Building a RPL practioner network **19**

Reflections and considerations from the Irish perspective

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RPL practice in Ireland continues to be very uneven. While practice has been developed and advanced in some institutions this is not universal. The EU recommendation of 2012 calls for all member countries to enable citizens to gain recognition for their prior non-formal and informal learning. In Ireland, as reflected in the recent Cedefop report, RPL is still confined to pockets of practice that are geographically and institutionally dispersed. As a country without a national strategy the question facing us is how to grow knowledge of RPL within education and training settings as well as in the public domain and how to build practice. In many arenas of higher level adult education RPL remains a peripheral practice. Few dedicated RPL staff exist in Ireland. This means that practitioners do not have the means for building their professional competencies and have little or no voice in policy development. The establishment of a national network for RPL was viewed as one way to help address these matters.

This paper outlines the author's reflections of developing an RPL practitioner network in Ireland. The purpose of the network is to inform and enhance the discussions surrounding RPL nationally by bringing practitioners together in a community of practice. The paper discusses some of the key reflections the authors have from building a RPL practitioner network in Ireland with a top down and bottom up approach for all practitioners across all sectors.

1. RPL policy in Ireland

RPL and has been on the agenda at the national and international level for some time. In Ireland, the term 'recognition of prior learning' entered the public domain in 1973 when the National Council for Educational awards (NCEA) advocated for 'a facility to recognise prior work –based learning' in the government committee report on Adult Education (OECD Country Background Report, Ireland. 2007:18). Almost a decade later the Commission on Adult Education Report, 1984 was published. In the following years, further policy was developed by NCEA on 'work experience and experiential learning'. Participation levels were very low as "higher education institutions were mainly concerned with accommodating increasing

numbers of school leavers" (2007:21). Finally, in 1993 the NCEA published a policy on Prior Experiential Learning. Some practice was initiated in some institutions although in the university sector it was mostly confined to adult education and access programmes (2007:21).

In 2012 the Quality and Quality Assurance Act established Qualifications and Quality Ireland (QQI) and tasked them to "establish and publish policies and criteria for access transfer and progression" (Section 56(1)) including policies on "credit and recognition of prior learning" (Section 56(3)). The complexity of the landscape of education and training in Ireland must be acknowledged here as it operates from levels one to ten on the framework with awards possible at all levels. Under the remit of the QQI are further education and training and the Institutes of Technology, including those with delegated authority. Dublin Institute of Technology and the University sector are not under the remit of the QQI. However, while the QQI do not have authority over Irish universities they were asked to 'co-operate with and give all reasonable assistance to the Authority in carrying out its functions'. RPL policy development and implementation is in the remit of QQI. In addition the Irish Universities signed up to The European Universities' Charter on Lifelong Learning (2010) which means that they agreed to the 10 commitments including one that stipulates support for policy and practice in the recognition of prior learning.

All post-compulsory education providers under QQI are required to develop "a statement of arrangements available in respect of each of their programmes for the recognition of prior learning, for entry, for credit towards an award and/or access to a full award" (2006:26). It would appear that legislatively, Irish post-compulsory education has a legal commitment to the implementation of RPL. But the enactment of such legislation to require all providers to make available RPL within their institutions is outside the remit of the QQI and is the responsibility of the Department of Education and Skills. There is no central authority tasked with the implementation of RPL.

Table (1 NFTL 2015) outlines some of the key reports that have informed policy and practice in Ireland over the past decade which demonstrates that it has been on the agenda for a considerable length of time.

Table 1. Key reporting on RPL since 2004 (international and Irish)

International / European	YEAR	Ireland
European principles for RPL (EC) The role of national qualification systems in promoting LLL (OECD)	2004	
Bergen Communique	2005	Principles and Operational Guidelines (NQAI) Guidelines Irish HE Quality Network
Helsinki Communique	2006	

London Communiqué	2007	*EGFSN Tomorrows skills , towards a national skills strategy*
The EQF for LLL (EC) *Country note on the Recognition of Non - formal and Informal Learning in Ireland (OECD)*	2008	
European Guidelines for VNFIL *Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué* *ET2020*	2009	*RPL - A focus on Practice (EIE)* *HETAC assessment and standards guidelines*
Country Practices Report (OECD) *Guidelines for RNFIL (OECD)* *Recommendation on the promotion and VNFIL (EC)*	2010	
	2011	*RPL in University Sector (FIN)* *National Strategy for Higher Education (DES)* *Role of RPL (EGFSN)* *National plan for Equity of Access to HE (HEA)*
Guidelines on the RVA of outcomes of NFIL (UNESCO) *EU Council Recommendation on VNFIL*	2012	*Part time and flexible HE in Ireland (HEA)* *Qualification and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act*
	2013	*Education at a glance OECD Indicators ; A country profile for Ireland* *RPL Consultation Document (QQI)* *Education at a glance (DES)*
European Inventory Country report Ireland (CEDEFOP) *Education and Training monitor (EC)* *Employment outlook ; how does Ireland compare (OECD)*	2014	*HE system performance - first report (HEA)* *HEA consultation paper towards new NP for equity of access in HE*
The Bologna process; setting up the EHEA (EC)	2015	*RPL Research (NFT&L)* *Qualifications recognition ; mutual recognition of professional qualifications in Ireland (DES)* *Pathways to work ; government policy statement (DSP)* *Springboard; building our future*

Source: 'A current overview of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in Irish Higher Education': Goggin. D, Sheridan. I, O'Leary. P, Cassidy. S NFTL 2015 report No 2

As evident in table 1, RPL in Ireland has been included in many of the major national reports on education. In 2005 the National Qualifications and Awards Ireland (NQAI) issued Principles and Operational Guidelines for RPL. It's evolvement since then in terms of policy has been absent. The national development or discussion

surrounding RPL has been within national strategy documents regarding skills development and recognition. It has also featured in the strategy documents of Further Education and Higher Education in Ireland as an opportunity to address national issues surrounding access, transfer and progression. The evolvements of RPL at the European level with the European Commission recommendation of 2012 with regard to the Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning has also ensured that RPL firmly stays on the agenda of the departments of government and the representative bodies who develop the strategy documents to inform future national directions.

The challenge in Ireland as identified in the National Forum on Teaching and Learning (NFTL) 2015 report is that though there are aspirations and recommendations for RPL at the national level these rarely translate into practice due to several reasons including resources, lack of expertise and the availability of appropriate systems to support RPL. The perception that RPL is difficult to implement contributes to the lack of development nationally as evident in the OECD Irish Country Report 2007 and European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) reports on the Recognition of non-Formal and Informal Learning 2010, 2014 and 2016. The added challenge nationally is that pockets of good practice are not always visible in the wider education, training and the public domain. These matters made the development of a network necessary.

2. The role of networks

Networks provide a means to develop collaboration amongst interest groups. They create a sense of common purpose and build solidarity. Thus they can emerge as a result of a shared desire for action in response to a policy and/or a knowledge development problem in a specific area (Popp, J. et al 2013:28). Many are 'bottom up' and are grown in local communities or communities of practice. Generally, in an educational context they act to:

> *… promote the dissemination of good practice, enhance professional development, support capacity building, mediate between centralised and decentralised structures, and assist in the process of re-structuring and re-culturing educational organisations and systems. (OECD 2003:153 in Kemp 2010:46)*

They can be influential agents of change. The shared knowledge and exchange through a network can be useful in identifying and highlighting problems and creating new knowledge with members. They can also create recommendations that are subsequently brought to the attention of policy makers and government. Thus they can promote collective action and use it in a highly strategic way to advance their perspectives. This may mean, amongst other things, overcoming some

'bureaucratic rigidity' (Kemp, A. 2010:45), questioning policy development or advocating for changes in practice. This paper outlines how the Irish RPL network came about in this way but also in tandem with a national policy development agenda. The approach for the Irish RPL practitioner network was both bottom up and top down and can therefore be said to have begun in the middle.

3. The Irish RPL Practitioner Network

The initial idea of the network came about when three practitioners, who had been involved in RPL and adult education for over a decade, met at a RPL network event in Estonia. Subsequently they attended the inaugural VPL Biennale in Rotterdam in April 2014. Their chance meeting planted the seed of starting an Irish practitioner network which were further teased out and discussed in the summer of 2014.

The decision to seek support from QQI came about because they were, as stated earlier, mandated to oversee Irish RPL development and the deadline for the European recommendation that all member states should have policy in place by 2018 was coming closer. It was felt that the network would benefit from their support as they had the capacity to disseminate the network idea to the wider RPL community and their endorsement would carry weight with institutions, policy makers, practitioners, management and external stakeholders.

QQI agreed to support the initiative and a Steering Group was formed. This was an atypical mode of building a network. While the idea came from practitioners, bottom up, the involvement of QQI, a state agency, made it top down as well. It made good sense for QQI to partner with the practitioners to establish the network. Although the motivations that prompted the network initiative were not only policy focused, it was acknowledged that policy development could not be done without the involvement of practitioners, their voice was crucial. As Kemp notes:

> In later modern society effective problem solving by government is argued to involve interdependency and cooperative efforts: policy development and implementation require the concerted effort of multiple actors that possess some capability to act; it involves dependency on others to develop policy and convert it into action. (Kickert et al. 1997; OECD 2001 in Kemp 2010:44).

The policy needs of QQI and the practice concerns of practitioners intersected. Consequently, the network had from its inception, received government imprimatur; it had a formal mandate. It was foreseen that it would facilitate the practical processes needed to implement RPL in Ireland as well as having a policy development role.

4. Structure of the network

The practitioners had a concern that the network might become dominated by one sector or institution and if it gained a reputation as a 'club' dominated by specific interests it would not work. It was important to the original Steering Group therefore that no one institution or organisation dominate the agenda or be perceived as owning the network. Conscious efforts were made to avoid a sectoral approach as it would inhibit cross sectoral learning and dialogue. It was decided that the network would span all education and training in Ireland including higher and further education, professional bodies, public authorities, companies and organisations, private and public training providers and trade unions. This was an ambitious aim however given the size of the country and dispersed nature of practice it was felt that it was important to include all.

A call was sent out by QQI to sectoral organisations and institutions to propose representatives for the Group. Representatives came forward from an Institute of Technology, a teacher education college, a university, The Irish University Association, Further Education Support Services, The Adult Guidance Association and The Agricultural and Food Development Authority of Ireland (TEAGASC). These together with a representative from QQI formed the Steering Group.
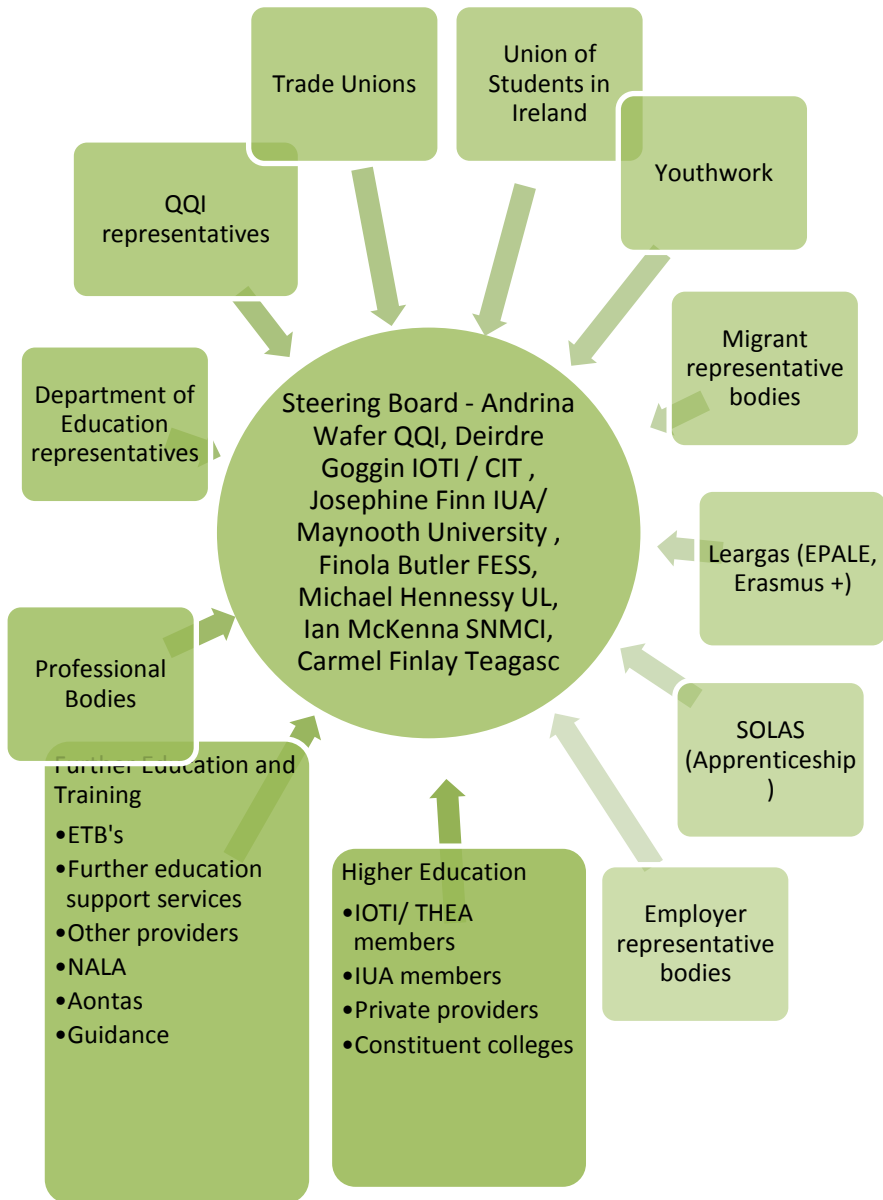
5. Governance

QQI didn't want to be the sole driving force behind the development of the network and it was agreed that two convenors would lead the network over a six-month period and then the mantle would be handed on to another two volunteers. Approval for the convenor system was proposed and approved by the members at the inaugural meeting of the network.

QQI at this point agreed to host and pay for four events over two years. They also agreed to aid the development of a web presence for the network and provide promotional advertisements and banners and give some administrative support to the convenors in the initial phase of expansion.

A network logo and website was developed by the Steering Group with some assistance from The National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education in Ireland. They were invited to become involved by the Steering Group as once more interests collided. The Forum has a role in promoting RPL in higher education and recognised the value of the network to their agenda.

In early 2016 a second RPL Practitioner network event was held in Dublin. At this event the governance of the network for the following six months was approved. Feedback and input from the floor was gathered at the initial two events which

informed the priorities of the network. The co-convenors were to assist in advancing these priorities and arranging two symposia that would focus on different sectoral perspectives.

Trade Unions

Union of Students in Ireland

Youthwork

QQI representatives

Migrant representative bodies

Department of Education representatives

Steering Board - Andrina Wafer QQI, Deirdre Goggin IOTI / CIT , Josephine Finn IUA/ Maynooth University , Finola Butler FESS, Michael Hennessy UL, Ian McKenna SNMCI, Carmel Finlay Teagasc

Leargas (EPALE, Erasmus +)

Professional Bodies

SOLAS (Apprenticeship)

Further Education and Training
•ETB's
•Further education support services
•Other providers
•NALA
•Aontas
•Guidance

Higher Education
•IOTI/ THEA members
•IUA members
•Private providers
•Constituent colleges

Employer representative bodies

Overall the members attending these two initial meetings placed a value on the diversity of the group and the network was viewed as a forum that could advance to

become not only a policy and practice network but a learning one as well. With this in mind it, the meeting asked that a national repository of practices from the multiple sectors involved in RPL be developed and that through this process members could learn from each other and enhance RPL in their own specific environment. To date this variety has kept it vibrant.

The chart above shows the range of organisations the network hopes to engage and serve. The initial meetings had strong representation from many of these.

At the first meeting many practitioners, senior management and key decision makers attended to ascertain what the network was all about and in particular how it related to their organisation and learners. As the network has evolved the mix of participants has grown to include private sector and local government representatives. Presentations at the sectoral focus symposia were provided by relevant specialists in the particular field. This approach was welcomed by members from these sectors as the issues, approaches and systems of RPL were of pertinent to them.

Identifying good practice and exemplars within the different sectors dispelled ideas that RPL is for others and not relevant within all sectors, for all learners or restricted to particular learning scenarios.

6. Priorities

In early 2015, the inaugural meeting of the RPL practitioner network took place in Dublin following several preparatory meetings of the Steering Group. It was hosted by QQI. The event was used to facilitate feedback from the participants about the value of such a network and to agree its terms of reference. It was also used to broaden membership of the Steering Group inviting those interested to become involved in growing and developing the network and RPL in Ireland.

The agenda and priorities being set by the members so far is being facilitated by the convenors and Steering Group. The members have begun to provide case studies of practice for the website and more and more practitioners, policy makers and educationalists with an interest in RPL are joining. The mix of participants is beginning to bring dividends. Next steps to promote deeper networking are being devised.

The first of these is the establishment of action and discussion boards around specific activities. The network needs a means of disseminating information on a regular basis. The establishment of a magazine or journal is proposed as the network grows and develops. It is envisaged that practitioners could provide short claimant profiles, photographs and commentary or stories from practice. These could be used to disseminate information about research in the field. It was agreed these would need a Publishing Board to develop and edit publications for the website and dissemination materials.

The second Board would be dedicated to policy critique and development. This is very relevant at the moment because policy is a hot topic and a national strategy is on the agenda. Practitioner's voices and the circumstances of their work need to be brought to the attention of government and articulated in policy. It would also become a policy watchdog on behalf of the members and a means of promoting their interests.

Some organisations are well practiced in using RPL while others are less involved. This requires sharing of knowledge and practice in a series of active learning events. A third Board devoted to practice itself is also proposed. It could also be a site for devising workshops, symposia and conferences.

While Ireland is a small country is can be difficult to maintain connections and this is a concern for network in the future. The idea that regional clusters be developed is attractive however it could lead to fragmentation. Locating symposia outside Dublin has been very positive. The first in Tullamore, Co Offaly and the second in Limerick city created a sense of a network that is mobile and ready to locate events where-ever they are required. This was received positively by the members.

7. Challenges

The network in its current evolvement and development has made some progress. However in looking at the future directions and aspirations of the network there is a challenge in terms of financial support. The network has been resourced up to now on the good will of institutions who have permitted staff to dedicate time to its establishment. The direct costs for events have been covered by QQI which has facilitated the sharing of practice and the European perspective from invited members of the European Qualifications Framework Advisory Group (EQF AG). QQI's involvement is for a limited period of two years after that members or institutions will have to be levied unless the Department of Education agrees to provide some grant aid to the network.

Funding models which may be available to the network at the national level need to be explored to guarantee its continued success. As the Steering Board is made up by a voluntary group who give their time in addition to doing their jobs, there is a need for a dedicated person to assist in driving the network.

Creating a learning network is also a challenge. Without adequate funding for secondment or 'buy out' of time members would be hard pressed to design and deliver learning workshops to further share practice and perspectives.

An online presence is very important to engage members fully in ongoing dialogue through social media, blogs and submission of exemplars. Responsibility for this activity is currently the remit of members of the Steering Committee however in the long time this will become piecemeal unless a person is assigned to oversee the website and its activities.

8. Reflections

Practitioner issues

When the network was initiated there was a variance in experience of networks within the Steering Board. Networks can be difficult to co-ordinate and build and it can be hard to hold the space and keep the energy flowing if the members are not active. This is one of the challenges for the RPL network too. As previously mentioned practitioners in Ireland usually do RPL work as part of another job. Little if anything is invested in their professional development and they can be given the responsibility for practice and procedures without any guidance or specific training. Anecdotal evidence suggests they are left to work it out for themselves. Invariably policy development relates to systems rather than practice, consequently the process of RPL itself is left out which is where the challenges predominantly exist. Practitioners have to use their ingenuity and instinct when working with students and must craft their practice through experience of actually doing RPL. This is of course an excellent way to learn however it means that they cannot benefit from the good practice already established elsewhere.

Some practitioners can find that the core process work of RPL is not recognised in their institution and becomes the invisible part of their jobs. Where RPL is less active it can be seen as a recurring nuisance especially where faculties are unconvinced about its value. In these situations, practitioners can become isolated and frustrated. The support of the network is vital in these cases as it can be a useful space to express frustrations and seek help to develop strategies to promote RPL in their workplace setting.

Support

One key reflection of the process is that the involvement and buy in from the national agency, Quality and Qualifications Ireland and the National Forum for Teaching and Learning has been key in assisting in the longevity of the network. Their involvement has been fundamental in getting the network established and generating interest beyond the practitioners who initiated the network. In one respect this is one of the interesting points about the Irish network that individuals, organisations and institutions did not become members of the network due to some financial incentive.

Diversity

Having a network which spans so many sectors and getting everyone into one room is unique. The diversity that this brings is so rich in terms of learning and development. There is huge comfort that the issues facing sectors are universal and that collectively in addressing problems more workable and realistic solutions are found. The key success of the network has been twofold the commitment of the individuals who initially drove the establishment of the network and the involvement of other individuals along the way has been crucial. The willingness of

institutions and organisations to support the network through the release of personnel has also been important. They did not try to dominate or control the agenda of the network either which should be noted. Instead the members have instilled a sense of ownership and are interested in the development of RPL for the state.

9. Future Directions

Keeping the network relevant

The challenge for the network is keeping it relevant to its members and they take ownership of it. This involves commitment of many rather than a few. Conversations about practice and policy begin across the sectors. While some interests cross sectors others are context specific. This means that the network needs an organisational structure that can accommodate both common and singular issues.

There are many layers within the network in terms of awareness and experience of RPL. The idea of having action learning regionalised workshops has been discussed as a possibility. These could be sector focused or more general practice based learning and sharing workshops. It is vitally important that topics and events are not dictated by the Steering Board, these must come from across the RPL environments and practice.

Promotion of RPL in the public domain

Raising awareness about RPL was cited as an important role for the network. To date little has been done in Ireland to promote it or to get the message out to the general public that it exists. Institutions readiness to respond to learners requests for RPL tends to be one of the reasons why there has been a reluctance to promote RPL nationally.

Becoming a singular organisation

Currently the network is integrally linked with QQI as a national agency. Whilst it was very beneficial to have this support for the past two years the network must seek to disentangle itself from QQI and become a singular organisation in its own right.

This separation is foreseen as a challenge. The network depends on the good will of institutions to release staff for short periods of time to drive the agenda of the network and the involvement of QQI has enabled the broadening of involvement and interest from beyond higher education institutions. This is currently on top of their day to day duties which reflects the story of RPL practice too. In the longer term this would be problematic. A workable solution needs to be found as the network cannot be absorbed into or rotated amongst different bodies. Sustainable strategies need to be found.

The operation of the network could be spread by establishing clusters on specific areas of interest. This would involve small working groups coming together in areas of interest. These would meet regularly and join the Steering Board for bi-annual

meetings to identify topics for seminars, workshops or conferences. The second option would be the secondment of an individual to co-ordinate and drive the network. This would need the endorsement of all the members and the main representative bodies would have to support it especially the Department of Education in Ireland. The purpose of the role would be to facilitate engagement between practitioners within and between sectors, support policy development in Ireland at national and institutional level and advance RPL education for assessors, guidance counsellors and for those in educational leadership roles. It would also serve as a bridge between QQI involvement and network self-sufficiency.

European Context

RPL networks are not common in Europe which means that the Irish Network is unique. In many countries RPL is included in the lifelong learning agenda and not separated from the broader picture. A long-term goal is to link with European networks and share practice in this wider context. Connecting with the European Qualifications Framework Advisory Group through the QQI and the invited speakers is key as a starting point.

10. Conclusions

The network is becoming valued by members as a space where RPL in all its difference, challenge and politics can be critiqued and analysed and where new possibilities for RPL may be imagined and pursued in the future. The network has achieved a lot in the short time it has been in existence, the most fundamental being the breadth of organisations and institutions who are represented in and by the network.

As with all networks their longevity is guaranteed only by sustained commitment to drive the network agenda forward coupled with maintaining its relevance to its members. In this regard, the network appears to have remained relevant however it is the commitment (financial and human resources) which are the challenge if it is to become sustainable into the future.

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