The Recognition of Prior Learning in the Community Education Sector

The European Agenda for Adult Learning

Dr Ciara Staunton
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Executive Summary

The Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is one of the current challenges experienced in the lifelong learning field. The underlying vision inspiring the direction of this report is the collaborative efforts of AONTAS, the national adult learning organisation in Ireland, and Adult Continuing Education (ACE) at University College Cork (UCC) to develop and evolve our thinking around the recognition or prior learning (RPL) in all its forms within the Irish community education sector. This work has been funded by the European Agenda for Adult Learning Project, **Adult and Community Education: Supported Learner Pathways 2020-2021**.

The specific aims of the work described in this report were to:

1. Provide an overview of the recognition of prior learning (RPL) in the community education sector in Ireland.
2. Develop and deliver a CPD programme for community adult education tutors and staff to build their capacity in the area of RPL.

RPL is an essential tool as part of European, national, institutional and community responses to the needs of citizens by supporting flexible learning pathways. Community education is **adult learning which takes place in local community settings across Ireland.** It is learner-centred and responds to the needs of the local community. It is vital for the community education sector to become familiar with RPL policy, both to meet Quality Assurance obligations via the Quality and Qualifications Framework Ireland (QQI), but also to build capacity to be involved in shaping policy.

AONTAS – The National Adult Learning Organisation

AONTAS organises and represents the Community Education Network (CEN) across the island of Ireland. AONTAS has a growing membership of over 500 organisations and individuals committed to lifelong learning which includes learners; tutors; and statutory, non-governmental, community, and voluntary organisations. As an umbrella body committed to advocating and lobbying for the development of a quality education for adult learners and promoting the value and benefits of lifelong learning, AONTAS has a long track record of support for adult learners, practitioners and providers. AONTAS is the National Coordinator for the European Agenda for Adult Learning (EAAL) in Ireland. The EAAL seeks to strengthen

the place of adult learning in the participating countries across Europe. In 2014, AONTAS was nominated by the Irish Department of Education and Skills to become the National Coordinator for implementing the EAAL. AONTAS facilitates cooperation with the other EU Member States and the European Commission in implementing the adult-learning agenda in Ireland. To read more about AONTAS' EAAL work, please click here.

ACE - Adult Continuing Education

ACE is the Centre for Adult Continuing Education at University College Cork (UCC). Lifelong learning is its raison d'etre. ACE a long-standing interest in RPL especially in the context of its access mission for students to third level from non-traditional backgrounds. On many of our programmes we apply equivalency criteria to recognise the prior learning and experiences of applicants. Some programmes have direct RPL entry routes and exemptions available to learners. ACE believes that this collaborative work with AONTAS will further enhance the third mission of our University: service to society and outreach. Links with the Community education sector will provide grassroots support for those involved in teaching and learning from which all can benefit.

This report will focus on the overall 'ecosystem' of RPL in Ireland in which the understanding of the opportunities in RPL with which the CE sector may engage, and the critical stakeholders that need to be engaged with. The report also outlines the design of a bespoke **Certificate in Continuing Professional Development in the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)** which has been strategically developed to support RPL within the sector. As such, this certificate is the only course of its kind in Ireland. As a Special Purpose Award consisting of 10 ECT Credits, it has been designed specifically for adult and community educators to support their work in the use of RPL when dealing with marginalised and vulnerable groups, and employees with low educational qualifications. The course will also build the capacity of staff for their own professional development and career opportunities. Over two modules, participants develop an awareness and understanding of RPL policy and practice while simultaneously providing them with the tools and toolkits to practice RPL.

The programme is thoroughly grounded in community education practice and its relationship to the RPL policy and practice changes in further and higher education. The aims and objectives are realistic, relevant, and achievable for busy adult learners. It reflects a DIY

approach, which is regarded as the best way of exploring the field of RPL, but which can be resisted by more traditionally trained educators. As such, it models the bottom-up approach characteristic of the informal community education sector and the CEN. The course fosters a collaborative approach to learning through the inclusion of peer learning triads which can build the expertise and capacity of adult and community educators across the entire community education sector in Ireland, thereby establishing a Community of Practice for RPL. It is hoped that this new course will provide the catalyst for continuous change and a mechanism for getting back to the original vision of community education. It will also help when advocating for stronger policy and more secure funding in the future. The blended learning approach makes the course more accessible for learners and the peer triad group approach adds another layer of collaboration and interaction to the course.

Qualitative data has been generated from feedback sought from the 25 community educators who completed the course between July and September 2021. This feedback highlights how the participants have developed an appreciation of RPL processes and what RPL could do for them in terms of their own career progression. It also highlighted how the course has helped to shape their understanding of the value of RPL and provided them with a commitment to find ways to practice it within their own organisations.

The long-term ambition is that this course, paralleled by other work supported by AONTAS, will help to build capacity within the community education sector. As such, the programme provides sustainable development opportunities for all stakeholders. Full course details available at: https://www.ucc.ie/en/ace-ccpdpl/

Acknowledgements

Introduction

The new lifelong learning for all approach is a true 'cradle to grave' view. It encompasses all purposeful learning activity undertaken with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence. It gives weight to building foundations for lifelong learning as well as .. second chances for adults. And it recognises that not only the settings of formal education but also the less formal settings of the home, the workplace, the community and society at large contribute to learning . . . No learning setting is an island. (OECD, 1998: 8-9)

In its simplest form, recognition of prior learning (RPL) is defined as a process whereby prior learning is given a value (European Commission, 2008; NQAI, 2005; OECD, 2004). However, in the spirit of the OECD definition above, RPL is better described a process used to evaluate skills and knowledge acquired outside the classroom for the purpose of recognising competence against a given set of standards, competencies, or learning outcomes. This learning may have taken place formally through a further or higher education provider or informally or non-formally through work/life experiences. RPL has been on the agenda at the national and international level for some time. It is practiced in many countries for a variety of purposes, for example an individual's standing in a profession, trades qualifications, academic achievement, recruitment, performance management, career and succession planning. In Ireland, the term 'recognition of prior learning' entered the public domain in 1973, when the National Council for Educational awards (NCEA) advocated for 'a facility to recognise prior work-based learning' in the government committee report on Adult Education" (OECD, 2007, cited in Goggin & Finn, nd:287). Ensuring that prior learning is recognised and given appropriate value is an important step in ensuring that lifelong learning pathways are meaningful and accessible for those with a variety of experiences.

Regardless of the definition used, and there are many, RPL is important in the context of accessing education and in support of lifelong learning. It has a pivotal role in addressing the issue of access equality into education and qualifications for all who wish to apply for admission, progression and recognition in formal education and training. It is a focus of development across Europe to improve people's chances of getting jobs that use their skills and competencies. RPL is more than a system, it is a valuable mode of learning for adults and can be very challenging for many especially for those whose educational capital has been

compromised by race, class, gender, or conflict for example. Within the adult education literature, theorists such as Knowles and Dewey have long highlighted the importance of understanding and clearly labelling RPL in education. Knowles' (1984) theory of andragogy refers to the assumption that as "a person matures s/he accumulates a growing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasing resource for learning" (p.12).

European Agenda for Adult Learning (EAAL)

The <u>Renewed European Agenda for Adult Learning</u> (2011) recognised that there is a need for all adults to regularly enhance their personal and professional skills and competences, but that adult learning policy and structures requires further strengthening in national lifelong-learning systems. The European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) further support the Council Resolution on a new European agenda for adult learning 2021- 2030, which was adopted by the Council on 29 November 2021. This agenda recognises the need for holistic adult learning and education provision that considers the needs to all groups of learners. In their report titled _'Implementing the Renewed Agenda for Adult Learning: Are We There Yet?'_, the EAEA detailed a consultation of EAEA members which showed that in countries such as Finland, where the European Agenda for Adult Learning has been fully implemented, adult education structures are comparatively strong. A majority of members, however, stated that the agenda has only been implemented partially in their countries (2019). Chapter 6 of the Eurydice Report _Adult Education and Training in Europe: Building Inclusive Pathways to Skills and Qualifications_ (2021), is dedicated to 'Recognition and Validation of Learning Outcomes', with a focus on non-formal and informal learning. "Since 2012, European cooperation in this area has been guided by the Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning. Although not legally binding, the recommendation asked Member States to implement, no later than 2018, national validation arrangements. It also specified several principles to be applied in relation to validation arrangements, including:

- linking validation to national qualifications frameworks,
- providing validation-related information and guidance,
- implementing quality assurance measures,
- focusing on disadvantaged groups and

- making provisions for the professional development of validation practitioners"

(p. 115).

"Moreover, the recommendation promoted specific steps to take as part of the validation process, namely

(1) the identification of an individual's learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal learning,

(2) the documentation of these outcomes,

(3) their assessment and, finally,

(4) the certification of the results of the assessment

Individuals should be able to take these steps either separately or in combination, in accordance with their needs" (p115).

The Eurydice Report proposes that the "European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning, aims . . . to establish better links between formal, non-formal and informal learning and, consequently, it supports the validation of learning outcomes acquired in different settings" (116).

Studies were conducted across the EU to examine to what extent skills audits and validation mechanisms had been developed and implemented, and which countries had achieved any of the measures outlined in the Council recommendations in 2012. "According to the most recent synthesis report linked to the inventory (Cedefop, European Commission and ICF, 2019), around two thirds of European countries have in place skills audits that are compatible with the definition in the 2012 Council Recommendation" (p 117). This highlights the fact that although much progress has been made, there is still a long way to go before all countries across the EU have reached the 2012 recommendations.

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in Ireland

In Ireland, the national objective is to move from a traditional learning society towards a 'lifelong learning society' that enables learners to take formal, informal learning or nonformal education throughout their lives and opens several pathways for them to enrol in institutions at various levels based on RPL. The Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education, published in 2000, was Ireland's first national policy on adult education. Lifelong learning was

the vision of this policy document. As such, RPL is an important aspect of lifelong learning. However, there is no separate or dedicated infrastructure for RPL in Ireland. Instead, it is practiced and largely understood in the context of education and training. It is shaped by different practices, some of which happen from the ground up and some which are driven by policy. In common with similar frameworks elsewhere in the world, the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) in Ireland aims to be a unifying device, to create ladders, linkages and pathways that affords seamless mobility to lifelong learners. An OECD report (2010) states that attaching award standards to prior learning makes invisible learning visible, and thus 'makes the stock of human capital more visible and more valuable to society at large ... [and enables people] to navigate better both the system of lifelong learning and the labour market' (p.1). Despite this, the rate of participation of lifelong learners in Ireland is dismally low, and well below the EU average. In fact, at just 8.9% (SOLAS, 2017), Ireland is ranked 20th out of 28 countries (Eurostat, 2017). Ireland's Action Plan for Education has the goal of increasing the lifelong learning participation rate to 15% by 2025 (2016).

Ireland is still without a national policy on RPL from which education providers can draw. Nevertheless, current legislation entitles learners to recognition for learning, however achieved, including for full awards - certificates, diplomas, and degrees. Institutions may in line with their own access, transfer and progression policies, set limitations for credit, on that scope. But the legislation allows for full recognition leading to awards, at all levels of the NFQ. In practice, the achievement of full awards, particularly at some levels of the NFQ is rare, but not impossible. Despite this, all educational organisations, institutions, and Universities will be required to incorporate RPL in their programmes to grant access, exemption, credits at different levels and their academic staff will need awareness and training to carry out activities at some level in relation to RPL. This is also true within the community education sector.

In line with the National Strategy for Higher Education (2030) in Ireland all who need to have their prior learning and experience assessed for university education should be afforded that opportunity. And yet RPL can be a complex and cumbersome process for both the institution and the learner (Sheridan, 2015). A new project among third level institutions in Ireland commenced in 2021 to put in place a consistent and coherent approach to RPL within and across the higher education sector (HCI Project, 2021). This four-year project is a welcome

initiative that will allow what is normally a marginalised process to become fully embedded within the third level sector. Education sectors cannot afford to operate in silos, let alone independently from each other when it comes to RPL. Therefore, work within the community education and further education sectors will need to be supported so that more transparent and seamless entry and progression pathways are developed.

Many awarding bodies and institutions use RPL in relation to accessing programmes and qualifications. They evaluate prior certificated as well as prior experiential learning. In the principles and operational guidelines for RPL in further and higher education in Ireland (NQAI, 2005), RPL is defined as 'the process by which prior learning is given a value. It is a means by which prior learning is formally identified, assessed and acknowledged' (p. 2). A fundamental principle of RPL is that a learner should not be asked to relearn something they already know. RPL is critical to the development of an accessible, flexible and permeable education and training system, and is a key enabler of lifelong learning and skills development, encouraging people of all ages to participate in learning pathways (Staunton & El Amoud, n.d).

For the purposes of this report the following definition of RPL extracted from the European Inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning, country report Ireland 2014 is useful as it specifically makes the link between RPL and the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). Making this explicit provides an important precedent so that RPL can shed itself of the poor cousin myth.

> "*RPL incorporates prior formal, informal and non-formal learning and that which is validated within the context of a specified destination award from level one to ten on the national framework of qualifications*" (p. 3, European Commission, Cedefop, ICF International; 2014). (https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/wp-content/uploads/NF-2015-A-Current-Overview-of-Recognition-of-Prior-Learning-RPL-in-Irish-Higher-Education.pdf).

We must take note of the key terms used here which are a) 'prior', i.e., learning already achieved; and b) 'process' i.e., the distinct stages of identification, assessment and certification. RPL encompasses all forms of prior learning, including learning acquired by following a course of study (i.e., formal learning), learning acquired outside of the formal education system which may not lead to certification (i.e., non-formal learning) and learning acquired through experience (i.e., informal learning). At the end of the day, no one should

have to relearn what they already know, nor should they have to prove this twice or more over. The process of RPL can be used to gain admission to courses where a person:

- may not have obtained the standard entry requirements;
- has exemptions from course components which duplicate the learning an individual has already acquired;
- has acquired credit towards a qualification;
- and has a qualification solely on the basis of prior learning.

Those who work in adult education understand that a broader cohort of adult students (lifelong learners) have different needs to the traditional student. Most adults have an array of accumulated capital, acquired through life experience and work-life experience. They are highly motivated as a rule but also have to balance education with other commitments such as work and family. This experience ought to be acknowledged as learning, thus the RPL approach to identifying such knowledge and skills is essential. Knowles (1980) specifically identifies the characteristics of the adult learner as autonomous and self-directed, possessing an accumulated foundation of experiences and knowledge, goal-oriented, relevancy-oriented, practical, and needing respect. Community and adult continuing education provide accessible routes into further and higher education to those who might not otherwise access programmes due to any number of factors that have been identified in the literature as barriers to formal education, (e.g. Belzer, 2004; Bowl, 2001; De Vito, 2009; McGivney, 2004; Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009; Russell, 2006; Villarruel, Canales, & Torres, 2001). The culture of programmes delivered through adult education is to break down these barriers by providing support through community outreach, academic development, and pastoral care. Equally, the promotion of wellbeing is core to the mission and philosophy of adult educators, underpinning learning objectives and outcomes.

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is a phrase as redolent with promise and expectation as it is with anxiety and frustration. (Wafer, 2017, p.4)

RPL in Community Education

To enhance capacity to develop RPL in the adult learning sector, more needs to be done. Community Education is very often non-formal in nature offering short, part-time courses and programmes, therefore can act as a first positive step back to education. They are typically non-accredited programmes or accredited between Levels 2 and 5 on the National Framework for Qualifications (NFQ). In Ireland, community education takes place in local community projects and centres around the country and offers the following:

- Courses for all adults in a welcoming environment;
- A positive, informal, non-threatening first step back to education;
- A wide range of part-time courses generally levels 2 to 5 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). Some organisations may offer courses at level 6 or above;
- Non-accredited courses for people who wish to learn a new skill, meet new people and/or develop their confidence;
- Courses including everything from computer skills, personal development, professional skills and hobby-based courses.

Participation in community education often leads to many possibilities for learners and communities, including skills development, confidence building, greater community involvement and progression to further education or employment. (www.aontas.com)

The National Learning Network (NLN) provides:

- Flexible courses and supports for people who need extra help (job seekers, unemployed, and people with an illness or disability)
- Class sizes are small so that students receive individual attention and can work at their own pace
- All courses include work experience and lead to levels 1-6 on the NFQ, other awards include ECDL (European Computer Drivers Licence) or City and Guilds qualification and help people to get a job or go on to further education. (www.nln.ie)

Ireland's Education and Training Boards (ETBs) are rapidly formalising their own approach to RPL informed by a series of engagements across different programmes, funding streams, and pilot projects. There have also been developments by QQI in this regard, for example their Access, Transfer and Progression Policy, and general QA guidelines .

The mission and vision outlined in Ireland's Education and Training Sector's report, Overview of Service Delivery and Reform (Department of Education and Skills, 2015b), underpin the conditions necessary for RPL to thrive: where an individual can achieve their full potential and the learning system can respond in a flexible way to the changing needs of society. This report stated that lifelong learning is to be nurtured through valuing the voice of the learner, allowing for increased participation and equity of access.

There is huge diversity and examples of good practice within the community education sector. As Ireland's national adult learning organisation, AONTAS has worked with adult learners for almost 50 years providing information about education and courses. Through the current iteration of the EAAL project, AONTAS has engaged a range of initiatives such as; hosting study visits, coordinating the Learners as Leaders programme, providing the One Step Up Information Referral Service, running Project Advisory Group meetings with adult learning organisations in Ireland, and holding the Lifelong Learning Conference, amongst other activities. The One Step Up Information Booklet and website provides an accessible and user-friendly guide for adults wishing to access information on courses, funding information, or local service contacts. AONTAS also manage the One Step Up website (www.onestepup.ie).

Examples:

The Dublin Adult Learning Centre (DALC) provides adult education for more than 500 adults each week, on improving reading and writing for learners at various levels, up to and including QQI Level 5 courses. Longford Women's Link runs interest and professional courses, that range between levels 2 – 6 on the NFQ. Initiatives like this are vital in providing the student accessibility and the confidence to move forward.

There are several other examples of community education practices in various Education Training Boards (ETB) in Ireland, as detailed in the 'Recognition of Prior Learning in Irish Further Education and Training (FET)' (Goggin, O'Leary, & Sheridan, 2017). These include: The

Limerick Clare ETB – Edge Project; RPL in the Craft Apprentice area (SOLAS); Cork ETB, and Donegal ETB.

For the Limerick and Clare ETB – Edge Project, an E-Portfolio and badge system were designed to "capture and recognise informal and non-formal learning" (Goggin, et al., 2017:36). The RPL in the Craft Apprentice area (SOLAS) is linked with the area of apprenticeship" (Goggin, et al., 2017:37). This report also provided a snapshot of RPL in St John's College, Cork, there are three strands of RPL available including: "College Module Exemption; Accredited Prior Learning APL and Recognition of Prior Learning RPL" (38). The Donegal ETB pilot project had the overall objective of validating the knowledge, skills and competencies acquired by Privates in the Defence Forces outside of the formal learning environment. The learners were awarded NFQ Level 3 awards "in Information and Communications Technology and Employability Skills" (39).

The RPL Practitioner Network

The RPL Practitioner Network is led by practitioners working and interested in the Recognition of Prior Learning. Since it was established in 2014, it has been making strides by providing an opportunity for the ongoing sharing of national practices. The network aims to:

- Provide a coherent practitioner voice to shape and inform policy development
- Support the development of a community of practice, providing opportunities to share learning, face to face, online and through practical sharing of toolkits and resources
- Promote good practice, informed by national and international practitioner and policy perspectives

AONTAS sits on the steering group of the Network thus ensuring that community education is represented on the Practitioner Board.

Regardless of these examples, the challenges faced by providers of community education relate in the main to securing adequate funding for the sector. There are hundreds of community education organisations around the island of Ireland. While there has been some work done on RPL on the ground, it is a hugely underfunded educational sector within Irish society that is largely supported by volunteers and part time staff on precarious contracts

(Fitzsimons, 2017). The job of community educators is difficult and their approach to RPL needs to recognise the unique context in which they practice. Large amounts of time are spent on applying for and reporting on funding outcomes, detailing how funding is released and administered. There are some geographic areas where community education is particularly underfunded and also particular courses that are underfunded.

Most tutors/teachers who work in this sector have an honours degree level qualification (Fitzsimons, 2017). They may also work in the Centre as a Manager or a CEO, or they may be a Community Employment Supervisor. There are hundreds of community education organisations around the island of Ireland. The gap is that there have not been enough professional development opportunities for practitioners in this sector to strategically implement it. And yet the pathways that RPL has the capacity to provide for the learners of such organisations into further (FE) and higher education (HE) is a crucial part of the national objective of the European Agenda for Adult Learning. As a representative of community education organisations, AONTAS is trying to address this sectoral gap.

In 2019, AONTAS ran two introductory RPL workshops with members of the CEN. An evaluation following the first of these sessions indicated a strong interest in the area, and a desire to become more informed about RPL and how it could be applied in a community education context. The challenge is to consider what supports would lead to more and better RPL cases being prepared. Improving supports for community educators to practice RPL in their sector will benefit all stakeholders, namely students, practitioners and education providers. It is within this context that the current project evolved.

Given the low level of formal RPL practice in community education settings, community education workers may not practical knowledge of the RPL processes which means they will have to receive information and some level of guidance about what is involved. Hence the idea for a bespoke certified course aimed at community educators that would enhance their continuous professional development was borne and the Certificate in Continuing Professional Development in the Recognition of Prior Learning was developed and delivered by ACE (Adult Continuing Education), University College Cork. The main aim of this course is to help address the sectoral gap and support the professional development of adult and community educators.

Hope for the Future

RPL can operate to provide recognition for advanced entry and non-standard admissions to educational pathways and is also used to award credit for elements within programmes. But that is RPL within a very narrow focus. It also has the potential to unlock barriers to access and progression by addressing the experiential learning that adult learners possess. Cooper and Harris (2013) refer to RPL as "a specialised pedagogic practice that provides tools for navigating access to new learning opportunities" (p. 447). RPL practice and policy has been very slowly developing, for various reasons, including lack of resources and of practitioners. However, over the decades since the NCEA acknowledged the importance of RPL, Irish practitioners continued their interest in recognition of prior work-based learning, and eventually, "in 1993, the NCEA published a policy on Prior Experiential Learning" (Goggin & Finn, n.d:287).

This has influenced the current narrative on lifelong learning which goes beyond formal education and training, to include learning at work, in the family and in the community. It acknowledges that learning is extended across the life span and encompasses the need to provide educational opportunities to those who may not have had them during the first stages of life (Field, 2006). A broader cohort of adult students (lifelong learners) has different needs to the traditional student. They are highly motivated as a rule but also have to balance education with other commitments such as work and family.

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) should provide the processes needed for the evaluation of those skills and knowledge acquired through life experience, allowing them to be formally recognized by a qualification system. As such, it is a central aspect of lifelong learning. According to Miguel, Ornelas and Maroco (2016) RPL is a critical strategy for enhancing skill development and motivating people's participation in learning activities (Colardyn & Bjornavold, 2004; Smith & Clayton, 2009). Encouraging people to become qualified or requalified attracts adults to re-engage in formal education systems (Cameron, 2014). RPL in all its forms can support the socially inclusive purposes of education in that it addresses the needs of disadvantaged groups, part-time learners and mature learners, and can have a positive impact on retention of students in accredited courses of study. In addition, RPL 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.

The Certificate in Continuing Professional Development in the Recognition of Prior Learning

A considerable consultation process took place over the duration of this project to clearly elicit and define the needs of the community education sector that would inform the development of the course. Through comprehensive dialogue with AONTAS and the Community Education Network (CEN) Steering Group, we adopted a co-creation of knowledge approach to recognise both the diversity within the sector and the emerging and evolving policies that are likely to shape RPL in the future. As a result, what follows is a brief description of the course that emerged including its aims and objectives. The Certificate in Continuing Professional Development in the Recognition of Prior Learning received full approval from University College Cork in April 2021 as a Special Purpose Level 7 course of study. The collaborative efforts between ACE and AONTAS was lauded an as example of programme development across modes of good practice engaging with community partners.

The course is delivered as two 5-credit modules over a 12-week period. It comprises an online webinar series with online workshop components. A Peer Triad Approach to Learning is also used, whereby students engage with each other in small groups of three.

The main academic objectives of the course are to:

- appraise the role that the recognition of prior learning (RPL) plays within the community education sector for lifelong learners,
- support community education practitioners in developing an awareness and understanding of RPL,
- provide the necessary toolkits for adult and community educators to practice RPL with their learners,
- identify the challenges faced by community education providers in supporting such RPL systems and ways to overcome them.

Participants must be practicing adult educators, or community education staff, and the course was offered to members of the Community Education Network (CEN) in a closed recruitment for the first cycle. Twenty-five community education practitioners completed the between

July and September 2021. They represented a variety of organisations with the community education sector from around the country.

Participants take **10 Credits** to fulfil the criteria of the Certificate in Continuing Professional Development in RPL as follows:

Module 1: Introduction to RPL (5 Credits). This module is designed as an introduction to the whole area of the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). The content covered in this module is intended as background information rather than hard content given that some areas (e.g., policy development) could be a module in itself. Overall, the module is the first step for adult and community educators where the fundamental scaffolds of RPL are developed.

Module 2: Case Study of RPL Practice (5 Credits). This module focuses on the practice of RPL. Community Education workers may not have any knowledge of the RPL process in the first place which means they will have to receive information and some level of guidance about what is involved. Therefore, the focus of this module will be on the participants themselves and what RPL could do for them in terms of their own career progression.

Both modules foster a collaborative approach to learning through the inclusion of the Peer Learning Triads which build the expertise and capacity of adult and community educators across the entire Community Education sector in Ireland.

Over the two modules, participants on the course learn to:

- Appraises the role that RPL plays as a mode of progression for lifelong learners;
- Explain the key values and principles associated with the Recognition or Prior Learning (RPL);
- Develop familiarity with existing RPL policies;
- Identify the existing supports that are available to adult learners through the Adult Guidance Services and/or local ETBs (Education and Training Boards),
- Demonstrate awareness of the requirements for RPL as set out by Further Education (FE) or Higher Education (HE) providers,

- Identify the challenges faced by community education providers in supporting RPL systems and ways to overcome them, through for example, knowledge of existing Community and Adult Education Supports,
- Support good ongoing networking between existing services to mitigate potential challenges to the practice of RPL in the sector,
- Develop the capacity to identify and connect with relevant stakeholders and service providers as an essential part of the RPL toolkit.

Participant Feedback

Upon completion of the course, qualitative feedback was sought from participants. Using three open ended questions, they were asked to identify what worked well, areas of the course that could be improved and to comment on the assessments used. This provided rich feedback which highlights the success of this course in achieving its aims, but more importantly, it acknowledges the voice of the learner. Strong themes emerged in relation to the peer triads, the case study assignment, and overall satisfaction with the course content. The themes of equal partnership and co-production also came across with participants highlighting this in relation to the RPL process.

Peer Triads

The strongest theme to emerge from participant feedback was that the peer triad aspect of the course worked extremely well. The feedback echoes the benefits outlined by the National Teaching and Learning Forum provided earlier. This is captured most tellingly by the following quotation:

> "The value of the peer triad throughout this course is hard to quantify. I was lucky to be the group I was, as we met on a weekly basis to check in with each other, see if there were areas we could help each other with. Create templates together, trash out ideas, vocalise where we saw each other's strengths and share the knowledge, learn from each other's lived experience, become better advocates for those we represent and for whom we are doing this course. To share our concerns and to reflect on where the learning in this course has brought us."

Further quotations highlight the success of the peer triads as follows.

"Being part of a triad has led me to see how RPL can be interpreted in different ways."

"Our meetings were instrumental in developing a more knowledgeable view of RPL."

"I found the weekly meetings with the triad an excellent space to air my feelings and concerns around how labour intensive RPL appears. Within the triad there is a wealth of experience, as we come together with varying experience of RPL."

"The triad discussions were really beneficial to connect and learn from others. The number of weeks were also useful."

"I learned a lot form my peers in the triads."

"The triads were very helpful."

"Preparation for the triad meeting and even having to verbalise my thoughts in a weekly meeting meant I had to reflect on each Thursday session afterwards, perhaps in a more diligent way that I might have done otherwise. Then our discussion usually brought a new slant to my thinking which led to some more reflection afterwards."

"Peer triads were very helpful to break down the course material. I learned a huge amount from my group."

"I think our triad discussions certainly gave me a better understand of RPL, particularly with regard to the practical difficulties as well as potential benefits. I felt it was a very respectful space, free of judgement."

"I have gained a holistic and comprehensive understanding from our peer triad covering issues associates with the mapping of qualifications to resources I can use as an educator and as an RPL mentor."

"As someone who was new to RPL, I learned a huge amount from my peer triad. My experience in the triad further highlighted how learning comes from sharing experiences and the common struggles that come from the work we do daily."

Other areas of the course that worked well were mentioned as follows:

"Practical examples worked really well for me as this is how I learn."

"The combined sessions/triad experiences."

"Policy Overview has worked well."

"CASE STUDIES - the farmers project, the digital project and the HEA talk. Really important to have as many live examples as possible."

"The first assignment was a nice opportunity to reflect and bring our personal experience into the course."

Assessments

The case study assessment brought to life the very real barriers that learners and potential applicants face if applying for RPL. In typical RPL processes, the onus is on the applicant to demonstrate their prior learning, by preparing and submitting adequate evidence, under the guidance of the education provider/institution. Learners were encouraged to take a direct approach by putting themselves through an RPL process. This provided the space for a real and honest account of their RPL journeys. Many expressed a reluctance and resistance to take this on within their case study write up. By reflecting on content both from the course directly and from outside of it, learners were able to comment on the process from their own perspective. Therefore, this assessment enhanced the students' ability to critically think about the issues in a very real way and of the boundaries / barriers that are evident in the process. The following quotations evidence this experience.

"Having to self-assess, reflect, and critically analyse my own prior learning, informal and formal, accredited, and non-accredited, was a task that I was somewhat resistant to."

"…..a sense of being overwhelmed and feeling frustrated at times with the RPL process."

"I think that the average person would have difficulty with the RPL process, a support person is needed to support the applicant as it is a daunting experience."

"The language and process of RPL is confusing and potentially disempowering for individuals".

Acknowledging the need for support was a clear theme. This is also evident in the literature which identifies that most individuals benefit from support when trying to gather the evidence of their learning (e.g. Conrad & Wardrop, 2010; Leister & Jensen, 2011). However,

this also comes with the caveat of the danger of the potential applicant becoming a bystander while someone else constructs meaning to their story.

> *"This case study has been a very worthwhile task. As I reflect on my experience, I not the potential similar experiences of future RPL applicants, the advantages and challenges of the process, along with the people and resources needed to support the process."*

> *"The case study has enhanced my own knowledge and experience of RPL."*

> *"The case study has underlined to me the value of dialogue with an experienced mentor to facilitate deep reflection on life experience, to evidence relevant claims, and to co-construct portfolios legible to both student and awarding body."*

> *"By stepping into the shoes of a potential applicant, I have gained a clearer understanding of what RPL will mean for incoming learners experiencing complex situations of social inequality."*

The process of building a portfolio – the most popular method of assessment in RPL (Whittaker & Brown, 2012) – can also facilitate the recognition of career achievements, the value of experiential learning (Brown 2002; Amorim 2006), and the acknowledgement of the learning outcomes through assessment (e.g. Fejes and Andersson 2009). However, we would argue that this can be a difficult task for those without the requisite academic skills. Without someone to champion an individual's case and coach them in these skills, it becomes an arduous process. The quotations above highlight the challenges in establishing precise linkages between experiences and specific learning outcomes. These insights echo the observations of Hamers (2013) who states that this is because much experiential learning occurs as an ongoing processual activity that does not neatly alight with ordered, narrow representations of learning.

The following quotation is a beautiful summation of the sheer effort that is currently involved in RPL processes.

> *"On reflection, I see the importance of really wanting to undertake the course because determination would be a huge factor in succeeding. This is to all intents and purposes*

a selling exercise and you would really need to use all your powers of influence and persuasion to gain access to the course from the outset."

Overall Course Feedback

In terms of overall course feedback, the theme of a deepened understanding and enhanced competence is evident. Participants highlight how they enjoyed the course, how it has helped to shape their understanding of the value of RPL and provided them with a deep commitment to find ways to practice it within their own organisations. The following quotes provide a flavour of the significance of the programme to the participants.

"I really enjoyed this course. It has helped me to look at topics from other angles and has helped me to have a better understanding of RPL. I feel that the peer triads were really good for looking at a topic in detail and allowed us to form and argue our own thoughts and opinions about the subject matter in a supportive and collaborative manner."

"I am intrigued by the crusade I see happening both internationally and in Ireland towards RPL and I am excited by what could be in-store for learners who enter my classroom."

"Participating in this RPL module has increased my awareness of active listening skills. Observing RPL and critically analysing it, visualising the outcomes, the timeframe, resources required and the necessity for networking all contributed to my self-development as an RPL practitioner."

"What I took most from this course was the necessity for me as an adult educator to challenge myself to think beyond the familiar and to resist a defensiveness that can keep us stuck in what we already do."

"The concept of RPL can be a challenge to conservative and traditional thinking within some areas of academia …. But I am certain that courses like this will only make RPL gain in strength and encourage a diverse range of potential students enter formal education with talents and skills that will benefit the learning environment and the student themselves."

"I felt the information gained built confidence and reassurance in current work."

"Having completed this course, I feel more capable of supporting learners as a mentor should they desire to enter the RPL process."

"I am far more informed on the topic and better equipped to support its implementation in my organisation."

"I am beginning to feel more equipped to support the development of RPL practices in my work and I feel hopeful for future RPL applicants, that they may be supported in recognising all their previous learning."

"I thoroughly enjoyed the different perspectives of all our lecturers. The perspective of the RPL learner is key on ensuring a successful process. This is why I love the structure of the programme and it the main reason I am truly learning."

"I can now answer many questions on RPL and more importantly know where to look and who to contact when RPL raises its beautiful and somewhat mysterious head from the sand."

"This RPL course has allowed me to re-imagine my launching back into the foray of formal education, with questions of what I might like to study and what institution I might like to attend."

"Overall, this was a thought-provoking course which allowed me to explore RPL in practice as well as examining my core beliefs and attitudes around the different values I unconsciously assigned to different types of learning. This will be incredibly useful in terms of working with clients in the future."

Summary and Conclusions

A Resolution adopted by the Council of the European Union (EU) on November 29th 2021 on a new European Agenda for Adult Learning highlights the need to significantly increase adult participation in learning. The new European Agenda for Adult learning outlines a vision of how adult learning should develop in Europe by 2030 in the following five priority areas

- governance of adult learning – with a strong focus on whole-of-government national strategies and stakeholder partnerships

- supply and take-up of lifelong learning opportunities with sustainable funding
- accessibility and flexibility – to adapt to the needs of adult
- quality, equity, inclusion and success in adult learning – emphasising the professional development of adult learning staff, the mobility of both learners and staff, quality assurance and active support to disadvantaged groups
- the green and digital transitions and related skill needs

The current project has been successful in contributing to this agenda by providing a mechanism to develop RPL capacity within the Community Education Sector while also providing continuing professional development to those working in the sector. This was identified as a gap during the consultation process. There are few opportunities for CPD from professional bodies for those working in community education. Coupled with that is the mix of professionals working in the field of community education. Therefore, the resulting Level 7 Certificate in Continuous Professional Development in RPL designed for community education practitioners is a positive and welcome addition to the Irish landscape – enabling participants to draw on existing research and evidence, reflect on existing practices and working together to develop case study materials. It will provide a coherent framework to further develop RPL for practitioners and learners and will be very valuable in terms of CPD for those working in the sector. The upskilling of community educators in RPL will help staff to consider all aspects of their teaching, from the use of the correct taxonomy in their learning outcomes (LOs) to really scrutinising what the LOs mean on a practical level (what exactly are they looking for students to be able to do and how can they demonstrate this). RPL also has the potential to boost numbers on programmes that are struggling if pathways like this are fully explored and disseminated.

Participant feedback has highlighted the impact that the course has had on them for their personal and professional development. Learners indicated that they have come away from the course with a clearer idea of the role of a community educator in the RPL process as distinct from a guidance person or assessor. The course has provided community educators with a deeper understanding of where RPL can fit into their work and how best to use it for learners they work with. It also highlighted the success of the collaborative learning environment. It was said best by the following participant:

"Having a critical mind around my possible RPL case study and four phases of validation that I would have to go through (identification, documentation, assessment, certification) was a confidence-building, transformative and educative experience."

For its part, ACE at UCC is committed to be supportive of the community education sector and develop a significant portfolio in this space. The collaboration between ACE and AONTAS is a fundamental step in this direction. Future collaborative work is anticipated with AONTAS, ETBI, NALA, SOLAS and others as the outcomes have the potential to greatly increase learner participation and professional education at community, Further and Higher education levels. Furthermore, UCC has a long-standing tradition of providing world class teacher education programmes at many levels of education and expanding this would ultimately benefit the links between Further and Higher education being developed through the department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

Next Steps and Recommendations

1. Following on from this work of designing the bespoke Level 7 course as part of the EAAL project, AONTAS is committed to developing a Community of Practice for those who successfully complete the course to integrate and support RPL within the sector.

2. The experience of RPL should remain an educative one. Reflecting on and examining one's own experiences, skills, and learning is challenging and time-consuming. Resources that can equip the learner to present prior learning and experience coherently are invaluable.

3. Quality assurance and skilled staff is imperative to achieve this across all education sectors in Ireland.

4. The upfront presentation of information regarding an institution's policies and practices is vital. At present, it appears ad hoc with some institutions having easily accessible and user-friendly information with others having little to no explanations of the procedures involved.

5. Having a "mapping process" that definitively evidences the achievement of specific learning outcomes is useful.

6. The availability of templates makes the process clear for applicants.

7. A national policy which provides a framework within RPL could operate would ensure standards in both practice and quality assurance.

8. There is a need for greater commitment at policy level to resourcing the community education sector to ensure it can build capacity in the area of RPL, for the ultimate benefit of adult learners.

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