0 Using a Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Approach to Evaluate Formal, Informal and Non formal 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 School of Religion and Political Science run an MPhil in International Peace Studies programme that aims to give students the analytical skills to examine the causes and consequences of war and armed conflict, with a view to understanding the achievement of sustainable peace. This is done through engaging students in interdisciplinary learning in subject areas such as conflict resolution, nonviolence, gender, human rights, international development, the role of religion and other topics relevant to understanding the dynamics of peace and conflict.

On the 7th March 2024, the Head of School of Religion received a scholarship application for its NFQ Level 9 MPhil in International Peace Studies programme. The applicant presented with a degree from abroad that did not meet the Irish NFQ Level 8 standard expected for programme entry. A process was developed by the School of Religion and the RPL Project Lead to assess the applicant's prior formal, informal and non-formal 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 formal, informal and non-formal learning and a method of capturing and assessing this learning was required to inform the decision-making process. Two bespoke methods were developed for the RPL case, firstly, a best practice approach suggested by the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) for measuring and evaluating informal and 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, an NFQ Level 8 Rubric was developed to assist in evidencing the applicants extensive formal certified learning against the expected generic outcomes at NFQ Level 8 (Knowledge, Skill, Competence). The applicant submitted their evidence portfolio for final review on the 26th March 2024.

Following a review by the Peace Studies Committee (Module leads and Programme Director), the Committee recommended the applicant for access onto the programme on the 4th April 2024. This decision was approved by the Dean of Graduate Studies on the 11th April 2024 followed by Academic Registry Approval on the 15th April 2024.

Communication to Stakeholders:

To be completed.

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 2024/2025.

Evaluation and Impact:

This case study details a robust tailored approach to measure and evaluate formal, informal and non-formal learning for postgraduate programme access at Trinity, which other Schools and HEIs can learn from..

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)