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

Respondent:	Maeve O'Grady Waterford institute of Technology (WIT)
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What was your first involvement with APEL/RPL?	Negotiating access and developing a higher-level qualification for community activists.
Year?	1996
How did that first model of APEL/RPL operate?	Participants were expected to submit a portfolio of prior experiential and uncertified learning to gain an exemption from one module at national/higher certificate (HETAC Level 6).
What aspects worked well?	Progress started to be made when a mentor was appointed.
What worked less well?	The process led with the supply of forms written in a formal language that the participants were not used to. The RPL was to be done first, before there was any familiarity with the formal language and requirements of third-level. Their experiential knowledge was tacit and needed to be brought to a cognitive level.
If the model continued what changes were made for subsequent versions?	All applicants for module exemption are now encouraged to meet with a mentor first and then engage with the more user-friendly documents and principles. I now lead with extending an applicant's c.v.. It is then relatively easy to identify where the matches for modules exists. The formal learning outcomes can then be explained to the applicant, so that the applicant recognises that skills and knowledge exist.
What RPL involvement have you had since that first instance?	Researched the developmental model of RPL for a Masters award. Developed the RPL and Study Skills special purpose award at Level 6 now running in WIT. Acting as RPL Advisor to the School of Education in WIT.

	The developmental model is the best for RPL applicants relying more on experiential learning.
Did you use any new 'tools' or 'technologies' in subsequent models?	Yes, the developmental approach, relying on extending the c.v. The portfolio idea is flexible enough to be able to advise an applicant when enough exists. The portfolio can be in hard copy or soft copy.
In your view, how has the National Framework of Qualifications (NQF) contributed to RPL/APEL practice?	It does away with the internalised belief that education should be 'front-ended', progressing by one means only. Applicants for advanced entry can have confidence that they are not going to miss out on anything vital.
In your view how has the NQF level descriptors influenced RPL practice?	I find that the level descriptors provide applicants with a good set of comparative indicators so that they can place themselves on a level in general terms. It makes the process very transparent for them, and it changes their sense of themselves as capable of formal learning at a particular stage. It also provides the notion of gradueness which is useful as a broad benchmark for likely equivalencies. So, for example, we expect a Level 7 ordinary degree holder to be able to supervise, and a Level 8 honours degree holder to be able to manage a project etc.
How has the Learning Outcomes paradigm influenced RPL practice?	It requires institutions to define their programmes in learning outcomes format, making it transparent for applicants and mentors. It describes clearly to the applicant what is expected. The applicant can have confidence that it is a criterion-referenced assessment process. It requires assessors to be clear about the relationship of an assignment/portfolio to the module learning outcomes. It initially shocked quite a few assessors that they can only assess on the basis of those learning outcomes and not require other elements that have not been identified in a course syllabus.
In your view are national standards for occupations and sectors helpful for RPL?	I find national standards very helpful. The Professional Development profiles in Childcare, for example, are very useful in showing an experienced childcare worker the stages she may already have achieved.
In your view are professional body RPL practices more influential than the	We need to always clarify for applicants the different approaches to RPL between professional institutes and HETAC, and the different referencing practices (norm-referencing vs. criterion-referencing). Their expectations should then be clearer and they

NQF?	will know what kind of questions to ask of a professional body. However, my own practice relates to the NQF rather than professional bodies.
Do you refer to the National Principles and Operational Guidelines for RPL 2005 in your own RPL practice?	Yes. Again, it gives an applicant confidence that this process is underpinned by a national policy. It also gives lecturers/assessors confidence in the process. It gives Departments the basic outline of what needs to be place.
In your view, has the particular design of the NQF hindered the potential of RPL practices?	I've no criticisms of the design of the NQF, but learners do need to differentiate between third-level institutions that are subject to HETAC policies and the universities.
How important are minor awards for RPL in your view?	The credits for a minor award may not be usable except in its associated major award. The transferability of minor award credits could be an issue. I would love to see a generic skills minor award at Level 6 that would enable learners to gain credit that can be 'cashed in' against any Level 6 Higher Certificate.
In your view, what has been the impact of the Bologna process for RPL?	The shifting emphasis to modular courses should enable more course syllabi to be available in learning outcomes format to RPL applicants. It will take more time for all modules to be written in a more RPL-appropriate learning outcomes format. Not all Departments seem to be interested in the RPL aspect of modularising their programmes.
In your view what is the usefulness of the EQF for RPL in Ireland?	The idea of transferability of awards and validation of experiential learning is a good one, but in practice, I think it will be relied on by people with prior certified learning. We do not seem to be adopting the French system of validation that would enable greater mobility of awards.
In your view how well has RPL worked for labour market activation initiatives so far?	It works really well for groups being made redundant, when combined with a study skills, taster modules and a guidance process, enabling substantial recognition of prior experiential learning to be gained combined with selecting a qualifications pathway, and maximizing special purpose award credits.
What is your view of recommendations for RPL as articulated in the Hunt report?	The power of inertia that blocks a wholehearted implementation of the modular system with clear learning outcomes is not addressed. However, consolidation of the higher education sector may hopefully allow best practice to be applied across more higher education institutions. There are suggestions that a practitioner could make that are not in the Hunt Report recommendations. If the funding for part-time courses is put on the same basis as

	<p>full-time courses, this will suit more mature students and work-based learners, and we can expect more demand for RPL.</p>
<p>As a practitioner, what is your view of the application of RPL in the Forfás RPL document?</p>	<p>Are the VECs and FAS/Solas really going to ‘stimulate demand for RPL?’ Of course they should, but this is not realistic without specific resources being applied. For higher education, leaving the driving of RPL to individual schools and departments will reproduce the status quo rather than changing it by clear leadership and direction at a national level matched by resources.</p>
<p>What ideological shifts have you noticed about RPL since your first involvement?</p>	<p>The confidence that now exists in the process: many learners have gained exemptions or advanced entry since the mid-1990s, and the awarding institutions have evidence of their ability to successfully participate and complete in higher education.</p> <p>The role of mentoring is now well recognised but this is really only relevant for individual applications. I do see and welcome the ability of new course designers to incorporate RPL and make it really relevant and accessible for people already working in a community of practice.</p>
<p>What operational/technical shifts have you noticed?</p>	<p>Higher education had difficulty with recognising experiential learning back in the 1990s, and largely relied on recognising certified learning rather than experiential learning. There is a greater willingness to entertain such applications now. However, formalising the process through setting up operational and technical aspects has unintended consequences. In fact, in one case, the formalisation of the mature student entry process has meant that relevant experiences were not given marks and the applicant did not get awarded a place on a course for which she was eminently suitable. The applicant undertook uncertified courses to prepare her for her occupational area, but these did not merit any points in a competitive process.</p>
<p>What is your prediction about RPL practice in the next five to ten years?</p>	<p>Only course designers who want to attract mature students will incorporate RPL well into their systems. The traditional idea of the student as a school leaver without experiential learning is still assumed to be the student around which all systems are developed. This will only change when mature students become a more critical mass in higher education.</p> <p>On the other hand, as those lecturers and Heads of Departments who have only experienced more traditional forms of higher education retire, the cohort of staff that are more open to seeing a positive view of RPL rather than fearing a ‘dumbing-down’ effect will increase in size relative to the cohort of ‘if it’s not</p>

	<p>done the way I did it, it's not higher education'.</p> <p>If/when part-time higher education (that most favoured by the mature student) becomes supported on the same basis as full-time higher education, then more resources may be applied for the use of RPL. If not, it is reasonable to expect that advocates of RPL will find the work increasingly frustrating.</p> <p>And at some stage, there will be (there certainly should be) a nationally-available database of all higher education modules, with the learning outcomes clear for any viewer, particularly an RPL applicant or an Adult Educational Guidance Counsellor.</p>
<p><i>Any other remarks you would like to make?</i></p>	<p>I recommend that we have a national system of 'general credits' to be made available that could be cashed in against any higher certificate Level 6 course.</p> <p>I believe that there exists a large cohort of potential learners who have the perception that the process is not learner-friendly, or who will only undertake the process if and when they select a course of study.</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-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>

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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>