



2013

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Recommended Citation

Murphy, Anne (2013) "Two Decades of RPL/APEL in IRELAND: Practitioner Views," *Level 3*: Vol. 11: Iss. 1, Article 1.
doi:10.21427/D77M8M
Available at: <https://arrow.dit.ie/level3/vol11/iss1/1>

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June 2013

Two decades of RPL/APEL in IRELAND: *Practitioner Views*

Respondent:	<p style="text-align: center;">Dr Anne Murphy Dublin Institute of Technology</p>
<p>What was your first involvement with APEL/RPL?</p>	<p>My first involvement with APEL was in 1990 when I was invited to design a system by which cohorts of experiences practitioners in the disability training sector could achieve a sectoral qualification primarily through recognition of prior certificated and experiential learning. A taught route to the particular qualification was already in operation in partnership between the Adult Education Centre in St Patrick’s College, Maynooth (now National University of Ireland, Maynooth) and the National Rehabilitation Board. The trainers’ qualification was an essential element of quality assurance for the sector with funding support provided by the EU Social Fund. However, it was obvious to the partners that many trainers were already sufficiently competent and experienced to meet the training standard required and that they did not require formal training in that regard. Therefore an APEL Route was devised, operationalised and piloted with twenty-five experienced trainers.</p>
<p>Year?</p>	<p>1991 onwards</p>
<p>How did that first model of APEL/RPL operate?</p>	<p>The model of APEL was based on achievement of the learning outcomes of the training programme. A detailed pro-forma template was provided to participants where they provided evidence of learning outcomes which could be demonstrated in such a format. A detailed Handbook was prepared for applicants and I acted as designer and facilitator for the entire process. Applicants for the APEL Route were obliged to ‘opt-in’ to the route by self-assessing their prior learning and current competences and challenging the portfolio requirements and the presentations and demonstrations involved. While applications were at individual level, the process was based on a cohort, work-shop approach where participants</p>

	<p>demonstrated and shared learning in relation to all aspects of the qualification, including the reflective journal.</p> <p>The APEL Route was an accelerated route with the entire process completed within twelve weeks on a part-time basis.</p> <p>Additional inputs were provided where particular learning gaps were identified for the cohort as a whole.</p> <p>The cohort acted as evaluators of the pilot delivery together with management staff from the University.</p> <p>The fees charged and time-on-task were equivalent to the taught route for operational reasons.</p>
<p>What aspects worked well?</p>	<p>The entire model worked well for several subsequent cohorts who could readily provide evidence of appropriate types and levels of learning.</p> <p>Equivalence with the taught route in terms of the value and recognition of the award was accepted both by the university and by the sector.</p> <p>Clarity of documentation and requirements from participants was a particular strength of the model.</p> <p>The cohort, or group, model was not only efficient: it also created a community of practitioners and a forum for intensive peer-learning as well as for demonstration of knowledge and competences for award purposes.</p> <p>The model and the process also built the capacity of the university with regard to APEL and with regard to application of appropriate assessment criteria to experiential learning.</p>
<p>What worked less well?</p>	<p>Perhaps the model and experience were not sufficiently disseminated and adapted for other occupational sectors at the time. It could be argued that APEL/RPL subsequently became a very individualistic pursuit and became less efficient and cost-effective for sectors and organisations.</p> <p>My subsequent involvement with a national organisation for accreditation of literacy tutors used the model less effectively for groups with too-much emphasis on ‘translating experience into learning’ to satisfy quite obscure terminology and to confining presentation of learning to a rigid portfolio format.</p>
<p>If the model continued what changes were made for subsequent versions?</p>	<p>The model was re-used subsequently while there were trainers in the sector with sufficient experience to undertake the APEL Route.</p>
<p>What RPL</p>	<p>Since that initial APEL experiment I have been involved in RPL policy development and RPL practice both for the national</p>

<p>involvement have you had since that first instance?</p>	<p>University of Ireland, Maynooth and for the Dublin Institute of Technology where I was RPL Policy Officer. I was also the DIT representative on Advisory Groups for the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland in development of National Principles and Operational Guidelines for RPL 2005 and for the Further Education and Training Awards Council. I represented the DIT on the Higher Education Authority (HEA) project <i>Education in Employment – RPL strand</i>. I developed the RPL Policy document approved by DIT’s Academic Council in 2007, delivered a DIT accredited RPL training programme for the higher education sector and produced two guides for RPL academic and operational practice.</p> <p>I have also been involved in international research projects, peer learning activities and training sessions for RPL and have several publications on the subject.</p>
<p>Did you use any new ‘tools’ or ‘technologies’ in subsequent models?</p>	<p>RPL in higher education operates for a number of purposes, particularly as follows:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. For entry to a programme of study at the initial stage b. For entry to a programme at an advanced stage with credits c. For exemption from elements of a programme of study with credits d. For transfer form one programme to another or from one providing institution to another e. For progression to higher specialist qualifications f. For non-standard entry to postgraduate programmes g. Towards achievement of a whole award. <p>Each purpose requires its own particular tools, technologies and processes which should maintain a focus of being both appropriate and fit-for-purposes. A focus should also be kept on the principle that applicants should be fully aware of the risks and rewards to them of using RPL for any purpose and on the principle that RPL should be used only where an applicant can have a reasonable chance of succeeding and of benefiting from it.</p> <p>Among the RPL ‘tools’ developed and described in the 2 RPL Guides are the following:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> i. Assessment criteria and quality assurance guidelines ii. RPL in curriculum design iii. RPL self-assessment templates in relation to a particular award iv. RPL dossier/portfolio templates v. RPL assessment report forms vi. Systems for recording instances of RPL in the student

	<p>record.</p> <p>vii. RPL interview report forms</p> <p>viii. RPL appeal report forms</p>
<p>In your view, how has the National Framework of Qualifications (NQF) contributed to RPL/APEL practice?</p>	<p>On the positive side the Irish NQF and supporting documentation have been very helpful in bringing a new coherence to the landscape of awards at all levels.</p> <p>The definition of levels of learning and the articulation of the type of learning expected at each level has been particularly useful for RPL purposes.</p> <p>The emphasis on using learning outcomes to explain curricular learning has been useful.</p> <p>The development of a credit system has been very useful. So too has the definition of major and minor award types and the preference for progression pathways within the NQF.</p> <p>The development of QUALIFAX and QualRec services have been particularly useful for individuals seeking RPL.</p> <p>On the negative side the design of the framework is entirely centred on formal awards and qualifications: it is an <i>awards</i> framework and not a learning framework. For RPL the impact in this regard is that only prior learning that relates to particular awards can be considered for recognition. While this is operationally logical, it does factor out any learning not implicated in a formal award on the framework and does not facilitate general, or work-based, credits which have a recognition and an exchange value in their own right.</p> <p>The implication of this awards framework model is that the curricula for new awards must now be designed with RPL as an integrated element. This latter point could, of course, be to the benefit of RPL expansion and to the benefit of learners. But, it could also be an anti-diversity opt-out mechanism for awards that centre on homogenous cohorts only.</p> <p>A further comment could be made regarding the lack of movement towards a national RPL policy since the publication of the RPL principles and operational guidelines in 2005. Without a policy there can be no coherent strategy. But a policy is not essential where RPL is a good strategic response to an immediate presenting problem!</p> <p>It could be argued that RPL is intrinsically connected to part-time learning and therefore should be part of a national strategy in that regard.</p>

<p>In your view how has the NQF level descriptors influenced RPL practice?</p>	<p>It might be argued that the definition of levels and their numbering in relation to major award types such as bachelor and masters have been more influential than the actual descriptors themselves, though there is no empirical evidence for this argument so far other than the apparent familiarity of the public with the numbering of levels.</p> <p>In my experience the really important aspects of level descriptors for RPL is how they are applied in articulating learning outcomes for particular programme documents at module level. The level descriptors themselves are useful in a general way.</p>
<p>How has the Learning Outcomes paradigm influenced RPL practice?</p>	<p>In my experience the availability of really well-worded learning outcomes have been central to all successful and scaled-up APEL/RPL models.</p> <p>Learning outcomes have been central to occupational and skills sectors for a long time now and it is relatively easy to assess performance against them.</p> <p>Where professional sectors such as nursing, engineering and medicine use standards based on learning outcomes it is relatively easy to devise transparent and efficient RPL systems. Assessment based on a pre-recorded set of learning outcomes is still a much-contested topic in education and it would be unreasonable to expect RPL to be free from such contestation. Again, assessors need to be trained and to be confident that the RPL assessment process is credible and transparently evidence-based. Where grading is not involved in RPL assessment it is relatively easy to use a result of 'learning outcome achieved' or 'not achieved'.</p>
<p>In your view are national standards for occupations and sectors helpful for RPL?</p>	<p>In my experience RPL can best be scaled-up where there is clear articulation of the standards required for different levels within sectoral qualifications. It may be that such standards are agreed at a national level or may straddle many international borders. Indeed many qualifications are now 'stateless' in that they are globally recognised and trusted.</p> <p>It is not unusual for professional and occupational sectors, and indeed for companies and organisations, to combine continuing professional development (CPD) training with RPL or work-based elements. There may, or may not, be a national agenda or strategy in such developments. Within these arrangements though, it is essential that there is transparency and objectivity to safeguard the individual and to provide fair opportunities for accreditation and mobility.</p> <p>The sectoral activities of Skillnets have raised awareness of the potential role of RPL within sectors and for individuals wishing to</p>

	<p>move to new sectors.</p>
<p>In your view are professional body RPL practices more influential than the NQF?</p>	<p>This is a difficult question to answer as it concerns aspects of control over particular work-practices and gate-keeping of routes to membership.</p> <p>It is true that many professional bodies guard their membership and determine routes into it regardless of initial academic awards held by individuals and the framework levels of such awards.</p> <p>Some professional bodies use RPL models which are more localised and more minutely articulated than the NQF level descriptors. This is not surprising given the generalist nature of the NQF level descriptor language and the highly codified supra-language of academic programme documents for those particular professional sectors. Given that professional bodies are highly influential with regard to curriculum content of relevant academic awards it is reasonable to argue that professional bodies, in many instances, are more influential than the national framework itself.</p>
<p>Do you refer to the National Principles and Operational Guidelines for RPL 2005 in your own RPL practice?</p>	<p>Yes I can truthfully say that my own practice has been highly cognisant of the principles and guidelines since its agreement in 2005. For me it is essential to continually articulate the principles which inform policy, strategy and practice in any sphere of education. In that regard the 2005 document has sustained itself to date. In my experience, academic practitioners like to fully understand the principles behind new policies and new practices which are recommended to them and /or which they are being obliged to accept.</p> <p>What has not yet been broached perhaps is a national policy and strategy for RPL. However, this may not be a wholly bad thing in itself, though it would be good if provision of RPL training and services were centrally funded as a discrete item, at least for a number of capacity-building years.</p>
<p>In your view, has the particular design of the NQF hindered the potential of RPL practices?</p>	<p>Again, this is difficult to comment upon without a clearer articulation of the question.</p> <p>What I could argue, however, is that the NQF has given RPL a definite language and map which are useful for individuals and for providers.</p> <p>Perhaps the ‘hindrances’ are more about structures which demarcate FE from HE and which demarcate the university sector as something ‘other’.</p> <p>The design of the framework presents an idealised progression system which is probably not a reality as the norm. In reality progression depends on many political, structural and budgetary factors which have nothing to do with RPL at all.</p>

<p>How important are minor awards for RPL in your view?</p>	<p>In my view one of the greatest strengths of the NQF is its respect for minor, progression, special purpose and CPD awards within the framework, particularly, but not exclusively, within the bachelor cycle.</p> <p>For many individuals, minor work-related awards are their only route to advancement. Where RPL combines with minor and CPD awards the synergies between education providers, the labour market and the desire of individuals can be both effective and powerful.</p>
<p>In your view, what has been the impact of the Bologna process for RPL?</p>	<p>Again this is a difficult question to answer without sound evidence of impact.</p> <p>But it is probably true that the Bologna preference for a unified bachelor cycle is more about technicist agendas for comparison of periods of study for full-time undergraduates that it is about lifelong learning or about access to CPD opportunities for adults. As an RPL practitioner of the pre-Bologna era I am not particularly interested in RPL being used for Erasmus exchange and recognition purposes only and the matching of credits etc.. In my view the Bologna process has yet to prove itself as useful for RPL generally outside the ENIC-NARIC systems.</p>
<p>In your view what is the usefulness of the EQF for RPL in Ireland?</p>	<p>Again I am not aware of any research evidence regarding how well the EQF is contributing to RPL in Ireland. It may be the case that some 'boundary-free' occupational sectors use the EQF as a tool to compare standards and qualifications.</p>
<p>In your view how well has RPL worked for labour market activation (LMA) initiatives so far?</p>	<p>There is evidence that RPL is becoming a useful mechanism for immediate and appropriate design of labour market activation interventions by Government, given the number of qualifications holders who are currently unemployed and the growth in particular sectors of employment.</p> <p>It makes good sense that RPL should be part of the solution to the problem of re-skilling or up-skilling individuals and that Forfas/EGFSN should promote RPL in this way.</p> <p>Providers benefit from this particular use of RPL as they can better design progression or re-skilling programmes which they know will be supported with extra funding from Government. They also build their capacity to interview applicants about their prior learning and apply approved criteria when evaluating applications. This way RPL becomes integrated into norms of recruitment and admission. Likewise the public becomes more familiar with presenting their prior learning in relation to specific awards and qualifications.</p> <p>Perhaps a more systematic and nuanced evaluation of how well RPL systems worked for all stakeholders in LMA programmes is now required? Such evaluation data might usefully inform an</p>

	<p>element of a national RPL policy and strategy. It might also point to the expose of a newly evolved social contract among publicly-funded education providers, private providers, departments of government, stakeholders in the labour market and the general citizenry, which is not necessarily as simplistic as critics of the neo-liberalism might imply.</p> <p>A recent feature of LMA initiatives is the involvement of Citizens Advice Bureau, Skillnets, and organisations representing the unemployed at information provision and advisory stage. Again this represents a more inclusive social dialogue about RPL and a more focused partnership model for the common good.</p>
<p>What is your view of recommendations for RPL as articulated in the Hunt report?</p>	<p>The Hunt report focused on meta-issues about the future of higher education provision within which RPL is but one, small element. But it is useful to see RPL mentioned in any case.</p>
<p>As a practitioner, what is your view of the application of RPL in the Forfás/EGFSN RPL document?</p>	<p>There is no escape from the reality that RPL works well for occupational and employment sectors.</p> <p>The fact that Forfás engaged in a consultation process about its RPL report is to be commended. The report itself shows a good understanding of the local state-of-play of RPL at the time of writing and avoided over-use of global literature which often does not speak accurately to the lived reality.</p> <p>Individuals and organisations/companies who/which pay for RPL systems and processes invariably have a work-related or human-resource development purpose in mind, most likely with further qualifications as the outcome. There are few individuals who can afford to pay for extensive RPL towards a full award without a work-related motivation. So, in this regards the Forfás report reflects the broad generality.</p> <p>It is also interesting that the report indicates that there is no great desire for a fee-based national RPL service or a service provided by the private sector, and that the preference is still for RPL to be regarded as the remit of the existing providers of further and higher education in relation to their awards.</p> <p>This is an interesting point as it indicates both a general trust in the competences of existing providers and an acknowledgement that there is a tacit social contract between citizens and providers in this regard, as mentioned in an earlier reflection above.</p>
<p>What ideological shifts have you noticed about RPL since your first</p>	<p>Again, this is difficult question, and yet an easy one.</p> <p>The easy answer is that there have been several ideological agendas at play with regard to RPL since its inception several decades ago. Where individual practitioners stand is as much a reflection of their stance about education generally as it is about</p>

involvement?	<p>RPL.</p> <p>My first involvements were about human resource development, accreditation of experiential learning, progression opportunities and quality assurance of sector workers. These particular aspects of RPL practice have sustained in Ireland as they have globally. Alongside this have been APEL/RPL movements more focused on the individual, on personal development, on social recognition of informal learning, on access to the ‘goods’ provided by formal education and training. These aspects have also sustained, particularly within the adult and community-based learning sector.</p> <p>At a scholarly level there have been shifts in how APEL/RPL is critiqued. There is still a definite wave of critique which is offended by the perceived marketisation and commodification of knowledge, by the perceived colonisation of the private sphere, by the possible subjugation of indigenous knowledges and local ways of knowing.</p> <p>At practitioner level there is well-founded critique that the promises of RPL are difficult to achieve for most individuals and that the structures of higher education are insurmountable barriers regardless of enabling policies and procedures.</p> <p>There are still some, but few, critical voices within higher education itself about the risks of permitting APEL towards awards and the potential damage to academic reputation. But in practice, there are differing ideological and pragmatic stances among providers to RPL. Providers with long-standing relationships with occupational and professional sectors and with the labour market generally have a different way of working with knowledge and competences than other providers with less-eclectic cultures. For some providers, such as the DIT in particular, there are few ontological or epistemological impasses when it comes to RPL given the Institute’s tradition of working hand-in-glove with knowledge creators and knowledge providers in a co-creative relationship. The DIT also has a particular eclectic genesis where disparate college traditions prevent the dominance of an exclusive ideology with regard to what constitutes legitimate and worthy knowledge. For several reasons, therefore, it was relatively easy for me as RPL Policy Officer to work with both academic and management colleagues in generation of a consensus-based RPL policy and an agreed operational systems where the principle of subsidiarity to the individual academic programme is paramount.</p>
What operational/technical	<p>In general it is reasonable to argue that virtually all higher education providers in Ireland have some familiarity with RPL</p>

<p>shifts have you noticed?</p>	<p>and have integrated it into their systems, even if it is primarily for access/entry or transfer purposes. Most providers have RPL information for applicants on their websites and in their documentation. Most have discrete RPL policies or subscribe to those of HETAC/QQI. Most providers are competent in assessment of prior learning towards module exemptions and in the use of RPL credits. RPL applicants are increasingly competent in developing portfolios and in maintaining records of their own training and learning, particularly in regulated occupations and professions. Most providers can track RPL within student record systems and generate statistical reports on RPL activity. In relation to evidence to date, it would appear that older students who engage with RPL are likely to persist and to achieve slightly better outcomes than the normal, full-time school leaver cohort.</p>
<p>What is your prediction about RPL practice in the next five to ten years?</p>	<p>The temptation here is to predict more of the same. But this would not necessarily be a bad thing, given the organic and responsive development of RPL so far. The danger in the past was that APEL/RPL was generally regarded as a good solution in search of a problem and that there was really no demand for it. But the twenty-first century adult is likely to change ‘career’ more than once their working lives and likely to experience periods of unemployment. They are likely too, to be mobile and to work in more than one region or country. The individual therefore is likely to be more self-enterprising than heretofore with a need for more pro-active engagement with new learning and new skills, perhaps with RPL as a starting point. Likewise providers are likely to deal with a more diverse learning population with requests for RPL from both local and non-national applicants on an increasing scale. If there is an economic and employment improvement in the near future there may be additional requests from employers for RPL as an element of HRD. If there is no economic improvement there is likely to be continued use of RPL for labour market activation, re-skilling and up-skilling towards growth sectors. This will further cement the emergence of a new social dialogue and new civil partnerships among education providers, the labour market and government. Invariably a small number of individuals will seek RPL for personal reasons regardless of the economic context. It is unlikely that a fully-fledged national RPL policy or strategy will emerge any time soon given the trust and confidence of</p>

	stakeholders in current arrangements and the more inclusive model of dialogue emerging among stakeholders as a result of the unemployment crisis.
Any other remarks you would like to make?	<p><i>I would like to acknowledge the development work on APEL/RPL in Ireland by the Irish Higher Education APEL Network in the late 1990s and the significant ground-breaking scholarly and practical contribution of individuals in the DIT, in CIT, in WIT, LIT and the UJ in particular.</i></p> <p><i>The support and facilitation provided by the original National Qualifications Authority deserves acknowledgement as does the significant contributions to RPL processes developed by The National Rehabilitation Board, The National Adult Literacy Agency, An Bórd Altranais and Engineers Ireland in particular.</i></p> <p><i>Personally I would like to acknowledge the contribution to RPL in Ireland made by the academic, management and administrative staff of the DIT who were ever-generous and open-minded in their approach to the development of RPL policies and procedures which are both exemplary and sustainable.</i></p>

Resources and publications recommended by the respondent:

EGFSN (2011) *Developing Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL): the role of RPL in the context of the national skills strategy up-skilling objectives*

<http://www.skillsireland.ie/media/egfsn110411-developing-recognition-of-prior-learning.pdf>

Scattergood, J. (2011) *Recognition of prior learning in the university sector; policy, case studies and issues arising*

<http://www.nfgnetwork.ie/fileupload/FIN%20REPORT%20%28Final%29.pdf>

National Strategy for Higher Education 2030 (Hunt report) (2011)

<http://www.heai.ie/sites/default/files/national-strategy-for-higher-education-2030.pdf>

Murphy, A. (2011 and 2012) *RPL Matters in the DIT: policy and practice guides for staff, parts 1 & 2*

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UNESCO Guidelines for the recognition, validation and accreditation of the outcomes of non-formal and informal learning

<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0021/002163/216360e.pdf>

