

Forum Insights

REPORT OF RESEARCH PROJECT 2

A Current Overview of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in Irish Higher Education

This *Forum Insight* summarises the key aspects of a project which examined current practices for recognition of prior learning in higher education institutions in Ireland. It will be of relevance to teachers, managers and students.

Introduction

As part of Forum's commitment to leading and facilitating evidence-based enhancement, it has funded a series of Focused Research Projects which were conducted over a six month period by higher education researchers in partnership with the National Forum. The projects were designed to provide a quick snapshot of the key issues and findings on a number of nationally important themes. Eight successful projects were awarded funding by the Forum following competitive selection, based on international peer review in December 2014. Ethics approval for the projects was granted through the higher education institutions involved and the National Forum's Research Ethics Committee. Overall this work has started to create a body of targeted knowledge that can be used quickly to guide future practices in teaching and learning. It also shows institutions working together and in partnership with the Forum to use research to improve approaches to the learning experience.

What did the study involve?

This project, a national analysis, explored current practices relating to the recognition of prior learning in Irish higher education, including HECA colleges, Institutes of Technology, Universities and Associate Colleges. A systematic review of information available publicly through institutions' websites, published policies for RPL as well as analysis of institutions' mission-based Performance Compacts was undertaken. In addition in-depth interviews with practitioners, employer case-studies and student perspectives were used to explore the practices of RPL in operation.

Working definitions and policy context

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) has a significant role to play in encouraging educational participation, through recognising prior learning gained in a range of contexts, thereby facilitating access to training and qualification and helping to meet the rapidly changing work context (p.2).

- The concept of lifelong learning as defined by the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD, 1998) is central (p2).

- While the Irish participation rate in full-time higher education exceeds the EU average, the level of engagement in lifelong learning is approximately 7% well below EU average (p2).
- The research was guided by the definition of RPL which includes formal, informal and non-formal learning (p3).
- The establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning and the Bologna Framework for the European Higher Education Area both include RPL as a central theme. The 2012 Bologna Process Implementation Report showed significant progress in the use of RPL with 47% of HE systems allowing RPL for access to higher education. The European Commission (2012) recommended that all countries should have RPL procedures in place by 2018 (p.5).
- In Ireland the Qualifications Act 1999 established the legal basis for the development of RPL in Ireland; in 2011 the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs recommended that procedures for RPL should be in place. The National Strategy for Higher Education 2011 called for a national framework for RPL to be developed (pp. 8-9).
- Several projects funding by the HEA Strategic Innovation Fund acted as drivers of RPL policy and practice in the period 2006-2014. Additionally QQI published a report on practices and case studies of RPL in the universities in 2011 (pp13-14).

What emerged from the research?

- A desk review of publicly available RPL policies showed that there is not an agreed definition or standard approach to RPL across all institutions, academic governance arrangements, limitations on RPL claims due to professional bodies or other programme requirements have an impact on practice (pp25-30).
- Performance Compacts for institutions were examined to identify explicit targets/objectives for RPL, from 26 compacts, 13 contained a reference to RPL (p23).
- Estimations of the level of RPL activity by research respondents demonstrated that variation in understanding what constitutes RPL combined with collation of reliable data prevented accurate comparison of activity across institutions (p34).
- On the question of RPL and CPD for staff, respondents indicated that 64% of staff received staff information sessions on RPL; however 55% did not receive staff development for RPL assessment. There appeared to be more limited understanding and awareness of how RPL could be used by staff in respect of their own CPD (p37).

- RPL practices have developed organically in Ireland, with some examples of good practice identified through international and national evaluation reports (p40).
- A number of professional bodies, Engineers Ireland, Certified Public Accountants Ireland (CPA), Royal Institute of Architects of Ireland, Institute of Professional Auctioneers and Valuers provide case studies of RPL and professional practice (pp. 42-50).

What does the research tell us?

The research underlines the need for a national policy and strategy for RPL, which is supported by agreed definitions and good practice guidelines. In addition the on-going implementation of RPL practices should be supported by systematic data collection, professional development for staff involved in RPL processes, including the inclusion of RPL processes in higher education continuing professional development frameworks (pp52-60).