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

Respondent:	Phil O'Leary Cork institute of Technology (CIT)
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What was your first involvement with APEL/RPL?	<p>I was first involved with RPL in 1996. I began working in CIT in July of that year to run a project trialing APL. It was a two year project, funded under the EU Adapt programme to develop and deliver policy and procedures for APL and to trial its use. The project proposal was written by CIT staff members Ray Coughlan and Michael Delaney.</p> <p>I began working with two academic Departments in particular: biological sciences and electronic and electrical engineering. At the time I travelled to Seagate in Clonmel where staff of an electronics company were completing the National Certificate in Electronic Engineering. One of the first year modules was based around workshop skills and workers in Seagate prepared experiential learning cases for exemptions. This was where I first was involved with mentoring for RPL exemption case preparation. There would have been a regular class size of about 20 to 25 students.</p>
Year?	1996
How did that first model of APEL/RPL operate?	With that first model, students had to meet 50% of the learning outcomes of the subject (pre-semesterised larger subjects) to be allowed the exemption.
What aspects worked well?	The mentoring worked well. Although numbers were small, it was easy to maintain. The delivery of the RPL policy and procedures worked well. Again it was straightforward when

	<p>dealing with a particular group and we were given class time (before their first lecture) to get the RPL questions and case preparation out of the way. We learned as we went. Staff were open to the idea of RPL/APL in general.</p> <p>In practice though, the growth in acceptance and proliferation of RPL as a practice was one of steady progress in the background. It was always down to on-the-ground contact with staff, supporting them with assessment and providing additional information or opinion that brought RPL along. I would call over to them, drop by, be available to go through the assessment of material, answer questions as to recording of the RPL. I firmly believe this on the ground contact is a key enabler of RPL. The staff and students are not on their own with an RPL case: there is help and support to get the case prepared and assessed.</p> <p>In the early years I worked with what we called ‘champions’ of RPL - those staff that believed in it and could see its relevance. We did not force it on anyone. RPL was available should the need arise. Over time the full range of academic disciplines have come to use it. Those who were hesitant or cautious about RPL overcame their initial misgivings when a particular case presented itself in front of them. So when the need arose, they contacted me and explained what they wanted and how I could help.</p> <p>This has always been the approach. We take the lead from the staff here in the Institute; it is their RPL, I am here to help. When a case arises for them, RPL becomes important then. It is then that they seek me out.</p>
<p>What worked less well?</p>	<p>In the early days I tracked the RPL cases with an excel spreadsheet. This was fine when the numbers were small. It grew to be a big task to maintain. The current system running in parallel to the online BANNER student record system is much better.</p> <p>In the early years we ran parallel RPL validation boards to formalise the requests for RPL. This grew to be a huge additional task for the staff involved as the numbers grew. This was discontinued in 2008 and now the RPL assessment results come before the regular module examination boards. This is much better.</p>

<p>If the model continued what changes were made for subsequent versions?</p>	<p>As above; tracking is now done on a parallel system to the Banner results.</p> <p>Module Examination Boards (MEBs) are used to formalise the RPL as a result.</p>
<p>What RPL involvement have you had since that first instance?</p>	<p>I have continued to provide RPL mentoring and staff support since 1996. In 1999 it was made a full-time academic post. In July 2013 I will be involved for 17 years with RPL.</p>
<p>Did you use any new 'tools' or 'technologies' in subsequent models?</p>	<p>As above; tracking is now done on a parallel system to the Banner results.</p> <p>MEBs are used to formalise the RPL as a result.</p>
<p>In your view, how has the National Framework of Qualifications (NQF) contributed to RPL/APEL practice?</p>	<p>The NFQ has contributed enormously to the practice of RPL in my view. It provides a transparent, easily accessible, user friendly set of standards which I use to scaffold the RPL cases prepared by the students. The NQF staff were helpful and supportive when contacted.</p>
<p>In your view how has the NQF level descriptors influenced RPL practice?</p>	<p>The level descriptors have helped enormously. They provide clarity and reassure both for the provider and for the candidate as to the level where they should be pitching their case. The descriptors are useful when reflecting on case preparation in deciding what evidence is appropriate to support a claim. I use them as prompts for the learner to get them to think about how they might structure the case (keeping the levels descriptors in mind), especially for the higher levels.</p>
<p>How has the Learning Outcomes paradigm influenced RPL practice?</p>	<p>Taking a learning outcomes approach to programme delivery has enabled RPL and allowed it to 'come of age' and become established. Without this approach I do not think RPL would work. The statements clearly state the learning requirements from a given module or set of modules. It is a fair and transparent way for the learner to see what is achieved within a module. It is straightforward then to ask them to pitch their case against these same statements. I remind them to treat the learning outcomes like 'goalposts' to showcase what they know in relation to them.</p>
<p>In your view are national standards for</p>	<p>In my view national standards for occupations and sectors are helpful. However, life is more complex and in reality individuals</p>

<p>occupations and sectors helpful for RPL?</p>	<p>come to a particular role through any number of routes, bringing their experiences and learning with them and using this prior knowledge to effectively deliver the role. So it might be a too-simplistic view to legislate for standards for a particular sector and to assume that all workers within will have uniform abilities.</p>
<p>In your view are professional body RPL practices more influential than the NQF?</p>	<p>No, although I think it depends on the sector, but I would not agree that professional bodies have more influence in terms of RPL than the NQF.</p>
<p>Do you refer to the National Principles and Operational Guidelines for RPL 2005 in your own RPL practice?</p>	<p>They are available and I know where to get them. Our work aligns to these guidelines and I keep an eye on developments. However in practice I do not refer to them. My focus is on helping the student prepare their case (with these principles in mind as I work).</p>
<p>In your view, has the particular design of the NQF hindered the potential of RPL practices?</p>	<p>I think the framework as it is supports RPL practice. It provides for a fair and transparent way for any learner to gather and present a case against any point on the framework. The focus on learning outcomes is helpful and supportive of the learners' task.</p> <p>The learning outcomes are presented as clear statements around which they must build a case. The programme outcomes are there as guideline statements of knowledge, skills and competence to which they can refer. The whole structure is there as a scaffold to which the learner can bring any combination of individual learning and claim for credits.</p>
<p>How important are minor awards for RPL in your view?</p>	<p>Minor awards in my view are a good thing. They will become more important as we move towards the learning society and the individual returns to education a number of times throughout a lifetime.</p> <p>RPL will come into its own within this context. Using RPL to recognise minor awards is a good thing. It will become increasingly important for the learner to document their learning journey (possibly on an e portfolio) over time and to articulate their knowledge, abilities and achievements in one particular space. It is on return to education that such an individual will be well prepared and will be able to claim credits for relevant learning.</p>

<p>In your view, what has been the impact of the Bologna process for RPL?</p>	<p>The Bologna Process has cemented RPL into mainstream provision in promoting mobility and transparency of qualifications. It was a key development and has significantly moved on the acceptance of RPL as a reality in Europe. Now providers must organise for RPL provision. The Bologna process was timely in that it reflects the new reality of individuals everywhere where returning to learning at various stages in life is almost a certainty.</p> <p>Learners must maintain a record of transcripts and syllabi and document key competencies or achievements in the workplace, community or sporting involvement.</p>
<p>In your view what is the usefulness of the EQF for RPL in Ireland?</p>	<p>I believe the existence of the EQF further cements or underpins the Irish NFQ. The fact that there is a European framework is a very good thing for RPL here and in Europe. The Irish NFQ links with the EQF and this further promotes mobility and transparency of qualifications in my view.</p>
<p>In your view how well has RPL worked for labour market activation (LMA) initiatives so far?</p>	<p>RPL has been significant for the LMA initiatives in that it raised its profile. More people know about RPL now in the general population because they would have come across RPL in advertisements/events or other marketing tools used to promote the LMA courses.</p> <p>RPL was there in principle as part of the initiative. But I wonder if more could have been done with RPL for these courses ? Possibly so.</p> <p>On the other hand, those providers that have well established RPL services certainly used it to benefit the learner as far as they could (the same as if they were regular students).</p>
<p>What is your view of recommendations for RPL as articulated in the Hunt report?</p>	<p>I welcome the recommendations for a framework for RPL. It wasn't very specific as to how we as providers should implement this framework, but it makes sense to build on the links already apparent as a result of the Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF) and other previous projects. Collaboration between practitioners is the way to go forward especially as some have more experience in the field than other smaller providers.</p> <p>It would be important for practitioners to have the opportunity to contribute ideas and opinions for the future framework. They understand the nuances and potential issues in what is a very</p>

	<p>complex field. RPL will continue to be significant for higher education in a time of economic uncertainty.</p>
<p>As a practitioner, what is your view of the application of RPL in the Forfás RPL document?</p>	<p>There is a lot of good advice in the report in terms of the recommendations made in the document, but there is nothing radically new or innovative that practitioners aren't aware of or carrying out already.</p>
<p>What ideological shifts have you noticed about RPL since your first involvement?</p>	<p>In 1996 there were two contrasting visions for RPL/APEL. The first one being the big headline maker; all singing all dancing RPL was seen as a cure-all. The opposite opinion prevailed then too; that of mistrust and negativity towards the idea of RPL and acceptance of it.</p> <p>In 1996 APEL/RPL was seen as something to make headlines about. It was held up as something that could deliver a big promise to the learner, such as their acceleration through a programme. Sometimes we had to talk down this promise and tune the individual into more mundane realities such as how their prior learning could deliver exemptions for them within the programme, but that in reality the set timetable dictates their progress through the programme. Also in the 1990s many staff and students did not know about RPL or trust it. Sometimes this lack of trust was because of a lack of understanding as to what RPL was.</p> <p>In contrast now RPL is seen as established and trusted when all else is changing. RPL is something that is quietly provided for in the background of the Institute in a time of huge change for higher education provision.</p> <p>RPL is seen as part of mainstream provision in that it belongs to the institute and staff are aware of it. In a recent survey of 30 students (2011) who had presented experiential learning cases in the previous year, when asked how did they find out about RPL the following results were apparent - 10 % found out about it from other students; 13 % from the Institute website; 13% from Head of Department; 22% from Course Co-ordinator; 26 % from subject lecturer; 16% from RPL co-ordinator. This shows how well embedded RPL is in the Institute; the learner will learn about it through a variety of sources. RPL is seen as an aspect of provision that compliments the Institute's initiatives in providing LMA courses, continuing professional development (CPD) courses and other lifelong learning initiatives. RPL was selected as a</p>

	<p>noteworthy aspect of provision when the Institute was recently evaluated.</p>
<p>What operational/technical shifts have you noticed?</p>	<p>Operational shifts There is certainly smoother processing and handling of RPL cases now than there was in the early days.</p> <p>Staff across the College know what RPL is (administrative and academic); they are aware of its existence and of what it is. If they are not sure they ask. They know there is help with any RPL query.</p> <p>We have made efforts to deal with the large number of cases by providing workshops, lunchtime and teatime on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesdays in the first six weeks of term. These workshops provide a forum for students to understand what RPL is and what the Institute requires of them in terms of case preparation. It gives them the opportunity to finalise their case and go through it all making sure everything is ready for assessment.</p> <p>Technical shifts Work needs to be done to help track RPL cases on the results system in CIT. This is being looked at the moment and will be finalised before year end. I keep a database of RPL cases which runs parallel to Banner. This is very helpful.</p>
<p>What is your prediction about RPL practice in the next five to ten years?</p>	<p>RPL will continue to be a significant aspect of higher education provision over the next ten years because of the following reasons;</p> <p>RPL will be mainstream activity It will be increasingly used to provide recognition for non-formal and informal learning on programmes and for advanced entry and non-standard admissions. It will increasingly be linked with LMA initiatives as Governments consider how to support those seeking employment.</p> <p>Knowledge is highly valued We compete on the basis of knowledge both as individuals and in the workplace. As we move towards the learning society the individual will most likely return to education a number of times in their working life. As a mature student returning, RPL will play a key role where their work-based knowledge complements a</p>

	<p>particular programme.</p> <p>HE will align provision with industry and community needs Higher education will engage more closely with industry and community groups in terms of supporting the provision of flexible responsive courses, and RPL will be a significant tool here.</p> <p>Benefits of collaboration will be apparent A community of practice and a toolkit will be available for all providers for RPL. This will support anyone implementing RPL.</p>
<p>Any other remarks you would like to make?</p>	<p>Higher education should support the step before RPL – that of ‘documenting as you go’ or ‘valuing learning’. It makes sense to promote the very idea of documenting knowledge, skills and abilities in an uncertain economic climate.</p> <p>Higher education should promote this mindset because it ties to the preparation of material for RPL should the individual’s learning be comparable with a particular programme or module.</p> <p>With this mindset it is possible to capture significant learning events as they occur and claim the learning in a reflective, meaningful way.</p>

Resources and publications recommended by the respondent:

Leiste, S. M., & Jensen, K. (2011). ‘Creating a Positive Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) Experience: A Step-by-Step Look at University PLA’. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Education*, 12(1).

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.hea.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>