European Inventory

on validation of informal and non-formal learning



European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learningIRELAND

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Contents PAGE

1.0	INTRODUCTION	1	
2.0	PUBLIC SECTOR	2	
2.1	Further education and training awards	4	
2.1.1	Policies		
2.1.2	Guidelines for assessment of individual's prior learning	5	
2.1.3	Impact	6	
2.2	Higher Education (excluding universities and the Dublin Institute of		
	Technology)	8	
2.2.1	Policies	8	
2.2.2	Procedure for assessment of RPL for direct awards	9	
2.2.3	Impact	9	
2.3	Universities	10	
3.0	PRIVATE SECTOR	11	
3.1	Construction Industry Federation	11	
3.2	The Lionra Network		
4.0	THE THIRD SECTOR	13	
4.1	Citizens Information Board (Comhairle)	13	
5.0	CONCLUSIONS	14	

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The accreditation of prior learning is currently the subject of major debate across all sections of education and training in Ireland. In fact, Ireland was one of the first EU states to implement national legislation relating to the recognition of prior informal and non-formal learning. This is documented in the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 in the section on 'access, transfer and progression'. This legislation means that any individual has the right to apply for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) for the purpose of gaining an award or qualification in the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) or in accessing education and training programmes. Nevertheless, the progress towards developing a national system has been fairly slow¹.

The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) is a new framework launched in October 2003, which allows formal, non-formal and informal learning to be recognised within one national structure. It is based on standards or learning outcomes and as such allows parity of recognition to be achieved across all forms of learning whether this is achieved in a formal or non-formal setting through the framework. The new framework is therefore compatible with the European policy agenda and will facilitate learner mobility within and between national systems.

¹ Coughlan, D (2005/2006) Accreditation of prior learning: an Irish perspective

2.0 PUBLIC SECTOR

Since the early nineties, there has been an increase in the incidence of RPL (Recognition of Prior Learning) in Ireland – largely in response to demand for certification from employed individuals and employers¹, the need to meet new regulatory requirements and to respond to a diversified student body (in higher education in particular). These processes were developed in a range of sectors (e.g. construction, childcare, hospitality) and by a range of former awarding bodies (e.g. the National Tourism Development Authority - Fáilte Ireland, FÁS National Training and Employment Authority). These processes, nevertheless, were not unified under any one national system for RPL.

The launch of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) in 2003 put renewed and increased emphasis on RPL. This is because the NFQ embodied the idea that: "Equal value should be given to all these forms of learning (i.e. formal, non-formal and informal), regardless of source, how it is achieved and when in life it is achieved". The Framework comprises ten different reference levels with each defined in terms of general standards of knowledge, skill and competence³. The learning outcomes set out in the Framework provide a common reference point or basis for RPL. Over time, the development of new Framework awards (including minor, special and supplemental awards) are expected to provide further opportunities for RPL⁴.

The National Qualifications Authority Ireland (NQAI), which leads the development and maintenance of the NQF, took on the task of promoting a national approach to RPL. The NQAI is the organisation responsible for "promoting the co-ordination and harmonisation of processes for the recognition of prior learning on the part of education providers and awarding bodies"⁵. The Authority determined that the recognition of prior learning would be applicable to learners gaining:

- Entry to education and training programmes;
- Credit towards an award or exemptions from specific programme requirements; and/or
- Eligibility for a full award/qualification.

¹ FETAC (2007) Recognition of Prior Learning; Evaluation Report 2007.

² Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning in Further and Higher Education and Training (June 2005)

³ FETAC (2007) Recognition of Prior Learning; Evaluation Report 2007.

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning in Further and Higher Education and Training (June 2005)

In 2004, the NQAI convened a national advisory group to devise a set of national principles for the recognition of prior learning in further and higher education in order to underpin the introduction of policy and procedures for RPL in Ireland. In June 2005, the NQAI published the "Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning in Further and Higher Education and Training". This aimed to provide a **national approach** to the recognition of formal, non-formal and informal learning, which could be used by education providers, awarding bodies and private sector companies. The principles agreed upon in the policy address the issues of quality, assessment, documentation and procedures for the review of policy and practice. They aim to encourage RPL, to bring consistency to RPL in Ireland and remove difficulties that may confront an applicant wishing to transfer within and between different education and training sectors.

The principles and guidelines have been utilised to varying degrees by the Irish Universities, the Dublin Institute of Technology, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) and the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) in developing their policies and procedures for RPL. NQAI recommends that they develop policies and procedures, which have the following elements:

Review and updating i.e. in line with the 2005 guidelines and in line with any changes thereafter;

Operational approaches e.g. identifying units/modules that can be achieved through RPL, identifying limits in the proportion of learning that can be recognised via RPL, identifying the roles and responsibilities of those that are involved in the process etc;

Assessment i.e. by competent persons, given training and support, developing a range of assessment tools etc;

Applicants i.e. being fully informed, given guidance and support;

Communications i.e. clear information to the learners/applicants, promoting the availability of RPL and regularly publishing information on the extent to which RPL is being implemented, best practice etc.

The main national awarding bodies are HETAC, FETAC and universities. The Qualifications (Education & Training) Act 1999 reduced the number of certifying bodies in Ireland and hence organisations such as the National Training and Employment Authority FAS, the National Council for Vocational Awards NCVA, the Irish Agriculture and Food Development AuthorityTeagasc and Failte Ireland came under the remit of a new organisation - the Further Education and Training Awards Council [FETAC]. Although

these organisations are not the only awarding bodies, they are the main ones in Ireland for qualifications offered outside formal schooling.

Universities enjoy significant autonomy in Ireland and are awarding bodies in their own right. HETAC is the qualifications awarding body for third-level educational and training institutions that are *outside* the university sector (both public and private). Other awarding bodies are the Dublin Institute of Technology and the State Examinations Commission, which makes the mainstream school-based education awards.

The following section describes the policies and procedures for all three above mentioned sectors; further education and training, higher education (excluding universities) and universities.

2.1 Further education and training awards

The Further Education and Training Awards Council, Ireland (FETAC) functions to make and promote awards, validate programmes, monitor and ensure the quality of programmes and determine standards. It has a particularly large remit since FETAC awards are offered nationwide by a wide range of providers in diverse settings. Hence FETAC awards are offered by Bord lascigh Mhara (Irish Fisheries Board), Failte Ireland, FAS, Teagasc Centres, Vocational Adult and Communicat Education and Training Centres Institutes of Technology and the workplace.

2.1.1 Policies

In its Strategic Plan 2003 – 2006, FETAC committed to publish a policy on recognition of prior learning in 2005 and to facilitate recognition of prior learning from 2006. FETAC agreed its Policy on Recognition of Prior Learning in April 2005, subject to the development of guidelines to support providers.

The Policy on Recognition of Prior Learning requires providers who register with FETAC to facilitate learners through the recognition of prior learning for access to programmes, exemptions/credit from requirements of a programme and access to full awards as far as they can, subject to the availability of guidelines on recognition of prior learning.

The FETAC RPL policy aims to ensure learners have opportunities to have their prior learning recognised, through providers who are quality assured offering validated programmes leading to FETAC awards. The policy supports the implementation of recognition of prior learning by providers for the purposes of access to programmes, gaining exemptions or credits and in some cases attaining full awards.

FETAC may also in conjunction with providers make awards directly to learners who, on the basis of RPL, can demonstrate they meet the standards for an award.

All providers who register with FETAC can facilitate learners through the RPL programme to support access to full awards, exemptions from programme requirements and access to full awards in accordance with the guidelines. All learners have the opportunity to have their prior learning recognised through providers that are quality assured.

2.1.2 Guidelines for assessment of individual's prior learning

The guidelines establish a number of processes for providers in offering RPL. The FETAC RPL model requires providers to¹:

- Provide information to the learner on entry requirements/exemptions available through RPL;
- Allow the learner to provide evidence of their RPL;
- Ensure providers assess the evidence (using mentors, assessors and external verifiers);
- Make recommendations as to whether RPL should be accepted.

This leads to the provider allowing entry onto programmes or exemptions from some programme requirements.

RPL can also lead to a FETAC award. A summary of the process for determining the eligibility for an award is given below:

Stage	Criteria
1. Award Identification/eligibility of the learner	The Award must be as listed in the FETAC Directory of Awards
- FETAC Guidelines available - Provider/Learner identify a FETAC award	Eligibility of the learner is established following quick scan of learning outcomes/standards for the award
2. Matching of experience to Standards - The provider/learner match the individually acquired knowledge, skill and competence to the national standards for an award.	The standards for the award must be available and the learners experiences must be clearly and accurately documented against the standards

¹ RPL: Policy and Guidelines (Draft). Published by FETAC.

5

- A mentor may support the learner	
3. Gathering of Evidence Evidence is gathered to prove the knowledge, skills and competences claimed by the learner to meet the learning outcomes of the award. The evidence will be collated into a Portfolio.	A portfolio/collection of evidence can conclude: - Curriculum Vitae - Certificates - Job Description (s) - References/testimonials - Products/Samples - Evidence from Courses attended - Work place assessment, test results - Interviews - Other
4. Assessment of Evidence An assessment and verification of the individual's knowledge, skills and competences is conducted against the award standards	Assessment criteria for the standards of the FETAC award must be deemed to be met. The evidence in the Portfolio must be assessed in terms of Sufficiency, Validity, Authenticity, Reliability and Currency.
5. Recommendation for an award A recommendation is made based on the evidence presented	(a) the learner meets the required standards for the award (b) the candidate almost meets the required standards but needs to provide additional evidence (c) The candidate has not provided adequate evidence to prove he/she meets the standards for the award.
6. Monitoring The recommended outcome is monitored by the provider and FETAC.	As per award requirement, the outcome of the assessment is monitored.

Source: RPL: Policy and Guidelines (draft). Published by FETAC

2.1.3 Impact

In 2006, FETAC launched a **pilot project** to identify and evaluate the experience of providers and FETAC in offering RPL. This project involved 9 providers and the evaluation of this pilot has just recently been published, in 2007. The participant providers included former awarding bodies, a college of further education, a sector industry body, a voluntary organisation, a community education provider and two private providers. Hence, although small scale, it aimed to be representative of further education and training.

As a result of the project 50 learners achieved major and minor awards in a variety of different fields and levels of the national framework¹. Awards were achieved in bar management, childcare, community development, security etc. The drop-out rate was low with only a small number of participants not completing the RPL process. The low drop-out rate was put down to, inter alia, the **careful selection of participants** on the programme. **Employer support** was also found to be critical for effective implementation of RPL.

The findings from this project are critical to the future implementation of RPL. A number of **recommendations** have been made, which FETAC will consider from 2007 onwards²:

- To build capacity by encouraging providers to network and share experiences/best practice;
- To require all providers to put in place policies and procedures for implementing RPL;
- To ensure that all providers that wish to offer RPL show evidence of being able to do so and be quality assured by FETAC;
- To support providers in streamlining their RPL procedures;
- To require providers who offer short courses as part of their submission for programme validation to identify their actual arrangements for recognising prior learning;
- To monitor providers' RPL activities to ensure consistent application across the board;
- To enhance the current draft guidelines to ensure providers are more clearly informed of RPL requirements and to review and amend the guidelines on an on-going basis;
- To put in place briefing sessions to further assist providers who can show competence and capacity to implement RPL policy and procedures;
- To gather and publish data on the number of learners accessing programmes, gaining exemptions and achieving full awards on the basis of RPL;
- To identify and acknowledge on its website all providers who are specifically quality assured to offer RPL for the purposes of enabling learners to achieve awards;
- To support employees in the workplace in developing "flexible and responsive training provision" as depicted in the policy document "Tomorrows Skills: Towards a National Skills Strategy".

The pilot project also brought about some clear **practical lessons**³:

 Providers dealing with RPL for the first time require support and advice at all stages of the process: planning, skills audit, evidence gathering and assessment.

¹ FETAC (2007) Recognition of Prior Learning; Evaluation Report 2007.

² FETAC (2007) Recognition of Prior Learning; Evaluation Report 2007.

³ FETAC (2007) Recognition of Prior Learning; Evaluation Report 2007.

- Critical factors for effective implementation of RPL for providers were an appropriate assessment of time required for planning and development of tools; the need for experienced staff; the need for employer commitment.
- Providers find the construction of portfolios difficult. Recommendation was made by an external evaluator of the initiative that sample portfolios would be provided for providers.
- The accurate and clear style and expression of learning outcomes in the awards standards is essential to ensure credibility of RPL; the learning outcomes must be understandable. Learning outcomes that are vague and overly complex can mean that neither the provider nor the learner may be in a position to make accurate judgements.
- Assessment interview to complement the portfolio of evidence was found useful.
 Assessors get to clarify the 'prior learning' of the individual and get a deeper understanding of the individuals portfolio of evidence.
- Individual participants emphasised the need for clear guidelines for the development of the portfolio; undertake personal skills analysis before entering the RPL process; the significance of on-going support from a mentor; appreciation of time required to complete the process while continuing to work full time.

Thus far, FETAC has developed guidelines, piloted the guidelines, published the findings of the pilot study and actually made its first awards to learners using the new RPL system. FETAC will now continue to promote and extend RPL within the further education and training sector, taking the recommendations listed above into account.

2.2 Higher Education (excluding universities and the Dublin Institute of Technology)

The Higher Education and Training Awards Council, Ireland (HETAC) is the organisation responsible for awarding qualifications at all levels of higher education, up to PhD level, in general, in respect of Institutes of Technology, recognised institutions and private providers. It sets standards for higher education and training awards, validates higher education and training programmes, monitors HEIs' quality assurance procedures, delegates awarding powers to recognised institutions, ensures student assessment is fair and consistent and protects students where HETAC awards cease to exist.

2.2.1 Policies

In addition to developing policies and procedures for providers who offer programmes leading to HETAC awards, HETAC, like FETAC, also makes awards directly to learners solely on the basis of RPL (in accordance with the Education and Training (Qualifications) Act 1999). It has draft policies and procedures on RPL in place, which update the

pioneering policies of its predecessor, the National Council for Educational Awards, on RPL.

In regard to the latter, HETAC published its 'Recognition Policy, Criteria and Process for a Direct Application to HETAC for a Named Award' in March 2006. This document offers supplementary guidance for "persons who have not already achieved academic qualifications for that learning and who can demonstrate that they have achieved the standard for one or more HETAC named awards".

HETAC has outlined a number of policies, criteria and processes in this document. Briefly these state that:

- The RPL process is available to everybody;
- The process is underpinned by quality assurance (ensuring the learner provides evidence of meeting published HETAC standards, that robust assessment of that evidence takes place, that rights to appeal are in place and that HETAC is fully compliant with NQAI guidelines), and;
- Ensures the Higher Education Providers help HETAC in forming an opinion on each learner application.

2.2.2 Procedure for assessment of RPL for direct awards

The processes involved in RPL include:

- Providing guidance on how to submit evidence e.g. using the Europass CV and the HETAC application form;
- Ensuring quality in the assessment process e.g. involving third party verification, being fair and consistent, involving external panel of expert assessors, compliance with HETAC's published standards etc;
- Putting in place appeal procedures for unsuccessful applicants.

2.2.3 Impact

An increasing number of providers are now offering RPL for entry, credit and/or exemptions and a number have institutions-wide policies in place. This is being driven by demand from the workplace, and from a more diverse student body as well as supportive chances such as flexible delivery, modularisation and credit systems.

Currently it is unknown how many students have accessed RPL as such data is not collected on a systematic basis. Students that have had their prior learning recognised are treated in like manner to other students This may however change in the future. In respect

¹ March 2006 Recognition Policy, Criteria and Process for a Direct Application to HETAC for a Named Award – Published by HETAC

of direct applications for awards on the basis of RPL, three such awards have been made to-date - an Ordinary Degree, a Masters degree and a doctorate.

2.3 Universities¹

Each of the seven universities in Ireland is self-governing in most matters but legislation does place certain responsibilities on the sector collectively in areas such as equality and access. This latter being quite important considering the role that RPL can and does play in improving access.

It is difficult to get a full picture of activity in RPL across the sector, although, in general, it does appear to be less than for the further education and training and the HETAC sectors. A small number are developing institution-wide policies and in other cases, activity tends to be located in the nursing, adult education and continuing professional development sectors (as well as in some cases, for mature students). A number of recent developments are putting increased pressure on the university sector to develop RPL - including increased pressure to maintain their enrolment numbers and with demographic trends indicating a fall in the number of school leavers it is imperative for systems to be put in place to allow for greater flexibility in the admissions system as well as the need to respond to workplace needs. As in the HETAC sector, the development of credit systems, modularisation and flexible delivery modes all support the development of RPL.

¹ Quoted directly from Coughlan, D (2005/2006) Accreditation of prior learning: an Irish perspective.

3.0 PRIVATE SECTOR

This section will describe validation in the context of the workplace and employment.

The new National Qualifications Framework provides for recognition of non-formal and informal learning in the workplace. All learning can be accommodated from the most basic to the most advanced and includes that achieved through experience in the workplace or other non-formal settings.

Currently, employers and the social partners are taking a more active interest in RPL and arguably are key drivers in taking RPL forward. For example:

In the nursing industry, the original requirement for entry into the profession has increased from diploma to degree level, which has created a need for RPL. Now all HEIs that supply nursing courses use RPL to allow nurses returning to the profession to have their knowledge and experience recognised.

In quarry management, the industry needed to up-skill the existing workforce and, with an Institute of Technology devised programmes and used RPL to enable their employees to achieve awards and career progression into positions of project management etc;

In industries such as security, childcare, construction and hospitality, an interest in professionalising the workforce and more significantly for some, the need to meet new regulatory requirements for practice is generating demand for RPL to enable existing workers access newly required qualifications.

In addition, the National Skills Strategy (2007) has a target to increase education and training by one level for 500,000 people by 2010. The Department for Enterprise and Employment and others are interested in the potential role of RPL in achieving this. This will provide a further drive for the use of RPL in up-skilling the workforce.

Below are two case studies of industries that have used RPL recently, one in the construction industry and one in IT. The examples quoted are designed to indicate the range of developments and are not representative of the workplace as a whole.

3.1 Construction Industry Federation

The Construction Industry Federation is the employer industry association for the construction industry. As part of the CIF/PREP (Performance Recognition and Enhancement Project) the CIF took part in the FETAC pilot project where it implemented

an RPL process with employees (and owners) of small and medium sized companies in the construction sector. This project resulted in six construction company employees achieving FETAC awards on the basis of RPL for the first time in Ireland.

A further RPL project has been initiated as a result of this pilot study.

3.2 The Lionra Network

The Lionra project, involving a number of higher education institutions and companies, commenced in March 2006 and focuses on ICT training for people in employment and developing a common approach to RPL. The project aims to provide¹:

- General awareness in training in RPL processes delivered in enterprises across the Border West Midlands (BMW) region;
- 250 individuals trained in portfolio preparation;
- 250 portfolios assessed and certification awarded in individual IT subject areas (where merited);
- 20 mentors in industry trained to support staff in portfolio preparation concerning RPL of their IT skills:
- Third level certification of RPL mentoring;
- Three IT subject matter experts trained in portfolio assessment in each participating Lionra Network College;
- Developing a common methodology for RPL.

The project is scheduled to be completed in September 2007 and is on target to meet its key goals. This project has gone some way in developing common RPL policies, procedures and practice, has developed awareness of RPL and its potential and has provided training and common resources to be used in the RPL process. In the future, it is anticipated that the learning from this project (which will be evaluated) will inform future joint initiatives on RPL in higher education and promote the wider development and use of RPL.

12

¹ Recognition of Prior Learning: A presentation by Roisin Sweeney (May 2007)

4.0 THE THIRD SECTOR

This section will describe validation in the context of the community and voluntary sector.

As in other sectors, there have been a number of ad-hoc projects carried out on RPL in the third sector. The following case studies aim to be indicative, not representative of the voluntary sector as a whole.

4.1 Citizens Information Board (Comhairle)

Comhairle, now the Citizens Information Board, took part in the FETAC pilot project, 2006, which enabled the Board to gain experience of the RPL process and recognise emerging issues with the implementation of RPL.

Comhairle's motivation for participating in the project included:

- Being able to develop RPL in line with their own training and development services;
- Facilitating their employed and voluntary advisors through the RPL process for the purposes of FETAC achieving awards;
- Being aware of the need for qualifications.

The result of this project was that 6 learners within Comhairle achieved FETAC minor awards at level 6 in the National Framework of Qualifications.

5.0 CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has shown that Ireland is advanced in that it has a framework and legislation in place for recognising prior learning. It also has national guidelines, which draw from the Common European Principles of 2004, and procedures for the recognition of prior learning in place for both higher and further education, the Awards Councils have polices in place and there is a body of experience of in using these procedures i.e. in designing tools, using appropriate assessment methods, quality assuring the process etc.

The current issues for the different stakeholders involved in RPL are therefore not so much in the development of reliable/valid RPL methods but in promoting and encouraging RPL, bearing in mind the funding and resource implications it has everyone involved. There are a number of barriers to increased use of RPL including broadly, a general lack understanding of the concept of RPL, limited funding and the significant investment it requires of all concerned. There is no national funding of RPL, with the exception of some research funding for HEIs. This means that institutions and providers have to fund RPL through their own funds, which is expensive. The RPL process is resource intensive given the amount of staff time, the fact that the process can be very individualised etc. This may act as a barrier to increased uptake of RPL.

For example, the priority for the NQAI now, drawing on national experience to date and its involvement in the OECD activity (2006-2008) on the recognition of non-formal and informal learning is to take stock of developments and consider appropriate targeted actions to promote RPL, taking account of current sources of demand and priorities in respect of education and training in general, as well as the implementation of the national framework of qualifications, which broadly supports the objectives of RPL.