context of labour market dislocation so that by the time the research concluded in May 2011 it had adapted from investigating RPL practice in companies and organisations to how RPL could be used as a mechanism for re-skilling and up-skilling of a labour market with 14.1% unemployment. This was in line with national and European policy which had moved in that direction. The changing context impacted on the positionality of the research which took a broader view of return on investment that incorporated the social aspect of return on investment from RPL. The research drew on social constructionism to address the main research question and sub-questions relating to the social return on investment from RPL from a broad array of perspectives. This multi-perspective approach used three methodological strands, namely: 1. An historical analysis of previous industry-academic RPL projects; 2. A comparative analysis of sixteen company case studies in RPL practice; 3. A Delphi future-oriented survey in three rounds. Each methodological strand also drew on a different analytical perspective to come to an overarching perspective of the impact of RPL. A full explanation of the research design can be found chapter two which follows and the analytical frameworks for the research are presented in chapter three.

# Chapter Two

## Research Design

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### 2.1 Genesis of the research approach

The research design and theoretical framework for this research study emerged from an iterative process to find the most appropriate means to address the research question:

***Is there a return on investment (ROI) from the recognition of prior learning (RPL) to companies and organisations that use RPL in their learning and development strategies?***

This question could be described as a formative-worth evaluation (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) which is concerned with assessing the extrinsic value of RPL with the intent of improving it. This type of evaluation is of greatest interest to those considering whether RPL might be adopted by an organisation and if so, what might be the best means of doing so.

The research study was essentially exploring the way the labour market had engaged with RPL. Therefore perceptions of RPL came from different stakeholder perspectives or interpretations. This research was in the constructionist tradition (within the interpretive paradigm) where all meaningful reality was based on human practices and where reality was constructed out of the interaction between human beings and their world (Creswell, 1998; 2003; Crotty, 2009; Grix, 2004). This then embraced the concept of intentionality, in that there was an active relationship between the conscious subject and the object of the subject's consciousness (Burr, 1998; Larkin, 2004a). Therefore there could not be a dichotomy between the subjective and the objective, they were always united (Crotty, 2009). Consequently, in constructionism, there is no true or valid interpretation, meaning emerges from interaction with the object and relating to it, so meanings are at once

objective and subjective (Jupp, 2006). Interpretation as the making of meaning implies neither subjectivism nor individualism because ultimately meaning has a social origin and character (Creswell, 2003; Crotty, 2009). Culture is inherent in society, whether it is defined as a system of intelligibility or a system of significant symbols (Geertz, 1973). Culture is therefore the source of human behaviour, a system already in place; therefore we are born into a world of meaning, a world that is already interpreted before we arrive (Crotty, 2009; Flick, 2002). As such, reality is socially constructed. Social constructionism as opposed to social constructivism guides this research epistemologically because constructivism concerns the individual human subject engaging with objects in the world and making sense of them and constructionism focuses on the collective generation of meaning (Gergen, 1985). Therefore constructivism emphasises the unique experience of each of us and social constructionism looks at the hold our culture has on us (Burr, 1995; 1998; Cromby & Nightingale, 1999).

Table 2.1 presents the ontological, epistemological, and methodological positions taken in the research study, which were embodied in the social constructionist approach to research. As shown in table 2.1, ontologically, this research rejected positivist claims to a universal truth, but it accepted the possibility of a specific, local, contingent, community-based truth (Edwards, Ashmore, & Potter, 1995; Larkin, 2004a; 2004b; Potter, 1996). Therefore there were multiple viewpoints to knowledge and truth taken in the research. Epistemologically, these local truths could be understood through both community-based knowledge creation and empirical observations that were bounded by subjectivity (Stam, 2001). At a methodological level this implied that truth was derived from empirical data and was based on dialogue, critique and consensus in different communities (Järvensivu & Törnroos, 2010

Table 2.1 Ontological, Epistemological and Methodological Overview of the research study

<b>Ontology</b>	<b>Epistemology</b>	<b>Methodology</b>	<b>Method</b>
There may be a reality	Aim of research is to create new usable knowledge through multiple view points	Historical Analysis	Semi-structured interviews and review of documents
Specific, local, contingent truth claims apply	Possible to understand local truths through community based knowledge	Comparative analysis of Organisational/ Company Case Study	Semi-structured interviews and review of documents
Multiple view points to knowledge and truth	Truth exists of dialogue, critique and consensus in different communities as well as empirical evidence	Delphi Future-Oriented Survey	On-line questionnaire distributed over three rounds with feedback after each round

In order to create dialogue, critique and consensus, the research study employed three methodological strands employing three different perspectives. The historical analysis drew on the past through semi-structured interviews and document review. The comparative analysis of case studies of RPL practice took a present day perspective through semi-structured interviews and document review. Finally the Delphi future-oriented survey took a future perspective through the consensus and divergence that emerged amongst the expert panel.

This chapter will present the overall research design. It will highlight the genesis of the research design and the specific theoretical and epistemological perspective which include a consideration of postmodernism, poststructuralism and complexity. Despite approaching this research by starting with the methods, this chapter will begin with a discussion of the epistemological and theoretical perspective as this best reflects the way the methods and methodology were developed. The epistemological focus is on constructionism and more specifically social constructionism which is the epistemological position taken in this



research study. The chapter will then go on to look at the three methodological strands of the thesis:

1. Historical analysis of previous industry-academic RPL projects,
2. Comparative analysis of sixteen company case studies in RPL practice,
3. Delphi future-oriented survey.

The final sections of this chapter concern the ethical implications of the research design as well as challenges and limitations experienced.

## **2.2 Epistemology and theoretical perspective**

The question of ontology concerns whether a reality exists independent of our possible knowledge of that reality. Epistemology considers whether objective observations of reality are possible or are always bounded by our subjective meanings of the world (Järvensivu & Törnroos, 2010). In the constructionist paradigm the main ontological and epistemological debates are considered in terms of realist and relativist positions (Burr, 1998; Larkin, 2004a; 2004b; Parker, 1998; Stam, 2001). Naïve relativism can be equated to an extreme form of constructionism where truth is socially constructed and objective observations of reality are meaningless (Cromby & Nightingale, 1999). This represents the postmodern idea that there are no general and universal claims to right or privileged authoritative knowledge (Larkin, 2004b). As such, this research study considered what constituted relevant research in the postmodern era, which will be discussed in the next section.

### **2.2.1 Postmodernism, complexity, and poststructuralism**

The influence of postmodernism, complexity and poststructuralism are evident in much of the research conducted today (Grbich, 2004; Hargreaves & Moore, 2000; Roberts, 1998). By the 1990s, the research community was moving beyond positivist and objectivist science to what Savickas (1993, as cited in Young & Collin, 2004, p.374) termed 'postmodern

interpretivism'. The emergence of social constructionism in research was facilitated by the influence of cognitive and postmodern thinking along with a move towards research approaches that were closer to real-life situations in practice (Young & Collin, 2004).

### ***2.2.1.1 Development of Postmodernism***

Postmodernism emerged at the turn of the twentieth century and moved away from what Lyotard (1984) described as the grand narrative of modernity; that things happen in an ordered and predictable way on the basis of determinism and of cause and effect. Postmodernism was the move towards a social consciousness of multiple belief systems and multiple perspectives (Jupp, 2006; Scott & Morrison, 2007).

Postmodernism rejects the idea of an absolute truth and is premised on the belief that no one true reality exists (Grbich, 2004; Grenz, 1996; Jameson, 2001). By the rejection of an objective reality, in the postmodern philosophy, nothing is value free (Larkin, 2004a). The assertion is that people inhabit different socially constituted 'realities' that vary across culture, time and context (Van Niekerk, 2005). A postmodern view describes multiple selves that are socially constructed, but these constructions are embedded in specific cultural and historical situations and in the context of constantly changing relationships (Best & Kellner, 1991; Jameson, 2001). Therefore the self is in a process of constant construction and reconstruction in a particular network of relations over time (Van Niekerk, 2005). Baronov (2004) used the term antifoundationalism instead of postmodernism, advocating the former as a more neutral and literal synthesis of currents running through social theory at the time.

### ***2.2.1.2 Antifoundationalism, postmodernism and grand-narratives***

The growth of antifoundationalist ideas were given credence after World War II with the emergence of the mass culture of a consumer society driven by industrialisation and

technological and social change which could not be accounted for in modernist theories (Baronov, 2004; Giddens, 1990; McGuigan, 2006). The postmodern world is dominated by decentralisation and micropolitics, globalisation, multinationalism, transnationalism and consumer capitalism (Grbich, 2004). The postmodern economy is one that values multi-skilling, worker flexibility, and skills and training, particularly those relating to the service sector, above the value placed on general education (Grbich, 2004; Jameson, 2001). Postmodernism is associated with the idea of a lack or blurring of boundaries and the European Union is often quoted as one of the first postmodern entities (Kinell, 2007; McCormick, 2006; Neljas, 2004), which has managed to interconnect disparate financial systems where a change in one financial system impacts on all others. Postmodernism heralds the end of grand narratives of which Lyotard (1984) is sceptical. Lyotard (1984) was critical of meta- or totalising grand narratives and the way they impacted on the nature of knowledge. Some authors hold that we are in a transitional stage of modernity (Giddens, 1990) and that we are surrounded by the competing meta-narratives of a post-modern society, a post-capitalist society, or a post-industrial society, but that there still remain the more durable neo-liberal ideas of the welfare state, a consumer society and globalisation which continue to impact on social thought today (Pintér, 2007).

### ***2.2.1.3 The neo-liberal grand narrative***

Blond (2008) spoke of the failure of neo-liberalism where neither free markets nor the welfare state have achieved what they aspired to achieve, and in fact could be perceived as limiting, similar to Lyotard's (1984) criticism of grand narratives that once implemented become corrupted and therefore lose credibility. The suggestion was to displace or reconstruct the neo-liberal paradigm in the face of its failure (Blackman, 2008). Boshier (1998, as cited in Holford, Jarvis, & Griffin, 1998) referred to the meta-narrative of a

postmodern lifelong learning that is fragmented, market-driven and subject to an autonomous free-floating individual learner-consumer. He distinguished lifelong learning from lifelong education, the latter which was about the access one had to a variety of deliberate situations that facilitated learning and which was underpinned, like adult education, by equity and social justice rather than the global economy, the workplace and the individual (Boshier, 1998 as cited in Holford et al., 1998).

#### ***2.2.1.4 Complexity and chaos***

One of the tensions raised by antifoundationalism concerned the linear, or cumulative, progress outlined in positivist thought against the discontinuity and rupture of social progression as viewed in antifoundationalism (Baronov, 2004; Best & Kellner, 1991; Cruikshank, 2003). These concepts of rupture, or chaos, had developed since the 1970s and suggested that linear progress was an artificial construct imposed on a chaotic social order (Johnson, 2007). Therefore systems were in a state of change, and this change involved fluctuations or instability (Johnson, 2007; Rosenhead, 1998). Change occurred as instability increased (or as an unstable system was disturbed beyond its zone of instability) and the system moved away from its starting point to chaos (a state that defied prediction but was not necessarily disorder and confusion) or until it resolved itself by being brought up against an over-riding constraint (Rosenhead, 1998). This was a view of dynamic systems (capable of changing over time) that under certain conditions exhibited regular or consistent behaviour, but in almost identical conditions, could also diverge from expected behaviour until the resulting behaviour was completely dissimilar to the original (Johnson, 2007). Therefore not all phenomena were orderly, reducible, predictable, or determined (Rosenhead, 1998).

### ***2.2.1.5 Structuralism and poststructuralism***

Structuralism grew in popularity in the 1960s and its critics instigated the poststructuralist movement which was more a continuation than a break from structuralist ideas (Best & Kellner, 1991). Structuralism was primarily concerned with the underlying forms and structures of the construction and transition of meaning (Clarke, 1981; Sarup, 1993) where language was a key component in that process. Therefore meaning, within the context of the text, was a structure that was revealed by uncovering the patterns and the order in which they were constructed (Grbich, 2004, p.33) so that the immediate world was less important than the reality behind that world (Baert, 1998). Functionalism, linguistics and social anthropology have dominated structuralism in research terms because structuralism is premised on the prioritisation of the whole over the parts, structural determinism, a reliance on reason over empiricism, and ahistorical and universal structures (Best & Kellner, 1991; Clarke, 1981; Sarup, 1993). Poststructuralism moved away from a focus on the structures that generate meaning to an endless deferral of meaning among a range of signifiers (Lechte, 1994).

In postmodernism, structuralism, and poststructuralism, meaning was *created* or *found*, whereas for constructionists meaning was *made* or *constructed*. The *constructionist* paradigm was equated to the relativism of postmodern thought which rejected the belief of an absolute truth (Järvensivu & Törnroos, 2010). Furthermore, by rejecting the objectivist stance that no one true reality existed; constructionist research reflected a postmodern epistemology. There now follows a discussion of the *constructionist* paradigm as used in this research study.

### 2.2.2 Constructionism

Constructionism corresponded with postmodernism in the belief that there were many possible 'truths', however it contrasted with postmodernism on the notion that all interpretations had equal validity (Larkin, 2004b). Constructionism was defined as an epistemology embedded in the interpretative theoretical perspective or paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Crotty, 2009). Constructionism was defined as:

The view that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context (Crotty, 2009, p.42).

Constructionism diverged from the subjectivism of structuralist, poststructuralist and postmodern thought. Instead it borrowed the idea of *intentionality* from phenomenology (Larkin, 2004a; 2004b). *Intentionality* implied an interaction between subject and object and it therefore rejected both subjectivism and objectivism and embraced the idea that no object could be adequately described in isolation from the conscious being experiencing it (Burr, 1995; 1998; Parker, 1998). Nor could any experience be adequately described in isolation from its object (Crotty, 2009; Harré, 1998). This suggested that our perceptions had intentionality and therefore our discourses were manifestations of this intentionality (Burr, 1998). This related to Foucault's (1972) argument that knowledge and practice cannot exist independently, therefore social change is tied to change in practice. Another dimension of constructionism, building on the fact that all objects were made and not found, was that objects were made as a result of our own interpretative strategies. However, there was no true or valid interpretation: there were only useful interpretations (Edwards, Ashmore, & Potter, 1995).

Constructionism was variously defined as a stand-alone theoretical perspective (Crotty, 2009; Larkin, 2004b) or subsumed under the umbrella term 'constructivism' (Van Niekerk, 2005; Young & Collin, 2003). Some authors saw *social constructionism* as a postmodern extension of *constructivism* (Van Niekerk, 2005). Therefore, all three theoretical stances originated in attempts to move away from the limitations of modernism by the recognition of multiple realities. It was difficult in the literature to discuss them in isolation. However there are underlying differences between them which will be discussed further below.

### **2.2.2.1 Constructionism versus Constructivism**

Crotty (2009) pointed to the importance of the distinction between *constructionism* and *constructivism* when thinking about research. *Constructivism* emphasised the validity and worth of each of our individual interpretations and therefore tended towards relativism, a criticism of both positions, while 'social' *constructionism* emphasised the way our culture shaped our interpretations and therefore tended toward embracing the critical spirit (Burr, 1998; Larkin, 2004a). The primary distinction between the two positions was whether the social dimension of meaning was at centre stage. For *constructionism* this was the case whereas for *constructivism* it was not (Duffy & Cunningham, 2008). Therefore *constructionism*, in this research study, was an epistemology that focused on the collective generation and transmission of meaning (Crotty, 2009). In contrast, *constructivism* concerned the meaning-making activity of the individual mind (Duffy & Cunningham, 2008).

### **2.2.2.2 Guba and Lincoln's Constructivism**

Guba and Lincoln (1994) described *constructivism* as one of four main paradigms of inquiry. They found that the aims of constructivist inquiry were understanding and reconstruction. Constructivism assumed multiple realities. Knowledge was created by the interaction between the investigator and respondents. It took on the idea of intentionality (which they

described as transactional and subjectivist) that the object and the investigator were linked so that the findings of an investigation were thereby created as the investigation proceeded. In other words it was not possible to pursue someone else's constructions with a set of predetermined questions as these would be based on the inquirer's constructions (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Of relevance to this research from the *constructivist* paradigm was the continuous interplay of data collection and analysis as well the tendency towards joint and grounded construction of findings (Creswell, 2003; Duffy & Cunningham, 2008). Therefore *constructivism* was concerned with the state of affairs that was believed to exist but also the underlying motives and rationales that lead to those beliefs (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

### ***2.2.2.3 Constructivism and the rise of social constructionism***

The terms 'constructivism' and 'constructionism' were used inconsistently throughout the literature. Even within constructivism itself there were different strands as shown in table 2.2 below. While the third position of *social constructivism* was similar to *social constructionism* it differed in the fact that *social constructivism* still embraced positivism's dualist ontology and epistemology (Young & Collin, 2004). As already mentioned the terms 'social constructionism' and 'constructivism' were used so idiosyncratically that it was difficult to define one without allusion to the other. That was not to say that they could not be distinguished one from the other as Young and Collin found:

*The former [constructivism] focuses on meaning making and the constructing of the social and psychological worlds through individual, cognitive processes while the latter [social constructionism] emphasizes that the social and psychological worlds are made real (constructed) through social processes and interaction (2004, p.375).*



Table 2.2 Differing strands of constructivism (Young & Collin, 2004, p.375)

Constructivist Position	Attributes
<b>Radical Constructivism (Von Glaserfeld, 1995)</b>	The individual mind constructs reality.
<b>Moderate Constructivism (Piaget, 1965)</b>	Individual constructions take place within a systematic relationship to the external world.
<b>Social Constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978)</b>	Influences on the individual construction are derived from and preceded by social relationships.

One of the deficiencies of *constructivism* was that it did not recognise the effects of a dominant social reality that impacted on the creation of meaning (Van Niekerk, 2005). This was due to the fact that *constructivism* took a highly individualistic approach to the creation of meaning without reference to social interaction, context and discourse (Young & Collin, 2004). Therefore *social constructionism* was seen as taking a postmodern theoretical stance to expand constructivism to include the social and cultural context (Van Niewkerk, 2005) and to challenge the dualist assumptions of *constructivism* (Young & Collin, 2004).

The main distinctions as identified in readings of the literature between *constructivism* and *social constructionism* are illustrated in figure 2.1 below. *Social constructionism* employed a constructionist realism which recognised the existence of a social world reflected in the natural attitudes of daily life and which existed prior to, and independent of, any constructionist analysis. However *social constructionism* was still broadly anti-essentialist and anti-realist as it was less concerned with ontological reality, but instead with constructed reality.

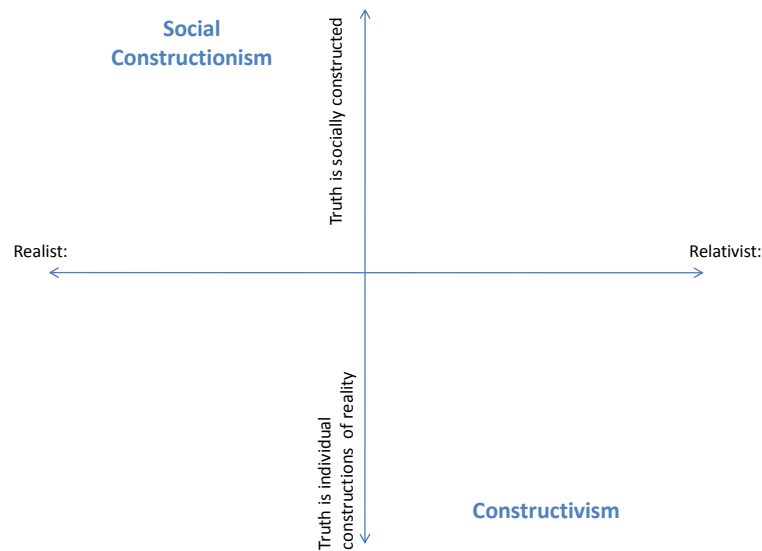


Figure 2.1 Social Constructionism and constructivism as conceived in this thesis

*Constructivism* still found that truth was relative to individuals and communities and this relativism made criticalism difficult (Harré, 1998). There was a downplay of power relations that privileged certain constructions over others in *constructivism*, unlike the focus on knowledge and power in *social constructionism* because of the belief that culture exerted an influence on people's lives (Van Niekerk, 2005).

### 2.2.3 Social Constructionism

According to Larkin (2004a) social constructionism was relativist in ontology and realist in epistemology.

*Discourse and subjectivity are ontologically 'real' because we can access them, though they are contingent upon language, which is situated in historical and cultural practice. Discourse and subjectivity construct our understanding of material reality, which, in itself, we cannot access (Larkin, 2004a, para. 23).*

Social constructionism stemmed from an epistemological position that focused on meaning and power (Larkin, 2004b) and derived from such multidisciplinary sources as: postmodernism (Derrida, 1974; Foucault, 1972), symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934, as cited in Crotty, 2009), dialectical development (Vygotsky, 1962), and phenomenology (Schutz, 1967 as cited in Crotty, 2009). What social constructionism suggested was that all meaningful reality was socially constructed but ‘social’ referred to the mode of generating meaning and not to the type of object that had meaning, therefore both social and physical phenomena were socially constructed (Crotty, 2009).

Similar to constructivism, there were different strands running through *social constructionism* based on whether the form of *social constructionism* employed was weak, moderate or strong.

Table 2.3 Different strands of social constructionism

Social Constructionist Perspective	Attributes
<b>Weak</b>	<b>Social</b> phenomena are constructed, sustained and reproduced through social life. (Objective truth still exists in the natural world)
<b>Moderate</b>	All <b>physical</b> and <b>social</b> phenomena are constructed, sustained and reproduced through social life. (no objective reality, but specific local, personal, and community forms of knowledge exist)
<b>Strong</b>	All <b>physical</b> and <b>social</b> phenomena are constructed, sustained and reproduced through social life. (Relativity in natural and social world)

Table 2.3 above presents an overview of the different forms of social constructionism as identified in the literature (Fopp, 2008; Young & Collin, 2004) of which **moderate social**

**constructionism** was employed in this research study. Weak social constructionism did not entirely reject the notion of an objective reality as it made the distinction between ideas and concepts which were socially constructed and physical phenomena which had a material existence (Fopp, 2008). Strong social constructionism adopted a postmodern perspective that relativism extended to facts as well as values. Therefore it was not possible to arbitrate between facts or sets of facts or theories (Fopp, 1998). Moderate social constructionism informed the content of the subsequent discussion of social constructionism.

### ***2.2.3.1 Moderate social constructionism***

Gergen (1985), when challenging the dominance of objectivity in social research, coined the term 'social constructionism'. Social constructionism was described as intersubjectively shared, social constructions of meaning and knowledge. Social constructionism took its 'social aspect' from commentators such as Gergen (1985) and his "*Social psychology as history*" which distinguished social from physical science and introduced the idea of a feedback loop between individuals, theory and cultural or social life. This echoed the double hermeneutic posited by Giddens (1976, as cited in Crotty, 2009) where social scientists were faced with two levels of interpretation; grasping the frames of meaning of the layman and then reconstituting these into new frames of meaning.

Geertz (1973) spoke of culture as the social setting in which meaning was made. Culture consisted of a system of significant symbols and was the source of human behaviour. Therefore in engaging with and making sense of the world in the constructionist sense one should also take an historical and social perspective. Therefore we were born into an already interpreted world which was at once natural and social (Crotty, 2009). In social

constructionism meaning was made in social settings which preceded us, where culture exerted an influence on interpretations of truth and knowledge (Van Niekerk, 2005).

### ***2.2.3.2 Relativist and subjectivist criticisms***

Relativism in constructionism was the result of the belief that there were an infinite number of constructions of events. If there was no objective truth, then how did one choose between alternative constructions? Parker (1998) suggested recourse to realism which could ground discursive accounts in social practices, the underlying structure and logic of which, could be discovered. As already mentioned, moderate social constructionism looked to constructionist realism, by recognising specific local, personal and community forms of knowledge.

Burr (1998) suggested the possibility in social constructionism of overcoming relativism by recognising the fact that we can only make a judgement from within our own cultural and historical value system and that we should defend that judgement from within that system irrespective of relativism. Social constructionism was realist because even though something was constructed that did not preclude it from being real. Crotty (2009) added to this viewpoint when he said that constructionist epistemology was perfectly compatible with realist ontology. Therefore *moderate social constructionism* was both realist and relativist. It was realist in that constructions could still be real and relativist in that the way things were was in fact just the sense we had made of them and these interpretations were historically and culturally affected (Crotty, 2009). Larkin (2004b) found social constructionism to be epistemologically relativist and therefore theories were situated historically and best understood in the context in which they emerged. For research this

implied that narration and description were in fact reports of how something was seen or meaningfully constructed within a given community.

Constructionism was further criticised for its rejection of subjectivism similar to the structural determinism of structuralism which attributed an individual's actions to the social system rather than their own subjective decision making (Baronov, 2004). In the case of constructionism the phenomenological concept of intersubjectivity accounted for a subjectivity that allowed for connections to be made between what was said and what was felt or thought (Larkin, 2011a). Intersubjectivity put forward that through a shared framework of meaning (language and culture) individuals could approximate each other's conscious worlds. Epistemically acceptable knowledge should be knowledge that was acceptable to the community, based on evidence that was acceptable to that community. Therefore knowledge in this research study was community-based through empirical observations that were bounded by the subjectivities of that community.

This epistemological discussion concerned the way the social constructionist paradigm had informed the theoretical perspective that was embedded in the methodology of this research study. The theoretical perspective impacted on the way knowledge was constructed, collected and developed for this research study (Scott & Morrison, 2007). Interpretivism was a theoretical perspective that *"looks for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social-life world"* (Crotty, 2009, p.67) and therefore suited the social constructionist paradigm used. At a methodological level the interpretative approach to truth in this research study was derived from empirical data and was based on dialogue, critique and consensus in different communities (Järvensivu & Törnroos, 2010).

## 2.3 Methodology

The methodology is the theory of how researchers gain knowledge in the research context and why (Scott & Morrison, 2007). The implications of the theoretical discussion above, focusing on the multiple community-based faces of reality, and the nature of the research question, emphasised an interpretative approach to methodology based around dialogue, co-construction, collaboration, community-building, and narrative (Young & Collin, 2004) . Social constructionism found that the focus of inquiry should have been on interaction, processes, and social practice. Rather than simply making social constructions, social constructionism was an epistemology that pointed to the historical and cultural locations of those constructions (Young & Collin, 2004). This thesis research took a multi-perspective approach to the way in which companies and organisations had engaged with RPL on the labour Market. The community in this thesis comprised those in the business, education and policy arenas who had engaged with RPL, and the research study explored this community's perspectives on return on investment from RPL. As such, the research methodology attempted to account for the 'multiple knowledges' and interpretations of RPL as recognised in social constructionism. The interpretivist perspective addressed the exploratory and interpretative nature of this RPL research where:

*Interpretive methods of research start from the position that our knowledge of reality, including the domain of human action, is a social construction by human actors and that this applies equally to researchers. Thus there is no objective reality which can be discovered by researchers and replicated by others, in contrast to the assumptions of positivist science...shared meanings are a form of intersubjectivity rather than objectivity (Walsham, 2009, p.5).*

Within the broad style of interpretative research there were many specific methodologies that could have been used to guide the research, but in this research study the emphasis

was placed on approaches that took account of multiple constructed community-bounded realities.

The methodological approaches employed in this research study were:

- Historical analysis of previous industry-academic RPL projects
- Comparative analysis of sixteen company case studies in RPL practice
- Delphi future-oriented survey

These methodologies were approached with an abductive logic. Abduction was the middle-ground between deductive and inductive modes of inference in scientific inquiry (Young and Collin, 2004). The basic premise of abduction was to be able to understand a phenomenon in a new way by observing and interpreting it in a new conceptual framework (Danermark, Ekström, Jakobsen, & Karlsson, 1997). It was concerned with what meaning was given to something interpreted within a particular conceptual framework. Abduction accepted existing theory, unlike induction, while allowing for a less theory-driven research process than deduction (Young & Collin, 2004). Abductive inference fitted with social constructionism in the potential for deeper knowledge about a particular case under study and the ability to test, modify and ground theories about general contexts by relating these theories to new cases (Danermark et al., 1997).

Abduction also impacted on concepts of validity and generalisability in social constructionist research. From a social constructionist perspective validity concerned knowing when specific social inquiries were trustworthy so that members of the studied community could act on them (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The exploration of perceptions of RPL from a variety of sources had to be taken as contextualised and specific to each of those sources and situations therefore generalisation of theory and universal truths were replaced in this research study by local and historical context-specific understanding (Young & Collin, 2004).



However, there may have been the prospect of transferring these contextual-community theories to other context-communities.

Several different methods of enquiry were used in this research study. Four interviews were conducted as part of the historical analysis and sixteen case study interviews were conducted. Additionally, historical project and company documents were extensively reviewed and were considered constructions of experiences by the RPL community (those in business, education and policy who had engaged with RPL). Twenty two experts took part in the three-rounds of online questionnaires as part of the Delphi Survey. The data were collected and analysed in terms of social constructionism, meaning the focus was on observing and understanding RPL as constructed by the RPL community itself. Thus the data were produced and conditioned by communal construction and thereby progressed in an abductive manner.

### **2.3.1 Abductive research logic**

The logic of the research study has followed a broadly abductive approach. The first stage of the research process began with a review of return on investment literature to see how companies and organisations perceived and valued learning and training (Barker, 2001; Bassi, 2001; Bates, 2004; Doucouliagos & Sgro, 2000; Garnett, Portwood & Costley, 2004; Glover, Long, Haas, & Alemany, 1999; Goldwasser, 2001; Kaufman, 2005; Kaufman, Keller, & Watkins, 1995; Misko, 2001; Mitchell, Hamilton & Hayman, 2003; Moy & McDonald, 2000; J. Phillips, 1997; J. Phillips & P. Phillips, 2007; 2010; P. Phillips & J. Phillips, 2007; J. Phillips & Stone, 2002; Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2004; Skillnets Ltd., 2005a; 2005b; 2005c). There was no specific literature on return on investment from RPL in Ireland. There was also consideration at this stage of potential research subjects. Therefore this stage was primarily

theory-driven but an empirical understanding was beginning to emerge in the search for suitable methods and research participants. This stage was not purely abductive as it involved a mostly deductive logic (ROI literature) with a separate inductive (research participants) line of inquiry.

The second stage proceeded with an abductive logic as the choices regarding the methodologies and specific methods started to influence theoretical thinking. It was at this point that the three methodological decisions were made as they best embodied the breadth of labour market perspectives on RPL. Table 2.4 gives an overview of the three methodologies employed in the research study, the subjects of the research, the specific methods associated with each methodology, and the return on investment (ROI) analytical framework for each of the three studies. Due to the nature of the research and the focus on generating theory, the analytical frameworks for the research are presented in chapter three.

Table 2.4 Methodological and analytical considerations in the research study

<b>Methodology</b>	<b>Research Subject</b>	<b>Method</b>	<b>ROI Analytical Framework</b>
<b>Historical Study</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• RPL Practitioners</li> <li>• Higher and Adult Education Practitioners</li> <li>• RPL Experts</li> </ul>	Interview and document review	Valorisation
<b>Company/Organisational Case Study using Grounded Theory</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning and Development Mangers</li> <li>• Training Providers</li> <li>• RPL Practitioners</li> <li>• Professional Bodies</li> <li>• Voluntary/Community Organisations</li> </ul>	Interview and document review	D. Phillips Framework for Case Study Comparison and Grounded theory
<b>Delphi Future-Oriented Study</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Business, education, and RPL policy experts</li> </ul>	On-line questionnaire over 3 rounds	Statistical analysis using descriptive statistics

The third stage of the research concentrated on the empirical investigations by way of the collection and analysis of in-depth empirical data. The research study was now focused on a core, RPL-engaged business, education, and policy community. Focused analytical frameworks were developed for each of the three methodological branches of the thesis research to explore return on investment:

- For the historical analysis the European concept of valorisation was employed to analyse the added value of RPL in the selected cases. Return on investment was defined as a product of sustainability, transferability, visibility, feeding policy, impact, and optimising value.
- For the comparative analysis of company and organisational case studies the adapted framework of D. Phillips (2006a; 2006b) which is a model for case study comparison was used with elements of grounded theory.
- The Delphi Future-Oriented Survey was analysed using descriptive statistics to isolate areas of convergence and divergence amongst the expert panel of respondents.

As each methodology concerned a specific perspective in this research the subsequent sections will address each in isolation and how they contributed to the overall research design.

## **2.3.2 Historical analysis of previous industry-academic RPL projects**

### ***2.3.2.1 Justification of the methodology***

The historical analysis that is presented in chapter six looked at previous, funded RPL projects that involved higher education and different workforce sectors in Ireland from the perspective of valorisation or the dissemination and exploitation of the ideas or models that resulted. Historical research is the collection and evaluation of data to describe, explain and thereby understand those actions or events that occurred in the past (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006). The reason for starting with an historical analysis was to situate RPL in its cultural and historical context as well as exploring if there was any legacy sustained from RPL.

Social constructionist research assumed multiple local-constructed realities. 'Local' also meant local in an historical sense, in the here and now (Hosking, 2002). That is to say that historical was not the conventional construction of past and present, but was instead a reconstruction of the past in the present (Hosking, 2002). Therefore an historical analysis was an appropriate means to address this facet of social constructionist research and reconstructing past experiences of RPL within the framework of valorisation.

One of the issues in terms of evaluating historical sources was criticism, both internal and external. *External* criticism related to the genuineness of the source and *internal* criticism referred to the accuracy of the contents of the source. The choice of projects was based on proximity or ease of access to information; with the provision that there was an industry-academic element. Therefore, caution had to be taken in applying broad generalisations to the data. However in terms of validity, it was almost impossible to control the sample for internal validity, particularly because of the nature of the sample, or ensure its representativeness.

### ***2.3.2.2 The Sample***

A significant date for the development of RPL in Ireland was 1993 when the NCEA (National Council for Educational Awards), now HETAC (Higher Education and Training Awards Council), launched an AP(E)L system to fit with the ACCS (Accumulation of Credits and Certification of Subjects) system (Murphy, 2008a). The ACCS system was supposed to be a force of change in higher education by leading to equality of opportunity for part-time students in NCEA institutions (Halpin, 1996).

The primary selection criteria for projects in this study were based on their inclusion of an RPL component, their industry-academic co-operation, and their age, providing a long-term perspective. Therefore the target population for the study were those who had engaged with RPL in a higher education-workplace project since 1993. Three of the projects were specifically selected for the thesis on the basis of their age in order to provide a long-term perspective on RPL. An important aspect of these projects was that they came before the Irish National Framework of Qualifications which was launched in Ireland in 2003.

The final four cases aimed to build on Murphy's (2008a) work entitled: "*APEL matters in Higher Education*", which analysed six AP(E)L models in higher education in Ireland. To that end purposive sampling was used to select the cases under study on the basis that they were key cases in the development of RPL in the higher education sector and labour market in Ireland and whose impact could be explored in this thesis. The specific cases were:

1. The National University of Ireland Maynooth (NUIM) and the National Rehabilitation Board (NRB) project for the accreditation of the Certificate in Training (Special Needs) which was aimed at those who had a track record of effective work in rehabilitation training but no general training qualification. This project incorporated an accelerated route to certification for the trainers by way of RPL.
2. The Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) and the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) response 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. It included module exemptions by way of RPL.
3. The OMNA project which ran in two phases: the DIT/NOW Childcare Project 1995-1997 and the DIT/NOW Early Childhood Project 1997-1999. The RPL (APL-Accreditation of Prior Learning, in this instance) component was initiated in OMNA I to offer accreditation against a national standard for workers in the field of early childhood care and education. It aimed to facilitate learners in the early childhood care and education arena who might not have completed secondary education but would have significant experiential learning.
4. The VaLEx AP(E)L Research Project was an EU Socrates-Grundtvig 2003-2005 research project to develop and test a theory-based model for APEL (Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning) as well as an assessment/accreditation mechanism.

### ***2.3.2.3 Methods of the Historical Analysis***

Historical research is descriptive and involved describing and interpreting events from the past (Picciano, 2004). The sources of data were very much dependent on the availability of sources from the period and ensuring their authenticity and completeness. The types of data sources available were interviews, oral histories, relics, and primary documents. The methods used in this research were semi-structured interviews and extensive reviews of primary documents. It was expected that despite the interviews being a primary source of oral history data, construction of the past could have been coloured by nostalgia or selective memory (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006). Additionally, the analytical framework purposely connected the interpretations of the past to concepts of return on investment in a relatively active interview process where return on investment in the context of each project was collaboratively constructed.

The questions that guided this part of the research were; how did 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 the project?
- Feed policy-processes and programming with results?

The study was carried out using project document sources and semi-structured interviews with one key project manager from each of the four projects. The interview schedules were subject to pilot-testing before going out into the field. Two of these interviews were conducted in 2009 and two in 2011. The types of documents examined included project information updates, workshop documents, sample learning outcome templates,

participant evaluations, module descriptors, project evaluations, and sample portfolios. A full list of documents that were examined for each project can be found in Appendices A - D.

The four interviewees were identified from the project documents as the researcher was given extensive access to project archives. Each interviewee was sent a letter of information about the research which included the interview schedule. Interview schedules were designed with reference to methods of constructing questions for interviews. This included the awareness that questions elicited the appropriate response and were understood by the respondent (Foddy, 1993). Caution was also taken concerning problems in qualitative interviewing such as the issue of accountability in terms of knowing how the data were produced (Gomm, 2004; Kvale 2007; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The availability of interview schedules and the recording and transcribing of the interviews sought to overcome these concerns. The primary types of questions were to elicit opinions and values and knowledge about the topic (Kvale, 2009). A follow-up phone call resulted in interviews being set up in all four cases. Each interview lasted approximately 35-50 minutes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interview schedule aimed to cover the six dimensions of valorisation already mentioned and which are outlined fully in chapters three and six. The full interview schedule can be found in Appendix E. Additionally each respondent was provided with a consent form which can be found in Appendix F.

Each document was read with notes taken manually and coded. The interview transcripts were also coded for the six valorisation dimensions described above, this is described as structural coding. The document notes were coded manually and the interview transcripts were coded in Nvivo. A full description of the analysis process can be found in chapter six.

## **2.4.2 Comparative Analysis of Company Case Studies in RPL Practice**

### ***2.4.2.1 Justification of the methodology***

The case study methodology is a research tool – one of many techniques used to collect data, and to build or validate theories (de Weerd-Nederhof, 2001; Eisenhardt 1989; Swartz & Boaden, 1997; Westbrook, 1995; Yin, 1994). According to the United States General Accounting Office [GAO] (1990, p.15) a case study is:

*A method for learning about a complex instance, based on a comprehensive understanding of that instance obtained by extensive description and analysis of that instance taken as a whole and in its context.*

Case research is superior to survey methods at answering the ‘why’ and ‘how’ questions because the case analysis can delve more deeply into motivations and actions than structured surveys (Westgren & Zering, 1998). The benefits of case studies are that the results are easily understood by a wide audience, they can catch unique features that may otherwise be lost in larger scale data, they are strong on reliability, they provide insights into other similar situations and cases thereby assisting interpretation, they can be undertaken by an individual researcher, they can embrace or build on unanticipated events and uncontrolled variables (Nisbet & Watt, 1984). Case studies are, however, weak on generalisability. This was countered in this research due to the number of case studies and the multiple perspectives from which the data were drawn as well as the concern in social constructionist research for transferability rather than generalisability.

Constructionism did, to a certain extent undermine the idea of authenticity (capturing the unique character of a person, situation, group) in case study research because if one was to take a strong social constructionist (or postmodernist) stance it would deny the existence of any ‘authentic’ situation that was independent of the investigation of it and would also



challenge the idea that people had a unitary perspective available for case study description (Nisbet & Watt, 1984, p.7).

This case study research drew on grounded theory in the analysis phase. Grounded theory was described by Alvesson and Sköldberg (2000) as an empirically oriented method. While Glaser and Strauss (1967) claimed that inductive grounded theory was superior to logical deduction, it was difficult to genuinely separate the two processes (Perry, 1998), particularly as reality was always already interpreted as in the constructionist perspective (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000). Therefore this research drew on grounded theory in the analysis but also recognised that there was a prior assumption of concepts of return on investment. Grounded theory was useful for this study in that it drew on its pragmatic routes of theory having practical application and was therefore relevant for real world problems, which applied to research such as this which intersected both policy and practice.

#### ***2.4.2.2 The Sample***

A case study does not need to have a minimum number of cases or to randomly select cases (Perry, 1998; Yin, 1994). In this research a cap of sixteen cases was decided to allow for cross case analysis for richer theory building. Yin (1994) advocated that multiple cases should be treated as multiple experiments and not as multiple respondents, therefore replication logic rather than sampling logic should be used (Perry, 1998). Therefore each case must be considered an instance of a class of events rather than a single measurement of a key variable (George & Bennett, 2005). It was expected that by sixteen cases theoretical saturation (Eisenhardt, 1989) would have been reached or sampling selection would have reached the point of redundancy (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Time and resource constraints also militated against more than sixteen cases. Sample size in this research study depended on

what you wanted to know, what would be useful, what would have credibility, and what could be done with available time and resources (Patton, 1990). The case in this study referred to each one of sixteen companies and organisations identified in the RPL literature as well as the sample frame. There were sixteen cases examined in the final sample. An overview of each case in the context of this research is presented in Appendix J.

A sample frame to represent as fully as possible the sixty-one industry sectors listed in the 'Irish Times Top 1000 Companies 2009' was populated using the following category of company/organisation:

1. The Irish Times Top 1000 companies (this was stratified by economic sector, and class size i.e. size of enterprise. Companies include state, semi-state, private, limited etc. According to Eurostat, the European Union's statistics service, the following classes exist: SMEs (1-249 persons employed); micro enterprises (1-9 persons employed); small enterprises (10-49 persons employed); medium-sized enterprises (50-249 persons employed); large enterprises (250 or more persons employed).

As not all of the sixty-one sectors were represented in the 'Top 1000 Companies' list, the following types of organisations were also included, in addition to the fact that they are relevant to the context of RPL practice as identified in the literature.

2. Professional Bodies
  - a. The Regulated Professions in Ireland as listed by the department of education and science
  - b. List of approved professional bodies from the Law Library of Ireland
  - c. Professional sectoral associations
3. Voluntary, Charity, Community organisation
4. Youth Organisations
5. Trade Unions

Patton (1990) discussed the use of sampling in qualitative inquiry where cases were selected purposefully rather than by way of probability. In this instance the case of purposeful sampling was most appropriate because of the need for information-rich cases i.e. those

companies and organisations that used or were thinking of using the Recognition of Prior Learning. In particular stratified purposeful sampling was used and then purposeful random sampling within each stratum to identify specific cases. For each sector it was attempted to identify at least one micro, one small, one medium and one large enterprise so that there was a broad mix of both sector and size in the final sample frame. The inclusion of random sampling increased the credibility of the sample. However, in all cases it was not necessarily possible to sample randomly either because there were only one or two enterprises in the sector or all four class-sizes of enterprises were not represented in all sectors. Therefore the list was divided into sectors and each sector stratified by the four enterprise class sizes. Cases that were known to practice some form of RPL activity were immediately included in the final sample frame of cases to contact for access. Thereafter cases were chosen randomly. In sectors with a large number of companies/organisations, there was an allowance for up to ten selections per sector, generally aiming for a quota of eight (two per class size). Some sectors contained less than eight companies/organisations, in which case all were included in the potential sample frame irrespective of class. It was likely that some or all of these cases did not practice recognition processes or were unwilling to participate. However, the original sample frame was large enough, consisting of some 430 companies, 100 professional bodies as well as 62 voluntary organisations, 25 trade unions, and 55 youth organisations to accommodate several iterations of sampling. For the cases of professional bodies, trade unions, voluntary, charity, and community organisations it was not possible to obtain information on class size, therefore sampling was purely purposeful random sampling by identifying those organisations that were known to take part in training activities and choosing randomly a sample from these. The twenty-five trade unions listed

by ICTU (Irish Congress of Trade Unions) were included in the sample frame without recourse to random sampling.

This research also used opportunistic sampling as new opportunities emerged during data collection. Both snowball sampling as well as the sampling of politically important cases was used for the Lónra APEL project companies, and the IBEC Retail, and Travel Professional companies although they did not participate in the final study.

The Lónra companies referred to the Lónra APL project for the development and application of a standard model to recognise and accredit prior learning in information technology for companies operating in the BMW (Border, Midlands, Western) region, the aim was to offer those who qualified a fast track route to obtaining a Higher Certificate. There was little remaining accessible information on this project and the companies involved. This project is elaborated further in chapter five on local RPL practice.

The final sample frame consisted of 224 SME and Large organisations, thirteen Lónra companies of which contact information could be obtained, twenty-five trade unions, ten youth organisations, twenty professional bodies/organisations, and ten community organisations. Random number sets were generated using the 'Research Randomizer' statistical tool from the social psychology network (Urbaniak & Pious, 2008). Of these, fifty were contacted in the first round of invitations sent out in February 2010 by way of purposeful sampling.

This final sample consisted of six professional/sectoral/regulatory bodies, five private limited companies, two training companies and three voluntary/community organisations.

#### ***2.4.2.3 Methods of the study***

The case studies in this research aimed to generate and test theory about whether there was a return on investment from RPL to companies and organisation with an abductive logic. In that sense the choice of cases to study influenced thinking on ROI and this impacted on the empirical investigations themselves. The cases were evaluated in terms of ROI in order to build theory about RPL in companies and organisations drawing on grounded theory. The role of theory in the cases of this study is more to locate and explain what goes on within a case in terms of its wider societal context (Hammersly & Gomm, 2000, p.6). This is probably more in line with Stake (2000) who argued that while case studies may be useful in theory building they are best used to add to existing experience and humanistic understanding.

George and Bennett (2005) spoke of the use of case studies to address real world problems and emphasised the aim of developing middle-range theories (limited in scope to explain different sub-classes of general phenomena). It was therefore necessary to engage in deductive and empirical ways of generating knowledge and theory.

#### **Interviews**

Formal letters of request were sent to each company/organisation, accompanied by an information sheet and a consent form. A follow-up phone call was made after two weeks to those who had not given an answer, as suggested by Saunders et al. (2000). A copy of the information sheet sent to potential interviewees can be found in Appendix H.

There were sixteen interviews conducted, eleven of which were with companies that had used RPL and five with companies that had not used RPL, but were interested in implementing it. The sixteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with the HR or Training/Learning and Development Officers in the organisations. In each case there was one interviewee with the exception of one case where there were two interviewees. The interview schedules for the case studies were pre-pilot and pilot tested prior to the researcher going out into the field. The interviews were constructed again adhering to the standards for conducting qualitative interviews (Foddy, 1993; Kvale, 2007; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Oppenheim (1999) discussed analytic questionnaire or interview designs which aim to explain things or to seek to answer 'why' questions. The case study interviews in this thesis employed an analytic design. Qualitative interviews are useful for getting the story behind an individual's experiences and similar to the historical analysis, a general interview guide or schedule was used to loosely structure each interview and collect the same general information from each interviewee (Kvale, 2009). Each semi-structured interview ranged between thirty-five to sixty minutes in duration and was divided into four main parts:

1. learning and development strategy in the company/organisation in general and how it is envisaged with regards to the strategic mission of the company/organisation,
2. the aims and objectives of investing in procedures for RPL and what steps had to be taken to implement it,
3. the specific costs and benefits of RPL as perceived by the organisation,
4. an overall evaluation of the organisation's experience with RPL so far.

## **Document Review**

Company documents were extensively reviewed to supplement the findings of the semi-structured interviews that were conducted. Documents included RPL company brochures, RPL evaluation forms, RPL policy documents, RPL worksheets and workbooks, annual company reports, and learning and development reports.

All of the interviews were transcribed. Analysis of the case studies used an adapted framework by D. Phillips (2006a; 2006b) of Bereday's (1964) Model of Case Study Comparison, already presented in chapter one, that begins with description, then interpretation, followed by juxtaposition and then finally comparison. The adapted framework begins with conceptualisation, followed by contextualisation, isolation, explanation, reconceptualisation and application. Elements from a grounded theory approach were also adopted for the analysis proper, drawing on the work of Strauss and Corbin (1998 as cited in Saunders et al., 2000), although it differed from pure grounded theory since analysis was still based on theoretical explanation. This process included open coding, which was described (Saunders et al., 2000) as the disaggregation of data into units, followed by axial coding to recognise relationships between categories and finally selective coding to integrate the categories to produce a theory.

### **2.4.3 Delphi Future Oriented Survey**

#### ***2.4.3.1 Justification of the Study***

The Delphi research method was an iterative data gathering process which got its name from the ancient Greek Oracle of Delphi, where individuals would consult with the oracle to hear the prophecies of Apollo. In research, it was a means of anonymous expert surveying without undue emphasis on individual opinion (Day, 2002). It was regarded as a highly

effective way to elicit, collate and focus expert judgement toward a consensus, and to identify areas of convergence and divergence (Farmer, 1998; Skumolski, Hartman, & Krahn, 2007; Turoff & Hiltz, 1995). The Delphi method generally involved three or more questionnaires sent either as paper documents or online to respondents to self-complete without direct contact with the researcher (Watson, 2008). Responses to each round were analysed to identify convergence and divergence. Figure 2.2 gives an overview of the iterative Delphi process of collecting and distilling anonymous expert judgments using questionnaires interspersed with feedback (Okoli & Powlowski, 2004). Areas of divergence informed the content of the second and third round questionnaires and new questions could be added if required. The areas of convergence were reported back to the respondents so that the logic of the second and subsequent rounds was reasonably clear (Yao & Liu, 2006). As a Delphi survey involved 'expert' opinion it was expected that it could cope with quite complex issues without being over-lengthy or complex in design (Scapolo & Miles, 2006).

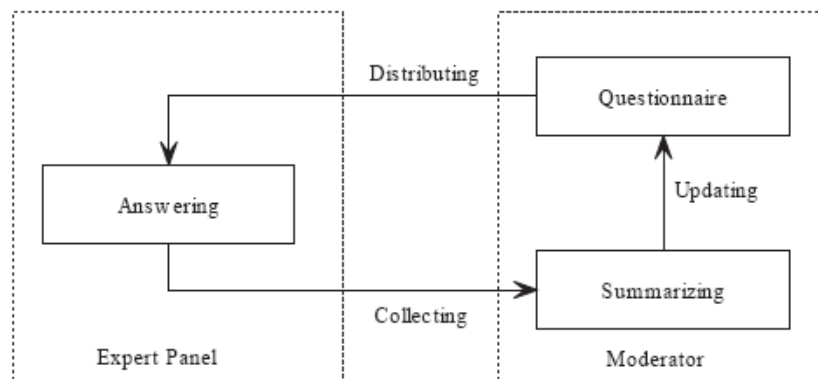
The Delphi method was generally cited as an alternative to the traditional survey method for a particular research approach. The Delphi Survey Method was akin to the hermeneutic dialectic of Guba and Lincoln (1989) in the sense of the questionnaire – feedback process paralleling an interpretive dialogue among a wide variety of stakeholders in order to attain consensus on an emerging construction of the evaluation. Okoli and Pawlowski (2004, p.15) found that the Delphi method fit with a research process defined as bricolage (to use whatever resources and repertoire one had to perform whatever task one faced) where the researcher was the bricoleur. Crotty (2009) commented on the definition of the bricoleur in the context of constructionism, distinguishing between the concept as described by Denzin



and Lincoln (2003) which was the one mentioned above, and that of Lévi-Strauss (1966, as cited in Crotty, 2009, p.48) which defined the bricoleur as a person able to make something new out of a range of things that had previously made up something different. Therefore the former regarded the researcher as self-reflexive and was concerned about whether he/she could do something, as opposed to the latter who considered what could be made of the 'range of things' (Crotty, 2009). As such the object was paramount in the concept envisaged by Lévi-Strauss. Therefore research in this mode (constructionist) approached the object without the constraint of conventional meanings and was thereby open to new interpretations. This is the way in which the Delphi method was viewed in this research.

The principles behind any Delphi survey are:

1. Anonymity of respondents
2. Iteration over at least three rounds to allow respondents to refine their views
3. Controlled feedback
4. Statistical aggregation of the group response for quantitative analysis (Skulmoski, Hartman, & Krahn, 2007, p.2).



**Figure 1.** The procedure of a Delphi survey.

Figure 2.2 The Delphi process (Yao & Liu, 2006, p.2)

A key advantage of a Delphi Survey was that it avoided the direct confrontation of experts (Watson, 2008). Additionally, it did not require them to meet physically - which would be impractical for international experts in any case (Okoli & Powlowski, 2004). Another benefit

of the Delphi survey method was that it was less likely to suffer from a low non-response rate, perhaps due to its brevity and to its curiosity value among experts (Turoff & Hiltz, 1995). The Delphi method was also flexible in its design, which was a key requirement for my particular research, as my overall research design is both iterative - to respond to the constant changing structures of organisations - and abductive in its approach (Mitroff & Turoff, 2002).

Delbecq, Van de Ven, & Gustafson (1975) pointed to inherent challenges in a Delphi Study which assumed participants who were skilled in written communication, and were highly knowledgeable and motivated. This is why the selection process as well as timely analysis and distribution of subsequent rounds of questionnaires was so important to avoid drop-out.

There were a number of precautions taken in this study to try to ensure the credibility and quality of the survey process, as follows:

1. Respondents were clearly informed about the objectives of the study in advance,
2. The questionnaires were brief, on-line, and sent over a short time-span so as to minimise the workload of the experts and to encourage a high response rate,
3. Areas of divergence as well as of convergence in the data from the respondents were carefully considered to ensure that no minority issues were ignored,
4. Care was taken to develop comprehensive descriptions of the data in both qualitative and quantitative forms,
5. Consideration was given to the selection of expert respondents across several countries and disciplinary areas to ensure a broad source of opinion and expertise.

#### ***2.4.3.2 The sample***

A sample frame, of national, European, and global RPL experts, was compiled from readings of the RPL literature and website searches. The result was a final sample frame of fifty-seven experts. Email addresses were obtained for all of the fifty-seven experts and they were

contacted by email with a letter explaining the study, what their participation would involve, a consent form and the ethical guidelines governing the research. A total of thirty respondents agreed to take part in the study. Of these thirty, only twenty-two took part in the first round, twenty in the second round and eighteen in the third and final round.

#### ***2.4.3.3 Methods of the Delphi Survey***

The Delphi Study was conducted in three rounds of online questionnaires between October 2009 and December 2009 through 'Freeonlinesurveys.com'. The study sought the opinions of twenty-two national and international experts from higher education, work-based learning, in-company training, professional bodies, further education, and continuing professional development, about future trends in the value of the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) to companies and organisations. The international, European and Irish expert respondents were from Australia (2), Ireland (14), Belgium (1), the United States (2), South Africa (1), Scotland (1), and England (1).

A limit of three rounds was set for the study because with more than three rounds the process becomes too-time consuming to maintain high response rates (Farmer, 1998). Each round was pilot-tested before being sent out to respondents. The Delphi surveys were constructed in the style of what Oppenheim (1999) called 'panel studies'. Primarily closed questions were used for the surveys in order to avoid unnecessary completion time and extended writing for respondents. Closed questions also facilitate group comparison, which was an essential part of the Delphi process (Oppenheim, 1999). In order not to lose the spontaneity of responses, the surveys provided for respondents to leave comments or offer additional comments for each question, which many did. The results of the surveys were analysed in SPSS with automatic generation of tables and graphs from the online survey

tool. The analysis was primarily based around points of divergence and ambiguity in the data returned from the respondents. A full description of the study can be found in chapter eight.

## **2.5 Ethical Considerations**

### **2.5.1 Consent, confidentiality, anonymity**

This research sought to comply with the DIT Ethics Committee which promoted the principles of honesty, openness, fairness, confidentiality, respect for human and animal subjects, awareness and declaration of conflicts of interest, assessing the risk of carrying out the research in light of its benefits, and adhering to best practice in research (plagiarism, data storage, and acknowledging collaboration).

The research was granted approval by the DIT Research Ethics Committee in 2009. A statement of ethics (see Appendix G) was sent to each participant prior to their taking part in the study with information about the research process to enable them to give, or withhold consent, on an informed basis. The statement informed them about the study and what would be expected from them if they agreed to participate. It stated that each participant could withdraw consent to participate or the usage of their responses at any stage of the research process. The names, addresses and identifying details of participants in the research would remain confidential to me, the researcher. No other person would be allowed access to this information without securing first written consent from each participant. All information circulated to anyone other than the respondent would be anonymous. The recorded interviews and their transcripts would be utilised by me for scholarship and research relating to the pursuit of my PhD at DIT. Completed interviews would be stored for two years after completion of the research project, thereupon they

would be deleted or permission for an extension would be sought from each participant. A statement of ethics is found in Appendix G.

### **2.5.2 Accuracy and transparency**

The research respected the rights of all research participants to confidentiality and privacy. The research used primary data in the form of interviews and surveys as well as secondary data in the form of project and company documents, many of which were publically available. The researcher made every attempt to present the data in an accurate and transparent way. One attempt at this transparency and accuracy was that the research instruments were presented at several in-house research seminars as well as presentations of data analysis at national and international conferences. A list of research presentations can be found in Appendix N.

### **2.5.3 Validity of the thesis research**

The ethical stance that informed this research aimed to ensure the integrity of the methodology and the validity of the conclusions drawn. Ontologically, social constructionism in this research was similar to the description of critical theory of Guba and Lincoln (1994) which employed an historical realism that foregrounded the historical, social, political, and economic values that shaped reality rather than a more relativist, individual and locally structured reality of constructivism. This was because *constructionism* that was realist in ontology embraced the critical spirit. Despite this, as Toma (2006) explained, in epistemological and methodological terms the quality criteria that Guba and Lincoln (1994) highlighted for the constructivist paradigm were more appropriate for this research. Therefore the social constructionist was concerned with how their work would lead to action, but action in the sense of the inquiry not being complete without the research prompting improvement. Therefore validity was defined in the sense of the research being:

*Sufficiently grounded, triangulated, based on naturalistic indicators, carefully fitted to theory (and its consequences), comprehensive in scope, credible in terms of member checks, logical, and truthful in terms of its reflection of the phenomenon in question (Lincoln, 1994, as cited in Toma, 2006, p.409).*

A key aspect of the validation process in this research was the concept of authenticity which was related to ethical principles that foregrounded the research participants. Implied in authenticity was a commitment to action to better participants' views of their reality and an appreciation of those of others (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). A surprising aspect of this research was the acknowledgement by several of the case study participants of the lack of monitoring of the RPL process in their organisations and a renewed commitment to raise awareness of RPL within the organisation as well as an attempt at a more comprehensive monitoring process. Additionally, the Delphi Survey was particularly useful in informing participants (in this case more correctly the RPL Community) of trends occurring in RPL policy and practice and raised interest in the findings of the study.

## **2.6 Challenges and Limitations**

### **2.6.1 Privilege**

Social constructionism offered challenges to evaluation-type research of the kind presented here because it did not privilege any one perspective or interpretation over another (Burr, 1998). This research was focused on organisations and therefore it was the voice of the organisation that was heard most often, but was not necessarily privileged. Attempts to neutralise that privilege were through methods used such as Kaufman's (2005) Organizational Elements Model (OEM), which is explained in chapter three, and the wide variety of stakeholders that engaged with RPL on the labour market.

### **2.6.2 Validity**

Threats to validity were constant, although validity was a contested topic in the constructionist paradigm, especially in a complex and fluid organisational environment. External validity was not a huge concern as this research did not claim to make firm generalisable conclusions (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2000), and where provision was made for this (D. Phillips, 2006a; 2006b Model for Case Study Comparison) it was the result of a structured analytical framework. Attempts to lessen concerns for internal validity were through a rigorous approach to sampling, and looking for data rich cases (Saunders et al., 2000). Additionally, the particular data collection instruments underwent pre-pilot and pilot testing. Data analysis also benefitted from a means of crystallisation with both inductive and deductive approaches adopted through the logic of abduction (Järvensivu & Törnroos, 2010).

The study of perceptions held by RPL experts and practitioners was the subject of a collective of individual perceptions where the researcher was an active agent in the inquiry by conducting the interviews, interacting with the participants and interpreting the resultant data (Järvensivu & Törnroos, 2010). Aspects of meaning, appropriateness, language and time are key factors in designing interviews and also, in the case of this thesis research, the Delphi Study (Foddy, 1998, Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008). Pilot testing in all cases of the interview schedules and questionnaires was undertaken. This included whether or not the interview questions allowed the participant to comment on aspects of the research question that they thought important, whether the interview questions and responses provided appropriate information that contributed to the information context, whether there was common usage of language between interviewer and the context, and finally to

ensure that the time allotted for interviews and questionnaires was sufficient to provide rich data but not to the point of excluding potential participants (Kvale, 2007; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

### **2.6.3 Generalisation**

Generalisation was a contested topic in social constructionist research. Writers such as Donmoyer (2000), Lincoln and Guba (2000), Stake (2000) offered the alternative of naturalistic generalisation, where the working hypothesis and transferability were the aims of inquiry instead of drawing conclusions. However, Schofield (2000) found that the latter was not ruled out in case study research. Stake (2000) proposed the distinction between explanation and understanding as the ends of inquiry with the former linked to propositional and the latter to tacit knowledge. Therefore approximating 'Truth' in the human sciences was best reached by perceptions and understanding as a result of immersion in the phenomena. Naturalistic generalisations were therefore derived from within a person as a product of experience (Stake, 2000). Guba and Lincoln (2000) stated that if inquiry was based on inductive logic then generalisation was relative because there were always multiple possible generalisations to account for specific outcomes; they were all probable inferences bound by context and time and part of closed systems of theories and laws. Gomm, Hammersley and Foster (2000) found that ultimately all case study research was directed to drawing conclusions which were of the kind of theoretical inference or empirical generalisation. The latter was about drawing inferences from a sample of a larger, finite population (Gomm et al., 2000, p. 103). Making empirical generalisations involved presenting information about the case and the population as in D. Phillips' (2006a, 2006b) adapted model for case study comparison and drawing on a systematic sampling procedure (D. Phillips, 2006a).



#### **2.6.4 Concept of return on investment**

Return on investment was also a challenging concept to portray in research given the limitations of the data and information available and the difficulty of making valid comparisons. It was not possible to provide any concrete, quantitative conclusions on cost-effectiveness although this was not the aim of the study in any case. One of the issues with a largely experience-based activity such as RPL is the difficulty of setting appropriate target outcomes and to measure success using any external indicator. There were also several caveats in ROI that should be mentioned here. ROI was considered a relative measure of a company's success and was often used to compare different companies (Skillnets Ltd, 2005a; 2005b; 2005c); however the subjective nature of most ROI processes raised questions about ROI for comparison across companies. Therefore this was part of the reasoning behind this research taking a broader view of ROI that was not dependent on a single metric or method to determine value, success or impact of RPL.

The return on investment aspect of the case study research was limited in that there were difficulties in linking case data with on the job performance as a result of an inability to disaggregate the data, the timing of data collection, and the potential impact of other variables. There were also difficulties in accessing the data because of a lack of RPL reporting. The issue of timing of return on investment studies is always a challenge; when will returns be most evident. It was also difficult to gain access to organisations/companies and it was necessary therefore to emphasise the benefits of participation to potential participants stressing the increased need for accountability across all organisational functions, particularly prioritising showing bottom line results.

### **2.6.5 Trustworthiness and authenticity of the data**

The historical study of past RPL projects was limited in a number of ways. The Valorisation framework for analysis was based on subjective determinants of value, not necessarily withstanding scientific rigour in terms of validity and reliability and verifiability (Creswell, 2003; Flick, 2002; Gomm, 2004), but the nature of this research was more concerned with notions of trustworthiness and authenticity of the data (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Trustworthiness was demonstrated by transferability, dependability, confirmability, and credibility as outlined by Guba and Lincoln (1989) and which were more in line with concepts and dimensions of valorisation. Credibility was related to the positivist internal validity; whether the instrument measured what it was intended to measure and the researcher could draw meaningful inferences as a result (Toma, 2006). Member checking such as carried out in the Delphi Study whereby participants were relayed feedback from previous rounds of the survey was one means of ensuring credibility. Peer-debriefing, such as the presentation of research results at external conferences or in-house seminars also aided in the credibility process. Transferability was to do with thick description such as providing information on time, place, context, and culture as was done in the case studies by presenting parallel descriptions of the cases in terms of mission, history, and culture (appendix J) which enabled others to assess the findings and whether they could be used in other contexts. Dependability concerned the development of an audit trail to track the research output and any changes that might have occurred, which was to do with replication in the positivist paradigm. This was particularly important for an evolving research design (Toma, 2006). Confirmability of data and interpretation was by way of tracking the raw data and documentary evidence as well as the data analysis and logic used to arrive at interpretations. Guba and Lincoln (1989) found that while the criteria described

above were a response to positivist criticism for rigour in qualitative research they referred to authenticity criteria as being more in line with concerns for rigour in qualitative research that stakeholders voices were heard (Silverman, 2004).

Authenticity referred to the reality to which the findings related and included ideas of fairness, ontological authenticity, educative authenticity, catalytic authenticity, and tactical authenticity (Seale & Silverman, 1997). Fairness was about including and balancing the voices and perspectives of study participants. Ontological and educative authenticity related to a raised awareness by participants in the research and those who surrounded them in their organisation. Finally catalytic and tactical authenticity encouraged action on the part of the research participants as well as action on the part of the researcher to train participants to act (Seale & Silverman, 1997). A key demonstration of these authenticity criteria was the commitment and engagement of research participants once they agreed to take part in the various studies to facilitate the interview or survey process and offering constructive criticism where relevant.

While this research was social constructionist in epistemology the case studies were still open to many of the criticisms of the case study method. Case studies in general are criticised on the grounds that they:

- Lack rigour
- Are open to the occurrence of bias
- Lack a basis for scientific generalisation
- Take too long and result in massive documents (Yin, 1993).

In an effort to overcome the possibility of subject error in the case studies, there was a relatively large number and type of respondent. The depth of information required aimed to

clarify or explain any possible errors that might have occurred from the judgments of participants. In order to minimise observer error quite structured instruments were used. In terms of observer bias a rigorous sampling technique as well as analysis that used both qualitative and quantitative measures to crystallise the data were utilised. Therefore the aim was to achieve symmetry and substance through an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multi-dimensionality and angles of approach (Young & Collin, 2004).

## **2.7 Chapter Summary**

This chapter outlined the research design and defended the social constructionist research approach that was taken. The design was contextualised in postmodern, complex and poststructural research approaches before being situated in the constructionist paradigm and adopting more specifically a social constructionist design. The three methodological strands of the research study, which were informed by an interpretative approach and an abductive logic, were described in the context of social constructionist research. The chapter also set out the ethical considerations of the research and was followed by an account of the challenges and limitations of the research design and the researcher as a co-constructor of knowledge in the research process. The next chapter presents the analytical frameworks governing the research study and methodologies.

# Chapter Three

## Analytical Frameworks

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### 3.1 Introduction

The analytical framework for this research study merits further explanation than the methodological section of the previous chapter would allow. The starting point for analysis in this research study was the concept of return on investment. This was tied to the labour market context of the research and the concern with human capital. This chapter will consider the return on investment (ROI) as the overall frame for analysis and then present the analytical frameworks for the three methodological strands of the research study described in the previous chapter. The first strand was the historical analysis that used the European concept of valorisation to frame the analysis. Secondly, an overview of D. Phillips' (2006) adapted model of case study comparison drawing on grounded theory will be discussed. The final study is a Delphi survey which used descriptive statistics to look at areas of convergence and divergence in the data.

### 3.2 Return on Investment

*Public policy decisions regarding investment in human capital rely on measuring the rates of return on such investments. Restrictive measurements compare the additional earnings from employment of better educated or - trained individuals to the additional social cost of investing in more education. Other less restrictive measurements take into account the social and economic benefits of such investments, such as better public health, lower crime, and a better environment (Bianco, 2011, para. 4).*

The concept of return on investment (ROI) can be perceived in both a broad and restrictive way, as Bianco (2011) recounts. In the strictest sense, ROI is an accountancy measure to calculate the possible monetary returns from an investment whereby all of the costs and benefits of that investment are accounted for and translated into financial terms. Return on

*training* investment (ROTI) is also a purely accountancy based concept, but increasingly it is being used to calculate intangible costs and benefits (Barker, 2001). ROTI is carried out from several different perspectives, from the point of view of the individual who underwent the training, from the HRM/personnel manager, from the organisation as a whole, or from a societal perspective (Barker, 2001).

The type of evidence that this research aimed to gather was based on a broad conception of return on investment that was concerned with value and impact viewed through a social return on investment (SROI) lens.

### **3.2.1 Social return on investment**

Social return on investment (SROI) was a model of social accounting and cost benefit analysis. The 'social' in SROI referred to,

*The entities affected by business: the environment, individuals, employees, communities and society – all of the non-investor stakeholders. These stakeholders may also be described as those affected by market externalities (Olsen, 2003, p.3).*

SROI must be considered in terms of the political environment and personal goals of the company or organisation performing the analysis. Furthermore, SROI aims to facilitate planning or prioritising that optimises both financial and social value creation for all key stakeholders (Olsen, 2003). SROI is a framework for understanding, measuring and managing the outcomes of an organisation's activities and can encompass all types of outcomes. Of importance to this research was that all stakeholders were involved in determining which outcomes were relevant (Office of the Third Sector, 2009).

### **3.2.2 Social accounting**

Social accounting was defined as:

*A systematic analysis of the effects of an organisation on its communities of interest or stakeholders, with stakeholder input as part of the data that are analysed for the accounting statement (Quarter, Mook & Richmond, 2003, p.3 as cited in Richmond, Mook & Quarter, 2003, p. 1).*

The ACCA (Association of Chartered Certified Accountants, 2009) found social accounting to be the process that organisations used to account for their social, environmental and economic impacts. Internal social accounting concerned how an organisation could operate in a more socially sustainable manner while external social accounting concerned the way an organisation integrated with the society and system in which it operated. Grey, Dey, Owen, Evans, and Zadek (1997) in their analysis of three approaches to social accounting suggested that all social accounting was social constructionist. Two of the approaches were weak or moderate social constructionist in the sense that the organisation and its relationships existed prior to the social account and these were reconstructed by the social account (Grey et al., 1997). One approach, the polyvocal citizen perspective, assumed that the organisation did not exist independent of the stakeholders and in that sense they created the organisation both socially and symbolically. Therefore these approaches differed ontologically in terms of their leanings towards either objectivity or subjectivity, both of which were embraced in social constructionism.

### **3.2.3 Social accounting and social return on investment in this research**

The role of social accounting and SROI within the social constructionist epistemology assumed a number of conditions for this research (adapted from Grey et al., 1997, p.348):

- That the multi-stakeholders' perspectives and conceptions of RPL in the labour market reflects a neo-liberal assumption of the need for democracy and accountability. Therefore, the use of SROI in this research study is predicated on the assumption of SROI's ability to command that accountability.

- That the account socially reconstructs perceptions of RPL, which pre-exist that account
- That the reconstruction is a reflexive and complex series of views from all stakeholders
- That the information should be trustworthy, transferable, dependable, confirmable, and authentic (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) in order to judge its goodness or quality as well as its incompleteness on these points.
- That a social account is a continuous process of iteration and negotiation.

This research drew on two primary ROI models; from Roger Kaufman et al. (1995) and Jack Phillips (1997). These models investigated perceptions of value through the “*evaluation of human performance interventions model*” and the “*ROI Process Model*” respectively. The research study also drew on social accounting literature which distinguished between internal and external social accounting. *Internal* social accounting referred to the provision of information to help an organisation’s management operate in a more socially sustainable manner (ACCA, 2009). *External* social accounting provided information on how an organisation integrated with the society and systems within which it operated (ACCA, 2009). This information was achieved through social return on investment models. The following two sections briefly outline the J. Phillips and Kaufman models and their fit with this research study.

### ***3.2.3.1 J. Phillips’ Systematic Evaluation Model***

One of the most recognised ROI models is that of Donald Kirkpatrick (1959), an ROI model that conceived evaluation in four steps of measurement: reaction, learning, behaviour, and results (J. Phillips & P. Phillips, 2007). In the 1980s J. Phillips added a fifth step or level and the resultant Kirkpatrick-Phillips model became one of the most used methods of ROI evaluation.



In Ireland, the Impact Measurement Skillnet (IMS) is focused on providing comprehensive evaluations of training programmes up to the point of a return on investment analysis. A 2004 pilot ROI project was carried out with several Irish companies and was based on the J. Phillips (1997) ROI methodology which evaluated training on five levels: **reaction, learning, application, business impact, and ROI**. Return on Investment measured the net programme benefits and costs. The ratio was usually expressed as a percentage by multiplying the fractional values by 100 (J. Phillips, 1997; J. Phillips & Stone, 2002). Prior to any evaluation it was necessary to establish baseline data. The next step was to measure the five levels of ROI as established by J. Phillips (1997; J. Phillips & Stone, 2002). The five levels were (1) *Reaction*: what the participants thought and felt about the training in terms of perceived value and expectations. This was measured by participants completing evaluation sheets at the end of training. (2) *Learning*: the resulting increase in knowledge and capability; did participants learn what they were supposed to learn? This was measured by comparing participant's scores on pre- and post- tests. (3) *Application*: the extent of behaviour and capability improvement and implementation/application; did participants apply their new learning on the job. This was measured by manager observation and follow-up to employee action plans. (4) *Business Impact*: the effects on the business or environment resulting from the trainee's performance; did the training have any measurable business impact. This was measured by a financial comparison of costs and benefits (5) *ROI*: This involved assigning monetary values to all of the data collected. Then a simple cost-benefit ratio was calculated to determine ROI (J. Phillips, 1997).

J. Phillips (1997, p.52) outlined an 18 step Systemic Evaluation Model consisting of the following steps to achieve the five levels described above:

1. Conduct a needs assessment and develop tentative objectives
2. Identify purposes of evaluation
3. Establish baseline data
4. Select Evaluation method/design
5. Determine evaluation strategy
6. Finalise programme objectives
7. Estimate programme costs/benefits
8. Prepare and present proposal
9. Design evaluation instruments
10. Determine and develop programme content
11. Design or select delivery methods
12. Test programme and make revisions
13. Implement or conduct programme
14. Collect data at proper stages
15. Analyse and interpret data
16. Make programme adjustments
17. Calculate return on investment
18. Communicate programme results

These steps and levels are illustrated in figure 3.1 below.

The higher the level of evaluation the greater the cost to the organisation in terms of time and resources therefore, in general, level four or level five evaluations were only used on programmes that met some of the following criteria (J. Phillips & Stone, 2002, p.29):

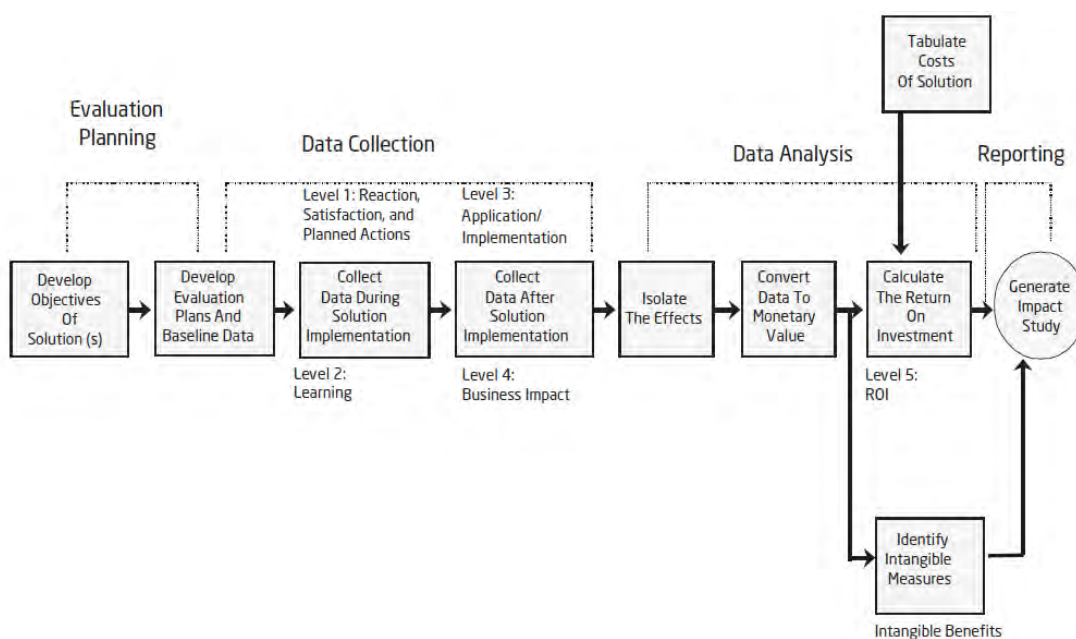


Figure 3.1 J. Phillips' ROI Model (Skillnets Ltd., 2005, p.3)

- The life cycle of the programme is such that it is expected to be effective for at least 12 to 18 months.
- The programme is important in implementing the organisation's strategies or meeting the organisation's goals.
- The cost of the programme is in the upper 20 percent of the training budget.
- The programme has a large target audience.
- The programme is highly visible.
- Management has expressed an interest in the programme.

In the case of RPL it was rare that it would meet more than one of the criteria listed above and therefore a rigid ROI process was not appropriate for this type of research. This reflected the social constructionist ROI perspective taken in this research which drew on the RPL community's perspectives of return on investment.

### ***3.2.3.2 Kaufman's Five Levels of Evaluation of Human Performance Improvement Interventions***

Kaufman, Keller and Watkins (1995), like J. Phillips, also built on the Kirkpatrick (1959) ROI model with the view that it was deficient in its definition of evaluation. Evaluation was not simply providing information to decision makers; rather it was providing information with a view to using it for performance improvement. This meant that the focus of evaluation should not simply be training, but also interventions such as organisational development, career planning, and mentoring to achieve performance improvement. This was described as mega-thinking, which was concerned with adding value for external clients and society using one's own job and organisation (Kaufman, 2005). Kaufman (2005) also criticised evaluation models that grouped all results of evaluation as *outcomes* instead of distinguishing between outcomes, outputs and products in results. This distinction is evident in the European Valorisation Framework used in this research (see section 3.3).

The Kaufman et al. (1995) model was the ‘five levels of evaluation of human performance improvement interventions’. It included a societal return on investment at Level Five. It became the ‘Organizational Elements Model’ (OEM) when revised in 2005. Additionally, the traditional Level 1 of Kirkpatrick and J. Phillips, was expanded to include the “*efficient use of organisational resources available*”. These five levels are laid out in table 3.1 below (Kaufman et al., 1995, p.12). I have also included a revised version of Kaufman’s five levels for mega-thinking and planning (OEM) in the right-hand column below (Kaufman, 2005, p.8):

Table 3.1 Kaufman’s Five Levels of Evaluation

<b>Kaufman Five Levels (1995)</b>	<b>Five levels revised: Mega-Thinking and Planning (2005)</b>
<b>5. Societal Outcomes</b>	5. Mega Outcomes (Strategic planning)
<b>4. Organisational Outcomes</b>	4. Macro Outputs (Tactical planning)
<b>3. Application</b>	3. Micro Products (Operational planning)
<b>2. Acquisition</b>	2. Processes
<b>1b. Reaction (Processes)</b>	1. Inputs
<b>1a. Enabling (Inputs)</b>	

Therefore ROI in this research study was thought of in terms of five levels within a company or organisation that impacted on perceptions of return on investment. These levels comprised the mega, macro, micro, process and input dynamics within an organisation. Therefore methodological concerns were to unearth perceptions of return on investment at strategic, tactical, operational, process and input levels for an RPL community that were both internal and external to the organisation. Table 3.2 below presents a comparison of the social accounting and SROI models already described in relation to the RPL-engaged

business, education and policy community for this project, and provided the basis of an over-arching analytical framework for the research study. The chapter now continues with an overview of the three analytical frameworks employed in the research study and discusses how they related to the overall conception of ROI used in the research.

Table 3.2 Comparison of ROI models as used in this research

<b>Kaufman’s Levels of evaluation</b>	<b>RPL Community</b>	<b>Type of Social Accounting</b>	<b>J. Phillips’ Levels of Evaluation</b>
<b>Mega Outcomes (5): Results and their consequences for external clients and society; a shared vision. (Strategic Planning)</b>	Labour Market Further and Higher Education (includes VET)	External Social	Level 5 – Return on Investment
<b>Macro Outputs (4): The results an organisation can or does deliver outside of itself. (Tactical Planning)</b>	Company/Organisation	External Social	Level 4 – Business Results
<b>Micro Products (3): The building block results that are produced within the organisation. (Operational Planning)</b>	Employees/Learners	Internal Social	Level 3 – Job application Level 2- Learning
<b>Process (2): The ways, means, activities, procedures, methods used internally.</b>	Company/Organisation	Internal Social	Level 1-Reaction and planned action
<b>Input (1): The human, physical, financial resources an organisation can or does use.</b>	Company/Organisation	Internal Social	Evaluation planning

### **3.3 Historical analysis of previous RPL projects using Valorisation**

Valorisation was 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 [EC], 2006). The European Commission has now deemed Valorisation an essential component of all Leonardo da Vinci projects. It was 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 (EC, 2006). The term 'valorisation' continued to be used in this research study despite its being superseded by the terms 'dissemination and exploitation' in current European Commission policy.

The European Commission (EC) defined Valorisation as (EC, 2006, p.1):

*the process of disseminating and exploiting the results of projects with a view to optimising their value, strengthening their impact, transferring them, integrating them in a sustainable way and using them actively in systems and practices at local, regional, national and European levels.*

Valorisation comprised dissemination and exploitation activities:

- Dissemination is a planned process of providing information about the results of a project to end-users and key actors.
- Exploitation comprises 'mainstreaming' (transferring the successful results of projects to appropriate decision-makers) and 'multiplication' (convincing end-users to adopt or apply project results) activities.

From readings of the literature and participation in EU projects six dimensions to Valorisation were identified as illustrated in figure 3.2 below. The six dimensions were defined as:

1. **Transferability:** The adaptation and/or further development of innovative results of a project, their transfer, piloting and integration into the public and/or private systems, companies, organisations at local, regional, national and/or Community level. The process has the objective of answering the needs of new target groups and users.
2. **Sustainability:** The capacity of the project to continue its existence and functioning beyond its end. The project results are used and exploited continuously. Sustainability of results implies use and exploitation of the results in the long term.

3. **Impact:** The effect that the project and its results have on various systems and practices. A project with impact contributes to the objectives of the programme and to the development of different European Union policies. The effective transfer and exploitation of results, together with the improvement of systems by innovation, produces positive impact.
4. **Optimise Value:** Fully exploiting the project and its results to achieve the maximum use from it. This goes in hand with needs analysis so that the needs of a target group are identified (future beneficiaries and users of the project results) to better orientate the project's activities, with the objective to effectively answer these needs.
5. **Feeding policy:** A process which enables activities to impact on policy and practice. This process includes identifying lessons, clarifying the innovative element and approach that produced the results, their dissemination, validation and transfer.
6. **Visibility:** Collecting and presenting project activities, experiences, results to potentially interested users. They are aimed at increasing knowledge of the projects (EC, 2007a, para. 11-30).

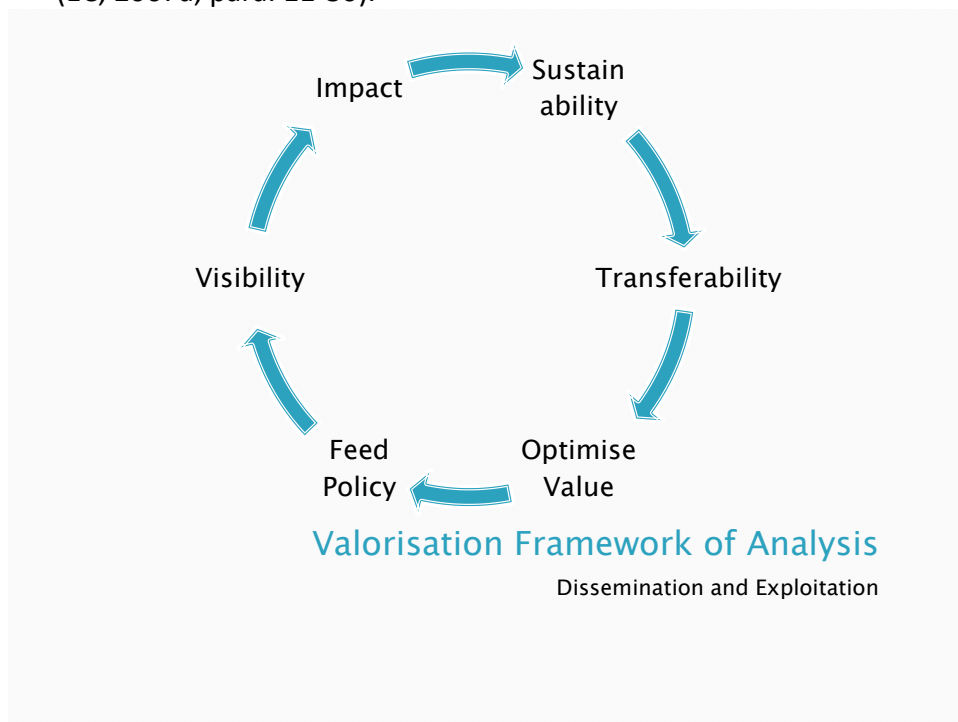


Figure 3.2 Valorisation Framework of Analysis

A cost-benefit analysis to determine the outcome of dissemination and exploitation activities (McCoshan, McDonald, Drozd, & Allen, 2008) used an impact matrix that was based on tangible (products and methods) and intangible results of Leonardo da Vinci projects. Each result was examined in terms of its output, target group, impact, and cost and

therefore distinguished between product, output and outcomes as in the Kaufman (2005) OEM.

Each transcript was given a number between one and four with accompanying project documents also given the same number to keep individual case data together. To start the process the four transcripts were electronically coded using Nvivo, a qualitative software analysis package using structured coding. The structured codes were the six dimensions of valorisation identified above. In addition, all project documents were summarised manually amounting to some 50 pages of handwritten notes and used as background material to inform the analysis and corroborate interviews.

### **3.4 Comparative analysis of company case studies in RPL practice using D. Phillips' Model of Case Study Comparison and Grounded Theory**

The purpose of the case studies was to explore whether there was a perception of return on investment to companies and organisations that used RPL (Recognition of Prior Learning). In most cases RPL had taken the form of 'learning and development' strategies within the organisations as well as specific organisational projects employing RPL to meet regulatory qualifications requirements, to gain funding, and to address the need for up-skilling in certain professions. These case studies were exploratory in that they sought the perceptions of the RPL community (company/organisation, employee, higher and further education, society, labour market) about the ROI from RPL. This was done by looking at what companies/organisations actually did with regard to RPL to determine whether there was an ROI from RPL in the company/organisational context.



Analysis of the case studies used an adapted framework by D. Phillips (2006a) of Bereday's (1964) Model of Case Study Comparison that began with description, then interpretation, followed by juxtaposition and then finally comparison. The adapted framework began with conceptualisation, followed by contextualisation, isolation, explanation, reconceptualisation and application as shown in table 3.3 below.

Table 3.3 D. Phillips' adapted model of case study comparison including Bereday's framework

<b>Conceptualisation (neutralisation of question)</b>					
Contextualisation Case Study 1 Description (Bereday)	Contextualisation Case Study 2 Description (Bereday)	Contextualisation Case Study 3 Description (Bereday)	Contextualisation Case Study 4 Description (Bereday)	Contextualisation Case Study 5 Description (Bereday)	Contextualisation Case Study 6 Description (Bereday)
<b>Isolation of differences (analysis of variables)</b>					
<b>Juxtaposition (Bereday)</b>					
<b>Explanation (development of synthesis)</b>					
<b>Interpretation (Bereday)</b>					
<b>Re-conceptualisation (contextualisation of findings)</b>					
<b>Comparison (Bereday)</b>					
<b>Application (generalisability of findings)</b>					

Bereday's *description* phase was a cataloguing of general information for each case, but extended to include the historical, political, economic and social background to each case. *Interpretation* was to expose the general case data to analysis, and then *juxtaposition* looked for similarities and differences in each case description against a common comparative framework. Finally *comparison* related the different cases to each other in a joint report (Bereday, 1964).

For D. Phillips (2006a) a schema for comparative inquiry that built on Bereday's began with *conceptualising* the issues to be addressed in isolation of the context; in this research study it was the nature of RPL in companies and organisations. This included the aims and

objectives of RPL for that organisation, those involved, the resources involved, and the result. The second step, *contextualisation*, was more akin to Bereday's description and interpretation stages in which a detailed analysis of the issues as manifest in each context was undertaken. It was here that the historical, political, economic and social background of each case was presented. Therefore this stage was seeking to provide a context for the original concept. Parallel descriptions of each case are presented in Appendix J for this contextualisation phase. The third, *isolation of differences* stage, was a juxtaposition stage to look for similarities and differences in the nature of RPL for specific phenomena in the context of each case. The *Explanation* stage was to develop a hypothesis in light of the similarities and differences and to find an explanation for them. The final stages of *reconceptualisation* and *generalisation* were a means to reconsider the original issues as a result of the findings and look at applying the findings to other situations (D. Phillips, 2006b).

Charmaz (2003) spoke of a constructivist grounded theory. This constructivism was in line with social constructionism in this research in assuming the relativism of multiple social realities, recognising the mutual creation of knowledge by the viewer and the viewed, and aimed towards an interpretive understanding of a subject's meaning (Charmaz, 2003, p.250). Grounded theory of Glaser and Strauss (1967) and later of Strauss and Corbin (1998) was ultimately realist in ontology and positivist in epistemology; it minimised the subjectivity of the researcher into the research, it assumed an external reality that could be discovered and recorded. Therefore most grounded theorists wrote as if the data had objective status when in fact data are reconstructions of experience (Charmaz, 2003). Therefore grounded theory in this research did not provide a window on reality, but rather

it concerned a discovered reality that arose from the interaction between researcher and subjects who confer meaning upon it. The concepts and hypotheses from grounded theory offered explanation and understanding, but not a generalisable truth (Charmaz, 2003). An important aspect of constructivist grounded theory was to look for respondents' values or meanings, this was done in this research study, particularly with the incorporation of values coding.

### **3.4.1 Conceptualisation**

The conceptualisation of RPL in companies and organisations formed part of the larger discussion of RPL as outlined in the literature review chapters therefore it is not necessary to present an overview here. However, it is worth mentioning that in practice terms there is now global interest in professional and occupational credentials and qualifications, especially as economies move to more knowledge-based than production-based activities (EGFSN, 2011). Companies and organisations are now very much focused on the need to know if their training in general is worthwhile and if the RPL (recognition of prior learning) process is worth additional investment. The process of RPL varies greatly, depending on the type of individual, the purpose for which they seek RPL and the capability of provider/accreditation bodies to provide it. The sixteen cases aimed to shed some light on how the process worked in terms of aims and objectives, infrastructures set in place, costing, added value and sustainability of RPL. These case studies also drew on the previous studies conducted by the OECD (Harold, Taguma, & Hagens, 2008; OECD, 2007c) which identified various benefits to companies and organisations that invested in RPL.

### **3.4.2 Contextualisation**

Contextualisation, was a detailed analysis of the issues as manifest in each context. For this part of the research there were sixteen contexts to present and analyse, as seen in

Appendix J. A part of this analysis included what Strauss and Corbin (1998) termed open coding, which was disaggregating the data into units to reveal the thoughts, ideas and meanings they contained (Deller, 2007).

Each transcript was given a number between one and sixteen with accompanying organisation/company documents also given the same number to keep individual case data together. To start the process each of the sixteen transcripts and some relevant company documents were manually coded using descriptive coding. Descriptive coding summarised the basic topic in the data, this acted as an initial way to become familiar with the data and begin to analyse it in a more structured fashion. In addition to the descriptive coding described above the data were also coded manually using evaluation coding and values coding. As recommended by Saldaña (2009) the data were also coded according to the four main topics examined through the interview schedule. This could be classed as structural coding, which applied a content-based or conceptual phrase representing a topic of inquiry to segments of data that related to specific research questions used to frame the interview (Saldaña, 2009). These coding strategies were refined and generated categories that were used in the next phase of the analysis, the isolation of differences.

### **3.4.3 Isolation of differences**

The isolation of differences stage used the parallel descriptions of cases that were put together to represent D. Phillip's call for parallel descriptions of data in each context. These parallel descriptions were compiled under the following headings:

- Company/Organisation Type
- Numbers (of RPL learners and cost of RPL)
- Form of RPL Used
- Mission/Values
- Strategic Goals

- Historical Context (traditions, stability in organisation)
- Political Context (relationship between State and company/organisation/sector/profession)
- Economic Context (Economic reasons for RPL)
- Social Context (Social questions implied in RPL)

The parallel descriptions can be found in Appendix J. In addition to the parallel descriptions, the categories identified in the previous stage were explored in this stage using the primary interview and document data.

#### **3.4.4 Explanation**

The fourth stage of D. Phillip's model was an attempt to explain the similarities and differences identified in the isolation of differences stage, against the background of differing contexts and their historical determinants, in order to develop some hypotheses. In other words this was a synthesising phase. It was also compatible with axial coding as outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1998) which was a matter of reassembling the data split during open coding (Saldaña, 2009) and relating those categories and sub-categories to reveal explanations for the phenomenon.

Strauss and Corbin (1998) referred to the use of a coding paradigm in axial coding to code the data for relevance to the phenomenon. The phenomenon was referenced by a given category for:

- Conditions (Causes)
- Interaction among the actors
- Strategies and tactics
- Consequences (Effects)

The axial codes were also given relational statements to show how these axial categories were linked into a logical flow from conditions to actions to consequences.

### **3.4.5 Reconceptualisation, generalisation and thematic coding**

The final stages of D. Phillips' model were a reconceptualisation of the original issues under investigation and to consider the application of any generalisable features that emerged from that analysis. Thematic (or selective) coding, in grounded theory, is about finding the central theme or category of the data and to which all categories and sub-categories can be systematically linked. The presentation of this central category can be in the form of an extended narrative or a set of propositions. To that end it fit with the final stages of D. Phillips' model for comparative case study enquiry. This final stage of thematic coding in grounded theory was the stage at which theory was created and was applicable to all cases in the thesis research. The properties and dimensions under each category and sub-category brought out the case differences and variations within a category (Saldaña, 2009). Therefore the theoretical code brought out the possible relationships between categories and moved the analysis in a theoretical direction. This was similar to Bereday's (1964) final comparison stage where separate accounts of each case were rewritten as a joint report and reference to one case elicited instantaneous comparison to another (Bereday, 1964).

The result of the analysis process was the identification of a core category which linked the categories identified in the axial coding and was an all-encompassing frame for the logical flow of consequences from RPL through to outcomes of RPL in companies and organisations. A full description of the case study analysis is presented in chapter seven.

### **3.5 Delphi future-oriented survey and descriptive statistics**

The three rounds of Delphi questionnaires yielded categorical data, data whose values cannot be measured (Saunders et al., 2000). Questions were primarily multiple-choice and produced categorical descriptive data. There were also categorical ranked data generated

from questions using Likert scales. The data were automatically entered into an excel file by the “*freeonlinesurveys.com*” software. These excel files were then used to input the data to SPSS, with each question category coded separately so that the selection of that category was a separate variable, known as multiple-dichotomy coding (Saunders et al., 2000), with either a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer coded as ‘1’ or ‘2’ respectively. The exceptions to this were the ranked data and the non-coded data. The non-coded data referred to additional comments that respondents were encouraged to make for each question, in order to encourage a multi-perspective social constructionist approach to the research.

The resultant SPSS databases contained 351 variables for round one, fifty-four for round two, and eighteen for round three. Each database was checked for errors before proceeding with the analysis. The coding strategy was already implemented on the data through the design of the questionnaires. For example, in the first round the questionnaire focused on the purposes for which RPL was practised in different organisational contexts, the main RPL tools used, the costs and benefits of RPL and the future of RPL. As a result of the analysis and feedback of the first round the second round questionnaire comprised a list of statements relating to the areas of convergence and divergence of the first round. This interplay of data collection and analysis represented constructionist research.

It was decided that exploratory analysis would be the most appropriate form of analysis for this strand of the research. Exploratory analysis of each variable gives an overview of the individual variables and their components (Saunders et al., 2000). This was achieved by generating descriptive statistics, primarily frequency distributions. The analysis was focused on highest and lowest values as well as proportions and distributions to reveal areas of

convergence and divergence in the data. A full description of the results of the analysis of the Delphi surveys can be found in chapter eight.

### **3.6 Chapter Summary**

This chapter briefly summarised the analytical framework used in this research study. It linked the concepts of return on investment, the locus of the research, with the three analytical methods employed. The concept of valorisation was tied to models of social return on investment with a focus on inputs, process, outputs, and outcomes. D. Phillips' (2006a; 2006b) model of case study comparison drawing on grounded theory tied into the mega, macro, and micro perspectives of social return on investment. This was particularly evident in the creation of the parallel descriptions of cases and the axial coding paradigm presenting a logical flow from consequences, to reactions, to outcomes, to the generation of a core or central category of the impact of RPL in companies and organisations. Finally the Delphi survey used exploratory descriptive statistics to investigate concepts of RPL in terms of the current and future potential of its added value in companies and organisations. The next chapter provides a context for some of the issues surrounding RPL by looking at the main policy discourses surrounding RPL.



## Chapter Four

# The Concepts and Theories of RPL

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This chapter sets out some of the different perspectives relating to three concepts which most inform RPL policy and practice. These concepts are:

- Work-based learning
- Notions of experience, experiential learning, APEL and RPL
- Informal and non-formal learning

All three concepts are explained as terms that are part of *“a cluster of concepts, including ‘lifelong learning’, ‘employability’ and ‘flexibility’”* (Roodhouse, 2010, p.21). Furthermore, these concepts are also entrenched in trends in wider policy to improve competitiveness in global markets by raising the levels of skills in the labour force, to measure effectiveness and success in organisations often by way of qualifications levels, to address the equity issue of social inclusion (Davies, 2000), to improve access to and efficiency in the formal education system, and to address the issues of an ageing population and increased numbers of migrants (Cedefop, 2008b).

This chapter will first give an overview of issues and concepts relating to recognition of prior learning (RPL) in work-based learning (WBL). These include metaphors of learning as well as individual and social perspectives on learning in the workplace. APEL and RPL are addressed next within the context of experiential learning. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of formal, non-formal and informal learning as conceived through the rhetoric of lifelong learning.

## **4.1 Work-based learning**

Terms such as 'globalisation' and the 'knowledge society' are synonymous with demands for change and renewal that have seen the move from education and teaching to learning and competence that cannot necessarily be acquired through traditional education routes (Illeris, 2003). The workplace is increasingly perceived as a site for skills development equal to or above those achieved through gaining qualifications and participating in formal training (Felstead, Fuller, Unwin, Ashton, Butler, Lee & Walters, 2004). Early definitions of work-based learning were to link learning to the work role (Brennan & Little, 1996). Low university representation in offering workplace learning programmes is cited as a matter of the nature of workplace training that does not necessarily need to lead to nationally recognised qualifications. Rather universities are utilised for continuous professional development and other short courses but not necessarily for 'training' more generally, which would account for the greatest proportion of organisational spend on learning and development activities (Roodhouse & Mumford, 2010). Workman (2008) identifies work-based learning as a field rather than a mode of study. However it is still affirmed that theories, concepts and practices in both work-based learning and the recognition of prior learning share the perspective that working life is a source of legitimate higher level learning (Murphy, 2008b). As such, Brennan and Little (1996) describe work-based learning as one form of off-campus learning that is recognised in higher education.

### **4.1.1 Defining work-based learning**

Much of the learning that takes place in the workplace or as a result of workplace issues is outside the scope of what higher education institutes (HEI) would be expected to engage with due to its low academic level or fleeting nature (Lester & Costley, 2010). However work-based learning concerned with higher level skills and knowledge is certainly relevant

for HEI involvement (Lester & Costley, 2010). National training and qualifications systems are seen as a means to link workplace skill recognition with national qualifications (Cedefop, 2009c; Dyson & Keating, 2005). As such, there is a north-south divide between the USA and Canada who do not have national training and qualifications systems and South Africa, New Zealand and Australia who do (Dyson & Keating, 2005).

Work-based learning and workplace learning discourse has been growing and features prominently in the rhetoric of lifelong learning. In higher education, accredited work-based learning is linked to economic imperatives to vocationalise higher education, and democratic imperatives to widen access to higher education (Reeve & Gallacher, 1999). The term '*accredited*' work-based learning is often superfluous, when, in general, work-based learning is perceived as a higher education programme of study (Boud & Solomon, 2000; Roodhouse, 2010). However work-based learning is also considered in a broader sense of learning *for, at* and *through* work (Boyd, Knox & Struthers, 2003; Brennan & Little, 1996) or solely learning *through* work (Reeve & Gallacher, 1999). Similarly workplace and work-related learning are also used to refer to broader conceptions of learning stimulated by the needs of the workplace, which include RPL (Roodhouse, 2010). *Work-related* learning is considered a much broader term that includes all aspects of learning related to work such as organisational training and development, but is not considered work-based learning in the strictest sense (Houlbrook, 2010). Therefore, *work-based* learning is subsumed under *workplace* learning and refers to the achievement of planned learning outcomes that may be both formal and informal (Linehan, 2008). Work-based learning is also defined as 'work as curriculum' within a formal credential framework such as a university award. This includes learning *for* (how to do new or existing things better; vocational), *at* (learning that

takes place in the workplace, work-related training and development), *through* (learning while working), *from* (learning from the experience of working), and *as work* (Brennan, 2007; Brennan & Little, 1996; Houlbrook, 2010). Murphy and O'Donnell (2010) suggest work-based learning continuums within higher education ranging between the curriculum presented as learning outcomes and a negotiated curriculum and learning outcomes, as well as the major or minor role played by WBL (Work-Based Learning) in the curriculum. Similarly, Houlbrook (2010) finds that a framework for WBL considers the proportion of WBL in the total course, the method of assessment, and the degree of student control.

#### **4.1.2 Metaphors of learning**

Work-based learning is associated with two primary metaphors of learning: learning as *acquisition (possession and transfer)* and learning as *participation* (Felstead et al., 2004; Hager, 2000; 2005; 2007) which are underpinned by theories of learning as a product with a visible, identifiable outcome, or learning as a process in which learners improve their work performance, respectively. Elkjaer (2003) also proposes learning as 'inquiry' and Hager (2007) built on the existing metaphors to propose learning as '*construction/re-construction*' and 'productive reflection' in opposition to the assumption that learning is simply attainment from education (Boud, 2004). In adult learning Fenwick and Tennant (2004) offer four perspectives of adult learning: learning as *acquisition*, learning as *reflection*, *practice-based community* lens of learning, and learning as *embodied co-emergent process*. The learning as acquisition metaphor has dominated popular thinking and formal education systems (Fenwick & Tennant, 2004; Hager, 2005). It views learning as substantive and is evident in most educational rhetoric of transfer of learning, acquisition of content, delivery of courses, course offerings, course load, etc. (Hager, 2007). This is evident in the use of qualifications as a proxy for skills (Felstead et al., 2009). Similarly, Illeris (2009) finds that

*assimilative* and *accommodative* learning are the most common forms of everyday learning. Illeris (2009) defines four types of learning: *cumulative* or mechanical learning, *assimilative* or learning by addition, *accommodative* or transcendent learning, and significant/expansive/transitional/ *transformative* learning. Assimilative and accommodative learning are distinguishable on grounds similar to Argyris and Schön's (1996) single and double-loop learning or Ellström's (2001) adaptive-oriented and development-oriented learning (Illeris, 2009). Hase and Kenyon (2000) describe the conceptualisation of double loop learning as testament to a paradigm shift from teacher-centred learning prevalent in traditional approaches to pedagogy and andragogy, to heutagogy. Heutagogy is the study of self-determined learning. These developments of various perspectives on learning are situated against a backdrop of economic and educational reform where work-based learning is described as one educational strategy in this reform (Houlbrook, 2010); and RPL another. Work-based learning is also defined as a form of flexible learning, espoused in lifelong learning rhetoric (Reeve & Gallacher, 1999) or a sub-set of lifelong learning (Houlbrook, 2010).

#### **4.1.3 Individual and social perspectives on learning**

Fenwick (2008) comments on the increasing difficulty to define work and the workplace as conceptions of workplace learning have gone beyond the acquisition metaphor. Understanding learning in work has been taken up as more holistic concepts that view learning as a socially and culturally constructed process with individual and social learning processes intertwined (Usher, 2009). The '*communities of practice*' model as one of the social theories of learning attempts to link the reflecting individual with the active collective in the learning process (Wenger, 2009). Lave and Wenger (2002) displace the traditional

conception of learning that goes on in the mind of the individual learner with a collective process of negotiating meaning within a particular context and community of practice.

The broader social, cultural and political context of the learning process is taken up in postmodern critiques of the individualised and universalised nature of reflection (Cross, 2006; Harrison et al., 2002). This is particularly relevant in discussions of professional collaboration, which is described as group reflection on a common problem rather than individual reflection in groups (Boud, 2006a). In fact Boud and Walker (2002) suggest that reflection is limited if it is conceived in an individualist discourse. There is also the danger of reflection becoming overly instrumental in approach so that it becomes checklist without reference to context or outcomes (Boud, 2006a; Boud & Walker, 2002). Reflection as a part of the learning process has been emphasised by a number of writers from adult and continuing education such as Kolb's (1984) Learning Cycle in which the second stage is "*reflective observation*", or Schön's (1983) "*reflective practitioner*". Boud and Walker (2002) present an overview of the problems with reflection in practice. One of the issues to do with a reliance on reflection in experiential learning and professional development is the fact that reflective activities do not necessarily lead to learning and vice versa (Boud & Walker, 2002). Furthermore, reflection does not fit with the concept of assessment. For example, in many programmes of study a student's reflective skills are assessed in reflective journals which the student may censor because they are conscious of assessment, and thereby fail to engage with their experience. At the same time this reflective writing may be assessed against standards for academic writing rather than reflective writing (Boud & Walker, 2002). There is also the idea that not simply the practice, but also the concept of reflection is limited. This is highlighted by Cross (2006) who found that reflection is constrained by

offering a myriad of variations of only a single idea. It is suggested that refraction, which sends an idea out in new directions, is therefore a richer model of transformation, change and innovation in learning, teaching and professional development. Researchers that focus on the participation and re-/construction (Hager, 2000) metaphor emphasise the transformative potential of workplace learning (Felstead et al., 2004).

The learning as participation metaphor is raised by Billett (2002) in describing learning as participation in social practices, where workplaces and educational institutes are both considered sites of social practices. This social relations view of workplace learning is at odds with the individualisation assumption of the learning as acquisition metaphor which seeks to enhance the transparency and visibility of learning (European Commission, 2001; Felstead et al., 2004). Much of the commentary of workplace learning finds that a great deal of learning is tacit and embedded in action and therefore non-transparent and thereby not recognised (Felstead et al., 2004; Hager, 2004; 2007). Descriptions of workplace learning as *'informal'* or *'unstructured'* are erroneous according to Billett (2002) and emphasise circumstance as opposed to human agency in the processes of learning in work practices that are structured by work experiences. In fact, learning experiences such as those associated with continuity for practice and pathways of learning like apprenticeship are highly structured and formalised, but that structure and formality is according to the community's norms and practices (Billett, 2002). Additionally, privileging learning within educational institutes limits understandings of workplace learning, when workplace learning is, in fact, an outcome of engagement in goal-directed activities that are shaped by work experiences (Billett, 2002).

#### **4.1.4 The nature of knowledge in work-based learning**

Learning is no longer considered an activity that occurs strictly outside of the workplace (Felstead et al., 2004). However, much of the policy-led research on workplace learning takes a human capital stance that draws on the learning as acquisition metaphor. Furthermore this stance assumes that it is possible to delineate learning from work which gives greater attention to deliberative, planned interventions rather than learning activities that arise naturally as part of the work process (Felstead et al., 2004). Tett (2006) highlights the importance of community and informal education where knowledge is not something accumulated, but is collectively used, tested, questioned and produced to make sense of the world and collectively acted upon. The learning as participation metaphor perceives the process and products of learning as indistinguishable and focuses on the way people actually improve their capabilities at work. This improvement is embedded in a particular context and born out of interaction between individuals rather than measured through behavioural outcomes (Felstead et al., 2004). In fact it raises the point of the impermanence of learning outcomes in the absence of practice. This also brings up the question of Mode 1 and Mode 2 knowledge production (Gibbons, 2001) at the interface of academic and working knowledge (Murphy, 2008b). Mode 1 refers to a form of knowledge production that is academic, disciplinary, homogenous, and hierarchical. Mode 2 is knowledge that is carried out in the context of application, it is transdisciplinary, heterogeneous, heterarchical, transient, socially accountable and reflexive, and more temporary and localised (Gibbons, 2001). This classification of knowledge production helps to identify how knowledge in workplaces may need to be considered differently from that of academic institutes (Boud & Solomon, 2000).



Questions of the nature of knowledge produced in WBL, such as explicit and tacit knowledge are raised throughout the commentary on work-based learning. Work-based learning is said to merge theory with practice and is therefore at the intersection of explicit and tacit knowledge (Houlbrook, 2010). It also follows that *work as curriculum* implies a degree of knowledge, skill and competence on the part of the work-based learner which generally accounts for the prevalence of RPL in WBL for access to programmes of study, to avoid repetition of learning, or to recognise the difference in knowledge production through WBL from traditional academic knowledge production (Houlbrook, 2010). This recognition of difference Houlbrook (2010) cites as highlighting the interdisciplinarity and co-production of knowledge in WBL, which is framed by the merging of tacit and explicit knowledge.

Some commentators find the tacit-explicit dichotomy is too simplistic and does not account for all aspects of knowledge in WBL. It is also perceived as unhelpful and even false to suggest that experiential and theoretical knowledge can be separated in this way (Usher, 2009). Furthermore, it may not necessarily be possible to convert explicit and tacit knowledge from one to the other (Tsoukas & Vladimirou, 2001) as suggested by Nonaka (2004). Similarly, Eraut (2007, p.18) stresses the difficulty of capturing tacit knowledge finding that much of what was cited in Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) as examples of tacit to explicit knowledge conversion were in fact examples of making explicit personal knowledge more public. Eraut (2001, as cited in Workman, 2008, p.3) calls informal learning, learning that emerges as a result of relearning due to new knowledge or experience, the outcome of which is tacit knowledge. It is only in practice when a situation requires action that tacit knowledge is uncovered (Workman, 2008). Murray and Hanlon also (2010) acknowledge the “stickiness” or difficulty of knowledge transfer while Murphy and O’Donnell (2010) highlight

the move away from the notion of a transfer to a facilitated model of education. Nonaka (1994) had partially built on the work of Michael Polanyi who had proposed the knowledge continuum between tacit and explicit knowledge, but also invoked the fact that all knowledge had a tacit presupposition, in other words tacit knowledge is not something that can be converted into explicit knowledge (Schütt, 2003; Tsoukas & Vladimirou, 2001). However the tendency is to define tacit knowledge as rooted in action and context and generated in the workplace in contrast to explicit knowledge which is codified in the academic tradition (Houlbrook, 2010). This runs in parallel to the binaries of Mode 1 and Mode 2 knowledge mentioned already, university and industry knowledge, theoretical and experiential knowledge, or declarative and procedural knowledge (Houlbrook, 2010; Raelin, 2008). One of the issues concerning WBL practice is that knowledge production is oriented to public goods (for example, knowledge, collective literacy, and common culture in higher education) and therefore conveys a benefit which can only be social. This does not fit with the dominant discourse of the knowledge economy and raises questions about the impact of a marketised approach in WBL on knowledge production (Houlbrook, 2010).

#### **4.1.5 Human resource development (HRD)**

Providing opportunities for learning in the workplace is increasingly associated with organisational performance and measured as part of HR practice (Clarke, 2004). Therefore assessment of learning in the workplace has taken on an added significance, but it is difficult to capture because of the various ways in which learning is conceptualised, which have raised questions about the nature and purpose of HRD itself. These learning perception debates centre around the same points of contention already mentioned above; whether learning is confined to the individual or embedded within socio-cultural practices, whether learning is formal or informal, and for HRD professionals this extends to whether

assessment of learning is based on measuring learning or measuring performance (Clarke, 2004). Another recent development in the field of HRD is the growth of work-based learning, often in the form of informal learning as opposed to off-the-job formal learning. Increasingly this informal learning is recognised as more relevant to organisational needs. Clarke (2004) therefore suggests that with regard to informal learning the focus of assessment should shift from outcomes to learning conditions or opportunities for informal learning to occur. However, measuring capacity for learning would not be sufficient for an organisation from a performance perspective. Furthermore the central point pertaining to training/learning evaluation in organisations tends to be how to improve instruction rather than demonstrating performance outcomes (Clarke, 2004).

HRD literature tends to uncritically espouse human capital theory on the grounds of power, privilege, and social justice; the pursuit of human development for organisational interests (Fenwick, 2004). The very concept of objectifying humans as resources that can progress in a linear developmental pattern is problematic in itself particularly on ideological grounds with adult learning (Fenwick, 2004). Furthermore, the discourse of organisational effectiveness tends to dominate and overshadow attempts at a more critical approach to HRD (Fenwick, 2004).

The role of human resources in organisational learning literature is limited to a mutually reinforcing relationship between enhanced opportunity for individual development and thereby enhanced organisational capability for competitive advantage (Argyris, 1999). Learning is perceived as unproblematic as discussed above with regard to the development of work-based learning. With the changing nature of work becoming more complex and

challenging, employee development initiatives have moved from formal classroom based training to more informal job-embedded training (Bell & Kozlowski, 2010). This also implies recognition of the complexity of organisational knowledge which becomes embedded in organisations in both explicit and tacit forms (Murray & Hanlon, 2010). There is also the acceptance that the majority of learning in organisations occurs informally and that developmental needs cannot simply be met through formal learning experiences (Tannenbaum, Beard, McNall, & Salas, 2010). However, simply providing employees with “*experience*” does not necessarily entail that learning will be the result (Tannenbaum et al., 2010). Increasingly organisational learning and development literature is expanding concepts of organisations to see them as part of an interdependent and interconnected web of society (Hannum & Kaufman, 2008; Porter & Kramer, 2011). This moves beyond social responsibility towards shared value (Porter & Kramer, 2011). Shared value manifests in a number of ways one of which is employee wellness (rather than cutting employee benefits to reduce costs) to enhance productivity (Porter & Kramer, 2011). Furthermore, related to the notion that significant amounts of learning in organisations are informal is the EU’s endorsement of the learning organisation as part of Lisbon 2010 goals for Europe to become the most competitive knowledge based economy by 2010 (Nyhan, Cressey, Tomassini, Kelleher & Poell, 2004). Organisational learning, a contested topic for some commentators particularly on questions surrounding the way in which learning is considered organisational, could be viewed from either a technical (effective processing, interpretation and response to information) or a social perspective (the way people make sense of their experiences at work ) (Smith, 2001). The technical view is considered akin to Argyris and Schön’s (1996) single- and double-loop learning while Lave and Wenger (2002) would exemplify the social perspective (Smith, 2001). Learning from experience is considered a

factor in all of these processes (Smith, 2001) and it is experiential learning that will be addressed in the next section.

## **4.2 Experiential Learning**

### **4.2.1 Problematising experience**

Postmodern developments in theoretical perspectives such as those outlined by Tennant (2009) and Usher (2009) have advanced the debate on adult learning theory where experiential learning has become central to education in the postmodern era. Experience is not unproblematic as Usher (2009) discusses in his pedagogical mapping of experiential learning which is structured around four discursive or material practices: *Lifestyle*, *vocational*, *confessional* and *critical*. Experiential learning is explored against the context of the meaning of experience and learning in the four discourses. For example, lifestyle practices posit learning as experience gained through consumption and novelty; empowerment through self-actualisation, but learners in this sense are both active subjects in creating themselves and also passive subjects of repression who may be excluded because of poverty or marginalisation, which limits choice in a consumer society (Usher, 2009). Vocational discourse stresses the need for motivation and becoming skilled by foregrounding continuous learning, social skills, and flexible competences. This is relevant to discussions of disciplinary power in the workplace which imposes, through education or teaching, an appropriate subjectivity on individuals that will make them actively economically productive (Usher, 1999). However, this power is not coercive and is described as self-surveillance where individuals actively regulate themselves and align their objectives with that of the organisation (Usher, 1999). Making work more subjectively meaningful and thereby a source of identity blurs the boundaries between work and non-work aspirations and identities (Usher, 1999). Therefore experiential learning is not

necessarily discipline free. Yet, the contradiction lies in the potential of experiential learning to unsettle the established power of academia while also having a domesticating effect because assessment and accreditation procedures can still only legitimate and value certain forms of experience against centrally formulated outcomes. This raises questions about the market for educational credit and the commodification of experiences.

The commodification of experience is raised by Fenwick (2006) who argues that experience is rooted in social discourse, which determines what is interpreted and how, and therefore reflection is always distorted. As such, experience is translated into a tradable commodity which prioritises only that which is useful on the market (Fenwick, 2006). A remedy to the commodification critique is from the context of community and informal learning settings where meaning is attached to shared experiences and common understandings with others. This therefore places the learner as the subject of learning rather than an object being acted upon by educational interventions (Tett, 2006).

Usher (1999) distinguishes between learning from experience and experiential learning. The former is characterised as experience as learning and the latter as part of a discourse that (re)constructs experience from which knowledge can be extracted. The meaning and significance of experience is however dependent on how it is interpreted and '*managed*' which involves the university, the organisation, and the learner (Usher, 1999). Experiential learning is one form of expressing informal learning and is relevant to workplace learning, which is recognised as embedded in work action (McGivney, 2006). One of the issues generally raised around experiential learning is the esteem placed on formal subject and disciplinary learning over experiential learning, particularly at a policy level and currently,

despite up-skilling objectives (McGivney, 2006). This issue of esteem is evident in concerns over assessment where experiential learning has erroneously been perceived as being quicker and easier than attending a programme of study (Pokorny, 2009). Therefore the APEL (Accreditation of prior experiential learning) process was careful to address many of these problems.

#### **4.2.2 Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL)**

A general definition of the accreditation of prior learning (APEL) is that it describes a process whereby experiential or uncertificated learning is recognised and given academic credit, although many definitions of the term encompass both prior *certificated* and *experiential* learning (Hemsworth, 2007). APEL is a widely used academic process in the United States (Prior Learning Assessment), Canada (Prior Learning Assessment & Recognition), in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa (Recognition of Prior Learning), and the Netherlands (Accreditation of Prior Learning).

For many authors APEL is rooted in adult learning where opportunities for empowerment mean the possibility of personal and professional development in a student-centred environment and a focus on an individual's experience and learning in a non-competitive setting (Merrill & Hill, 2003). APEL is said to challenge long-held assumptions about knowledge and traditional ways of teaching and learning by advocating life and work experience as valid knowledge (Merill & Hill, 2003). Furthermore it is suggested to bridge the gap between formal and informal learning by breaking down the boundaries and hierarchy between the two (Merill & Hill, 2003). Harris (2006b) provides an interesting discussion of RPL in relation to hierarchical and horizontal knowledge structures where in practice often it is the hierarchical structure that is utilised because the language of the

subject can be recognised and realised more readily for learners. This occurs despite the presence of APEL because it is the language of the academic programme that dominates. APEL is also associated with drives for flexibility, social inclusion, widening access, and lifelong learning as well as worker mobility (Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning [CRL], 2002).

#### ***4.2.2.1 Public and private learning***

On a more practical level, APEL is referred to within the context of work-based learning as a factor in demand-led employer based programmes that encompass activities to recognise and value knowledge and skills that are developed in the workplace, as well as activities to build on workplace learning and develop new learning (Brennan, 2007). Here APEL is perceived as useful to accredit individual knowledge and skills developed in the workplace. There is particular potential for APEL for developmental purposes in work-based learning programmes that are negotiated with either the individual or the organisation (Andresen, Boud & Cohen, 2000; Brennan, 2007). Furthermore APEL is at the heart of learning *through* work where learning derived from the experience of doing a job of work is evidenced and assessed and can thereby provide access to higher education or act as a starting point for continuing education and professional development (Brennan & Little, 1996). However, at issue is whether and how learning is evidenced and assessed (Brennan & Little, 1996). Here the questions of what it means to be qualified, how to translate experiential learning to a public discourse (usually that of academia), and under-valuing experience because it may not be relevant to higher education are raised (Brennan & Little, 1996). The point of translating individual experience to public discourse with APEL has initiated debate regarding the paradox between the private experience and the learning that is brought under public scrutiny according to an institutional public discourse. In other words local



knowledge must be individualised and expressed with institutional vocabulary (Fenwick, 2006). For some, APEL is considered part of a formalisation of learning which therefore changes the nature of non-formal or informal learning. This formalisation may run counter to the intentions of introducing APEL in the first place and therefore raises questions about the potential for unequal power relations in learning with APEL (Colley, Hodkinson, & Malcolm, 2003).

#### ***4.2.2.2 Hybrid discourses of APEL***

Murphy (2004; Harris, 2006b; Whittaker, 2008) commented on the difficulty of translating experiential learning across undergraduate programmes possibly because of tighter curricular designs. Also postgraduate programmes are focused on specialist knowledge and skill, they therefore foreground practice even in theoretical work, and they use the idea of a reflective practitioner (Harris, 2006b). Furthermore, while the APEL process might be located within a programme that is learner-centred the fact that claims must be devised to fit an academic template restricts the value of learning (Workman, 2008). This highlights what Harris (2000) calls the hybrid discourses of APEL where practices such as authentic assessment and transparency suggest a situated view of learning while the process itself is seen in constructivist terms with active learners.

The implementation of APEL processes have also raised question of authenticity, currency and sufficiency of evidence in assessment (Brennan & Little, 1996). It was also clear in the early days of APEL that turning the rhetoric of recognising prior learning into practice in a higher education institution was not an easy matter. Two primary approaches to APEL were adopted in higher education in the United Kingdom: the 'credit-exchange' model where prior experiential learning is matched against formal learning criteria; and the

'developmental' model where credit is awarded for knowledge and skills arising from experience as well as how that learning informs work practice (Brennan & Little, 1996).

#### **4.2.2.3 APEL binaries**

A point about the distinctions between education and learning and qualifications and accreditation merits mention here. Education provides a public recognition through the award of credits or qualifications for the learning it provides, but learning is ultimately a private activity (Davies, 2000). Also, a qualification has a status and currency that is distinct from that of accreditation because the latter leads to a qualification (Davies, 2000). Similarly, Lennon (1999) distinguishes between the accreditation process, which quality assures the practices and standards of educational and training provision, and the certification process which acknowledges with physical evidence that a learner has achieved a set of learning outcomes to a particular level.

Outcomes-based systems are said to separate learning from certification, in other words to distinguish between the processes of teaching and learning, on the one hand, and certification, on the other (Wheelahan, 2003). However, the point that learning is far more complex than a simple input-output model suggests that learning outcomes cannot be as rich as the learning process itself and it is not necessarily possible to de-contextualise learning from the context in which it was acquired. Furthermore, qualifying is also a process, not just an outcome and therefore whether one can separate the processes of teaching and learning from those of certification are uncertain (Wheelahan, 2003).

According to Evans (2006) APEL variously refers to validation, assessment, accreditation and certification of prior and experiential learning. In Ireland this was referred to as APL

(Accreditation of Prior Learning), but today the term RPL (Recognition of Prior Learning) is generally used (Evans, 2006). In Scotland a change from APEL to RPL was noted as the result of national debates on RPL in 2004 (Whittaker, 2008). Primarily this was because there was far more evidence that prior experiential learning was being recognised and acknowledged for access or advanced standing in academic programmes, but rarely was it formally accredited (CRL, 2002). The change in rhetoric to RPL is perhaps evidence of a willingness to think of experiential learning in terms of credit and awards rather than skills and competencies (Murphy, 2004). In Canada, the term RPL is used to encompass three fields of assessment and recognition: credential assessment, credit transfer and prior learning assessment and recognition (Prior Learning Assessment [PLA] Centre, 2008). Cox and Green (2001) found that APEL had run its course because it was associated with more barriers, particularly conceptual ones, than benefits. According to Gallacher and Feutrie (2003) RPL is a preferable term because APEL suggests a re-shaping of learning to fit the criteria of the academy and therefore learning is no longer recognised for its intrinsic worth. RPL, on the other hand, is to recognise learning in which people have engaged rather than re-shaping it to fit a requirement (Gallacher & Feutrie, 2003).

#### **4.2.3 Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)**

The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) defines the recognition of prior learning (RPL) as:

*Recognition is a process by which prior learning is given a value. It is a means by which prior learning is formally identified, assessed and acknowledged. This makes it possible for an individual to build on learning achieved and be formally rewarded for it. The term 'prior learning' is 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 (National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, 2005, p.2).*

Furthermore RPL is considered to encompass all forms of prior learning including: APEL, APL, APCL (Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning), APL & A (Accreditation of Prior Learning & Achievement), RCC (Recognition of Current Competencies), and LOFT (Learning Outside Formal Teaching) (NQAI, 2005). However it is made clear that RPL is concerned with giving recognition for learning and not experience alone (Schutz, 2009; Whittaker, 2008).

#### ***4.2.3.1 Purpose of RPL***

As already mentioned 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 or those for credit exchange; primarily it is the latter model that receives most attention, especially within the context of higher education. Whittaker (2008) similarly describes RPL for personal and career development (formative recognition) and RPL for credit (summative recognition). Formative recognition aims at building learner confidence and looking at ways that skills and knowledge can be built on to support further learning and development (Whittaker, 2008). The developmental model of RPL is recommended as a means to reconceptualise ideas around social inclusion, participation and equity within RPL (Cameron, 2006). This entails an RPL model that is not limited by a focus on assessment and credit-exchange. The credit-exchange model of RPL assumes applicants have levels of literacy relevant to the production of academic texts, are familiar with formal learning systems and can translate their life and work experience to codified formal knowledge (Cameron, 2006). In other words RPL assumes applicants have the necessary cultural capital to succeed with an RPL claim (Cameron & Miller, 2004). It also places greater value on knowledge acquired formally and is not necessarily viable for people who are economically vulnerable or disengaged from formal learning (Cameron, 2006).

RPL is aligned to what Harris (2006a, p. 178) calls “(often) competing social projects” with the aim of:

- Widening participation in higher education
- Influencing traditional curricular practices in favour of greater flexibility and learner-centeredness
- Bringing about closer links between the worlds of work and higher education to increase individual employability, national skill profiles and economic competitiveness.

Cameron and Miller (2004) found that RPL had already failed to encourage under-represented and disadvantaged groups to access formal education and training. RPL tends to be utilised by those already with experience and success of education and training (Cameron & Miller, 2004; Wheelahan, Miller & Newton, 2003). Additionally the failure of RPL to act as a mechanism for social inclusion is also a result of the focus on outcomes rather than process in RPL as well as the extent to which RPL is mediated by exclusionary processes from formal education and training (Wheelahan et al., 2003). In the case of immigrants in Sweden Andersson (2008) found that validation procedures were often expressions of the tensions between the aims of social justice to integrate immigrants and the aims of economic development to supply labour to the labour market. As such professional recognition of immigrants was concentrated in workforce sectors that were lacking competence (Andersson, 2008).

#### ***4.2.3.2 Benefits of RPL***

Hargreaves (2006) finds that despite the challenges of RPL, as mentioned above, there is also evidence that there are significant benefits, especially as a result of the diversity of RPL practices occurring throughout education and training systems. RPL is a diverse practice and can take the form of a basic assessment process all the way through to a reflective process impacting on the nature of learning itself (Hargreaves, 2006). In certain instances in the

vocational sector recognition takes place after the commencement of the education/training programme when it becomes evident that the individual has the required knowledge and skills and can therefore accelerate through the programme (Hargreaves, 2006). These practices occur informally and are therefore not necessarily recorded which raises the question of how much RPL is actually occurring as opposed to that recorded in official statistics (Hargreaves, 2006). The recognition of current competence (RCC) is also considered a manifestation of RPL but it occurs in the context of reassessing competence to ensure that it has been maintained, therefore no additional knowledge or skill is recognised (Hargreaves, 2006). The information gained through the RPL process itself is also advantageous for students and employers. Such information includes insights into what the individual already knows and how they learn best and therefore how best to use their existing knowledge, skill and experience in the workplace (Smith, 2004).

It was seen that RPL, while accepted in theory by higher education, was lacking in practice, instigating many accounts of the failure of RPL as mentioned above because of higher education's inability to recognise legitimate learning from outside of the formal context. Pitman (2009) suggests that the situation has changed and that the profile of RPL in Australian universities has increased significantly. It appears that traditional questions over inferior learning through RPL, 'graduateness', and adverse effects on educational standards have begun to be overcome both conceptually and procedurally (Pitman, 2009).

#### ***4.2.3.3 Relevance of RPL***

RPL, already mentioned above, is a significant component of skills upgrading initiatives tied to sustainable economic growth (Whittaker, 2009a). This is evident in the recent publication by the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (2011) in Ireland entitled "*Developing*

*Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in the context of the National Skills Strategy Upskilling Objectives*". The report also suggests the relevance of RPL for reducing unemployment by recognising and valuing people's skills and providing relevant and flexible education and training that meets individual and enterprise needs by using resources effectively and avoiding duplication of training (Expert Group on Future Skills Needs [EGFSN], 2011). RPL for employers is also considered relevant for use in recruitment processes to identify skills and to effectively target resources for employee learning and development (Whittaker, 2009a).

At an individual level the transformative potential of RPL is said to increase a learner's self-confidence and motivation to go on to further learning and development by shaping their identity as a learner (Merrill & Hill, 2003; Whittaker, 2009a; 2009b). It has also been found to impact on an individual's practice in the workplace as they grow in confidence (Whittaker, 2009b). In the United States research has shown that prior learning assessment (PLA) for students who complete a PLA portfolio is positively associated with persistence (propensity to complete a programme of study) and cognitive transformation (ability to solve problems at a higher complexity than those in class-room based courses) (Travers, 2009). In Canada PLAR (Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition) is thought to help workers to adjust to career transitions and labour market dislocation (PLA Centre, 2008).

Harris (2006a) presents an analysis of an RPL pilot project for a post-graduate diploma for adult educators in South Africa in which the transformative potential of RPL was found to be distinctly lacking. The fact that the diploma incorporated RPL meant that it impacted on 'distributive rules' by increasing access to the diploma, but it did not alter the pedagogic

discourse of the diploma as knowledge that was not within its curricular boundaries was not accepted (Harris, 2006a). This example highlights the RPL rhetoric in the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) which perceives RPL as supporting the transformation of the education and training system by addressing the visible and invisible barriers to learning and assessment (South African Qualifications Authority [SAQA], 2004). However, in the Harris (2006a) case it was found that achieving transformative, curricular change was caught between the competing transformative projects of the diploma to instigate social reconstruction through adult educators and that of RPL to value and recognise professional prior learning based on experience.

#### ***4.2.3.4 RPL Conceptual assumptions***

Conceptual discussions of RPL comment on the assumptions behind the RPL pedagogic discourse. The first assumption is that there is an unproblematic translation of experience into formal knowledge (Harris, 2006a). This relates to issues of knowledge boundaries and transfer (Harris, 2006b). In other words, boundaries between different types of knowledge (experiential and formal) are soft and therefore transfer of knowledge between contexts is unproblematic. The second assumption theorises RPL within the confines of experiential learning theory to address issues of knowledge and power (Harris, 2006a) or even that experiential learning theory can provide RPL with a theory of knowledge (Harris, 2006b). In practical terms these assumptions do not address the fact that RPL candidates operate in a particular curricular context and discourse and it is important that they are aware of the logic behind a particular programme of study in higher education (Harris, 2006b). Peters (2006) comments on the RPL paradox whereby candidates are upsetting the status quo by wanting their learning gained outside formal education recognised while also buying into the educational hierarchy to have their learning recognised. She finds RPL to be in a three-



sided conflict: to have unvalued knowledge recognised, to open up traditional disciplines, and to argue against the role of vocationalism in dumbing down knowledge (Peters, 2006).

Shalem and Steinberg (2006) focus on the assessment process of RPL where the assessor must consider *retrospectively* the candidate's demonstration of competence that has already been acquired and *prospectively* the candidate's readiness to enter a programme of study. The former retrospective action is geared towards social interests and a plurality of knowledge and assessment and pays less attention to disciplinary knowledge and assessment methods. However, the latter prospective process relies on specialised knowledge, which regulates the assessment and value of practice (Shalem & Steinberg, 2006). This raises the subject of the invisible pedagogy (the denial of knowledge specialisation to candidates but the use of specialised criteria in assessment) that impacts on candidates as they move from a vocational discourse (knowledge from experience) to a scholastic discourse (knowledge separated from experience). Therefore there is a university assessment discourse that controls what is accepted as valid knowledge (Peters, 2006). The use of learning outcomes, as will be discussed below, is also raised by Peters (2006) citing the difficulty of RPL candidates to express their experience as learning outcomes, particularly when they are unfamiliar with the discourse of learning outcomes.

There is also the question of 'graduateness' and RPL raised by Wheelahan (2003) where students who achieved part or a whole qualification through RPL lacked something that other graduates had. Therefore, while an individual may have achieved the learning outcomes for a qualification there is something lacking to bring it all together (Wheelahan, 2003). This raises the question of learning outcomes and whether they encompass the

attributes as opposed to simply skills sought. This raises questions of the logic behind which a curriculum operates and how to make that explicit for gradueness (Harris, 2006b). Furthermore the over-specification of learning outcomes narrows learning and therefore creates a difference between those who have a qualification through RPL and those who do not (Wheelahan, 2003).

In European rhetoric particularly, RPL is not the usual terminology used, rather it is a matter of recognition and validation as opposed to accreditation and assessment as well as informal and non-formal learning in place of prior learning (Davies, 2006). This implies a different purpose, policy and practice to that of APEL, which will be discussed below.

### **4.3 Informal and non-formal learning for lifelong learning**

Contemporary discourses of lifelong learning are loosening the boundaries around learning where there now *“seems to be no aspect of human experience that does not lend itself to appropriation as a pedagogical project”* (Harrison, Reeves, Hanson & Clarke, 2002, p.1).

Learning has come to inhabit both lifelong (throughout the life course) and life-wide (throughout all aspects of the life experience) perceptions of learning (Cedefop, 2008b; Harrison et al., 2002). Lifelong learning appears to be taking form along two strands of lifelong learning for: a knowledge-based society to facilitate employability, social inclusion, and economic growth; and personal growth supported by learning pathways (Ni Mhaolrúnaigh, 2003).

#### **4.3.1 Lifelong learning agenda**

European Union policies from the Bologna Declaration (1999) to promote mobility and transparency in higher education to the Lisbon 2010 (2000) goals to increase participation in

higher education, of which lifelong learning was a core ambition, aimed to widen access and flexibility of routes to education and have set the course firmly for informal and non-formal learning. Similarly, an interest in learning at work is being seen in national and international policy debates such as the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) "*Decent Work Agenda*" (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2011), Eurofound's (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions) report on the quality of work in Europe (Eurofound, 2002) and their report on "*Preparing for the Upswing: training and qualifications during the crisis*" (Eurofound, 2011). While much of the research work on the subject of work and learning aims to conceptualise the phenomenon, policy-makers have assumed that learning is beneficial for all stakeholders. Coupled with the fact that the labour force may be out of reach of formal education, and the fears of an ageing workforce, lifelong learning has been placed high on policy agendas (Felstead, Fuller, Jewson, & Unwin, 2009). However, it may not always apply that more learning is beneficial or better in the business case as the economic rationale for formal learning or training may not be evident to employees or their employers (Felstead et al., 2009). For example employees may be fully proficient in their job and there would be no additional business benefit to staff going on training from the employers' perspective (Felstead et al., 2009). Furthermore, Felstead et al. (2004) found that less formal activities such as doing the job itself had a greater perceived impact on employees' improved work performance than participation in training programmes or acquiring qualifications. In addition, learning could be considered as coercive rather than wholly positive when it is contextualised within the power relations of the workplace (Malcolm & Zukas, 2006).

It is also the case that RPL may not always be the best option as individuals may prefer to participate in training for the learning experience and social interaction (Hargreaves, 2006). It is considered insurance for employers if their employees have attended training. Furthermore skills can become redundant quickly in sectors with changing knowledge and skill demands and therefore education/training rather than RPL is more appropriate (Hargreaves, 2006).

#### **4.3.2 Validation of informal and non-formal learning (VINFL)**

The term *validation* is defined as the process of identifying, assessing and recognising a wide range of skills and competencies, which people develop through their lives in different contexts (Singh, 2008). Identification and validation of informal and non-formal learning (VINFL) are the terms used in European policy rhetoric while the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) has maintained '*recognition*' (Werquin, 2008; 2010). The identification of non-formal and informal learning is about recording and making visible an individual's learning outcomes (Cedefop, 2009c). Validation in European terms involves the assessment of learning outcomes which may result in certification (Cedefop, 2009c). The validation of learning outcomes concerns the confirmation that learning outcomes acquired by an individual have been assessed against set criteria and are deemed to comply with the requirements by a competent body (Cedefop, 2009c).

#### **4.3.3 Recognition of non-formal and informal learning (RNFIL)**

Recognition, for the OECD, is used in the sense of, acknowledging that learning has taken place, the recognition of learning outcomes which is the result of an assessment process, and social recognition of learning (Werquin, 2008). The recognition of learning outcomes concerns agreed standards and levels and communicates acquired knowledge, skills and competences (Werquin, 2008). As social recognition is essential to appropriating value to

informal and non-formal learning the term recognition seems more appropriate than validation or accreditation, which refer to technical aspects (Werquin, 2008).

#### **4.3.4 Research in non-formal and informal learning**

The view just five years ago was that informal learning was attractive to researchers, but it was difficult to study because it is hard to identify. One reason for this is that learning was not necessarily the primary reason for engaging in an activity, and such learning was usually unplanned, incidental, or not recognised as learning (McGivney, 2006). Much of this was tied to narrow definitions of what learning actually was (Felstead et al., 2004; McGivney, 2006). Rephrasing using terms such as knowledge, skills, and understanding tends to elicit a broader view of conceptions of learning. Eraut (2007) argues that if learning is defined as a change in a person's capabilities or understanding then it includes more than formal accredited learning. Fenwick (2006) advocates an *embodied* experiential learning that is informed by complexity science, which is learning occurring within action and bodies and therefore subject to systems of culture, history and social relations in which everyday bodies and lives are enacted rather than learning as a product of experience.

By 2010 (Werquin, 2010a) ideas recognising that non-formal and informal learning outcomes were essential to make human capital more visible and therefore more valuable prevailed. The logic is that by making individual's competences visible it should be more cost and time efficient for workers and employers to match skills to jobs. In addition to economic benefits there are also educational, social and psychological benefits associated with recognition (Werquin, 2010a). Much of the literature on informal and non-formal learning (RNFIL) is focused on listing the potential benefits of investing in procedures for the validation of informal and non-formal learning without qualifying how these might be best

achieved. Instead there is a focus on technical aspects of, for example, the distinction between the recognition of learning outcomes and the recognition of learning where the latter does not indicate whether the learning can lead to a qualification as it does not yet relate to any corresponding outcomes (Werquin, 2010a). It is more a recognition that legitimate learning can occur outside of the formal setting. The former refers to specific learning outcomes, recognising that knowledge, skills and competences have been acquired to publicly recognised standards (Werquin, 2010a). There is an acceptance that RNFIL generates gains, prefacing any such gains with modal phrases where recognition might result in economic benefits to the individual such as shorter and more effective training periods thereby saving time and money, and may enable foreigners to have their knowledge, skills and competence recognised (Equal, 2005). For employers the benefits of recognition would come from closer ties between the world of learning and the labour market generating greater levels of employee productivity, and techniques for recruitment and work organisation as a result of understanding individuals' knowledge, skills and competences made visible through recognition (Werquin, 2010a). For learning providers many are exploring the possibility of using recognition to attract non-traditional students and diversify their student intake. For trade unions the possibility of their members achieving qualifications could have direct benefits in terms of increased wages (Werquin, 2010a). For governments recognition appears to offer the potential to develop human capital for economic growth and social participation as well as to address work sectors where there may be shortages of qualified workers (Werquin, 2010a).

#### **4.3.5 Non-formal and informal learning policy focus**

Policy-makers at European and international levels have tended to focus on overcoming obstacles to VINFL/RNFIL at a technical level such as how to deal with the entrance of new

stakeholders to the formal learning system, assessment methods, standards against which learning outcomes are measured, cost, and take-up (Werquin, 2008). Concerns over assessment relate to the social acceptance of qualifications gained through the recognition of non-formal and informal learning and the potential to undermine formal education (Werquin, 2010a). Murphy (2010b) finds that RPL systems trying to mimic formal codified systems exacerbate perceptions that experiential learning outcomes need more rigorous assessment. The issue of the cost of recognition is raised by many commentators (Cedefop, 2008b; Davidson & Nevala, 2007; Smith, 2004; Werquin, 2008; 2010) as RNFIL is an individualised process although examples such as in the OMNA project attempted to achieve economies of scale through group APEL (OMNA-DIT/NOW, 2000). There are various procedures in place for monetary costs of recognition to the individual or the employing organisation such as a flat rate per learner or per hour of contact time, per portfolio, per module in a programme of study or the cost is absorbed in the price of the programme of study. This raises issues of the legitimacy of the recognition of non-formal and informal learning over formal learning because recognition of certificated learning for exemptions does not generally carry a cost. Another issue is the lack of awareness of RNFIL and how to access it which is associated with its low-take up in many countries (Smith & Clayton, 2009; Werquin, 2008;). Issue of low take-up are related to the perception of complexity in RPL which is a disincentive for students and also providers who must first interpret the often-jargon filled supporting information (Smith, 2004). There is also little robust data on recognition systems, as well as the benefits that accrue to individuals from participation in recognition processes. Even where there are centralised systems for recording all credits they do not differentiate between those gained through formal or informal means (Dyson &

Keating, 2005). The benefits are often intrinsic to the individuals and therefore tend to go unnoticed in any analysis (Smith & Clayton, 2009; Werquin, 2008).

#### **4.3.6 Defining formal, non-formal and informal learning**

European policy for lifelong learning distinguishes between the terms 'formal', 'non-formal', and 'informal' learning, but the distinction between informal and non-formal learning is not made entirely clear (Colley, Hodkinson & Malcolm, 2006). Informal learning is defined as unstructured learning resulting from daily activities; it would generally not lead to a qualification (European Commission, 2001). Non-formal learning is defined as structured learning that may be intentional, but is generally unintentional and neither certified nor recognised (European Commission, 2001). Bjørnavåld (2000) describes non-formal learning as encompassing informal learning. The least contentious term, *formal* learning, is defined as intentional and structured leading to a qualification (European Commission, 2001). Werquin (2008) suggests distinguishing these forms of learning according to three characteristics, whether the learning involves objectives, whether it is intentional and whether it leads to a qualification. This research study uses the definitions provided by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (2005, p.3) which defines:

1. **formal learning** which takes place through programmes of study or training that are delivered by education or training providers, and which attract awards.
2. **non-formal learning** that takes place alongside the mainstream systems of education and training. It may be assessed but does not normally lead to formal certification. Examples of non-formal learning are: learning and training activities undertaken in the workplace, voluntary sector or trade union and in community-based learning.
3. **informal learning** that takes place through life and work experience. (And is sometimes referred to as experiential learning.) Often, it is learning that is unintentional and the learner may not recognise at the time of the experience that it contributed to his or her knowledge, skills and competences.

Billett (2002) has argued, as already mentioned, that it is incorrect to describe and categorise learning as either informal or formal as this represents a misunderstanding of the



nature of learning. Colley et al. (2003; 2006) suggest using *attributes* of formality and informality of learning instead because it is not possible to define separate ideal informal or non-formal learning situations. Engeström's (2009) expansive learning approach similarly transcends a focus on the merging of formal, informal, experiential, reflective, tacit and self-directed learning, which is perceived as unhelpful to research, to espouse a sideways or horizontal learning.

#### **4.3.7 Discourses of non-formal and informal learning**

Singh (2008) finds that *recognition of prior learning* (RPL) is short hand for *non-formal education* and *informal prior learning*. The term '*non-formal education*' came into use through a UNESCO report in 1947 on the underdeveloped world. Subsequent developments in the use of the term have emerged from theories of international development with moves to expand non-formal *learning* on principles of economic growth and social justice (Colley et al., 2006). Non-formal learning as distinct from non-formal education is considered an individualised and depoliticised approach to learning, where learners can take control of their own learning outside of formal institutes (Colley et al., 2006). However, economic, social and cultural capitals still determine the level of access to learning, afforded on the basis of the resources an individual holds. Additionally, learning is conceived of as an individual deficit remedied by skills development (Tett, 2006). Neo-liberal development theories instigated moves to codify and formalise what had previously been non-formal, particularly vocational training through the introduction of competency-based assessment and qualifications (Colley et al., 2006). The growth of the audit society saw the rise of another discourse of informal learning to achieve social cohesion and economic competitiveness, and to make non-formal learning visible; from an educational to a work-oriented perspective on learning (Boud, 2006b). Bjørnavåld (2000: 29) argues that

competencies (the results of learning processes) *“have to be made visible if they are to be fully integrated into such a broader strategy for knowledge reproduction and renewal”*. However, this visibility and classification of learning also reveals the dominant power structures that construct and constrain learning and over-simplify it (Colley et al., 2006). Boud (2006b) criticises the *‘learning as visible’* discourse which takes the form of recognition of prior learning or competency demonstration and focuses on measurement of skills rather than learning and development. The focus on formalising learning can distract from what is actually being learned in particular contexts by using education through the discourse of lifelong learning to colonise the worlds of work, life and community (Boud, 2006b).

#### **4.3.8 Problematising of non-formal and informal learning**

Problematising distinctions between formal and informal learning draws attention to the potential drawbacks of informal learning, particularly in the workplace. These include the potential for informal learning to be too narrowly based, bad habits or wrong lessons may be learned and the difficulty to accredit formal qualifications (Lee, Fuller, Ashton, Butler, Felstead, Unwin & Walters, 2004). There is also the fact that with informal and non-formal learning the output process is visible and open to quality assurance rather than the input, as in formal learning (Werquin, 2008). Therefore knowledge, skills or competence are not *‘created’* through the validation of informal and non-formal learning, but there is much comment that recognition procedures could act as learning processes themselves (Werquin, 2008). Questions of power and control also emerge as who defines what counts as valid knowledge with regard to informal and non-formal learning. Singh (2008) finds that the importance given to the term validation in European policy on informal and non-formal learning is testament to the emphasis placed on what counts as valid knowledge as opposed to the site of that knowledge production or the learning itself. However as Andresen, Boud

and Cohen (2000) found with experience-based learning was the difficulty to determine learning outcomes for an individual's personal experience. This is exacerbated with work-based learning where the curriculum is negotiated and the study takes place outside of the accrediting institute (Andresen, Boud, & Cohen, 2000).

#### **4.3.9 Competence and learning outcomes**

Lifelong learning underpins human capital approaches to learning that include competency-based learning, which extends to the notion of experience-based learning, both of which tend to be framed within work-based learning (WBL). Competence is advocated in work-based learning and vocational education and training (VET) for clarity purposes as well as for a relative certainty and transparency of standards or criteria to be achieved (Coughlan, 2007). Newton (1994) concluded that APL could only advance within the context of competence-based education which properly addresses individual and industry needs. Academic objections to competence concern reductionism, a propensity towards behavioural models of teaching and learning, and an over-simplistic approach to complex phenomena (Coughlan, 2007). The trend towards competence in VET is seen in both national and international contexts and generally takes one of three approaches: behaviourist, generic, and cognitive (Mulder, Weigel, & Collins, 2006). For example, the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) takes a generic approach to competence through the attainment of key competencies. The ECVET (European Credit system for VET) uses the EQF-LLL (European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning) for reference levels described as learning outcomes comprising knowledge, skills and competence, which take the form of cognitive competence, functional competence, and social competence respectively (Mulder et al., 2006). Furthermore the Tuning Project, within the context of the Bologna Process, to develop key learning outcomes and

competences for degree programmes in Europe, uses subject specific and generic competences (instrumental, interpersonal, and systemic) as well as learning outcomes (Tuning Project, 2004). Hager (2004) is critical of competence in VET because it incorrectly views learning as a product and reifies transparent learning - explicit statements of competence or propositional knowledge. He further argues that precision is only possible in expressing performance and its outcomes, but not for the components of competence (capabilities, abilities, skills) as these are individual attributes (Hager, 2004). However, performance and outcomes are often incorrectly equated with skills and capability which assumes that if precise specifications for performance and outcomes can be given then it is also possible to do the same for skills and capability (Hager, 2004). Therefore competency standards are taken as specifications for knowledge and skills rather than as performance descriptors. Additionally the belief that performance descriptors (or competency standards) are comprehensive is also mistaken because they are only verbal descriptions that cannot capture the full wealth of the described performance (Hager, 2004). Furthermore, Hager (2004) also makes the distinction between learning outcomes (as mini-stages of a curriculum) and performance outcomes (outcomes of a course or workplace). Hager (2006 as cited in Mulder et al., 2006, p.74) states that the Tuning project learning outcomes are more akin to performance outcomes and by equating learning outcomes with competences that can be precisely stated implies a false objectivity of competence. Peters (2006) critiques learning outcomes through critical discourse analysis finding that they form part of a discourse that controls the recognition of knowledge from outside of the academy.

The question of learning outcomes was also problematic with regard to ECTS (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System) when credits were based on workload ie. input

rather than output measures, but this is changing as learning outcomes become the norm in higher education curricula (Adam, 2006). A good example of RPL and credit working in harmony is the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) which uses qualification levels and credit points. Each of the twelve levels is described according to level descriptors that cover five main areas or general outcomes of learning. The credit points are then used to quantify the learning outcomes. They relate to time to complete a qualification or learning programme. RPL can be used to achieve credit points, or summative recognition against the outcomes of a qualification or learning programme (SCQF Partnership, 2010). In the United Kingdom, on the other hand, Workman (2008) found that for work-based learning, describing credit volume was value laden as academic values determine academic credit and the focus is on learning outputs rather than the process which does not favour the claimant. In contrast, Cedefop (2009c) state that a focus on input-based standards presents serious obstacles to the validation of non-formal and informal learning (VINFL) as it restricts the breadth of relevant learning pathways and experiences.

Despite disagreements on the technologies of validation, VINFL is now a policy priority to become established as a normal route to a qualification and ultimately to facilitate lifelong learning (Harris, 2009). The distinctions between the processes of identification and assessment, on the one hand, corresponding to formative assessment, and, on the other hand, the process of recognition corresponding to summative assessment (Cedefop, 2009c) are at the centre of technical arrangements to link VINFL to national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). NQFs and the EQF will be discussed in detail in Chapter Five.

## **4.4 Chapter Summary**

This chapter has attempted to balance the RPL policy focus on technicalities, procedures, and systems with the concerns of academics on conceptual and theoretical frameworks for RPL. The first section, on work-based learning, synthesised theories of learning and knowledge in the workplace to lead to a discussion that problematised experiential learning in the educational sector as well as the labour market. APEL and RPL were addressed within the bounds of experiential learning to illustrate the connections between conceptual assumptions that have both helped and hindered the advance of RPL theoretically and practically. This includes the difficulty of reconciling public and private constructions of learning. The idea of public and private learning appears again when looking at non-formal and informal learning within the context of lifelong learning. The technologies of learning outcomes and qualifications systems are at the centre of definitions and discourses that inform conceptions of formal, non-formal and informal learning. The next chapter will address the prevailing policy discourses surrounding RPL.

# *Chapter Five*

## **Interacting Policy Discourses**

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### **5.1 Introduction**

Foucault described discourse as a system of representation concerning the rules and practices that produce meaningful statements. It provides a language for talking about a particular topic at a particular moment in time and governs the way it can be meaningfully talked and reasoned about (Hall, 1997). This chapter attempts to address the rich complexity of the RPL policy context and its interacting policy discourses by setting out the drivers and assumptions that are at play. There are a lot of different themes interacting which are related but still distinctive - social inclusion, mobility, economic regeneration, organisational development, personal development, self actualisation, managing the economic crisis, workforce skills agendas, professional and sectoral knowledge, to name a few.

This chapter will provide an overview of these thematic developments within the context of Global, European, national, and local RPL policies as outlined in Table 5.1 below. A definition of organisational/policy body acronyms used in Table 5.1 can be found in the glossary of terms. RPL policy development has been increasingly subsumed within global and neo-liberal market values and discourses of economic and human capital. While APEL (Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning) can be traced back to the post-World War II era where increasing numbers of adults were returning to education (Murphy, 2008), this research will focus on policy development since the 1990s where there was intense activity in RPL policy developments. Therefore this chapter will begin by looking at the development

of RPL policy since the 1990s followed by a breakdown of specific policy perspectives on a global, European, national and local scale.

Table 5.1 RPL Policy Context

<p><b>RPL Policy</b></p> <p><b><u>Global and International</u></b></p> <p>OECD, ILO, UN, NAFTA, World Bank, WTO-GATS, UNESCO, PLIRC, mutual recognition agreements, competence frameworks,</p> <p><b><u>European</u></b></p> <p>EHEA, Council of Europe, EQF-LLL, ECVET, European Commission, EUA, Europass, ENIC, NARIC, ELM, ESRI, Cedefop, mutual recognition agreements</p> <p><b><u>National</u></b></p> <p>CAPLA, UVAC, NCVER, HEA, HETAC, FETAC, Léargas, FÁS, NQAI, EGFSN, ISME, Department of Education and Skills, National Skills Strategy, National Development Plan, Sectoral/professional bodies, community organisations, FIN Network, national qualifications frameworks, country examples (Scotland, Wales, Canada, South Africa, Netherlands, Belgium, New Zealand, USA, England)</p> <p><b><u>Local</u></b></p> <p>Skillnets Ireland, Universities, Institutes of Technology, Dublin Institute of Technology, Colleges of Further Education, VECs.</p>
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## 5.2 A Neo-Liberal Frame for RPL Policy Development

Essentially the underlying conflict in the RPL discourse is RPL's positioning at the interface between policy and practice and the difficulties of accommodating the merger of the two. At a policy level a global neo-liberal discourse surrounds RPL and the market for education. Education is distinctive in the fact that as a public service, money spent on its provision is



considered an investment that will provide a social return. However, neo-liberal assumptions and human capital approaches to learning and development are predicated on individual returns as a result of individual investments. The following sections present an overview of the way neo-liberal arguments have shaped economic, cultural and social policies and thereby RPL policy.

### **5.2.1 Neo-liberal approach to learning and development**

Lynch (2006) describes the prevailing neo-liberal discourse as one where market supremacy determines cultural logic and citizenship. At the extreme, it is the privatisation of such public goods as education, welfare, and health to be delivered on the market as service offerings. Neo-liberalism espouses principles of fairness and choice for economically motivated actors and therefore in education a market approach has emerged; marketisation of education (Douglass, 2005; Hill, 2003; Kirss, 2004; Lynch, 2006). At issue is the fact that the market can only satisfy those who have the money to buy the goods it provides (Hill, 2003). Therefore the 'choice' that neo-liberalism claims to foster is limiting in itself. This marketisation and commodification of traditionally state-provided public services is criticised on grounds of:

- reducing individuals to "*autonomous, rational, market-oriented, consuming and self-interested*" (Lynch, 2006, p.4),
- a loss of equity and economic and social justice,
- a loss of democracy and democratic accountability,
- a loss of critical thought within a culture of performativity,
- changing university culture from academic to operational (and the resultant implications of an auditing and measuring culture, student pursuit of credentials, the merging of commercial and scholarly research).

Critics of neo-liberalism would suggest that even self-employment in the global neo-liberal economy still masks exploitation and subjugation such as low pay, lack of benefits and lack of security (Lange & Fenwick, 2003).

One of the contradictions within a neo-liberalist concept of education is the idea that education can be commodified when it is still considered a public service. Therefore competition on the market does not eradicate 'low-quality' public education institutes; rather it allows for selectivity on the part of credential-oriented institutes (Kirss, 2004). Similarly, Bourke (1997; 2000) adds that government intervention in higher education is a barrier to international trade in higher education, and does not serve to guarantee the quality of the service offering. Additionally, this neo-liberal Capitalism is motivated by profit not public, social or common good. In this mode, business values and interests are at the heart of public services. Therefore the real beneficiary of this model is the global corporate market at the cost of individual fairness and social justice (Hill, 2003). Education institutes are said to have to look at ways to differentiate their offerings to achieve a competitive advantage (Kirss, 2004).

One of the accusations levelled at neo-liberal models of higher education is a loss of autonomy and democracy. Lauder (1991) suggests that neo-liberalism trades off democracy for economic efficiency. This economic efficiency is achieved by governments' weakening of the boundaries between education and economic or political spheres and impinging on the autonomy previously held by educators (Beck, 1999). Von Prondzynski (2009) cites a university's strategic autonomy and the ability to be entrepreneurial and innovative as key to national success and stimulating the local economy. He contrasts this to the 'European' view of universities as educational agencies following a national plan.

### **5.2.2 Global neo-liberalism in learning and development**

Hill (2003) speaks of a global capitalism as part of the neo-liberal project. It requires a strong interventionist State, particularly in the fields of education and training for the social

production of labour power (Hill, 2003). Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff (1998) hint at the idea of the interventionist state in their discussion of the 'triple helix' of university-industry-government relations where industry is looking to universities as potential sources of useful knowledge and technology in a highly competitive, global economy. These relations are often spurred on by government for the pursuit of economic growth and as a source of new products and companies. Goals for technological, economic and social development are increasingly set by bodies such as the WTO (World Trade Organisation), the IMF (International Monetary Fund) and the EU (European Union). Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff (1998) speak of flux in the boundaries between university and industry and Bartelse (2003) finds higher education becoming borderless, internationalised, and increasingly interdependent and interconnected in economics and social affairs. This reflects the world systems or interdependent approach in national education systems described by Bourke (1997).

Shinn (2002) compares the triple helix to Gibbons et al.'s (1994) *"The New Production of Knowledge"*. The distinction is made between the latter who argue that scientific knowledge, technical practices, industry, education and society at large are not organised or no longer function in the same way as in earlier times. By contrast the triple helix stresses the continuity of the earlier relations between university, industry and government with the addition of another model of interaction or knowledge development where the three parties meet to address problems arising in a knowledge-based social order (Shinn, 2002, p.600).

Douglass (2005) finds that globalisation in higher education is more than a simplistic paradigm shift shaped by market forces. It is a process influenced by technology, organisational and behavioural change in the face of competition, a need for new sources of finance and the influence of government and international body policies. Peter Jarvis (2009) in a similar vein speaks of globalisation as having a long history, but that the particular type of globalisation operating now lays power in the hands of those who control the Capital and information technology in particular. In this system the market was played up and the state was played down, this has now changed as the market has collapsed. The state is now coming to the fore (Jarvis, 2009). These sentiments are echoed in Blackman's (2008) description of the comprehensive failure of the neo-liberal paradigm and the irony for the neo-liberal 'free market' that deplored the idea of government intervention, yet had to be rescued by that intervention.

Hofheinz (2009), in a discussion of human capital and skills as key for Europe's future, finds that globalisation (primarily the rising standards of global prosperity) is causing both economic and social dislocation in Europe. In other words Europe is losing its global edge in science, education and innovation and in order to remedy that, the skills and human capital agenda must take precedence (Hofheinz, 2009). It is this human capital agenda that will be discussed in the next section.

### **5.2.3 Human capital approach to learning and development**

Allied to the concepts outlined in the global neo-liberal model is a human capital approach that frames the discourse surrounding RPL in this study. Human capital is brought about by changes in a person's skills and capabilities which make them able to act in new ways (Coleman, 1988). Human capital is therefore embodied in an individual's skills and

knowledge. Bianco (2011) describes human capital as education, on-the-job training and work experience of the work force. An investment in human capital (some form of education or training to improve workforce quality) should yield a return. Investing in human capital is tied to neo-liberal policies for the social production of labour power, where the additional social cost of investment in education and training is weighed against the potential additional earnings from employing better educated and trained individuals. There might also be consideration of other social or economic benefits such as better public health or lower crime rates (Bianco, 2011).

A strict approach to human capital is taken by Ederer (2006, p.2) in his definition of the European Human Capital Index:

*We define human capital as the cost of formal and informal education expressed in euros and multiplied by the number of people living in each country...we account for some depreciation, deducting value due to the fact that some knowledge will become obsolete and that people will forget some of what they learn. We also adjust for ongoing demographic developments, provisioning for the loss of human capital due to declining populations and shifting employment patterns.*

Human capital theory is criticised on the basis that a person's ability, despite their education is also a factor in an individual's success on the labour market and also the cultural capital attributed to credentials can account for higher earnings but not necessarily higher productivity (Bianco, 2011). With greater access to information and technology, human capital is increasingly seen as the differentiating factor between firms and therefore investment in human capital is used strategically to achieve corporate goals and forms part of long-term human resource management strategies (Bianco, 2011). This is particularly salient when reports such as Ederer (2006) claim that adult education and learning on the job have relatively fast pay back periods of only a few years.

In modern growth theory sustained economic development is directly attributed to investment in human capital although it has not been established that there is a direct causal relationship between higher education and higher earnings (Son, 2010; Wilson and Briscoe, 2004). The OECD's (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development) report "*Education at a Glance 2009*" made attempts to research the link between educational attainment and prosperity and calculated that tax payers receive a \$50,000 return on investment in terms of future tax revenue per student who graduates tertiary education (OECD, 2009, p.162).

This modern view of human capital is evident in much of the macroeconomic policy initiatives suggested to combat the economic downturn. For example, José Manuel Barroso (President of the European Commission) at the 5<sup>th</sup> *EUA Convention on Higher Education Institutions* emphasised that cutting expenditure on education and research could have a direct negative impact on future economic growth and therefore universities have a role to play in economic recovery by responding to labour market needs (Miller, 2009). Hofheinz (2009) in accounting for the human capital skills agenda as the means to achieve prosperity (producing outstanding products commanding higher prices) in an advanced industrial economy like Europe, highlights the rise in jobs requiring complex communication and expert thinking and a decline in routine cognitive and manual tasks in jobs. It therefore follows that the greatest levels of unemployment in this context are found amongst the lowest skilled (based on level of educational attainment) whom it is found receive the least amount of education and training. However, this is qualified by the fact that lower skilled people are less likely to seek learning opportunities. The proposed solution is the European skills and education agenda, to promote lifelong learning to achieve upward mobility and

economic relevance and to avoid social exclusion and marginalisation (Hofheinz, 2009). These themes are discussed further in subsequent sections firstly within the context of global policy perspectives, followed by European, national, and local perspectives.

### **5.3 Global and International RPL Policy Perspectives**

Neo-liberal policy at a global level, such as the financial liberalisation espoused by the IMF (International Monetary Fund) in the 1990s, was unsuccessful in Latin America and saw the collapse of the banking sector in Jamaica (Blackman, 2008). However, such global policy perspectives have both instigated and paralleled policy at European, national, and local levels. Hartmann (2008) identifies two main types of intergovernmental arrangements for recognition: economic integration agreements and government to government agreements and conventions for cultural and educational cooperation. International economic integration agreements such as GATS and Directives from the European Union have framed much of the discourse surrounding the international recognition of skills (Hartmann, 2008). Investments in policies for qualification (both academic and occupational) recognition are expected to yield returns, some of which include ensuring the portability of qualifications, to facilitate national and international mobility, to integrate formal, non-formal and informal learning, to bring public and private stakeholders together, to provide a framework to develop standards and to bring order to the system of awards (MEDA-ETE, 2009).

It is these policy agreements emanating from global bodies that will be discussed here. It will start with looking at the GATS (General Agreement on Trade in Services) within the WTO (World Trade Organization), and then the UNESCO Conventions will be discussed followed by the OECD and their policy initiatives with regard to education, training and RPL.

### 5.3.1 GATS and the WTO

The General Agreement on Trade in Services was signed in 1994 and came into effect in 1995 (Bultot, 2003) to remove obstacles to international trade in services (Bartelse, 2003).

The GATS has categorised twelve service sectors, of which education is one. The education sector is further sub-divided into five service sub-sectors: primary, secondary, higher, adult, and other (Knight, 2006). It was inspired by the GATT (GATS' counterpart agreement on tariffs and trade of merchandise) and prompted debate on the appropriateness of commercialising education by liberalising the trade of services (Bultot, 2003). It is also suggested that GATS should provide a framework through the WTO for those educational institutes that have been driven to the market as a result of governmental budget cuts (Bartelse, 2003). Hill (2003) describes the drive for privatisation of traditionally public services in the United Kingdom as the result of a strengthened GATS to ensure indigenous service providers can fend off foreign competitors and expand into other foreign markets.

The WTO (2001) suggests that trade liberalisation by way of GATS is one of the instruments a government can use to promote human welfare. It has been said that GATS is similar to other initiatives, such as the UNESCO Conventions on the recognition of qualifications, as they both promote *"international cooperation in higher education and the reduction of obstacles to the mobility of teachers and students by a mutual recognition of degrees and qualifications between the countries that have ratified them"* (UNESCO, 2006). However UNESCO is aimed at non-profit internationalisation while GATS aims at trade in higher education to achieve market liberalisation (UNESCO, 2006). Similarly, Nyborg (2003, p.2) questioned whether the Bologna Process, based on cooperation, could co-exist with GATS, which is based on competition, in the higher education sector. This competition it is feared could lead to more social inequalities in access to education (Bartelse, 2003).



The WTO (2001) have denied many of the negative claims about the implications of GATS in their “*GATS-Fact and Fiction*” information booklet. The claims such as, WTO member countries are obliged to open up all of their services sectors to foreign competition, or that all public services must be opened up to foreign competition, that liberalisation through GATS means the deregulation of services, and that GATS commitments are irreversible and negotiations are secretive and anti-democratic are said to be false. In particular, with regard to education, the WTO emphasised that private education will supplement rather than displace public education systems (WTO, 2001).

GATS, therefore has important implications for human resources at national and institutional levels for education policies, immigration, science and technology, trade, employment, and foreign relations. This highlights the interrelation between national policy for trade in education, migration policy and human capacity-building (Knight, 2006).

The influence of GATS on RPL policy and practice development concerns the recognition of qualifications of potential service providers in GATS Article VII (WTO, 2007). Article VII however simply specifies the right, but not the procedure, of WTO member states to recognition:

*A Member may recognize the education or experience obtained, requirements met, or licences or certifications granted in a particular country. Such recognition, which may be achieved through harmonization or otherwise, may be based upon an agreement or arrangement with the country concerned or may be accorded autonomously (WTO, 2007).*

This does not include professional qualifications or the obligation to extend recognition agreements between some member states to all members (Hartmann, 2008). This

contradicts the 'most-favoured-nation' (non-discrimination principle) principle in GATS (International Bar Association [IBA], 2001). Therefore, the GATS *recognition* regime takes place outside of the framework of GATS unlike recognition arrangements within the EU (Hartmann, 2008). Additionally, recognition is not an obligatory clause for member states in the agreement. Recognition is thereby distinctive in this economic integration agreement and is at the discretion of member states, possibly because of the lack of visible economic returns from recognition or the difficulty of clarifying standards and procedures for recognition.

The International Bar Association (IBA) called for a more nuanced approach to the recognition of qualifications and more specifically, professional qualifications than that which would be obtained through the 'most-favoured-nation' (MFN) principle in GATS (IBA, 2001). The MFN principle is endorsed in Article V of the agreement which therefore contrasts with the openness espoused in Article VII. Mutual recognition agreements between professions are also precarious under GATS because GATS negotiations are carried out between governments that do not have jurisdiction over the professions (Hartmann, 2008). The IBA is advocating a clarification of standards and procedures for the recognition of professional qualifications, drawing on current and future mutual recognition agreements. The Accountancy profession in 1998 established its 'necessary disciplines' recognition procedures under GATS, which specifies further appropriate measures for qualification requirements and procedures for the accountancy profession (Hartmann, 2008). However, with the exception of accountancy, there are no other 'necessary disciplines' frameworks in place and the alternative is outlined in Article VI where

assessment of qualifications must be compared to standards of agreements set by international organisations (Hartmann, 2008).

WTO members have been looking to the UNESCO conventions as a result of the weaknesses inherent in GATS highlighted above, particularly when cross-border education is occurring outside of trade regimes (Knight, 2006). There is a need for greater student access to post-secondary education from the knowledge economy, lifelong learning, and changing human resource needs which GATS supporters believe is achieved through greater trade liberalisation (Knight, 2006). The question is whether trade rules will privilege only those who can afford the service (Knight, 2006). This accounts for the stunted development of strong recognition agreements. Extant multi-lateral recognition agreements such as the UNESCO Conventions merit further discussion; the next section will address UNESCO and its response to the ethical challenges and dilemmas facing higher education in a globalised era, particularly as a result of GATS.

### **5.3.2 UNESCO**

UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) entered the GATS debate in 2002 when it launched the *“Global Forum on International Quality Assurance, Accreditation and the Recognition of Qualifications”*. One of the outcomes of this was to look at adapting the UNESCO Conventions to the challenges of globalisation (Knight, 2006). The UNESCO Conventions on the Recognition of Studies, Certificates, Diplomas, Degrees and other Qualifications in Higher Education first appeared in 1974 encompassing Latin America and the Caribbean and culminated with the Council of Europe/UNESCO Convention in 1997 (Lisbon Convention). The UNESCO conventions are aimed at promoting the recognition of academic qualifications for academic purposes. They form legal agreements

between countries to allow for the international mobility of students and skilled labour.

Currently the conventions listed below are in place:

- Regional:
  - Regional Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Certificates, Diplomas, Degrees and other Academic Qualifications in Higher Education in the **African States** (1981)
  - Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees concerning Higher Education in the **Arab States** (1978)
  - Regional Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education in **Asia and the Pacific** (1983)
  - Regional Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education in **Latin America and the Caribbean** (1974)
- European:
  - Council of Europe/UNESCO Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the **European Region** (1997) (Lisbon)
  - Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education in the States belonging to the **Europe** Region (1979)
- Interregional:
  - International Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education in the **Arab** and **European** States bordering on the **Mediterranean** (1976).

In addition to these Conventions there are Recommendations that also relate to the recognition of qualifications:

- The Recommendation on the Recognition of Studies and Qualifications in Higher Education (1993)
- Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel (1997)
- ILO/UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of Teachers
- UNESCO/Council of Europe Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications (2001)
- Code of Practice for the Provision of Transnational Education (2001)

There are also guidelines for the mutual recognition of qualifications between the European member states and the United States (2000) as well as recognition of qualifications from the Russian Federation (1994).

These conventions and recommendations highlighted the demand for academic and professional mobility. The “*Council of Europe/UNESCO Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region*” (Lisbon Convention) in 1997 marked the beginning of a more formal approach towards trans-national higher educational policy in Europe. In 2001 UNESCO and the council of Europe established a code of good practice for transnational education that is now a recognised part of the Lisbon convention (Knight, 2006).

In addition to the recognition of formal qualifications, the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) is active in the area of the recognition, validation and accreditation (RVA) of non-formal and informal learning, which is explicitly subsumed under the broader lifelong learning agenda. These initiatives are particularly concerned with operationalising RVA in national qualifications frameworks (UIL, 2010). Lifelong learning is considered crucial to poverty-reduction, job creation and progression in knowledge-based societies (Singh, 2008). Additionally, embracing a lifelong learning perspective is essential to achieve the principles of the *United Nations Decade of Education on Sustainable Development* (DESD) which espouses a transition to a socially, economically and ecologically sustainable society (Singh, 2010). Despite cultural and educational overtones there are socio-economic considerations, echoed by other international organisations such as the OECD, evident in the UNESCO stance on RPL. For example, the commentary from an RPL pilot project between UIL and the Mauritius Qualifications Authority stated that RPL as a tool to formally recognise skills supports capacity-building initiatives by improving opportunities for employment and career prospects. There is also emphasis on the ability of RPL to break down barriers to education and contribute to an individual’s self-esteem (UNESCO, 2007).

UNESCO and the OECD have also co-operated in their educational response to GATS. They jointly prepared the “*Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border Education*” in 2005; a framework to promote dialogue between providers and receivers of higher education (Knight, 2006) as well as concerns for high quality procedures for RVA (Singh, 2008). The aim was consumer protection in cross-border higher education (OECD/CERI, 2003). The next section will look at the OECD in more detail.

### **5.3.3 OECD**

Since 1996 the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) has taken a lifelong learning stance when it comes to qualifications in that qualifications systems must be flexible to include all formal, non-formal and informal learning (OECD/CERI, 2003). There is a socio-economic or human capital perspective evident in OECD publications towards lifelong learning, in order to respond to the demands of knowledge-based economies and the uneven distribution of learning opportunities (OECD, 2007b). Lifelong learning is a necessary condition for individual success in the labour market and for general social well-being (OECD, 2007a). Therefore, a qualifications system for lifelong learning is necessary to better addresses the learning needs of knowledge economies and open societies (OECD, 2007a).

In achieving lifelong learning there is a perception that reform of a country’s qualification system is linked to widespread participation in learning endeavours. One of those reforms includes the provision for high-quality recognition of learning because:

*A qualification is anything that confers official recognition of value in the labour market and in further education and training, so a qualifications system includes all aspects of a country's activity that results in recognition of learning (OECD, 2007a, p.3).*

The OECD espouses mechanisms to achieve lifelong learning. These mechanisms include establishing a qualifications framework, providing credit transfer, creating new routes to qualifications, *recognising informal and non-formal learning*, and ensuring the involvement of all stakeholders (OECD, 2007b).

As already mentioned the OECD and UNESCO issued joint guidelines on quality assurance in higher education in 2005. This co-operation included OECD/CERI (2003) work on mapping international trends in quality assurance, accreditation and recognition of qualifications. To complement those guidelines, UNESCO and the Asia-Pacific Quality Network prepared a *"Toolkit on Regulating Quality Assurance in Cross-border Education"* (Knight, 2006). There have also been international, regional and national declarations on quality in cross-border education such as the International Association of Universities' international statement, *"Sharing Quality Higher Education Across Borders: A Statement on Behalf of Higher Education Institutions Worldwide"* (Knight, 2006).

The OECD is particularly concerned with higher education in a globalised world that is challenged by the regulatory capacities and boundaries of existing national or regional policy frameworks (OECD/CERI, 2003). These challenges also offer potential economic opportunities and benefits from cross-border educational provision, commercial education services, and non-traditional delivery modes (OECD/CERI, 2003). Recognition is seen as a way to come to an understanding about the academic or professional value of

qualifications. Furthermore it is of greater value to come to that understanding by way of the comparability of the outcomes of qualifications because those outcomes are intrinsically unaffected by divergences in inputs (OECD/CERI, 2003). The advantage of focusing on outcomes allows for competencies and qualifications obtained in non-formal, non-traditional, and non-tertiary educational settings to be taken into account. Additionally, competencies acquired informally outside of educational settings in the form of *prior* and *experiential* learning are increasingly emphasised as definitions of learning sites and settings expand (OECD/CERI, 2003). However, assessing competencies and evaluating credentials are conceptually and methodologically challenging.

The OECD has just completed a scoping research project in the area of recognition of non-formal and informal learning which included twenty-two country background reports on their national RPL practices (Werquin, 2010b). The purpose of this project entitled, *“Recognition of Non-Formal and Informal Learning”*, was to look at the potential benefits of the recognition of non-formal and informal learning to individuals and society (Harold, Taguma, & Hagens, 2008). Of particular relevance to this thesis is the *“OECD Country Background report”* for Ireland in which it stated that there were no available data in Ireland on the return on investment from RPL. In these reports, particularly since the economic crisis of 2008, labour market needs are one of the most cited reasons for looking to the *“recognition of non-formal and informal outcomes”* to address skills in short supply and to offer employment opportunities to disadvantaged groups (Werquin, 2010b). Additionally, the labour market is considered the prime setting for the production of informal and non-formal learning (Werquin, 2010b).



The OECD rationale for implementing systems for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning is to promote lifelong learning and to make the labour market more effective and equitable (Werquin, 2008). Furthermore the use of human capital is hindered by not making knowledge, skills and competence visible, particularly when it concerns informal and non-formal learning (Werquin, 2008). The recognition of non-formal and informal learning (RNFIL) to make knowledge, skills and competence visible should also improve access and mobility within the labour market and help employers to better match workers with jobs. There should also be potential to overcome skills shortages (Werquin, 2008; 2010a). The OECD also perceives savings in terms of cost and duration of education and training through RNFIL for individuals, as recognition can optimise learning paths. RNFIL could also improve the distribution of qualifications across the population without additional burden on the systems of formal education and training (Werquin, 2008; 2010a). Finally, RNFIL is also an efficient solution for enterprises that need to meet certain staff qualification regulatory requirements. A key aspect of qualifications achieved fully or partly through RNFIL is that they have value on the labour market (Werquin, 2010a).

This view is echoed by the ILO (International Labour Organisation) in their *“Multilateral Framework on Labour Migration”* (2005) which underlines the vulnerability of migrants who cannot have their knowledge, skills and competence valued on the labour market as a result of their lack of citizenship and social rights (Hartmann, 2008). The ILO framework also calls for improved recognition for the skills of migrants and links to the ILO’s Human Resource Development Recommendation (2004) which also calls for the promotion of the recognition and portability of skills, competences and qualifications (Hartmann, 2008).

The three key international organisations mentioned above are not the sole drivers of RPL development at a global level; however they have had a significant impact on this research study. At a European level one of the key forces for recognition procedures is the European Union. The next section will discuss some of the key developments at a European level that have impacted on the rhetoric informing this research study.

## **5.4 European RPL Policy Perspectives**

The developments over the last decade in education and training were driven initially by the evolving lifelong learning agenda and also by the Bologna Declaration (1999), the Lisbon Strategy (2000), the Copenhagen Process (2002), and the Education and Training 2010 Work Programme. Lifelong learning is highlighted as a means to continuously upgrade knowledge and skills over a lifetime. This is significant in light of the changing nature of work and Europe's ageing population (Kelly, 2010). The recognition of qualifications has been a topic of discussion in European policy for several decades, particularly recognition for student mobility in NARIC (National Academic Recognition Information Centres) and the Erasmus (European Region Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students) programme.

### **5.4.1 NARIC and ENIC**

The NARIC network was established in 1984 by the European Commission and the ENIC (European National Information Centres) network in 1994 by the Council of Europe and UNESCO (Council of Europe, 2011b).

The NARIC network aims to improve the recognition of academic qualifications and study periods in European member states, in the European Economic Area and Central and Eastern European Countries. NARIC was an important part of the Erasmus Community

education programme (1987) and the first Socrates programme (1994) (CIEP, 2009). In addition to Erasmus and the Lifelong Learning programme (which is the successor to Socrates), the Tempus (Trans-European Mobility Scheme for University Studies), Erasmus Mundus, and the Alfa exchange programmes were also put in place to foster cooperation in education within and beyond the European Union.

ENIC networks were formed from the Council of Europe/UNESCO Recognition Convention in order to develop joint policy and practice on the recognition of qualifications (Council of Europe, 2011b). The networks are focused on providing information about education systems in European countries, the recognition of foreign academic and professional qualifications, and mobility for academic and professional purposes (European Commission, 2009). The ENIC network co-operates with the NARIC network and the European Commission Union but they work to different ends.

#### **5.4.2 The Lisbon Strategy (Education and Training 2010 and 2020)**

The UNESCO/Council of Europe Lisbon Convention (1997) mentioned in section 5.3.2 is not to be confused with the Lisbon Strategy. The Lisbon Strategy was launched in 2000 with the express purpose to make the European Union the most competitive knowledge-based economy by 2010. This has now been replaced by the ET 2020 Strategy. According to the European Commission the process to create a competitive knowledge-based economy rests on the three tenets of education, research and innovation, in order to achieve economic growth and job creation. Thereby European initiatives have been focused on education and training systems (European Commission, 2010). The European Commission drove the Lisbon Strategy by agreeing the *“Education and Training 2010 Work Programme”* (Council of the European Union, 2002) and issuing recommendations such as *“Mobilising the brainpower*

*of Europe: enabling universities to make their full contribution to the Lisbon Strategy*” (Commission of the European Communities, 2005) and *“From Bergen to London: the contribution of the European Commission to the Bologna Process”* (European Commission, 2007) which gave recommendations on the modernisation agenda for universities in education, research and innovation and the *“Detailed work programme on the follow-up of the objectives of education and training systems in Europe”* (Council of the European Union, 2002) about opening up education and training systems.

The Education and Training 2010 Work Programme had three primary shared objectives (Kelly, 2010):

- to improve the quality and effectiveness of EU education and training systems
- to ensure that these systems are accessible to all
- and to open up education and training to the wider world

In 2006 a cluster on the recognition of learning outcomes was established within the context of the Education and Training 2010 work programme to follow-up on the *“Common Principles on Identification and Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning”* adopted in 2004 (Cedefop, 2009c) .

A range of recommendations and resolutions were set in motion to move towards achieving the goals of the Lisbon Strategy by 2010. These included the development of the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF-LLL), Europass, Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), the European Credit Transfer System for Higher Education (ECTS), the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET), and the Adult Education Plan (Kelly, 2010).

By 2010 Europe was under pressure as a result of the economic crisis to adapt education and training systems to rebuild economic and social infrastructure (Kelly, 2010). Therefore, the “*Strategic Framework for European cooperation in education and training*” (ET 2020) has been set up and embraces lifelong learning as key to employment, economic success and sustainability (Kelly, 2010). ET 2020 has set four European objectives to be achieved by 2020 (Council of the European Union, 2009, p.3):

- Making lifelong learning and mobility a reality
- Improving the quality and efficiency of education and training
- Promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship
- Enhancing creativity and innovation, including entrepreneurship at all levels of education and training

These objectives are set against the following five benchmarks (Council of the European Union, 2009, p.7):

- Participation in early childhood education
- Low achievers in reading, mathematics and science
- Early leavers from education and training
- Higher education attainment
- Adult participation in lifelong learning

The Lisbon Strategy in conjunction with the Bologna Declaration set in motion a move towards greater transparency of qualifications, mobility of learners, and flexibility in, and access to, education and training. The Council of Europe had an active role to play in these developments.

### **5.4.3 The Council of Europe**

The Council of Europe was founded in 1949 by ten countries and today has forty-seven member countries across Europe (Council of Europe [COE], 2011a). The Council of Europe is focused on the protection of the individual through the protection of human rights, democracy and law (COE, 2011a). This is encompassed in aspirations towards a pan-

European legal area through the conclusion of treaties such as the Council of Europe/UNESCO *“Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education in the European Region”* (1997). These treaties are international agreements between States and are governed by the rule of international law (COE, 2009). The Council of Europe was responsible for the conclusion of the *“Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms”* which was ratified in 1953.

As a result of work in the higher education arena, particularly with regard to the recognition of qualifications, the Council of Europe played an active role in the lead up to the Bologna Declaration and within the Bologna Follow-up Groups. An ENIC working party was established as part of the Bologna process to deal with recognition issues (COE, 2011c), which the Council of Europe dealt with as part of normal business due to the Lisbon Recognition Convention. Furthermore the Council of Europe’s *“European Cultural Convention”* (1954) was accepted as the geographical criteria for accession to the Bologna process. The Bologna Declaration and the creation of the European Higher Education Area are at the heart of the development of systems for European qualifications recognition and will be discussed hereafter

#### **5.4.4 The Bologna Declaration**

The Bologna Process, from 1999, began the move to create a European Higher Education Area (EHEA), when thirty countries agreed to harmonise their higher education structures. This has resulted in a three-cycle structure for higher education (Davies, 2009). There are now forty-seven Bologna countries and the EHEA was formally launched in March 2010. The Bologna Declaration was concerned with the employability of Europeans and the competitiveness of the European higher education system (Joint Declaration of the

European Ministers of Education, 1999). The Copenhagen process from 2002 could be described as a parallel process, but for enhanced cooperation in vocational education and training.

One of the main objectives of the Bologna Declaration in 1999 was to achieve ECTS compatible systems to promote student mobility that also covered lifelong learning (Pouliquen, 2007). This was coupled with adopting systems of 'easily readable and comparable degrees' along with the diploma supplement and a two cycle education system of undergraduate (bachelor) and postgraduate (master and doctorate) qualifications. Quality assurance considerations were brought to the fore as a result.

In 2001 the Ministers for Education for each country met in Prague and while lifelong learning was espoused in policy, the action points that came out of that meeting in the 'Prague Communiqué' concerned the implementation of the bachelor, master, doctorate (BMD) structure (Pouliquen, 2007). It was at this meeting that ministers committed to the development of a common qualifications framework to ensure the readability and comparability of European qualifications worldwide as a means to promote the EHEA (European Ministers in Charge of Higher Education, 2001).

In 2003 the ministers met in Berlin where the 'Berlin Communiqué' reported the patchy development on the ground of lifelong learning strategies (Pouliquen, 2007). The intermediate priorities that were set for the period between 2003 and 2005 were: quality assurance, the degree system, and recognition of degrees and periods of study (Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, 2003). This last objective was tied to a recommendation

to Bologna countries to ratify the Lisbon Convention. A framework for comparable and compatible qualifications basing descriptions on workload, level, learning outcomes, competences, and profile was also emphasised.

The Bergen meeting in 2005 appeared to return to the topic of lifelong learning with greater zest (Pouliquen, 2007). This meeting saw the adoption of the overarching framework for qualifications in the EHEA comprising three cycles and a commitment to national qualifications frameworks that would be compatible with the EHEA framework (European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, 2005). Each cycle, should meet the needs of the labour market thereby increasing graduate employability and also lead to further study. The EQF-LLL was also mentioned in discussions of how to ensure that it complemented the QF-EHEA and vice versa. An important point was that amongst the progress objectives set for 2007, the recognition of prior learning was specifically mentioned as part of the creation of flexible learning paths in higher education (European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, 2005). The other areas for progress included implementation of national qualifications frameworks and the implementation of standards and guidelines for quality assurance.

Ministers meeting in London in 2007 advocated the move to student rather than teacher-centred higher education within the EHEA. However, there is no mention of the importance of student participation in the Bologna process as in previous communiqués. The recognition of non-formal and informal learning was declared an essential part of the EHEA. There was also a commitment to implement national qualifications frameworks that are certified against the overarching 'Framework for Qualifications of the EHEA' and which



improve the recognition of qualifications and all forms of prior learning (Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, 2007). Lifelong learning through the creation of flexible pathways to learning was still considered to be at an early stage of implementation. This was highlighted by the lack of development in most EHEA countries of the recognition of prior learning for access or credits. One of the aspirations for 2009 was to improve employability in the three cycle degree system, partnering with employers to make appropriate reforms (Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, 2007).

The final meeting in Leuven in 2009 before the launch of the EHEA in 2010, stressed the new economic climate in which the EHEA was now operating. Successful policies for lifelong learning must include basic principles and procedure for the recognition of prior learning on the basis of learning outcomes and irrespective of whether that learning was gained through formal, non-formal or informal routes (European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, 2009). The year 2012 was set for national qualifications frameworks to be certified against the overarching Qualifications Framework for the EHEA (QF-EHEA). In terms of employability, higher skills levels and transversal competences were emphasised for higher education to equip students for professional life; work placements and on the job learning were encouraged (European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, 2009).

The next meeting on the progress of the EHEA will be held in Bucharest in 2012. Discussions as a result of the March 2010 launch of the EHEA in Budapest-Vienna have focused on the impact of Bologna on higher education in Europe today. This stock-taking includes the EUA *“Trends 2010: A decade of change in European higher education”* (Trends VI, 2010), the ESU (European Students’ Union) Report *“Bologna at the Finish Line: An account of ten years of*

*European higher education reform*” (2010), or the Eurydice report “*Focus on Higher Education in Europe 2010: The Impact of the Bologna Process*” (2010). It is difficult to assess the overall impact of the Bologna reform process because it is too early to answer such a question and not all countries have achieved the aims of compatibility and comparability. Furthermore, the focus has been on policy rather than an evaluation of the specific outcomes (Westerheijden, 2010). The ESU (2010) report finds that the ambitions of creating the EHEA have not been borne out by efforts to make it a reality. They are particularly critical of the mobility agenda which is focused more on incoming students as a potential source of income rather than outgoing students who lack the financial support to become truly *mobile*. Since the signing of the Lisbon Convention in 1997 there has been significant progress in terms of the recognition of qualifications, but mobility is hindered when it comes to prior learning where universities still have the monopoly on learning and qualifications (ESU, 2010). Additionally, employability is an issue as the three-cycle system has not yet transferred to the labour market and in many countries the bachelor is not considered sufficient for entry to the labour market, rather the master is considered the minimum requirement (Sursock & Smidt, 2010). Some countries have kept their old system as well as implementing the new (EUA, 2010; Eurydice, 2010). Furthermore, while the implementation of national qualifications frameworks has served to increase the comparability and compatibility of qualifications, confusion is rampant between previously existing qualifications systems and new national qualifications systems as well as a qualifications system for higher education, QF-EHEA and a qualifications system for lifelong learning, EQF-LLL (ESU, 2010). The EQF-LLL will be addressed in section 5.4.5.

The Bologna process appears to have triggered the move for other inter-regional higher educational reforms, for example some of the French speaking countries of Africa (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia) have moved to model their higher-education systems after France's licence-master-doctoral (LMD) or Bologna inspired qualifications framework (Clarke, 2007). It should also be noted that this process was preceded by several regional meetings, all with the purpose of exploring how African Universities can learn from the Bologna process and move towards international cooperation (Robertson, 2008). The spirit of consultation that was occurring in establishing best practice for the implementation of the LMD extended beyond Francophone Africa to include the Mediterranean region. The Catania Declaration in 2006 established the Euro-Mediterranean Area of Higher Education and Research and this was formalised further with the Cairo Declaration in 2007. Similarly, Portuguese speaking countries forged higher education area links in 2004 through the Community of Portuguese Speaking Communities (CPLP) and a convention on the recognition of qualifications (Zgaga, 2006). The Association of the Portuguese Speaking Universities (APSU), similar to the European Universities Association (EUA) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations-European Union (ASEAN-EU) University Network Programme are another feature of collaboration in higher education, primarily fostering inter-institutional collaboration. Cooperation has also extended to the Asia-Pacific region when in 2006 countries across Asia, the Middle East, the Near East and Australia met and agreed to strengthen relations in the area of education and training, known as the Brisbane Communiqué initiative (Australian Government, 2010). Australia already has many affiliations with the EHEA, having ratified the Lisbon Convention in 2002.

A final point regarding the Bologna process is the creation of the Recognition of Prior Learning European Network as part of the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG) in 2010. The BFUG RPL Network held its first meeting in November 2010. The network aims to promote, inform and share RPL practice and policy across countries (Gibson, 2011). The network has already collected and published a set of thirty RPL case studies from thirteen countries. Briefly the main findings from the case studies were that RPL policy or intentions are far ahead of practice on the ground. Also, only one third of European higher education institutes do not do any form of RPL activity (Madill, 2011). Furthermore the European Commission launched a call for a public consultation on possible future action to support the promotion and validation of non-formal and informal learning which will report later in 2011.

The validation of non-formal and informal learning is tied to another important aspect of the development of lifelong learning and that is the EQF-LLL (European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning), the second European meta-framework.

#### **5.4.5 EQF-LLL**

The EQF-LLL is considered a driver and catalyst for reform, especially increasing the momentum surrounding lifelong learning and the development of national qualifications frameworks (Bjornavold, Zabilas & Huigens, 2009) despite a number of qualifications frameworks pre-dating it, for example Australia has had a national qualifications framework since 1995. The EQF-LLL came properly into force in 2008 as a translation device to compare qualifications and as a reference point and system for classifying qualifications levels. It is considered to contribute directly to the Lisbon Strategy and the Education and Training 2010 work programme (Commission of the European Communities, 2005; NQAI, 2008).

The EQF-LLL aims at facilitating trans-national mobility and lifelong learning and promotes the validation of non-formal and informal learning outcomes (European Parliament/Council, 2008). Countries must find a way to refer their national qualifications to levels on the EQF. Therefore NQFs (National Qualifications Frameworks) are advocated as key implementation devices because the EQF-LLL is based on levels of learning that are expressed through learning outcomes by way of knowledge, skills and competence. If each country has its own qualifications framework based on learning outcomes it is reasonably feasible to compare and contrast these to the EQF level descriptors. A number of international organisations such as the ILO (International Labour Organisation) and the OECD are also looking to NQFs as systems of reform and they are therefore appearing in countries such as Russia, Ukraine, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Thailand, Namibia and Botswana (Bjornavold et al., 2009).

A key aspect of the EQF-LLL is to address the changing roles and functions of qualifications that are now geared towards lifelong learning in the face of technological and economic change and ageing populations. This includes the development of arrangements and instruments that support the transfer and accumulation of learning outcomes such as the validation of non-formal and informal learning and credit transfer (Cedefop, 2009b). The NQAI (2008) also highlight how the recognition of non-formal and informal learning is a means to support lifelong learning. Some commentators found that if the European “*Key competences for Lifelong Learning*” were included in the EQF-LLL it would facilitate informal and non-formal learning (AuGent, 2007). The need also to link the recognition of prior informal and non-formal learning to formal pathways has raised some questions, for example, formalising informal learning threatens to alter the nature of informal learning

(Colley, Hodkinson & Malcolm, 2002). Furthermore, learning outcomes may not be all encompassing to describe a learning programme and may exclude some informal and non-formal competences that are gained. Additionally not all qualifications are linked to formal learning pathways (AuGent, 2007).

The EQF-LLL is a contested concept. For example, the EUA discussed the potential confusion that could emerge for the EHEA over the fact that two European qualifications frameworks exist (EUA, 2007). EQF-LLL level descriptors 5-8 correspond to the Bologna cycle descriptors (Maguire, Mernagh, & Murray, 2007/2008). This duplication of responsibility was also raised with regard to quality assurance and the roles of National Qualifications Frameworks, the 'European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance' adopted as part of the Bologna process in 2005 and the EQF-LLL (EUA, 2007). There is also discussion surrounding the fact that National Qualifications Frameworks (NQF) were put in place on the basis of the QF-EHEA and many of the provisions of the EQF-LLL attempt to bypass NQFs taking a top-down approach rather than a bottom-up approach espoused by the EUA. For example, the 2005 proposal for the EQF-LLL (Commission of the European Communities, 2005) suggested sectoral qualifications could be related to the EQF-LLL and then referenced to NQFs rather than the other way around (EUA, 2007). Some commentators have even suggested discussing the advantages of a national qualifications framework compared to already existing sectoral frameworks and the EQF-LLL (AuGent, 2007). It is also interesting to note some discrepancies in the relationship between the EQF-LLL and the QF-EHEA where all bachelor qualifications are at a level 6 in the EQF-LLL but not all level 6 qualifications are at bachelor level (AuGent, 2007). Furthermore there is doubt that the EQF-LLL level descriptors

are in accordance with the QF-EHEA descriptors, primarily the Dublin Descriptors (AuGent, 2007).

The EQF-LLL, as well as the QF-EHEA before it, raises questions surrounding the mission of higher education, and universities especially, as the success of a qualification is increasingly predicated on its ability to achieve graduate employability (Zaharia, Korca, & Trască, 2009).

The matter of employability is explicit in the Copenhagen process and moves to the ECVET.

#### **5.4.6 Copenhagen Process and ECVET (European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training)**

The Copenhagen Declaration in 2002 aimed at strengthening cooperation between VET (vocational education and training) systems (Bouder, Dauty, Kirsch, & Lemistre, 2007). In the Maastricht Communiqué of December 2004, on the future priorities of enhanced European cooperation in vocational education and training, it was agreed to give priority to the development of a European qualifications framework covering both VET and general education (Commission of the European Communities, 2005). The Copenhagen Process instigated the development of the *“Common European Principles on the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning”* from the European Council in 2004 to ensure greater comparability to approaches across countries (Feutrie, 2004). This has led to consideration of such principles for higher education (Roberts, 2009). In 2009 the *“European Guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning”* were published by Cedefop, the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, based on the Council’s 2004 principles. These guidelines were facilitated by the work of the recognition of learning outcomes cluster that was established as part of the ET 2010 work programme (Cedefop, 2009c). Cedefop were also responsible for the *“European Inventory on Validation of*

*Informal and Non-Formal Learning*” which was first published in 2004 and had updates released in 2005, 2007/8 and there is one forthcoming for 2011 (Cedefop, 2011). The inventory showcases the developments in RPL in European countries.

The key objectives of the Copenhagen process were to investigate how *transparency, comparability, transferability* and *recognition* of competences and/or qualifications could be promoted by developing: reference levels, common principles for certification, common measures (e.g. credit transfer system), and national reference points providing information on VET (Feutrie, 2004). Three work plans ensued; to achieve the Copenhagen objectives:

1. A single framework for transparency of competences and qualifications
2. Developing common principles on quality
3. A credit transfer system for VET

The *Europass* Documents are a legacy of the first work plan as part of increasing the transparency of competences and qualifications. The ECVET, coming out of work plan 3 was adopted in 2009. It espouses a qualifications system based on learning outcomes while the ECTS for higher education looks to qualifications based on *both* learning outcomes and work load. If the EQF-LLL is also to facilitate the development of ECTS and ECVET then a credit system for lifelong learning must reconcile this distinction (EUA, 2007). However, Feutrie (2004) stated that it was not possible to trace the ECVET onto the ECTS. This anomaly also presents obstacles to mobility between vocational and higher education. Furthermore, the ECTS system is linked to the QF-EHEA while ECVET is linked to EQF-LLL. The EQF-LLL should increase the transferability, comparability and portability of *qualifications* while the ECVET aims to facilitate the transferability, recognition and accumulation of *learning outcomes* based on competence (Le Mouillour, 2009).



In concluding this section of European policy the *“Tuning Educational Structures in Europe”* project and process merits mention. It began in 2000 to link the objectives of the Bologna Process and the Lisbon Strategy to the higher educational sector. The first and second phases of the Tuning project were to develop points of reference or common understanding between higher educational institutes in subject areas based on competence and learning outcomes for nine subject areas initially: business, chemistry, earth sciences, education, European studies, history, mathematics, nursing and physics (Tuning Members, 2007). The subsequent phases of the project 2005 – 2008 expanded the breadth of subjects covered. The project advances the discussion on learning outcomes that shows that there are differences between disciplinary domains and individual subject areas, as such the focus is on educational structures, and more specifically the content of studies, rather than systems (Maguire, 2010).

What all of the systems mentioned above have in common is their endorsement of national qualifications frameworks for the advancement of lifelong learning. The next section will address RPL policy at national level.

## **5.5 National RPL Policy Perspectives**

The development of RPL at a national level touches on many issues to do with the development of concepts of knowledge and learning. The main vehicle for development of RPL nationally is national qualifications frameworks (NQFs). Tied to NQFs is the move to learning outcomes, a contested topic for many commentators. There are also many national organisations that are concerned with RPL such as CAPLA (Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment) in Canada, UVAC (University Vocational Awards Council) in the UK and NCVET (National Council for Vocational Education Research) in Australia. In the Irish context

the national policy bodies concerned with education have all influenced RPL policy from the HEA (Higher Education Authority) who have commissioned RPL projects to HETAC (Higher Education and Training Awards Council), FETAC (Further Education and Training Awards Council), the NQAI (National Qualifications Authority of Ireland), and FÁS (Irish national training and employment authority). Projects in the area of RPL are also at European and global levels from the Leonardo da Vinci and Socrates-Gruntvig projects to OECD and UNESCO projects, as already mentioned, and study visits such as those organised by Cedefop at European level or Léargas (Irish national agency managing national and international exchange) at national level. Furthermore, national initiatives in countries all over the world have provided a wealth of information on RPL practice.

### **5.5.1 Irish RPL Policy Development**

The development of RPL policy in Ireland accelerated as a result of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 which established the NQAI (National Qualifications Authority of Ireland), HETAC (Higher Education and Training Awards Council) and FETAC (Further Education and Training Awards Council). HETAC and FETAC replaced the NCEA (National Council for Educational Awards) and the NCVA (National Council for Vocational Awards) respectively, through which there were already some facilities for RPL (McGinn, 2007). For example, the NCEA had already in 1975 established within its *“Guidelines for the Evaluation of Study Courses”* recognition of and credit for work units in practical work, although it received little attention in practice (Murphy, 2008a). In addition, Fáilte Ireland and Teagasc, within the NCVA framework had been providing APL since the late 1990s (FETAC, 2007; McGinn, 2007).

The *“Green Paper on Adult Education: Education in an Era of Lifelong Learning”* in 1998 strengthened the role of adult education in Irish educational policy, and not simply for economic reasons, but also societal benefit (GHK Consulting, 2011). Reaction to the Green Paper saw the publication in 2000 of the *“White Paper on Adult Education”* which aimed to increase the participation of adult learners, particularly more marginalised groups (GHK Consulting, 2011). Coupled with this is the drive of the National Skills Strategy (2007) to develop the skills base of the labour force so that by the year 2020 there will be some 48% of the Irish labour force with qualifications between levels 6 to 10 on the National Framework of Qualifications (EGFSN, 1997, p.7).

With the development of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) in 2003 followed by the *“Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in Further and Higher Education and Training”* in 2005 (NQAI, 2006) the stage was set for the explicit incorporation of RPL in Irish education policy for access, transfer and progression for learners for:

- entry to a programme leading to an award
- credit towards an award or exemption from some programme requirements
- eligibility for a full award (NQAI, 2006, p.8)

There is now a wealth of RPL practice across the universities, the institutes of technology and the Dublin Institute of Technology since the 1990s including models of RPL at Waterford Institute of Technology, National University of Ireland Maynooth, the Cork Institute of Technology, and the Tralee Institute of Technology (Murphy, 2008a). FETAC in 2005 and HETAC in 2006 also developed their own RPL policies.

In April 2011 the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN) released *“Developing Recognition of Prior Learning: The Role of RPL in the Context of the National Skills Strategy Upskilling Objectives”* (EGFSN, 2011). The primary recommendations from that report suggest:

- The development of an RPL service at levels 1-3 on the NFQ to recognise ‘core skills’
- Up-skilling within sectors at levels 4-6 on the NQF with exemptions/credit from modules through RPL as well as using RPL to recognise core or generic skills for progression pathways at level 4
- RPL for entry or advanced entry to higher education at levels 6-10 on the NFQ (EGFSN, 2011, pp. 47-53)

One of the most significant developments for RPL in recent years has been the development of a national qualifications framework in Ireland in 2003. The next section will present an overview of national qualifications in general and their influence on RPL policy and practice.

### **5.5.2 National Qualifications Frameworks**

The OECD suggests that there is a link between the development of lifelong learning in any country and the development of qualifications systems, with mechanisms such as credit transfer, recognising non-formal and informal learning, creating new routes to qualifications, optimising stakeholder involvement in the qualifications system, expressing qualifications as learning outcomes and establishing qualifications frameworks (OECD, 2007b). Frameworks of Qualifications have emerged to facilitate making qualifications visible. It is suggested that not providing a range of means for the recognition of experience and/or qualifications leads to considerable misallocation or under-use of resources, which could otherwise, with the proper support, address certain skill shortages (Cedefop, 2008a). Furthermore, learning inputs, the question of when, where and how learning takes place, have traditionally decided the nature, significance and level of qualifications. The emphasis

is now moving away from learning inputs to learning outputs or outcomes, namely what a learner knows, understands or is able to do (Cedefop, 2008a). This shift to learning outcomes is part of the lifelong learning agenda where they act as a common reference point for qualifications (Collins, Kelly, Murdoch, Raffe, & Murphy, 2009). Learning outcomes facilitate the formal assessment of learning against specified learning outcomes or specific standards. Collins et al. (2009) have found that the Irish National Framework of Qualifications, with its focus on learning outcomes, has considerable potential for use in recruitment, developing career pathways, planning work-based learning and training and recognising transferable skills. Furthermore learning outcomes contribute to the recognition process by acting as descriptors relevant for academic or professional practice and can therefore accommodate competencies and qualifications acquired in non-formal, non-traditional, and non-tertiary settings (OECD/DES, 2005).

Smyth and Dow (1998) raise the subject of learning outcomes as part of the human capital discourse pervading educational dialogue. Outcomes delimit educationally legitimate activities and represent what Smyth and Dow (1998, p. 302) call the 'Evaluative State'. They are a technical-rational response to the notion that education is the answer to the economic imperative. Some commentators suggest that learning outcomes could lead to a diminution of standards (NQAI, 2010) or question the possibility of defining qualifications through outcomes without reference to the independent institutes, learning pathways and curricula that lead to them (Young, 2007). This point of reifying outcomes is criticised in the context of the recognition of non-formal or experiential learning. In modern knowledge economies most of the knowledge required cannot be gained at work and the emphasis placed on RPL

through NQFs, particularly for those who lack formal knowledge, could lead to new inequalities (Young, 2007).

A point about the functionality of the European meta-frameworks (QF-EHEA and EQF-LLL) is that they add value through the development of national qualifications frameworks in order to show the relationships that exist between NQFs (Maguire, 2010; Werquin, 2007). In other words the EQF-LLL defines levels of learning independent of qualifications (Coles, 2010). The successful development of NQFs is in part related to their origin. For example, the Irish NQF is described as a unitary framework while the Scottish SCQF is an embedded framework (Maguire, 2010); it is the result of bottom-up development for the purpose of communication rather than regulation (Gallacher, Toman, Caldwell, Raffe, & Edwards, 2005; Raffe, 2007; Young, 2007). In contrast to the gradual development in Scotland, the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) took the lead in developing the SAQF (South African Qualifications Framework) which was expected to be a driver of both educational and social reform (Young, 2007). This was beyond the ability of a device that serves to *“support coordination, correspondence, coherence, integration or harmonisation of alternative, sometimes competing systems”* (NQAI, 2002, p.2). In the case of Ireland in addition to the NQF, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council has developed standards of knowledge, skill and competence for broad fields of learning for awards at levels 6 to 9 on the Irish NQF. Knowledge, skill and competence are the award descriptors used in the NFQ (National Framework of Qualifications). Standards have been developed in the fields of Science, Business, Engineering, Art and design, Computing, Complimentary therapy, Architecture, Nursing and Midwifery, and Social Care Work (HETAC, 2005).

Definitions of qualifications as distinct from definitions of *'being qualified'* and the resulting focus on credentialism are emerging criticisms of the move towards qualifications frameworks. Bowen-Clewley, Farley, Rowe, and Russel (2005) suggest that a qualification varies according to the internal agenda behind it, so that it can affirm a person's ability to do a particular job, act as a means of access to a job, recognise knowledge and skills gained informally, and provide a means for the comparability of qualifications (and credentials). Furthermore, being qualified appears to be more to do with being competent, while a qualification does not necessarily imply the same. From an organisational point of view, qualifications can be of benefit as a way of ensuring legal compliance, managing risk, acknowledging the value of employees, motivating employees, providing for succession planning, and building organisational skills and knowledge (Bowen-Clewley et al., 2005). Formalising workplace learning by way of assessment and accreditation (if appropriate) can structure learning in a way that is meaningful to an organisation. However, recognising qualifications can imply a narrowing of curricula in that only that which can be assessed really matters.

Some of the many value-adding characteristics attributed to NQFs (National Qualifications Frameworks) include an increased consistency of qualifications, better transparency for citizens, an increased currency (level and value of specific learning experiences) of single qualifications, recognition of a broader range of learning, a reference point for qualification standards, clarification of learning pathways and progression, portability of qualifications, and a platform for strengthening co-operation between stakeholders. However, an NQF alone cannot do any of the above: it is the stakeholders (social partners, learning providers, qualification agencies) who make these benefits available with the NQF as a means to

promote dialogue and co-ordination between them (Bjornavold & Coles, 2009). Responding to a broader range of learners in the lifelong learning agenda means that qualifications are becoming more complex and diverse, as are work practices. Therefore the labour market is also demanding more diverse types of qualifications. This calls for greater levels of transparency, consistency and coherence of qualifications. NQFs can provide that transparency, consistency and coherence through their structure of levels, learning outcomes, construction and description of qualifications, and quality assurance.

Ofqual (Office of the Qualifications and Examinations Regulator, UK) emphasises how the UK National Qualifications Framework is a structure to gain information about the broad equivalence of qualifications. The NQAI (National Qualifications Authority of Ireland) focuses on its framework as a structure to compare and contrast the level and standard of different qualifications. The South African Qualifications Authority talks of a structured system to compare and evaluate qualifications. Qualifications frameworks are now in place in the UK, Ireland, Scotland, Malaysia, New Zealand, Australia, Canada, Netherlands, Germany and Belgium. In fact there are some 70 countries worldwide in the process of developing or implementing national frameworks (Maguire, 2010). Furthermore the NQAI (National Qualifications Authority of Ireland) has instigated two projects with Australia (Mernagh, 2010) and New Zealand (NQAI and NZQA, 2010) to map the Irish and Australian and the Irish and New Zealand qualifications frameworks (Maguire, 2010). These projects are intended to advance the potential of aligning international NQFs to the two European meta-frameworks and to enhance the visibility of Irish qualifications on the international stage (Mernagh, 2010).



A final point about national qualifications frameworks is the mode in which they account for particular occupational and knowledge fields, particularly the distinction between construction where much progression can take place through *learning on the job* and medicine, where most of the progression takes place initially through formal learning (Young, 2007). In some instances this might exclude some professional or sectoral bodies from using the framework and who, for the most part, have developed their own progression pathways and qualifications frameworks. The next section addresses some issues surrounding professional and sectoral qualifications.

## **5.6 Professional and sectoral RPL Policy Perspectives**

Professional recognition of qualifications can be complex because of the number of stakeholders involved; professional associations, regulatory bodies, and employer's organisations (OECD/CERI, 2003). The regulated professions are more straightforward but in the unregulated professions, which make up the majority, the validity of a qualification is at the discretion of the employer (OECD/CERI, 2003). In some cases such as nursing in Ireland, there exist statutory professional regulatory bodies or in engineering autonomous professional regulatory bodies which set the standards and entry requirements to which qualifications and credentials must comply (OECD/CERI, 2003.). Within the EU most of these professional bodies are required to recognise European qualifications under the Directive 2005/36/EC. Agreements such as this and GATS have brought professional recognition to the international level. While having a qualification may be a pre-requisite for entry to a sector or profession, it is often more important to measure and ensure current competency (Bowen-Clewley et al., 2005). However, in many instances a qualification is a legal requirement for entry into a profession: teaching or health care for example. The Irish National Framework of Qualifications has made efforts to include the awards of regulatory,

professional and international bodies to ensure the wide use of the framework on the labour market. There are various sectoral and professional systems of recognition of qualifications such as in engineering with the European Network for Accreditation of Engineering Education (ENAE), FEANI (Fédération Européenne d'Associations Nationales d'Ingénieurs), the International Register of Professional Engineers, the Washington Accord (1989) and subsequent agreements. The Washington Accord is not, however, a formal mutual recognition agreement: rather it recognises the substantial equivalence of programmes. The nursing, medical and architectural professions have also taken steps to facilitate recognition for practitioners across countries. The International Union of Architects (UIA), founded in 1948, is a long-standing initiative from a professional group to work towards international standards for the profession.

Information on the value of a qualification is a necessity now for professionals as well as for employers. Professionals need to be able to comply with the requirements of the professional and/or regulatory body in another country. The WTO's (World Trade Organisation) recognition agreement, GATS (General Agreement on Trade and Services) since 1995 is a means of setting standards and criteria to meet the regulatory standards of certain professions. The European Certificate of Experience is another initiative for workers, which acts as evidence of their experience, training and qualifications. This certificate applies to the trade and craft work areas. The most progress has been made where professional bodies took the lead and in those professions where there were already precedents for mutual recognition or equivalency procedures. The Bologna Process again can have a role to play here. The move towards comparable and compatible degree

structures in higher education and professional recognition arrangements, especially in the regulated professions, should ideally be harmonised.

A report from “*Integrating Ireland*” in 2007 (Ní Mhurchú, 2007) found that despite proactive initiatives, many immigrants (primarily non-EU nationals) in Ireland were prevented from practising in their professional area because of their inability to have their qualifications recognised by the relevant professional body in Ireland. The main fault lies with the administration systems which were designed for Irish applicants and did not have the flexibility to deal with exceptional cases. Additionally, in cases such as for the regulated professions, the information regarding recognition and registration of qualifications is not sufficiently communicated to employer or migrant bodies. However, professional bodies, such as An Bórd Altranais (Irish Nursing Board), have set precedents in best practice such as the ‘period of adaptation’ for those whose qualifications fall short of the requirements to be registered.

There is commentary on formative RPL or formative recognition frameworks already in use at sectoral level. In professional life the emphasis is not necessarily on upgrading *qualifications*, but *updating competence* (Witts, 2010). Therefore RPL could be used to match a competence-based HR system at the organisational level and a competence-based qualifications system at the national level; provided competence is based on learning outcomes (Duvekot, 2010). The idea of formative RPL is also gaining momentum currently as a tool to address the lack of formal qualifications of workers made redundant. However there is little information available about the impact of this type of recognition (or validation) on the individual; is it simply an exercise in confidence building or is it used to

further up-skill? (Sheehan, 2010). Projects investigating sectoral qualifications such as “*EQF and Compatibility of Sectoral Qualifications between the Countries*” (SECCOMPAT) and “*Marketing Sectoral National Qualifications Framework*” (MSNQF) are already at advanced stages. SECCOMPAT reported in 2009. It compared qualifications in the construction sector in Ireland, Lithuania, France, Czech Republic, and Austria reporting four different types of interaction with varying degrees of reference to NQFs, the EQF or no qualifications frameworks. The occurrence of initiatives for RPL such as the two above mentioned projects for sectoral qualifications are increasing. Some of these initiatives are described in the next section.

## **5.7 Local practice impacting on RPL policy development**

A final point in this chapter must be addressed in relation to RPL practice locally. There have been a range of initiatives taking place that have impacted on both RPL policy and practice in Ireland; some of these are outlined below. However, there is also a wealth of European and international RPL initiatives taking place in other regions in a similar vein, particularly significant for Ireland are efforts in Scotland, Wales, England, Northern Ireland, Australia, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, New Zealand, South Africa and Canada.

In Ireland, schemes emanating from the human capital discourse have been in evidence for many years. For example FÁS implemented the “*Excellence Through People*” quality training awards to promote the value of training and developing employees in the workplace. Also the “*Construction Skills Certification Scheme*” (CSCS) was launched in 1997 to develop and validate training and assessment programmes for non-craft occupations. This scheme, based on competence, required a review of competence at five-year intervals and included a registration card system (FÁS, 1999). FÁS was also involved in an APL (Accreditation of Prior

Learning) project with the ESB (Electricity Supply Board) to accredit prior learning in relation to craft skills, which commenced in 2000 (FÁS, 2001). The project used a combination of APL and additional training modules to accredit ESB line workers as recognised electricians with a National Craft Certificate (FÁS, 2001). FÁS have also recently introduced the “*CSCS Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Scheme*” where applicants may apply for exemptions from some or all elements of the “*CSCS New Entrants Programme*”. There are also opportunities now being created for redundant apprentices and crafts persons through the “*Certificate in Craft Transferable Skills*” which is a special purpose award at HETAC Level 6. An apprentice may use this award to enter into relevant Higher Certificate Programmes or Ordinary Degree Programmes (Stritch, 2011).

FETAC (Further Education and Training Awards Council) in 2005 set out a pilot project on the Implementation of the Recognition of Prior Learning that included such further education providers as:

- Construction Industry Federation
- Comhairle, Training and Development Service
- Eiri Corca Baiscinn
- Fáilte Ireland - the National Tourism Development Authority
- Killester College of Further Education
- Teagasc - Irish Agriculture and Food Development Authority
- Tallaght Partnership
- Chevron Training and Development (FETAC, 2007)

The project aimed to implement RPL policy with a number of providers using the FETAC “*Draft Guidelines on the Recognition of prior learning*” which had been prepared by FETAC earlier in 2005 (FETAC, 2007). Each provider offered RPL as a part of their activities. The result was that fifty learners achieved major and minor awards on the National Framework

of Qualifications. The resulting evaluation concentrated on feedback from the providers, learners and external examiners.

Another initiative, the Lónra APL project (2006-2007) was for the development and application of a standard model to recognise and accredit prior learning in information technology for companies operating in the BMW (Border, Midlands, Western) region, therefore the priority was on up-skilling employees as well as identifying skill gaps to be addressed. The project was one of the first initiatives to actively promote the concept and methodology of APL to industry. This project was funded by FÁS through the “Training for People in Employment” initiative (Keher, 2007). The aim was to offer those who qualified a fast track route to obtaining a Higher Certificate in participating third level institutes. The project was tied into the ‘one step up’ national initiative for those in employment to achieve or upgrade a qualification on the national framework of qualifications. Types of companies included call centres, retail outlets, hotels, financial institutions, community and leisure centres, private training companies, construction, ICT, and healthcare. There were APL workshops for staff in the participating institutes to prepare them for working with APL applicants. Information was disseminated to potential applicants through public information sessions, specifically targeting employers and introducing APL to them and holding in-company APL information sessions. The project revealed significant issues for APL at a systems level in institutes such as the recording of APL applicants and their results by the educational institutes and applicant appeals systems (Keher, 2007). Further issues included difficulties in explaining the concept, interpreting learning outcomes, high implementation costs, and maintenance of quality standards (Keher, 2007).

The Higher Education Authority (HEA) introduced the Strategic Innovation Fund in 2006 to enhance collaboration amongst higher education institutes in Ireland. One of the initiatives under this fund was the “*Education in Employment*” (EinE) project led by Cork Institute of Technology (Sheridan & Linehan, 2009). The project comprised four strands, one of which was the recognition of prior learning. While the project did not carry out RPL on a practical level, the project was significant for its inter-institutional sharing of RPL practice in the partner institutes.

As part of the EinE project the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), with Dundalk Institute of Technology, held a regional RPL seminar on 12<sup>th</sup> March 2009 on “*The Potential of RPL (Recognition of Prior Learning) in a Changing Economic and Employment Landscape*”. The seminar brought together RPL policy representatives and practitioners which included four cases from within the DIT itself where RPL has been developed for different work sectors: built environment, tourism and food, journalism, design, and electrical engineering. The main issues arising from the seminar were:

- A suggested review of the NQAI “*Principles and Operational Guidelines*” after four years of practice.
- A need to review RPL terminology.
- The issues of funding and resources overall for RPL.
- The varying levels of exemptions granted across institutes.
- A national strategy for RPL?
- The potential of RPL in the current unemployment crisis.
- Partnerships and collaboration across institutes and sectors.
- Academic rigour, fairness and consistency of judgements.
- Looking to why a business would want to carry out RPL for its employees (Duff, 2009).

In fact the DIT has had a long history of involvement in RPL policy and practice. It has taken part in a number of significant research projects such as the DIT/OMNA Project in early

childhood care and education, the WIT/NALA programme with literacy practitioners, VaLEx (Valuing Learning from Experience), and the HEQ\_Bridges Project: Building Bridges between the EQF-LLL and the QF-EHEA. In 2009 the DIT developed and ran a continuing professional development (CPD) course in RPL for higher education at level nine on the national framework of qualifications entitled *“Recognition of Prior Learning in Higher Education: policies, procedures and pedagogies”*. The programme has had several deliveries with participants from the universities, the DIT, HETAC and other third level institutes.

Athlone Institute of Technology delivers a number of programmes that include RPL and which are tied to companies and businesses such as a *‘Certificate in RPL Mentoring’* at level 6 aimed at HRM, HRD and educational organisations. The *‘Higher Certificate in Business’* which is delivered to Bord na Móna staff consists of twelve modules, four of which are through RPL (Doyle, 2009). Letterkenny Institute of Technology (LYIT) are also active in the promotion of RPL in the workplace, particularly as a result of their involvement in the Lónra project in 2006. In addition to facilitating learners to achieve modules at third level through RPL, LYIT has also developed a Level 7 Minor Award Programme *“Managing and Mentoring People”* for managerial level employees in organisations that are using RPL. They have also partnered with industry designing programmes to meet their needs combining RPL, work-based learning (WBL), Web communication technology, and mentoring (Doherty, 2009).

LYIT was also involved in the development of occupational qualifications for the retail sector in partnership with the IBEC Retail Skillnet. The Skillnets Ltd. organisation comprises networks of private sector companies through which Skillnets funds and facilitates training to member-companies. A four-year, part-time Ordinary Degree in Retail Management was



developed starting in 2009 using RPL and WBL with LYIT. The IBEC Retail Skillnet also offers FETAC Level 5 Awards through RPL in Retail Customer Service, Retail Selling, Communications, and Work Experience. These modules are assessed against the occupational standards and qualifications that were developed for the sector through the network (IBEC Retail Skillnet, 2008).

Therefore it is clear that RPL has taken a more prominent role in both further and higher education as well as on the labour market. In particular, RPL as a part of the Labour Activation (LMA) Programmes in Ireland to up-skill those recently made unemployed or redundant through the granting of credit towards an award or exemptions from parts of a programme of study is a significant example of the recent rapid advancement of RPL on the public policy agenda.

## **5.8 Chapter Summary**

This chapter attempts to locate the development of RPL in the global neo-liberal policy agendas structured around the market and human capital development. Policies for trade liberalisation such as GATS have run parallel to the developments of UNESCO and OECD policies to protect consumers, particularly in cross-border education. Development in cross-border education to ensure quality of service increasingly became tied, in the European context, to qualifications recognition, lifelong learning, and economic development. RPL has emerged in this context and most recently in response to the economic crisis when higher level skills and qualifications are perceived as having a greater currency on the market.

## *Chapter Six*

# **Historical Analysis of Previous industry-academic RPL Projects**

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## **6.1 Introduction**

The four projects for this historical analysis took place in Ireland between 1995 and 2005, OMNA-DIT/NOW under the auspices of the Employment NOW (New Opportunities for Women) programme, VaLEx under Socrates-Grundtvig, and the NUIM/NRB and WIT/NALA projects at the behest of the provider/awarding institutes in response to sectoral body initiatives and funded by the European Social Fund. They are significant projects because they marked a change from the traditional individual focus of AP(E)L or RPL to scaled-up models taking a collective or sectoral approach to RPL (Murphy, 2007).

This chapter will first present a brief overview of each the four projects followed by a discussion of the coding analysis under the six dimensions of valorisation, namely: Optimise value, sustainability, impact, transfer, visibility, and feed policy. These six dimensions will then be brought together to highlight the three overarching themes of *Pedagogy*, *Professional identity*, and *Uncertainty* that characterised the state of play of RPL at that time.

## **6.2 Overview of Projects**

The four projects examined as part of the historical analysis are described in terms of their main objectives, target groups and the contribution of RPL to each. The first project is that between the National University of Ireland Maynooth (NUIM) and the National Rehabilitation Board (NRB). The second project is between Waterford Institute of

Technology (WIT) and the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA). The third project is the OMNA/DIT-NOW Early Childhood Care Project and the fourth is the Valuing Learning from Experience (VaLEx) project. Table 6.1 below provides an overview of the four projects.

Table 6.1 Overview of project examined in historical study

<b>Project</b>	<b>Objective</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Target Group</b>
<b>NUIM/NRB</b>	Sectoral qualification and accreditation	Addition of AP(E)L element to extant professional qualification	Personnel with a record of rehabilitation training but no general training qualification.
<b>WIT/NALA</b>	Sectoral qualification and accreditation	AP(E)L and taught routes to professional qualification from the start	Literacy scheme organisers and workers
<b>OMNA-DIT/NOW</b>	Develop framework and quality standard for sectoral training 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.
<b>VaLEx</b>	AP(E)L pedagogical model and toolkit for access to higher education professional qualification	A sustainable and transformative model of AP(E)L in higher education	-Experienced practitioners without a professional qualification in their field of practice. -Learners likely to suffer from social exclusion

### **6.2.1 National University of Ireland Maynooth and National Rehabilitation Board**

In 1998 the National Training and Development Institute (NTDI-now the National Learning Network) and National University of Ireland Maynooth (NUIM) undertook the exploration of the 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 addressed 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 in which they could have confidence.

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 for 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 in these. A full list of the documents consulted for this project can be found in Appendix A.

### **6.2.2 Waterford Institute of Technology and National Adult Literacy Agency**

In 1996 the National Adult Literacy Agency (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. The Certificate was also aimed at supporting professional development, situating practice in a theoretical framework for good practice, and providing access to third level qualifications. The programmes were based on NALA principles for adult learning in which adult learners are active participants in the learning process, the focus is on development of the whole person rather than solely specific skills and that learning is a lifelong process (NALA, 2005). 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 relatively new and practice was limited. However, it was the intention, from the beginning, to have a mechanism for accrediting prior learning (Interviewee 2, February 18, 2009). The course was piloted between February 1997 and October 1998.

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 certificate by way of RPL, was transferred into the teaching and delivery of the course (Interviewee 2, February 18, 2009). There were six modules in the National Certificate in Training and Development Adult Basic Education – Management that were provided as AP(E)L modules. These were:

- Public Relations/Media Skills
- Adult Teaching Skills
- Groupwork
- Evaluation of [literacy] scheme
- Literacy Methodologies
- Computer Applications

The NCEA set a maximum of 50% of course requirements that could be achieved through RPL. Additionally, assessors had to be satisfied that learners conformed to at least 50% of the syllabus (list of topics/items to be covered) content. The assessment system was on a pass/fail basis and some learners stated that they would have preferred grading instead. These restrictions were a hindrance to RPL because they implied that experiential learning had a lower status than formal learning as well as making it procedurally more difficult.

The original certificate has since been developed further to BA Ordinary and Honours level, but at this stage 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. A full list of the documents consulted for this project can be found in Appendix B.

### **6.2.3 OMNA-DIT/NOW Early Childhood Project**

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 (APEL-Accreditation of Prior Experience and Learning, in this instance) component was initiated in OMNA I to offer accreditation against a national standard, the *“Guide to Essential Skills and Knowledge for ECCE”*. The majority of workers in the area had a diverse range of training and experience, but no specific national certification in ECCE. The RPL component was specifically aimed at a sector within which it was not feasible to take up full- or part- time study to achieve a qualification. 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. Portfolios were not graded, rather candidates were deemed either competent or not yet competent against the common standards. There were seven different modules broken down into specific skills and knowledge at each qualification level from foundation to postgraduate level. Within



each qualification level there were criteria of competence to be achieved, of which each candidate had to achieve a minimum of 70%. As APL was not related to an award candidates could apply for 100% of modules through APL. 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 – APL Cluster Groups - set up and evaluated in OMNA I and II. The first was in Ennis, Co. Clare in May 1996 and the second took place between December 1996 and June 1997 after changes had been made to the APL system from evaluation of the first pilot. The APL cluster groups were regional, this was essentially a way to maximise resources, but was also beneficial to workers in the ECCE sector to gain a network of professional practice. 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-DIT/NOW, 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 play a part, 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. A full list of the documents consulted for this project can be found in Appendix C.

#### **6.2.4 Valuing Learning from Experience (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 the traditional higher education competence approach for credit exchange. It was underpinned by work-based learning theory and learning-in-practice for professional development (Murphy, 2007). It was also the only one of these four projects that was in a position to use the Irish National Framework of Qualifications as well as the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland's (NQAI, 2005) *"Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning in Further and Higher Education"*. The model was piloted with experienced social care workers who had no previous professional qualifications in social care or experience of higher education. Two degree programmes were made available for participants to achieve 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 (in-service) at DIT and the

Bachelor of Arts in Applied Social Studies (Disability) at the Open Training College. The modules available for exemption were (Murphy, 2007):

- DIT: (i) *Principles of Professional Practice* (ii) *Health and Well-being*
- OTC: (i) *Introduction to disability* (ii) *Health, Safety and Personal Care*

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 model relied on more than just the traditional presentation of evidence in portfolio which was often considered time-consuming, individualist, and technical, although a portfolio was still one of the approaches considered for recognition or assessment. Critical reflection on life history and professional experience was also a key element of the model as well as developing academic capabilities to survive in higher education (Murphy, 2007).

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 also to advance the above-mentioned previous models of scaled-up RPL for vocational/professional areas, all three of which drew on different theoretical and pedagogical approaches (Murphy, 2007). VaLEx 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). The model also targeted hard-to-reach learners that despite rhetoric of lifelong learning to the contrary, tended to be socially excluded from formal learning and RPL. To that end the model attempted to emphasise the transformative potential of RPL as a means to widen participation and develop learner identities for non-traditional learners.

VaLEx was to enable RPL for both formative and summative recognition. Here, summative recognition is described as RPL for credit, or AP(E)L. The model provides for a flexible approach to recognition or assessment depending on the purpose for which the RPL claim is made; formative (confidence-building, personal learning or development plan) or summative (entry and/or credit within a formal programme of study towards a qualification). Formative assessment can act as a starting point for making a claim for summative recognition. Two Valex modules were created as part of the project. Valex 1 was to enable learners to recognise the knowledge and skills they had gained through life and work experience, as part of a process of self-evaluation of their personal and professional capacities. Valex 2 built on the formative recognition of Valex 1 as a means to achieve credit for prior learning at third level or summative recognition. In the Dublin pilot the learners met for eight separate three-hour AP(E)L session over two months between March and May 2005. The result was that 14 volunteers participated in the pilot in Dublin, with seven learners each completing portfolios for each of the DIT and OTC modules from which they would be exempted when enrolling on the degree programme. A full list of the documents consulted for this project can be found in Appendix D.

### 6.3 Discussion of results of the Valorisation analysis

As already mentioned the analysis was based around the concept of valorisation with the structured coding of interview transcripts with project members undertaken as well as supporting project documents. Six conceptual phrases relating to specific research questions for this historical study were applied to the four interview transcripts (Soldaña, 2009):

- Optimise value - How did RPL optimise the value of the project for stakeholders?
- Sustainability – How did RPL improve the sustainability of the results?
- Impact – How did RPL strengthen the impact of the project?
- Transfer – How did RPL provide for the transfer of the results of the project to other contexts or target groups?
- Visibility – How did RPL strengthen the visibility of the project?
- Feeding policy – How did RPL feed or influence policy or programmes?

Quotes from the data have been used to illustrate each of the six conceptual phrases listed above. In some parts of the data “X” has been substituted for any identifying names or places; this does not detract from the overall understanding in the extracts quoted. For each project there was one interview conducted. Interviewees correspond to each project as follows:

- Interviewee 1: National University of Ireland, Maynooth and National Rehabilitation Board project.
- Interviewee 2: Waterford Institute of Technology and National Adult Literacy Agency project.
- Interviewee 3: OMNA-DIT/NOW project.
- Interviewee 4: Valuing Learning from Experience, VaLEX project.

The drivers for RPL, as evidenced here, were the professional sectors themselves; from experienced practitioners who had little or no access to professional qualification, certification or formal institutional/third-level training. In all cases the process was referred to as AP(E)L reflecting the terminology of the time and in the case of OMNA the theoretical concept behind the model which was very much focused on experience, which the project

found was sometimes lost in the term RPL. This AP(E)L-RPL evolution was already discussed in chapter four.

RPL use in education is stated for the specific purposes of access, transfer or progression (NQAI, 2005) in further and higher education. This does not necessarily offer a translation mechanism between academic learning and learning from practice, however the case of VaLEx showed the potential to link the scholarship and practice of AP(E)L and WBL (Work-based learning) in higher education curriculum design (Koivisto, 2005). In fact these projects highlighted the potential to link higher education and the workplace through AP(E)L and WBL rather than offering direct translations of experience to outcomes of learning.

The six dimensions of Valorisation will now be discussed further below.

### **6.3.1 Optimise value**

Optimising value means to fully exploit the outcomes of the project. The RPL initiatives described here were mechanisms to address a particular demand from practitioners which could ultimately add value, and increase the usefulness of the project/programme/curriculum developed for each stakeholder. The value was to open up an education/training route based on professional rather than academic standards because using RPL and WBL (Work-based learning) in the curriculum reconceptualised the context for education and training, distinct from the traditional model of higher education. There was a balance that had to be maintained throughout the process because the credibility of the recognised achievement rested on its fit with the traditional or standard route to education and training as well as the buy-in from the practitioner-learners. To that end RPL was a valuable addition to each project. However, because it had to be moulded to extant

curriculum models of assessment and quality assurance RPL in these projects faced a number of procedural hurdles.

RPL had a pedagogical value for learners in the projects with regard to the identification of gaps in their own professional knowledge as well as the value of the experience of going through the process itself. In other words RPL became more than a simple assessment tool. Rather it was a means of locating one's level of expertise in comparison to others and validating one's professional standing. Furthermore, while giving exemptions for advanced standing in a programme was not a huge additional value to the learners; its value came from the fact that it was an affirmation of their capabilities:

Interviewee 3	<i>"I think we would probably say that one of the most beneficial elements of the project was to help people recognise the gaps in their own knowledge and to foreground the more actually professional dimension of their work. It was a very strong learning experience".</i>
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In the case of VaLEx there was an added technological or infrastructural value from AP(E)L to test new technologies such as the National Framework of Qualifications, learning outcomes, and modularisation. RPL was more accepted by that time as the emphasis was placed on a flexible learning infrastructure which was in contrast to the ambivalence experienced in the earlier projects on the part of educational policy bodies with regard to the ability to credit prior learning.

In addition to the pedagogical and technological value of RPL there was also a professional value in the creation of a professional identity. The aspect of professional identity for the individual and for the sector was an important factor not only in the creation of professional

qualifications or standards such as in the cases of NUIM/NRB and OMNA, but also the ability to access or achieve a professional qualification through RPL and thereby value individual knowledge and skills and the collective knowledge and skills of the sector in its own right:

Interviewee 4	<i>“In higher education and if it’s a thing you’re trying to professionalise a sector you also need them to become professional practitioners in the sector to raise the collective competence and professionalism of the sector...to professionalise the sector by making people in it aware of the knowledge that circulates and the value of that knowledge”.</i>
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Professionalising sectors was also a matter of regulation and it was important for practitioners to have an appropriate and reliable qualification for practice, particularly where no previous common standards had existed. RPL played a key role in linking professional skills and experience with a professional qualification. This also added to the idea of a professional identity already mentioned above.

There was also a social value in group RPL where a professional network of people could offer support and learn from each other, creating a community of practitioners. This scaled-up RPL also offered economies of scale:

Interviewee 3	<i>“That’s why I think the value, the value we felt of clusters, even if it was only a cluster of four because there was network and peer support which we built up, that was really important”.</i>
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### **6.3.2 Sustainability**

Sustainability concerns the ability of the project to continue its existence beyond its end point. The question of sustainability is more difficult to address because in all cases, with the exception of VaLEx, the RPL element was 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 it was another facet of it. It should be considered that in the cases of the literacy tutors, the special needs trainers and the ECCE practitioners the



qualification or professional standard was a mile-stone. Furthermore, an interesting point to do with the potential of RPL was that once established, the Certificate in Training (Special Needs) sought the provision of APEL. Since VaLEx, positions have been changing and models for practice have emerged that consider the work context and the higher education context. For example, in these earlier projects the cumbersome portfolio of paper evidence was found to be a very difficult option for those working full time or who may not have had 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 has greatly improved. This is particularly evident in the current government and university partnerships for up-skilling and re-skilling the unemployed labour force. These labour force activation schemes in DIT (Dublin Institute of Technology) have successfully employed a modified Europass CV to compile a profile of a potential candidate's experiential and formal learning.

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 have already taken place (Brennan, 2008) and knowledge and skills that need to be developed further. The RPL option continues to be offered in all of the original programmes mentioned, but often not explicitly. Partnerships with sectoral or training bodies (National Learning Network, National Adult Literacy Agency) were, and are, also important for the longevity of RPL.

A disjunction that emerged in the RPL projects described here was that between the original pedagogical concept of RPL in the projects and the concept as utilised in practice. Much of

this related to the absence of those who spearheaded the process in the first place, which when rolled out, then reverted to prescriptive check lists of outcomes to be evidenced in order to achieve a direct translation from evidence of learning to learning outcomes. As already mentioned perhaps it is more prudent to think in terms of the potential to link the worlds of education and the worlds of work than to directly translate one to the other.

A key factor in the sustainability of the projects was the buy-in from practitioners and all other stakeholders, not just of the RPL element, but of the overall pedagogical approach to practitioner development. However, there was some ambivalence on the part of the National Council for Educational Awards at the time with regard to crediting prior learning. The concerns were primarily operational, but set against a backdrop of philosophical resistance to the idea:

Interviewee 2	<i>“So I suppose the impetus for it all came from the fact that we were working with a very experienced group of practitioners who wanted access to third level qualifications but who were very clear that they wanted some sort of recognition for the experience and learning that they were bringing to the course and were reluctant to sit through modules where they felt they’d already met those learning outcomes”.</i>
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Evidence of the take-up of RPL following on from the projects is limited, but it is worth noting some of the implication of the RPL ethos that emerged from those projects, particularly with regard to the acknowledgement at policy level that practical experience could result in legitimate knowledge which could be recognised, assessed and validated:

Interviewee 2	<i>“But again, once it moved out of our department it took on a life of its own in other areas”.</i> <i>“I suppose I just feel disappointed that something that had so much potential never got a chance to go any further, you know to bring it past its initial intent. Though it probably had, and I’m probably not even aware of some of the implications it’s had beyond on the project in that I do know that other areas of the college now offer a form of APEL as well”.</i>
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The factor of time and monetary costs proved both a help and a hindrance in each of the different projects as interviewees differed in their perceptions of the overall cost of RPL. The specific monetary costs of RPL for the NUIM-NRB project were conceived as the cost to the individual and were calculated on the basis of services performed for the individual rather than number of exemptions achieved. In the case of WIT-NALA the cost was IR£250 for participating in the APEL programme to achieve what was, at the time, a national certificate. There was the option to do single modules at IR£5 each with an additional IR£10 for final assessment. In the case of OMNA there was a cost of IR£50 for an APL information pack followed by IR£50 for a portfolio building pack and an additional IR£50 for any additional RPL modules. The costs, however, of developing and implementing the process are not clear; the emphasis was on making RPL feasible for the individual looking to enter into the education system. Therefore RPL was promoted as a cost-effective alternative to mainstream educational routes to achieve qualifications. Yet interviewees differed on their perceptions of costs, and costing practices today continue to differ amongst RPL provider bodies:

Interviewee 2	<i>“This would have been a big selling point for the programme originally, you know, in terms of recruiting...It was a big selling point with the Department of Education as well in that it had implications for funding because it was cheaper to APEL than to do taught residential modules”.</i>
Interviewee 3	<i>“It’s actually a very expensive and time consuming process if you’re doing it as a real pedagogical initiative”.</i>

In many ways RPL has been disadvantaged by the costing structure surrounding it. For example, it is often the case that the cost for gaining a module exemption through RPL is the same as the cost of the module itself. Furthermore, RPL claimants are not charged for exemptions as a result of certificated learning; placing greater value on certificated learning.

### **6.3.3 Impact**

Impact relates to the effects on systems and practices. At a practical level RPL in each project achieved its goals 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 NUIM, 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 that was created through the project and then go onto higher education, and the VaLEx Dublin Pilot Project participants were able to access a degree programme at advanced standing. 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 them against their existing knowledge and skills was considered to be a learning process in itself (NUIM Evaluation Questionnaire, 1998). From participant evaluations of the NUIM, WIT, VaLEx and OMNA projects, it was found that 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. The VaLEx model has also gone on to influence the RPL Toolkit of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework Partnership.

The impact of RPL on practice at a sectoral level and institutional level varied as already mentioned, but the impact on thinking about learning and learning from life and work experience appeared to be significant. This was particularly evident in the acceptance of RPL as an assessment tool as well as RPL as a learning process in itself. At issue was how to transfer that thinking into practice and how RPL could maintain the principles of the original projects in practice:

Interviewee 2	<p><i>“So we had a certain amount of information about APEL, about implementing it, but its impact on course design hadn’t been thought through. So the next time that we went through a programmatic review we took that into account because we now had built up what the implications were for course and development”.</i></p> <p><i>“So while it was developed originally as a way of sort of assessing, you know, learning that’s been gained experientially or through certification, it became, a lot of that learning was transferred through to the taught courses as a pedagogical tool in reflexivity. So, that was really really good, and that’s lived on today, you know, very much so, and has become very core in our teaching because we’re working towards reflective practitioners”.</i></p>
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The issue of resourcing and cost as already mentioned in the context of sustainability also emerged with regard to the potential impact the projects and RPL had or could have had on the various systems and practices in which they operated. Part of this was also the impact that RPL had on pedagogical theory, but there was difficulty in articulating concepts like the identification and self-awareness of gaps in one’s knowledge in higher education practice. This highlights again the disjuncture between the advances of RPL theory without a commensurate advance in practice. There were identified target groups who demanded APEL but the resources were not put in place to supply them. This discrepancy has also revealed some of the tensions with regard to differences in the values that were placed on experiential versus certificated learning as already mentioned in section 6.3.2 with regard to costing structures for RPL.

### **6.3.4 Transfer**

Transfer is the adaptation and further development of the results of a 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, but the resources were not made available to offer it. Furthermore it was adapted, in that instance, by the Regional Educational Guidance Service as an access tool rather than for exemptions. It might also be

interesting to note the potential of RPL that was raised for industry as a diagnostic tool instead of the process of annual evaluations where prior learning would be measured against the standards for performance of a specific job.

The adaptation of each particular RPL model to other target groups is a key aspect of transferability and raised individual issues in each case. One of the key problems surrounding the transferability of RPL in these projects was that it was not adopted into policy and therefore its spread was informal and therefore limited. A second key problem was whether it was possible to transfer both the philosophy as well as the operational mechanisms of an RPL model, particularly when valuing prior learning towards an award. It is a distinction between whether RPL is seen as a pedagogical approach or an assessment process:

Interviewee 3	<i>“I think what I learned in terms of transferability is that if you only transfer the mechanistic dimensions and don’t bed it well in you know with a really strong content, which is the way I think really FÁS did it then you’re, I think you’re losing the power of APEL and I think you’re probably doing it a disservice in treating it as a pedagogical approach to further learning and development”.</i>
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At the specific institutional level there was another transfer issue at play. This was the adaptation of traditionally taught modules for APEL. Experiential learning made this adaptation more difficult because of the inherent uncertainty that came with using individual experience and measuring it against formal learning outcomes:

Interviewee 2	<i>“So the higher certificate programme was written to be taught. And then we were tinkering around with it to make it fit APEL”.</i>
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### **6.3.5 Visibility**

In terms of visibility, outside of the target groups the RPL element was not hugely noticeable. It was not easily located in academic programme documents or programme web

sites and the terminology varied in each institute and programme. However, there were large-scale dissemination events for the OMNA and VaLEX projects, with VaLEX even hosting its own website [www.valex-apel.com](http://www.valex-apel.com). These were the exceptions and for students investigating the possibility of RPL they would have had to be intentionally pursuing it as an option rather than stumbling upon it when investigating possibilities for further or flexible education or training. The visibility was really limited to the target groups for each project, therefore RPL became immersed in specific, short-term, small-scale initiatives that were demand-led and case specific. However, this does not imply a failure on the part of RPL because it was successful in the initiatives of which it was a part.

In all of the projects the visibility of RPL amongst the target groups ensured it had high take-up rates. In the larger European funded OMNA and VaLEX projects there was a requirement for the projects and their activities to be presented to potentially interested users and, as such, more activity was evident in these cases. There was also the added advantage that RPL was tied to new developments in the accreditation of practitioners and therefore there was a huge take-up of these new awards and thereby of RPL.

This visibility dimension highlights the need for research on RPL to identify appropriate target groups for whom it is useful because when properly targeted it is much more appropriate to think in terms of return on investment.

### **6.3.6 Feeding Policy**

Feeding policy concerns how activities impact on policy and practice. RPL has grown, primarily because of the impact and transferability possibilities it offers. It is perceived as a key component of 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 have been put in place. RPL at a policy level was spearheaded by the NCEA (National Council for Educational Awards-now HETAC) and it has been taken forward by the Irish APEL Network (first convened in 1997), and 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 research study. The Strategic Innovation Fund RPL Project was also influential in promoting institutional cooperation in RPL development, and which published its final report in 2009. 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.

A key point with these projects was whether the ultimate objective was to influence higher education practice or national policy. There are quite a number of policy threads running through these RPL projects. The first relates to the change in education from an elite form to a universal form which should be accompanied by relevant changes in ideas about knowledge, learning, procedures and policy. Of particular concern was quality standards and



how to ensure these before RPL could have a broader policy impact. And in fact the stigma of compromised quality has attached itself to RPL and has slowed down its development. This is particularly evident in perceptions of RPL being a less demanding route to a qualification, when as experience has shown, it is not.

Interviewee 3	<i>“It raised of course a whole lot of educational issues around, I mean we had things like, you know, of so there are this many learning outcomes on this module and this person is showing evidence of having achieved these outcomes, well do they have to show evidence of achieving learning outcomes all of the learning outcomes? Is it a cumulative effect of some of the learning outcomes, are there core learning or isn’t all learning outcomes a core learning outcome and then what would be a pass at a learning outcome level? So we had huge pedagogical discussions around standards and quality”.</i>
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A second thread was embedding an RPL policy within the higher education institute, which at the time proved very difficult without the force of policy behind it like today. With the slight exceptions of the OMNA and VaLEx projects there was limited institutional spread of RPL and it was perceived more for the use of providing access at an advanced standing for practitioners to higher level professional qualifications. Therefore it became part of the fast-tracking infrastructure through higher education.

There were also some divergence between the social justice remit of RPL policy and the practice of providing evidence of skills and experience, which was often not suitable for practitioners who lacked higher level study skills.

## **6.4 Themes Emerging**

This analysis formed the starting point for the subsequent two studies of this research. The valorisation approach was a useful instrument to examine the projects from a return on investment perspective. It is more appropriate to think about the valorisation of these

projects in the round than within six separate dimensions as similar themes emerged in each of the six categories.

It is necessary to remember that these projects took place either before or when RPL (APEL) and many of the technologies that are a normal part of academic systems today were in their infancies. This includes programmes of study based on learning outcomes, modularisation, national qualifications frameworks, Bologna framework, Lisbon process, European Principles on the validation of non-formal and informal learning etc. As such the issues that confronted them differ, to a certain extent, from those of later RPL initiatives.

#### **6.4.1 Pedagogy**

One of the first themes that emerged in this analysis was the matter of pedagogy. There was the pedagogical value in the revelation for the individual to identify their own levels of knowledge, skill and competence as well as gaps in these. This act of self-actualisation was also at the sectoral level, creating an awareness of the knowledge and skills that existed in a particular profession as well as an appreciation and legitimisation for professional knowledge and learning by those individuals, the sector, and to a lesser extent higher education. The differentiated acknowledgement of learning from outside the academy manifested in different ways for each project, and was problematic for the OMNA project because there was no specific award against which to base accreditation. Pedagogical value was also a matter of the value placed on the two processes of the recognition of experience and the accreditation of experience. It was often the former that was perceived of as having greater use value in the long-run even when accreditation was achieved.

The theme of pedagogy was also in relation to conceptualisations of teaching and learning where all stakeholders had to gain an understanding of learning that included learning in working life. However, it was problematic to reconcile an APEL social project aimed at placing a pedagogical value on learning from experience with the academic project of standardised modules and assessment. In some cases this translated RPL into a checklist assessment procedure that pushed experience to the side-lines, and certificated learning to the foreground. This was also a matter of the questions surrounding how to articulate a taught module in the language of RPL, particularly in the beginning when there were no examples from which to draw. Therefore advances in practice lagged behind advances in theory and the format and structures for formal learning were at the basis of streamlining RPL practice.

#### **6.4.2 Professional identity**

A second theme of professional identity emerged with regard to these projects. This involved creating a professional identity for practitioners who had up to that point not always been recognised as a unified community of practice. This professional identity was facilitated by a scaled-up approach to RPL where the social justice aspect of RPL was tied to creating a network of learning practitioners. However, there tended to be a discord between facilitating learners without a traditional educational background into the culture of higher education and the difficulties many learners had in adapting to that. This raised questions around assessment procedures and much of the RPL work in these projects was based on the quality of RPL in higher educational practice rather than influencing national policy.

### **6.4.3 Uncertainty**

The third theme of uncertainty was also apparent in these projects. There was an emphasis on promoting RPL at the individual level and many educational institutes found that the resources required to provide information to and process RPL learners were in excess to those required for standard learners, at issue was that these were considered non-standard learners for the institute and non-standard implied uncertainty.

There was also uncertainty with regard to transferring RPL to different contexts and target groups. The broad potential for RPL as well as the context-specific nature of these RPL projects meant that it was not necessarily straightforward to identify future targets for these specific RPL models, except in the case of VaLEx and OMNA whose RPL models were less tied to specific qualifications. This also impacted on the visibility of RPL at this time which was very much confined to the target groups of the projects. Therefore promotion of RPL was limited to those target groups. This was not disadvantageous to the core objectives of the projects. As such, the costs of RPL were conceived in terms of cost to the individual rather than cost to the organisation where, without tangible evidence, support in the form of funding was not prioritised.

## **6.5 Chapter Summary**

This chapter has looked at RPL from an historical perspective when RPL was still in its infancy to chart its progression from initial attempts at operationalising it through to current practices in chapter seven and future perspectives in chapter eight. The study used valorisation as a vehicle through which to conceive of the impact of RPL theory and practice in industry and higher education. These first RPL activities formed the basis on which further RPL work was based. They highlighted the opportunities RPL could provide for people in the

workplace who had developed skills through non-formal or informal learning but also raised the many complexities that RPL brings into the education arena. These include perceptions around traditional learning as the sole route to qualifications, the amount of work involved in an RPL claim and subsequent participation in education. Many of these issues are built on and discussed further in chapter seven which looks at sixteen case studies of RPL in companies and organisations in Ireland.

## *Chapter Seven*

# **Comparative Analysis of Company Case Studies in RPL Practice**

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### **7.1 Introduction**

The purpose of these case studies is to explore whether there is a return on investment to companies and organisations that use RPL (Recognition of Prior Learning). In most cases RPL has taken the form of 'learning and development' strategies within the organisations as well as within specific projects employing RPL to meet regulatory qualifications requirements, to gain funding, and to address the need for up-skilling in certain professions. These case studies are exploratory in that they seek the perceptions of the primary organisational stakeholders (company/organisation, employee, society) about the ROI from RPL. They are looking at what companies/organisations currently do with regard to RPL and to determine what is the impact from RPL in the company/organisational context.

### **7.2 Discussion of the results of the case study analysis**

There were sixteen cases examined in the final sample. These cases included six professional/sectoral/regulatory bodies, five private limited companies, two training companies and three voluntary/community organisations. These are elaborated further in table 7.1 below. It should be noted that five of the cases *did not* carry out RPL, but rather were interested in its use or were starting to implement it. They are underlined in table 7.1. Eleven of the cases *did* have RPL systems in place.

Table 7.1 Overview of cases of RPL

<b>Company/Organisation Type</b>	<b>Form of RPL</b>
1. Irish Professional Body (One interviewee)	Experiential learning route to membership and professional title
2. National Sectoral Authority (One interviewee)	Recognition of formal qualifications for state aid and admission to industrial training programmes
3. Regional Training Network (One interviewee)	Specific RPL project in healthcare sector to up-skill workers in order to achieve qualifications to meet regulatory requirements
4. National Service-Oriented Agency (One interviewee)	Staff/Member training accredited by FETAC with possibility to achieve accreditation through RPL
5. Irish Professional Regulatory Body (One interviewee)	<u>Regulation</u> of profession through recognition of current competence
6. International Service Management Company (One interviewee)	<u>Interested in RPL</u> for staff personal and career development
7. International Restaurant Chain (One interviewee)	Management training programme in partnership with third level institution includes RPL for exemptions as a result of company training
8. Banking and Financial Services Organisation (One interviewee)	<u>Interested in RPL</u> for staff personal and career development. Use of RPL for exemptions in modular distance learning programme.
9. Private Training Provider (One interviewee)	<u>Tendered for project</u> for RPL route to FETAC award
10. Sectoral Support Service for Professionals and Service Providers (Two interviewees)	APEL route to FETAC sectoral qualification
11. Private Training Provider (One interviewee)	Specific RPL project for management training in healthcare sector to achieve FETAC award
12. International Private Manufacturing Company (One interviewee)	Development of accredited certificate and degree programmes in partnership with third level institute for staff. Access through RPL.
13. National Community Agency (One interviewee)	FETAC accredited programme for supervisory staff through RPL
14. International Private Software Development Company (One interviewee)	Development of accredited programmes for staff in partnership with third level institution with exemptions through RPL or stand alone RPL awards
15. National Community Charity (One interviewee)	<u>Attempted RPL</u> for staff as part of tailored training offerings
16. Sectoral Training Network (One interviewee)	Partnership with third level institute to offer certificate, bachelor and master programmes including facility for exemptions through RPL

The case studies were of two broad category types:

1. Discussing RPL practice (cases 1-4, 7, 10-13) Cases **did** practice RPL.
2. Discussing the idea of using RPL in practice (cases 5-6, 8-9, 15) Cases **did not** practice RPL.

To that end the interview schedules were adapted by focusing on the expectations of RPL for the latter category. The data was collected from each case using three methods:

- the use of existing company/organisation data such as annual reports, RPL documents (course documents, brochures, student evaluations), organisational mission statements, as a means of triangulating data,
- the collection of data on RPL return on investment from key learning and development personnel using semi-structured interviews,
- short, highly targeted self-completion questionnaires to collect data from key informants on immediate and longer term organisational benefits for use in the analysis.

The subsequent sub-sections will present the case study analysis using D. Phillips' (2006a; 2006b) model of case study comparison, drawing on elements of grounded theory.

### **7.2.1 Conceptualisation of RPL in the cases**

The conceptualisation of RPL in companies and organisations forms part of the larger discussion of RPL as outlined in the literature review chapters therefore there will be only a brief overview given here.

This research aimed to build on previous initiatives in Ireland. These include the FETAC (Further Education and Training Awards Council) pilot project (2007) on RPL launched in December 2005 with nine providers (Construction Industry Federation, Citizens Information Board, Failte Ireland, Killester College of Further Education, Security Institute of Ireland, Kilrush Community Childcare Early Years Project, Tallaght Partnership, Teagasc, and Chevron



Training Services). There are also initiatives from higher education such as those described in the previous chapter.

These case studies draw primarily from the previous studies conducted for the OECD Country Background Report for the Recognition of non-formal and informal learning in Ireland in 2008 as well as the Lónra project evaluation in 2007, which identified various benefits to companies and organisations that invested in RPL. Furthermore, continuous OECD work on the recognition of non formal and informal learning, such as their recently published report, *“Recognising Non-Formal and Informal Learning: Outcomes: Policies and Practices”* (OECD, 2010) also charts a range of benefits that recognition can deliver such as economic, social and education benefits. The work of Forfás (EGFSN, 2011) is also significant where RPL is considered a key strategy for up-skilling in Ireland as part of the National Skills Strategy. However, it would be not be prudent at this point to suggest that the benefits of RPL outweigh its costs, as suggested in both of the aforementioned reports, at least not as a broad sweeping statement, but rather more in a planned and targeted approach which the latter report does go in some way to suggest.

### **7.2.2 Contextualisation of RPL in the cases**

As already mentioned, contextualisation, the second stage of D. Phillips’ (2006a; 2006b) model, is a detailed analysis of the issues as manifest in each context. For this part of the research there are sixteen contexts to present and analyse. A part of this analysis included what Strauss and Corbin term open coding, which is disaggregating the data into units to reveal the thoughts, ideas and meanings they contain (Deller, 2007).

Each transcript was given a number between one and sixteen with accompanying organisation/company documents also given the same number to keep individual case data together. To start the process each of the sixteen transcripts and some relevant company documents were manually coded descriptively. Descriptive coding summarises the basic topic in the data, this acted as an initial way to familiarise myself with the data and begin to analyse it in a more structured fashion. In addition to the descriptive coding described above I also coded the data manually using evaluation coding and values coding. Evaluation coding places non-quantitative codes that assign judgments about the merits or worth of a programme or policy, in this case those codes were based on return on investment (ROI) and social return on investment (SROI). Values coding concerns personal values, attitudes and beliefs (Saldaña, 2009) and was used because of the emergence of organisational and personal views on investment in learning and development. This is where the analysis deviates from pure grounded theory which would utilise in vivo coding (using codes taken directly from the data) in as much as possible to let the data speak for itself. To a large extent many of the codes are, in fact, in vivo codes as it was attempted to limit my own interpretations of the data, however the nature of the research question and framework of analysis allowed for deviations from this. SROI was also taken into account in the data analysis and is compatible with D. Phillips' (2006a; 2006b) model of case study comparison in taking into account the political, social, economic, and historical aspects of each case. It is also worth taking note of Roger Kaufman's Five Levels of return on investment which includes the fifth level of social return.

As recommended by Saldaña (2009) the data were also coded according to the four main topics examined through my interview schedule. This could be classed as structural coding,

which applies a content-based or conceptual phrase representing a topic of inquiry to segments of data that relate to specific research questions used to frame the interview (Saldaña, 2009). There were four main topics examined in each interview, but it was found when coding that a fifth topic emerged, but which was not a specific topic of inquiry during the interviews. This step was carried out using Nvivo, a qualitative data analysis software package. It is a useful tool to organise the data and assign properties to the code categories as well as record annotations or memos that were noted during the manual descriptive coding stage. Annotations were used primarily to record any questions or points of interest that occurred to me during coding.

The five structural code categories were:

1. Aims and objectives of RPL
2. Costs and benefits of RPL
3. Organisational Strategy
4. Overall RPL Assessment
5. Learning and Development (RPL) models

The fifth category of Learning and Development (RPL) models was not part of the original interview schedule, but was a category that emerged during the coding. Within three of these categories (numbers 2, 3, 5) there were further subdivisions during this first coding stage as shown in table 7.2 below as a result of the evaluation and values coding. It was felt necessary to look at the data in a number of different ways to explore as many avenues of analysis as possible so as not to miss any points in the analysis.

Table 7.2 Sub-codes in Round One – Open Coding

<b>2. Costs and Benefits of RPL</b>	<b>3. Organisational Strategy</b>	<b>5. Learning and Development (RPL) Models</b>
Access to qualification or accreditation	Enabling access to award or title	Competence standards
Alternate pathway to qualification/accreditation	Ensuring standards or rigour	Extent of RPL
Attractive to industry	Meet demand	Formal learning
Awareness of RPL	Opportunities for CPD	Performance appraisal
Employability	Organisational management	RPL as a matching exercise
Employee motivation	Professional formation	RPL structure
Employee/Member satisfaction	Qualification equivalence	Sectoral/professional awards
Employee turnover	RPL assessment	Technical and transferable skills
Examiners, interviewers, mentors, assessors	RPL costing structure	
Flexibility	RPL integrated into L&D	
Language of RPL	Supportive RPL structure	
Limits of RPL	Training needs	
Mobility	Type of RPL learner	
Monetary costs and benefits	Value of learning	
Mutual recognition of qualifications		
Organisational performance		
Personal development		
Planning learning pathways		
Professional development		
Profitability		
Quality assurance		
Recording of informal, non-formal learning		
Recruitment		
Reputation		
Re-skilling		
RPL facilitated by competence		
RPL for credit		
RPL for exemptions		
RPL for individual		
RPL for societal benefit		
RPL for transfer		
RPL to fast track to award or title		
RPL to meet regulations		
RPL to recognise learning/training		
Social inclusion		
Social justice		
Time cost of RPL		

A refinement of the initial round of open coding (structural, descriptive, values and evaluative) was undertaken to ungroup, regroup and rename the categories and thereby subdivide and refine all five original categories. To do this, for each case, each code and sub-code and the data under each were examined using Nvivo, which was very helpful at this stage of the analysis. The five codes and their corresponding sub-codes were then listed in an excel spreadsheet. This was used to compile a combined list of codes and sub-codes in order to remove any repetition of codes, this list comprised ninety-seven codes in total. Additionally, a table of parallel case descriptions, which can be found in Appendix J, was put together for each case under the following headings:

- Company/Organisation Type
- Numbers (of RPL learners and cost of RPL)
- Form of RPL Used
- Mission/Values
- Strategic Goals
- Historical Context (traditions, stability in organisation)
- Political Context (relationship between State and company/organisation/sector/profession)
- Economic Context (Economic reasons for RPL)
- Social Context (Social questions implied in RPL)

This table represented D. Phillips' (2006) parallel descriptions of data in each context. Using the interview data associated with each code and sub-code and the information from the table of parallel descriptions outlined above, the codes were re-categorised into eleven categories of codes and their associated sub-codes and descriptors. Table 7.3 below outlines these eleven codes and their associated sub-codes.

Table 7. 3. Categories and sub-categories after second round of coding

<b>Category 1. RPL Systems</b>
Investment not cost, education discourse, education system, structured or flexible RPL, quality assurance, RPL in applied disciplines, formal expression (literacy), competence development and continued competence
<b>Category 2. RPL Process</b>
RPL learner support, type of RPL learner, mentors/assessors
<b>Category 3. RPL for Individuals</b>
Employee engagement, personal development, professional development, empowerment, meet individual (training) needs
<b>Category 4. RPL Resources</b>
Monetary, material, time, staff/student work
<b>Category 5. Learning in RPL</b>
Learning experience, value of experience (or formal learning)
<b>Category 6. RPL in the Labour Market</b>
Partnerships, meet market (training) needs, meet organisational (training) needs
<b>Category 7. Organisational Strategy</b>
Goals, education/training and L&D, organisational culture, RPL part of job role, training (funding) stable, competence
<b>Category 8. Sustainability</b>
Scepticism (and misinterpretation) of RPL, awareness of RPL (spread, volume, completion), awareness raising of RPL, barriers to RPL, RPL minimal cost overall, recourse to training
<b>Category 9. Evaluation</b>
Assessment fit for purpose, return on (training) investment, RPL against standards (competence), RPL against standards (education), RPL assessment, RPL for analysis
<b>Category 10. Added Value</b>
Access to qualifications, achieve qualifications, alternate route to qualifications, accreditation of training, up-skilling, qualifications for regulation, recognition, recognition of qualifications, fast-track to award, credit, exemptions, sectoral RPL, value of RPL, differentiation/reputation, monetary benefit, operational benefit, societal benefit
<b>Category 11. Progression</b>
Adaptability, career progression, employability, social inclusion, social justice

### 7.2.3 Isolation of differences – presentation of open code categories

The third stage is an isolation of differences stage which drew on both interview transcripts and company/organisation documents. Direct quotes from the data have been used to illustrate each category listed in table 7.3. The isolation of differences stage was supplemented by the analysis of the historical, political, social and economic factors (Table of Parallel Descriptions – Appendix J) in the data for each context. This will form part of the discussion in the final stages of the analysis. There were eleven overarching codes identified

from the open coding of the data as listed in table 7.3. In some parts of the data “X” has been substituted for any identifying names or places; this does not detract from the overall understanding in the extracts quoted.

### ***7.2.3.1 RPL Systems***

Regarding the RPL systems in place, seven cases worked towards FETAC (Further Education and Training Awards Council) awards either as a result of being FETAC accredited providers or because of the nature of the awards they were looking to achieve. Therefore, to a certain extent as FETAC providers they were obliged to make provision through RPL for access, transfer and progression, as outlined in FETAC’s RPL Policy in 2005. FETAC has proved to be more of a hindrance in many cases than a help due to the fact that their policy and guidelines are difficult to interpret for providers as well as learners. This is in contrast to the level of awards that are offered by FETAC which some providers felt did not merit the amount of work involved to both understand and then apply for and implement RPL.

It was perceived that RPL lends itself more to applied or technical disciplines because in these cases evidence of learning is the demonstration of whether a person can or cannot do particular tasks. To that end, at the foreground is the ability to connect individual learning to right or wrong practice and therefore the individual aspect of one’s prior learning is set in the background. The portfolio supplemented with interviews or practical exams was considered the most appropriate tool to assess an RPL claim as it is considered a means to reflect on the theory behind the practice in addition to demonstrations in practice. However, this raises questions of whether relating technical experience to specific awards is ultimately limiting because the individual’s theoretical perspective may not have developed in line with their practice despite their being competent in practice. This relates back to

discussions of tacit and explicit knowledge. In any case the integration of prior learning into technical or applied disciplines rests on whether that prior learning can be shown to have impacted on individual practice and that rests on the ability to express theoretical as well as practical understanding. This should, in theory reflect the relative success of what they have or have not done or can or cannot do:

Interviewee Case 5	<i>“The critical thing from my perspective is the integration of their learning prior learning, continuous professional development and practice development the linking between learning and development of their practice not learning to be seen as something purely for the self or purely for academic purposes but rather for the development of professional practice”.</i>
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In addition to questions of whether using academic standards to assess professional practice is limiting, is the aspect of RPL being limited in the mainstream education system because it is tied to awards. The current mainstream higher education system in Ireland is perceived as a one size fits all system where RPL could be incorporated to provide a targeted more customised educational opportunity for those who may not fit the extant system. If that is the case and RPL is a more flexible and customised route to education then who owns knowledge? This is particularly relevant for RPL which puts the learner and their existing knowledge and competence at the centre of any educational experience and yet is still tied to formal educational structures:

Interviewee Case 8	<i>“You know you’re claiming you’re out here in this experiential learning and all this kind of stuff but you still have to go through the old fashioned university style of exams and stuff to satisfy an external examination board you know because there’s no nobody has come up with a way of you know measuring the learning for two years outside of the old fashioned you know ram it down their throat and after give them an exam to regurgitate it on you know it’s such a challenge”.</i>
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What is also important in discussions about the mainstream education system is the structured or flexible approach, the latter of which RPL is purported to be a part. However



when it came to assessment in RPL, being flexible was found to be very unmanageable in terms of keeping records organised and having assessors and examiners receiving assessments in disjointed spurts rather than all at once as is usually the case in mainstream procedures:

Interviewee Case 13	<i>“FETAC is very much into having as much flexibility as possible with RPL learners...and I felt it should be more flexible, it’s RPL, they’re busy people and they’re new to education and let’s be nice, but it caused complete chaos the first year, but at least I was responsible for the chaos so you know we just kind of let it run but it meant the assessments were coming in at different times and feedback wasn’t coordinated properly and then when it went to the regions it became really unmanageable”.</i>
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A difficulty of this flexibility and independent learning mentality was to get people to follow through and complete an RPL claim. This may have been related to the fact that RPL was unfamiliar to many people and they therefore did not place the same value on this route to an award as going through traditional channels. Ideas such as credit in exchange for prior learning do not fit with ideas of traditional classroom and summative examination processes:

Interviewee Case 14	<i>“I think it would be new to people, I think that was the biggest thing that it be new to people and it’s unfamiliar territory so they wouldn’t be, you know the idea of going to classes at night would be quite familiar whereas the idea of actually sitting down and learning how to pull together all their own information and take it further would perhaps be daunting, particularly there might be literacy issues”.</i>
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Completing RPL is also a matter of ability as well as motivation. Literacy and academic skills featured highly here and impacted on the way assessment and mentoring were operationalised. For example, in situations where RPL learners had low level academic skills, presenting evidence of learning in written academic format could be considered as disadvantaging those types of learners. However, if a learner is pursuing an academic award

through RPL or otherwise they must possess or develop the necessary skills to achieve that award. Supports can and generally are put in place such as mentoring to facilitate those learners and draw out their learning in the appropriate format for assessment.

Furthermore, if the award being pursued requires manual skills and experience then it is manual ability rather than literacy skills that are assessed. Therefore, the placement of RPL within academic systems means that there can be no doubts about the award of qualifications through RPL. In cases where significant academic or practical learning is lacking RPL may not be the best course to pursue. Nor is RPL an easier course to pursue, particularly where certain skills are lacking because the final award is the same as that achieved through the traditional route, therefore the standards to achieve that award are the same. In other words the RPL route must insure the integrity of the award that is being pursued:

Interviewee Case 16	<i>“but then critically then as well how you’re going to assess the RPL piece in some sort of an objective and robust fashion that you’re not just giving it away because it doesn’t do an institution any good if people take the view that the RPL element is basically a gimme regardless of who you are, what you are, that’s not clever, and I think ultimately devalues the degree for everybody there”.</i>
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A significant recurring theme in the RPL cases examined here was the concern regarding actual and perceived success levels of those pursuing RPL. In general, those that did take part in the process generally always achieved the award; the inference being that RPL guaranteed an award and traditional formal learning processes did not necessarily imply the same. This in effect devalues RPL as a route to achieve awards and contradicts the attention to standards and rigour in assessment. It is interesting to note that the learners that make it

to the RPL assessment stage who as a result of the various selection and mentoring processes are generally assured of success:

Interviewee Case One	<i>“Bear in mind the following; we have a one hundred per cent success rate in the oral exams. Now, why is that? Well, we have various filters all the way up to the point of somebody being examined...so you can see that all the way along the filtration is such that we’re getting people to oral exam stage who are virtually guaranteed success. Now it may be that we’re not rigorous enough at that point, I don’t know. And that’s what I’d like to monitor”.</i>
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Part of the perception that success is guaranteed in RPL and it is therefore an easier route to an award is the view that no one should be limited in an RPL assessment process. This non-limiting dimension of RPL includes the provision for flexibility as already mentioned above which brought its own administrative tensions. Striving not to disadvantage any learner through assessment while including a rigorous selection procedure does, to a certain extent, devalue RPL because there is not a clear balance between the academic credibility of an RPL award and the process to help a person achieve that award.

However, in a company/organisational setting investing in a person to pursue an award through RPL is unlikely to occur unless that person has the requisite knowledge, skills and competence to achieve that award.

### **7.2.3.2 RPL Process**

All of the cases involved were very pragmatic and flexible when it came to the RPL process itself, taking into account the needs of people in the workplace. The process itself comprised application, evidencing, and assessment.

Application procedures primarily comprised completing an application form or using some form of assessment of current knowledge and skills. In any case the application process was separate to the non-RPL route for the same award and was considered a non-routine means to assess a person's fit for RPL for that award.

The actual process itself could be time consuming and labour intensive. In general, evidence was documented in portfolio format supplemented with analysis of current competence through demonstration of practical skills or oral interview, for example. The portfolio of evidence was complicated by the lack of familiarity with learning outcomes and demonstration of experience and skills for each. Some learners struggled with the lack of structure and formality of an RPL process in contrast to their experiences of school settings.

Interviewee Case 11	<i>"Yeah it's the person getting their head around that they have to document this stuff and trying to understand, everybody tries to get a very simple structure in their head you try to explain to them that you want everybody's portfolio to be individual, but some people almost want you to give them a template, you know and that's a dangerous thing, you don't want to be necessarily giving them a template for completing a folder, but you might give them the key headings and you might show them how another portfolio from a different area has been organised".</i>
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One suggested template, the Europass CV which is advocated by FETAC was found to be unsuitable for those with low IT skills although it was successfully adapted by the DIT for use in the labour market activation schemes in 2009 and 2010. This returns to the question of literacy and thereby assessment that is fitting for the award being sought.

The terms used to describe the person availing of RPL in the cases under investigation varied between learners, claimants, applicants, participants, employees, trainees, and students. The tendency in this research is towards the word "learner", but it is really dependent on the type of organisation involved, the way RPL is used and the ultimate aims of RPL which

determine the title of the individual involved. In the case of RPL learners as employees it is a matter of selection and judgement of how successful that person might be in achieving credits or an award through RPL. In all cases it was those who had been employed by the organisation long-term and who had therefore built up a great deal of company experience and training. To that end the selection process was generally a determinant of the high standards and success rates of most RPL applicants:

Interviewee Case 3	<i>“To get an idea of where people were, make sure that people were suitably experienced. That was something we were upfront with the [X] from the beginning, look this is designed for someone with a certain level of experience in the job and not for some new recruit in the door who hasn’t worked in this area before because we will be requiring that the staff are able to demonstrate adequate levels of skills and experience in the areas for the learning outcomes”.</i>
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One of the key tenets of RPL, irrespective of the term used to describe the learner, was the recognition of the needs and benefits of adult learners. In particular this relates to acknowledging a person’s life experience, which if recognised in a robust and defensible fashion can make a significant contribution to their learning and development. This acknowledgement impacted on perceptions of quality of what RPL learners produced, which in most cases were far in advance of their non-RPL counterparts. It was also a factor in the supports they need in a learning situation especially if they had been out of education for an extended period of time. Furthermore, in a learning situation adult learners are considered to take a far more active role in the learning situation than their younger counterparts.

It was emphasised on several occasions that RPL was the alternative for a bank of people that were not willing or able to face the formal classroom situation. This placed a demand on RPL providers and mentors or facilitators to create a learning situation for those who

were resistant to returning to “learning”; including the provision of supports that recognised deficiencies in literacy and academic/IT skills. It also appealed to those who were not willing to attend education/training to achieve a qualification, but were motivated and able to take a more independent RPL route.

The support facilities in all cases were aimed at ensuring the individual succeeded in completing the process, with the emphasis placed on mentorship as a key component in this.

### ***7.2.3.3 RPL for individuals***

The category of RPL for individuals is concerned with employee engagement, personal and professional development, meeting individual (training) needs, and empowerment.

At an individual level RPL was found to be a means to recognise the skills and experience of employees/practitioners who did not have any formal recognition or validation for the skills and knowledge that they had developed in the field over many years. The ethos of recognition which became apparent in the organisations in this research had a positive impact on the workplace. Employees who were more up-skilled and therefore confident, empowered and motivated approached their work tasks in more effective ways.

In line with the idea of more empowered and confident employees, there were also related personal development aspects noted from taking part in RPL. These included the ability of individuals to reflect on their skills in relation to their work (for a professional or sectoral award) and fill any gaps that they found in their knowledge. This self actualisation was carried on into their work and with other colleagues. There were also benefits expressed for

the company or organisation where a higher qualified workforce could, in theory, provide a better service and be more willing to take the initiative in their job role.

Professional development was also evident. The RPL route appears to be connected with establishing learning pathways for career development, which is also related to the category of *progression* discussed later in this chapter. These learning pathways developed from the process of self appraisal that took place and particularly concerned achieving a “*qualification*” or “*credit*” towards an award in order to strengthen a learner’s professional profile. This also benefitted the employer who could assist their employees by keeping them interested and enriched, and therefore positively engage with them. Therefore RPL was considered a way to reward and recognise staff and offer them opportunities in the current economic climate:

Interviewee Case 8	<i>“So the traditional ways of motivating people are gone right and we’re having a distinct strategy around particularly education and learning and development that in the absence of the others that’s where I’ll be focusing it on”.</i>
Interviewee Case 10	<i>“And it was, you know from the point of view of the employer and the establishments it was saying here’s a way as well that you can motivate your staff, here’s a way you know you can do something and become an employer of choice if you’re offering this kind of training and this kind of opportunity”.</i>

#### **7.2.3.4 RPL Resources**

RPL is traditionally viewed as being resource intensive. It has certainly proved in the cases examined here to be time consuming, especially at the developmental stage. Other resources of note are funding, materials and learner work effort that is taken to complete portfolios.

The main point that balances out the amount of time required to develop RPL is that maintenance thereafter is not hugely time consuming. Time is also concerned with the pragmatism of RPL to avoid wasting the time of individuals who already have the experience above that required for a programme of study. Therefore it saves time away from work which is attractive to companies and organisations.

Many individuals also rejected RPL because of the time cost. In particular, for lower-level qualifications, learners preferred to simply take the course. There are questions raised here surrounding the RPL process and how that has impacted on the spread and take-up of RPL. This is most relevant for lower level qualifications where the validation of the RPL process as a legitimate route to an academic award was undermined by the pain of the process. However RPL did appeal to experienced individuals who wanted to achieve higher-level awards at an accelerated pace as a result of that experience.

The monetary cost of RPL varied depending on the RPL process and the organisation as shown in the examples below. The costing structure is a major barrier for RPL because there is no single metric in place as each situation differs. The charge is not always applied as some cases base the charge on the amount of administration or mentoring involved. Others do not charge for the initial assessment of an RPL applicant:

Interviewee Case 1	<i>"We charge, the administration of it is a bit heavy. We charge at the moment two hundred euro for the interview process and a hundred to you for the initial assessment".</i>
Interviewee Case 14	<i>"The portfolios themselves off the top of my head whether they're a hundred and twenty euro or ninety euro, it's not a big financial cost, probably the biggest cost is in allowing people time to complete their portfolios or go down and evidence their portfolios down in the college".</i>
Interviewee Case 3	<i>"We would charge, I think, what were we charging, between about</i>



	<i>four hundred and five hundred euros per person to take the course, so if you multiply that by thirty you get an idea of the kind of level of matched funding that could be brought in from that”.</i>
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Other resources that are required to ensure the operation of RPL, similar to academic programmes, are documentation, rooms for assessment, tutorials or mentor meetings.

### **7.2.3.5 Learning in RPL**

There is a view in RPL that the process itself is a learning experience, and to a certain extent this has been mentioned already in terms of people doing additional work where there are gaps in their knowledge. In the workplace, the value placed on experience, as distinct from formal learning was very much in evidence. In fact an emphasis was placed on the idea that it makes sense in the work context to value informal learning both from an individual confidence-building perspective and from an organisational continuing professional development perspective.

The experience of RPL is almost considered as important or beneficial as the outcome itself. This comes from several factors. Firstly, the learners themselves who strengthen the whole learning experience for everyone on the programme because of what they bring from prior learning. Secondly, the needs analysis aspect of the process allows the learners to recognise where they are lacking in certain areas and therefore create learning pathways to build on those gaps. Thirdly, the ethos of recognition which validates what a person has learned irrespective of how they learned it. RPL is a way to make that learning meaningful and useful:

Interviewee Case 5	<i>“It’s about learning that is meaningful and learning that is meaningful is very often contextualised learning and contextualised learning for practitioners very often takes place in the practice area, though it’s very often informal, very often not recorded, very often not reflected upon and I hope this process will allow them to do all those things so they make that learning more meaningful and useable and the more beneficial to them as individuals, you know. It’s not just about something I’ve done and forgotten about, it’s about something I’ve been able to capture in some form and influence what I do”.</i>
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### **7.2.3.6 RPL in the Labour Market**

The category of RPL in the labour market concerns university-industry partnerships, of which there were four in this case study research. At a market level this involved aligning the needs of business with those of education as well as meeting, what are termed in this research as “market” needs. The market refers to those who might be seeking RPL such as employees, employers, private training providers, clients, or members. At an organisational level RPL in the labour market involved meeting organisational needs, which drive investment in learning and development.

In terms of meeting market needs, RPL was more to do with re-conceptualising education to meet market needs. Such needs included flexibility in education or broader training options for practitioners. For educational providers, RPL is considered a part of their general service offering which despite take-up in low volumes is a genuine education and training support for particular cohorts of people. The low take-up of RPL could be related to the difficulties to align different stakeholders. For example, an RPL course that could be promoted across a range of businesses and also satisfy each business as well as each employee illustrates the difficulties faced by any educational programme that is geared towards the workplace.

RPL is especially remarked upon for meeting the specific organisational need of avoiding downtime and fast-tracking the qualifications process for employees:

Interviewee 16	Case	<i>"I think it has great allure to industry because it's very practical. I think it's very challenging for higher education to get their head around it".</i>
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RPL is also a tool for companies and organisation to have their own training accredited which boosts their reputation and competitive advantage over rival companies. It also validates their training in their employees' eyes; which has a role to play in terms of employee engagement.

### **7.2.3.7 Organisational Strategy**

Each organisation is focused on particular goals, but in all sixteen cases these different goals have all found RPL could or does contribute to their achievement. The emphasis is on growth, ensuring quality and survival. Interestingly, only two of the companies/organisations placed staff welfare in their mission statements (see Appendix J). However all of the case companies/organisations have placed value on non-traditional ways, including RPL, to engage with their members or employees. The for-profit companies have a business, product or services focus, wanting to be the best provider of their product or service in the eyes of their customers and to offer the best value. The community organisations have a community or societal focus and the professional and regulatory bodies seek to maintain the standards in their profession and to see its development and ensure its sustainability.

Of relevance to the analysis here is the distinction made between what is classed as training and what is classed as learning and development, where the focus is less on training and more on long-term development to support or enhance what is already there. Therefore,

increasingly there is a focus in learning and development on the more substantive and accredited educational programmes rather than one-day training sessions, which is counter-intuitive in the current economy as they are more expensive. This may be indicative of a shift from a tendency to be reactive to organisational problems by sending people on shorter training courses to a more future-oriented perspective being taken in organisational learning and development through long-term accredited programmes. This talent mindset is also a part of the drive for qualifications that is evident in the labour market today, whether for regulatory purposes or to comply with HR policies as well as a means to engage with employees.

RPL is seen to have a role in competency frameworks and domains of competence, particularly for three cases that used the individual annual performance review mechanism within learning and development strategies as well as an annual organisational training needs review. Within continuous professional and practice development RPL can contribute to the recognition of formal and informal professional and practice activities as a measure of overall competence.

### **7.2.3.8 Sustainability**

It is suggested that the potential of RPL could be unlimited provided it found a way to address both market and organisation needs as already discussed in the previous section:

Interviewee Case 3	<i>“Yeah, well it’s almost limitless the amount of areas you could move into you know, it’s just about finding the right type of course where and the right type of companies that would be willing to engage and I guess the right subject that fits their needs”.</i>
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However the question remains why RPL has not made more of an impact in terms of volume if it is as useful and valuable as it has been purported to be. Part of RPL's lack of impact could be based on scepticism of RPL. This was evident in the early 1990s in Ireland. This came not only from academia, but also from learners themselves. There were misunderstandings about using learning outcomes as the benchmarks on which to base evidence of learning. However the shift to learning outcomes also raises its own challenges around whether it is possible to describe the learning involved in certain subject areas in a set number of statements about what a person should know, understand or be able to do.

The low volume of RPL applicants is also a symptom of the levels of awareness of RPL; people don't know about it so they don't apply. They also do not apply because they misinterpret what RPL involves. As already discussed RPL is equated to a "going back to school" learning situation to which there is resistance from people on many levels; individuals who work full-time and do not have the time to attend a programme of study, individuals that have had bad experiences of learning, individuals that have low-level academic or literacy skills.

To counter the lack of awareness there are increasingly awareness raising activities taking place, but these are limited to what the organisation or provider could potentially deliver in terms of RPL. There is a fear that if RPL did increase in volume the demand could not be met because it is resource intensive, to that end RPL is not as widely promoted as other educational offerings. This is in part why RPL hasn't made the potential impact that is reported in writings. Therefore, for the moment RPL remains a marginal activity:

Interviewee Case 2	<i>“So that’s to some degree because it’s not so, such a huge, in terms of volume of applicants, I can cope with it, but I suppose the challenge is a threat for the organisation if it took off and there would be a risk it would take off”.</i>
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Some of the existing barriers to RPL have already been mentioned such as the time the process took to complete, the expectation that a person doing RPL should excel, the lack of structure in RPL from traditional classroom programmes, and resistance to a new process.

Another barrier was an individual feeling that it was more worthwhile to sit through a programme rather than go through RPL, especially in the case of lower-level qualifications.

There were also questions of how to define and recognise legitimate learning from RPL, particularly from a quality assurance point of view.

One way suggested of sustaining RPL was to look at its potential within extant programmes, especially those that are regularly delivered at company-level or as part of recognising current competence or for regulation purposes. These are cases where there would be cohorts of experienced individuals who have the knowledge and skills required or who can prove they have the knowledge and skills required in order to avoid unnecessary training time and expenditure:

Interviewee Case 3	<i>“And I would think you could have a look, if they’re delivering large, repetitive programmes to large groups of employees, the same programme once or twice a year, every year, and it’s something that’s certified say by FETAC then could they look at that and say well fair enough for new staff, is there a way we could offer an RPL version, and that’s for people who already have their, most of the relevant experience and yeah, that makes perfect sense to me”.</i>
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### **7.2.3.9 Evaluation**

The primary research question for this study is related to evaluating the achievement of impact of RPL and evaluation is a key element in the RPL process. Evaluation in RPL concerns determining: what is a real learning event; what form of assessment is fit for the purpose; and what is the impact of investing in this process? Knowledge, skills and competence are also evaluated through RPL against educational and competence standards for awards, credit, or exemptions. RPL itself is considered a means to evaluate an individual's existing levels of knowledge, skills and competence in relation to a set of learning outcomes.

There is very little data available on RPL in terms of its impact and that trend is evident in this case study research. A significant factor in the lack of data available on RPL is the low volume of RPL in any one company or organisation and therefore RPL did not merit company evaluation in terms of impact.

This lack of evaluation begs the question of why evaluation, or in this case return on investment (ROI) as a means to evaluate impact, proves to be so problematic. As already mentioned, there were a number of discussions in the cases about the limitations of assessment. For example, a traditional exam only tests recall, not behaviour. A reliance on competence is also limited in that a person is not easily reduced to a set number of descriptors of levels of knowledge, skills and attitudes to be demonstrated. Finally, there is a fear that due to the limitations of assessment, what a person says they are able to do is not necessarily what they can actually do, which would compromise the quality of an award achieved through RPL if proved true. However, the perception is that there shouldn't be a

distinction between an award achieved through RPL and an award achieved through a formal programme because the learning outcomes are the same.

Return on investment (ROI) can be a contentious issue because of the perception that it is not necessarily appropriate or effective as an evaluation of the impact of training or RPL. ROI does not appear to be compatible with RPL because of the underlying attitudes and assumptions behind it. The potential to disprove an ROI analysis is also quite high. This is an interesting debate, especially in the context of this research and the wider policy interest in conducting an ROI of RPL. There are questions about how to quantify the perception of a benefit from RPL and the perception of a return from RPL. Furthermore, there are discussions of how it is possible to isolate the RPL variable in calculations of returns from RPL and assign specific benefits as a result. Finally if a negative ROI is calculated, does that imply that no action should be taken? Employee engagement or satisfaction measures are suggested as more appropriate measures to evaluate RPL:

Interviewee Case 16	<i>"I just think it's a bogus argument in the whole area of training, well not that it's a bogus argument I think I have a problem with the focus in ROI because I think it can be hijacked as an excuse to do nothing because it's so difficult to prove an ROI to the standard that a typical or a stereotypical accountant will look for. It's so easy to disprove those links between variables or to cause enough doubt to say you can't really claim that you end up in a situation where you can basically show that no training programmes have any value at all and that's obviously cobblers so I think it's a dangerous, I think the whole training and development industry are nuts to be going that way because what they're actually doing is making that stick, they're fighting a battle that they obviously can't win because they're dealing with a sceptical audience".</i>
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RPL is associated in the literature with its potential to act as a platform for the analysis of training needs and therefore instigate more relevant and cost effective training. This



appeared to hold for the cases in this research which also found the analysis aspect of RPL as a means of then developing a career or learning pathway for an individual as a result. This was already discussed in section 7.2.3.3 on RPL for Individuals.

### **7.2.3.10 Added Value**

At the core of this research is the potential added value of RPL. This emerged through a number of different codes and sub-codes, ultimately traversing them all. One benefit attributed to RPL was its use as a means to encourage people to take part in learning or training by taking away the fear aspect by showing how a programme is broken down and within that breakdown how much knowledge an individual already has. This was pertinent for those who had never taken part in third level education. There is also the practicality behind RPL which influences why people would choose it as a route to achieve a qualification. For example, it is a more appropriate route to achieve an award for an individual because of their seniority and level of experience. Furthermore, its speed and cost savings in comparison to a traditional course or programme is appealing, especially in the area of professional practice where there would be groups of practitioners with a lifetime of experience that do not need to attend a full programme of study:

<p>Interviewee Case 11</p>	<p><i>“But what I mean is if somebody perceived it as a different way of doing it and it’s easier to them but why else would anybody do RPL in the first place unless they perceived it as being an easier option potentially or more palatable option for them to take, surely so otherwise RPL wouldn’t have any value whatsoever, there has to be a reason why. They’re not just going to undertake RPL for academic reasons, you know that it’s some kind of interesting experiment or something you know”.</i></p>
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One way that RPL facilitates the current drive for a qualification is to provide an access route to education to as wide a population as possible. Access implied offering an alternative route for people to achieve an award or qualification and thereby recognise their skills and

competence irrespective of how they gained them. Access to qualifications or awards through RPL was considered to have a positive impact on society at large as well as the individual:

Interviewee Case 2	<i>“Now I’m sure there is, been, almost by definition giving people who have no formal qualifications access to a Level Five is I would say there will be stories there of people whose confidence has been impacted to a certain extent that there is a social, a wider social aspect to the, to the benefits felt by that programme, be it that they engage in some type of further education or they move to a higher role within a company or find themselves more employable if they find themselves not working for that company anymore”.</i>
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RPL as a means to fast-track an individual’s route to an award or qualification is a key driver of RPL in companies and organisations. However, the perception of RPL as simply a quick route to an award contributed to the initial scepticism about it. In practice, the process was far more robust and challenging than a way to achieve the qualification in a quarter of the time.

Where up-skilling and RPL are concerned there was an emphasis on how the RPL process identifies gaps in knowledge or skills which the individual is often motivated to improve, as already discussed. RPL also played a key role in professional up-skilling where people achieved awards in sectors or industries where previously there were no qualifications. However, up-skilling was not the prime motivation to engage with RPL, it was the recognition and engagement aspect that was most important. The attitude about up-skilling and RPL can be summed up as follows:

Interviewee Case 14	<i>“Yeah I suppose from a company point of view with RPL from a skills point of view there wasn’t that huge a jump in skills knowledge with RPL”.</i>
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However, where RPL concerned access to an award, advanced standing or an alternative route to an award, up-skilling was a key outcome of that process. The point above should be qualified by the fact that this case distinguished between, on the one hand, RPL as a stand-alone process to recognise and validate a transversal skill such as customer service, and on the other hand, RPL embedded within a programme for exemptions; the latter which was defined as up-skilling.

Regulation has also been a driver of qualifications and RPL has had a role to play especially when time is at a premium for workers who need to maintain their jobs in a regulatory environment. Therefore increasingly there are cohorts of experienced professionals who have an urgent educational need to achieve the minimum required qualification as in the cases examined here.

Operational benefits of RPL were brought up during the case studies such as providing their services adequately, saving resources in the long-term because of more knowledgeable and qualified individuals in the workforce, raising professional standards, and meeting set operational targets.

In addition to operational benefits RPL also had benefits for the organisation in terms of a company's/organisation's reputation and differentiation for competitive advantage where RPL suggested being open, being at the forefront of learning and development, and being a great employer.

### 7.2.3.11 Progression

RPL is also very much concerned with what has been termed here, progression. Progression in this research encompasses the adaptability and flexibility of employees as a result of being more qualified. This adaptability then impacts on employability and career progression. Social inclusion in the company and organisational context is tied to occupational progression, and linked to social inclusion is social justice as well.

The added adaptability of employees meant that they were more adaptable to change, which is particularly relevant in the current economic climate. More adaptable and flexible employees are then open to more employment opportunities:

Interviewee Case 6	<i>"I think really doing something like this is going to help them do their jobs better so therefore if they can perform at a higher level there will be more opportunities for them".</i>
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RPL was paramount in relation to discussions of career progression which was another category that emerged in this research. In many companies and organisations people who are lacking in formal qualifications are often excluded from advancing to higher positions despite the fact that they may be more qualified for the position than someone who has less experience but a more advanced qualification. There is now a tendency to facilitate these individuals. Therefore, RPL as a factor in up-skilling and re-skilling facilitates occupational progression, primarily related to the fact that a person is more employable as a result of up-skilling and re-skilling.

RPL can offer opportunities for re-skilling despite some disagreement over the fact that there is in theory no real skills gain in RPL, but RPL facilitating access to or exemptions from elements of a related programme can allow an individual to re-skill:

Interviewee Case 14	<p><i>“Another element where we’ve used it hugely successfully is in partnering with [X] where we would have employees in the call centre operations who would want a career path into the software development side of the business so we did a lot of partnering with [X] and we created programmes where RPL is a huge element within those programmes. So the programmes will have elements of self-study, they’ll have elements of classroom training and they’ll have elements of RPL and that makes up the programme...so it’s huge, it’s a very beneficial career path for those employees that they’re really moving into a new profession as they move from call centre into software development”.</i></p>
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In this research social inclusion in the context of the labour market is synonymous with occupational progression. It is recognition that professionals go through a lot of training that is often not recognised and that there are many people working who lack qualifications but have experience. Social justice was also accepted as part of the discourse of RPL in that with the changing concepts of learning and awards it is now accepted that people have a right to access qualifications and progress from further to higher education.

This isolation of differences stage now leads onto the explanation of differences and similarities stage.

#### **7.2.4 Explanation of differences and similarities – axial coding**

The fourth stage of D. Phillips’ (2006a; 2006b) model is an attempt to explain the similarities and differences identified in the isolation of differences stage, against the background of differing contexts and their historical determinants, in order to develop some hypotheses. Summaries of the differing context for each case and their historical determinants can be found in Appendix J. In other words this is a synthesising phase. It is also compatible with axial coding as outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1998) which is a matter of reassembling the data split during open coding (Saldaña, 2009) and relating those categories and sub-

categories to reveal explanations for the phenomenon. These explanations of relationships are referred to as hypotheses. This is called axial coding because the coding revolves around the axis of a core category or categories and links their different sub-categories at the level of their properties and dimensions (Deller, 2007).

At the axial coding stage researchers are looking for answers to questions such as why, how come, where, when, how, and with what results (Deller, 2007). In answering these questions the researcher can relate structure (the conditions that give rise to the problem/issue) to process (the actions of players in response to the problem/issue), which are necessary to capture the dynamic evolution of events. In other words the researcher is looking to identify the conditions to a phenomenon, the actions and interactions that arise in response to those conditions and the consequences of those actions and interactions (Deller, 2007). This is what Strauss and Corbin (1998) refer to as the use of a coding paradigm to code the data for relevance to whatever phenomena are referenced by a given category for:

- Conditions (Causes)
- Interaction among the actors
- Strategies and tactics
- Consequences (Effects)

To complete the axial coding stage using the coding paradigm all of the coded data, memos, annotations and thematic notes taken during the previous coding stage were reviewed and used to answer questions such as, what is going on here? What conditions gave rise to it? What actions and interactions have arisen as a result and what are the consequences of these actions/interactions for the nature of RPL in companies and organisations? It was thereby possible to group together the open codes into broader axial codes and suggest

how the categories impacted on each other. Relational statements were then proposed, which according to Strauss and Corbin (1998), are like hypotheses that link the axial categories into a logical flow from conditions to actions to consequences. RPL literature was also drawn upon to see if similar hypotheses were already in existence. This is the process for emerging theory, and although this is not necessarily the ultimate aim of this research it is useful for analytical purposes at this stage.

In addition to the process outlined above, the analysis drew on Jack Phillips' (2002) model for determining the return to investment in human resource development and Kaufman's (2005) organizational elements model of evaluation. Table 7.4 below presents a summary of this axial analysis, the open codes attributed to each axial code and how the axial codes are related with a relational statement in the third column. The hypothesised flow of these relational statements makes an attempt at D. Phillips' (2006a; 2006b) explanation stage. Each axial category will now be discussed under a separate heading.

Table 7.4 Summary of the analysis at axial coding stage

<b>Open Coding Categories</b>	<b>Axial Coding Categories</b>	<b>Relational Statement</b>
<b>Category 4: RPL Resources</b> <b>Category 6: RPL in the Labour Market</b> <b>Category 7: Organisational Strategy</b>	Catalyst for RPL in company or organisation	Circumstances (including aims and objectives) for RPL in company or organisation (Evaluation/Planning stage-Phillips, Inputs-Kaufman)
<b>Category 1: RPL Systems</b> <b>Category 2: RPL Process</b> <b>Category 9: Evaluation</b>	Change in perception of learning	Systems level reactions as a consequence of RPL in the company or organisation (Level 1/2-Phillips, Process-Kaufman)
<b>Category 3: RPL for Individuals</b> <b>Category 5: Learning in RPL</b> <b>Category 11: Progression</b>	Change in perception of the personal or the professional self	Individual level reaction as a consequence of RPL in the company or organisation (Level 1/2-Phillips, Micro Products-Kaufman)
<b>Category 10: Added Value</b>	Address stakeholder needs	Reactions to the entire RPL process as a consequence of RPL in the company or organisation (Level 3/4-Phillips, Macro outputs-Kaufman)
<b>Category 8: Sustainability</b>	Sustainability	Outcome of reactions to entire RPL process as a consequence of RPL in the company or organisation (Level 5-Phillips, Mega Outcomes-Kaufman)

#### **7.2.4.1 Circumstances leading to RPL in Company or Organisation**

The first axial code is ‘*Catalyst for RPL in company or organisation*’ which is really to do with the circumstances that led to RPL being practised. This was very much dependent on organisational strategy, mission and culture which were centred on maximising learning and development opportunities, and which are now perceived as an essential part of company or organisational life, while at the same time minimising cost. As such, most case companies were looking for non-traditional routes to staff learning and development, of which RPL was one.



The 'market' for learning and development is now focused on specialised, accredited, supportive employee development that meets both the organisation and individual needs. Accreditation is centred on the NFQ (National Framework of Qualification) in Ireland, which in many cases meant a partnership with a third level institute or a further or higher education awarding body. An accredited programme generally requires a great level of commitment from both the organisation and employee in terms of resources; time, money, materials. RPL is perceived as being more compatible with an organisation's needs for a specialised, accredited, supportive type of learning experience despite its resource intensive nature.

Therefore it is being suggested here that companies and organisations are looking for ways to develop their staff without recourse to 'training'. RPL is considered an appropriate alternative to 'training', in fact references to training were superseded by references to development where ultimately RPL is perceived as a labour market tool for workforce development. In other words RPL is more linked to the market and practice than it is to the State and education systems.

#### ***7.2.4.2 Change in perception of learning – a systems level reaction to RPL in the company or organisation***

The second axial code '*change in perception of learning*' is about a systems level reaction to RPL; what occurred in response to RPL in companies and organisations at a meta-level. The three categories of 'RPL System', 'RPL Process' and 'Evaluation' have been grouped together because they illustrate the response to RPL from its dominant systems. The RPL system in Ireland is governed by awarding bodies who interpret what knowledge is measured and what counts as a learning experience; where to begin and end with RPL. This highlights the

role of what is termed here as 'evaluation' in RPL, which encompasses assessment. Evaluation is about engaging in a process that will provide us with information to make a judgement about a situation; therefore value is inherent in judgement. At a procedural level this influences the type of 'learner' that can and will avail of RPL which brings us back to how knowledge and learning are valued, which ultimately brings us back to evaluation.

In this circle of value there is concern over quality assurance. RPL is almost synonymous with success, in large part this is due to the type of 'learner' that takes part in the process, generally an individual with an extensive skills base in the area relating to the RPL award. Such is the screening process to determine a candidate's suitability for RPL that high achievement is expected, thereby failure implies that the candidate is not suitable for the position that they occupy (if they are in employment) and raises questions about the standards and rigour in RPL assessment, at the latter stages in particular. Assessment is based on the idea that it should not disadvantage anyone, but there is the danger that disadvantage could become synonymous with failure. Does this expectation of success devalue the RPL process? And what is the impact on the learner who is expected to excel?

There was issue with the use of the term 'ROI' (Return on Investment) in this research, but there is an increasing demand from government and employer sources looking to make the business case for RPL. ROI is problematic, firstly because it could lead to inertia, if there is a negative ROI it can be an excuse to do nothing. Furthermore, the subjectivity surrounding many ROI models also raises questions about comparability across cases and the ease with which it can be disproved. Rather than look at RPL in terms of ROI, which companies found

to be incompatible with RPL, it might be more prudent to evaluate RPL in terms of achievement of impact, which is what this research has moved towards.

RPL is situated in the education system as an alternative for those that do not fit into the mainstream system; it is therefore tied to procedures from the mainstream, but targeted at the exceptions to it. The particular type of learner involved in the RPL cases in question were long-term employees that had built up a great deal of organisational experience and had been through a lot of training within the organisation, but they were not necessarily used to learning. Therefore how does the present system amend itself to cater for the anomalies to it? For example, concepts of where knowledge resides are being revised, particularly in the context of applied disciplines and professional or sectoral bodies. In fact many of these bodies have bypassed the NFQ and codified their own knowledge for their own professional awards and within mutual recognition of qualification agreements.

Therefore it is being suggested here that value is a key issue in RPL, particularly because RPL is a process where prior learning is given a value. Learning outcomes were cited as key to transforming views on the education system and how knowledge is valued, based on outputs rather than inputs. The development of national qualifications frameworks, the Bologna QF-EHEA and the EQF-LLL, with qualifications and level descriptors linked to competences and learning outcomes that now underlie value in the qualifications system in Ireland at a systems-level, but in practice this has undermined the value placed on experience through social and work practices which has, to a certain extent, contributed to the drive in companies and organisations to have a 'qualified' labour force. Professional and occupational sectoral bodies have tended to look for their own solutions to this

qualifications race, particularly because the Irish NFQ is an awards based framework which has increased the difficulty to align professional practice qualifications to the levels and descriptors on the framework. Those professions or sectors that have made the profession all graduate have obviously overcome this barrier, but those professions and occupational sectors that have not are valuing their own forms of knowledge and thereby developing their own RPL mechanisms.

#### ***7.2.4.3 Change in perception of personal and professional self – individual level reaction to RPL in the company or organisation***

The third axial category is '*change in perception of personal and professional self*' and it comprises the sub-categories of 'RPL for the individual', 'Learning in RPL' and 'RPL and Progression'. It is termed the individual level reaction to RPL in companies and organisations. Social inclusion is within this category because in the cases under study social inclusion is more tied to occupational progression as organisations are looking for alternative ways to recognise and reward their staff in the current economic climate. RPL appears to offer the potential to individuals who may not have had access to achieve a qualification previously and cannot progress professionally without one. It is important for these types of learners to make a distinction between formal learning and RPL even though RPL may lead to formal learning, because the key selling point for RPL in that context is its appeal to those who do not want to return to the classroom.

RPL had an impact in terms of the way individuals approached their work because of the adaptability inherent in being more qualified. This adaptability stemmed from the RPL process itself in that reflection allowed individuals to see where there were gaps in their knowledge and pushed them to take the initiative to change that. That opened up

pathways for the individual to see where they came from, assess where they were, and decide where they wanted to go. This personal realisation transferred to the professional sphere as individuals used their new found reflections to approach their work in a more empowered way. Social justice as an individual's right to have access to qualifications was an important aspect of the organisational drive for more qualified staff. Within that was a social inclusion remit to give those who were less qualified the opportunity to be recognised for their skills and experience. This was also a means to engage with and motivate staff when the traditional routes to engagement had and have been curtailed.

A final point should be made about the RPL learner and transversal skills such as communications, presentation skills and customer service. There are growing links between RPL as a component of CPD to contribute to an individual's progression in the labour market, particularly along sectoral qualifications frameworks. Short CPD qualifications, which are one means of using RPL for progression in the labour market, were found in several of the cases examined here (Cases 6,8, 12,14,15) to suffer from low-completion rates primarily because of the lack of structure and academic guidance of more formal routes to qualifications, raising the debate around the preferred levels of structure and flexibility in RPL, unanticipated for adult learners who it was assumed would be highly motivated and respectful of deadlines. This is an issue of intentions advancing ahead of practice on the ground, a resounding theme in this discussion of RPL.

#### ***7.2.4.4 Meet stakeholder needs – Reaction to entire RPL process in the company or organisation***

The fourth code category is called '*meet stakeholder needs*'. This category is comprised solely of the sub-category added-value and is concerned with the reaction to the entire RPL

process as a result of the systems and individual level reactions to RPL in the company or organisation. The stakeholders that emerged during these case studies were: the RPL learners, the organisation, policy-makers, regulatory bodies, society, and professional or sectoral bodies or professional practice/discipline, and further and higher education. Table 7.5 below summarises what needs are met by RPL for each stakeholder as identified from this study.

Table 7.5 Using RPL to meet stakeholder needs

<b>Stakeholder</b>	<b>Needs met through RPL</b>
<b>RPL learner (participant, candidate, applicant, claimant, trainee, student, employee)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Appeals to people with experience in senior positions</li> <li>➤ Speed and cost savings to achieve award through RPL</li> <li>➤ RPL for personal and professional development to identify and resolve gaps in knowledge</li> <li>➤ Appeals to those who do not want to return to traditional formal learning</li> <li>➤ Recognition and validation of skills and experience</li> <li>➤ Up-skilling and re-skilling (through entry into programmes leading to qualifications and awards)</li> </ul>
<b>Company/organisation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Encourages staff participation in learning/training</li> <li>➤ Is practical for business needs</li> <li>➤ Recognising employee skills through RPL can recognise value of company/organisational training</li> <li>➤ Reputation as employer of choice and differentiation from competitors</li> <li>➤ Ethos of recognition to support practitioners and make learning more relevant</li> <li>➤ Non-traditional route to employee engagement</li> </ul>
<b>Policy-makers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Drive to up-skill the workforce</li> <li>➤ Occupational progression as a means of social inclusion</li> </ul>
<b>Regulatory bodies</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ RPL to meet regulatory qualification requirements</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ RPL as an element of recognition of current competence process</li> </ul>
<b>Society</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Access to qualifications for those who would not have access otherwise</li> <li>➤ Up-skilled workforce in the sector /industry/company/organisation</li> </ul>
<b>Professional or Sectoral body/ Professional practice/discipline</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Mutual recognition of qualifications to adhere to regulations and serve the sector/profession</li> <li>➤ RPL to provide a service to entire profession or sector</li> <li>➤ RPL to support practitioners</li> </ul>
<b>Further and Higher Education</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Increased student numbers</li> <li>➤ Broadened range of educational and training offerings to potential students</li> <li>➤ Complying with Lifelong learning policies for flexible routes to awards</li> <li>➤ Potential to increase investment in FE and HE through participation in up-skilling and re-skilling projects for the labour market and partnership with industry</li> </ul>

It might also be necessary here to mention how RPL does not meet these stakeholders' needs. This is outlined in table 7.6 below.

Table 7.6 How RPL does not meet stakeholder needs

<b>Stakeholder</b>	<b>Needs not met through RPL</b>
<b>RPL learner (participant, candidate, applicant, claimant, trainee, student, employee)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Some learners often have preference to attend the formal programme</li> <li>➤ RPL can be as expensive as taking the formal programme</li> <li>➤ Recognition and validation of skills may not live up to expectations if unsuccessful in RPL</li> <li>➤ Process can be time consuming and taxing for those out of learning for extended periods or with low levels of literacy</li> </ul>
<b>Company/organisation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ RPL is time consuming to implement and run</li> <li>➤ Scheduling in RPL, when tied to formal learning, can be difficult to coordinate with business schedules</li> <li>➤ Ethos in company or organisation to use training to solve problems</li> <li>➤ Requirements of RPL process, particularly from FETAC can be off-putting; seems easier to send employees to attend the full FETAC programme</li> </ul>
<b>Policy-makers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ RPL does not necessarily facilitate mobility, employability, social inclusion, and social justice</li> <li>➤ Sustaining RPL requires increased funding from policy bodies</li> </ul>
<b>Regulatory bodies</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Meeting regulations concerns current knowledge and competence, not past knowledge and competence</li> </ul>
<b>Society</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ RPL is not promoted as widely as it could be to meet individual's needs</li> <li>➤ RPL process can be off-putting for those lacking in educational experience</li> </ul>
<b>Professional or Sectoral body/ Professional practice/discipline</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ RPL does not increase membership because it occurs in low volumes</li> </ul>
<b>Further and Higher Education</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Cost (staff time, policy, documentation) of implementing mechanisms for RPL</li> <li>➤ RPL does not link directly to strategies around research, R&amp;D and innovation</li> </ul>



This category is really concerned with where the value of RPL lies for each of the identified stakeholders in the RPL process and that despite that value RPL has not made as much progress as expected. Ultimately the value from RPL comes from the access route it provides to qualifications and awards, which impacts on all of the stakeholders listed above. The outcomes of that access provide routes to up-skilling and re-skilling of individuals, and the recognition and validation of sectoral, organisational and individual learning. It does this in a potentially quicker, practical, and more cost effective way than other routes of access in the context of the drive now to achieve qualifications to meet regulations, to meet occupational demands for learning and development, and to meet individual and political demands for social inclusion and social justice. However, RPL continues as a marginal activity perhaps because of an issue with RPL in the context of increasing skills and qualifications that, technically, there is no actual skills gain through RPL. Partly due to the lack of research in the area, there is little accessible evidence of the benefits of recognition and validation of prior learning and therefore RPL is often seen solely as an individual personal development tool or for simple credit exchange. There is evidence in this research that the key motivation for RPL in companies and organisations is a tool for employee engagement; this engagement includes personal and professional development, particularly around recognition, rewards and career progression.

#### ***7.2.4.5 Sustainability – Outcome of reaction to entire RPL process in companies and organisations***

The final axial code category, '*Sustainability*' is termed as the outcome of the reaction to the entire RPL process in companies and organisations. Only the sub-category of sustainability has been included here. This category is concerned with the motivations to sustain an RPL system at meta- and micro-levels. At the meta-level is the way the demand for RPL is met

through policies, procedures and resources put in place. This includes application procedures, costing, funding, support to learners, and assessment procedures. It is also a matter of how RPL is measured, where particular knowledge is placed on the value continuum, where RPL sits in relation to the mainstream education system and the labour market, how structured or flexible the RPL process is made, and the standards used to ensure its credibility. At a micro-level this is a matter of how an individual's experience from social or work practices is valued and how the experience of RPL impacts on the individual. These two levels intersect at the point of demand, where the system has to respond to the demand for RPL that the individual makes. There is a contradiction at this point of intersection with organisations unable or unwilling to promote RPL because there is a belief that they would be unable to meet the demand if it were to grow because RPL is considered so resource intensive. However, if RPL is not promoted then there will be no demand. Therefore there is a distinct contradiction between wanting to sustain RPL but at the same time limiting its demand.

RPL is linked to a number of other barriers that have limited its impact. Scepticism on the ground, less so at the provider level, more so at the individual level where people are used to the mainstream education system format and do not comprehend the concept of learning outcomes and the potential of valuing their experience for credit or progress toward an award. This misinterpretation is also at the level of RPL as a guaranteed route to an award with minimal effort. It is this interpretation that is feared would grow demand beyond the resources available and reduce the credibility of RPL as a whole. There is also a promotional lag because of the possibility that the resources are not, in fact, there.

The short-term resources required for RPL have proved problematic. The demand for resources from the learner's point of view have often left them questioning if a more traditional route to an award or qualification would have been more appropriate because of the amount of work involved in RPL, the gain in theoretical knowledge from a formal programme of study, and the cost of RPL assessment, which can sometimes be equivalent to the cost of the formal programme itself. The long-term resources required for RPL, however, are less problematic and in fact lead on to comment on the long-term impact of RPL. While RPL may be expensive and time consuming to implement in the short-term, in the long-term it is relatively inexpensive in terms of both time and cost to maintain, as outlined in the cases under study. From the learner's perspective in the company or organisational context, this long-term impact manifests itself in the form of greater commitment to the job role, a different approach to the job role, the transfer of their knowledge and skills in the workplace, employability leading to flexibility in the job role and promotion, and ultimately the continued use of an RPL model within the company or the organisation, planned and targeted at a specific cohort, but not readily transferred to new cohorts without the resource intensity required during RPL implementation.

### **7.2.5 Reconceptualisation and generalisation and thematic coding**

The final stages of D. Phillips' (2006a; 2006b) model are a reconceptualisation of the original issues under investigation and to consider the application of any generalisable features that emerge from that analysis. Thematic (or selective) coding is about finding the central theme or category of the data and to which all categories and sub-categories can be systematically linked. The presentation of this central category can be in the form of an extended narrative or a set of propositions. To that end it fits with the final stages of D. Phillips' (2006a; 2006b) model for comparative case study enquiry. This final stage of thematic

coding in grounded theory is the stage at which theory is created and is applicable to all cases in the study. The properties and dimensions under each category and sub-category bring out the case differences and variations within a category (Saldaña, 2009). Therefore the theoretical code brings out the possible relationships between categories and moves the analysis in a theoretical direction. This is similar to Bereday's final comparison stage where separate accounts of each case are rewritten as a joint report and reference to one case must elicit instantaneous comparison to another (Bereday, 1964).

The central or core category of this research is **Achievement of impact of RPL in the labour market**. The labour market concerns the suppliers of the labour service (workers) and the demanders of the labour service (employers). Linked to this supply and demand chain is the education and training system that produces the human capital to supply the labour service demanded by employers.

The category '*Achievement of impact of RPL in the labour market*' fits the data as well as the literature reviewed on RPL in this research. Drawing on the table of parallel descriptions of each case (Appendix J), made at the beginning of the analysis, the economic reasons for RPL for each case were focused on the human capital approach to their staff learning and development, particularly in perceptions of expenditure on learning and development as investments not costs.

The overall category links the sub categories identified in axial coding as follows in figure 7.1 below. The circumstances and aims and objectives of RPL (catalyst) are the starting point for the system level and individual level reactions to RPL which are both impacted by the way

RPL meets systems' and individual's needs, which results in the outcome of the system and individual reactions to RPL in the case companies which is ultimately the impact that RPL has achieved overall.

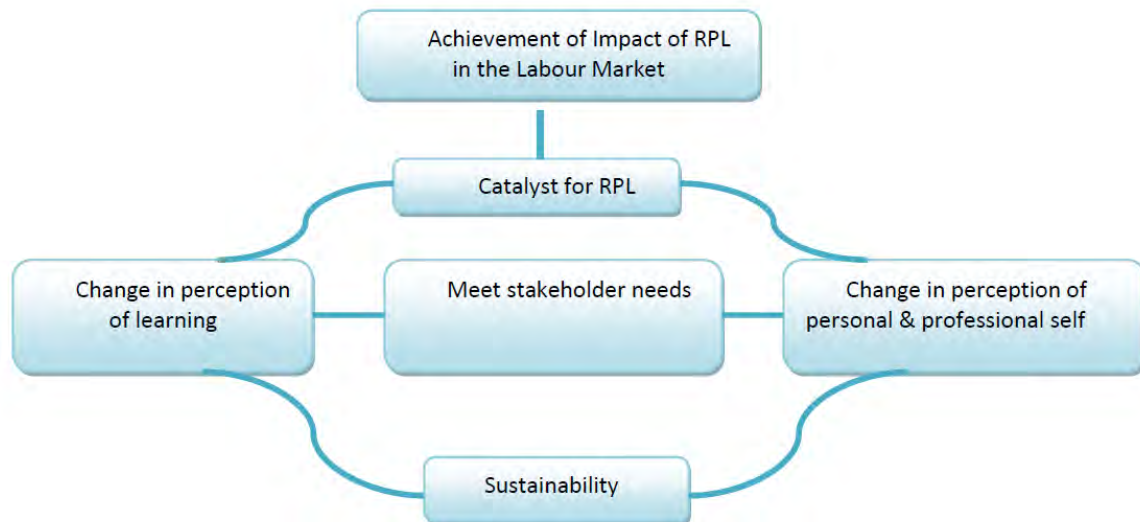


Figure 7.1 Linking core category and sub-categories in analysis

The impact of RPL in companies and organisations is the phenomenon under study in this part of the research. In defining impact the definition of the 'impact' dimension of the 'valorisation' framework used to analyse the first strand of this thesis research is used:

*Impact is the effect that the project and its results have on various systems and practices. A project with impact contributes to the objectives of programmes and to the development of different European Union policies. The effective transfer and exploitation of results, together with the improvement of systems by innovation, produces positive impact.*

Ultimately, the companies and organisations in this research were looking for ways to engage with and develop their employees without using the traditional routes of reward and training. Following planned implementation of RPL, except in one case where RPL was simply put forward without any serious pre-planning, the reactions to RPL were explored. These reactions emerged at both meta- and micro-levels.

At a meta- level RPL has impacted on the way knowledge and learning are valued in the education system and in the workplace or occupational sectors. The drive for qualifications has opened up new avenues to awards but these avenues have placed a premium on learning outcomes and matching knowledge and learning to descriptors and ultimately this favours formal learning in the Irish case because the Irish NFQ is an awards-based framework. RPL is limited to equating non-academic experience to formal academic awards. However, in theory, learning outcomes do facilitate RPL in terms of transparency and it is the process of evaluating these learning outcomes that determines whether RPL is valuable in the system. Yet, there may in fact be greater levels of de-valuing RPL at a systems-level than adding value. This is evident in the fact that many of the professional and sectoral bodies have created their own RPL routes, independent of frameworks.

At a micro-level RPL has impacted on occupational progression for the individual RPL learner or candidate. It is a means to provide progression pathways for those with limited formal qualifications and who cannot advance in the organisation without them. It was also a form of recognition to recognise the experience of professionals and thereby reward them at a time when there are limited opportunities to do so. This is a form of social inclusion on the part of the organisation and it also benefits the organisation that does not have to invest in recruitment and induction procedures for new employees to take on roles that would suit those already in the organisation. There were also impacts seen in the form of employee empowerment where individuals were more confident in their roles and therefore more flexible and adaptable to change and subsequent learning and development. This personal and professional development was also tied to notions of employability because there are more opportunities for those with greater levels of qualifications. However it cannot be said

that the impact is purely positive because there were relatively large levels of drop-out and incompleteness with regard to RPL. This was a case of lack of understanding of the RPL process and the need to manage expectations, learners often expected a greater level of structure and support in the process than was often given which led them to leave RPL unfinished or prefer to attend a formal training programme instead. Providers also expected that adult learners would be highly motivated to complete the process, which often was not the case as taking on RPL took place within the context of balancing work and family obligations as well.

Therefore the overall reaction to RPL in the companies and organisations stems from how RPL meets stakeholder needs at a systems and individual level which is marred by interpretations of what RPL can and does actually do. The outcome or the calculation of return on investment of this reaction is the current inertia found in sustaining RPL because of the conflict between the benefit of the potential demand for RPL and the cost of the resources required to sustain RPL for that potential demand.

### **7.3 Chapter Summary**

This chapter presented the results of sixteen case studies in companies and organisations that used or were thinking about using RPL as part of their staff learning and development strategies. The specific focus of these case studies was perceptions of return on investment to the company or organisation from RPL. D. Phillips' (2006a; 2006b) adapted framework for case study comparison was used to analyse the data in conjunction with elements of grounded theory. Coding unearthed the overall theme of the data which was the achievement of impact of RPL on the labour market which is a consequence of the catalyst to RPL in those companies and organisations. This catalyst causes a reaction at a system and

individual level. The reaction signifies the way in which RPL meets system and individual stakeholder needs, which ultimately brings about the impact that RPL has achieved overall. A future perspective on the impact of RPL as defined by an expert panel of national and international respondents in the areas of work-based learning, higher education, further education, in-company training, professional bodies, and continuing professional development is the subject of chapter eight. The Delphi survey in chapter eight, which is based on RPL policy, provides a contrast to the subject of this chapter, which was focused on practice.



# *Chapter Eight*

## **A Delphi Future-Oriented Survey**

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### **8.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents the findings of the Delphi survey which sought the opinions of twenty-two national and international experts from higher education, work-based learning, in-company training, professional bodies, further education, and continuing professional development, about future trends in the value of the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) to companies and organisations. The international, European and Irish expert respondents were from Australia (2), Ireland (14), Belgium (1), the United States (2), South Africa (1), Scotland (1), and England (1). The high numbers of Irish respondents was considered with regard to potential 'skewing' of the data in this thesis research.

The research was conducted in three rounds of online questionnaires between October 2009 and December 2009 through "*Freeonlinesurveys.com*". Feedback was delivered by email to each of the respondents after rounds one and two. The results were analysed in SPSS with automatic generation of tables and graphs from the online survey tool. The analysis was primarily based around points of divergence and ambiguity with less emphasis on broad consensus in the data returned from the respondents.

This chapter gives a detailed presentation of data from the three survey rounds. The survey questionnaires are included in appendices K, L and M. Section 8.2 presents the data from the first round questionnaire which was sent out in October 2009. Section 8.3 presents the second round data and the themes emerging from the twenty-eight statements that made

up that second questionnaire. Section 8.4 presents the findings from round three, with a focus on the ten policy statements on which the respondents commented in the final round in December 2009. Section 8.5 offers a brief discussion of findings and tentative conclusions from the study.

## **8.2 Data from Round One**

The first round Delphi was divided into six parts:

1. About the respondent
2. About qualifications frameworks, professional regulating bodies and other systems
3. About RPL in work-based learning
4. About costs, benefits and ROI from RPL
5. About RPL technologies: learning outcomes, credits, levels
6. About future trends in RPL.

A total of twenty-two respondents completed the first round questionnaire. The first set of questions asked about the purposes for which RPL is practised in organisations based on fourteen listed contexts. A further set of questions asked about the main RPL tools that are used in companies and organisations, the main methods employed, and the main users. The fourth section asked about the costs and benefits of RPL for the labour market, the individual worker, the employing organisation, and further and higher education. An additional question was asked on the direct costs of RPL, such as, salary of consultant/instructor, tuition, and salary of staff while training. The final section was about the future of RPL. Firstly, about RPL technologies that will support its development in companies and organisations such as flexible learning pathways, levels of learning on an agreed framework, credits, learning outcomes, state funding, modules, sectoral qualifications and e-portfolios. Secondly, respondents were asked their level of agreement with a number of statements about the future of RPL including some of its main drivers and obstacles.

### **8.2.1 About RPL purpose and context**

Across the fourteen listed contexts in which RPL has been practised the purposes of *'meeting legal requirements'* and *'membership of a professional body'* were selected in the lowest proportions by the panel while RPL for *'access to qualifications'* and *'up-skilling'* were selected in the highest first proportions. This was determined by the frequency of answers to the 'agree' and 'strongly agree' options to this question which consisted of a five point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Respondents were asked to add additional purposes for RPL if they felt the list incomplete. Additional items were added for the contexts of higher education (access to programmes, exemptions from modules or programmes), adult education (exemptions) and voluntary sector (empowerment, to value volunteers). Some of these purposes of RPL and their contexts for practice are further discussed below.

#### ***8.2.1.1 RPL for Training Needs Analysis***

RPL for the purpose of *'training needs analysis'* was chosen highest for the context of further education (36.4%) while higher education (22.7%) was third after work-based learning/in-company training (31%) as shown in figure 8.1. This may be related to ideas about training bodies such as FÁS (the Irish national training and employment authority) which have pioneered a number of RPL initiatives as well as Fáilte Ireland, a corporate resource for tourism professionals and service providers at local, regional and national levels, who offer training opportunities incorporating APL (Accreditation of prior learning), and the Construction Industry Federation (CIF) who also offered RPL. This function has been made redundant as a result of economic changes in the Construction Industry Federation. As there is little concrete information on the returns from RPL it is little surprising that it can no longer be justified as a policy priority. Funding mechanisms continue to be on a project

basis, especially from European initiatives (Strategic Innovation Fund-Education in Employment, VaLex-Valuing Learning from Experience, OMNA/DIT-NOW).



Figure 8.1 Contexts for which respondents find RPL used for training needs analysis

### 8.2.1.2 RPL for Access to Qualifications and Credit

RPL for ‘access to qualifications’ was chosen in relatively high proportions across all fourteen contexts but the highest ranking were higher education (77.3%), further education (45.5%) and continuing professional development (40.9%). It is interesting that continuing professional development features highly here, in line with the lifelong learning dialogue of learning opportunities encompassing the entire lifecycle and including all formal, non-formal and informal learning.

Despite the high proportionate response to RPL for the purpose of access to qualifications, RPL for ‘credits’ is lower across the fourteen contexts, except for the higher education context (68.2%) and the work sectors context did not feature at all. It should be noted that

in most countries only higher education has credits, which accounts for this result. However, work-based learning/in-company training was placed at the same levels as continuing professional development, adult education, and vocational education (22.7%) as the next most highly ranked contexts after higher education, as shown in figure 8.2. Perhaps the ECVET featured in these considerations.

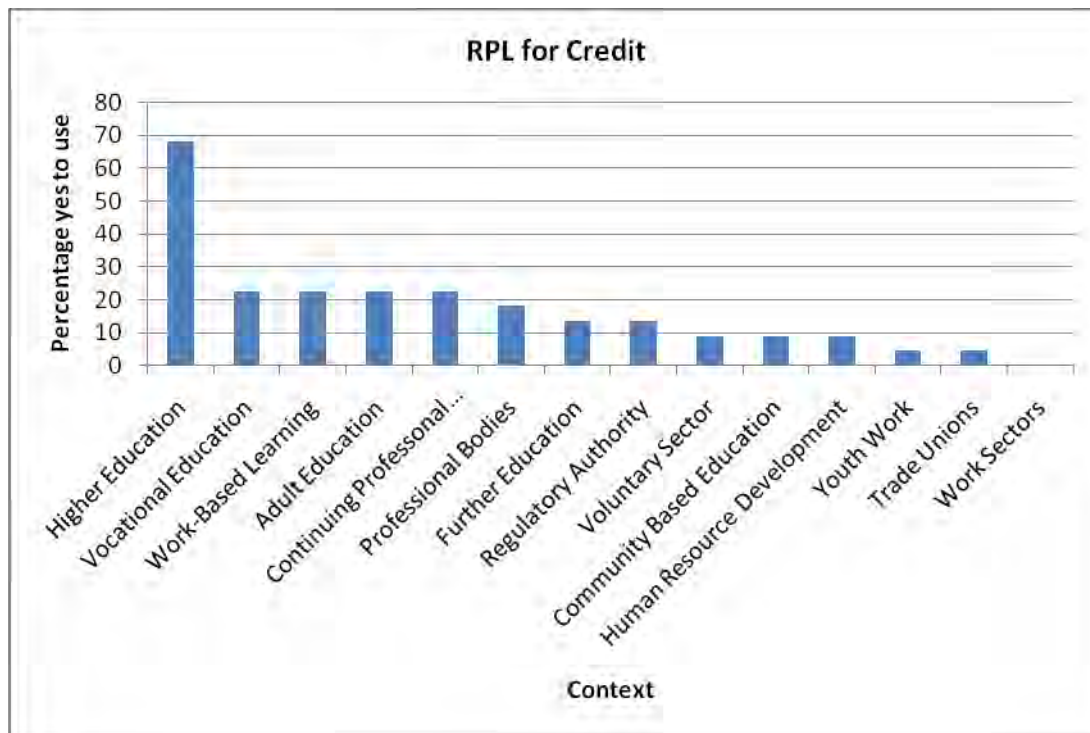


Figure 8.2 Contexts for which respondents find RPL used for credits

RPL for the purpose of *'personal development plans'* featured highest in the context of work-based learning/in-company training (40.9%) and RPL for the purposes of *'re-skilling'* (27.3%) followed in second place in the work-based learning/in-company training context.

### 8.2.1.3 RPL to up-skill and re-skill

The contexts of the voluntary sector and regulatory authorities were not chosen at all by the panel for the purpose of *'re-skilling'*. However, RPL for *'up-skilling'* was ranked highest for the context of higher education (40.9%). This may be a timing issue, considering the current global economic crisis. The further education and work-based learning/in-company training

(36.4%) contexts were the next highest ranked. Additionally, for both the purposes of 're-skilling' and 'up-skilling' the contexts of community based education, adult education, youth work, trade unions, work sectors, professional bodies, voluntary sector, and regulatory authority were chosen in very small proportions by the panel (<18%). This raises some questions around the priority given to the social inclusion agenda of RPL to provide for economic, social and cultural integration of individuals. However, the profile of the respondents may be a factor in this result. Yet, as a return on investment to the labour market, RPL '*facilitates social inclusion*' was one of the highest ranked items at 95% as well as '*RPL achieves up-skilling in the workplace*' (70%).

#### **8.2.1.4 RPL to meet legal requirements**

RPL for the purposes of '*meeting legal requirements*' was not selected by the panel for the contexts of work-based learning/in-company training, adult education, voluntary sector, and community based education. It was chosen in the highest proportions for the contexts of professional bodies (31.8%) and regulatory authorities (22.7%).

#### **8.2.1.5 RPL for mobility**

RPL for '*mobility*' was chosen in the greatest proportions for the contexts of higher education (27.3%) and work-based learning/in-company training (22.7%) as illustrated in figure 8.3. However there were generally low levels of agreement overall with '*mobility*' as a purpose of RPL, which again raises questions about the differences between the aspirations of policy and the reality of practice. Yet in the questions about the return on investment (ROI) of RPL to the labour market, the individual, the employing organisation, and further and higher education, it was found that '*RPL facilitates mobility*' was the highest ranked ROI to the labour market from RPL (100%) and '*the main driver of RPL will be the need for worker mobility*' (63.1%) was amongst the highest ranked statements on the future of RPL.

Additionally RPL for ‘membership of a professional body’ was also chosen in very low proportions overall and was not chosen at all for the contexts of adult education and youth work.

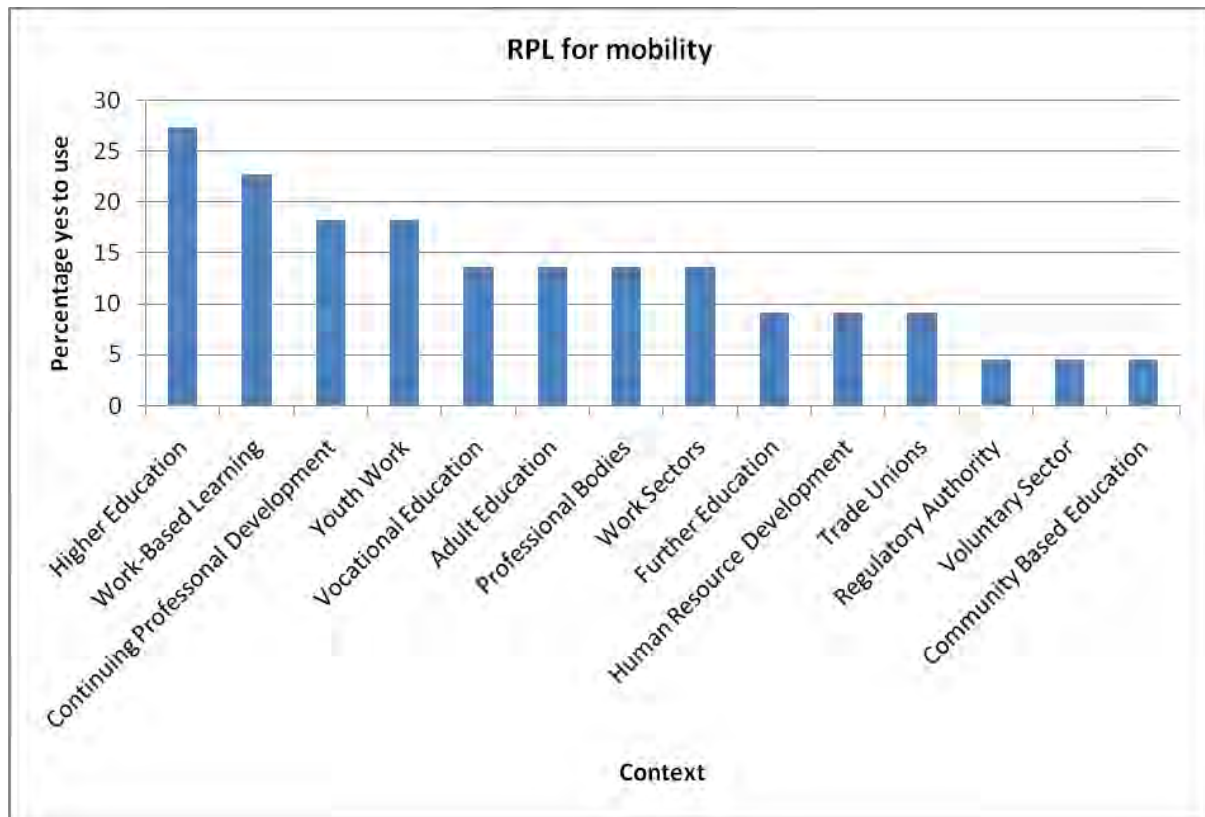


Figure 8.3 Contexts for which respondents find RPL used for mobility

### 8.2.1.6 RPL in the context of higher education

When thinking about higher education there were firm views about RPL for ‘access to qualifications’ and RPL for ‘credits’, which were selected by 77.3% and 68.2% of respondents respectively, see figure 8.5. In round three this was qualified by the fact that outside of higher education RPL is not very well known (by individuals, employers, training organisations) and the difficulty of validation and assessment in the higher education context, which is still underdeveloped. According to many respondents RPL assessment and validation is focused on credit arrangements and yet still subject to questions over the value of RPL accreditation. Respondents also added purposes of RPL for higher education, which

were RPL for ‘access to programmes’ and ‘exemptions from modules or programmes’. In most cases there is a general bias towards the higher education context for RPL, primarily because there is less experience and experimentation outside of that context.

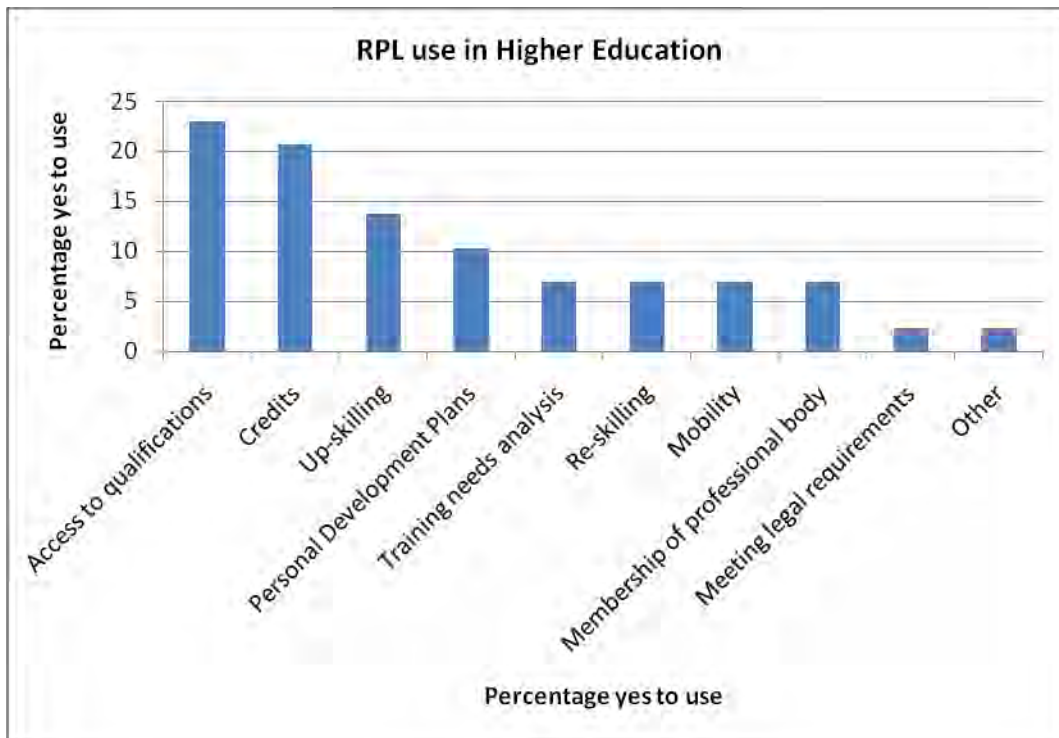


Figure 8.5 RPL use in the context of higher education in companies and organisations

## 8.2.2 RPL tools and methods

### 8.2.2.1 Tools

There was a set of questions about the main RPL tools used in companies and organisations with the ‘*Europass documents*’ (Europass CV, Diploma supplement, certificate supplement) and the ‘*European Qualifications Framework*’ rated the lowest with ‘*standards of professional body*’ (81.1%) and ‘*national qualification frameworks*’ (72.7%) being the highest, as shown in figure 8.6. As there were a number of non-European respondents the same analysis was carried out only on the European respondents with the same results except for the ‘*Europass CV*’ achieving a slightly higher sixth place ranking (23.5%) as opposed to the previous eighth place (18.2%). Two additional tools were supplied by the



panel, these were *'templates provided by RPL officers in third level organisations'* and *'any endorsed documentation demonstrating professional achievement of experience'*.

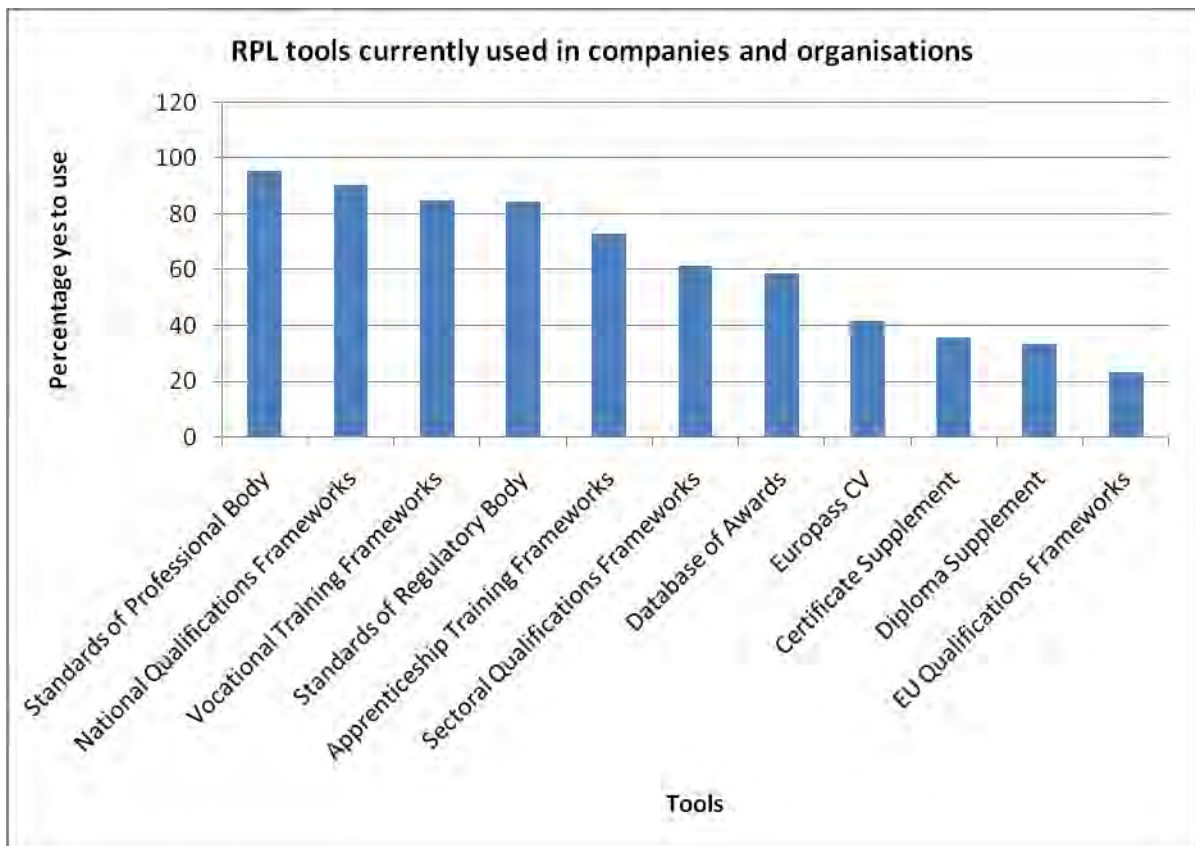


Figure 8.6 RPL tools currently used in companies and organisations

### 8.2.2.2 Methods

In terms of methods used the *'portfolio/dossier'* and *'interviews'* were cited as the most used. There was an additional answer to this question from respondents of *'intervention of RPL advisors from third level bodies'* (see figure 8.7 for more information)

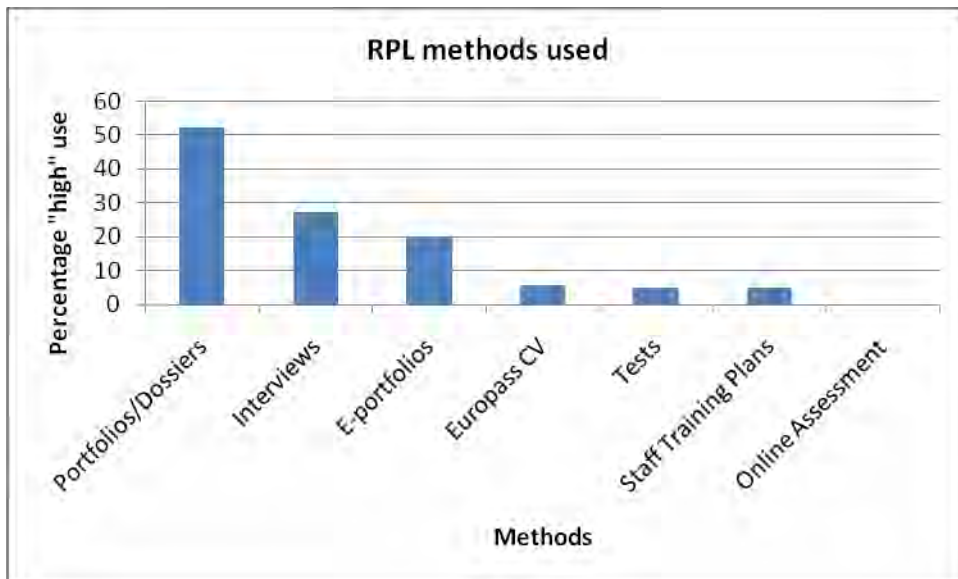


Figure 8.7 RPL methods used in companies and organisations by choice of “high” on a five point Likert scale

When asked about the costs of RPL to the organisation there was a tendency toward the diagnostic aspect of RPL; as a means of assessment of competence followed by training to develop any gaps found, therefore ‘instructor/consultant’, followed by ‘tuition’ were the greatest costs. In terms of the future ‘technologies’ that would further develop RPL ‘flexible learning pathways’ was chosen highest by all, on a Likert scale from 1 (low) to 5 (high), with a mean of 4.87 and median of 5 (high) while ‘sectoral qualifications’ (61.91%, mean of 3.95 and median of 5=high) and ‘e-portfolios’ (52.17%, mean of 3.7 and median of 3) were chosen the least. One panellist had no experience of this aspect and another stated that RPL and training are considered two separate activities, in their experience, where RPL is seen as an assessment of competences that are recorded in a certificate/credit/qualification and after the assessment training can be an option to develop those missing competences required to achieve one’s goal, but it is optional and not part of the same package.

### **8.2.3 Return on Investment**

The panel were also asked to rate their opinions on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) on the return on investment from RPL to companies and organisations against a number of statements in the contexts of the Labour Market, the Individual Worker, the Employing Organisation, and Further and Higher Education.

#### ***8.2.3.1 The Labour Market***

The question on the return on investment from RPL to the labour market consisted of sixteen statements. The greatest levels of agreement were with the statements '*RPL facilitates labour mobility*' with a 100% agreement rate (mean of 4.17 and median of 4), '*RPL facilitates social inclusion*' (95% agreement, mean of 4.04 and median of 4), and '*RPL is a catalyst for lifelong learning*' (95% agreement, mean of 4.61 and median of 5). Figure 8.8 below provides an overview of the highest rated statements for the 'agree' and 'strongly agree' responses. The statements '*RPL addresses overall skill level in an industry*' and '*RPL maintains workplace standards*' received the lowest levels of agreement of 40.91% (means of 3.18 and 3.36 respectively and medians of 3.5).

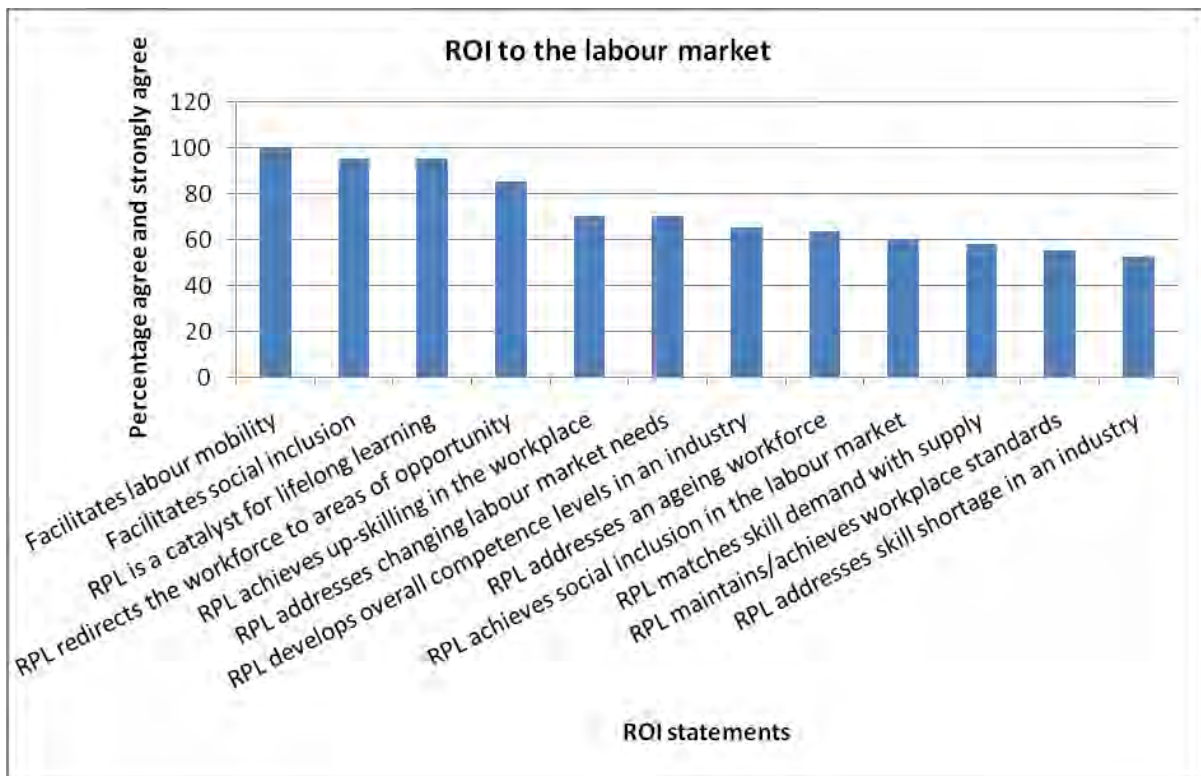


Figure 8.8 ROI to the Labour Market from RPL

### 8.2.3.2 The Individual Worker

The return on Investment from RPL to the individual was evaluated by rating twenty-four statements. The statements with a 100% agreement level were ‘RPL improves individual career prospects’ (mean of 4.35 and median of 4), ‘RPL provides access to education and training’ (mean of 4.7 and median of 5), ‘RPL provides alternate pathways to qualifications’ (mean of 4.57 and median of 5) and ‘RPL facilitates flexibility in learning’ (mean of 4.39 and median of 4). The statements receiving the lowest agreement levels were ‘RPL improves relations with management’ (21.74 % agreement, mean of 3.13 and median of 3), ‘RPL improves performance on the job’ (34.78% agreement, mean of 3.43, median of 3) and ‘RPL increases job security’ (34.79% agreement, mean of 3.3, median of 3). Despite the high levels of agreement with a large number of statements, as shown in figure 8.9, regarding returns for the individual it is not necessarily apparent that the panel have envisaged

individual returns in the context of the organisation or company, rather the focus of these individual returns seems to be on the higher or further education context.

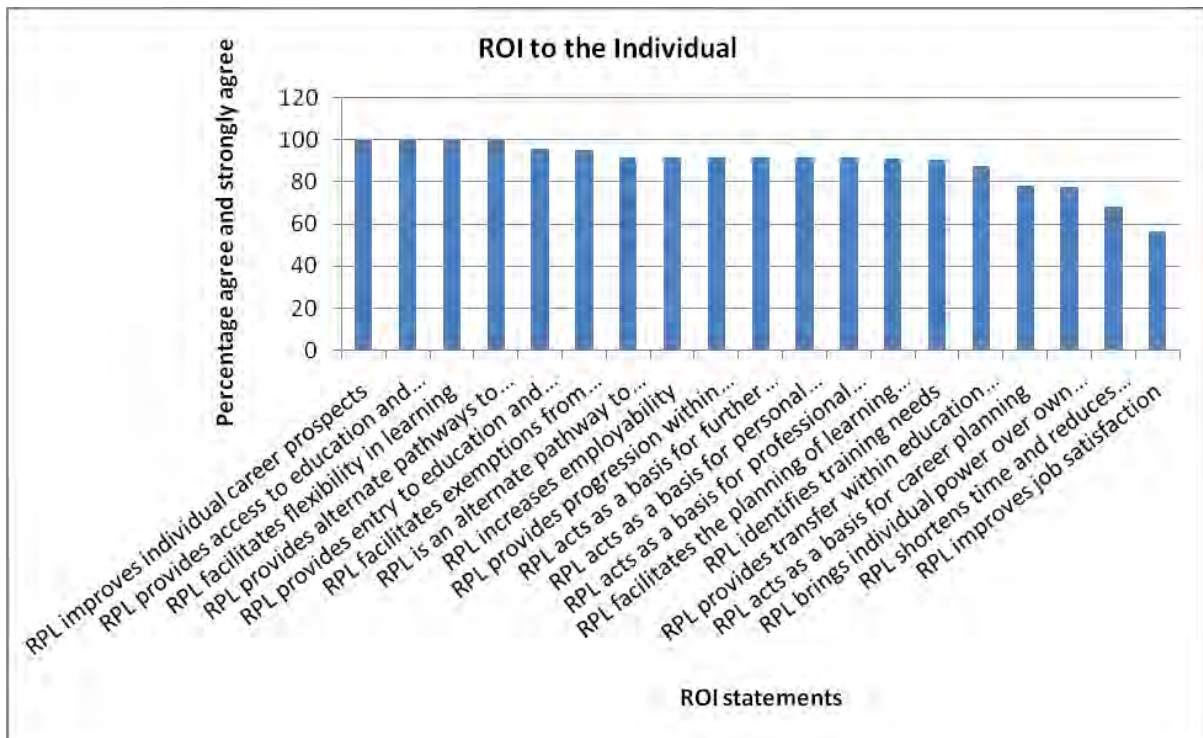


Figure 8.9 ROI to the Individual Worker from RPL

### 8.2.3.3 The Employing Organisation

The return on investment from RPL to the employing organisations was evaluated by the respondents through fifteen statements. Those with the highest levels of agreement were ‘RPL increases employee morale’ (77.28 % agreement, mean of 3.91 and median of 4), ‘RPL improves job satisfaction’ (65.22% agreement, mean of 3.74 and median of 3.5), and ‘RPL increases competitiveness’ (59.09% agreement, mean of 3.64 and median of 4). These are illustrated in figure 8.10. These statements may reflect the nature of return on investment to companies and organisations, and were highlighted in chapter seven with regard to benefits from RPL. Among the lowest agreement levels were the statements ‘RPL reduces overtime’ (0% agreement, mean of 2.68 and median of 3), ‘RPL reduces levels of employee

*supervision*' (9.1% agreement, mean of 2.91 and median of 3), and *'RPL reduces employee grievances'* (13.64%, mean of 3 and median of 3). The majority of responses were around the *'neither agree nor disagree'* mark. This opaqueness permeates this question of return on investment from RPL to the employing company or organisation, for example, despite relatively high levels of agreement with the statement *'RPL improves job satisfaction'* the mean and median suggest a tendency more towards the *'neither agree nor disagree'*(3) category. This qualification is also evident for the lowest agreement statements mentioned above.

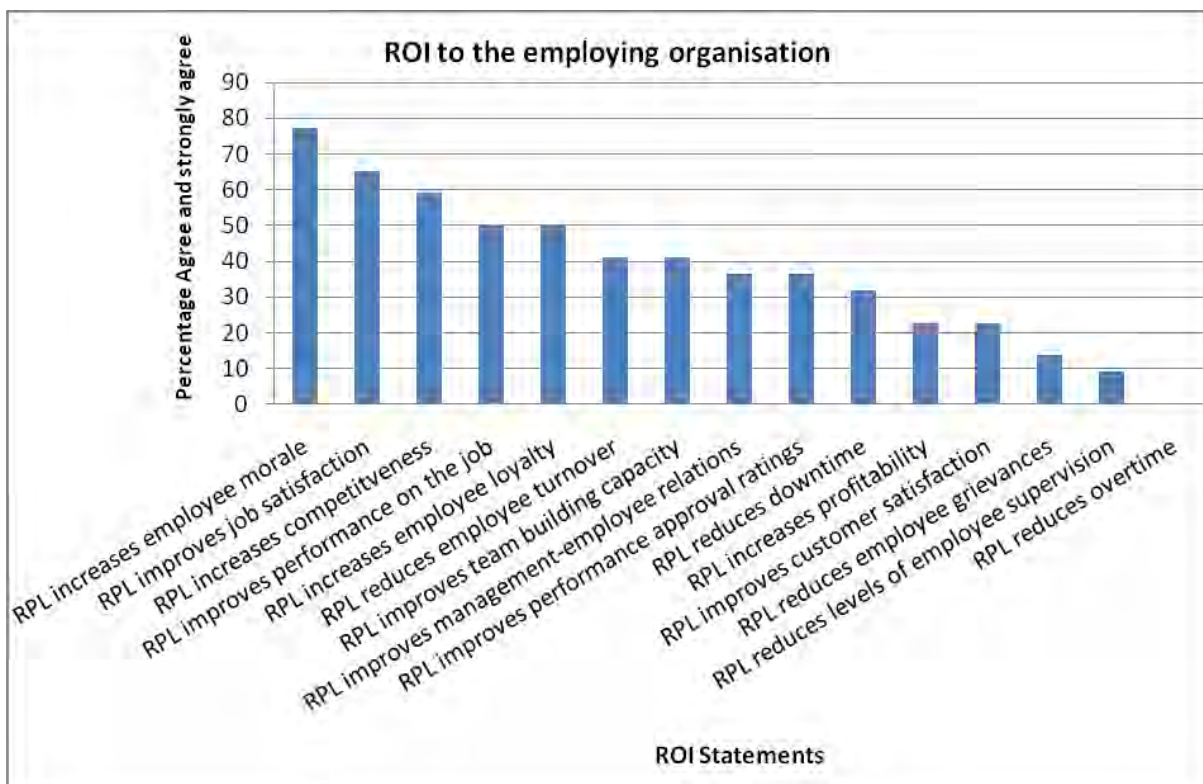


Figure 8.10 ROI to the Employing Organisation from RPL

However, this can be related to question twenty-three, which asked the panel what, in their experience, is RPL mostly used for in companies and organisations on a scale from 1 (high use) to 5 (low use). It was found that *'up-skilling'* (90.48% high and medium high use, mean of 1.81 and median of 2), *'award of formal credit for non-formal and informal learning'* (70% high and medium high use, mean of 2.3 and median of 2), *'re-skilling'* (65% high and

medium high use, mean of 2.3 and median of 2) and ‘meeting regulatory standards’ (64.71% high and medium high use, mean of 2.29 and median of 2) were considered the most used functions of RPL for companies and organisations. Those with the lowest use, such as ‘preparation for redundancy’ (6.25% high and medium high use, mean of 3.94 and median of 4), ‘recruitment’ (21.05% high and medium high use, mean of 4 and median of 5), and ‘promotions’ (26.32% high and medium high use, mean of 3.74 and median of 4) tend to be cited in the literature as areas where RPL could have considerable potential in addition to the areas of up-skilling and re-skilling, although RPL for re-skilling was not as highly valued by respondents in this study. Therefore there appears to be a contrast between the use of RPL in an organisation and where exactly there are potential returns to that organisation.

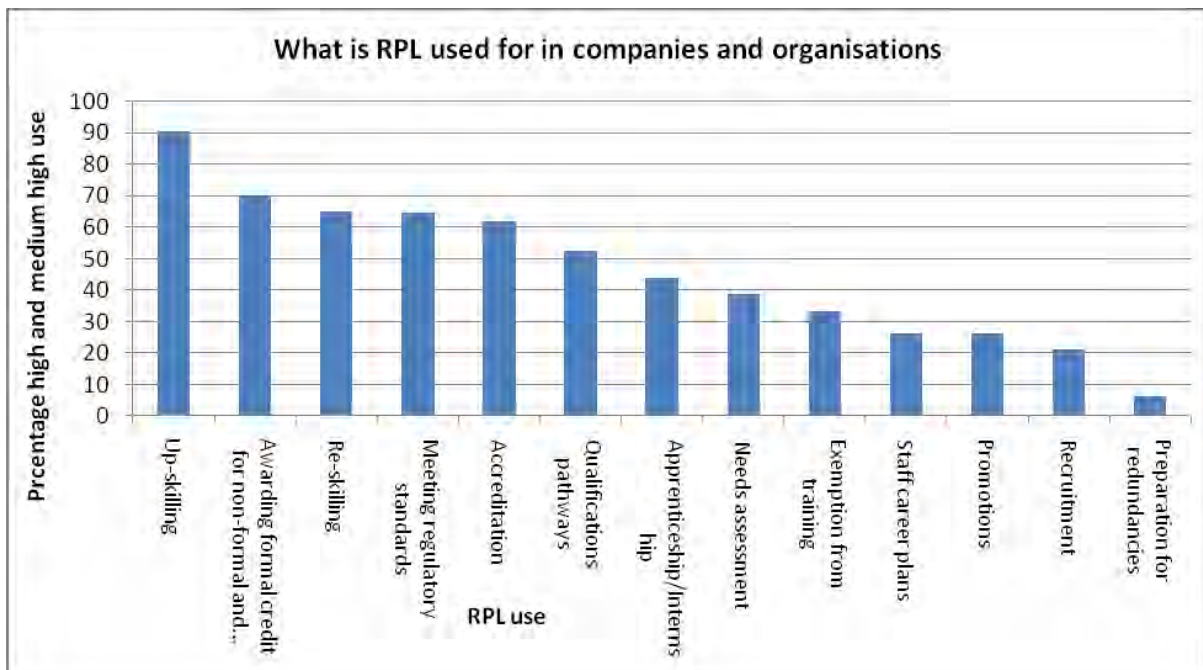


Figure 8.11 For what is RPL mostly used in companies and organisations?

### 8.2.3.4 Further and Higher Education

The return on investment from RPL to further and higher education was examined through thirteen statements, again to be rated on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) as shown in figure 8.12. Those statements with levels of agreement of

100% were 'RPL offers alternate pathways to qualification' (mean of 4.5 and median 4.5), 'RPL facilitates transfer into further and higher education' (mean of 4.5 and median of 4.5), 'RPL offers non-traditional learners the opportunity to participate in further and higher education' (mean of 4.71 and median of 5), and 'RPL policy should be mainstream in the higher education sector' (mean of 4.67 and median of 5). It is apparent that there is much more conclusive thinking on returns for the higher education sector, as well as the labour market and the individual than for the abovementioned employing organisation. This shows, on the one hand, the lack of precise information on RPL in the organisational or company context and, on the other hand, the more precise information or experience of RPL in the labour market, for the individual and for higher and further education. It also begs the question if the panel have considered RPL returns to the labour market, the individual and higher and further education on the whole or within the context of an organisation or company?

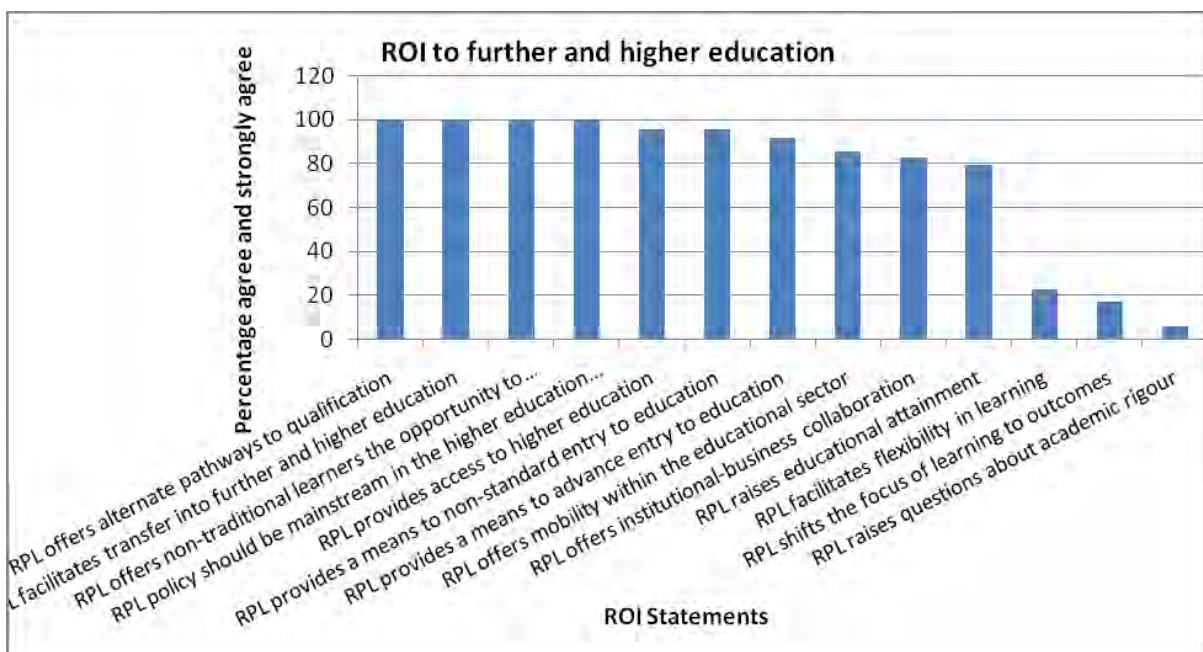


Figure 8.12 ROI to further and higher education from RPL



### ***8.2.3.4 Future of RPL in Companies and Organisations***

The final section of the first round asked respondents' level of agreement with twenty-eight statements on the future of RPL on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Table 8.1 below shows the ten highest ranking statements. There was low agreement with *'the Council of Europe will be a main driver of a social justice model of RPL'* (26.4%, mean 2.95, median 3=neither agree nor disagree) as well as *'the main driver of RPL will be social justice'* (26.4%, mean 2.76, median 3=neither agree nor disagree). Yet *'RPL facilitates social inclusion'* achieved a 95% (mean of 4.04, median of 4=agree) agreement rate as a return on investment from RPL to the labour market. The highest ranking statements to this question included *'RPL will only expand if there is mutual recognition of qualifications and awards'* (75%, mean 3.82 and median of 4=agree) and *'the main driver of RPL will be individual qualifications'* (72.2%, mean of 4, median=4). Therefore would recognition of qualifications rather than recognition of non-formal and informal learning be seen more as a means of social inclusion or social justice?

An agreement level of 21.1% (mean of 2.86, median of 3=neither agree nor disagree) was found for *'the main driver of RPL will be harmonisation of qualification systems'*. This is interesting because there is a high level of agreement to *'RPL will only expand if there is mutual recognition of qualifications and awards'* (75%, mean of 3.82, median of 4=agree) yet the harmonisation of these systems is not rated which suggests mutual recognition is the limit towards the greater synchronisation of qualification systems.

Finally, the *'main driver of RPL will be the globalisation of knowledge'* received only 22.3% (mean of 2.62, median of 2.5) of agreement by the panel and *'UNESCO will be a main driver*

of a global model of RPL' received the lowest levels of agreement of 15% (mean of 2.82, median of 3) despite globalisation being paramount to the expansion of lifelong learning in the literature. Also receiving low levels of agreement was the item '*the main driver of RPL will be to keep up with technological change*' (27.8%, mean 2.76, median of 2=disagree) which is another item often going hand in hand with the concept of globalisation in the context of lifelong learning.

Table 8.1 Respondent agreement with statements on the future of RPL

Statement	Percentage agree and strongly agree
Employers will only use RPL if it is cost effective	100
RPL will only expand if there is mutual recognition of qualifications and awards	75
RPL will only expand if there is trust and credibility among powerful stakeholders	73.7
The main driver of RPL will be individual qualifications	72.2
The main driver of RPL will be for accreditation of non-formal and informal learning	71.4
The main driver of RPL will be the need for worker mobility	63.1
Universities will continue to resist RPL	57.9
RPL must be sought by individual workers themselves	57.1
RPL will expand only if there are frameworks of qualifications	52.7
RPL is likely to expand in medium or small enterprises	52.4

## 8.3. Data from Round Two

### 8.3.1 Introduction

The second round questionnaire consisted of twenty-six statements resulting from the ambiguities and divergence emerging in round one. Each statement included an option for additional comment from respondents. Respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement with each statement on a Likert scale ranging from 'strongly agree' (1) to

'strongly disagree' (5). There were a total of twenty respondents to this second round of the survey. Analysis for this part of the survey looked at the responses to the "agree" and "strongly agree" categories as well as the "disagree" and "strongly disagree". The mean and median were also used, generated automatically by the online survey tool, to inform the feedback and the third and final questionnaire.

Of general agreement between respondents was that RPL would increasingly be used for the mutual recognition of qualifications than the harmonisation of qualifications systems. Also that the globalisation of knowledge, goods and services would increase the demand for RPL in companies and organisations, that RPL would be driven greatly by the need to keep pace with technological change, and that external consultants would become increasingly important for RPL development in companies and organisations.

The strongest level of agreement was with the statement '*RPL credits will increasingly count towards an award or qualification and not for the notional concept of "credit" as in "valuing learning"*' (84.2%). This tendency toward a credit-qualification link was further supported by the ambiguity surrounding the statement '*a market in tradable credits is inevitable*' which was ranked in eighteenth place at a 25% level of agreement, a mean of 3.14 (the neither agree nor disagree mark) and median of 3 also. This might be related to the large proportion of Irish respondents and the Irish National Qualifications Framework, which is an award-based framework.

Table 8.2 Statements with highest level of agreement in descending order

Statement	Percentage of strongly agree/agree
RPL credits will increasingly count towards an award or qualification and not for the notional concept of "credit" as in "valuing learning".	84.2
RPL will facilitate the mobility of workers more across and within qualifications frameworks than across borders.	78.9
RPL in companies and organisations will be driven greatly in the future by the need to keep up with technological change.	70
RPL will facilitate rather than achieve social inclusion.	
RPL in the context of continuing professional development in companies and organisations will be valuable primarily for access to qualifications.	65
Electronic-RPL (e-portfolios and online assessment) will have to become one of the most used RPL "technologies" if economies of scale are to be achieved.	
External RPL consultants and/or RPL brokers will be increasingly important for the development of RPL in companies and organisations.	
Globalisation of knowledge, goods, services and economic activity will increase the demand for RPL in companies and organisations.	55
RPL will be increasingly used for mutual recognition of qualifications than for the harmonisation of qualifications systems.	50

### 8.3.2 RPL and Mobility

The concept of professional mobility is considered one of the potential value-adding attributes of RPL in terms of lifelong learning yet the second highest level of agreement was with the statement '*RPL will facilitate the mobility of workers more across and within qualifications frameworks than across borders*' (78.9% agreement). However, '*RPL for mobility is really part of the lifelong learning policy discourse rather than an actual lived*

*practice and likely to remain so* had a 45% agreement and no ‘strongly agree’ answers, but it was qualified by the fact that it had a mean of 3 (neither agree nor disagree) and median of 3, as in figure 8.13 .

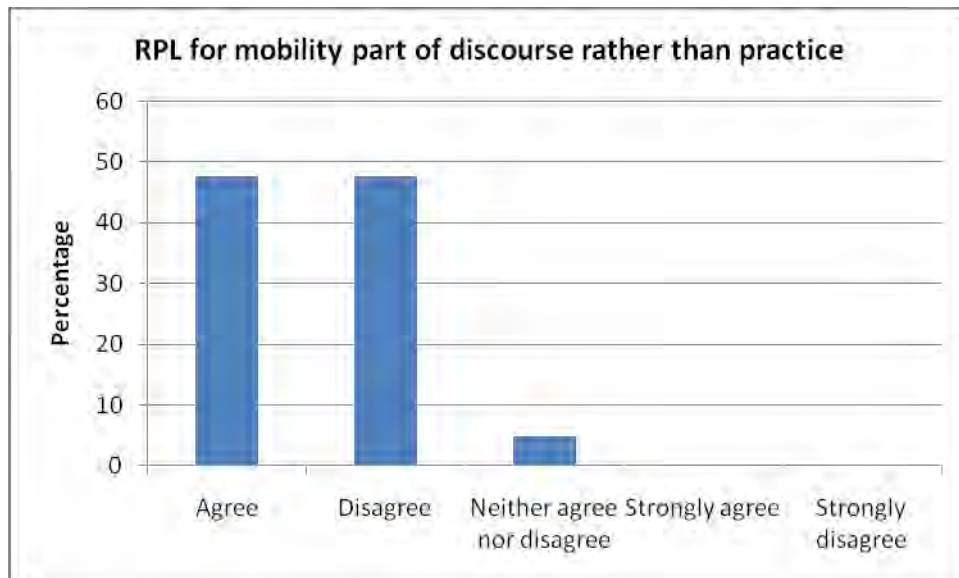


Figure 8.13 RPL for mobility is really part of the lifelong learning policy discourse rather than an actual lived practice and likely to remain so.

Furthermore the statement *‘without global RPL principles for non-formal and informal learning it is likely that only certified learning will facilitate mobility of workers’* (figure 8.14) had a 45% agreement, no ‘strongly agree’ answers, but a median of 2 (agree). What might be emerging here is a concern for standards of quality assurance in the process of professional mobility, and that the consideration in industry surrounding RPL is not necessarily for its mobility potential.



Figure 8.14 Without global recognition of qualifications RPL for mobility has limited value to companies and organisations

There is also an aspect of comparability between further and higher education institutes in terms of RPL implementation and integration which lends itself more to formal qualifications than RPL, and which are slow to be implemented in these institutes. There were low levels of agreement with *'without global recognition of qualifications, RPL for mobility has limited value to companies and organisations'*, as in figure 8.15 (35% agreement, median of 4=disagree, mean of 3.15), *'RPL for sectoral qualifications will become more used for mobility than will RPL for individual qualifications'* (20% agreement, no 'strongly agree', mean of 3.14 and median of 3), and *'the Europass CV and Mobility Pass will become the most used tools for making qualifications and skills visible for the mobility purposes of workers'* (10% agreement, no 'strongly agree').

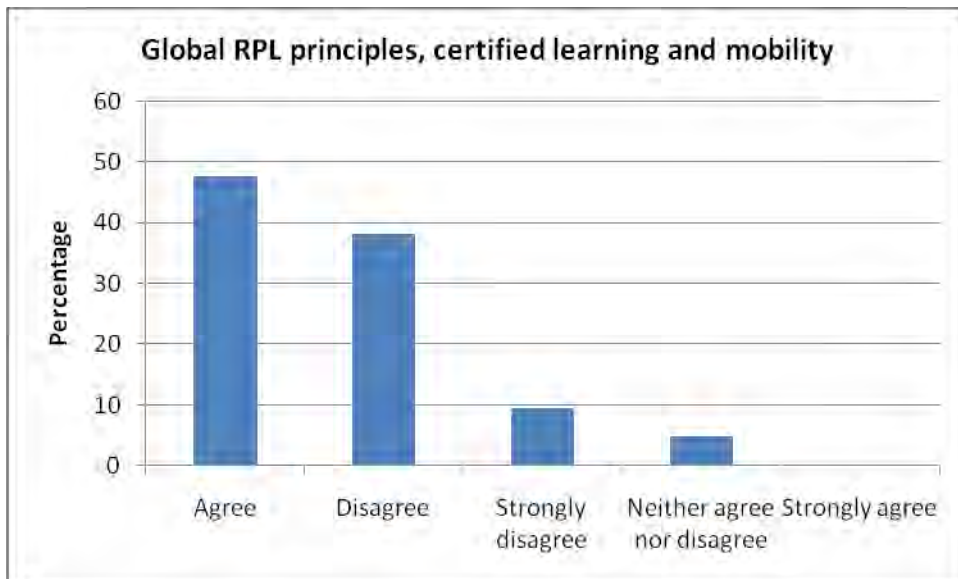


Figure 8.15 Without global RPL principles for non-formal and informal learning it is likely that only certified learning will facilitate mobility of workers

The once again low levels of support for the Europass documents, as already seen in round one in terms of RPL tools for the future development of RPL in companies and organisations, brings up the question of a mismatch between what is occurring in policy and what is happening in practice. This is partly due to the equity aspects of such documents, which, according to the panel favour those who can represent their learning in text form, as with the web-based RPL tools (e-portfolios, on-line assessment). However, when it comes to RPL and technology there was a 65% agreement with the statement *'electronic-RPL (e-portfolios and online assessment) will have to become one of the most used RPL "technologies" if economies of scale are to be achieved'* (mean 2.43 and median of 2=agree).

### 8.3.3 RPL and Qualifications

In thinking more about qualification recognition, there was disagreement with the statement *'recognition of qualifications rather than recognition of non-formal/informal learning will remain the focus of RPL in companies and organisations'* (20% agreement), which illustrates the importance of experience to companies and organisations and which

was stressed many times by the panel in their additional comments, especially referring to qualifications being only one aspect of what is considered in employee recruitment and development, with the recognition of non-formal and informal learning playing an increasingly important role in making plans for employee development, productivity and flexibility. This is supported by the high level of agreement with the statement *'RPL in the context of continuing professional development in companies and organisations will be valuable primarily for access to qualifications'* (65% agreement). However, in the context of companies and organisations, the use of RPL to achieve a qualification will depend on circumstances such as the occupation itself and the currency of skills requirements. It is also worthwhile to mention here a 55% agreement (mean of 2.48 and median of 2=agree) with *'globalisation of knowledge, goods, services and economic activity will increase the demand for RPL in companies and organisations'*. Yet a call for global principles of RPL or global recognition of qualifications (as mentioned above), although within the context of mobility, did not receive high levels of agreement despite an acknowledgement that global practice will necessitate some form of trans-national agreements from authorities with global standing.

#### **8.3.4 RPL and Re-skilling and Up-skilling**

There was a differentiation in round one regarding the uses of RPL for re-skilling and RPL for up-skilling, with what seemed to be a convergence around the greater potential of RPL in up-skilling than in re-skilling. The distinction was not as obvious in round two, especially when considering the large disagreement and ambiguity level with the statement *'RPL for up-skilling will be more valuable to companies and organisations than RPL for re-skilling'* (30% agreement, mean of 3 and median of 3.5 between 3=neither agree nor disagree and 4=disagree) as in figure 8.16. Additionally, there was a 25% agreement with the statement



*'RPL for up-skilling will more frequently be used in the contexts of State supported VET and Higher Education than in commercial companies and organisations'* (with a mean of 3.14 and medians of 3 and 4), as shown in figure 8.17.

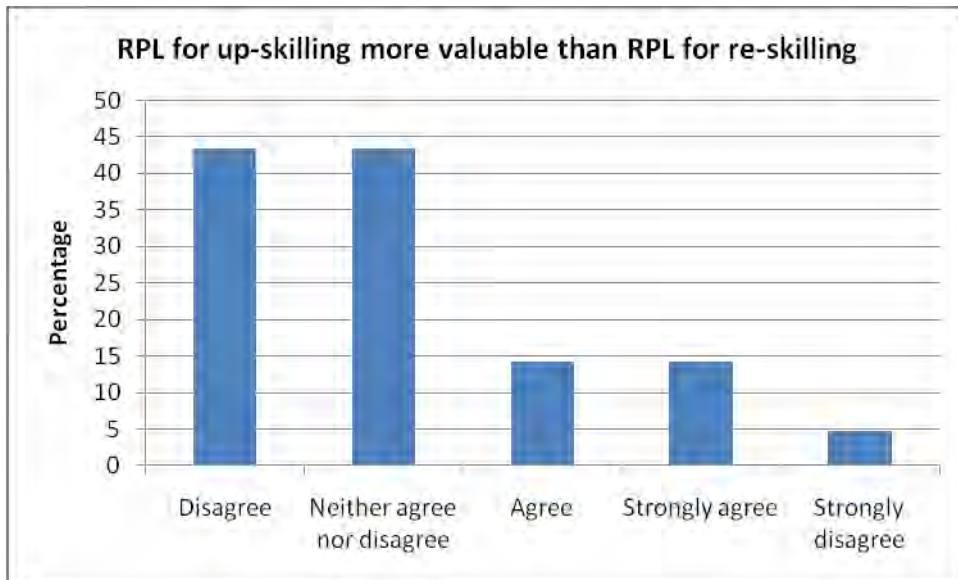


Figure 8.16 RPL for up-skilling will be more valuable to companies and organisations than RPL for re-skilling

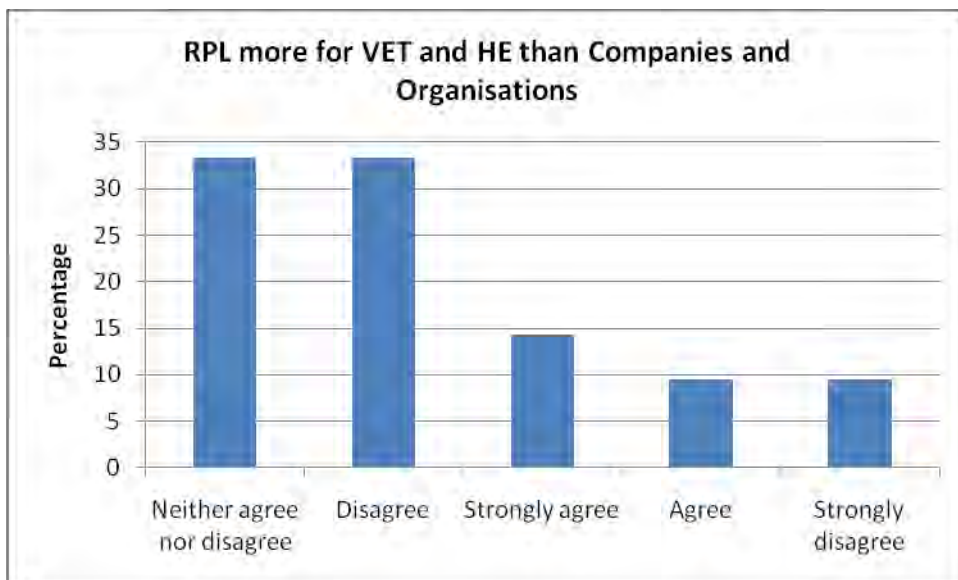


Figure 8.17 RPL for up-skilling will more frequently be used in the contexts of state supported VET and Higher Education than in commercial companies and organisations.

### 8.3.5 RPL and Social Inclusion

The question of social inclusion and RPL in companies and organisations was not conclusively answered as large levels of agreement pointed to RPL as a means to facilitate social inclusion (70% agreement), but views were mixed on the statement that social inclusion brings direct returns to industry, as shown in figure 8.18 (40% agreement, but a mean of 2.76 and median of 2.5 (between 2=agree and 3=neither agree nor disagree). This statement was contextualised with additional comments saying that social inclusion is not a priority for industry and is also restricted by a societal prejudice against investing in those seen as less productive (older workers, immigrants etc.). Furthermore the youth and voluntary sectors are frequently seen as contexts for the practice of RPL yet in round one these were not greatly recognised, however, in round two there was a 35% agreement with the statement '*RPL will not be more extensively used in the voluntary sector*' and a 5% agreement with '*RPL will not add value to youth work*'. It appears that the panel do not discount these contexts, as might have been suggested in round one.

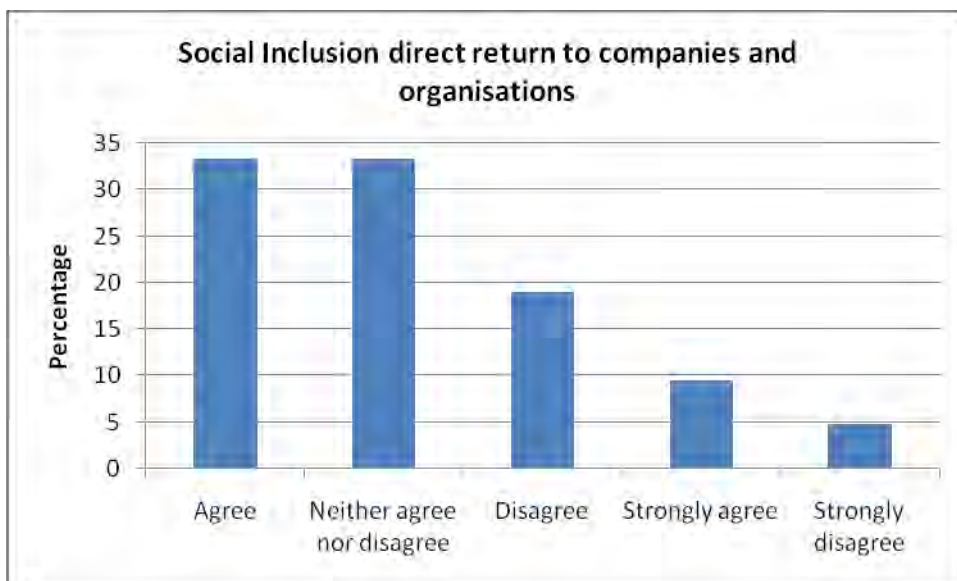


Figure 8.18 The Social Inclusion agenda of lifelong learning discourses is of direct returns relevance to companies and organisations

### **8.3.6 RPL and External Consultants, Training Needs Analysis and Personal Development Plans**

Further questions concerned *'external RPL consultants and/or brokers will be increasingly important for the development of RPL in companies and organisations'* (65% agreement, mean of 2.48 and median of 2=agree). There were additional comments stating that RPL is up to the individual and it is up to educational institutes to build RPL into their systems however, it was also said that academia does not lend itself to the simple solutions that organisations require and this therefore necessitates some form of facilitation. There was a question over RPL for training needs analysis in the context of higher education, which was not rated highly in round one, *'RPL for training needs analysis purposes will disappear from higher educational contexts'*. There was only a 20% agreement with this statement (no 'strongly agree', mean of 3.62 and median of 4=disagree). This suggests that, as one of the panel commented, RPL for training needs analysis in higher education may have greater use in occupationally-specific programmes. There was an equally low 20% agreement with the statement *'RPL for the purposes of personal development plans will be valuable in a work-based training/in-company training context only'* (mean of 3.52 and median of 4=disagree). One of the panel suggested that RPL for personal development plans would be more suited for professional recognition in educational programmes than in workplaces. The question of the role of Human Resources in organisations to facilitate personal development plans was also raised in further comments from the panel.

## **8.4 Data from Round Three**

The third round questionnaire was delivered in December 2009 with a total of eighteen respondents.

### 8.4.1 Policy Energy and Support Funding for RPL

Question two asked about the policy energy and support funding now allocated to the re-skilling of workers made redundant or in danger of redundancy. Respondents were asked to answer on a scale from 'none' (1) to 'significant amount' (4) as shown in figure 8.19 below.

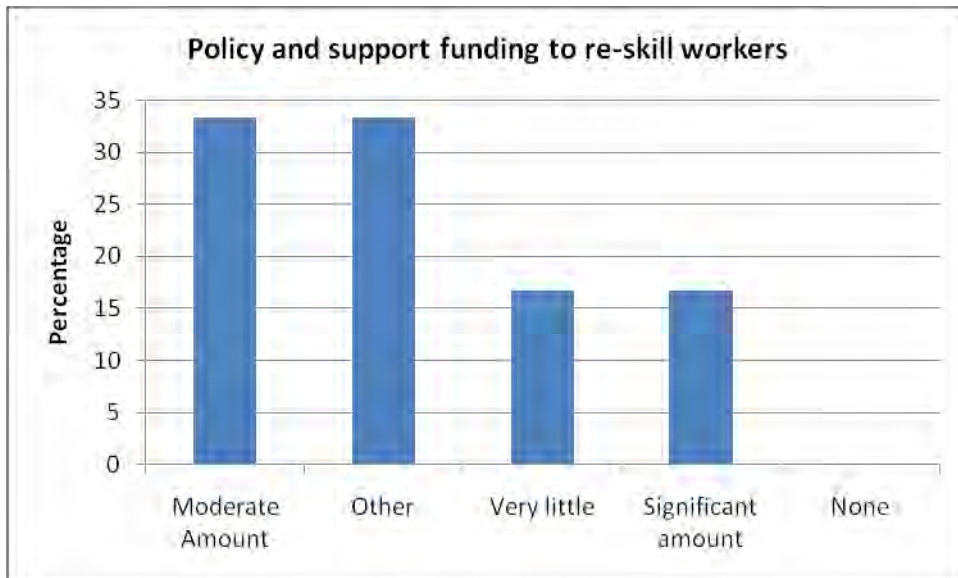


Figure 8.19 How much policy and support funding is now being allocated to re-skill workers made redundant or in danger of such?

The majority of responses to this question were for the 'moderate amount' of policy energy and support funding (33.3%) response category with no respondents choosing the 'none' response option. The same amount of respondents (33.3%) offered additional comments which focused on the ad-hoc nature of both re-skilling efforts and funding allocations, where the scarcity of funding or lack of structured funding policy has meant that efforts are small-scale and through key education and training providers rather than a coordinated government strategy. There were 16.7% of respondents who found 'a significant amount' of funding was being allocated, this is probably in reference to the Labour Market Activation Scheme in Ireland and the provisions of the European Globalisation Fund.

### 8.4.2 RPL and Redundancy Re-skilling

Question three asked about the extent to which RPL was a factor in the re-skilling of workers made redundant. Respondents were asked to answer on a scale from 'not at all' (1) to 'serious commitment' (4) as set out in figure 8.20. The majority of answers were for 'increasing' (38.9%) and 'a gesture only' (27.8%). No respondents found there to be a 'serious commitment' to RPL for re-skilling. Additional comments from respondents (27.8%) emphasised the marginal role of RPL in the re-skilling process because it is not fully integrated into policies, because it is more appropriate to assist those who lack formal qualifications to gain access to third-level education than to re-skill, because demand for RPL depends on labour supply (or shortages), and because it is more appropriate to look at the potential of RPL within the context of continuing professional development, as a means to enhance one's current skill set than to re-skill.

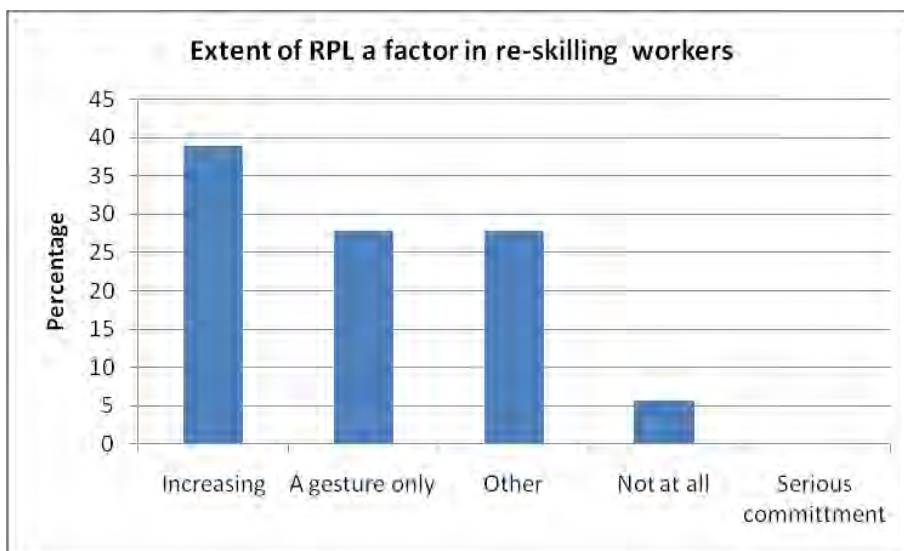


Figure 8.20 To what extent is RPL a factor in re-skilling redundant workers in your country/state/region?

### 8.4.3 Promoting RPL as a means to Up-skill

Question four asked about the extent to which policy makers promote RPL as a means of up-skilling workers (figure 8.21). Respondents were asked to answer on a scale from 'not at all' (1) to 'actually happening' (3). Respondents were leaning more towards 'just starting' (33.3%) and 'not at all' (27.8%). A smaller 16.7% saw this as 'actually happening'. Additional comments (22.2%) from respondents pointed to the fact that within industry there has certainly been an interest in promoting RPL, but not necessarily as a means of up-skilling workers.

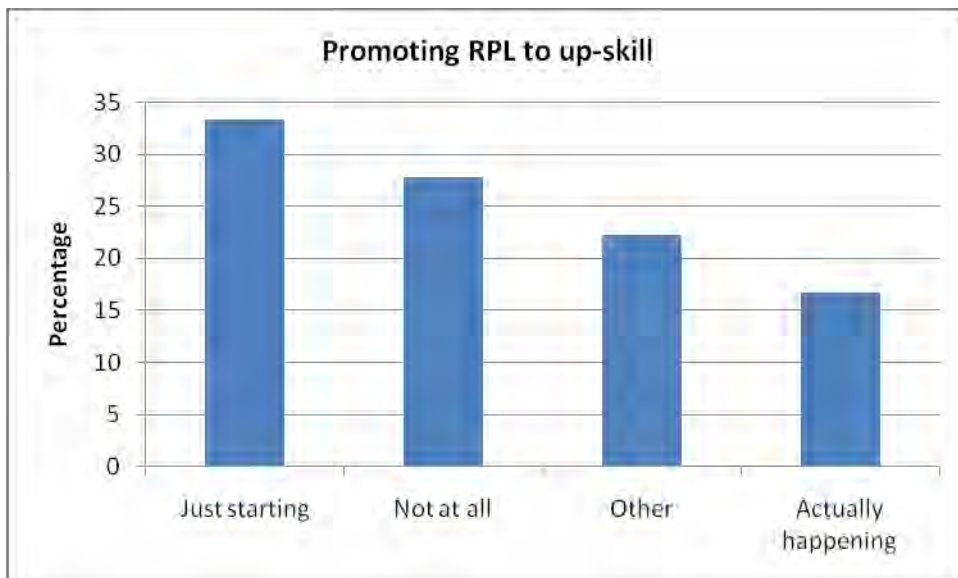


Figure 8.21 To what extent have policy makers begun to promote RPL as a means of up-skilling redundant workers in your state/country/region?

### 8.4.4 RPL in the economic crisis

Question five asked respondents to predict the role of RPL for re-skilling workers in the current global economic crisis. The comments were broadly divided into two opposing views, those who saw potential and those who did not see the potential of RPL for re-skilling workers. For analysis purposes the following themes were evident:

- RPL as a means of access to education and training,
- RPL as one of several small-scale policy options to the economic crisis,

- RPL as having potential, but potential that may not be achieved either because of policy or funding issues,
- RPL as a means of recognising either experience or qualifications,
- RPL as a means of facilitating mobility and employability,
- RPL as a means to focus on skills, skills gaps and demands,
- RPL dependence on funding and labour market demand.

The abovementioned themes are further elaborated below.

#### ***8.4.4.1 Access***

In terms of access, RPL is viewed as facilitating access to third level institutes for those who lack formal qualifications, at an appropriate level and in this way is concerned with the re-skilling process. In other words RPL is not central to re-skilling, but can indirectly facilitate it.

#### ***8.4.4.2 Small-scale policy***

As a small-scale policy option what came across was that RPL is one element of the re-skilling process and it continues to occur in dispersed local pockets on an ad-hoc basis within existing policy remits, so that the pressure of collective RPL expertise is never brought to bear at higher policy levels to impact on long-term approaches to re-skilling.

#### ***8.4.4.3 Potential***

Where potential is concerned the panel varied between the fact that RPL has a great deal of potential in the re-skilling process by way of capturing experience, but this potential is unlikely to be achieved since RPL is not widely known among key stakeholders in the re-skill/up-skill process, and that RPL has potential in up-skilling (growing to a higher level in the same job or sector), but not in re-skilling (learning new skills in another sector or job profile), or finally that it can be significant to re-skilling, but it will be some time before this comes to fruition.

#### ***8.4.4.4 Policy and Funding***

Issues of policy and funding were expressed by the panel as a lack of meaningful funding surrounding RPL, which hinders the acceptance of RPL within further and higher education because of the resources required to put it into practice. The impact of European policy on RPL is clearly visible (within Europe) but world bodies are less influential. Funding does not come from a single, centralised point as part of a structured government strategy, but is rather from a number of different providers meaning there is no coherent policy guiding what funding does exist.

#### ***8.4.4.5 Recognition***

On recognition, the panel commented that RPL can recognise formal learning and learning from experience which is tacit learning, and can assist in the mapping of qualifications already obtained onto national frameworks of qualifications for the movement of people between states for work.

#### ***8.4.4.6 Employability***

For employability purposes RPL is most useful within the context of career guidance to assist those unemployed to recognise their knowledge, skills and attitudes (KSAs) in order to differentiate themselves from the large labour pool of skilled unemployed that currently exist.

#### ***8.4.4.7 Skills***

With reference to skills the members of the panel suggested that RPL could be significant in a transition from a declining sector (e.g. construction) to a 'new' sector (e.g. green economy). There was also mention of the role of RPL in overcoming skill gaps to address future economic challenges. However, another panellist found CPD (Continuing Professional Development) to enhance the current skill set of a worker to be a more appropriate term to



address the re-skilling process rather than RPL. This is similar to the previous comments above from the panel regarding the lack of potential for RPL in re-skilling, but its significant potential in up-skilling. A final comment from one respondent alluded to previous rounds and the emphasis on the individual to use RPL for their advancement, especially in the labour market where it is skills achieved through experience that hold the greatest weight.

#### ***8.4.4.8 Demand***

A final theme emerging from the panel's comments was that of the demand dependency of RPL, which is logical because RPL did not emerge in a vacuum.

#### **8.4.5 Policy Statements**

The final set of questions presented respondents with ten RPL policy statements from different global organisations and asked them to comment on the relevance of these for RPL practice from 'little or no relevance to local RPL practices' (1) to 'local RPL informed by this policy ideology' (4) as well as space for additional comments on each statement. These policy statements can be found in the third round questionnaire in Appendix M. The organisations were UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), Council of Europe, World Bank, WTO and GATS (World Trade Organization and General Agreement on Trade in Services), ILO (International Labour Organization, European Commission, EQF (European Qualifications Framework), ECVET (European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training), NCVET (National Centre for Vocational Education Research), SAQA (South African Qualifications Authority), and NQAI (National Qualifications Authority of Ireland). The organisations chosen in the highest proportions by the panel for each response category are shown in table 8.3 below.

Table 8.3 Responses to RPL policy statements from European and International organisations

Response Category	Local RPL informed by this policy ideology	Starting to impact on local RPL practice	Background relevance only	Little or no relevance to local RPL practice
Policy Statement	NQAI (35.3%)	European Commission (41.2%)	World Bank (47.1%)	WTO and GATS (41.2%)
	EQF (25%)	ILO (29.4%)	WTO and GATS (47.1%)	SAQA (33.3%)
		OECD (23.5%)	SAQA (40%)	ECVET (31.3%)

### 8.4.5.1 UNESCO

The UNESCO statement focuses on the capacity building potential of RPL for workers to improve their career prospects. The majority of respondents found this to be of background relevance only (35.3%) to the reality of practice, 23.5% chose the ‘other’ response, but there were 17.6% of respondents who did find that local RPL, in their experience, is informed by this policy ideology (figure 8.22). Additional comments from respondents found this to present a useful set of purposes, but it is not known by policy makers or even many RPL practitioners. Another panellist found it to be influential, but only in specific occupational areas such as health care.

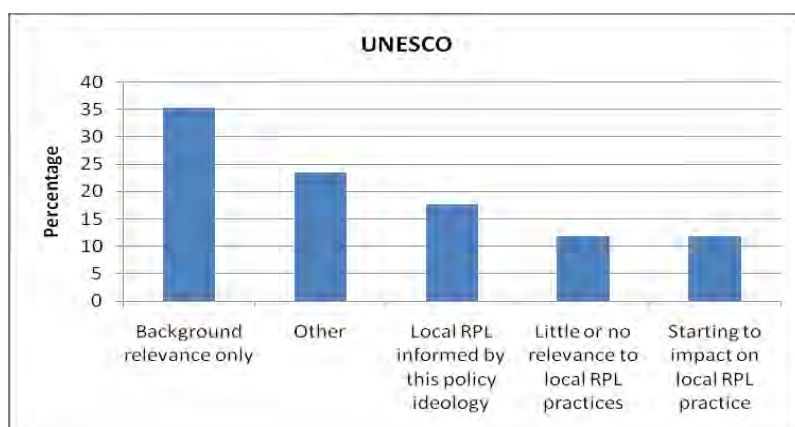


Figure 8.22 Relevance of UNESCO RPL policy statements to practice

### 8.4.5.2 Council of Europe

The Council of Europe statement emphasises the recognition of qualifications (although it does not discount recognition of experience) in the context of lifelong learning and to take employers' education and training needs into account. Both the 'little or no relevance to local RPL practices' and the 'other' response categories received 29.4% of responses and the 'starting to impact on local RPL practice' response was chosen by 17.6% of respondents (figure 8.23). Those 29.4% that offered other comments found that it does reflect many of the policy ideals of higher education i.e. the recognition of qualifications, the use of the diploma supplement, credit arrangements, and dialogue with employers. However three of the panel said that relevant links in the broader issues of lifelong learning such as with employers and the establishment of assessment and validation procedures are still lacking.

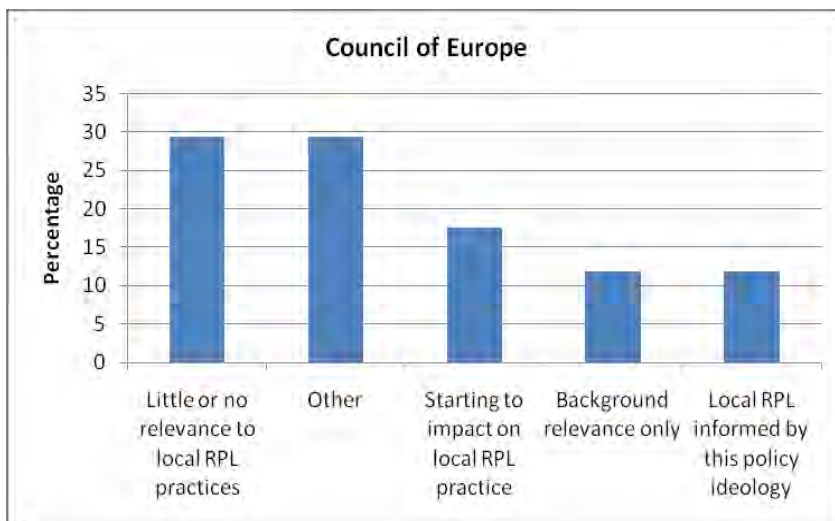


Figure 8.23 Relevance of Council of Europe RPL policy statements to practice

### 8.4.5.3 OECD

The OECD looks to the recognition of non-formal and informal learning as central to lifelong learning and the creation of open, knowledge societies. It emphasises the importance of recognition procedures having and maintaining their social value. The majority of

respondents found this statement having ‘little or no relevance to local RPL practices’ (29.4%). There were 23.5% who saw it as ‘starting to impact on local RPL practice’ and 17.6% for both ‘background relevance only’ and ‘local RPL informed by this policy ideology’ (figure 8.24). Two additional comments from the panel referred to the importance of their own national qualification frameworks in increasing the significance of RPL in lifelong learning in general and as a means to engender value in an RPL award certificate.

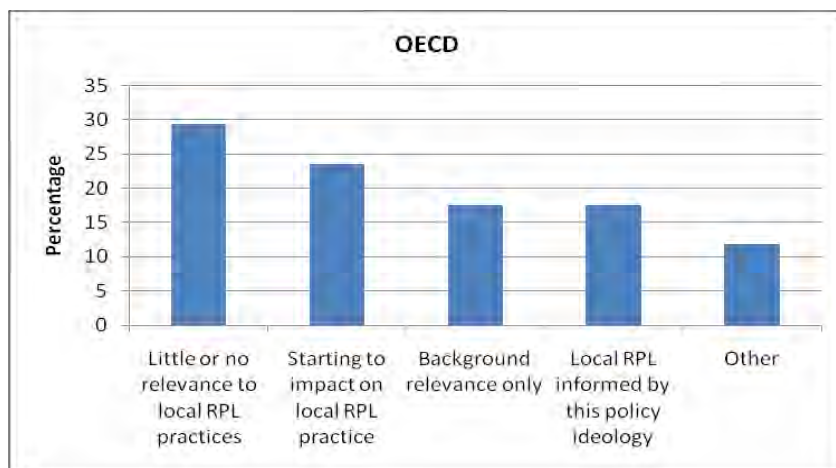


Figure 8.24 Relevance of OECD RPL policy statements to practice

#### **8.4.5.4 World Bank**

The World Bank statement is about the labour market relevance of qualifications which includes the creation of flexible and transferable skills in students as well as provisions for the recognition of prior learning. A large 47.1% of respondents found this statement to be of ‘background relevance only’ with another 23.5% seeing it as having ‘little or no relevance to local RPL practices’ (figure 8.25). In the additional comments from respondents one panellist found that this implied a national lifelong learning focus, which is still not the case in many countries, but another panellist said there is interest at policy level in some countries where they have begun to redesign their curricula for this purpose.

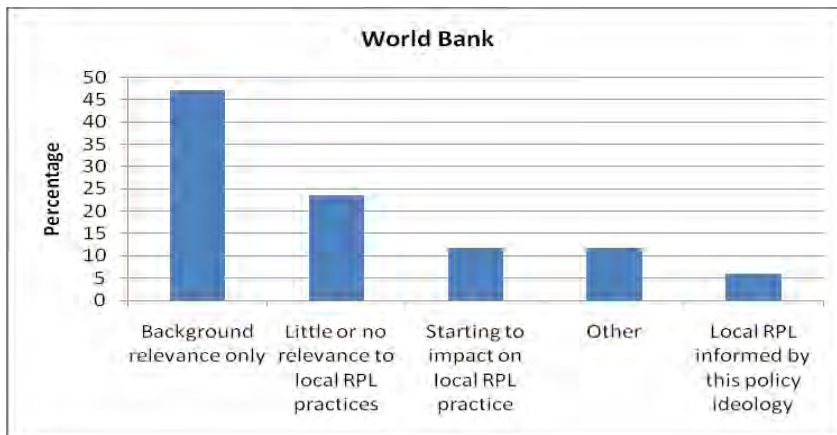


Figure 8.25 Relevance of World Bank RPL policy statements to practice

#### 8.4.5.5 WTO and GATS

The WTO and GATS represents professional recognition agreements by way of harmonisation or internationally agreed criteria, in other words, provisions that go beyond conventions to more binding and obligatory procedures. There was another large proportion of 47.1% who chose 'background relevance only' and another 41.2% that found it of 'little or no relevance to local RPL practices' (figure 8.26). There were no respondents who chose the 'local RPL informed by this policy ideology' nor were there any responses for the 'other' option.

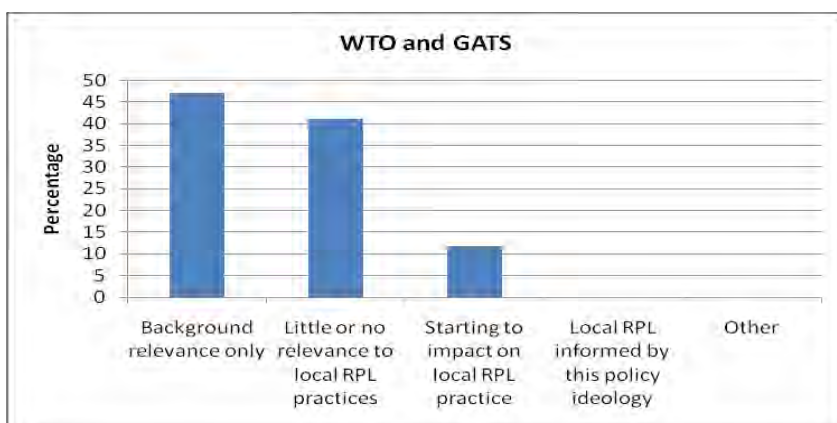


Figure 8.26 Relevance of WTO and GATS RPL policy statements to practice

### 8.4.5.6 ILO

The ILO statement is very much focused on transparent mechanisms for the recognition of prior learning, specifically national qualifications frameworks and consultation with social partners for skills that are portable across the labour market, especially for migrant workers. There were 29.4% of respondents who found this statement ‘starting to impact on local RPL practice’, but a further 23.5% who saw it having ‘little or no relevance to local RPL practices’ and also who chose the ‘other’ option (figure 8.27). These other comments centred on RPL in the labour market for the recognition of prior learning of refugees and asylum seekers, in particular, through qualifications frameworks. However, there was criticism of the strong emphasis on skills and credentials to the detriment of knowledge and competence as well as skill. It was also noted that as it stands the financing of RPL in the labour market is project-based; primarily EU subsidised and is therefore not yet a structural policy commitment. Furthermore the portfolio assessment procedure in higher education may exclude migrant workers from either accessing or benefitting from RPL altogether.

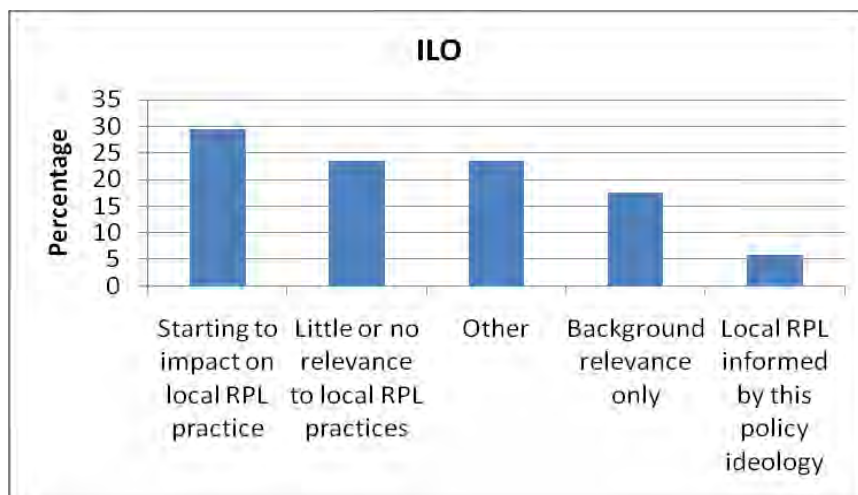


Figure 8.27 Relevance of ILO RPL policy statements to practice

#### 8.4.5.7 European Commission

The European Commission states that the realisation of lifelong learning requires strategies to identify and validate learning irrespective of the setting in which it was acquired to make it visible in the labour market and in society in general. The greatest number of the panel (41.2%) chose the response 'starting to impact on local RPL practice' and then the responses 'background relevance only' and 'local RPL informed by this policy ideology' each received 17.6% from the panel (figure 28). There was an 11.8% response rate to the 'other' category with comments saying that while recognised in policy this has not yet transferred into practice and that there have been attempts to put this policy into practice in the social-cultural adult education and youth work sectors with tools to make their learning more visible.

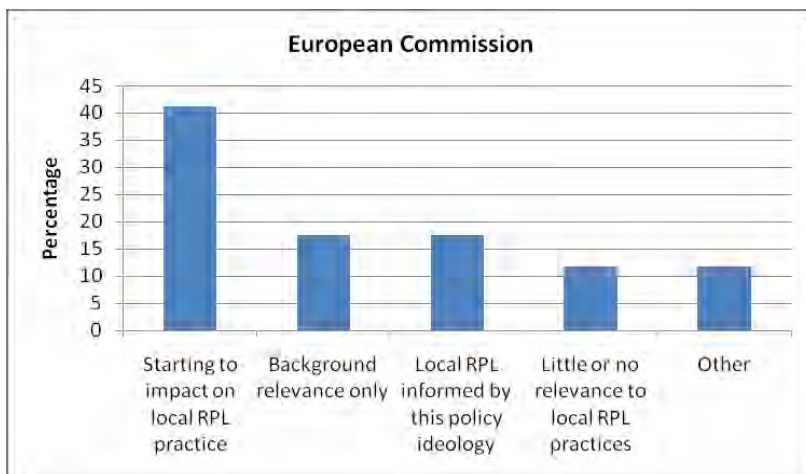


Figure 8.28 Relevance of European Commission RPL policy statements to practice

#### 8.4.5.8 EQF

The EQF is espoused as a translation tool to make qualifications readable and assess their equivalence across Europe for the promotion and facilitation of both workers' and learners' mobility and lifelong learning. The greatest response category for this statement was 'local RPL informed by this policy ideology' (25%). All of the other response categories received 18.8% each (figure 8.29). The additional comments from the panel were, on the one hand,

how the EQF is influential at policy level but not yet at operational level, and on the other hand, the NFQs have been formally aligned to the EQF with RPL embedded as an equivalent learning trajectory to that of formal learning.

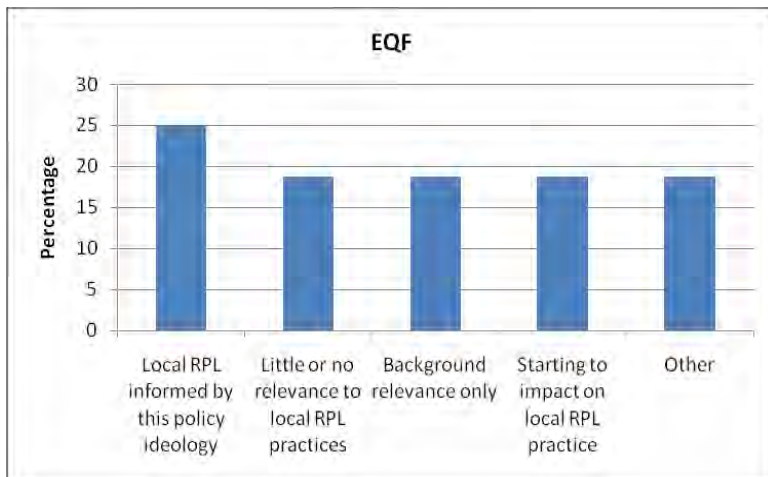


Figure 8.29 Relevance of EQF RPL policy statements to practice

#### **8.4.5.9 ECVET**

The ECVET emphasises the mobility of workers, the transparency of qualifications, and the need for trust in the recognition of prior learning. The greatest response category was ‘little or no relevance to local RPL practice’ (31.3%) followed by ‘background relevance only’ (25%) and then 18.8% each to ‘starting to impact on local RPL practice’ and ‘other’ (figure 8.30). The additional comments were all of the view that this has little impact on practice. While the higher education system uses ECTS, as one of the panel pointed out, ECVET is one of a number of initiatives that includes ECTS, Europass documents and the EQF to recognise learning across countries and institutes. In the labour market the recognition of prior learning is informed by the VET as well as the HE context.



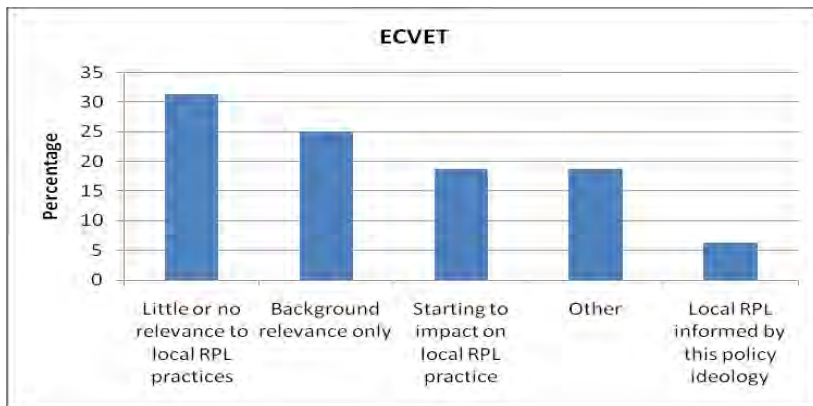


Figure 8.30 Relevance of ECVET RPL policy statements to practice

#### **8.4.5.10 NCVER**

NCVER is an Australian non-profit body for research in vocational education. This statement is from a report carried out on why RPL is used and why it may not always be the most appropriate tool for bringing people into the learning system. This statement highlights the potential or documented benefits of RPL for individuals, employers, and registered training organisations if they are to employ it. The majority of respondents found this to have ‘background relevance only’ (37.5%) followed by 31.3% of respondent opting for the ‘other’ option (figure 8.31). Their comments here are that this is once again reflected in policy but not in practice, one panellist goes further saying that this is philosophy more than policy, and finally while initial research shows these listed benefits to be true RPL is still not well known outside of higher education.

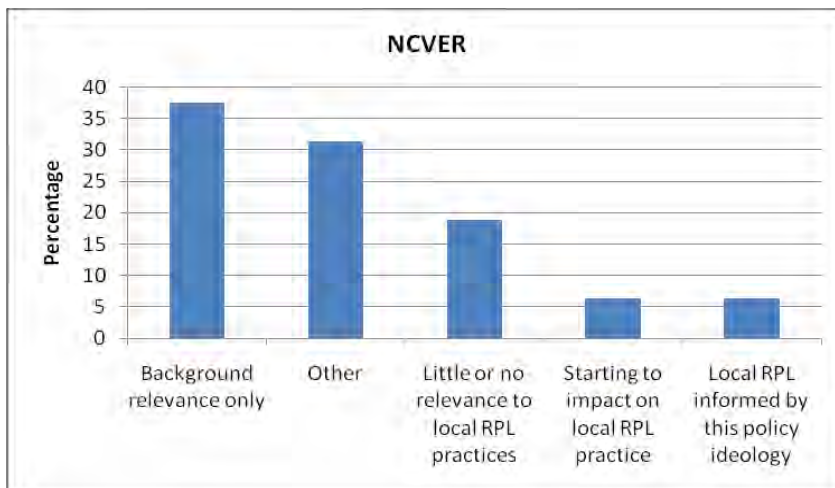


Figure 8.31 Relevance of NCVER RPL policy statements to practice

#### **8.4.5.11 SAQA**

The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) proposes a transformative aspect to RPL to develop an equitable education and training system, as well as the various contexts (further education and training, general education and training, adult education and training, formal institution, workplace) and purposes (personal development, certification of skills, progression to learning programme, promotion, career change) for RPL. The greatest proportion of respondents (40%) found this statement to have ‘background relevance only’ followed by ‘little or no relevance to local RPL practices’ (33.3%). There were no respondents who found ‘local RPL informed by this policy ideology’ (figure 8.32). From the ‘other’ (20%) responses the panel found this policy having unrealistically high expectations, and as mentioned previously, leaning towards philosophy rather than policy. Rather than transforming the system they suggest RPL as a tool that supports the development of an integrated lifelong learning system.

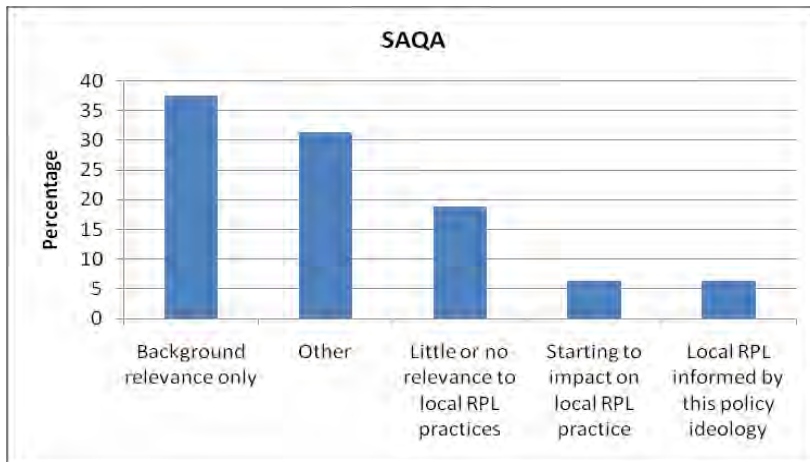


Figure 8.32 Relevance of SAQA RPL policy statements to practice

#### **8.4.5.12 NQAI**

The NQAI's RPL policy addresses what RPL can do such as supporting a socially inclusive education and training system, addressing the needs of mature, disadvantaged or part-time students, and meeting workforce needs. It is not surprising that most respondents (35.3%) chose the 'local RPL informed by this policy ideology' considering fourteen of the eighteen respondents were Irish. The responses 'little or no relevance to local RPL practice' and 'background relevance only' were both chosen by 17.6% of respondents each, as was the 'other' response category (figure 8.33). The additional comments suggest that the NQAI approach is similar to that of other countries however its application is still lacking. Furthermore, in order to address the needs of disadvantaged groups, as is stressed in this statement; additional measures will be needed as RPL in its current form is still primarily beneficial to the already advantaged groups in society.

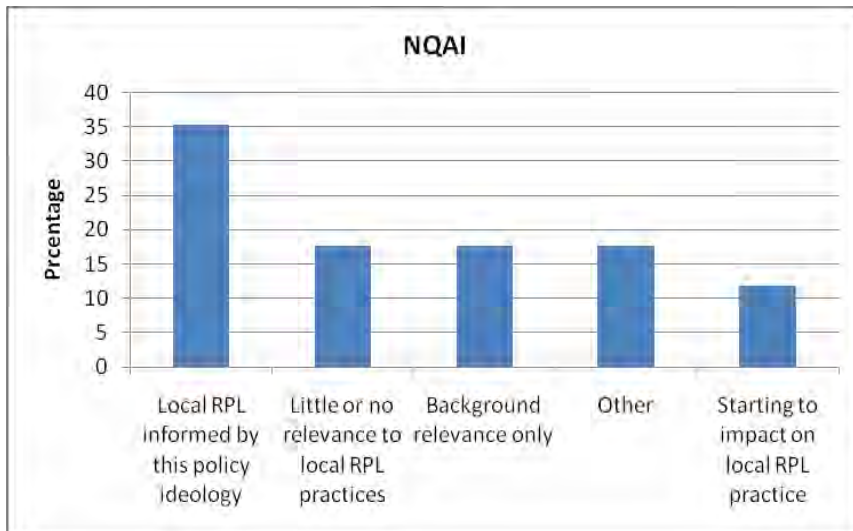


Figure 8.33 Relevance of NQAI RPL policy statements to practice

## 8.5. Emerging Themes

In making some concluding points about this Delphi survey, there were four themes that emerged as a result of divergence and ambiguity from the data. These four themes are: the divergence between what is aspired to in policy and what is actually achieved or achievable in practice. The second is the distinctions between the appropriateness of RPL for up-skilling but not for re-skilling. The third theme refers to mobility which in this study is tied to employability within one's own sector. The fourth them is social inclusion which was not prioritised by the expert panel with regard to RPL in companies and organisations but it could be an unintended consequence. There is a brief discussion of these four themes below.

### 8.5.1 Policy versus practice

As was already noted in rounds one and two there were ambiguities surrounding what appeared to be aspired to in policy and actually achieved in practice, particularly around the concepts of 'mobility' and 'social inclusion'. Among the policy statements from world bodies such as the EQF and the ECVET, which emphasise mobility, there were a number of additional comments from respondents that RPL policy was influential but not yet evident at

operational level. Similarly, the statements from the European Commission and the NCVET also received the comments that the policy they set out was not yet seen in practice. Some comments referred to the distinction between what was more ideology than policy as in the SAQA policy or that of UNESCO.

The view also emerged that RPL is appropriate only for specific circumstances, or is more appropriate for certain occupational areas. Furthermore, outside of higher education RPL is not widely known by employers or employees. Additionally, RPL is only one of a number of policy options and it continues to be practised on a small-scale and is therefore limited in terms of impact. It is also limited in terms of the broad policy aspirations outlined by policy bodies yet not supported by relevant structures for dissemination such as funding and concrete government policies. Funding is a key issue, not only in the implementation of RPL, but also in its sustainability. Despite government commitments to RPL there is no structured policy or funding mechanism in place yet in Ireland.

### **8.5.2 Up-skilling and re-skilling**

The distinctions between RPL for up-skilling and RPL for re-skilling emerged from round one and continued into round three. It was not evident that RPL is viewed as a distinct policy in these processes as it is not fully integrated into re-skilling or up-skilling strategies and furthermore because respondents found there to be a distinction between the potential of RPL; with more of a focus on up-skilling than re-skilling where, to re-skill is to learn new skills and to up-skill is to enhance one's extant skill set. Up-skilling was highly rated in the higher education context, probably a result of the current large proportion of unemployed people going back to education.

### **8.5.3 Mobility**

The mobility potential of RPL was also a disputed concept throughout the three rounds of this Delphi research. In round one there were generally low levels of agreement overall with RPL for the purpose of 'mobility', despite there being full agreement that RPL as a means to facilitate mobility was a return on investment to the labour market. In round two there appeared to be a tension between the potential for professional mobility and questions of assuring quality in that process. In round three the question of mobility emerged through the various policy statements and featured within the comments pertaining to policy aspiration rather than lived practice. Mobility in these statements is tied into the social inclusion agenda especially when considering the recognition of qualifications of non-European migrants who often remain marginalised despite many provisions for recognition of both qualifications and skills for mobility purposes. Mobility is also tied into the concept of employability, though employability in the context of this study has referred to career development and employability within one's own sector and country rather than an employable mobile workforce.

### **8.5.4 Social inclusion**

The final point emerging from this research is on the topic of social inclusion. There were low levels of support for the contexts of the voluntary sector, youth sector, community education, adult education, work sectors, trade unions and professional bodies for the practice of RPL for the purposes of 're-skilling' and 'up-skilling'. This raised questions around the priorities attached to using RPL in the first place, and whether they extend beyond the economic to the social and cultural integration of individuals. This does not appear to be the case as the panel found RPL facilitating social inclusion a return to the labour market from RPL, but not to the individual, the employing organisation nor higher and further education.

Furthermore, a social justice model of RPL was not rated highly in the future development of RPL. In round two this lack of a social inclusion agenda was less evident, but in thinking of responses to the policy statements presented in round three, it appears that it is a lack of policy and funding and inbuilt inequalities in the existing systems for RPL, which do not address the needs of the disadvantaged. What did emerge, to a certain extent, was the possibility that RPL in terms of the recognition of qualifications rather than of non-formal or informal learning were more a means of social inclusion, through the mutual recognition of qualifications and awards. In the particular context of companies and organisations implementing RPL for the purpose of social inclusion was not a consideration at all in most cases, although it may be a by-product of RPL.

## **8.6 Chapter Summary**

This chapter has explored the perception of RPL from twenty-two national and international experts in the areas of work-based learning, continuing professional development, higher education, in-company training, professional bodies, and further education. The first round questionnaire was focused on the way RPL is used in various contexts resulting in RPL use for access and up-skilling through portfolios based on professional standards or national qualifications frameworks. Return on investment from RPL concerned labour mobility, social inclusion, improved individual career prospects, employee morale, and alternate pathways to qualification. The second round questionnaire found general agreement between respondents that RPL would increasingly be used for the mutual recognition of qualifications rather than the harmonisation of qualifications systems. Additionally, that the globalisation of knowledge, goods and services would increase the demand for RPL in companies and organisations, that RPL would be driven greatly by the need to keep pace with technological change, and that external consultants would become increasingly important for RPL development in companies and

organisations. The third and final questionnaire exposed some of the divergences between RPL policy and practice through ten policy statements from global, European and national organisations. The resulting four themes of divergence and ambiguity that emerged will form part of the final concluding chapter nine, which synthesises the three studies of this research study.



## *Chapter Nine*

# **Implications of the Research Findings for RPL Policy and Practice**

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This research study has attempted to bring together perceptions of the return on investment from RPL to companies and organisations by ultimately investigating the impact of RPL on the labour market. Due to data collection and measurement deficiencies it was not possible to pursue a return on investment analysis in this research study. However, it was possible to investigate results and impact of RPL. It was within this context that the overall research question was asked:

***Is there a return on investment from the recognition of prior learning to companies and organisations that use the recognition of prior learning in their learning and development strategies?***

Return on investment in this research is conceived as achievement of impact at a societal, organisational and individual level. This chapter aims to synthesise the three studies of this research and also address the research study audience identified in chapter one; of RPL practitioners in higher and further education, human resource or learning and development officers, and policy makers in further and higher education.

The researcher is aware of the limitations of this research study as already laid out in chapter two therefore some of these caveats will only be mentioned briefly here. This research does not claim to make any generalisable conclusions, but does make recommendations from the data as efforts were made through the research design and

analytical framework to attempt to provide for external and internal validity as the research strove for naturalistic generalisation from which it is still possible to draw conclusions (Stake, 2000). Therefore, this research study was concerned with the trustworthiness and authenticity of the data demonstrated through the transferability, dependability, credibility and confirmability of the data. This research provided a talking point for those who were involved by raising their awareness of the issues surrounding RPL and encouraging them to think more about the impact of RPL on their companies and organisations.

This concluding chapter brings together this exploration of the impact of RPL in companies and organisations under the following three headings:

1. Findings for RPL policy
2. Findings for RPL practice
3. Findings for companies and organisations

## **9.1 Findings for RPL Policy**

Some of the more significant findings for policy that have emerged from this research study relate to the issue of resources. One of the main issues in mainstreaming RPL is the concern for resources, however rather than a separate RPL system as seen in the Dutch ‘Kenniscentrums’, it is more appropriate to embed RPL throughout the normal systems and practices of education providers, companies and organisations or professional bodies, which is already taking place in Ireland. To that end the primary resources for RPL are already accounted for in day to day operational costs. Embedding RPL into institutes of education was difficult at the initial stages of RPL development when the force of policy at global, European, national and particularly local levels was lacking, unlike policy development today such as the Bologna framework (EF-EHEA), the European Qualifications Framework (EQF-LLL), national frameworks of qualifications, sectoral frameworks, modularisation, and

curriculum changes that reflect new conceptions of knowledge and learning including learning outcomes.

Despite new facilitating mechanisms, demand for RPL is still based on labour market demands for learning in general; tied to accredited qualifications in the current drive for credentials. National qualifications frameworks and sectoral frameworks are therefore key factors in the development of RPL in companies and organisations and thereby, university-Industry partnerships, where RPL is combined with work-based learning, have become increasingly more prevalent. This should continue as RPL is now linked to up-skilling strategies as part of the National Skills Strategy in Ireland. This suggests RPL as a means to validate company and organisational training by linking it to national or sectoral qualifications frameworks. In theory the EQF-LLL should be paramount in this translation process however in practice it is national and sectoral qualifications frameworks that have taken precedence over the EQF-LLL.

Much RPL policy is focused on mobility and employability. Mobility, as a factor in RPL, is tied to concepts of employability and social inclusion in this research. Social inclusion is really a matter of occupational or career progression for those who lack qualifications or accreditation. Geographic mobility is not a primary consideration for employing RPL in companies and organisations because it would not be logical to invest in staff for them to become mobile, but mobility is considered a resulting consequence of the process. Mobility in relation to RPL in this research study concerned occupational and academic mobility rather than geographical mobility. In other words, mobility in practice concerned moving across and within organisational, sectoral and accreditation frameworks on a national or

local level, rather than mobility throughout Europe. Similarly, Murphy (2005) found that there was little evidence of Irish policy on trans-frontier mobility despite reports stating that much recent European policy development in education and training had been informed by the goal of promoting the mobility of learners and workers throughout Europe.

Mobility must therefore be seen in the context of sectoral or company/organisational learning and development. This once again emphasises the importance of national and sectoral qualifications frameworks in the context of RPL in companies and organisations. The fact that the Irish National Qualifications Framework is based on awards only rather than credit is a distinct disadvantage to the further development of company and organisational training to validate it from the company perspective and to up-skill and re-skill individuals to become occupationally mobile.

Mobility in this research is linked to dimensions of RPL for up-skilling and re-skilling where up-skilling is for the purposes of increased productivity and career progression and re-skilling is for employment in an industry. However, up-skilling has received greater policy attention. While re-skilling may be side-lined in theoretical terms, in practical terms it is a means to move between differing job-areas within one organisation.

Drives for economic competitiveness and up-skilling of the labour force, subsumed under lifelong learning policy, have impacted on educational culture. Educational culture has also been impacted by the value placed on learning from outside the academy now permeating thinking in educational policy and practice. These drives, in conjunction with economic difficulties, have put the spotlight on specialised, supportive, and most importantly

accredited means of employee development. A critical view of accreditation considers it as simply another aspect of the audit culture that has grown out of the lifelong learning discourse and another facet of the credentialising drive that inflates the credentials for jobs. Livingston (1998, as cited in Fenwick, 2002, p. 92) states that the major problem with upskilling is that it leads to underemployment as individuals have more skills and knowledge than they can put into practice on their jobs.

A preference for qualifications above experience has seen professional and occupational sectors look at ways of formalising routes to qualification, registration, membership, and within that making their own provisions for RPL; often using national and sectoral qualification and accreditation frameworks to move away from being economic to professional sectors. Taking these factors together at a policy level there is significant scope here for RPL to be a part of the sectoral and organisational professionalising process.

## **9.2 Findings for RPL practice**

The findings of this research for practice, suggest that RPL is a tool for continuing professional development and employee engagement. Continuing professional development through RPL as opposed to annual evaluations is a more conceptually acceptable means to address employee development in companies and organisations. RPL as part of CPD also facilitates social inclusion by way of occupational progression or mobility.

The pedagogical aspect of RPL as a tool to reflect on knowledge and skills was perceived by learners as a tool to reflect on their own knowledge and skills and use that as a basis for personal or professional development. This reflective aspect then transferred into greater initiative and empowerment on the part of the employee-learner in work practice. RPL also

gave learners a professional identity in the sense that it legitimated their position within their job role. However, using RPL solely as a means to reflect on knowledge and skills for formative recognition is harder to achieve in the workplace as people are busy with their working lives and are less motivated unless formative recognition is the first step towards summative recognition in the shape of qualifications or awards. One example of formative RPL in the business context is using RPL for diagnostic purposes as part of the continuing professional development process. RPL in continuing professional development is associated with formative recognition, but with the caveat that in the reality of working life employees in increasingly precarious employment positions are suspicious of what is perceived as the annual evaluation process, which is equated to unwelcomed additional workload. Therefore, linking the CPD process to RPL is an effective means to achieve qualifications for staff in specific occupational sectors that are increasingly being professionalised and regulated for quality assurance purposes. Meeting legal requirements is not given a great deal of attention in RPL policy, but in practice it proves to be an increasingly useful and used sectoral and professional facet of RPL.

Employee development, particularly with regard to regulatory or organisational requirements, is linked to formative RPL for diagnostic purposes. However it is not always feasible to make such formative learning visible in the form of qualifications or certification. This is particularly relevant in Ireland because recognition for credit, for example, has little value unless it is tied to an award on the Irish national framework of qualifications therefore accreditation rather than credit is emphasised in Ireland. Within the context of regulating continued competence RPL serves to recognise current competence and identify gaps in competence if any exist. As part of a process of regulating continued competence, the e-

portfolio is considered a comprehensive way to capture the formative process of learning rather than simply the output or outcome as in a paper portfolio (Hartnell-Young & Morriss, 2007). The e-portfolio has been given limited attention in the data because many RPL learners in this research study were not digitally literate or the focus was on the outcome rather than the process, for which the paper portfolio is ideal. In order to streamline the RPL process, which is criticised for being too labour and resource intensive and focused solely on outputs, the e-portfolio is one tool that merits further exploration, particularly in the context of recognition of current competence and the regulation of continued competence. Therefore, it is suggested that the e-portfolio should be given greater consideration in streamlining RPL processes for companies and organisation and as a means to streamline the RPL process for higher education.

The way RPL was used to determine the value of learning was, for this research study, described as evaluation. Scepticism of RPL evaluation impacted on perceptions of the standards and rigour required of RPL assessment. Connected to this was the practice of RPL in companies and organisations where access to RPL was limited to selected learners on the grounds of their length of employment and skill level in conjunction with screening to maximise their potential for a successful RPL claim. What was seen from the data was that the RPL process is premised on an evaluation that inherently denies disadvantaging the learner, but this has compromised the credibility of the process for some when the reasons for successful RPL claims are less an outcome of the RPL process itself and more an outcome of the selection and screening processes. The issue was not that RPL might award undeserving candidates, but rather that the process ensured that no undeserving candidates made it to the qualification stage and therefore vigilance at that final evaluation

stages could be compromised. One of the issues surrounding this scepticism of the RPL route to an award in contrast to the traditional educational route to an award was the time and effort demand placed on the learner without a commensurate gain in theoretical knowledge from a formal programme of study. However, this research shows that where gaps in knowledge through RPL were identified they were used to gain theoretical knowledge that was lacking either through self-study or entering into a formal programme.

In practical terms a scaled-up model of RPL is the most efficient RPL model in companies and organisations in terms of cost, benefits to the individual and benefits to the organisation in that greater numbers complete the process because there is a social support and a formal structure unlike if the individual was working alone. RPL can bring together practitioners in group RPL programmes as in the cases from this research, where the social aspect was considered an important part of the RPL process itself in terms of support and learning from each other. Group RPL is also a force in creating a professional identity for a sector or profession which was an important factor in the early stages of RPL practice where it had a role to play in identifying the knowledge and skills that existed in a professional community. Importantly, group RPL offers economies of scale for companies and organisations.

### **9.3 Findings for Companies and Organisations**

The results have shown that RPL is still very much a contested topic with proponents for and against its use in the workplace. The cost and resource concerns are alleviated in the case of scaled-up RPL for groups of worker-learners in partnership with educational providers. The benefits for organisations are in terms of employee engagement and empowerment through RPL as a CPD tool for employers rather than the annual review process. In



companies and organisations there is less concern with RPL for societal benefit, however a more employable and qualified workforce inevitably impacts on the labour market. RPL has proved a successful route to employee engagement in this research and therefore this research suggests that CPD through RPL as an employee engagement strategy is a more appropriate way to operationalise CPD in the workplace than through the annual evaluation process. Thereby, CPD in this context is aligned to employability and mobility within one's own job or career. In other words, RPL as CPD offers occupational progression for employees who lack qualifications and are therefore given the opportunity to access higher education in order to progress in their job roles. This opportunity to achieve qualifications also refers to employee engagement when traditional routes to recognition and rewards have disappeared. The fact that RPL is distinct to formal learning is an important factor for people who may object to undertaking formal learning. RPL also acknowledges the significant knowledge and skills of learners in the workplace, which was an important factor in the early RPL projects within professional sectors.

Today RPL, where it is practised, is perceived as a non-traditional route to staff learning and development that maximises impact and minimises cost. RPL is most appropriate in organisations that place learning and development as central to strategy or mission. In most cases however, as was found by the Irish Labour Relations Commission:

*On the whole, there is a relative absence of reports of innovative HR approaches to the economic recession. There is little evidence, for instance, of firms introducing greater training and up-skilling programmes for employees as an alternative to redundancies or even short term working for that matter (Roche, Teague, Coughlan & Fahey, 2011, p.8).*

Consequently where learning and development are prioritised RPL has the potential to be high on company or organisational agendas, but as a result of cutbacks during the economic recession, this is not the case. However, despite its resource-intensive nature RPL is perceived as appropriate for organisations that are looking for an alternative to 'training' that is connected to the labour market. RPL is considered practical for business needs in opposition to the traditional recourse to going out on training to address identified learning and development needs. Yet, in some instances it is easier and more appropriate to send people on formal training programmes.

Therefore, what role do companies and organisation have in the future development of RPL? It would appear that industry collaboration with further and higher education institutes is one way forward, as well as bringing together RPL expertise that is a dispersed practice at the moment. Accessibility to RPL for companies and organisations points to a role for outside brokers and consultants to liaise between the company/organisation and RPL provider. However, due to the diversity of needs and practices associated with RPL it is difficult to be specific, not only about how to define RPL in an organisational context, but also how it will impact on that organisation. The focus of study on RPL tends to be on benefits to the learner and to a lesser extent on benefits to the organisation. The perceived knowledge and cost resources of RPL in its current format also influence its take-up by organisations. Ultimately, the findings from all three strands of the research suggest that RPL policy development and policy aspirations are not in line with what is feasible or desired in practice.

## **9.4 Chapter Summary**

This final concluding chapter has summarised the main findings of the research and some of the implications for RPL policy, RPL practice and RPL in companies and organisations. In policy terms RPL is intricately linked to the drive for up-skilling and accreditation for occupational mobility and as a means to validate sectoral or organisational training through national and sectoral qualification and accreditation frameworks. In practice RPL is an appropriate tool in the workplace to address continuing professional development and regulatory needs without recourse to “training” or the annual review process. Finally in companies and organisations continuing professional development through RPL is an ideal way for employers to engage with their staff by way of recognition and rewards.

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# *Appendix A*

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## **NUIM/NRB Certificate in Training (Special Needs) Documents for Historical Analysis of Previous Industry-Academic RPL Projects**

- Certificate in Training (Special Needs) – Themes and Principles (1993) Brochure, National Rehabilitation Board (NRB) 16 pages.
- Course Guide – Brochure (1993), National Rehabilitation Board (NRB), 20 pages.
- AP(E)L Route Portfolio Handbook, Pilot Programme (1998) Centre for Adult Community Education, NUI Maynooth [Anne Ryan (Academic Director & Course Co-ordinator), Tom Collins (Academic Director), Anne Murphy (Course Facilitator)], Pilot January 1998, 10 pages.
- Certificate in Training (Special Needs) AP(E)L Route –Rationale, Process, Roles, Procedures (Draft), January 1997, 36 pages.
- Pilot Programme, AP(E)L Route, Participants’ Evaluation, NUI Maynooth, Centre for Adult Education, June 1998, 5 pages [total of 12 evaluations].
- Interview reports by James Connolly (Assessor), 9<sup>th</sup> June 1998, 12 interviewees.
- Interview reports by Bríd Connolly (Assessor), 9<sup>th</sup> July 1998, 2 interviewees.
- Guidelines for Writing and Training Programme Specification, NRB, September 1994, 35 pages.
- Certificate in Training (Special Needs) through AP(E)L, Discussion document, prepared by Anne Murphy in consultation with Anne Ryan and Tom Collins, May 1996, 9 pages.
- Certificate in Training (Special Needs) AAPL method, application screening checklist, proposed self-assessment rating criteria.
- Case Study Presentations, AAPL (1 page-in handbook).
- Journal, AAPL method.
- From Handbook – Sections 5.5 (Quality Assurance), 5.6 (Monitoring), 5.7 (Fees).
- Acetate slides from Preparatory Workshop on “*Experiential Learning*”.
- Matrix for Assessment of Levels of Practice, adapted from Bement, M. And Lyons, F. (1994).
- Handwritten Note entitled, “*Focus Questions*” by Anne Murphy, 1998.
- Diploma in Arts (Training in Special Needs) 19<sup>th</sup> February 1999.

## *Appendix B*

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## **WIT/NALA Accreditation Project Documents for Historical Analysis of Previous Industry-Academic RPL Projects**

- WIT/NALA Accreditation Project, Information Update, October 1999, 5 pages.
- Accreditation of Prior Learning, NCEA Workshop, RTC Tallaght, 1-2 September 1994, Institutional Structures, Systems and Procedures, M. Doran, Registrar, RTC Sligo, 21 pages.
- NCEA Workshop, Dublin, 4<sup>th</sup> May 1994, Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning, Introduction and Operation, M. Doran, Registrar, RTC Sligo, 17 pages.
- Sample of Learning Outcomes from the Literacy Methodology Portfolio, September 1999 (Learning Outcomes Claims and Supporting Evidence – 9 claims).
- WIT/NALA Accreditation Project – Effective Management Module – Diploma Level – sample of 6 End of Module Assignment for ratification by External Examiner (Anne Murphy) for National Diploma in Training and Development, Adult Basic Education/ Management '99/2000 from Madeline Donohoe (Course Organiser and Student Support, WIT) – February 2000.
- National Certificate/Diploma in Training and Development, Adult Basic Education Management, Subject No. 9: Evaluation of Scheme, Guidelines – Margaret Donaghey, September 1997, 5 pages.
- National Certificate in Training and Development (Adult Basic Education – Management) Course Programme date 1997/1998.
- Module Evaluation of Scheme Effectiveness – NALA 1996 by Margaret Donaghey.
- Subject No. 9, Evaluation of Scheme, Additional Recommended Reading.
- National Certificate/Diploma in Training and Development: Adult Basic Education, AP(E)L Portfolio Guidelines, Module: Public Relations and Media Skills, 3 pages.
- Letter from Geraldine Mernagh (Director NALA) to Anne Murphy [18 April 1996] regarding submission for approval of National Certificate/Diploma in Training and Development (Adult Basic Education – Management) to NCEA on 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1996, including NALA Policy Document “Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work” and preparation sheet.
- Letter from Helena Farrell (Development Worker NALA) to Anne Murphy regarding meeting with Ted Flemming on 2<sup>nd</sup> June 1995 for NCEA course approval meeting (26<sup>th</sup> May 1995) including copy of module “Literacy in the context of the development of social systems globally and nationally.
- Letter from Geraldine Mernagh to Anne Murphy, 10<sup>th</sup> April 1995, including copy of rationale, aims, learning modes AND module format template.
- Response from Anne Murphy to Geraldine Mernagh regarding submission for approval to NCEA, 6<sup>th</sup> March 1995, including draft module “Literacy in Context and Community Development”.

- Letter to Anne Murphy from Helena Farrell (NALA) re: organisers' accredited course, 23 June 1995.
- Memo to all staff (Department of Adult and Community Education) from Ted Flemming on 30<sup>th</sup> June 1995 regarding recruitment of students for autumn 1995 Diploma Courses.
- Proposed Course Outlines for 1995-96 as set out at meeting on 26<sup>th</sup> June 1995.
- Letter to Geraldine Mernagh (NALA) from Margaret Donaghey regarding a request for Accreditation of Prior Achievement of Literacy Methodologies on the basis of a candidate's RSA Diploma in Teaching and Learning in Adult Basic Education (DTLBE), 6<sup>th</sup> July 1997.
- National Certificate in Training and Development, Adult Basic Education-Management, AP(E)L Assessors Meeting, 11<sup>th</sup> February 1998, Agenda.
- Handwritten not [Anne Murphy] 1998 – Points arising from portfolios.
- National Certificate in Training and Development, Adult Basic Education-Management, Assessors Feedback Comments for APEL Applicants.
- National Certificate in Training and Development, Adult Basic Education-Management, Teaching Skills Guidelines for Practical Teaching Skills.
- Letter from Madeline (NALA) to Anne Murphy (NUI Maynooth) regarding responsibilities for National Certificate in Training and Development, Adult Basic Education-Management, 22<sup>nd</sup> October 1997, including full list of AP(E)L applicants, guidelines for the groupwork and literacy methodologies modules, important dates for remainder of course – up to October 1998, transcript of course board meeting in Waterford Institute of Technology on 9<sup>th</sup> September 1997.
- Proposed course schedule for National Certificate in Training and Development, Adult Basic Education-Management, 21<sup>st</sup> January 1998.
- Letter to Anne Murphy from Dr. Venie Martin (Head of Department, WRTC) 9<sup>th</sup> April 1996 re: preparation and defence of NCEA course for Literacy Organisers.
- National Certificate in Humanities in Adult and Community Education, Literacy Management Elective, Assessors's Report (on AP(E)L Portfolio) [2000].
- Documents presented to applicants for AP(E)L workshop.
- Acetate sheet shown to applicants during AP(E)L workshop – Steps in AP(E)L.
- Minutes of Course Board Meeting for WIT/NALA Accreditation Project, Certificate in Adult and Community Education – Literacy Management and Tutoring, Waterford Institute of Technology, 6<sup>th</sup> June 2000.
- Notes from AP(E)L moderation and monitoring meeting, 27<sup>th</sup> March 2000.
- National Certificate in Training and Development, Adult Basic Education-Management 1997-98 Evaluation Report, Elizabeth McSkeane, November 1998, 73 pages.
- Waterford RTC, National Certificate in Training and Development (Adult Basic Education-Management) School of Business Studies, Accountancy and Adult and

Continuing Education, November 1995, Submission to NCEA for recognition of award, 58 pages.

- Leaflet: WIT National Certificate in Training and Development (Community Education and Development), A4 page in 3 columns.
- Waterford RTC, National Certificate in Training and Development, Adult Basic Education-Management, Student Handbook 1997/98, 34 pages.
- WIT National Certificate in Humanities in Adult and Community Education (Tutoring), Student Handbook 1999/2000, 40 pages.
- WIT National Certificate in Training and Development, Adult Basic Education-Management, Student Handbook 1999/2000, 20 pages.

## *Appendix C*

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## **OMNA-DIT/NOW Early Childhood Project Documents for Historical Analysis of Previous Industry-Academic RPL Projects**

- OMNA-DIT/NOW Early Childhood Project, Portfolio Building Guide (12 Pages)
- European Union Human Resources Initiative, Employment NOW, Project Action Plan, Title of proposed project: DIT/NOW Early Childhood Project (Training and Development), 1997,
- OMNA-DIT/NOW Early Childhood Project, What is WBT in Early Childhood Care and Education? (ECCE), Work Based Training (WBT) Trainee Information Booklet (16 Pages)
- OMNA-DIT/NOW Early Childhood Project, Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Learners Guide (16 pages)
- DIT/NOW Early Childhood Project, Work Based Training (WBT) Providers Guide, 13 pages
- DIT/NOW Early Childhood Project, General Information Booklet, 8 pages
- OMNA-DIT/NOW Early Childhood Project, Work Based Training (WBT) Mentor/Assessor Survival Kit, 20 pages
- OMNA-DIT/NOW Early Childhood Project Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) Providers Guide, 16 pages
- OMNA early years training research project, DRAFT, Summary Report, 2001, 12 pages
- OMNA-DIT/NOW Early Childhood Project, November 1999, Supplementary Evidence for NCVA (folder)
- DIT/NOW Early Childhood Project, APL-Final Evaluation Forms, Mentors
- DIT/NOW Early Childhood Project, APL Cluster Group Evaluation Forms,
- DIT/NOW Early Childhood Project, Analysis of the Impact and Effectiveness of the NOW Programme: Participant Study, Candidates, February 2000
- BM Megarry (October 1999) DIT/NOW Early Childhood Project, Drogheda Partnership, APL Seminar, DIT/NOW Early Childhood Project 1996-1999: The Development and implementation of an Accreditation of Prior Learning System in the Field of Early Childhood Care and Education (Paper) 1-13 pages.
- APL Candidates Information Booklet (1996-1997)
- CSER (8 June 2001) OMNA Early Years Training Research Project, Centre for Social and Educational Research, Issues and Discussion Paper, The Relevance of a Qualification and Training Framework for the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Sector in Ireland, May 2001 (25pp and Appendices)
- APL Handbook, DIT/NOW Childcare Project 1996-1997 (28pages +forms + letters)
- Final Report, OMNA DIT/NOW Childcare Project 1996/1997 (54 pages + appendices)

## *Appendix D*

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## Valuing Learning from Experience (VaLEx) Project Documents for Historical Analysis of Previous Industry-Academic RPL Projects

- Anne Murphy (2007) A Scaled-up Model of AP(E)L for Sectoral Professionalisation: Lessons from the 2005 Valex Pilot Project (Dublin), *The Irish Journal of Adult and Community Education, The Adult Learner 2007*, accessed 08/04/2009 from [www.aontas.com/download/pdf/aontas\\_adult\\_learner2007.pdf](http://www.aontas.com/download/pdf/aontas_adult_learner2007.pdf).
- Anne Murphy (2004) AP(E)L in Irish higher education: findings from an audit of practice undertaken as an activity within the Socrates-Gruntvig research project VaLEX Valuing Learning from Experience 2003-2005, *Level3*, June 2004, accessed 13/01/2009 from [www.level3.dit.ie/html/issue2/murphy/issue2\\_Murphy.pdf](http://www.level3.dit.ie/html/issue2/murphy/issue2_Murphy.pdf).
- Valuing Learning from Experience (VALEX), A Practical Guide, Tutor's Pack Part 1, Draft September 2005, 23 pages.
- VaLEX AP(E)L Pilot Project in Social Care Practice, November 2004-June 2005, DIT and The Open Training College with ERHA, Information document for agencies and participants, December 2004.
- Valuing Learning from Experience (VaLEx) Project – A Socrates-Gruntvig Project 2003-2005, information sheet, 1 page.
- Valuing learning from experience (VaLEx), A proposed model for local partners, 7 pages.
- Valuing Learning from Experience (VALEX) Theoretical Guide, Tutor's Pack, Part 2, 19 pages.
- Valuing Learning from Experience (VALEX), A Practical Guide, Tutor's Pack Part 1, Draft, September 2005, 31 pages.
- Final Project Evaluation Report, VaLEx – Valuing Learning from Experience, Socrates Grundtvig, 1<sup>st</sup> October 2003 – 30<sup>th</sup> September 2005, 14 pages.
- VaLEx programme, Overview of 12 sessions, 5 pages.
- How do you learn best? Information sheet on learning styles.
- Valuing Your Learning from Experience, A Learner's Guide, A Guide For Learners on the Recognition of Prior Informal Learning (RPL), 24 pages.
- VALEX Model, Epistemological Position, Potential Approaches Translated into Tools and Procedures, The Circles Portfolio, The Circles Counsellors, 12 pages.
- VaLEx – valuing learning from experience, A Socrates-Grundtvig 1 Research Project, Activity 1 – to review and carry out an analysis of existing learning and teaching strategies underpinning the implementation of APEL in the partner countries, 1 page.
- Module Descriptor, Valuing Learning from Experience 1, 5 pages.
- VaLEx – Valuing Learning from Experience Pilot Programme, Evaluation Questionnaire for Students, Phase 1, 4 pages.
- Anne Murphy, June 2004, Powerpoint presentation – AP(E)L & Work-based learning, 12 slides.

- Entry at advanced standing to the Postgraduate Diploma in Third Level Learning and Teaching, AP(E)L Portfolio Assessment Criteria, Dublin Institute of Technology, Learning & Teaching Centre, 2 pages.
- VaLEx Programme, 12 Week Overview of Topics, Shona Keenan, 10<sup>th</sup> September, 22 pages.

## *Appendix E*

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**PhD Research** - brief information for interviewees

**Question: Is there a Return on Investment from Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) to Companies and Organisations?**

**Researcher:** Kate Collins, School of Social Science and Law, DIT

**Phone:** 01-4024268

**Email:** katherine.collins@student.dit.ie

**Supervisors:** Dr Anne Murphy, Directorate of Academic Affairs, DIT  
Prof. Noirin Hayes, President's Office, DIT

*This research is part-funded by a scholarship fund from the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences (IRCHSS) 2009-2011.*

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**What is RPL?**

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is a process which gives value to past learning – both formal, certificated learning, and non-formal, work-based or experiential learning. RPL can be used for the following purposes:

1. as part of a process by which workers/adults can have their skills and knowledge assessed in relation to awards and qualifications and in relation to professional practice and accreditation standards
2. to achieve full or part qualification
3. to join a training programme at an advanced stage
4. to gain exemption from parts of a study programme
3. to identify what further training may be needed to get a qualification or to achieve professional accreditation.

**What is Valorisation?**

The European Commission defines Valorisation as “the process of disseminating and exploiting the results of projects with a view to optimising their value, strengthening their impact, transferring them, integrating them in a sustainable way and using them actively in systems and practices at local, regional, national and European levels”.

Valorisation comprises dissemination and exploitation activities:

- Dissemination is a planned process of providing information about the results of a project to end-users and key actors.
- Exploitation comprises ‘mainstreaming’ (transferring the successful results of projects to appropriate decision-makers) and ‘multiplication’ (convincing end-users to adopt or apply project results) activities.

**What this PhD research is trying to find out**

This research aims to look 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. There are no data available about the sustainability of RPL in workplaces and professional sectors, where these projects were set. Therefore, this research is trying to establish the real added value, if any, of RPL for an number of different workforce sectors in Ireland. The key research questions are:

- \* What were the broad aims and objectives of the RPL-element of the project?
- \* Who were the main target groups or beneficiaries?
- \* Have the project results been adapted or further developed for other target groups or contexts?

- \* Have the project results continued to be used in the long-term?
- \* What effect had RPL on the main project stakeholders?
- \* In the context of the project how has the project and its results fed RPL policy and practice?
- \* How did RPL best meet the needs of the target group?
- \* How was knowledge of the project increased?
- \* What were the main problems with RPL encountered during the project and afterwards?
- \* What were the main costs and benefits of RPL in the project?
- \* How would you assess the overall success of RPL in the project?

### **Data Collection Methods**

Data collection for this element of the research is by semi-structured interviews with the main participants in the RPL project in question.

Interviewees may be requested to supply relevant **facts** and **figures** as well as opinions and comments so that comparisons across the data are possible.

Individual interviews will take approximately 30-40 minutes. They will be recorded with the permission of interviewees. Interviewees may remain anonymous if required. Any personal details provided will remain confidential.

Ethical guidelines for DIT researchers apply to this study.

### **Possible Benefit to Interviewees**

The main benefit to project members participating in this study is an opportunity to assess the long-term added value of the project in general as well as from the RPL process.

The research cannot promise to have significant policy impact but at least it will go some way to providing data that have not been available heretofore, so that future RPL policy at national and local levels is a little more informed from the perspective of the workforce sectors.

Thank you in advance for considering participating as an interviewee.

## *Appendix F*

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## CONSENT FORM

<b>Researcher's Name:</b> (use block capitals)	<b>Title:</b>
<b>Faculty/School/Department:</b>	
<b>Title of Study:</b>	
<b>To be completed by the:</b> <b>subject/patient/volunteer/informant/interviewee/parent/guardian</b> <i>(delete as necessary)</i>	
3.1 Have you been fully informed/read the information sheet about this study?	YES/NO
3.2 Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study?	YES/NO
3.3. Have you received satisfactory answers to all your questions?	YES/NO
3.4 Have you received enough information about this study and any associated health and safety implications if applicable?	YES/NO
3.5 Do you understand that you are free to withdraw from this study?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• at any time</li> <li>• without giving a reason for withdrawing</li> <li>• without affecting your future relationship with the Institute</li> </ul>	YES/NO
3.6 Do you agree to take part in this study the results of which are likely to be published?	YES/NO
3.7 Have you been informed that this consent form shall be kept in the confidence of the researcher?	YES/NO
Signed _____ Date _____ Name in Block Letters _____ Signature of Researcher _____ Date _____	

**Please note:**

- For persons under 18 years of age the consent of the parents or guardians must be obtained or an explanation given to the Research Ethics Committee and the assent of the child/young person should be obtained to the degree possible dependent on the age of the child/young person. **Please complete the Consent Form (section 4) for Research Involving 'Less Powerful' Subjects or Those Under 18 Yrs.**
- In some studies, witnessed consent may be appropriate.
- The researcher concerned must sign the consent form after having explained the project to the subject and after having answered his/her questions about the project.

## *Appendix G*

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## Kate Collins, PhD Candidate, Statement of Ethics

In this attachment there is information about the Statement of Ethical Practice for the research

Statement of Ethics		
General Information	Research student	Kate Collins, PhD candidate, DIT, 41-45 Mountjoy Square, Dublin 1. Tel. 402 4268, Email <a href="mailto:Katherine.collins@student.dit.ie">Katherine.collins@student.dit.ie</a>
	Supervisor	Dr Anne Murphy Directorate of Academic Affairs, DIT, 143-149 Rathmines Road, Dublin 6 Tel. 402 7507, Email <a href="mailto:anne.murphy@dit.ie">anne.murphy@dit.ie</a>
	Programme College Purpose Thesis Title	PhD Dublin Institute of Technology Gathering data for PhD Return on investment from recognition of prior learning to companies and organisations.

Please read the following statement

**This research has been granted ethical approval by the Dublin Institute of Technology Research Ethics Committee.**

Read more about Ethics at DIT at [http://mydit.dit.ie/cp/tag.9624ac5332f35eed.render.userLayoutRootNode.uP?uP\\_root=root&uP\\_s\\_param=activeTab&activeTab=u1111s35&uP\\_tparam=frm&frm=frame](http://mydit.dit.ie/cp/tag.9624ac5332f35eed.render.userLayoutRootNode.uP?uP_root=root&uP_s_param=activeTab&activeTab=u1111s35&uP_tparam=frm&frm=frame)

**Honesty and Fairness:** This researcher strives to be honest and truthful. The researcher will refrain from plagiarism and deception or the fabrication or falsification of results and declare any conflict of interests. All reasonable measures will be taken to ensure the accuracy and completeness of information.

**Consent:** Information about the Delphi consultation will be given to each participant to enable them to give, or withhold consent, on an informed basis. Each potential participant will be sent a letter telling them about the Delphi and what would be expected from them if they agreed to participate. The letter will advise potential participants they can contact me if they have any concerns or questions about what the Delphi involves. The participant may withdraw consent to participate or the usage of their responses at any stage of the research process.

**Confidentiality:** The names, addresses and identifying details of participants in the Delphi consultation will remain confidential to me, the researcher. No other person will be allowed access to this information without securing first written consent from each participant.

**Anonymity:** All information circulated to anyone other than the respondent will be anonymous.

**Review:** The participant has the right to review the results for each round and insert clarifications or corrections where necessary.

**Purpose:** The recorded survey responses will be utilised by the research student for scholarship and research relating to the pursuit of her PhD at DIT.

**Publication:** The analysed material may appear in the thesis, conference presentation, papers submitted to academic journals.

**Availability:** Extracts or the full content of the analysed material will be accessible from the DIT library, conference papers, academic papers and certain electronic repositories.

**Security:** All recorded material is electronic and password protected.

**Storage:** Completed surveys will be stored for 2 years after completion of the research project, thereupon they will be deleted or permission for an extension will be sought from each participant.

**Not-for-profit:** This is a non-commercial piece of academic research; the author will disseminate the findings on a cost neutral basis.

## *Appendix H*

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## PhD Research - brief information for interviewees

### Question: Is there a Return on Investment from Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) to Companies and Organisations?

**Researcher:** Kate Collins, School of Social Science and Law, DIT

**Phone:** 01-4024268

**Email:** katherine.collins@student.dit.ie

**Supervisors:** Dr Anne Murphy, Directorate of Academic Affairs, DIT  
Prof. Noirin Hayes, President's Office, DIT

*This research is part-funded by a scholarship fund from the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences (IRCHSS) 2009-2011.*

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#### What is RPL?

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is a process which gives value to past learning – both formal, certificated learning, and non-formal, work-based or experiential learning. RPL can be used for the following purposes:

1. as part of a process by which workers/adults can have their skills and knowledge assessed in relation to awards and qualifications and in relation to professional practice and accreditation standards
2. to achieve full or part qualification
3. to join a training programme at an advanced stage
4. to gain exemption from parts of a study programme
3. to identify what further training may be needed to get a qualification or to achieve professional accreditation.

#### Why companies and organisations use RPL

1. RPL can save a company or organisation time and money by tailoring new training only to identified learning needs.
2. Gaining recognised qualifications with an RPL element can be a strong motivating factor for skilled staff to commit themselves to their company, organization or profession.
3. It can indirectly boost productivity and effectiveness
4. Having appropriately qualified workers is also becoming increasingly important in quality assurance for industries and sectors: RPL is frequently used for such compliance.
5. By having employees' existing skills formally recognised with at least partial use of RPL, companies and organisations may use RPL as one strategy to:
  - identify current skills and skills gaps to target training investment
  - increase productivity and improve business reputation
  - engage a greater variety of work and expand to new markets
  - meet business objectives faster
  - retain an edge over your competitors
  - retain valuable staff
  - facilitate staff redeployment or staff reduction.

#### What this PhD research is trying to find out

It is suggested that workers who are qualified or who have been up-skilled are a vital part of the business team and enable the company to move forward, be innovative and meet development challenges with speed and effectiveness. There are no data available about the cost-effectiveness of RPL in workplaces and professional sectors. Therefore, this research is trying to establish the real costs and benefits of RPL to companies and organisations which have used it to date in Ireland. The key research questions are:

- \* What was invested in the RPL process and by whom?
- \* What were the broad aims and objectives of investing in the RPL process?
- \* How were the costs and benefits of the RPL process defined?

- \* What was the result of the investment in RPL?
- \* Who gained what?
- \* Do the returns justify the investment?
- \* To what extent was the desired return achieved?
- \* Would companies and organisations continue to invest in RPL? If not, why not?

### **Data Collection Methods**

Data collection for this element of the research is by semi-structured interviews with companies and organisations: CEOs, HRM managers, training managers etc in professional organizations, semi-state organizations, small, medium and large enterprises.

Interviewees may be requested to supply relevant **facts** and **figures** as well as opinions and comments so that comparisons across the data are possible.

Individual interviews will take approximately 30-40 minutes. They will be recorded with the permission of interviewees. Interviewees may remain anonymous if required. Any personal details provided will remain confidential.

Ethical guidelines for DIT researchers apply to this study.

### **Possible Benefit to Interviewees**

The main benefit to businesses and organisations participating in this study is an opportunity to assess their own return on investment from staff training and development in general as well as from the RPL process.

The research cannot promise to have significant policy impact but at least it will go some way to providing data that have not been available heretofore, so that future RPL policy at national and local levels is a little more informed from the perspective of companies and organisations.

Thank you in advance for considering participating as an interviewee.

# *Appendix I*

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### Section 1: General Information

This research is trying to establish the real costs and benefits of RPL to companies and organisations which have used it to date in Ireland. The key research questions are:

- \* What was invested in the RPL process and by whom?
- \* What were the broad aims and objectives of investing in the RPL process?
- \* How were the costs and benefits of the RPL process defined?
- \* What was the result of the investment in RPL?
- \* Who gained what?
- \* Do the returns justify the investment?
- \* To what extent was the desired return achieved?
- \* Would companies and organisations continue to invest in RPL? If not, why not?

This case study element involves conducting interviews of approx 35-40 minutes with CEOs, HRM managers, training managers etc in professional organizations, semi-state organizations, small, medium and large enterprises. It requires some facts and figures as well as comments and opinion.

The interviews will be recorded with your permission and any personal details that are provided will be kept confidential.

It is also imperative to state that this research adheres to the Ethical Guidelines for DIT researchers.

### Section 2: Business Description

1. What would you say is **X's** key strategic priority/mission for the next three years?
2. How does (or will) Recognition of Prior Learning fit into this strategy?
3. In your daily business, where do you already see Recognition of Prior Learning having the greatest impact or affect?
4. How has **X's** strategy changed since the beginning of the economic shift of 2008?
  - a. and in what way has this impacted or affected on your daily operations?

### Section 3: Aims and Objectives

5. What were the broad aims and objectives of investing in/implementing procedures for Recognition of Prior Learning in the first place?
6. What other important issues were considered when you were planning to implement Recognition of Prior Learning in **X**?
7. Were there specific desired returns of investing in procedures for Recognition of Prior Learning?
8. How were these specific returns achieved through Recognition of Prior Learning?

### Section 4: Costs and Benefits

9. What would you say and by whom were the key investments in the Recognition of Prior Learning process for **X** to date?
  - a. Can you quantify the costs of these investments to the organisation? (*total sum to date, % of education budget, in days/staff, etc.*)
10. What were the key benefits from the Recognition of Prior Learning process for **X**?
  - a. Can you quantify any of these benefits to the organisation? (*did you use any way of measuring impact?*)



**Section 5: Overall result of RPL**

11. How beneficial has Recognition of Prior Learning been to **X** overall since you first started carrying it out?
12. To what extent has Recognition of Prior Learning achieved your desired return on investment? (*either monetary or other*)
13. What difficulties have you encountered so far in the Recognition of Prior Learning process?
14. Would you change any part of your Recognition of Prior Learning process? If so, what?

## *Appendix J*

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<b>Company/ Organisation Type</b>	<b>Numbers (of RPL learners and cost of RPL)</b>	<b>Form of RPL</b>	<b>Mission/Values</b>	<b>Strategic Goals</b>	<b>Political</b>	<b>Economic</b>	<b>Social</b>	<b>History</b>
<b>1. Irish Professional Body</b>	10-15 RPL learners in 2009 at cost of €300 per person	Experiential learning route to membership and professional title	Ensure standards of the profession, promote the profession as a career, represent the interests of profession internationally, promote CPD for professionals	To double membership and income, to be most trusted and influential voice of the profession in Ireland, to make it a good place to work.	State gave the profession chartered status. Involved in accreditation of third level programmes for the profession	Move up career ladder, keep pace with technological change, advance professional status, develop in demand skills	Help to promote and facilitate lifelong learning by providing learning and development opportunities.	Began with leaders in the profession in Ireland forming a society to promote their profession and share experiences. The body grew and widened its scope and came to represent all disciplines in the profession and to award professional titles.

<b>Company/ Organisation Type</b>	<b>Numbers (of RPL learners and cost of RPL)</b>	<b>Form of RPL</b>	<b>Mission/Values</b>	<b>Strategic Goals</b>	<b>Political</b>	<b>Economic</b>	<b>Social</b>	<b>History</b>
<b>2. National Sectoral Authority</b>	approximately 40 RPL cases over three years. Cost of €150 per case, but not always charged; depended on level of mentoring and admin required	Recognition of formal qualifications for state aid and admission to industrial training programmes	To support and be recognised for providing science-based innovation in the sector that will underpin profitability, competitiveness and sustainability. To be responsive, flexible and accountable and work in partnership with other organisations to meet the needs of clients and stakeholders.	Improve competitiveness of the sector. Deliver value for money through high standards of accountability and governance. Support sustainability in the sector and improve the environment.	Established by the State to provide research, advisory and training services to the sector, is statutorily responsible to perform these duties. State tax relief given to professionals with qualifications. RPL instigated in compliance with FETAC regulations.	Emphasis on training and changes in training as a result of a changing economy, changing demographics in the sector, changes in EU and WTO policies, demands from customers, and shifts in the sector on a global scale.	If access to a programme gained through RPL and award achieved will generally gain employment due to nature of the sector and thereby improve efficiency and management in that job and they are thereby contributing to improved standards throughout the sector.	Training instigated by grant aid from the State and local authorities in recompense for levies placed on those in the sector to finance sector committees. This training became the norm for those in the sector and saw full classes for extended periods of time. Decline in student numbers in recent years has seen a move to certify all courses and upgrade some to third level.

<b>Company/ Organisation Type</b>	<b>Numbers (of RPL learners and cost of RPL)</b>	<b>Form of RPL</b>	<b>Mission/Values</b>	<b>Strategic Goals</b>	<b>Political</b>	<b>Economic</b>	<b>Social</b>	<b>History</b>
<b>3. Regional Training Network</b>	15 RPL learners in 2008 and 15 RPL learners in 2009. Cost of €400- €500 per person.	Specific RPL project in healthcare sector to up-skill workers in order to achieve qualifications to meet regulatory requirements	To help local companies address training needs across all business activities with a particular focus on developing core workplace skills.	To match funding given by funding body with funds from member companies for training programmes. To provide at least 70% of training in the LBS area. To provide programmes to member companies that meet their needs	Required to meet funding body targets for training days completed and catering to LBS (low basic skills) type training programmes.	Promoting training to achieve productivity increases, improved employee retention and better labour/management relations.	The network is people based, therefore aimed at providing the workforce in the area with training and certification as part of a community regeneration initiative.	Established in partnership with local employers and community organisations to deliver training over a two year period in the region.
<b>4. National Service- Oriented Agency</b>	Data not available	Staff/Member training accredited by FETAC with possibility to achieve accreditation through RPL	To ensure all people can fully take part in society and have equality of access to learning opportunities	Secure the support of policy makers and politicians for providing increased resources. Facilitate access to education and training programmes. Make approaches to teaching and learning more effective. To encourage	Persuade policy makers to increase funding to the area, and work with them to develop policies and plans for skills development.	To enable people to begin or return to work as well as benefitting the workforce to up-skill which has been linked to increased productivity and gross domestic product (GDP).	To make education and training inclusive of all members of society and to put the learner at the centre of educational provision.	Established in 1980 as an independent membership organisation by volunteers to campaign and lobby on behalf of members. Also continued to become involved in tutor training, developing teaching materials, distance

<b>Company/ Organisation Type</b>	<b>Numbers (of RPL learners and cost of RPL)</b>	<b>Form of RPL</b>	<b>Mission/Values</b>	<b>Strategic Goals</b>	<b>Political</b>	<b>Economic</b>	<b>Social</b>	<b>History</b>
				organisations to be inclusive of those who require additional skill support.				education, policy making, research and awareness raising campaigns.
<b>5. Irish Professional Regulatory Body</b>	Potential RPL population of 64,000 people with cost to run system of €300,000 per annum.	Regulation of profession through recognition of current competence	To promote high standards of professional education, training, practice and professional conduct.	To maintain a register of professionals. To guide and control the education and training of professionals, fitness to practice and discipline. To put in place policies and procedures for the regulation of advanced practice and the regulation of continued competence.	Must respond to changes in legislation relating to the regulation of the profession.	To improve quality of professional service provision for the benefit of the public.	Quality of education and training is related to safeguarding the public.	Body established under legislation to be the regulatory body for the profession.

Company/ Organisation Type	Numbers (of RPL learners and cost of RPL)	Form of RPL	Mission/Values	Strategic Goals	Political	Economic	Social	History
<b>6. Multinational Service Management Company</b>	N/A	Interested in RPL for staff personal and career development	To develop long term and sustaining relationships with our customers, constantly exceeding expectation. To benefit the environment by maximising the use of technologies and resources. To provide an enjoyable place to work for our employees in a challenging, safe, secure and rewarding work environment. To provide our Group with a good return.	To always act with integrity and respect, to portray a quality image at all times, to treat customers as a number one priority, to encourage and invest in development and training, to recognise achievement, to work as a team at all times, to operate an open style of management.	Use of Research and Development to maintain position as key player in service provision to government and local authorities.	Conduct group job/skills evaluation as well as annual interviews to maximise on professional development and therefore customer experience and therefore performance.	Focus on training is to ensure health and safety and environmental protection	A division of a French multinational company with a small shareholding from a French semi-state body therefore much policy is determined centrally. Human resource management is a strategic priority in order to have a wealth of trained staff to provide quality customer service.
<b>7. International Restaurant Chain</b>	19 Managers achieved award with RPL exemptions in 2010 at €1725 per person	Management training programme in partnership with third level institution	We make sure that our products are of the highest quality and are safe for you and your family. We take care of the	Five Ps: People, Product, Promotion, Planet, Price. Within "People" the main focus is on accreditation.	In certain jurisdictions the organisation has been involved in state up-	Invest largely in training staff because of belief that the better trained people are the better able they are to do their jobs.	Aim to have training recognised by an outside body to differentiate from	Founded in the United States with the first franchise arriving in Ireland some years later. The

Company/ Organisation Type	Numbers (of RPL learners and cost of RPL)	Form of RPL	Mission/Values	Strategic Goals	Political	Economic	Social	History
	(third level programme)	includes RPL for exemptions as a result of company training	people who work with us because they are the key to our continued success. We are honest and open about how we conduct our business. We give something back to the community which supports our business. While we are proud of our successes, we never stop trying to improve.		skilling programmes but this has not occurred in Ireland. Adherence to State and European quality assurance schemes for food supply.		competitors and to recognise top performing staff.	company in Ireland consists of both owner- operated and company- operated restaurants. Large-scale campaigns in recent years have been used to promote a more responsible and caring image for the company. It has an excellent reputation in training circles for the quality of staff training and opportunities provided.



Company/ Organisation Type	Numbers (of RPL learners and cost of RPL)	Form of RPL	Mission/Values	Strategic Goals	Political	Economic	Social	History
<b>8. Banking and Financial Services Organisation</b>	N/A	Interested in RPL for staff personal and career development. Use of RPL for exemptions in modular distance learning programme.	Value and service are at the heart of our business. We aim to provide real value to every one of our customers and to deliver the highest standard of service in banking and financial services.	Stabilise the company, secure it's future and sustain it.	For all intents and purposes it is now a government institution	Argue that if you turn off the tap of learning and development now you won't see any negative impact for a year, you mightn't even see a negative impact for two years but then if you turn the tap back on in two years it's another two years before you start seeing the benefit of investing in people again. So if you turn the tap off now there's a four year lag.	supports a philosophy of continuous learning and development. They are committed to enhancing your leadership skills; bringing out your potential to allow you to develop within our organisation. Are also looking at continued investment in L & D for employee engagement in an environment of lessening opportunities	An amalgamation of three long standing banking and financial institutions. It subsequently expanded to the UK and overseas and continued to look for and enter into new business opportunities until the economic crisis necessitated the selling off many assets.

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<b>9. Private Training Provider</b>	N/A	Tendered for project for RPL route to FETAC award	We commit ourselves to giving you the very best training in all our dedicated fields of expertise both In-Company and Public Courses.	Continuing to focus on niche markets of higher end training in the continuous education field.	Benefitted from Act 2005- Saftey Health and Welfare at Work and much training would be around employers complying with this Act. Move to RPL now driven by regulation requiring a set niche sectoral trainers to have a minimum qualification.	Training required during the construction boom and then moved to other niche markets that emerged from economic circumstances such as focus on warehouse safety and return to work schemes.	Deal with many learners who do not want to return to the classroom situation, therefore RPL appropriate for them as well as being inclusive of those who will have literacy problems because of the nature of the sector but who will need to have a qualification to remain in employment.	Company started with a focus on health and safety training, an offshoot of which was consultancy and expansion ot other related niche markets. Focus is on meeting market demands.
<b>10. Sectoral Support Service for Professionals and Service Providers</b>	Total RPL claims completed not available. Cost of €85 per person (real cost is €1200-1500)	APEL route to FETAC sectoral qualification	to guide and support the development and sustainability of the industry in Ireland.	Focus on helping the industry to survive the market difficulties and sustain employment with tailored business supports and marketing	Must report to the State annually and governing authority State appointed.	The industry requires a skilled and professional workforce in order to deliver the highest standards of service. It is their responsibility to encourage, promote and support training	In conjunction with industry bodies, Institutes of Technology and other educational providers, ensures high quality training	Formed under an Act of Government to support and develop the industry. Partnered with other inter- and intra- state bodies to

Company/ Organisation Type	Numbers (of RPL learners and cost of RPL)	Form of RPL	Mission/Values	Strategic Goals	Political	Economic	Social	History
				interventions. Ensuring that the industry would be well placed to take advantage of the expected recovery in market conditions.		and education for the industry.	is accessible at all levels.	promote the product in Ireland and beyond.
<b>11. Private Training Provider</b>	Not available	Specific RPL project for management training in healthcare sector to achieve FETAC award	To responsibly and profitably help people and organisations to empower themselves through excellent training and education	Aim to establish as a commercial or private college in the region and become one of the premier colleges of that region.		RPL seen as key component in demand for flexible education and therefore of commercial value to large cohorts of people in particular sectors such as healthcare and childcare.	Aimed to appeal to market of experienced professionals who lacked qualifications in a way that would acknowledge what they already have and speed up the process of accreditation for them.	Started as self-employed provider of training in personal and career development. Grew to a company with external relations with accreditation bodies in Ireland and the UK

<b>Company/ Organisation Type</b>	<b>Numbers (of RPL learners and cost of RPL)</b>	<b>Form of RPL</b>	<b>Mission/Values</b>	<b>Strategic Goals</b>	<b>Political</b>	<b>Economic</b>	<b>Social</b>	<b>History</b>
<b>12. International Private Manufacturing Company</b>	From 2008 20 RPL learners completed certificate and 19 RPL learners currently on degree programmes with access by way of RPL.	Development of accredited certificate and degree programmes in partnership with third level institution for staff	To be the best provider of industry products in the eyes of our customers, employees, suppliers and communities.	To deliver strategic growth initiatives- build number of markets and gain market share. To reduce costs.	Benefit from Government sponsored subsidies for workforce training. Large employer in the region, in best interests to support the organisation.	Better qualified employees more open to change and to adapt to new systems and incorporate new knowledge into daily operations and therefore increase productivity and efficiencies.	One of first endeavours for an industry- university partnership and an opportunity for semi-skilled workers in a marginalised region who would not have access to further education and accreditation for logistical and lack of formal qualifications reasons.	Originally an American company but bought out on several occasions by different buyers the last acquisition taking place in 2001. This final and current owner introduced a new business model to focus on the core product range and to increase productivity through employee engagement and development.

<b>Company/ Organisation Type</b>	<b>Numbers (of RPL learners and cost of RPL)</b>	<b>Form of RPL</b>	<b>Mission/Values</b>	<b>Strategic Goals</b>	<b>Political</b>	<b>Economic</b>	<b>Social</b>	<b>History</b>
<b>13. National Community Agency</b>	6 RPL learners in 2006, 30 RPL learners in 2007 (24 completed), 10-15 RPL learners for 2008, 2009, and 2010. Cost not available, integrated into work roles.	FETAC accredited programme for supervisory staff through RPL	Our commitment is that people will receive independent, reliable information, advice and advocacy wherever they are located in Ireland and in a way that suits their needs.	To ensure that our service users receive consistently high quality services that meet their individual needs and requirements. To ensure that, we are organised to deliver quality services to our clients, with clear referral pathways between channels while demonstrating value for money.	Required to report to the State three times a year with strategy plans on fulfilling its mandate. Government public sector reorganisation as well as value for money are key drivers of learning and development.	Increased demand for services as a result of economic crisis has placed more demands on service providers	See themselves as a key part of the Government Social Inclusion agenda; people on low incomes, migrant workers, people with disabilities, older people are the main clients	Statutory Body with mandated duties in the areas of information provision, advice and advocacy, principally aiming to reach the most vulnerable in society .
<b>14. International Private Software Development Company</b>	One group of 4 trainers completed RPL in 2010. No information for stand-alone RPL and level 6 and level 7 programmes. Costs of programme at third level	Development of accredited programmes for staff in partnership with third level institution with exemptions through RPL or stand alone RPL awards	Our mission is to consistently focus on the total cost of ownership by delivering value added service and building our capabilities.	Delivering high quality, cost-effective project management, analysis, development and quality assurance services. To reduce costs. Providing high end contact centre support services.	Participate in State employment schemes by providing facilities for placement in training programmes.	Use of RPL to provide for employee re-skilling to ensure a constant qualified pool within the organisation and for employee engagement.	significant advances in personal development as a result of recognition of skills for accreditation.	An subsidiary of an American company that set up in Ireland some ten years ago. Learning and development are driven by annual individual and organisational needs analyses.

<b>Company/ Organisation Type</b>	<b>Numbers (of RPL learners and cost of RPL)</b>	<b>Form of RPL</b>	<b>Mission/Values</b>	<b>Strategic Goals</b>	<b>Political</b>	<b>Economic</b>	<b>Social</b>	<b>History</b>
	institute.							
<b>15. National Community Charity</b>	N/A	Attempted RPL for staff as part of tailored training offerings	To challenge and support families, communities, society and government , focusing specifically on those people whose well-being is under threat.	Focus on developing staff and encouraging opportunities in the organisation for development to give best service to clients.	In receipt of both voluntary and statutory funding. Statutory funding generally through negotiated service level agreements.	Belief that qualified staff and people who've had training and good training are just streets ahead in the way they can think and act in terms of work, they definitely are, their attitudes, often their openness to changes and making progress and improving qualities is much more than people who've got less qualifications and perhaps are more rigid in attitudes.	Have a number of staff who would be in positions where they have limited progression possibilities because of lack of formal qualifications, RPL to provide route to qualifications for staff. Will be greater demands for qualifications in the sector as workforce development plan comes into force	Charity originally founded in the UK to provide education and skills for vulnerable sectors of society. Expanded to Ireland establishing information, support, counselling and advocacy services for the sector.

Company/ Organisation Type	Numbers (of RPL learners and cost of RPL)	Form of RPL	Mission/Values	Strategic Goals	Political	Economic	Social	History
<b>16. Sectoral Training Network</b>	12 RPL learners in 2009 and 7 RPL learners in 2008. Cost of Masters programme €4,000.	Partnership with third level institute to offer certificate, bachelor and master programmes including facility for exemptions through RPL	To deliver training solutions to member companies to improve business performance	Increase number of accredited programmes in line with emphasis from funding body on accreditation.	Required to meet funding body target for training days completed.	Increasing importance of management in the industry saw demand for supportive training to strategically improve the management of the business.	Nature of industry is that there are large numbers of people without qualifications due to lack of sectoral qualification availability or ability to access qualifications. Belief that to attract senior business people to learning, must recognise the experience that they have, pragmatism.	An amalgamation of sectoral training networks focused on delivering training solutions to member companies to improve business performance. Have increasingly moved to more long-term accredited training programmes rather than one day skills training courses.

## *Appendix K*

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**Kate Collins Delphi Future Trends Research 2009-  
Round 1**



Dear Research Respondent,

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this PhD research project The Return on Investment from Recognition of Prior Learning to companies and organisations.

You are one of circa 20 international experts selected for my study. You will receive a series of three on-line questionnaires to complete and return to me. The likely time needed should be no greater than **15 minutes per questionnaire**

The first questionnaire is the longest with 6 parts. The second and third questionnaires will be considerably shorter.

The purpose of these questionnaires is to identify key areas of consensus and divergence among respondents on likely future trends in RPL in companies and organisations and the likely return on investment from the use of RPL.

The ethical framework for this research was attached to the email for this Round One Questionnaire.

This Questionnaire has 6 parts:

- PART 1 – About you, the expert respondent
- PART 2 – About Qualifications frameworks, professional regulating bodies and other systems
- PART 3 – About RPL in work-based learning
- PART 4 – About costs, benefits and return on investment from RPL
- PART 5 – About RPL ‘technologies’; learning outcomes, credits, levels, etc.
- PART 6 – About future trends in RPL

When you have completed the questions please SUBMIT.  
You will receive an automatic receipt.

Thank you again for your cooperation. I am looking forward to your responses.

Sincerely

Kate Collins

**N.B. This online survey programme will cut out and your responses will be lost if the survey is not in use for more than 5minutes**

1) Name

2) Organisation/Institution

3) Email

4) Type of contexts in which you have experience of RPL (choose all that apply).	
Higher Education	
Further Education	
Vocational Education and Training (VET)	
Work-based learning/In-company Training	
Adult Education	
Youth Work	
Trade Unions	
Continuing Professional Development	
Community-based Education	
Human Resource Development	
Professional Body	
Regulatory Authority	
Work Sector (e.g. rail transport)	
Other (Please Specify):	

<b>5) Please complete Questions 5-18 where applicable (i.e. for those contexts chosen in Question 4)</b>	
What in your experience of the context of <b>Higher Education</b> is RPL mostly used for in companies and organisations?	
Training Needs Analysis	
Access to Qualifications	
Credits	
Personal Development Plans	
Re-skilling	
Up-skilling	
Meeting Legal Requirements	
Mobility	
Membership of Professional Body	
Not Applicable	
Other (Please Specify):	

6) What in your experience of the context of <b>Further Education</b> is RPL mostly used for in companies and organisations?
--

Training Needs Analysis	
Access to Qualifications	
Credits	
Personal Development Plans	
Re-skilling	
Up-skilling	
Meeting Legal Requirements	
Mobility	
Membership of Professional Body	
Not Applicable	
Other (Please Specify):	

7) What in your experience of the context of **Vocational Education and Training (VET)** is RPL mostly used for in companies and organisations?

Training Needs Analysis	
Access to Qualifications	
Credits	
Personal Development Plans	
Re-Skilling	
Up-skilling	
Meeting Legal Requirements	
Mobility	
Membership of Professional Body	
Not Applicable	
Other (Please Specify):	

8) What in your experience of the context of **Work-Based Learning/In-Company Training** is RPL mostly used for in companies and organisations?

Training Needs Analysis	
Access to Qualifications	
Credits	
Personal Development Plans	
Re-skilling	
Up-skilling	

Meeting Legal Requirements	
Mobility	
Membership of Professional Body	
Not Applicable	
Other (Please Specify):	

9) What in your experience of the context of <b>Adult Education</b> is RPL mostly used for in companies and organisations?	
Training Needs Analysis	
Access to Qualifications	
Credits	
Personal Development Plans	
Re-skilling	
Up-skilling	
Meeting Legal Requirements	
Mobility	
Membership of Professional Body	
Not Applicable	
Other (Please Specify):	

10) What in your experience of the context of <b>Youth Work</b> is RPL mostly used for in companies and organisations?	
Training Needs Analysis	
Access to Qualifications	
Credits	
Personal Development Plans	
Re-skilling	
Up-skilling	
Meeting Legal Requirements	
Mobility	
Membership of Professional Body	
Not Applicable	
Other (Please Specify):	

11) What in your experience of the context of <b>Voluntary Sector</b> is RPL mostly used for in companies and organisations?	
Training Needs Analysis	
Access to Qualifications	
Credits	
Personal Development Plans	
Re-skilling	
Up-skilling	
Meeting Legal Requirements	
Mobility	
Membership of Professional Body	
Not Applicable	
Other (Please Specify):	

12) What in your experience of the context of <b>Trade Unions</b> is RPL mostly used for in companies and organisations?	
Training Needs Analysis	
Access to Qualifications	
Credits	
Personal Development Plans	
Re-skilling	
Up-skilling	
Meeting Legal Requirements	
Mobility	
Membership of Professional Body	
Not Applicable	
Other (Please Specify):	

13) What in your experience of the context of <b>Continuing Professional Development</b> is RPL mostly used for in companies and organisations?	
Training Needs Analysis	
Access to Qualifications	
Credits	
Personal Development Plans	

Re-skilling	
Up-skilling	
Meeting Legal Requirements	
Mobility	
Membership of Professional Body	
Not Applicable	
Other (Please Specify):	

14) What in your experience of the context of <b>Community Based Education</b> is RPL mostly used for in companies and organisations?	
Training Needs Analysis	
Access to Qualifications	
Credits	
Personal Development Plans	
Re-skilling	
Up-skilling	
Meeting Legal Requirements	
Mobility	
Membership of Professional Body	
Not Applicable	
Other (Please Specify):	

15) What in your experience of the context of <b>Human Resource Development</b> is RPL mostly used for in companies and organisations?	
Training Needs Analysis	
Access to Qualifications	
Credits	
Personal Development Plans	
Re-skilling	
Up-skilling	
Meeting Legal Requirements	
Mobility	
Membership of Professional Body	
Not Applicable	

Other (Please Specify):

16) What in your experience of the context of <b>Professional Bodies</b> is RPL mostly used for in companies and organisations?	
Training Needs Analysis	
Access to Qualifications	
Credits	
Personal Development Plans	
Re-skilling	
Up-skilling	
Meeting Legal Requirements	
Mobility	
Membership of Professional Body	
Not Applicable	
Other (Please Specify):	

17) What in your experience of the context of <b>Regulatory Authorities</b> is RPL mostly used for in companies and organisations?	
Training Needs Analysis	
Access to Qualifications	
Credits	
Personal Development Plans	
Re-skilling	
Up-skilling	
Meeting Legal Requirements	
Mobility	
Membership of Professional Body	
Not Applicable	
Other (Please Specify):	

18) What in your experience of the context of <b>Work Sectors (e.g. rail transport)</b> is RPL mostly used for in companies and organisations?	
Training Needs Analysis	
Access to Qualifications	

Credits	
Personal Development Plans	
Re-skilling	
Up-skilling	
Meeting Legal Requirements	
Mobility	
Membership of Professional Body	
Not Applicable	
Other (Please Specify):	

19) In your experience, which of the following tools are currently used for RPL in companies and organisations?

	Yes	No
National Qualifications Frameworks		
EU Qualifications Frameworks		
Sectoral Qualifications Frameworks		
Standards of Regulatory Body		
Standards of Professional Body		
Vocational Training Frameworks		
Apprenticeship Training Frameworks		
Europass CV		
Certificate Supplement		
Diploma Supplement		
Data-base of Awards		

20) Other (please specify)

--

21) Who are the main users of RPL in work-based learning?

	1 High	2	3	4	5 Low
HR Departments					
Training Departments					
Supervisors					
Individual Workers					
Multi-national Companies					
Large Organisations					



Professional Bodies					
Regulatory Bodies					
Work Sectors					
Trade Unions					

22) Other (please specify)

23) What, in your experience, is RPL mostly used for in companies and organisations?					
	1 High	2	3	4	5 Low
Up-skilling					
Re-skilling					
Recruitment					
Awarding formal credit for non-formal and informal learning					
Apprenticeship/Internship					
Preparation for redundancies					
Staff career plans					
Qualifications pathways					
Promotions					
Needs assessment					
Accreditation					
Meeting regulatory standards					
Exemption from training					

24) Other (please specify)

25) What RPL tools are used in companies and organisations?					
	1 High	2	3	4	5 Low
Portfolios/Dossiers					
E-portfolios					
Online assessment					
Tests					
Europass CV					
Interviews					
Staff training plans					

26) Other (please specify)

27) Who manages RPL in workplaces?					
	1 High	2	3	4	5 Low
HR department					
Training department					
Supervisors					
Management					
Individual workers					

28) Other (please specify)

29) Rate your personal opinion about the return on investment of RPL to the <b>LABOUR MARKET</b> .					
	1 Strongly disagree	2 Disagree	3 Neither agree nor disagree	4 Agree	5 Strongly agree
RPL addresses skill shortage in an industry					
RPL addresses changing labour market needs					
RPL addresses an ageing workforce					
RPL matches skill demand with supply					
RPL addresses overall skill level in an industry					
RPL improves overall work performance in an industry					
RPL facilitates labour mobility					
RPL addresses workplace requirements					
RPL develops overall competence levels in an industry					
RPL maintains workplace standards					
RPL maintains/achieves workplace standards					
RPL achieves up-skilling in the workplace					
RPL redirects the workforce to areas of opportunity					
RPL achieves social inclusion in the labour market					
RPL facilitates social inclusion					
RPL is a catalyst for lifelong learning					

30) Rate your personal opinion about the return on investment of RPL to **INDIVIDUAL WORKERS**.

	1 Strongly disagree	2 Disagree	3 Neither agree nor disagree	4 Agree	5 Strongly agree
RPL increases employability					
RPL improves individual career prospects					
RPL provides access to education and training					
RPL provides entry to education and training					
RPL provides progression within education and training					
RPL provides transfer within education and training					
RPL provides alternate pathways to qualifications					
RPL improves performance in daily job tasks					
RPL acts as the basis for further education and training					
RPL improves job satisfaction					
RPL improves performance on the job					
RPL increases job security					
RPL shortens time and reduces financial costs to education and training					
RPL brings individual power over own learning					
RPL is an alternate pathway to qualification					
RPL facilitates flexibility in learning					
RPL facilitates exemptions from learning elements					
RPL facilitates the planning of learning pathways					
RPL identifies training needs					
RPL improves relations with management					
RPL acts as a basis for further education and training					
RPL acts as a basis for personal development					
RPL acts as a basis for professional development					
RPL acts as a basis for career planning					

31) Rate your personal opinion about the return on investment of RPL to the **EMPLOYING ORGANISATION**.

	1 Strongly disagree	2 Disagree	3 Neither agree nor disagree	4 Agree	5 Strongly agree
RPL increases competitiveness					
RPL increases profitability					
RPL reduces downtime					
RPL reduces levels of employee supervision					
RPL reduces overtime					
RPL reduces employee turnover					
RPL reduces employee grievances					
RPL improves team building capacity					
RPL improves performance on the job					
RPL improves job satisfaction					
RPL improves management-employee relations					
RPL increases employee loyalty					
RPL improves customer satisfaction					
RPL improves performance appraisal ratings					
RPL increases employee morale					

32) Rate your opinion about the return on investment of RPL to **FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION**.

	1 Strongly disagree	2 Disagree	3 Neither agree nor disagree	4 Agree	5 Strongly agree
RPL offers alternate pathways to qualification					
RPL offers institutional-business collaboration					
RPL provides access to higher education					
RPL facilitates transfer into further and higher education					
RPL provides a means to advance entry to education					
RPL provides a means to non-standard entry to education					
RPL offers non-traditional learners the opportunity to participate in further and higher education					
RPL offers mobility within the educational sector					

RPL policy should be mainstream in the higher education sector					
RPL raises educational attainment					
RPL facilitates flexibility in learning					
RPL raises questions about academic rigour					
RPL shifts the focus of learning to outcomes					

33) From your experience please rate where the costs of RPL mostly apply to companies and organisations.

	1 Low	2	3	4	5 High
Needs analysis/surveys					
Course design, development, purchase					
Salary of instructor/consultant					
Salary of staff while on training					
Off-site travel, lodging, meals					
Facilities rented or allocated					
Equipment and hardware					
Instructional and testing materials					
Course/Training evaluation					
Tuition					
Books/Materials					
Loss of productivity while attending training					
Other employee time related to training					
Missed opportunity cost					
Induction cost					
Replacing employee while attending course					
Maintenance costs (e.g. refreshments, record keeping, stationery)					
Higher wastage rates until trainee is fully proficient					
Recruitment of training staff/selection of training package					
Risk that more highly trained employees leave					

34) Other (please specify)

--

35) In your expert opinion how important are the following RPL technologies for future

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development of RPL in workplaces?					
	1 Low	2	3	4	5 High
Learning outcomes					
Credits					
Modules					
Accreditation					
Flexible learning pathways					
Levels of learning on an agreed framework					
Sectoral qualifications					
State funding					
E-portfolios					

36) Other (please specify)

37) Please rate your level of agreement with the statements below					
	1 Strongly disagree	2 Disagree	3 Neither agree nor disagree	4 Agree	5 Strongly agree
RPL will expand only in multi-national companies.					
RPL is likely to expand in medium or small enterprises.					
RPL must be sought by individual workers themselves					
The main driver of RPL will be the need to reduce the costs of education and training.					
The main driver of RPL will be for up-skilling.					
The main driver of RPL will be for re-skilling					
The main driver of RPL will be for accreditation of non-formal and informal learning					
The main driver of RPL will be the need for sectoral qualifications.					
The main driver of RPL will be the need for worker mobility.					
The main driver of RPL will be individual qualifications.					
The main driver of RPL will be social justice.					
The main driver of RPL will be governments cutting spending costs.					

The main driver of RPL will be harmonisation of qualification systems.					
The main driver of RPL will be up-skilling an ageing worker population.					
The main driver of RPL will be to keep up with technological changes.					
The main driver of RPL will be the globalisation of knowledge.					
The main driver of RPL will be wages determined by qualifications.					
Universities will continue to resist RPL.					
RPL will expand only if there are frameworks of qualifications					
RPL will only expand if there is trust and credibility among powerful stakeholders.					
RPL will only expand if there is mutual recognition of qualifications and awards.					
RPL will mainly become a mechanism for worker mobility rather than social justice					
The main focus of RPL in the future will be economic interests.					
The OECD will be a main driver for an economic model of RPL					
The Council of Europe will be a main driver of a social justice model of RPL.					
UNESCO will be a main driver of a global model of RPL					
Employers will only use RPL if it is cost effective.					
Multinationals will not need qualifications frameworks to support their model of RPL					

## *Appendix L*

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## Copy of Delphi Future Trends Research 2009 Round 2



Dear Expert Panel,

Thank you for your thoughtful and considered responses to the First Round Questionnaire of this Delphi Future Trends Research into the Recognition of Prior Learning in Companies and Organisations.

In the first round there were areas of consensus and areas of divergence among you. Additionally there were areas of ambiguities.

In this second round the focus is on the areas of divergence, contradiction and ambiguity. Some new questions have been added where I considered clarity was required.

This round should take no more than **5 minutes to complete.**

When you have completed the questionnaire please SUBMIT and you will receive an automatic receipt.

If you have any questions please contact me.

I hope to receive your questionnaires within 5 working days if possible to enable the final round to be circulated before Christmas together with a summary of findings.

Thank you again for your cooperation. I am looking forward to your responses.

Sincerely

Kate Collins

**N.B. This online survey will cut out and your responses lost if it is left idle for more than 5 minutes.**

1) Name

2) Please rate your level of agreement with the statements below						
	1 Strongly agree	2 Agree	3 Neither agree nor disagree	4 Disagree	5 Strongly disagree	Comments (Please Specify):
RPL for training needs analysis purposes will disappear from higher education contexts.						
RPL in the context of continuing professional development in companies and organisations will be valuable primarily for access to qualifications.						
RPL credits will						

increasingly count towards an award or qualification and not for the notional concept of "credit" as in "valuing learning".						
RPL for the purposes of personal development plans will be valuable in a work-based training/in-company training context only.						
RPL for up-skilling will be more valuable to companies and organisations than RPL for re-skilling.						
RPL will not be more extensively used in the voluntary sector.						
RPL for re-skilling will not be particularly useful to regulatory bodies.						
RPL for up-skilling will more frequently be used in the contexts of State supported VET and Higher Education than in commercial companies and organisations.						
RPL for meeting legal requirements will not be extensively useful in the work-based learning/in-company training context.						
RPL will facilitate the mobility of workers more across and within qualifications frameworks than across borders.						
RPL for mobility is really part of the lifelong learning policy discourse rather than an actual lived practice and likely to remain so.						
Without global recognition of qualifications, RPL for mobility has limited value to companies and organisations.						
Without global RPL						

principles for non-formal and informal learning it is likely that only certified learning will facilitate mobility of workers.						
RPL will not add value to youth work.						
The Europass CV and Mobility Pass will become the most used tools for making qualifications and skills visible for the mobility purposes of workers.						
Electronic-RPL (e-portfolios and online assessment) will have to become one of the most used RPL "technologies" if economies of scale are to be achieved.						
RPL for sectoral qualifications will become more used for mobility than will RPL for individual qualifications.						
RPL will facilitate rather than achieve social inclusion.						
The social inclusion agenda of lifelong learning discourses is of direct returns relevance to companies and organisations.						
RPL will be increasingly used for mutual recognition of qualifications than for the harmonisation of qualifications systems.						
Globalisation of knowledge, goods, services and economic activity will increase the demand for RPL in companies and organisations.						
RPL in companies and organisations will be driven greatly in the future by the need to keep up with technological change.						
External RPL consultants						

and/or RPL brokers will be increasingly important for the development of RPL in companies and organisations.						
A market in tradable credits from RPL is inevitable.						
Recognition of qualifications rather than recognition of non-formal/informal learning will remain the focus of RPL in companies and organisations.						
RPL will increasingly create greater qualifications inflation.						

3) Do you have any other comments you would like to add on any aspect of the questionnaire, terminology, or approach?

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## *Appendix M*

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### Kate Collins Delphi Round 3



Dear Respondents,

Thank you for taking the time to respond to my Round 2 Delphi Future Trends Research on the Return on Investment from RPL to Companies and Organisations.

From the responses there remain two particular areas of divergent opinion:

1. The perceived and actual role of RPL in re-skilling workers now that an economic crisis is extending globally.
2. The gap between the inclusive ideals for RPL provided by major global organisations and the actual reality you experience as RPL practitioners and/or local policy makers.

This 3rd Round tries to unpick these two areas a little more. The format of the questions is a little different to Rounds 1 and 2 and there is more scope for you to comment from your local perspective as well as from your global expertise. It is in three parts and should take no more than **10 minutes** to complete.

Thank you again for your time and patience, I really appreciate it.

I hope to have a draft analysis report on the full findings completed by mid-January 2010 which I will send on to you for your information and further comment if you wish.

Kind regards and many thanks

Kate

**N.B. Your session will time out if it is left idle for more than 5 minutes and all of your answers will be lost**

1) Name

<b>2) PART 1</b> <b>RPL and re-skilling for workers</b>	
In your state/country how much policy energy and supporting funding is now being allocated to managing the downturn in the economy through the re-skilling of workers already made redundant or in danger of redundancy?	
None	
Very Little	
Moderate Amount	
Significant Amount	
Additional Comments:	

3) To what extent is RPL a factor in re-skilling of redundant workers in your country/state/region generally?
---

Not at all	
A gesture only	
Increasing	
Serious committment	
Additional Comments:	

4) To what extent have policy makers begun to promote RPL as a means of up-skilling redundant workers in your country/state/region?

Not at all	
Just starting	
Actually Happening	
Additonal Comments:	

5) From your experience as an academic or policy-maker what do you predict as the future role of RPL in re-skilling workers in the current global economic crisis?

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**6) PART 2**

**Global Organisations' Policies and ideologies on the role and potential of RPL: How "real" are they in your experience?**

In this part there are 10 short extracts about RPL from policy documents used by:

1. UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation)
2. Council of Europe
3. OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development)
4. World Bank
5. WTO and GATS (World Trade Organisation and General Agreement on Trade in Services)
6. ILO (International Labour Organisation)
7. European Commission
8. The European Qualifications Framework
9. ECVET (European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training)

10a. NCVER (National Centre for Vocational Education Research)

10b. SAQA (South African Qualifications Authority)

10c. National Qualifications Authority of Ireland.

Please comment on the extent to which the ideologies in the extracts actually happen in the reality of practice in education and training activities in your country/state/organisation. You may add any additional comments you wish.

**UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization)**

RPL has various advantages. It supports capacity building initiatives in difficult and challenging economic and social contexts, breaks down the traditional barriers to education and training,

<p>opens up opportunities of entry to courses, and it is able to transfer and value knowledge and experience gained previously and experientially. By formally recognizing skills through RPL, those with few formal skills can gain opportunities for further employment and improve their career prospects. Recognition of skills can also contribute much to those retrenched workers' self-esteem.</p>	
Little or no relevance to local RPL practices	
Background relevance only	
Starting to impact on local RPL practice	
Local RPL informed by this policy ideology	
Additional Comments:	

<p><b>7) COUNCIL OF EUROPE</b>          Governments should encourage higher education institutions and other competent national authorities to provide opportunities for individuals to have their competencies evaluated and to set up procedures for assessment and validation of professional experience and prior learning. The recognition granted to each qualification should be independent of the mode of study and the learning path leading to it. The principles of the Council of Europe/UNESCO Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (Lisbon Recognition Convention) should be applied also to qualifications earned under different lifelong learning arrangements. The ENIC Network should be encouraged to develop new assessment methods and procedures to this end. Governments should encourage higher education institutions to use the "Diploma Supplement" to allow greater transparency and facilitate recognition. Steps should be taken to establish the employers' needs in terms of education and training of their employees and these should be taken into account in the overall policies for the provision of lifelong learning and in the design of individual programmes.</p>	
Little or no relevance to local RPL practices	
Background relevance only	
Starting to impact on local RPL practice	
Local RPL informed by this policy ideology	
Additional Comments:	

<p><b>8) OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development)</b>          The recognition of non-formal and informal learning is an important means for making the 'lifelong learning for all' agenda a reality for all and, subsequently, for reshaping learning to better match the needs of the 21st century knowledge economies and open societies. Individuals engaging in a recognition process for their non-formal and informal learning outcomes must be awarded a document that has social value and is widely recognised so that they can benefit from it, now or later in life, when returning to the formal lifelong learning system or to the labour market.</p>	
Little or no relevance to local RPL practices	
Background relevance only	



Starting to impact on local RPL practice	
Local RPL informed by this policy ideology	
Additional Comments:	

**9) WORLD BANK**

The provision of relevant quality secondary education should facilitate broader participation in education and increase labour market relevance of qualifications. This should be by way of curricula for flexible and transferable core skills, certification to facilitate the transferability and portability of skills and competencies and recognition of prior learning and quality Assurance and Accreditation for all forms of Lifelong Learning.

Little or no relevance to local RPL practices	
Background relevance only	
Starting to impact on local RPL practice	
Local RPL informed by this policy ideology	
Additional Comments:	

**10) WTO and GATS (World Trade Organization and General Agreement on Trade in Services)**

The agreement contains obligations with respect to recognition requirements (educational background, for instance) for the purpose of securing authorizations, licenses or certification in the services area. It encourages recognition requirements achieved through harmonization and internationally-agreed criteria.

Little or no relevance to local RPL practices	
Background relevance only	
Starting to impact on local RPL practice	
Local RPL informed by this policy ideology	
Additional Comments:	

**11) ILO (International Labour Organisation)**

Measures should be adopted, in consultation with the social partners and using a national qualifications framework, to promote the development, implementation and financing of a transparent mechanism for the assessment, certification and recognition of skills, including prior learning and previous experience, irrespective of the countries where they were acquired and whether acquired formally or informally. Such an assessment methodology should be objective, non-discriminatory and linked to standards.

The national framework should include a credible system of certification which will ensure that skills are portable and recognized across sectors, industries, enterprises and educational institutions. Special provisions should be designed to ensure recognition and certification of skills and qualifications for migrant workers.

Little or no relevance to local RPL practices	
Background relevance only	
Starting to impact on local RPL practice	
Local RPL informed by this policy ideology	
Additional Comments:	

### 12) EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Learning takes place in different settings and contexts, formal, non-formal as well as informal. Learning that is taking place in the formal education and training system is traditionally the most visible and the one likely to be recognised in the labour market and by society in general. In recent years, however, there has been a growing appreciation that learning in non-formal and informal settings is seen as crucial for the realisation of lifelong learning, thus requiring new strategies for identification and validation of these 'invisible' learning outcomes.

Little or no relevance to local RPL practices	
Background relevance only	
Starting to impact on local RPL practice	
Local RPL informed by this policy ideology	
Additional Comments:	

### 13) THE EUROPEAN QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK

The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) acts as a translation device to make national qualifications more readable across Europe, promoting workers' and learners' mobility between countries and facilitating their lifelong learning. The EQF can support individuals with extensive experience from work or other fields of activity by facilitating validation of non-formal and informal learning. The focus on learning outcomes will make it easier to assess whether learning outcomes acquired in these settings are equivalent in content and relevance to formal qualifications.

Little or no relevance to local RPL practices	
Background relevance only	
Starting to impact on local RPL practice	
Local RPL informed by this policy ideology	
Additional Comments:	

### 14) ECVET (European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training)

ECVET aspires to be an information exchange tool to help individuals take full advantage of learning acquired, in particular as a result of transnational mobility, whether the context was formal, non-formal or informal. It aims to facilitate the mobility of people undertaking training, the validation of the outcomes of lifelong learning, the transparency of qualifications, and mutual trust between vocational training and education providers in Europe.

Little or no relevance to local RPL practices	
Background relevance only	
Starting to impact on local RPL practice	
Local RPL informed by this policy ideology	
Additional Comments:	

#### 15) **NCVER (National Centre for Vocational Education Research)**

Recognition of prior learning has been identified as a powerful tool for bringing people into the learning system. However neither industry nor individuals consider that RPL is always the best option, even when the person is eligible for RPL.

Individuals use recognition of prior learning because it:

- saves time because they do not have to repeat learning for skills or knowledge they already have
- allows fast-tracking to recognised qualifications
- allows for employment-related gains and career development opportunities
- can have a significant impact on self-esteem and motivation
- can satisfy industry licensing arrangements.

Employers encourage recognition of prior learning because it:

- provides a way of more effectively and efficiently utilising skills already in the workforce
- allows fast-tracking, which means employees can become fully competent as quickly as possible
- enables skill gaps to be identified, providing a sound basis for training needs analysis and career planning
- fosters a learning culture, since it builds confidence to undertake further training, and it motivates employees.

Registered training organisations offer recognition of prior learning because it:

- meets the requirements of the Australian Quality Training Framework
- meets the wishes of employers and individuals
- is a potentially efficient and time-saving process; only training that adds value is required to be delivered
- can assist the development of learner and employer-centred training programs
- has genuine and valuable learning outcomes in its own right, regardless of whether recognition is awarded.

Little or no relevance to local RPL practices	
Background relevance only	
Starting to impact on local RPL practice	
Local RPL informed by this policy ideology	
Additional Comments:	

#### 16) **SAQA (South African Qualifications Authority)**

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in South Africa is critical to the development of an equitable education and training system. RPL is meant to support **transformation** of the education and training system of the country. RPL is practised in the Higher Education and Training (HET), Further Education and Training (FET) and General Education and Training (GET) Bands and in Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET), in formal institutions of learning, as well as at workplace-based education and training centres and by small private

single purpose providers. Therefore RPL practice will be linked to various purposes: <b>Personal development</b> and/or certification of current skills without progression into a learning programme, if the candidate so chooses; <b>Progression into a learning programme</b> , using RPL to fast-track progression through the learning programme; <b>Promotion</b> ; and Career or <b>job change</b> .	
Little or no relevance to local RPL practices	
Background relevance only	
Starting to impact on local RPL practice	
Local RPL informed by this policy ideology	
Additional Comments:	

<b>17) National Qualifications Authority of Ireland</b> Recognition of prior learning can support the socially inclusive purposes of further and higher education and training, in that it facilitates entry to programmes, gives credit to or exemptions from a programme of study or access to a full award. Recognition of prior learning can address the needs of disadvantaged groups, part-time students and mature students, and can have a positive impact on retention of students. In addition, recognition of prior learning gives opportunities to providers of education and awarding bodies to use their assessment capability to up-skill individuals and meet workforce needs at local and national levels. Recognition of prior learning can bring benefits to the workplace by enhancing worker's employability and a better matching of skills demand and supply. Recognition of prior learning can assist in supporting staff development within organisations by increasing staff motivation to undertake appropriate education or training. It can reduce the amount of time required to acquire a qualification.	
Little or no relevance to local RPL practices	
Background relevance only	
Starting to impact on local RPL practice	
Local RPL informed by this policy ideology	
Additional Comments:	

<b>18) PART 3</b> If you have any additional comments or feedback please complete the box below.

## *Appendix N*

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## Presentations and Publications

- Facilicode Project Partner Meetings, Dublin, Ireland (December 2008), Aalborg, Denmark (18<sup>th</sup> -20<sup>th</sup> March 2009, Valencia, Spain (27-28<sup>th</sup> May 2009)
- Presentation of Research Design to supervisors, 17<sup>th</sup> December 2008
- The Skills Research Initiative, Research Capacity Building Workshops, January – March 2009
- CPD Course ‘Recognition of Prior Learning in Higher Education: *policies, procedures and pedagogies*’ March - May 2009 and Wednesday 28<sup>th</sup> -30<sup>th</sup> October 2009. Presentation of research course participants 30<sup>th</sup> October 2009.
- DIT RPL Regional Seminar ‘The potential of RPL in a changing economic and employment landscape’ 12<sup>th</sup> March 2009.
- SIF Education in Employment RPL Working Group Meetings 26<sup>th</sup> May 2009, GMIT.
- Paper ‘A Review of Irish Projects on the Sustainability of Recognition of Prior Learning Initiatives’ presentation at the 6<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Researching Working and Learning, June 28<sup>th</sup> –July 1<sup>st</sup> 2009, Roskilde Denmark.
- Paper ‘The Development of policies and practices for the recognition of qualifications’ presentation at SRHE Annual Conference 2009, 8-10 December 2010.
- Presentation of Delphi initial results to DIT colleagues 15<sup>th</sup> December 2010.
- 11<sup>th</sup> January 2010 – 14<sup>th</sup> January 2010 Learning Assessment Seminars for SR Technic former employees
- Presentation of ‘Case Study Methodology’ to DIT staff on Tuesday 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2010
- Léargas Study Visit on ‘the NQF, Quality Assurance and Recognition of Prior Learning’ Thursday 11<sup>th</sup> February 2010

- March, 2010: Publication of 'Report of a Delphi Future Oriented Study: Is there a return on investment (ROI) from the recognition of prior learning to companies and organisations?' and dissemination to research participants and interested parties.
- Participation in SENSAS (on apprenticeship entrepreneurial training) Leonardo da Vinci Project Partner Meeting in Lisbon, Portugal, 22-25 March 2010. Responsible for dissemination and exploitation activities and report.
- Transfer Exam, oral presentation and report, Tuesday 20<sup>th</sup> April 2010.
- Participation in SENSAS (on apprenticeship entrepreneurial training) Leonardo da Vinci Project Partner Meeting in Avignon, France 24-27 May 2010. Responsible for dissemination and exploitation activities and report.
- Presentation of paper at the International Conference on Organizational Learning, Knowledge and Capabilities OLKC 2010 in Boston Massachusetts, USA on 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> June 2010 and attendance at OLKC conference 3<sup>rd</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> June 2010
- Presentation of research to Léargas Study Visit, Maldron Hotel, Wednesday 11<sup>th</sup> October 2010.
- Presentation of paper 'Globalised higher education in the economic crisis: RPL as a tool for the recognition of qualifications, student mobility, up-skilling and re-skilling' at the SRHEPG (Society for Research in Higher Education Postgraduate) Conference, Wales, 13-16 December 2010.
- Presentation of research at 'International RPL Network Meeting', Glasgow Caledonian University, Tuesday 8<sup>th</sup> February 2011.
- Article 'Recent Trends in Compatibility and Recognition of Qualifications' in publication 2011 for *European Journal of Qualifications*

- Article submitted to Level3 and peer reviewed, 'Globalised higher education in the economic crisis: RPL as a tool for the recognition of qualifications, student mobility, up-skilling and re-skilling', 2011. Article to be amended.