ECER

2008

Innovative Instruments for the Accreditation of Vocational Learning Outcomes

Recognition and Validation of Prior learning in Vocationally related Education in Ireland

Justin Rami & John Lalor – Dublin City University

DCU
Dublin City University
Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath

Table of Contents 2

Introduction

This paper seeks to outline the key aspects of the validation and recognition of prior learning in the vocational education sector in Ireland In line with the current EU CREDIVOC project special attention will be paid to the common sector area, in this case engineering. McCarthy et al (2001) suggest that 'VET systems can only be adequately understood with reference to the dynamic set of interrelationships between the education and training systems, the industrial relations system, the organizational structure of industry, and the class and status relations of the wider society as reflected in its political system' (p. 425). It is important to observe that the context of any situation is relevant, not more so than in Ireland due to the rapid economic growth the country has experienced in the last ten to fifteen years. With Europe's drive to consolidate its policies within the economic sectors through its members towards a knowledge economy (Brinkley & Lee 2006) the streamlining and harmonization of qualifications systems is key to this success. To help with this success it is firstly important to map current trends throughout Europe in vocational sectors.

Social and economic context of VET in Ireland

From 1970 to 1992 Ireland experienced very difficult economic circumstances. Unemployment rates in the late 1980s and early 1990s peaked at around 17 percent, with higher rates for school leavers. Emigration, which had always been a feature of Irish society, also soared with thousands of secondary school and university graduates leaving the country every year. However, since the early nineties, Ireland has been experiencing a period of unprecedented economic growth, well ahead of the OECD average, achieving an average GDP growth rate of 4.8 percent between 1990-95, and 9.5 percent from 1995-2000. Since 2000, the per capita GDP of Ireland has grown at annual rates of 2.5 %– 4.2%, substantially exceeding the EU average in every year. In 2003, Ireland had the second highest GDP per capita within the enlarged EU -- almost one-third higher than the EU 25 average. The country benefited from a high level of investment by multinational companies and significant growth in the area of high technology enterprises such as information and communication technologies, chemical and pharmaceutical industries, and financial services. By 2000 the unemployment rate fell to below 4 percent, and in 2007 it was 4.5 percent. Instead of

an older tradition of emigration, the pattern has shifted to inward migration and the active recruitment of foreign workers.

According to the latest census figures (CSO, 2006) the Irish population of approx 4.2 million comprises of over 400, 000 people who have come to Ireland over the last 15 years from the enlarged EU, other parts of Europe, Asia, China, the U.K. and the Americas, attracted here by the economic upturn and other social factors. This inward migration trend is set to continue according to Government projections and this phenomenon is having and will continue to have great implications for social and economic policy over the coming decades. One of the arenas in which this will play out is that of Vocational Education and Training, as a considerable majority of those who have settled in the country have come to Ireland in order to work. This has brought issues of transferability of qualifications and access to further education and training to the forefront of the national debate.

VET system in Ireland (and its relationship to the labour market)

There is some debate as to the unity of such a system, but there is clear evidence in the Irish context of a range of structures, systems and agencies that play a significant role within VET (McCarthy et al, 2001). A brief description of this system will therefore suffice for the purposes of this paper. At a policy level, there exists some unity on the principles that govern vocational learning in Ireland. These principles primarily relate to issues of access at all levels, recognition of achievements, progression to higher levels, quality, relevance and partnership in delivery, the espousal of a learner orientation as central to the VET process and the promotion of lifelong learning. There also exists some agreement as to the priority areas (ibid). Less unity exists in terms of structures and delivery. However this paper will seek to try to describe existing vocationally related structures.

In Ireland, Vocational Education & Training (VET) embraces education and training which occurs primarily after second-level schooling and mainly in the further and continuing education sector. VET also occurs in some third level institutions. A distinctive feature of further and vocational education generally is its diversity and breadth of provision, and its linkages with other services such as employment, training, area partnership, welfare, youth, school, juvenile liaison, justice and community and voluntary sector interests. A wide range of Government Departments,

statutory agencies and voluntary and community organisations provide services in this area. Vocational education and training in Ireland not only is about employability it embraces the key concepts of life long learning (Government of Ireland, 2000). Coughlan & Scanlon (2007) suggest it 'is about getting or keeping the opportunity to perform, to contribute to society, by having a paid job, being a valued volunteer or contributing in other ways to society; in short, employability is about getting or keeping a job. Learning is at the heart of being employable as an individual, while working encompasses all kinds of activity, from paid work to voluntary work and active citizenship. In this way learning is also strongly linked to employability, or the many ways to empower people in order to be a socially and economically active member of society'(p.5).

Recent developments in VET in Ireland

In 1999 the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act was passed. This Act led to the establishment of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI). The main focus of this body is the establishment of a national framework of qualifications for non-university education awards at further and higher level, taking account of education, training, social partner, voluntary organisation and learner interests. The Act also saw the introduction two new award councils FETAC (Further Education & Training Awards Council) and HETAC (Higher Education & Training Awards Council).. Their role in their respective areas is to determine the standards of knowledge and skill or competence to be acquired by learners for awards that they make. Programme providers represent the interface between the majority of learners and the National Framework of Qualifications initiated by NQAI and are, therefore, critical to its successful implementation. This paper forms the basis of work conducted by the Irish partner of the EUs CREDIVOC project. The CREDIVOC project aims tio focus on the identification, testing and transfer of instruments based on the principles of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and the ECVET that can be used for the recognition and accreditation of learning outcomes from initial and continuing vocational education and training for further education As the CREDIVOC project aims to seek out innovation in accreditation instruments in the vocational sector. The NFQ in Ireland is arguably the most significant of these instruments that Ireland has to date.

National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)

The NFQ sets the overall standards of the awards of FETAC (Further Education and Training Awards Council) and HETAC (Higher Education & Training Awards Council), as well as accommodating the awards of the universities. The Framework is the single, nationally and internationally accepted entity, through which all learning achievements may be measured and related to each other, and which defines the relationship between all education and training awards**.** The Framework of Qualifications comprises 10 levels, award types, level indicators (expressed as learning outcomes) and related policies on access, transfer and progression, including the Recognition of Prior Learning and Credit and is designed to facilitate the development of a credit accumulation and transfer system based on learning units (FETAC, 2007).
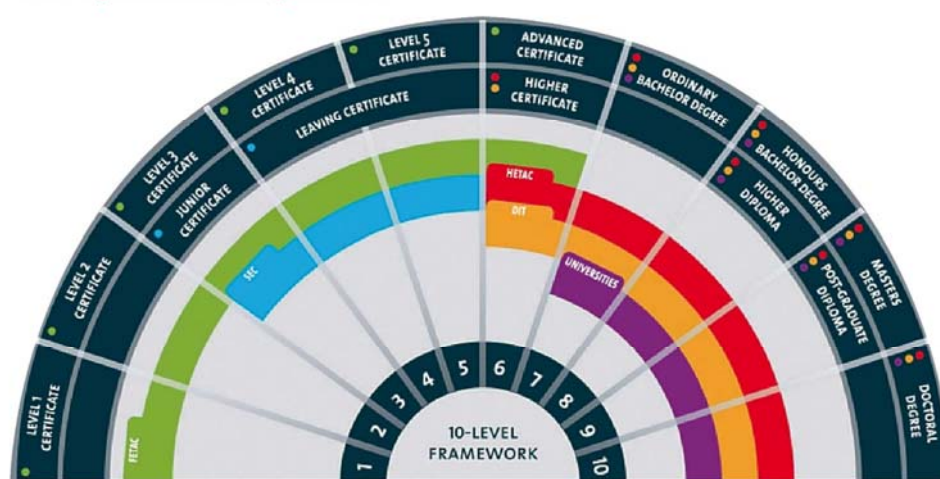
The framework is based on *learning outcomes* that are determined by standards of *knowledge, skill and competence*. The higher education and training awards are at levels 6 to 10. Vocational Education and Training is not explicitly described within the Framework as this can straddle Levels 5 to 8. The framework consists of major award types as set out overleaf. There are also minor and special purpose awards available at each level with supplemental awards available from Level 4.

	(NFQ)	Major Award Types	
Higher	10	Higher Doctorate	Doctoral Degree
Education	9	Masters Degree	Post-graduate Diploma
	8	Honours Bachelor Degree	Higher Diploma
Further	7	Ordinary Bachelor Degree	
Education	6	Higher Certificate	
(VET)	6	Advanced Certificate	
Upper	5	Level 5 Certificate	
Secondary	4/5	Leaving Certificate	
	4	Level 4 Certificate	
Lower	3	Level 3 Certificate	Junior Certificate
Secondary	2	Level 2 Certificate	
	1	Level 1 Certificate	

Figure 1: Table view of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (adapted from: NQAI, NFQ 2007

Awards at levels 6 to 10 with the exception of the Advanced Certificate at Level 6 (further education) may be made by HETAC, DIT, the Universities and IoTs (Institutes of Technology) with Delegated Authority. The implementation of the National Framework across the higher education system is well advanced. All awards included in the Framework are underpinned by legislative quality assurance arrangements.

Figure 2: a visual representation of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (source NQAI 2005)

European policy influences

As well as policy development in the area of validation of prior and experiential learning, elements such ECTS and ECVET and the EQF have all been driving forces within the vocational education landscape in Ireland.

ECVET and developments in Ireland

The proposed approach to ECVET has many parallels with the Irish national approach to frameworks, qualifications, credit and vocational education and training. Ireland is one of a few countries that have a single framework of qualifications, the National Framework of Qualifications, introduced in October 2003 *(described in previous section)*. The national framework is designed to facilitate the development of a credit accumulation and transfer system based on learning units. In 2001 two awards

councils were established (FETAC and HETAC) with responsibility respectively for further education and training and higher education and training. Their responsibilities include quality assurance of providers and programmes and making awards. Both Councils have similar functions with regard to their respective sectors. Higher education in Ireland fully supports the Bologna process and higher education credit operates in accordance with the European Transfer and Credit System (ECTS). The broad approach of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland is to work towards a national approach to credit that will facilitate a seamless transfer between further education and training and higher education and training. In principle the ECVET system should facilitate mobility and transfer for workers and students throughout the EU. The individual can transfer and accumulate learning outcomes in order to obtain a qualification. To facilitate the transfer process of learning outcomes, ECVET is based on:

- *The description of qualifications in terms of learning outcomes (knowledge, skill and competence)*
- *The expression of qualifications in units of learning outcomes which can be transferred and accumulated.*

To facilitate the understanding of qualifications and units, ECVET credit points are used as a numerical representation of each unit and to define its weight and its relative value compared to the whole qualification (FETAC, 2007). As part of the consultation regarding the ECVET, FETAC issued a formal response to the proposals in 2007. Although FETAC generally accepted the EQF and ECVET alignment it did have some concerns. The document stated concerns regarding the overlap of the EQF & ECVET. The integration of ECTS and ECVET mechanisms has been clearly identified as an issue of concern by Irish stakeholders. In their background paper *'Towards a European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training, 2007'.,* FETAC have stressed caution in the development of this area. They suggest that two parallel systems operating on different principles may complicate the implementation of ECVET. It is important that coherence and mutual understanding need to be achieved between VET and higher education in order to facilitate learners moving across borders and across systems. Further more they also added that when the EQF was agreed by the EU member it could be opportune to commence discussions and development at a European level of a unified credit system/model (across VET and

HE) to sit/link/accompany the EQF. FETAC also went on to recommend that that the Commission establish a working group to look into this option. A standardised metric for the size of units as proposed needs to be determined before further progress is made on ECVET. (FETAC, 2007)

The metric of 120 credits needs to be considered. In the Irish context 120 credits apply to a full major award. ECVET should have the facility to allow recognition of smaller credits e.g. 30-40 to be achieved while abroad to facilitate their accumulation towards the attainment of a full award in their home country which could amount to 120 credits. A standard size of 1 credit to 10 hours notional effort should be considered for VET. This metric can easily translate to the HE metric set for ECTS.

Competent body/institution A in Country X	Individuals transcript of record travels from A to B	Competent body/institution B in Country Y
- assesses certain individuals learning outcomes and - awards credit to the individual	=>	- validates credits obtained and transferred by the individual and - recognises learning outcomes as part of the qualification to be obtained

Figure 3: ECVET transfer and methodology for individual recognition.

'Bologna' Framework of Qualifications / EQF

The NFQ is aligned with the Framework of Qualifications for the European Higher Education Area ('Bologna' Framework). Running parallel to the Bologna Process is the development of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) for lifelong learning. The National Framework is to be aligned with the EQF. Alignment facilitates the recognition of learning and supports access, transfer and progression for learners. To date there has been tentative referencing of the National Framework of Qualifications to the European Qualifications Framework. *(See Figure 4. overleaf).*

NFQ - Ireland	EQF
1 & 2	1
3	2
4	3
5	4
6	5
7 & 8	6
9	7
10	8

Figure 4. Tentative referencing of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications to the European Qualifications Framework *(source FETAC (2007) Towards a European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training)*

The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) has been incorporated into the awards systems of HETAC, the IoTs, DIT and the Universities and most programmes are now ECTS compatible. ECTS is a learner-centred system for credit accumulation and transfer based on the transparency of learning outcomes and learning processes. It aims to facilitate planning, delivery, evaluation, recognition and validation of qualifications and units of learning as well as student mobility.

National perspective on Accreditation of Prior (Experience) Learning (AP(E)L)

The accreditation of prior learning is currently the subject of major debate across al sections of education and training in Ireland (Davidson & Nevala 2007). Ireland was one of the first EU states to implement national legislation relating to the recognition of prior informal and non-formal learning. The introduction of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 pays special attention to this in the section on 'access, transfer and progression'. The legislation was designed so 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. This was very progressive thinking in 1999. Coughlan & Scanlon (2007) however suggest that the progress towards developing a national system has been fairly slow.

In 2004, the NQAI put together 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 strengthen the introduction of policy and procedures for RPL in Ireland. In 2005, the NQAI published the "Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning in Further and Higher Education and Training". This document 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. Because of this national approach the principles and guidelines have been utilised to varying degrees Vocational and Higher education sectors (Davidson & Nevala 2007). The NQAI insist that a 'national approach builds on and takes account of developments already taking place both nationally and internationally' (NQAI 2005, p.4). It also states 'that many awarding bodies are, or have been, actively developing their own policies and practices, thus there is a need to develop a national approach to ensure coherence and widespread acceptance of the outcomes of recognition' (ibid). The NQAIs intention is that these principles should be built on to develop operational guidelines which could be 'an exemplar of the nature of arrangements that further and higher education and training bodies (the Further Education and Training Awards Council, The Higher Education and Training Awards Council, the universities and the Dublin Institute of Technology) should consider putting in place' (ibid).

FETAC (Further Education and Training Awards Council)

As mentioned previously in this paper the 1999 Qualifications Act saw the establishment of FETAC, the Further Education and Training Awards Council. Under the terms of the Act, FETAC is charged with being the single national awarding body for further education and training. Among FETAC's roles and responsibilities are the

design of arrangements linked to the assessment, transfer, validation and recognition processes and the description of qualifications in terms of units of learning outcomes.

FETAC has been identified by the Irish team as being uniquely placed in terms of its mission and processes to act as a partner in this project. One of the principal factors which qualify FETAC for such a role is its approach to the provision and validation of assessment procedures. FETAC consider the question of assessment instruments and define such an instrument as 'the specific activity/task or question(s) devised by the assessor based on the specified assessment technique. For example, if the assessment technique specified in the Award Specification is an examination, the assessment instrument is the/an examination paper/ questions/case study' (FETAC, 2007).

FETAC also issue guidelines on the design of such assessment instruments and require that they

- *Be appropriate to the technique and fit for purpose*
- *Allow learners to generate sufficient evidence*
- *Enable evidence to be generated which can be measured against the learning outcomes outlined in the Award Specification*
- *Enable reliable assessment decisions by assessors*
- *Be selected to make the best use of available resources i.e. is 'practicable'.*

Providers have a responsibility in the areas of assessing learners, verification and authentication of assessment approval of results, processing appeals and requesting FETAC to make awards to learners. At the local level where VET takes place FETAC modules offer a range of assessment techniques such as written assignment, project work, portfolio/collection of work, skills demonstration, examination and learner record (see **Appendix 2** for a description of the appropriateness of these techniques in terms of the level of the award and the learning outcomes assessed).

FETAC & RPL

In addition to its work in the area of assessment FETAC's responsibilities extend to other domains. In 2005 it agreed a Policy on Recognition of Prior Learning. According to the Council *'RPL is a significant mechanism to improve access, transfer*

and progression for learners and is essential for the promotion of lifelong learning' (FETAC, 2005) where RPL is defined as *'prior learning that is given a value, by having it affirmed, acknowledged, assessed or certified' (ibid).* Recognition of prior learning has been a feature of the Irish VET system for a number of years but the recent economic and social developments in the country have accelerated the need for the development of policies such as those devised by FETAC.

Broadly speaking the principal aim of FETAC's policy in this area is concerned with ensuring access, transfer and progression of learners through the recognition of prior learning within the national framework of qualifications. This policy is implemented on the ground through FETAC's quality assured programme providers who are encouraged by FETAC to facilitate learners through the recognition of prior learning in the areas of *'entry to programmes, exemptions from programme requirements, credit towards an award and eligibility for a full award within the framework of qualifications'* (ibid). In addition because RPL is essentially a mode of assessment learners will have to fulfil the assessment criteria specified for FETAC awards. In its strategic plan for 2003 – 2006 FETAC committed itself to development and publishing of a policy on the issue of accreditation of prior learning. In keeping with its track record of attaining targets set, the board of FETAC agreed and approved a policy on the Recognition of Prior Learning in April 2005. FETAC defined the recognition of prior learning as "prior learning that is given a value, by having it affirmed, acknowledged, assessed or certified."

The policy in this area is quite detailed and comprehensive and is beyond the scope of this paper to outline here. Full details for the guidelines governing the implementation of the RPLP policy can be found in **Appendix 3.**

The Higher Education System and AP(E)L

HETAC (the Higher Education and Training Awards Council) was established on 11 June 2001, under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999. It is the successor to the National Council for Educational Awards (NCEA). HETAC is the qualifications awarding body for third-level education and training institutions outside the university sector. HETAC in Ireland describes prior experiential learning as

knowledge and skills acquired through life, work experience and study, not formally attested through formal certification. In so doing however Coughlan & Scanlon (2007) suggest that it is also very clear that experience is an input and that learning outcomes are the result of a successful learning process. Interestingly it states categorically that academic credit can be awarded only for the achievement of learning outcomes and not simply for experience. The guiding principle underpinning the guidelines is that they are an integrated part of the Council's strategy to create a ladder of learning as indicated in the third mission ' Provide systematic progression pathways.' (HETAC 2006).   It states that concept of AP(E)L is one which is aimed primarily at people who for one reason or another such as, the lack of finance or other support did not have the chance to commence or complete a third level programme. Having now amassed a significant level of life experience they could now qualify to have this experience assessed academically to gain access to or exemptions within the third level system. Learning outcomes are used where AP(E)L is related to specific modules or courses with the expectation in some cases that applicants will meet all the learning outcomes to a specified sufficiency.

In a recent research conducted by Anne Murphy (2004) the findings suggested that the use of learning outcomes for AP(E)L is conceptually difficult in a higher education context where knowledge is not generally pegged to measurable occupational competence standards. It went on to say '*Curriculum design, syllabus content and assessment in higher education generally operate from a different philosophy in this regard and the university preference is for assessment of experiential learning in-the-round, drawing on the teaching experience of academic staff and panels of experts closest to the field of learning in each case'* (p.5)

The University Sector & AP(E)L

The University system has up until recent times been the slowest to act on developing instruments and policies in the area of AP(E)L. Coughlan & Scanlon (2007) suggest that this is however due to the lack of institutional-wide initiatives. However due to the increased demands for vocationally related degrees such as Teaching and Nursing, and more so in recent years with extra resources being put into Science and Engineering a number of recent developments are putting increased pressure on the

university sector to become more involved in the area of AP(E)L. Traditionally there has been a steady influx of students from the Higher Education sector to the University sector and a very well established system of APL existed to cater for these students. This interaction has diminished in recent times due to the increased authority of the HE sector to award their own degrees and post graduate qualifications and the greater acceptance of these awards by employers Coughlan & Scanlon (2007 p.17) .In recent years the applications through the CAO (Central Admissions Office) in the areas of science and engineering have been decreasing. Because of this and pressure from the NQAI the university sector is now under increasing stress to maintain their enrolment numbers. They have recognized that it is now imperative for systems to be put in place to allow for greater flexibility in the admissions system.

Sectoral case study – Engineering

The CREDIVOC project is still in its infancy and innovations and models of good practice have yet to be established between partners. This section gives an overview of current procedures within this sector. S previously mentioned vocational education and training is not necessarily based on vocational to higher educational pathways. Learners often straddle several domains. FETAC & HETAC have both made awards in the engineering sector through the AP(E)L process. Outside of the process for APEL through the traditional educational routes such as VET and Higher Education degrees the sectoral body for Chartered Engineers in Ireland (Engineers Ireland) has developed its own system for the recognition of competencies for individuals presenting themselves for recognition as Chartered Engineers within the profession. Within Engineers Ireland the Experiential Learning Procedure has been developed for those who do not have formal academic qualifications at the required level but who, over an extensive number of years may have developed the competencies of a Chartered Engineer. The body recognises that the development of engineering competencies can take place in a wide range of settings. Individuals with a personal interest in and enthusiasm for engineering may study engineering and attend various training courses throughout their career. The procedure, which is administered internally, was formulated in recognition of those working in the industry that do not have at least a primary degree in an engineering discipline and want to be recognised

as Chartered Engineers. The applicant initiates the process by completing an "Alternative Routes to Assessment Form" and successful candidates will be invited to produce a portfolio describing past learning and achievements to date. The portfolio consists of three sections:

– Report on Experiential Learning (Section 8)

– Report on an Engineering Project (Section 9)

– Two Essays (Section 10)

 The Membership and Qualifications Board determine suitability based on the candidates experience in relation to "*the competencies of a chartered engineer*" a 1419 word document available to all candidates and a mentor is allocated to each candidate. The relationship with the mentor is paramount however the role of the mentor is confined to assisting the candidate in understanding the meaning of the competencies described in "*the competencies of a chartered engineer*" and accurately identifying and describing his/her skills and knowledge insofar as these relate to the competencies. The mentor's role does not in any way extend to enhancing the quality of the candidate's skills and knowledge beyond assisting the candidate as described above. The mentor has no role or influence in the examination of the candidate and cannot be held responsible in any way for the outcome of the examination. On successful completion of the portfolio the applicant submits to an oral examination with an examination board made up of engineers at least one of who is an expert in the candidate's discipline (Coughlan & Scanlon 2007).

Summary

This paper is intended to set the scene in an Irish context of how assessments occur primarily through the FETAC system, which is the dominant accrediting body for vocational learning in Ireland. It outlines the overlap between vocation (further0 education and higher education. Reference is made to the Universities and the other Higher Education bodies such as HETAC. The paper outlines the interrelationship between European developments and theoretical frameworks as well as observing the current changes occurring within this sector. The basis of the paper is to establish up-to-date developments connected with the assessment and APEL tools and instruments that are aligned with current legislation. In the case of Ireland, the NFQ (National

Framework of Qualifications) is one of these instruments as well as the APEL policies of the NQAI (National Qualifications Authority of Ireland) which is written as Irish law in the form of learning outcomes. The paper also discusses the significance of the development of the EQF as well as the implications of the ECVET process. The next stage of this research within the CREDIVOC project is to develop the empirical research through case studies and engage with a domain specific sector (such as engineering) and examine how these instruments work in practice with a special emphasis on the R (A)PL (Recognition and Accreditation of Prior learning). The project will hopefully produce some recommendations that can be transferred throughout the project . As Anne Murphy says in her report, '*AP(E)L in Irish higher education: findings from an audit of practice undertaken as an activity within the Socrates-Grundtvig research project* VaLEx *Valuing Learning from Experience'* The drivers of AP(E)L development in Ireland have been the professions such as nursing, social care engineering (p.5). E ,look forward to investigating this sector in more detail through the case studies.

References

Brinkley I and Lee N (2006). *The knowledge economy in Europe: A report prepared for the 2007* EU Spring Council, London, The Work Foundation

Coughlan, D & Scanlon, G. (2007) *Ireland VPL-country report 2007* - Managing European Diversity in lifelong learning (VPL2) EU/Leonardo project NL/05/C/F/TH-81802

Davidson, M & Nevala A-M. (2007*) European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning* IRELAND (draft) C3342 / ECOTEC Research & Consulting Ltd.

FETAC (2007) *Towards a European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training: Background Paper,* January 2007, FETAC, Dublin, Ireland.

FETAC (2007) *Quality Assuring Assessment: Guidelines for Providers*. FETAC, Dublin, Ireland

FETAC (2005): *RPL: Policy and Guidelines (Draft*) : FETAC, Dublin, Ireland

FETAC (2007) Towards a European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training: Irish Response

Finlay, I., Niven, S. & Young, S. (Eds) (1998) *Changing Vocational Education and Training: an international comparative perspective*. London: Routledge.

Government of Ireland, Department of Education & Science (DES) (2000). Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education. Dublin: The Stationery Office.

Heraty, N., M. Morley and A. McCarthy, (2000), *Vocational Education and Training in the Republic of Ireland: Institutional Reform and Policy Developments since the 1960s*, Journal of Vocational Education and Training, Vol. 51, No. 2, pp. 177-198

McCarthy, O'Donnell & Garavan (2001) *Understanding the Irish VET system: beyond neoclassicism*, International Journal of Manpower, Intellectual Capital Research Institute, Ballyagran, Limerick County, Ireland, Volume: 22, Number, 5, pp: 425-444

Murphy, A (2004) *AP(E)L in Irish higher education: findings from an audit of practice undertaken as an activity within the Socrates-Grundtvig research project VaLEx Valuing Learning from Experience 2003-2005***,** Dublin Institute of Technology, Ireland

Online References

http://www.fetac.ie/info/about_fetac.htm (accessed 17th May, 2008)

Appendix 1

FETAC Module descriptor: http://www.fetac.ie/

Appendix 2

Assessment Techniques - Summary

The following table summaries the assessment techniques identified for assessing learners, and their appropriateness to the level of the award and the learning outcomes being assessed.

Assessment technique	Level appropriateness	Assessor needs to prepare:	Learning outcomes assessed
Assignment	Level 1 - 6	Assignment brief	Knowledge, know-how and skill, competence
Project	Level 4 - 6	Project brief	Knowledge, know-how and skill, competence
Portfolio/collection of work	**Particularly appropriate for levels 1 - 3**	Instructions/tasks. Guidelines on compiling portfolio	Knowledge, Know-how and skill, competence
Skills demonstration	Level 1 - 6	Instructions, tasks, activities or brief	Particularly appropriate to know-how and skill and competence
Examination	Level 4 - 6	Examination paper, examination questions, instructions for learners e.g. time allowed	Theory based examination is particularly suitable for the assessment of knowledge outcomes. Practical examinations can be used to assess know-how and skill and competence
Learner record	Level 4 - 6	Brief/instructions. Guidelines for learners on format of the record.	Knowledge, know-how and skill, competence

Appendix 3

FETAC: RPL: Policy and Guidelines (Draft) 2005

Specific Requirements
FETAC has prepared the following specific Guidelines to assist providers to facilitate learners through the recognition of prior learning with regard to entry, exemption or eligibility for an award.

Entry/access to programmes
The facilitation of the recognition of prior learning process for entry to programmes is the responsibility of the programme provider to which the individual applies.The provider's procedure for entry to programmes will be approved by FETAC at the point of programme validation within the context of the agreed provider's quality assurance policy and FETAC's award arrangements.

Guidelines
Providers will be required to:
- Advise and support learners of the value of prior learning and of the steps in the process involved for making an application
- Provide appropriate information to learners on the entry criteria/requirements to successfully participate in a programme. RPL information leaflets and RP application procedures should be made available to learners.
- Specify the entry criteria which form the basis for successful participation for each programme to be validated by FETAC. These criteria will refer to the standards and level of the award and take into account the knowledge, skill and competence to be acquired by the learner. This will be required when validation of programmes commences in Spring 2006.
- Include RPL information in all programme materials i.e. programme prospectus or course profile prepared in advance of the programme. This information should be readily available to prospective learners in an appropriate medium
- Establish an application procedure to assist the learner to apply on the basis of prior learning experiences and to attach supporting evidence of prior learning experiences. The application procedure should be simple and allow the individual to document the relevant prior learning experiences. The standard application procedure with an additional section for RPL applicants is recommended.
- The application procedure should gather information on the learner's prior experience such as: personal information, previous employments, leisure and voluntary activities, education and training undertaken, and references as well as reasons for applying for the programme. The applicant should be given an opportunity to highlight the relevant prior learning in relation to the entry criteria.
- Criteria for the evaluation of the learner should include minimum acceptable criteria for successful participation such as: a minimum of 5 years relevant life experience, a clear demonstration of the capacity to succeed – standard of overall application, individual commitment of the learner and other specific requirements which may specific to the programme.
- The assessment of the prior learning in the application should be carried out by persons with appropriate expertise in the relevant field. If required the provider may seek more information and evidence from the prospective learner.
- Ensure that their arrangements for selecting and assessing learners for entry are transparent and fair. Prospective learners can be interviewed to discuss the above to assist in the decision making process.
- On completion of the assessment of the application a recommendation will be made regarding entry to the programme.
- An appeals mechanism should be in place as for all prospective applicants in the event of a learner making an appeal.
- Monitor and record the application and its outcome to meet requirements of quality assurance elements for recognition of prior learning for entry.

- To assist providers a sample application form is attached illustrating information that is required for processing prior learning applicants. It is of course possible for providers to develop or amend this as appropriate.

Exemptions from programme requirements

A learner may be granted an exemption from some programme requirements on the basis of prior learning experiences. It is the responsibility of the provider to grant the exemption(s) in accordance with the requirements and guidelines below; As and from January 2005 and as part of FETAC Quality Assurance requirement providers will be required to grant exemptions to learners by recognising prior learning.

Guidelines

To facilitate the granting of exemptions provider will be required to:

1. Outline their criteria for exemption arrangements on the basis of prior learning for each programme submitted to FETAC for validation. A provider should identify the criteria for the granting of exemptions to a learner during consultation for and development of the programme
2. This information should be available in advance of selection of learners and available to prospective learners in all programme literature.
3. Grant an exemption on the basis of a successfully completed FETAC or other recognised award. Learners who already hold any FETAC minor award should be granted an exemption towards a major award for which this minor award is a requirement.
4. If seeking recognition for other award learners should be advised to present the **original** of the relevant certificate in order for exemption to be granted.
5. In the case of 'other recognised award' the provider will refer to FETAC for information on the status of the award. Providers will refer to FETAC's register of Recognized Awards. www.fetac.ie to ensure that learners holding awards recognised by FETAC are given appropriate recognition as art of the programme. Details of other awards can be sent to FETAC at recognition@fetac.ie for evaluation.
6. Grant an exemption on the basis of prior learning experiences, which in the opinion of the provider meet a number of learning outcomes in part of a programme or programme requirement. This type of exemption will not exempt the learner from assessment (as it is not formally recognised) and the learner will be required to be fully assessed at the award stage of the programme.
7. For uncertified learning experiences the learner will be required to present evidence to demonstrate how he or she meets the relevant programme requirements. This evidence must demonstrate clearly how, when and where the learner met the criteria. The evidence presented will be assessed in a fair and consistent manner against the assessment criteria for the specified learning outcomes. This prior learning evidence must meet the assessment standards of authenticity, currency, validity and reliability.
8. If the evidence does not meet the assessment criteria the learner will be advised to undertake the assessment.

Eligibility for an award

This applies to learners who are seeking to have their prior learning experience formally recognised for the purposes of achieving a major, minor, special purpose or supplemental award. From summer 2005 a learner3 may, on the basis of prior learning experiences apply for a FETAC award independent of programmes. Learners can achieve an award if they can demonstrate that they meet the standard for an award on the basis of prior learning experience. In the case of a direct application to FETAC the assistance of a provider will be required to confirm the standard of attainment for an award.

Guidelines

Recognition of prior learning for an award is significantly more complex than recognition within a programme for entry or exemption in that a learner is facilitated to attain a complete award. This involves a rigorous process of analysis and evidence gathering in order to ensure that the standards for the award have been attained. FETAC must ensure the integrity of the award standards is maintained and any process such as the assessment of prior learning must clearly demonstrate achievement of these standards.

To assist providers FETAC has identified a series of steps in the process to enable learners to gain recognition of prior learning for an award

These are:
- Identifying the award
- Determining eligibility
- Analysis of knowledge, skill and competence
- Gathering Evidence
- Assessment of the evidence
- Making a recommendation

The term learner is used as in the context of a 'lifelong learner' (NQAI Draft Principles)

I.   **Identifying the award**
The first step towards the attainment of an award is to identify the relevant and appropriate award. Following an initial enquiry the award must be clearly identified by the learner. The FETAC Directory of Awards contains all the awards currently made by FETAC. The award and the Award standards must be available to the individual learner and provider. These can be requested from FETAC or downloaded from the website. FETAC recommends that the learner undertakes this in conjunction with a provider or an employer.

II.   **Determine the eligibility of the learner**
Following the identification of an award the eligibility of the individual learner must be determined. The eligibility of the learner is critical and the breadth and depth of the prior learning experiences of the learner must be evaluated. The learner must be able to show that he or she has adequate prior learning. If not the learner cannot proceed. FETAC recommends that A 'Quick Scan' of the learning outcomes for the award be undertaken by the provider with the learner to determine eligibility for the award. This quick scan will enable the provider to evaluate the prior learning. The learner should be requested to submit a Curriculum Vitae or Application form outlining their work history to date. It is also recommended that the learner be requested to give a number of reasons why he or she are applying for the award employability, mobility, personal development etc to assist with the determination of the motivation of the learner. FETAC recommends the following criteria for the determining of eligibility for a learner seeking an award:

a) For a major award it is recommended that the learner should have a minimum of 6-8 years direct work experience for a major award
b) For a minor award, special purpose and supplemental award the learner should have more than 2-3 years directly relevant prior learning experiences.
c) The identified prior learning must be directly related to the targeted award.
d) The learner should display a commitment to undertaking a rigorous demanding process
e) The learner should display an ability to undertake the process of personal evaluation and to gather evidence in an efficient and effective manner.
f) The learner should be willing to take additional assessment as deemed appropriate and/or attend an interview if required these recommendations are not fixed as each award and the life experience will vary. Learner may require top up training in order to reach the appropriate standard if they do not have sufficient prior learning.

III. **Analysis/review of knowledge, skill and competence of the award**
The analysis of learning outcomes involves a review of the knowledge, skill and competence for the award of the learner and matching this prior learning against the learning outcomes for the award. This process may also be referred to as an 'audit'. This process is to be undertaken by the learner with support of a mentor as appropriate. The steps include:

a) Listing the learning outcomes for a specified award
b) For **each** learning outcome consider in terms of 'can do/cannot do/have experience of/know and have applied '. This will require discussion, reflection and self analysis on the part of the learner.
c) Record the learning outcomes as 'achieved/not achieved'

d) Identify for each learning outcome precisely how, where and when this learning took place: the learner will need to review **all** the learning outcomes for the identified award.

As a general rule the prior learning experience of the learner should ensure the **majority of learning outcomes are achieved** – more than 70%. If not, it is likely that the learner does not have sufficient experience to prove their competent

IV. **Gathering of Evidence**

For each learning outcome the learner should identify a piece of evidence to be used to demonstrate the achievement of the outcome. The evidence can be collected in a Portfolio of Evidence/collection of evidence. The same piece of evidence may be presented for more than one outcome if appropriate to those outcomes as a group relating to a particular field of learning. Evidence which applies to more than one learning outcome must be clearly labelled and cross – referenced. This Portfolio/collection of Evidence will be assessed by an assessor who will make a recommendation on the outcome to be achieved. The Portfolio/collection of evidence should contain the following:

- Personal details and contact information
- Table of contents listing the various sections in the portfolio
- Full Curriculum Vitae expanded to included detailed work history (European CV recommended)
- Reference information on award identified
- List of learning outcomes/standards for the award and details of analysis recorded as achieved/not achieved with identified evidence reference
- Referenced/indexed listing of evidence - referenced to learning outcomes
- Copies of correspondence/applications forms etc
- Details of meetings with mentor
- A Range of supporting evidence including the following:
- **Direct evidence**
- Project or work based assignments
- Evidence of work based assessment – on the job assessment for work skills
- Job Specification(s)
- Company organisation charts
- Personnel records of in house training and development
- Accounts of personal experiences
- Employer endorsement and /testimonials
- Prior qualifications, Certificates of Education and Training – FETAC, in house etc
- Training, Assessment and test results
- Curricula/course descriptions/outcomes
- Staff training records/personal records
- Products of work, samples of documentation/work undertaken, photographs
- **Indirect evidence**
- Membership of related organisations and societies
- General references
- Newspaper cuttings
- Other evidence – accounts of overseas experience, voluntary work etc.

All relevant evidence and documentation relating to the prior learning of the learner must be identified by the learner. Some evidence will be readily available. Further research will be required to gather other evidence through contact with present and former employers, personnel departments, trainers, personal contacts as well as other sources. As part of learner support the mentor will assist the learner to identify the range and types of evidence to be presented.

Ensuring quality of evidence

Direct Evidence will provide **direct proof** of knowledge, skills and competence of the learner and will relate specifically to the identified learning outcome/standard of the award. It will fully support a claim.

Other **indirect** evidence can be used to support the application but may not clearly demonstrate competence. It may support an application but will need to be linked to the standards as clearly as possible. It is likely that this indirect evidence on its own will not be sufficient to prove full achievement of the standards for the award.

Guidelines for Gathering Evidence/Portfolio Development
The evidence must be clearly linked to the learning outcomes/standards which have been declared to have been achieved. The evidence must be directly relevant to the learning outcomes identified.
It is recommended that a minimum of two pieces of evidence be presented for each learning outcome/set of learning outcomes. This for example would consist of a CV with relevant detail of directly relevant work experience and some supporting evidence of informal training undertaken. Another alternative would be direct work experience and evidence of assessment on the job. These items of evidence would be required to be authenticated appropriately.
The assessor will judge the evidence against the assessment criteria for the award and will consider the evidence for: Authenticity, Currency, Sufficiency and Validity. The assessor must also be satisfied that the knowledge, skill and competence elements for the award are met in full through the evidence as presented. When the evidence/Portfolio is completed it will be checked by the mentor and submitted for assessment.

V. **Assessment of evidence**
Assessment of prior learning is a core element of the Recognition of Prior Learning process. Providers, as part of their quality assurance procedures will require assessors to accurately assess the evidence of candidates against the standards of FETAC awards. RPL is a mode of assessment and like all assessment modes needs to be fairly and consistently applied.
Assessment of evidence is a formal process of assessment which has to prove the learner meets the standards. A learner must be able to provide **documentary evidence** of prior learning experiences which prove the achievement of the standards. This evidence will be assessed against the relevant standards of the award and its assessment criteria. Following assessment a recommendation will be made to the learner. The assessor will **review the portfolio against the standards for the award** identified and must be satisfied that all assessment criteria for the award are met. Assessors will be required to:

a) Assess i.e. judge the learner's evidence against the national standards as outlined in the award standards ensuring authenticity, currency, reliability and sufficiency.
b) Ensure the evidence has met more than 70% of all of the declared learning outcomes.
c) Ensure the evidence presented has met the knowledge, skill and competence elements of the award.
d) Judge and allocate a score to the evidence as presented in terms of achieving the standard on a scale of 0 -100% full achievement.
e) Undertake further assessment of the learner as appropriate to ensure the learner meets the standard.
f) Arrange the verification of the achievement of the standard by a 'person competent' to ensure the achieve of the standard
g) Make recommendations to FETAC regarding the learner attaining the award

The assessor will **score and grade the evidence** in accordance with the scoring and grading mechanisms established for the award.
The assessor will use the following criteria when undertaking the assessment of prior learning evidence:

Sufficiency – is there enough evidence to demonstrate achievement of the standard.
The assessor needs to be satisfied that the evidence presented shows the necessary breadth and depth as required in the standards for the award. The assessor will take into account the

level of the award on the framework of qualifications and the descriptors of knowledge, skill and competence required.

Currency – the assessor needs to be sure that the evidence is recent enough to be up to date in relation to the standards for the award. While not all evidence needs to be current there are some types of evidence which may be outdated by new technological procedures and developments. The experienced assessor who is a subject matter expert will take this into account in the evaluation of the evidence.

Authenticity – the application will need to be clearly established as the property of the individual. Where appropriate the evidence should be endorsed and dated by the candidate. Endorsement of evidence by the supervisor/employer will also demonstrate authenticity. Letters of authentication of evidence will provide good supporting evidence.

Validity – relevance to the training standard is critical. The assessor needs to judge if the evidence presented is appropriate to the standards as indicated.

The assessor will record the results throughout and may seek clarification and meet/interview the candidate if required. In order to facilitate RPL assessors will need to be trained and experienced in their specific field and in the assessment requirements for the award

External verification

The process of assessment of a candidate's evidence will need to include external verification to ensure consistency and compliance with national standards.

Assessment of prior learning is a mode of assessment. External verification will ensure the standard for the award is met and the overall creditability of FETAC awards is maintained.

Providers will ensure that this requirement will be met in their quality assurance policy and procedures on assessment.

VI. **Recommendation for an award**

Once the assessment is complete a recommendation is made by the assessor regarding the attainment of the award. In the case of recognition of prior learning the award is processed in the standard manner and results returned for result approval in the normal way. The returning of results will be quality assured by providers in accordance with FETAC QA requirements. The grading of the award will be made in accordance with the assessment criteria for the award in question. At present the grading will be in accordance with the existing criteria of the awards as constituted by the former awarding bodies. When new FETAC awards are introduced the grading criteria will obviously evolve.