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Katherine Collins
Technological University Dublin

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HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE ECONOMIC CRISIS: RPL AS A TOOL FOR THE RECOGNITION OF QUALIFICATIONS, STUDENT MOBILITY, UP-SKILLING AND RE-SKILLING

KATE COLLINS

Abstract

This article investigates how higher education (HE) experts and training stakeholders perceive the use and value of recognition of prior learning (RPL) in responding to changing learner profiles in the context of increasing economic difficulties globally and their resulting impact on employment, the labour market and education and training systems. The data were gathered as an element of the author's doctoral research. The immediate research context was shaped by a rich policy discourse on social inclusion, mobility, organisational development, personal development, up-skilling and re-skilling in the labour market, and economic regeneration. A Delphi survey was undertaken to gather data on the possible future use and benefits of recognition of prior learning (RPL) in this context. The survey 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 on the specific advantages and potential usages of RPL to companies and organisations. Analysis of the data found three main areas of divergence and ambiguity, namely: higher education and the recognition of qualifications; higher education and mobility; and higher education and up-skilling and re-skilling. The main findings are presented and discussed below.

Key words: recognition of prior learning; labour market; Delphi survey; future trends.

1. Introduction and context

This article investigates how higher education (HE) and the training sector generally perceive the value of the recognition of prior learning (RPL) in responding to changing learner profiles in the context of increasing economic difficulties globally, and their resulting impact on employment, the labour market, and education and training systems. The article is based on an element of my doctoral research data and related to a presentation I made at the SRHE Postgraduate and New Researchers Conference in December 2010.

What the statistics say

Investigations of unemployment since the economic crisis from 2008 have found that unemployment rates are 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). 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 Ireland, the Expert Group on Future Skill Needs (EGFSN) 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, Condon, McNaboe et al., 2007). Despite the economic downturn the EGFSN reports for 2009 (Behan, Condon, Hogan et al., 2009) and 2010 (Behan, Condon, Hogan et al., 2010) found that there was still a need for up-skilling and even more so to re-skill those facing redundancy and 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. In addition to the national higher education context international and European higher education policy has been promoting RPL to address the demands for greater levels of skills and qualifications in the international labour market.

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, 2008). This focus on enhanced human capital is evident in European RPL 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 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).

The European and national higher education (HE) landscape has been changing and there is now a need for greater transparency of qualifications, mobility of learners, and flexibility in and access to education and training. Much higher educational policy reform is tied to European Union (EU) priorities of labour market development and economic competitiveness, where education and training are considered key contributing factors to success.

Content and structure of the article

This article outlines perceptions of the role of RPL in higher education and the labour market. The article is structured into six sections. Section one described the background to the research including the research context. Section two describes RPL policy at national and European levels. Section three presents an overview of the Delphi Survey and reasons for its use. Section four summarises the findings from the three survey rounds, and section five presents a discussion of the findings, highlighting three main points of discussion that emerged. Section six is a short concluding section to summarise the findings.

2. The Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in this research

RPL 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 Up-skilling 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).

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).

Identification and validation of informal and non-formal learning (VINFL) are the terms used for RPL in European policy rhetoric while the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) has maintained the term ‘*recognition*’ of informal and non-formal learning (Werquin, 2008; 2010). The identification of non-formal and informal learning is about recording and making visible an individual’s learning outcomes (Cedefop, 2009). 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, 2009).

Policy-makers at European and international levels have tended to focus on overcoming obstacles to RPL 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, 2008; Davidson & Nevala, 2007; Smith, 2004; Werquin, 2008; 2010) as RPL 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).

3. The Delphi Survey Research Method

The Delphi survey research method is an iterative data gathering process. In research, it is 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 involves three or more questionnaires sent either as paper documents or online to respondents to self-complete without direct contact with the researcher (Watson, 2008).

The Delphi method was chosen for this particular research because it was regarded as an ideal methodology for the rigorous consultation of experts and stakeholders. 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 survey method was also flexible in its design, which was a key requirement for this particular research (Mitroff & Turoff, 2002).

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. The final panel comprised individuals from different backgrounds and roles to reflect the variety of contexts and applications for which RPL is practised; not just confined to academia. Furthermore this variety of perspectives aimed to enhance the credibility of the research, which was facilitated by the process of feedback to respondents as a form of member-checking.

The research was conducted in three rounds of online questionnaires between October 2009 and December 2009 through “Freeonlinesurveys.com”. 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. Each round was pilot-tested before being sent out to respondents. The results were analysed in SPSS with automatic generation of tables and graphs from the online survey tool. Feedback was delivered by email to each of the respondents after rounds one and two. Analysis of responses was based largely around points of divergence and ambiguity with less emphasis on areas of consensus and broad agreement.

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 first round 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. These areas were considered the most relevant to explore the value and future potential of RPL. The subsequent second and third questionnaires were structured from the analysis and feedback from the previous questionnaires.

4. Findings of the Delphi Survey

4.1 Data from Round One

The first round Delphi was divided into six parts. A total of twenty-two respondents completed the first round questionnaire. The first set of questions asked about the purposes for which RPL was practised in organisations based on fourteen listed contexts. A further set of questions asked about the main RPL tools that were used in companies and organisations, the main assessment methods for RPL 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.

The final section was about the future of RPL. Firstly, about RPL technologies that would support the development of RPL 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.

There were fourteen contexts for RPL practice listed in the first round questionnaire. Across these fourteen contexts RPL for the purposes ‘access to qualifications’ and ‘up-skilling’ were selected in the highest 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). This paper concentrates on responses where the context of higher education was rated highest. For example, RPL for the purpose of ‘access to qualifications’ was chosen in the highest proportions for the contexts of higher education (77.3%), further education (45.5%) and continuing professional development (40.9%). RPL for the purpose of ‘credits’ was chosen in low proportions across all of the fourteen contexts, except for the higher education context (68.2%). RPL for ‘up-skilling’ was ranked highest for the context of higher education (40.9%). 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%). However there were generally low levels of agreement overall with

‘mobility’ as a purpose of RPL. Table 1 below presents the most frequently chosen contexts for each listed RPL use.

Table 1: The most frequently chosen contexts for each RPL use (Q. 5-18)

| RPL Use | Context |
|---------------------------------|---|
| Training needs analysis | Further education (36.4%) |
| Access to qualifications | Higher education (77.3%) |
| Credits | Higher education (68.2%) |
| Personal development plans | Work-based learning/in-company training (40.9%) |
| Re-skilling | Work-based learning/in-company training (27.3%) |
| Up-skilling | Higher education (40.9%) |
| Meeting legal requirements | Professional bodies (31.8%) |
| Mobility | Higher education (27.3%) |
| Membership of professional body | Professional body (36.4%) |

Therefore, in relation to higher education there were firm opinions about RPL for ‘access to qualifications’, for ‘credits’, for ‘up-skilling’ and for ‘mobility’. There were questions raised over the value of awards achieved through RPL. Respondents also added purposes of RPL for higher education, which were RPL for ‘access to programmes’ and ‘exemptions from modules or programmes’.

The return on investment (ROI) 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). Those statements with the highest levels of agreement are illustrated in table 2 below. Statements with a 100% rating for the ‘agree’ and ‘strongly agree’ answers 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).

Table 2: Return on Investment for further and higher education

| ROI item | Percentage agree and strongly agree |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| RPL offers alternate pathways to qualification | 100 |
| RPL facilitates transfer into further and higher education | |
| RPL offers non-traditional learners the opportunity to participate in further and higher education | |
| RPL policy should be mainstream in the higher education sector | |
| RPL provides access to higher education | 95.2 |
| RPL provides a means to non-standard entry to education | |
| RPL facilitates flexibility in learning | |
| RPL provides a means to advance entry to education | 90.5 |
| RPL offers mobility within the educational sector | 81 |
| RPL offers institutional-business collaboration | 80 |
| RPL raises educational attainment | 76.1 |
| RPL shifts the focus to learning outcomes | 66.7 |
| RPL raises questions about academic rigour | 28.6 |

The final section of the first round asked respondents to rate twenty-eight statements on the future of RPL on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The highest ranking statements to this question are given in Table 3 and 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). 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’. Furthermore, 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.

Table 3: 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 |

4.2 Data from Round Two

The second round questionnaire consisted of twenty-six statements resulting from the ambiguities and divergence that emerged 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 study. The statements with the highest levels of agreement are shown in table 4.

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). 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' had a 45% agreement, no 'strongly agree' answers, but a median of 2 (agree).

With regard to 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). There was also a 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). 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.

Table 4: Statements with highest levels 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 | 65 |

| | |
|---|----|
| qualifications. | |
| 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 |

The market demands placed on higher education were also evident in the context of debates over up-skilling and re-skilling of people where 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). There were additional comments from respondents stating that RPL is up to the individual, and it is up to educational institutions 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 that 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). 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.

4.3 Data from Round Three

The third round questionnaire was delivered in December 2009 with a total of eighteen respondents.

Respondents were asked about the extent to which RPL was a factor in the re-skilling of workers made redundant. They were asked to answer on a scale from ‘not at all’ (1) to ‘serious commitment’ (4). 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.

Respondents were also asked to predict the role of RPL for re-skilling workers in the current global economic crisis. These predictions included RPL as a means of access to education and training, as one of several small-scale policy options in the economic crisis, as a means of recognising both experience and qualifications, as a means to facilitate mobility and employability, and as a means to focus on skills, skill gaps and demand.

The final section of Round Three presented respondents with ten RPL policy statements from global, European and National Organisations. These 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), NCVER (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 5 below. Respondents were asked 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.

Table 5: 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%) |

5. Discussion

There are a number of points to be made regarding RPL and its role in defining higher educational practice in globalised terms that are shaped by economic pressures, social dynamics and policy developments. The first point is about higher education and the recognition of qualifications which, according to this study, has the potential to act as a means of social inclusion by providing access routes to higher education for non-traditional students whether that is due to level of educational attainment, origin of original qualifications, or the attainment of occupational or sectoral awards. The second defining point is about higher education is its role in both professional and academic mobility where mobility is tied to concepts of employability and social inclusion, and also to RPL, which in the context of higher education is considered a means to achieve mobility. A third and final point is about higher education is the up-skilling agenda, particularly evident in labour activation schemes and over-arching funding mechanisms such as the European Globalisation Fund. These three points are discussed further below.

5.1 Higher Education and the Recognition of Qualifications

In Round One, RPL for ‘access to qualifications’ was chosen in relatively high proportions across all of the fourteen listed contexts for that question, but the highest ranking were higher education (77.3%), further education (45.5%) and continuing professional development (40.9%). It is expected that higher education can and will address the needs of non-traditional learners

although in the majority of cases this takes place within the bounds of traditional structures. This is not surprising, however, when considering the concept of credit which in the case of Ireland has become tied to awards and is therefore in many ways an inflexible tool. For example, in Round Two of this study, 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. The high ‘credit’ rating for the higher education context in round one was qualified in round three by the perception from the expert panel that outside of higher education RPL is not very well known. Furthermore there is still a perception that it is difficult to both assess and validate RPL in the higher education context, which is still according to many respondents, focused on credit arrangements.

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 respondents 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 ten policy statements presented in round three for comment, 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 award

5.2 Higher Education and Mobility

In Round One RPL for the purposes of ‘mobility’ was rated highest by the expert panel for the contexts of higher education (27.3%) and work-based learning/in-company training (22.7%). There were generally low levels of agreement overall with ‘mobility’ as a purpose of RPL, which raises questions about the differences between the aspirations of policy and the reality of practice. However, there were a number of questions asking about the return on investment (ROI) from RPL to the labour market, the individual, the employing organisation, and further and higher education, and here 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 in companies and organisations.

Therefore, it is clear that the mobility potential of RPL was a disputed concept throughout the three rounds of this Delphi research. In round one, as mentioned above, 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 considered 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.

One might also consider the drive now to embed employability into higher education programmes such as using personal development planning and work placements to ensure that graduates are ‘work ready’. This also places further challenges and pressures on institutions to

increase partnerships with industry and further places higher education at the threshold of market and the economy.

5.3 Higher Education and Up-Skilling and Re-Skilling

In Round One, 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, 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%).

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. Furthermore, 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 existing 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 and increasing government policy looking to higher education as a tool for economic regeneration.

6. Conclusion

This paper 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 was used in higher education indicating RPL use for access, credit, mobility and up-skilling. Return on investment from RPL to higher education

primarily concerned alternate pathways to qualification and access for non-traditional learners to higher education. 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. 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 discussion found three main points of divergence and ambiguity that emerged from the data, namely: higher education and the recognition of qualifications; higher education and mobility; and higher education and up-skilling and re-skilling. Therefore, within the dialogue of lifelong learning and a reformed higher education area, higher education is expected to provide an alternate pathway into higher education. That alternate pathway can be through transfer from other educational sectors or making it possible to give exemptions from elements of a programme, or giving non-traditional learners the opportunity to enter into higher education by accrediting their prior experience and qualifications against programme learning outcomes. This has also meant incorporating new technologies such as modularisation, a credit transfer system and basing programmes on outcomes as opposed to inputs as well as framing qualifications and awards for qualifications frameworks.

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