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Policy development and implementation procedures for recognition of prior learning: a case study of practice in higher education

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Abstract

This case study presents a detailed description of the process of developing and implementing policies and procedures for recognition of prior learning (RPL) in one higher education institution, namely, the Dublin Institute of Technology, between 2007 and 2010. It relates the process to the nationally agreed principles and operational guidelines for recognition of non-formal and informal learning developed through a consultation process with stakeholders by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland. The article includes examples of how RPL is being used to respond to government initiatives to stimulate the labour market and to facilitate continuing education for regulated professions. While the case study is specific to one institution and refers to one national qualifications framework, there may be elements which are sufficiently generic to be of value to readers from other states and working in different contexts of practice.

Key words – APEL; continuing professional development; credits; levels; informal and non-formal learning; learning outcomes; recognition of prior learning/RPL

Introduction

Recognition of prior learning, both formal and non-formal learning, is now a key area of policy interest across national frameworks and across the two meta-frameworks in Europe: the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF-LLL) and the Bologna framework for the European higher education area (EHEA). It is also a significant policy area in vocational education and training, in continuing professional development, in sectoral qualifications, and with regulatory authorities and quality assurance bodies. Mutual recognition of formal awards and qualifications is being addressed through databases which have a high level of trust and confidence among users such as the ENIC-NARIC system. That trust and confidence is, of course, reinforcing the perception, and perhaps the belief, that knowledge, skills and competences (learning outcomes) which are codified in the standardised descriptors of education and training providers are somehow of greater exchange value than those acquired through social and work practices. RPL systems which try to mimic codified systems contribute to perceptions that experiential learning outcomes are somehow qualitatively less worthy of trust and confidence and therefore need more rigorous assessment than formal learning. However, experiences of RPL practitioners over two decades have dispelled many such myths and have proven that there are greater rewards than risks in integrating RPL into the normal business of education and training.

This case study, however, is not a defence of RPL practice *per se*. Rather, it takes as a starting point that RPL is an inevitable higher education practice resulting from the trajectory of years of organic research and development at practitioner level which has now become an element of instrumental policy development at the meta level. This is not to argue that policy makers

are ill-informed about learning from research and practice: rather it is to argue that sustainable RPL development is more likely when policy development follows existing practices which already have the trust and confidence of practitioners at the real-world, micro level, and that RPL is less likely to succeed in contexts of instrumental, externally imposed policy interventions.

The institutional context

The Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) is a large, urban college which achieved legal status and awarding powers in 1992 through amalgamation of six long-established colleges, some of which had over a century's tradition of education provision in professional and work-related fields, including apprentice and craft training. This history invariably enabled the development of progression pathways and professional development arrangements, which could, in retrospect, be described as recognition of prior learning (RPL) systems. Like many other providers in the 1990s, the DIT developed draft policies for accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) following models of practice in the United States and the United Kingdom and had its own systems for determining equivalence of awards and qualifications. However, the draft APEL policy was not formalised at the time, possibly because of the more pressing issue of accommodating the rapidly expanding numbers of school-leavers progressing to higher education. Procedurally APEL was regarded as time-consuming and individualistic, and indeed it was under-theorised and overly-technicist at that time. Nor were the technologies of qualifications frameworks such as levels of learning, modules, credits systems, or agreed definitions of learning outcomes widely available to facilitate scaled-up, sustainable RPL systems. However, the scholarship of APEL was developing over the 1990s supported by national and EU-funded research projects, by the research and publications of individual academics, and by the Irish APEL Network for Higher Education which was active for the years before the development of the national framework. This supportive 'local' environment with its pockets of indigenous RPL expertise made the wider development of RPL relatively easy in more recent years.

The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) was established in 2001 and the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) approved in 2003. Also in 2003 a policy document related to access, transfer and progression of learners invariably led to the development of an RPL policy document in 2005 with a statutory obligation on all providers of education and training to develop and publish its RPL policy and to implement that policy. The case study in this article begins at that point in time and describes RPL policy development actions and implementation activities in the DIT up to 2010.

Table 1: Irish nationally agreed principles for RPL**Principles for the recognition of prior learning**

The principles for the recognition of prior learning are addressed to education and training providers, awarding bodies, and those in the workplace. The principles are available to those who are developing systems of recognition of prior learning and to those who wish to make use of the prior learning that has been recognised by other providers or awarding bodies.

General

- The recognition of prior learning will give value to all learning, no matter how that learning is achieved.
- Participation in recognition is a voluntary matter for the individual.
- The recognition of prior learning will be part of an inclusive approach to learning by education and training providers and awarding bodies.
- Recognition of prior learning will provide opportunities for access, transfer and progression to education and training and for the achievement of an award.
- Recognition of prior learning will provide opportunities for learners to participate on an active basis in society in general and within a workplace context.

Quality

- Recognition of prior learning should be fully embedded within the quality assurance procedures of providers and awarding bodies.
- Recognition of prior learning should maintain the standards of the National Framework of Qualifications and its awards.
- Processes for the recognition of prior learning should be credible to all stakeholders.
- The outcomes-based approach of the National Framework of Qualifications supports the attainment of awards through diverse routes, including the recognition of prior learning, and such recognition of prior learning will maintain and support the standards associated with the National Framework of Qualifications and its awards.

Communication/documentation

- A clear statement of the policies, processes and practices of the education and training providers and awarding bodies for the recognition of prior learning should be available to all users.
- Processes and practices for the recognition of prior learning should be clearly documented.
- Processes and practices for the recognition of prior learning should be communicated openly and clearly to all. (Applicants, education and training staff and assessors).

Assessment

- Assessment criteria for the recognition of prior learning should be published, made explicit to applicants, and applied consistently and fairly.
- Assessment criteria should be based on learning outcomes of awards or standards of knowledge, skill and competence set out in the National Framework of Qualifications and by the relevant awarding bodies.
- Assessment and verification mechanisms for the recognition of prior learning should be appropriate and fit for purpose.

Process

- Guidance and support should be available for applicants and all involved in the processes of recognition of prior learning.
- An appropriate appeals mechanism should be in place.
- Recognition of prior learning processes should be easy to understand, fair and transparent, and be conducted in a reasonable time frame.
- The recognition of prior learning processes should be organised in such a way that they do not create barriers for the applicant
- Appropriate resources to support the processes for the recognition of prior learning should be in place.

National principles for RPL

Nationally agreed principles for RPL were produced by an RPL consultative group representing all education and training stakeholders convened by the NQAI in 2004. Following a series of intensive working sessions a consensus was reached on the text of the document: 'Principles and operational guidelines for recognition of prior learning in further and higher education and training - June 2005'. In relation to the possible benefits of RPL, the final document contained the following text:

Benefits of developing principles for the recognition of prior learning

Recognition of prior learning should meet the needs of learners. Recognition of prior learning can support the socially inclusive purposes of further and higher education and training, in that it facilitates entry to programmes, gives credit to or exemptions from a programme of study or access to a full award. Recognition of prior learning can address the needs of disadvantaged groups, part-time students and mature students, and can have a positive impact on retention of students. In addition, recognition of prior learning gives opportunities to providers of education and awarding bodies to use their assessment capability to up-skill individuals and meet workforce needs at local and national levels. Recognition of prior learning can bring benefits to the workplace by enhancing worker's employability and a better matching of skills demand and supply.

Recognition of prior learning can assist in supporting staff development within organisations by increasing staff motivation to undertake appropriate education or training. It can reduce the amount of time required to acquire a qualification.

Specific principles relate to quality assurance, communication/documentation, assessment, and process. These principles formed the basis of the 2007 DIT policy document for RPL. The implications of each principle are elaborated in Table 1 above as included in the NQAI document. The agreed principles aimed to combine the benefits above with specific details in relation to how providers of education and training should integrate RPL into academic activities as a normal practice.

Operational guidelines for RPL

The NQAI document of 2005 is specific in outlining the statutory responsibilities of all education and training providers in enabling the agreed RPL principles to be implemented at operational level under the Authority's published procedures for access, transfer and progression of learners (2003). Five elements of RPL implementation were distinguished: review and updating; operational approaches; assessment; applicants; communications. These elements were further elaborated into a set of very specific operational guidelines as follows:

Table 2: Operational guidelines for RPL

| |
|---|
| <p><i>Review and updating</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Each further and higher education and training awarding body will review and update the policies and procedures that it has in place for the recognition of prior learning following the publication of these guidelines and each body will review its policies and procedures on a regular basis in the future. <p><i>Operational approaches</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The units, modules, programmes and awards that can be achieved on the basis of recognition of prior learning should be identified.• Where any limits are put in place on the proportion of learning that can be recognised as prior learning, these should be explicitly stated. (In the case of direct applicants, the awards Councils cannot put in place any such limits for their awards)• The roles and responsibilities of those involved in the process should be clearly set out, for example, the applicant, the assessor, and any other persons or boards/committees involved in recognition processes.• Process should ensure that, where possible, the applicant can complete the recognition process in a shorter time than it would take to achieve the relevant unit, module, programme or award.• Collaboration across sectors and between awarding bodies, providers and stakeholders should be encouraged. <p><i>Assessment</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Assessment of prior learning should be carried out by persons who are competent.• Assessors and other persons involved in the recognition process should be given training and support as appropriate.• The development and use of a range of assessment mechanisms should be encouraged. These should be proportionate to the task and comparable to other assessment processes used to determine whether learning outcomes have been achieved. <p><i>Applicants</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Applicants should be fully informed of the application process, the stages within it and the nature and range of evidence that is considered appropriate to support a claim for the recognition of prior learning, including the learning outcomes against which prior learning will be assessed.• The availability of guidance and support to applicants in the submission of evidence for assessment will be promoted. There should be contact points for advice and support and they should be clearly signalled. |
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Pro-active stance of the DIT

The DIT was represented on the RPL Advisory Group by the author of this article who was subsequently appointed as RPL Policy Development Officer in the Directorate of Academic Affairs on an academic secondment basis. An RPL policy was to be developed and approved by Academic Council within one academic year and a two-year implementation plan to follow. The implementation plan was subsequently agreed as a key element of the Institute's strategic vision and negotiated as an action in the overall two-year strategic development plan as summarised in Table 3 below:

Table 3: 2 year RPL implementation strategy

| | START | 1 Year | 2 Years |
|--|--------|--------|---------|
| <i>RPL policy agreed by Academic Council</i> | | | |
| 1. <i>First RPL guide for academic staff</i> | | | |
| 2. <i>Information on public website</i> | | | |
| 3. <i>Information on staff intranet</i> | | | |
| 4. <i>Consultancy and briefings for staff</i> | | | |
| 5. <i>Formal staff training</i> | | | |
| 6. <i>RPL in Assessment Regulations</i> | | | |
| 7. <i>RPL in Academic Quality Assurance</i> | | | |
| 8. <i>RPL case studies and exemplars</i> | | | |
| 9. <i>Protocols for Recruitment & Admissions</i> | | | |
| 10. <i>Comprehensive RPL Guide for staff</i> | | | |
| 11. <i>RPL services for applicants</i> | | | |
| 12. <i>RPL scholarship and research</i> | | | |
| 13. <i>Review and updating</i> | | | |

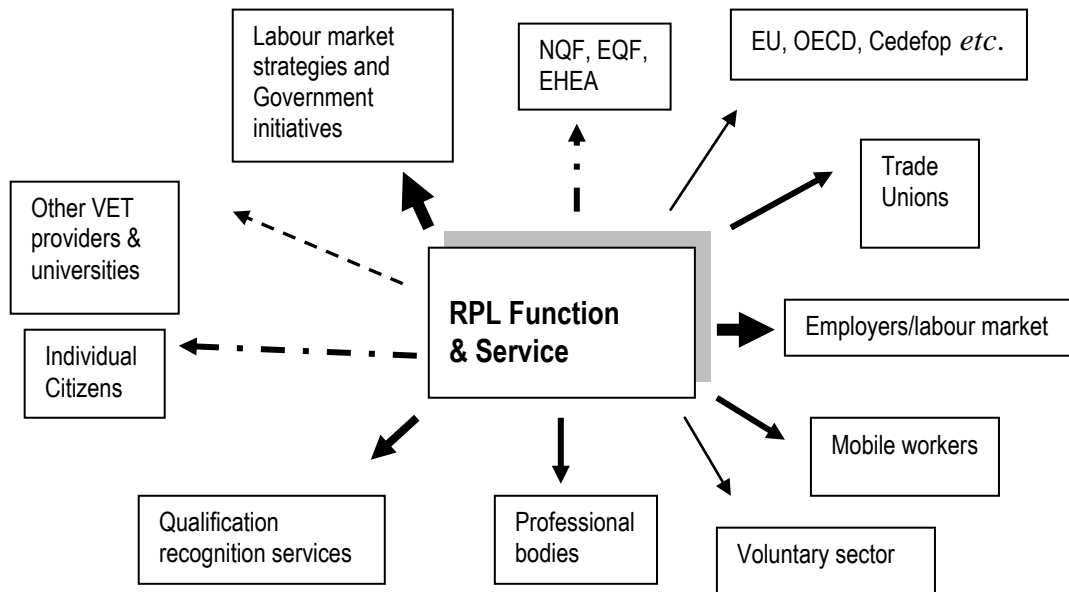
From the workplan it is clear that a key element is on-going briefings and consultation with both academic and administrative staff. Consensus was essential in negotiating changes to quality assurance procedures in relation to assessment, programme design and articulation of learning outcomes. Without such consensus the approved RPL policy could not be operationalised. Likewise formal training of staff was essential in relation to their immediate procedural or pedagogical needs. Clearly admissions and records staff had immediate need for clarity of procedures in relation to advanced entry, module exemptions and accumulation of credits. Academic staff had a range of needs related to programme design, assessment procedures, allocation of credits and noting of RPL decisions in the student record system. Additionally academic staff involved in partnerships with workplaces and regulated professions had immediate needs in relation to negotiating advanced entry and module exemptions for groups of learners and perhaps for work sectors.

The consultation and consensus-building process

The process of developing RPL policy was based on broad principles of sustainable development including identifying existing good practices, consulting all stakeholders, subsidiarity to local management level where possible, and a ‘light touch’ approach to implementation guidelines with appropriate flexibility to accommodate diversity in epistemologies and professional practices without undermining trust and confidence in DIT awards. Before starting to consult staff formally, an RPL mapping exercise was undertaken.

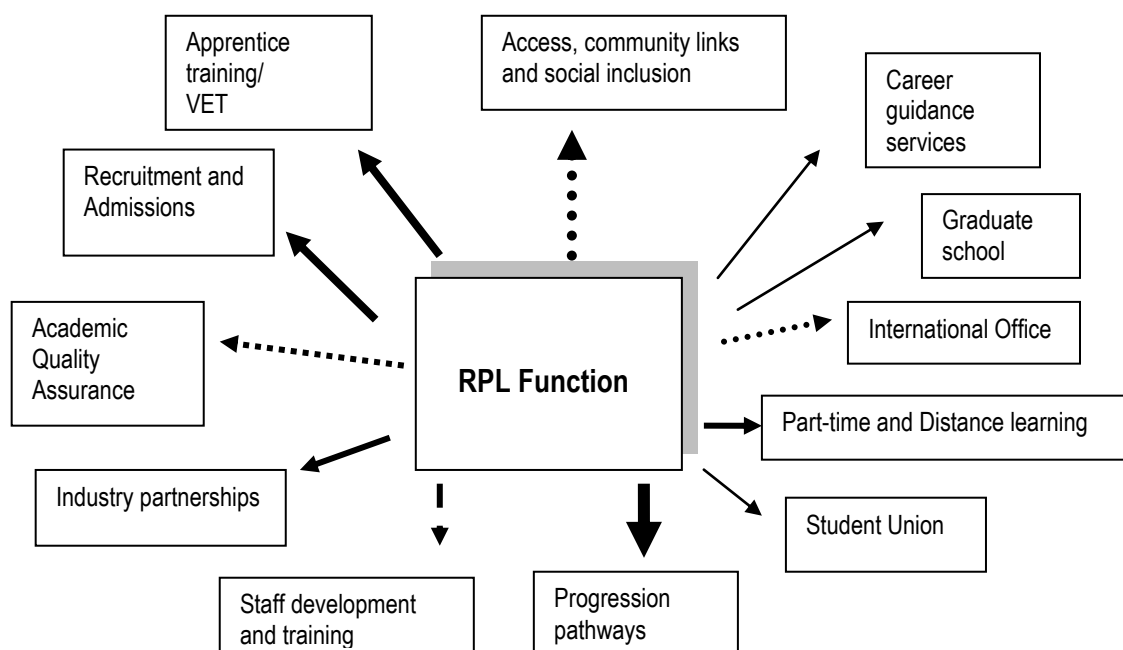
The stakeholder mapping exercise identified the academic staff groups and operational functions with degrees of interest and involvement in RPL policy development and the external stakeholders upon whom that policy could impact. In Figure 1 below the likely degree of involvement of external stakeholders is indicated by the size of arrow.

Figure 1: Mapping RPL external stakeholders



Likewise a mapping exercise to illustrate internal colleagues likely to have a need for an RPL function confirmed that RPL has a range of applications across the business of the Institute and that several staff groups and units would require briefing and training. Again, the degree of involvement is illustrated by the weighting of the arrows, as illustrate in Figure 1.

Figure 2: Mapping internal stakeholders with relationship to RPL function



A series of interviews and focus group sessions were held to establish existing practices and preferences for future policy development. There was remarkably little divergence of opinion except for an expressed unease about the possibility of achieving of a full Institute award on the basis of RPL. This unease was taken into consideration in the draft and final RPL policy document with limitations placed on the nature of the prior learning presented for a DIT award at the final stage.

The mapping exercise itself was useful in deciding if RPL was to be considered a marginal, peripheral activity managed in a discrete office or unit, or if it was to be embedded in all aspects of business of the Institute. The decision in this regard was that RPL as an academic activity was to be delegated to School level with quality assurance oversight at Faculty level subject to quality assurance policy agreed by Academic Council. This was a fundamental decision in relation to the agreed national principles, and in relation to the resources required for full implementation of agreed policy. It was also significant that RPL was firmly thus regarded as an academic activity related to standards of the Institute's awards and not an administrative procedure removed for the normal academic business of teaching, learning, assessment scholarship and research. Additionally it was not to be regarded as a marketing device, or a recruitment and admissions procedure where the assessment element is separated from the academic domain.

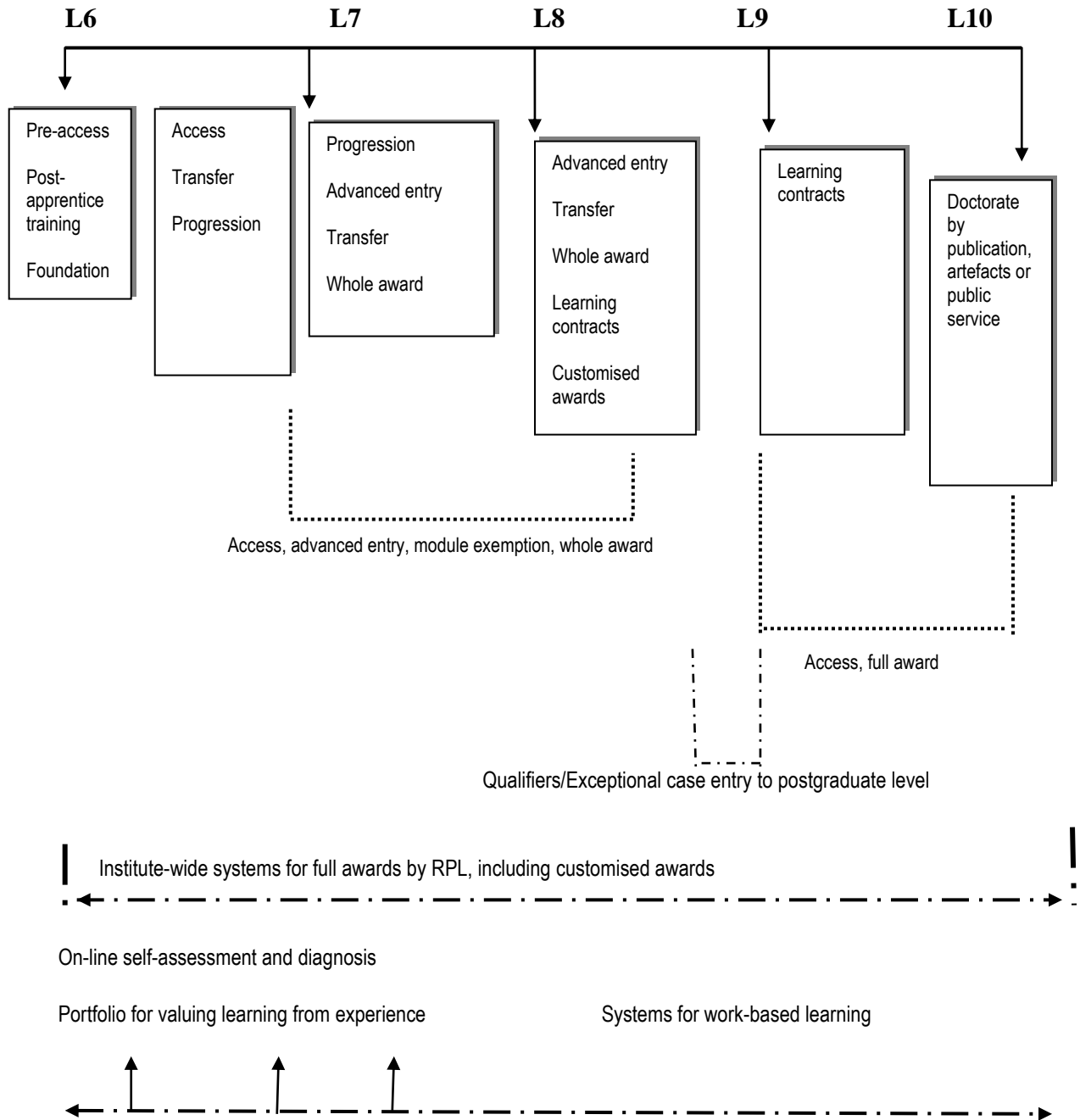
Visioning the RPL continuum across framework levels

When the decision was taken to regard RPL as primarily an academic activity, it then became necessary to vision how and where it could be used across all programme design and award-making activity. Figure 3 below represents the first visualisation of an RPL continuum across NQF levels 6 to 10 (Higher Certificate to Doctorate) and which included sub-strands of the framework such as minor and special purpose awards. That vision took into account programme design and pedagogical models such as continuing professional development courses and work-based learning arrangements in addition to traditional taught programmes. It presumes both horizontal and vertical movement across NQF/EHEA levels within the DIT's own range of awards initially, and indeed interface with the EQF-LLL in the future.

While the continuum may appear coherent and logical as a visual image, in reality the range of RPL practices in a large, diverse organisation such as the DIT is considerably more complex. It is fair to concede that we have not yet achieved the full visualised continuum of RPL which ideally would include facilities for self-assessment of learning in relation to awards. Such a possibility would include procedural challenges such as continual updating of awards and of module learning outcomes, together with descriptions of how each learning

outcome could be achieved through RPL. However, a start has been made on this issue as described later in this article.

Figure 3: Vision of the RPL Continuum



A start has also been made in bringing coherence to the RPL portfolio/dossier by designing a generic RPL application template based on the Europass CV. This model has been tested with large numbers of applicants to programmes funded by the Government as initiatives to re-skill and up-skill recently unemployed workers. The portfolio model combines the recruitment information and academic advanced entry information required to scale-up the RPL process

for labour market sectors. This division of information in a single process satisfies both administrative and academic staff, minimising the role tensions that are often a feature of RPL activities.

The RPL continuum has not yet fully articulated how an internal academic model will interface with in-house work-based learning and company training. Attempts have been made to explore the interface between individual learning plans of employees with both DIT framework awards and with customised awards. This research is referred to later in this article in relation to facilitated work-based learning.

RPL policy approval process

The draft DIT RPL policy document was submitted to Academic Council in May 2008 and made available for general consultation and comment. The final document was passed by Council in June of that year with no significant changes.

RPL implementation strategy

A key element of the RPL policy document, as indicated earlier, was that implementation was designated to School level rather than located in a central operation or unit, thereby confirming the School structure as both the decision-making level and the level of operational implementation. This enabled each School to build on its own academic RPL culture within its existing practices, with policy oversight and quality assurance at central level. A general implementation guide in relation to the approved RPL policy and the text of the nationally agreed principles and operational guidelines was circulated by the author. The rationale for the guide was that it would facilitate the emergence of practices at the level of the academic programme which were 'owned' by the School and which were a good fit with approved policy and in line with national guidelines. An example of an RPL implementation planning exercise is illustrated in Figure 4 below. The text of the principles is presented followed by an exercise which would move RPL from principle to local practice.

Figure 4: Example of RPL implementation exercise

Nationally agreed principle:

- Processes and practices for the recognition of prior learning should be communicated openly and clearly to all. (Applicants, education and training staff and assessors).

Please describe where and how RPL information will be available at School/Department/programme levels (website, brochures, leaflets...).

The guide included activities to enable academic staff to consider each and every principle and operational guideline in the nationally agreed document of 2005 with the RPL policy agreed for the DIT. In reality, the task of drafting RPL policy at School level fell initially to staff who had an immediate need to integrate RPL into their own programmes. Their experiences were useful in generating case studies and repositories of models, processes and supporting documents for others to learn from and to develop further. This *bottom-up* meets *top-down* approach offers a degree of academic freedom to staff to debate the nature of their disciplinary knowledge and to consider how such knowledge can be achieved in the ‘learned’ curriculum of work and life as well as the ‘taught’ curriculum of academic programmes and awards. This essentially is the key business of RPL and indeed the epistemology of disciplinary, professional and sectoral knowledges is the most elusive element of RPL ‘politics’ in the current landscape which revolves around the technology of learning outcomes. Unsurprisingly this is the area of RPL which is the most intellectually engaging for academic staff and which represents a context for discussion of their tacit knowledge which should logically precede development of policies and procedures for relationships among national and meta-frameworks!

Information, awareness raising and capacity building

Since the approved RPL policy 2008 document was based on existing practice, as well as on statutory obligations, it was inevitable that the immediate needs of staff would have varying degrees of urgency. Academic and administrative staff involved in arrangements for non-standard entry and advanced entry inevitably required urgent guidelines. Academic staff involved with exemptions and credits based on prior learning had different, but equally urgent, needs. In response, the approach to information provision, awareness raising and capacity building involved the following:

1. General briefing of academic staff in all Faculties as well as in-depth consultation where there were urgent needs
2. Intensive briefing sessions with staff involved in academic quality assurance
3. Training days with staff involved in student admissions and processing of applications with structured opportunities to formalise their existing RPL procedures for transparency and recording purposes
4. Development of a formal continuing professional development programme at Masters level for academic and administrative staff with high levels of RPL involvement
5. Consultancy and intensive workshops for academic staff groups with immediate curriculum and assessment design needs.

Information for the public was designed and published both on the DIT website and in printed form. In this regard, and as indicated earlier, it proved conceptually and procedurally difficult to design any meaningful RPL self-assessment resources for the general public since all RPL applications are related to awards and qualifications only. In the Irish qualifications framework there is no provision for allocation of academic credits which are of a generic nature and not evaluated in relation to awards in the framework. Nor is there yet a fully-developed credit system for vocational education and training on the framework in the same way as the ECTS system applies to higher education. This particular framework design issue has had a mixed impact on how higher education providers designed their RPL arrangements for two particular reasons. Firstly, it made arrangements simpler in that a provider need only consider RPL in relation to its own awards. Secondly, it solidified the division between academic awards and professional practice awards. The subsequent development of ECVET credits and the EQF for lifelong learning have not significantly reduced this division. But, perhaps this is a debate for the future!

RPL in assessment regulations and procedures

A significant element of RPL is the assessment process used in the recognition process. In higher education, assessment is generally regarded as an academic activity carried out by appropriately competent staff. Accordingly, an augmentation was agreed by Academic Council to the DIT General Assessment Regulations 2009 to reflect this principle. The full text of that augmentation is outlined in Table 4 below.

Criteria for evaluating prior certificated learning

The RPL policy development and implementation exercise exposed the need for greater transparency of existing practices with regard to evaluating prior certificated learning for entry and module exemption purposes. Prior certificated learning is mostly used to evaluate applications for entry to postgraduate programmes. The DIT traditionally managed that process quite transparently with clear benchmarks for standard entry. Additionally a non-standard entry committee evaluated applications from applicants who did not quite meet the benchmark criteria but who demonstrated a capacity to succeed and benefit. All non-standard decisions were subject to external quality auditing on an annual basis and outcomes monitored with regard to norms of academic standards. Statistics in this regard over several audits indicated that applicants who achieved entry with a combination of certificated and experiential learning performed marginally or significantly better than the 'standard' entrant.

Table 4: RPL in General Assessment Regulations**8 Recognition and Assessment of Prior Learning**

In instances where RPL is used for initial entry, advanced entry, progression, or transfer, the process is broadly one of 'recognition' for admission to a programme rather than a process of assessment of learning in relation to a programme or award *per se*. In instances where RPL is used for exemption from a programme module, or from an element of a module, or for a whole award, the process is essentially one of assessment. The purpose of assessment in these latter instances is to establish if sufficient and appropriate prior learning, either certificated, or experiential, or in combination, has been acquired to justify the exemption or award sought. RPL for exemption or award, therefore, is subject to General Assessment Regulations of the Institute specifically as follows:

- a. Assessment of prior learning is normally related only to the learning outcomes of the award, programme, modules, or elements of modules, concerned.
- b. Assessment of prior learning should be carried out only by staff who are competent in assessment of the programme or award concerned in an RPL application using normal programme arrangements for internal and external examining.
- c. Assessment methods used for RPL should be appropriate and fit for purpose.
- d. Module exemptions awarded on the basis of RPL should attract the same number of ECTS credits as the module itself.
- e. Programme documents and student handbooks should indicate the extent of RPL permitted in relation to exemption from modules, exemption from elements of modules, or for achievement of a full award.
- f. Programme documents and student handbooks should indicate if modules exemption on the basis of prior learning are graded for award classification purposes or awarded as exemptions with credits only. In cases where graded exemptions are available, the criteria for assessment should be clearly articulated the approved programme Document.
- g. Student handbooks for programmes which permit RPL should indicate the level of support available for preparation of an RPL claim as well as indicating the form/s of assessment used, together with the assessment criteria to be applied.
- h. Where exemption is awarded for an element of a module, programme documents and student handbooks should indicate arrangements for award of marks.
- i. Students who successfully achieve module exemptions on the basis of assessment of prior learning should be fully informed of the consequences for marks and classification purposes.
- j. Students who seek and achieve module exemptions and who subsequently re-consider should have the right to decline module exemptions and to take modules in the taught mode.
- k. Exemptions achieved on the basis of RPL should be entered into the student record through BANNER or other appropriate system using EX. A notional pass mark of 40% should not be used to represent a module exemption based on RPL as it may have consequences for progression, compensation, and/or classification.
- l. Documents/materials/products used for successful RPL exemptions or awards should be available to Examination and Progression Boards in the same way as traditional assessment documents/materials/products.

This feature has been found at undergraduate levels as well. The encouraging aspect of this finding is that RPL is an overall benefit to academic standards and not a risk in any way. The finding also reinforces the natural justice argument that gate-keeping on the basis of certificated learning is an unsustainable position. However, even within this stance it is essential that the criteria applied to evaluation of prior certificated learning be made explicit for all stakeholders. Guidance to DIT staff is to use the following criteria:

- | | |
|----------------------|----------------------------------|
| • Volume (years) | • Volume (credits) |
| • Depth/NQF level | • Learning outcomes |
| • Content | • Readings |
| • Research component | • Practice component |
| • Internship | • Currency/Recency |
| • Examination papers | • Status of awarding institution |

Criteria for evaluating prior experiential learning (non-formal and informal learning)

In reality, RPL applications usually contain a mix of certificated and non-certificated evidence of learning. However, it is essential to apply different, but ‘equal’ criteria to evaluation of experiential learning in relation to learning on formal programmes. The recommended criteria for DIT staff are as follows:

- | | |
|---|--|
| • Authenticity | • Relevance |
| • Currency | • Level in relation to NQF descriptors |
| • Sufficiency/no gaps | • Capacity of the applicant to succeed and benefit |
| • Good fit with learning outcomes of receiving award/programme. | |

Academic quality assurance matters

A key principle of nationally agreed RPL principles is that RPL should be fully embedded within the quality assurance procedures of providers and awarding bodies. Accordingly the DIT has amended its Handbook for Academic Quality Enhancement to include RPL quality assurance arrangements agreed by Academic Council. The key text in those amendments is contained in tables 5a, 5b and 5c below. They are sufficiently explicit and require no additional comment here.

Table 5a: RPL in Quality Assurance

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| <p>Summary of Quality Enhancement procedures</p> <p>Recognition of Prior Learning</p> <p>Recognition of prior learning (RPL) is a process used in the DIT for the following purposes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - to achieve entry to a programme of study at initial or advanced stage - to achieve exemption from an element/s of a programme - to transfer from one programme to another - to achieve a full award. <p>To ensure quality enhanced RPL practices at programme, Department and School levels careful cognisance should be taken in validation and review processes of the following:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. DIT policies and procedures for RPL approved by Academic Council in June 2008. b. General RPL Implementation Guidelines in line with nationally agreed RPL Principles and Operational Guidelines 2005. c. Chapter 8 of <i>General Assessment Regulations, June 2009</i> in relation to assessment of prior learning. d. The RPL-related element of the revised Module Template 2010 (M1). |
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Table 5b: Summary of assessment by RPL

5.7 Assessment by RPL

Assessment by RPL is detailed in Chapter Eight of the General Assessment Regulations, June 2009 and represents Institute policy in this regard. The principles and procedures in that chapter are further elaborated in the text below.

Essentially assessment by RPL involves relating prior learning to the intended learning outcomes of a module or set of modules and granting the appropriate number of credits and/or module exemptions in cases of successful applications. Ideally, module descriptors should indicate arrangements for RPL, both APCL and APEL. Ideally, the sets of criteria for assessment of certified and experiential learning outlined in the RPL Implementation Guidelines for Schools should inform the process of assessment of prior learning at module level. Results of RPL assessments at module level should be noted on the Examination Results Broadsheet using Ex for module exemption and the appropriate marks where a grading system was used. If RPL is used for module exemption at an award classification stage, the arrangements for calculation of the overall classification based on marks should be explicit in programme documents.

Table 5c: RPL information for students

RPL in the Student Handbook

ii. Programme details

- a. duration of the programme and minimum and maximum periods of registration
- b. list of those lecturers on the programme together with an outline of their areas of interest
- c. class timetables
- d. list of (a) recommended and (b) reference textbooks
- e. general schedule of examinations and assessments, relative weightings of courses/modules, re-checks and appeals
- f. regulations for progression through the programme
- g. regulations for module exemptions based on RPL
- h. recognition of the programme by appropriate professional bodies.

Embedding RPL in Module Descriptors

In line with the technical requirement of the NQF, the EQF-LL and EHEA, the DIT now uses modular programme design with sets of programme learning outcomes and module learning outcomes for its awards. The RPL augmentation to the module template involved 30 words, as highlighted in Table 6 below. These 30 words have been a significant technical catalyst in provoking academic discourse.

Table 6: RPL in Module Descriptor Template

| N Module | Pre-Requisite Modules code(s) | Co-Requisite Modules code(s) | ISCED Code | ECTS Credits | Module Code | Module Title |
|-----------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------|---------------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| | | | | | | |

1.1 Module author: Person(s) responsible for writing the module.

1.2 Module Description:

In this section a brief description of the general subject of the module. Statements about how the module is structured into Knowledge (breadth, kind, range), Know-how and skill (range and selectivity) and Competence (context, role, learning to learn, insight). Structure should map onto the learning outcomes.

1.3 Module aim

The aim of this module is to.....

Learning Outcomes:

On completion of this module, the learner will be able to.....

1.4 Learning and Teaching Methods:

When designing the module, tutors should consider the variety of learning methods, which may be used to achieve the module learning outcomes. This section should state these processes for the module. For example: lectures, discussion, role-play, case study, problem-solving exercises, video, film, work-based learning, readings, project work, self-directed learning, dissertation, computer-based learning, ODL, correspondence, or a combination of methods.

Module content:

Description of syllabus content covered in module.

1.5 Module Assessment

1.6 Statement on the methods of assessment to be used to measure the stated learning outcomes of the module.

Statements on proportion of marks allocated to each element of assessment in the Module (Practical, Theory, Continuous Assessment etc).
Statements on performance requirements in individual elements of Module, if any: e.g.- minimum performance threshold.

Statement about module assessment based on RPL (APCL and APEL) including the methods of assessment to be used to measure the achievement of the stated learning outcomes of the module.

1.7 Recommended Reading: (author, date, title, publisher)

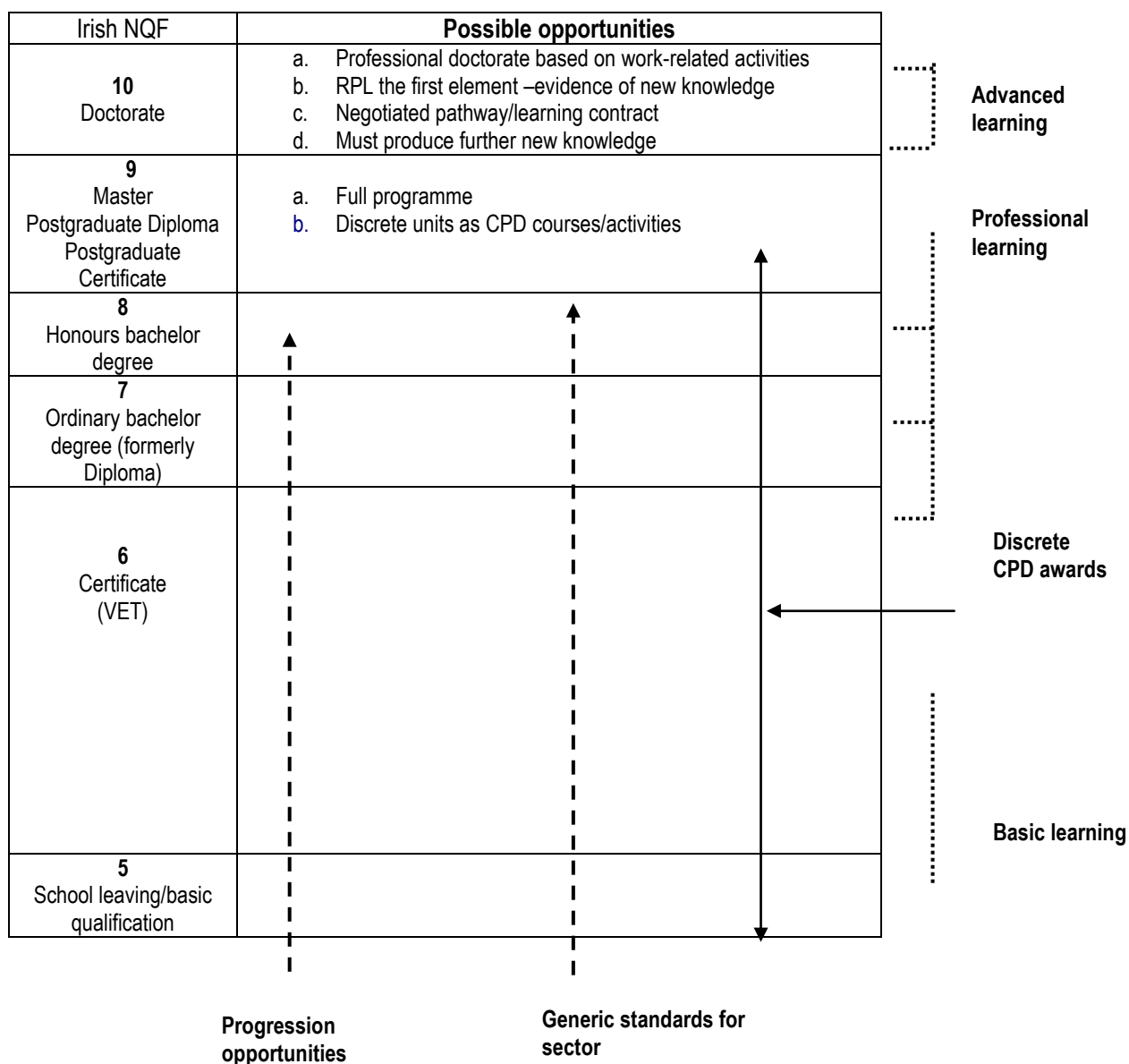
1.8 Web references, journals and other:

Further Details: e.g. class size, contact hours. To be delivered in one semester or year- long.

RPL for up-skilling and re-skilling in the workplace

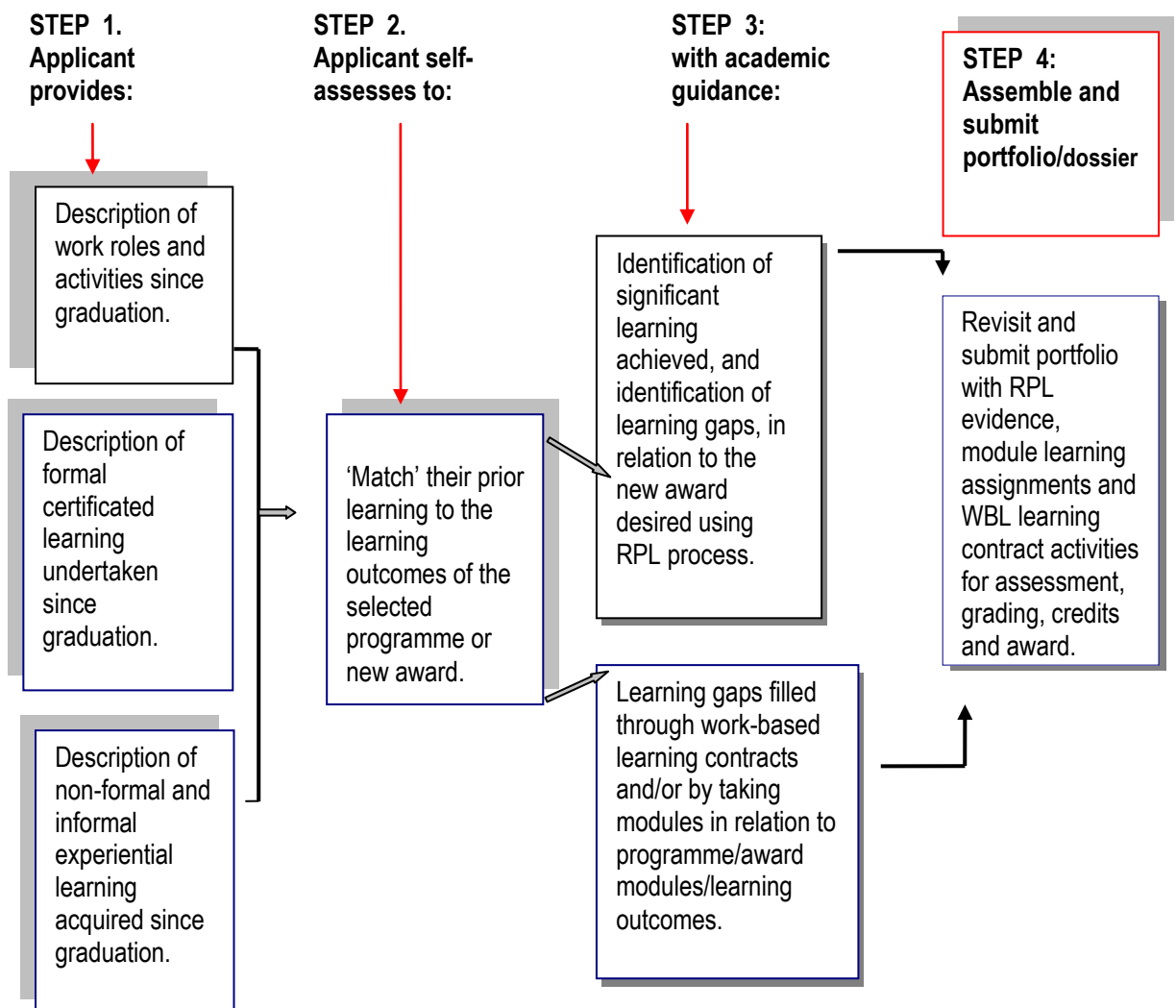
One of the key expectations of RPL is that it will contribute to efficiencies and quality in the labour market by enabling more focused training and up-skilling pathways. As with other aspects of RPL, the DIT has found that expressed needs and local practices precede policy in this regard. Companies, professional bodies and sectors tend to find solutions to their own problems, often in negotiation with education and training providers. Devising an RPL strategy in a vacuum, without realworld problems has not tended to be sustainable. Nonetheless it behoves us as providers and awarding bodies to visualise such a scenario so that responses are not invented newly for each and every situation. Figure 5 below is a ‘vision’ of RPL for DIT-company responses to labour force needs developed as an element of the EU Project: Facilicode (facilitated work-based learning) in which the DIT is a partner.

Figure 5: RPL facilitating individual learning career progression as well as company needs



At the curriculum and pedagogical design level it was clear that an overall ‘vision’ of how an RPL and work-based learning contract model might operate in reality. With this in mind, a collective of academic staff contributed to the model illustrated in Figure 6 below. This model illustrates how an experienced practitioner seeking a specific higher education award which takes account of prior learning might go about negotiating a learning contract to achieve the learning outcomes of the award. This model is ideal for a progression pathway to the next level up on the national framework in question. It also illustrates how prior learning can be integrated in a meaningful way into a pedagogical design in real time. The model is now being used in a number of professional development contexts in the DIT particularly for sectors and regulated professions.

Figure 6: Model of curriculum process with RPL and WBL



Who needs to know what about RPL?

As a result of policy development and implementation experiences it is clear that there are varying ‘need to know’ levels across academic, management and administrative staff. The RPL policy and practice guide for staff 2010 offers an indication of ‘who needs to know what’, as indicated in the example in Table 7 below.

Table 7: Who needs to know what about RPL?

| Non-academic staff | Should know about... |
|--|---|
| International recruitment staff at fairs, events etc | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RPL policy • RPL in relation to programmes • Processes for establishing equivalence of awards • Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) for applicants and staff |
| Recruitment staff on school visits, advertising etc | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specifics of RPL on programmes for initial entry, advanced entry, transfer etc • RPL Policy • FAQs for applicants and staff |
| Admissions staff processing applications | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RPL policy • Programme entry requirements • Criteria for APCL and APEL for initial entry and advanced entry • FAQs for applicants and staff |

RPL scholarship

As mentioned earlier in this article, the scholarship of RPL/APEL is a growing field of academic research interest. The processes of RPL can be unsettling for traditional academic staff who have little or no involvement with professional development or work-related learning. Indeed, there is a growing scholarship which is critical of the trend towards overly-technicist, outcomes-based learning where only particular learning is valued and rewarded, particularly if there is an over-emphasis in policy on human capital models at the expense of social and cultural capital. Tensions in beliefs about legitimate forms of knowledge are inevitable across higher education traditions. RPL can sometimes be the site where such tensions become public. In such contexts there is merit in facilitating expressions of concern and making divergence of opinion explicit without an adversarial culture of competing tribes and territories.

RPL can impact on norms of curriculum design and relationships with external stakeholders. In this regard it is essential that staff have sufficient time and space to consider the impact of RPL on their personal and institutional practices in the same way as developments in learning and teaching generally are managed.

With this in mind, DIT staff are encouraged to make use of the RPL scholarship resources available in Schools and on the staff intranet and to participate in the continuing professional development programme about RPL policies, procedures and pedagogies.

Left to do

At this stage there is virtually no scepticism about the value of RPL among DIT staff. Since using RPL is a matter for academic decision at the programme level there is no managerial imposition and therefore no resistance. What remains to be done relate to technical, political and institutional issues rather than ideological, epistemological or pedagogical issues. Some of those issues are indicated below.

Technical

The most challenging aspect of RPL implementation across international experiences seems to be the management of applications using on-line self-assessment systems. This has also been the experience of the DIT.

Political

The meta-promise of policy documents that all learning can be made visible and subsequently valued is ambitious and perhaps disingenuous to the general public. The DIT has managed this reasonably well to date by relating all RPL activity to its own current or past awards in the first instance and by using trusted databases of qualifications to establish equivalence. However, this area of activity is not entirely complete.

Institutional

How to manage expectations from RPL in a fair and transparent way – both internally and with the public – is one of the last remaining ‘things to do’ about RPL in the DIT.

Cultural

What may seem as loosening of control by introducing RPL can be uncomfortable and unsettling for traditional academic cultures. So too can top-down tightening of control over what was heretofore an area of academic freedom. Innovatory academic staff will invariably continue to be innovatory, but being too-far ahead can stimulate over-re-action by traditionalists and perhaps risk loss of credibility and trust in the innovation. The public management of well-considered RPL innovations is perhaps the next stage for the DIT and one which is welcome.

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