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Deirdre Goggin
Cork institute of Technology

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arrow.admin@dit.ie, brian.widdis@dit.ie.





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

Respondent:	Deirdre Goggin BBS, HDip., BFIS, MA, Cork Institute of Technology (CIT)
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What was your first involvement with APEL/RPL?	My initial involvement was as an RPL assessor of an application for a marketing subject I was delivering through the Continuing Education Department. At the time RPL was not as developed as it is now within CIT. I received the required paper work and sat down with Phil O'Leary, CIT's RPL Officer, who familiarised me with the process. In later years I moved from the private sector into the RPL office of CIT. I assisted staff and students in the RPL process, in preparing and assessing material. In conjunction with Phil O'Leary we developed an updated student handbook for circulation to students. I delivered a number of workshops to staff on the RPL processes in CIT.
Year?	2001
How did that first model of APEL/RPL operate?	<p>In terms of the limitations on applicants, the first model of RPL allowed 50% recognition of informal, non-formal and formal learning at a non-award year and 33% in an award year. It was only necessary to show that you had 50% of the learning outcomes covered in a subject in order to receive an exemption.</p> <p>There was always support available to the learner in the preparation of their portfolio submission. Academic and administrative staff were supported in terms of developing their understanding of RPL and how it can be used by students within programmes in CIT and also how outcomes should be recorded.</p> <p>The RPL results were processed separately in an RPL Examination Board at School level. Once ratified they became part of the</p>

	regular results for the progression boards.
What aspects worked well?	In the early days the fact that there was a dedicated full-time resource in place to deal with the queries and the development of portfolio applications ensured that student queries were dealt with in a timely and consistent manner. In terms of quality assurance procedures, as everything was monitored centrally it ensured consistency in the application of CIT's RPL policy.
What worked less well?	<p>The practice wasn't consistently used or applied across all academic departments in the Institute by staff as they had reservations as to its relevance to their area or that experiential learning was equivalent to learning acquired in the classroom.</p> <p>It took time to build up staffs familiarity with the system in terms of what would be submitted by students and how it should be assessed.</p>
If the model continued what changes were made for subsequent versions?	<p>In subsequent models the limits varied for the volume of learning recognised at non award and award years. The current limits only exist for formal learning for modules contributing to a major award. We require that they have at least 60 credits of new learning acquired.</p> <p>In addition, as learning outcomes became the minimum standards of learning the 50% limit became 100% of learning outcomes to be evidenced.</p> <p>A formal policy was put in place which was relevant to all programmes at all levels in the Institute. Champions were also identified within the Institute and within Departments who drove the process forward.</p>
What RPL involvement have you had since that first instance?	My involvement in the area has significantly developed since my role as an RPL assessor in 2001. In 2003 I moved more into the RPL area whilst researching on European funded projects in areas relevant to learning development. In 2007 I moved full time into RPL and was involved in the Strategic innovation Fund (SIF) <i>Education in Employment</i> (EIE) and Roadmap for Enterprise Academic Partnership (REAP) projects. I am part of the CIT internal RPL working group which develops the policy and procedures which govern practice within the Institute.

	<p>Since 2003 I have been responsible for training staff on new RPL processes and procedures, working with staff and students on RPL applications including the development and assessment of material. I updated and developed the CIT staff and student handbooks in 2012 for RPL.</p> <p>In addition to this internal work I have worked with employer organisations on RPL and WBL and training staff on the associated processes.</p> <p>I have been continuously involved in the development of RPL in the Institute on a daily basis and planning for the necessary future amendments to policy and practice to ensure consistency with national and international practice.</p>
<p>Did you use any new 'tools' or 'technologies' in subsequent models?</p>	<p>We trialed a number of e-portfolios but decided not to implement into the main RPL process as they seldom met the requirements of an academic system.</p> <p>In 2010 I developed a precedence database in consultation with an in-house IT systems expert which runs alongside Banner recording student applications and outcomes of assessment.</p>
<p>In your view, how has the National Framework of Qualifications (NQF) contributed to RPL/APEL practice?</p>	<p>In terms of measuring experiential learning the national framework of qualifications provides level descriptors which can be used to contextualise learning acquired experientially through work and life. It makes the comparison of learning system more transparent as the standards are available. In terms of formal qualifications it is possible to compare previous qualification either acquired nationally or internationally through qualifications recognition formally through the NQAI and now QQI.</p> <p>In terms of building confidence with staff having a national system which dictates the level of learning required in terms of knowledge, skill and competence and using these standards for RPL builds confidence in what is being required of a RPL student.</p> <p>It also facilitates the placing of a value on learning in terms of the level accomplished which again assists in the comparison process.</p>

<p>In your view how has the NQF level descriptors influenced RPL practice?</p>	<p>I think the NQF level descriptors have made RPL easier in terms of establishing comparison between programmes and also establishing the level of learning previously acquired by existing or potential students.</p> <p>It makes the RPL system more transparent for the student and the assessor. The difficulty assessors commonly have is determining the level of the learning previously acquired so I think that the level descriptors provide comfort for the assessor as to whether the learning is appropriate or inappropriate for the programme or module in question.</p> <p>In terms of explaining to the student as to how higher education is structured, the level descriptors show how learning varies from one level to another and where their learning is on the framework. In general, it is when learning isn't being recognised as being appropriate that the questions start.</p>
<p>How has the Learning Outcomes paradigm influenced RPL practice?</p>	<p>I think that with learning outcomes having clear defined statements as to what a student should know at the end of the module encourages RPL as applicants have a clear indication as to what they have to demonstrate and also more importantly identify the gaps in their learning.</p> <p>In my experience the indicative content is as important as the learning outcomes as they are usually five concise statements which can encompass so much. The indicative content broadens the learning outcomes and sets out the content of the module in more detail.</p>
<p>In your view are national standards for occupations and sectors helpful for RPL?</p>	<p>If there is no comparable programme available in the Institute which could be used for entry to a programme based on RPL then the national standards for occupations and sectors are useful to determine what standard the learner should have. In term of experiential learning the standards are particularly helpful. I have also referred to the UK standards for occupations and disciplines as reference points if we do not have any thing suitable in the Irish system.</p>
<p>In your view are professional body RPL practices more</p>	<p>I think the influence of the workplace on education is a major driver of RPL. I wouldn't agree that the professional bodies are more influential than the NQF, I would think that it is dependent on the sector. In terms of some of the professional bodies they</p>

<p>influential than the NQF?</p>	<p>do have well established practices in terms of RPL, predominantly in terms of exemptions from modules covered formally in undergraduate programmes.</p>
<p>Do you refer to the National Principles and Operational Guidelines for RPL 2005 in your own RPL practice?</p>	<p>Originally we would have referred to these guidelines in the development of our policy and practice but more recently we have referred to the assessment and standards 2009 formerly HETAC and now QQI. I am very mindful of keeping abreast of national and international developments in the area so as to ensure that the policy and practice of CIT is up to date in the area of RPL.</p>
<p>In your view, has the particular design of the NQF hindered the potential of RPL practices?</p>	<p>I think in terms of determining if someone is competent in an area then having everything pinned to the NQF does limit the flexibility in application somewhat. In other European countries where NQFs do not exist then they are able to evaluate the learning of an individual and make judgements on the competence of someone in a particular area or for a particular job.</p> <p>As RPL is traditionally only used within Academia it limits a more flexible application of the process and it possibly doesn't maximise its use. In terms of comparison of academic RPL it does maintain the standards.</p>
<p>How important are minor awards for RPL in your view?</p>	<p>I think using RPL to its fullest extent is always very positive for the learner and the higher education institution. It provides flexibility in terms of formally recognising what a person has accomplished . The barrier to using RPL in this way is that it is seldom that two learners are similar so in terms of creating a minor award in 'x' for RPL students will be quite difficult to achieve in terms of naming that award and it being meaningful to the learner.</p>
<p>In your view, what has been the impact of the Bologna process for RPL?</p>	<p>The concept of the Bologna process is designed to ensure comparability in the standards and quality of education qualifications. I believe that the Bologna process provides a framework for the access and transfer of learners across Europe. It started the debate on learning taking place outside the confines of a classroom and on lifelong learning. This I feel is all very positive in terms of access, transfer and progression for the learner and for the higher education institutions to have a gauge to compare programmes across Europe.</p>

<p>In your view what is the usefulness of the EQF for RPL in Ireland?</p>	<p>As we use our own national framework to gauge the prior learning of individuals the EQF provides a useful comparator across Europe which can be adopted by all countries. Not all countries have national frameworks and the parameters which are set out in this framework provide benchmarks for those countries in terms of level descriptors of knowledge, skill and competence.</p>
<p>In your view how well has RPL worked for labour market activation initiatives so far?</p>	<p>In terms of providing access to education I don't think that RPL has been used to its fullest capacity in terms of building on the existing learning of those currently unemployed. This perhaps has to do with the type of programmes on offer and the learning of those seeking new training. There is seldom a correlation between the two so the prior learning can seldom be used as a mechanism for advanced entry to a level 7 or 8 programme.</p> <p>In addition to this if there is any training already done in the area then it seldom is at the appropriate level or has covered material commensurate with the content of the modules of the programme.</p> <p>In the Forfás report suggesting that people can RPL the core skills of a programme using their work based learning is limited in my opinion.</p>
<p>What is your view of recommendations for RPL as articulated in the Hunt report?</p>	<p>As the Hunt report outlines the 'National Strategy for Higher Education' it includes a number of references to RPL with regard to transfer, progression and non-standard entry routes to higher education in Ireland.</p> <p>In my opinion the recommendation for the creation of a national framework for RPL is very positive in terms of equal opportunity for all learners but I think the report lacks clarity on how this would happen given the myriad of higher education providers in Ireland. It is the lack of detail on the implementation that is disappointing. There is no reference to how this could be resourced from a local, regional or national perspective. The report also refers to building from the knowledge and expertise that already exists within higher education institutions but this again varies considerably from one institution to another so there is no indication as to which approach is best.</p>
<p>As a practitioner, what is your view of the application of RPL</p>	<p>In terms of meeting future skill needs and facilitating people in upskilling or reskilling the view in the Forfás report is very positive in that it is seen as a method to use what skills people</p>

in the Forfás RPL document?	have already and build learning from that point. In terms of the application I don't think that the report is breaking new ground in terms of how RPL can be used.
What ideological shifts have you noticed about RPL since your first involvement?	In my opinion there has been a mind-shift about the validity of RPL as an assessment method. The shifts haven't only occurred at a local level but I think the recent government reports on up skilling and re-skilling have focused their attentions on how RPL can facilitate learners. There appears to be fewer battles between staff and even a broadening of approach in terms of using RPL to facilitate learners where possible.
What operational/technical shifts have you noticed?	<p>In terms of the CIT picture, staff are more familiar with the process so it tends to run smoother. If staff are unsure then they will ask or at least know who they can ask for clarification which wasn't always there in the beginning. A trust has built up with the academic staff who are assessing the material and they appear to be happier to take the advice of the RPL office if a similar case has happened elsewhere in the institute.</p> <p>Tracking and recording the instances of RPL has become more structured in the past number of years.</p>
What is your prediction about RPL practice in the next five to ten years?	In the next 5- 10 years I would think that RPL in terms of informal and non-formal learning will become more important in terms of employer- academic partnerships and being used to meet the ever changing requirements of industry.
<i>Any other remarks you would like to make?</i>	

Resources and publications recommended by the respondent:

Duvekot, R. (2010). 'The age of APL, activating APL in a diversity of perspectives'. NVR seminar on Kvalitekskodeks for realkompetence. Aarhus, Denmark: 11.

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-2003.pdf>

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

<http://arrow.dit.ie/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1001&context=ltcrep>

[http://arrow.dit.ie/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?filename=\)&article=1001&context=ltcrep&type=additional](http://arrow.dit.ie/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?filename=)&article=1001&context=ltcrep&type=additional)

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>