
A European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning

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1.0 VALIDATION OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING IN IRELAND

By John Konrad (Konrad Associates International)

1.1 Introduction

This area of educational policy and practice is currently undergoing rapid development. This report is based primarily on discussions with key stakeholders, supplemented by quotations from relevant studies and documents. The period covered in the study is the last four years.

As will be seen subsequently, whilst only a limited analysis has been undertaken, care has been taken to make the approach capable of regular updating.

1.2 Review of existing initiatives: Public Sector

1.2.1 Overview of political and practical initiatives by public authorities National Framework of Qualifications

There are many changes currently taking place in education and training in Ireland. The new National Framework of Qualifications was developed between 2001 and 2003, co-ordinated by the National Qualification Authority for Ireland [NQAI] a key element in these changes. It signals significant progress in the creation of a single, coherent, more easily understood qualifications system for all levels of education and training. It is also compatible with European and international developments to enhance learner mobility within and between national systems¹.

The NQAI maintains the Framework. While all the awards made by the national awarding bodies in Ireland are included in the Framework, they are not all included in the same way because these bodies differ with respect to their structures, functions and autonomy. For example, as discussed below, Universities have a significant degree of autonomy. The Qualifications (Education & Training) Act 1999 established separate but interdependent roles for the NQAI and the Awards Councils - the Further Education and Training Awards Council [FETAC] and Higher Education and Training Awards Council [HETAC]. The overall standards of awards of FETAC, HETAC and the Dublin Institute of Technology [DIT] are set by the Framework and these bodies, as awarding bodies, are responsible for setting detailed standards for named awards, validate programmes, make awards, agree and monitor quality assurance procedures and ensure fair and consistent assessment of learners. In the case of the DIT, which is both a provider and an awarding body, it validates its own programmes and ensures that quality assurance procedures are in place.

The awards councils may also delegate authority to make awards to particular institutions that are within their remit. This will be based on criteria and procedures agreed between the Councils concerned and the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland. Such criteria and procedures have been agreed by HETAC and the Authority and are being implemented.

¹ See <http://www.nfq.ie/nfq/en/>

The universities are both providers and awarding bodies and set the standards for their awards. Awards made by the universities will be accommodated in the Framework on an agreed basis with the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland.

The State Examinations Commission is responsible for setting standards for the Junior Certificate and the Leaving Certificate. These awards are accommodated in the Framework on an agreed basis with the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland.

1.2.2 Review of National Policies for Education

Currently, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] has been undertaking a review of national policies in Higher Education during 2004.

“We regard it as critical that the cause of lifelong learning is reinvigorated. It is self-evident that significant generations of potential graduates did not penetrate higher education in the past and that, though on a lesser scale the situation continues now. ... Much more needs to be done to facilitate credit transfer and accumulation, including the recognition of work experience and prior experience. ... However, progress is slow and there is an urgent need to secure agreement across the various providers and to move on to develop a mechanism to enable the introduction of APEL to encourage adult students to resume learning.²”

This quotation summarises the current situation where the fit between the needs of the economy and the outcomes of the formal education and training systems needs significant development in access to Higher Education. Changes that meet this need will also be capable of use in recognising competencies in Further Education.

1.2.3 Key Questions

“To improve training outcomes, governments and social partners could establish systems of accreditation and recognition that facilitate investment in adult skills. Recognition of prior learning is a prime example. This means that non-formal learning is either accredited as a formal qualification, or recognised for the purposes of acquiring a new formal qualification. While recognition of prior learning can prove a useful stepping-stone into further learning, it is essential to ensure that certification systems are credible and transparent to employers, while also reflecting changing skill requirements. Otherwise, certified skills might lose value in the labour market. In addition, recognition of prior learning needs to be translated into higher earnings/better career prospects for the workers concerned. How to create a system of recognition and accreditation of skills that can be used as “currency” in the labour market, while keeping track with changing skill requirements? In particular, what is the experience of

² OECD (2004), Review of National Policies for Education: Review of Higher Education in Ireland – Examiners’ Report, EDU/EC(2004)14, September, Para 59.

social partners defining jointly education and training curricula leading to recognised qualifications?³”

These questions, though formulated in the context of Higher Education, are also relevant to the development of a coherent strategy of Lifelong Learning at all levels.

1.3 Review of existing initiatives: Private Sector

Developments relating to RPL in Ireland relate to the establishment in Ireland of a new framework of qualifications by the national Qualifications Authority in 2003. The framework is defined as ‘the single, nationally and internationally accepted entity, through which all learning achievements may be measured and related to each other in a coherent way and which defines the relationship between all education and training awards’

The new National Qualifications Framework provides for recognition of non-formal and informal learning in both the workplace and in the voluntary sector. 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. Under the terms of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 the Councils are required to ensure that providers facilitate access, transfer and progression of learners (within the framework of qualifications) (Section 14d); and to make or recognise awards to persons who apply for those awards who in the opinion of the Council have achieved the standards determined by the Council (section 14c)

The National Qualifications Authority has defined Recognition of Prior Learning [RPL] as: ‘Recognition of learning that has taken place, but not necessarily been assessed or measured, prior to entering a programme. Such prior learning may have been acquired through formal, non-formal and informal routes’

There are a number of organisations in Ireland who have devised and implemented APL/RPL to date. The examples quoted below are designed to indicate the range of developments and are not necessarily representative of particular sectors.

³ OECD/Department for Education and Science, Ireland: International Colloquium on Business-education partnerships: Learning from the world of work Dublin, January 24-25 2005 paragraph 19. [Further activities are planned for later in 2005]

1.3.1 FÁS

“FÁS — Training and Employment Authority, was established in January 1988, under the Labour Services Act 1987 to provide a wide range of services to the labour market in Ireland. For example, FÁS Food Industry Training and Development Unit, Services to Business provides a wide range of training programmes for the Food Industry. These training programmes are delivered in training establishments or are conducted on site, i.e. in-company.

FÁS recognises and arranges certification of skills whether they are acquired formally on courses or informally through work and/or life experiences.

It is FAS policy to widen access to certification, to acknowledge life-long learning and emphasise the importance of skills acquired by means other than formal training.

FÁS, through its Certification and Standards Department, has developed a process of Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL), which allows existing employees gain certification using the APL system.

“In Ireland there have been a number of pilot experiences in the recognition of prior learning developed as a result of a demand for access/entry to education and training and for certification of skills. Assessments of Prior Learning (APL) responses have been devised to respond to the needs of industries experiencing organisational change. FÁS, the training and employment authority worked with the Irish Electricity Supply Board in an accreditation programme for semi-skilled linesmen who were all experienced workers. These workers were fast-tracked through an electrical apprenticeship and were credited for prior experience as part of the process.⁴”

FÁS has devised and implemented an APL process since 1992. A methodology incorporating advice, skills analysis and a variety of evidence gathering procedures followed by assessment and verification was developed by FÁS. APL in FÁS operates within the existing systems of assessment and certification using the FÁS training standards for awards. APL processes undertaken include facilitating employed and unemployed persons in sectors of retailing, teleservices, meat trade, childcare, craft electricians, and construction skills. FÁS has worked with ESB, private retailers, Chambers of Commerce, and CIF. Training and supporting documentation has been developed for facilitating the process for all involved in the process to support advisers/facilitators, and assessors/verifiers. FÁS adopted the term ‘taking credit’ for initial work in the field.

The FÁS definition of APL is that of S. Simosko: ‘the accreditation of prior learning is a process that enables people of all ages, backgrounds and attitudes to receive formal recognition for skills and knowledge they already possess’.

Evaluation elements regarding the assessment of all APL material included authenticity, validity, sufficiency and currency of material and a minimum of two items of evidence for a

⁴ OECD (2004), *The Role of National Qualifications Systems in Promoting Lifelong Learning*, para 3.5 page 16. <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/57/27/34376318.pdf>

particular outcome or set of outcomes. In FÁS each sectoral area presented with particular requirement – an individual interview was a feature in retail APL while a panel of assessors was a feature in electrical sectors. Union agreement was also a feature to consider.

Using the same model FÁS International devised and implemented a major project in RPL for craft sector in South Africa with the Building Industry Training Board and subsequently the Construction Education and Training Authority (CETA).

FÁS also participated through Leonardo in a number of APEL projects on the development of a common model for APL in the EU.

1.3.2 Failte Ireland (CERT/NTCB)

Failte Ireland (National Tourism Development Authority) formerly CERT has in place a methodology for APL for craft and other awards in a range of occupations, entitled: ‘get your experience recognised’. A model process has been adopted similar to that of FAS. Clear methodology with supporting documentation has been devised and tested. The process is individually focussed with growing numbers participating.

Candidates apply to Failte Ireland, are appointed a Mentor, prepare a portfolio of evidence, which is submitted to Failte Ireland, are interviewed by an APL committee and awarded a certificate if they achieve the standards. There is ‘no written examination’.

The process operates within the existing assessment processes of NTCB and is verified accordingly. Full awards have been made following successful APL applications.

1.3.3 NCVA (1994-2001)

The NCVA devised an RPL process titled APEAL in its Work Experience Module to enable candidates use experience acquired informally in the workplace and gain recognition for learning. A feasibility study was undertaken to test the model which utilised a Portfolio building process structured according to guidelines and criteria in the NCVA assessment process. The portfolios were externally moderated.

NCVA also participated as the awarding body for the DIT/OMNA Childcare APL programme and devised a model for the process. The DIT/Omna project devised a 9-stage process including Contact, registration, and introduction, assistance by a mentor, mentor contact, portfolio preparation, portfolio building, assessment and recognition. Supporting documentation and training materials were also developed.

This included devising of evidence and criteria of competence for NCVA Modules and the identification of required training. DIT/OMNA assisted candidates to gather evidence and graded and using the mainstream NCVA processes for assessment and verification enabled 10 candidates to receive awards in Childcare.

1.3.4 HETAC (NCEA) APEL Policy

The APEL model established by the NCEA – National Council for Educational Awards now HETAC is about gaining exemptions from subjects within a programme of learning and credits the candidate to a maximum of 50% of an award. The HETAC model is applied within outcomes based programme/award.

An individual can make an application to an institution with supporting reasons why the applicant feels his/her case merits consideration. Applicants prepare a Portfolio describing the prior experience in the context of ‘credible learning and experience is endorsed by employers where appropriate. An assessor(s) evaluates the portfolio and tests out other instruments which may be utilised as required. Assessors must match the learning with the outcomes of the subject from which the candidate seeks exemption.

HETAC has specified a number of criteria for rigorous application in assessment of the portfolio which include:

- Balance between theory and practice,
- Transferability of learning, and,
- Academic level of learning.

The Cork Institute of Technology has further implemented RPL in a number of sectoral areas. The DEIS – Department of Educational Development have developed a number of initiatives in this field and have made full awards using the RPL process.

Up to 50% of an award can be achieved in any year with 35% in award bearing year Learning portfolio is the approach taken - is developed including CV, job description learning outcomes and proof which can be endorsements and such evidence as syllabi/prospectuses. Other Institutes of Technology and Universities in Ireland also have policies and practices in APL/RPL. Waterford Institute of Technology, Institute of Technology Tralee and the University of Limerick are examples.

1.3.5 Developments in Further Education

FETAC is currently developing policy and approaches and these are subject to wide consultation with stakeholders. A draft Policy Paper will be presented to FETAC in January 2005. The following excerpts are from the March 2005 draft⁵.

Recognition of Prior Learning is defined as a process of identification, assessment and recognition of learning howsoever acquired (Includes formal, non-formal and informal learning).

FETAC Strategy:

- Aims to facilitate the recognition of learning undertaken throughout life within a personal, civic and social and or employment related perspective.
- Makes quality assured Awards, determine national standards, and ensures providers operate fair & consistent assessment of learners.

⁵ Personal communication from Angela Lambkin, FETAC

Draft FETAC policy:

- FETAC aims to introduce RPL to the further education and training sector. From 2005 all new providers who register with FETAC and agree their quality assurance policies with FETAC will begin to facilitate learners through its providers using RPL for the purposes of access to programmes, exemptions from programme requirements and to attain full awards as appropriate⁶.
- HETAC the higher education and training awards council has the same responsibilities and functions as FETAC and is in the process of developing an RPL policy and procedure. In partnership with FETAC, the CEDEFOP Virtual Community on the Identification will provide support during 2005 for the above development at a European level.

1.4 Review of existing initiatives: The Third Sector

The Community Women's Education Initiative (CWEI)⁷ is a partner in the Socrates-Grundtvig ADEPT project. CWEI developed learning portfolios at foundation level. The learning portfolio at foundation level is aimed specifically at making visible the learning of traveller women by exploring the meaning and value of story telling in the traveller culture. This portfolio uses a number of non-written techniques for this purpose:

- Collages and photography with which the women produce a family tree to record knowledge learned from their families;
- Individual interviews with the traveller women to explore learning and skills within their cultural background

At the end of this process a portfolio is produced that includes a folder with the collage work, the transcript of the interviews and a highlight of the areas that are particularly significant to the particular women. The purpose of this work is to build the women's confidence, encourage team work and identify the skills and knowledge within them and validate it. The method has been piloted with 67 women in two groups.

1.5 Conclusions

Ongoing research is principally taking place in the context of European projects. It is expected that with the implementation of the National Qualification Framework and the outcomes of the OECD study, co-ordinated national development will occur. It is currently too early to evaluate the impact of the proposals, but this should be possible in the second half of 2005. As already identified above, APEL is an important part of a strategy to improve the synergy between the needs of the economy and the delivery of the National Qualification Framework. Some of the parameters for promoting social inclusion are identified below. Analysing the efficiency and effectiveness (with references to the costs and benefits of different initiatives) of current initiatives and the overall framework for validation

⁶ Policies Actions and Procedures on Access, Transfer and Progression, NQAI, 2003

⁷ CWEI is a women's community education organisation providing education initiatives for women who left the education system early and have not achieved high levels of formal qualifications.

At the time of writing, it is not yet possible to carry out this analysis. The study has identified a range of policies and initiatives, together with the Action Plan 2005 – 2007 for Achieving Equity of Access to Higher Education Ireland. In the context of achieving a broader range of teaching and learning practices, one of the Action Points is to “Promote modular, credit-based learning and accreditation of prior learning with financial and other resources.”⁸ . In particular, the evaluation of developments will be improved by the introduction of appropriate data collection, which would enable the identification of the impact of the new policies.

⁸ Higher Education Authority (2004), Action Plan 2005-2007, Dublin, November, page 18.