0 Using a Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Approach to Evaluate Experiential Learning for Access to a Postgraduate Education Programme

Context:

Trinity has participated in the National Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in Higher Education Project since 2021. This project is a collaborative initiative working to embed and expand RPL across 14 partner higher education institutions. The project is funded by the Human Capital Initiative Pillar 3 (Innovation and Agility) and co-sponsored by the Technological Higher Education Association and the Irish Universities Association.

A Framework for RPL in HE was agreed in June 2022 by all partner institutions which represents a shared understanding of RPL with a set of principles underpinned by quality assurance.

A Trinity RPL Working Group, chaired by the Dean of Graduate Studies, was established in March 2022 to review current RPL policy and practice across the University considering the national RPL project and make recommendations for the future use of RPL at Trinity.

During the project lifecycle institutions are encouraged to engage in case study development to highlight how RPL could be further enhanced, and to showcase new and innovative RPL approaches for further consideration.

Case Study Identification:

The Global Brain Health Institute (GBHI) at Trinity runs multidisciplinary leadership training programmes aimed at developing a global response to increasing dementia rates by developing scalable, policy-relevant methods for dementia prevention and mitigation.

On the 6th July 2022, GBHI received an application for its NFQ Level 9 Postgraduate Certificate in Equity in Brain Health in which the applicant did not meet the entry criteria of a 2.1 Honours Degree but had relevant experience. A process was developed by GBHI and the RPL Project Lead to assess the applicant's prior experiential learning to ensure sufficient rigour could be applied for waiving the 2.1 Honours Degree requirement for programme access. This approach was used to design and build a case study to inform RPL practice at Trinity.

RPL Process Development:

The applicant had extensive prior non-formal experiential learning and a method of capturing and assessing this learning was required to inform the decision-making process. A best practice approach suggested by European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) for measuring and evaluating non-formal learning was modified to develop the IDAC methodology which can be summarised as follows:

1. ***Identification:*** The learner explores their prior learning with a view to making an RPL application.
2. ***Documentation:*** The learner undertakes a reflective process and gathers relevant materials to substantiate their application.
3. ***Assessment:*** The learner's application is assessed. A range of assessment mechanisms may be used (e.g., portfolios, interviews).
4. ***Certification:*** If the application is successful, the learner will receive formal recognition or certification, which will lead to one or more outcomes (e.g., access, advanced entry, module exemption).

In addition to the IDAC approach above, GBHI included some additional tailored questions for the applicant to address. The application was also evaluated against the NFQ Grid of Level Indicators at Levels 8 and 9. The applicant submitted their evidence portfolio for final review on the 20th July 2022.

Following a review by the Course Committee (Module leads and Programme Director), the Committee recommended the applicant for access onto the programme on the 8th August 2022. This decision was approved by the Dean of Graduate Studies on the 18th August 2022 followed by Academic Registry Approval on the 9th September 2022.

Communication to Stakeholders:

This case study with its RPL process approach was presented to participants on National RPL in HE Project Digital Badge series in April 2022, and discussed at the QQI 20th Anniversary of the NFQ in November 2023. GBHI will also present this case study at a Trinity RPL Event planned for January 2024.

Benefits of the RPL Project:

The RPL Project at Trinity has allowed for the sharing of good practice in RPL application processing and decision making across Schools and has created awareness of the potential use of RPL across programmes. This work is underpinned by the Trinity RPL Policy, which will undergo an extensive review led by the RPL Working Group in 2023/2024.

Evaluation and Impact:

This case study details a robust tailored approach to measure and evaluate non-formal learning for postgraduate programme access at Trinity, which other Schools and HEIs can learn from. The applicant concerned has since successfully graduated from Trinity and has gone on to advance their research in dementia care and support.

Supporting Policies and Procedures:

The following policies and procedures were consulted as part of this RPL process development:

1. Trinity RPL Policy: rpl-jan2021.pdf (tcd.ie)
2. Cedefop Guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning: European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning (europa.eu))
3. QQI NFQ Grid of Level Indicators: NFQLevelindicators.pdf (qqi.ie)