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Change Management in Higher Education

- **An exploration of a cross-organisational change initiative and the development of a framework to support such endeavours**

A project submitted to Middlesex University in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of *Doctor of Professional Studies*

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Abstract

This action research project was based on the leadership of a collaborative change initiative which sought to effect changes across a consortium of higher education institutions in Ireland. The changes sought were defined and agreed with the Higher Education Authority as funding agency for the initiative. The changes sought to ensure that the higher education provision was more relevant and accessible to learners in the work place.

Four specific strands of activity formed the basis of the initiative and in all cases the change processes were informed through an exploration and sharing of current practice and a collective agreement on priorities and actions arising from the exploration stages. A variety of research techniques was used in the collection of information on the existing practice and these were distilled into guidelines for the improvement of practice generally. In the case of each of the strands of activity the major outcome, in the form of a report, was widely disseminated throughout the Irish higher education sector and has had a significant impact on practice within the nine higher education institutions which formed the consortium and beyond.

The particular leadership challenges associated with leading a collaborative project such as this are addressed. An analysis of the extant literature points to the lack of a suitable framework to support this type of cross-organisational change management initiative. Through an action research approach and the inclusion of a number of different perspectives in building a three dimensional focus of informed enquiry, a revised Framework for Change is developed. The Framework is informed by the analysis of in-depth interviews with participants in the change initiative and it is developed as a re-usable framework which will inform the design and leadership of broad, collaborative, cross-organisational change endeavours generally.

Chapter 1: Introduction

*In order to arrive at what you are not,
You must go through the way in which you are not,
And what you do not know is the only thing you know,
And what you own is what you do not own,
And where you are is where you are not.*

T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*

Introduction

Change is a reality facing most organisations. This is especially evident in Ireland at present where the current economic challenges have led to greater turmoil for organisations. In practice, organisations must embrace change and organisational leaders must use their experience and knowledge to predict the changes necessary in order to survive or end up falling victim to the changing environment in which they seek to operate. Senior management within organisations, therefore, must take a structured approach to managing change in order support the transitions necessary to move from the existing state to that which is desired. This research seeks to contribute to the development of a structured framework which will support cross-organisational collaborative change processes and address the deficits in the current structures relating to these more complex endeavours. According to Beer and Nohria (2000) leading and managing change remains difficult and few organisations manage the change process as well as they would like. This particular study presents research into a change initiative which is more complex and innovative than most, involving as it does, a collaborative change scheme in which a number of organisations work together to bring about agreed, desired changes within the organisations, with the express aim of impacting on policy and practice at a national level. This is further supplemented by the aim of contributing to the development of a transferable framework which will be broadly useful to others leading similar initiatives.

The pressure to implement change is faced by both private sector and public sector organisations in Ireland as elsewhere. These pressures ensure that senior management need to manage changes in order to survive in their rapidly evolving environment. Organisations such as higher educational institutes, for example, have found that, due to a decrease in government funding, increased participation in education by a diverse range of learners and increased influence from Europe, greater pressure is being placed upon them to make organisational changes in order to survive

in the progressively competitive and increasingly globalised education environment. Educational change is rarely easy, hard to justify, and almost impossible to sustain, therefore, implementing changes within educational systems presents many challenges for senior management (Hargreaves and Fink, 2003). Organisational changes within Irish higher educational institutes have now become important for their success and their survival both at a national and international level because of the complex and fast-changing demands of the knowledge society.

This report describes a change initiative in which a number of higher education institutions collaborated and worked together under the leadership of the author in order to bring about agreed changes within their institutions. The changes were part of a proposal which sought to make the education provision within the institutions more relevant and accessible to learners and potential learners in the workplace. The research journey described here includes a consideration of the change initiative and the leadership of that initiative as well as research into the views and experiences of others distributed throughout the change initiative partnership. These different perspectives and experiences are distilled into conclusions, outcomes and findings which are presented as a means of enriching the design, management and implementation of cross-organisational collaborative change initiatives generally.

While change in various forms is a reality of organisational life, implementing change processes, however, can exert a heavy toll on both the human and economic elements of an organisation. To reduce the possibility of failure, the change leadership must understand the nature and process of change. They must become immersed in the planning and methodology of the change without losing focus on what they ultimately want to achieve. The implementation of organisational change, however, has long been problematic and the weaknesses of such changes are often attributed to failures in the implementation process rather than the strategy itself (Waldersee and Griffiths, 2004).

Existing change management literature has explained some of the reasons why change initiatives fail or may prove difficult to sustain, however the particular complexity of a change management initiative developed and implemented through a consortium of competing and collaborating organisations has not been the subject of research. In particular, there is a dearth of research relating to Irish third-level institutes regarding attitudes to organisational change and the particular roles of the various actors within the change process. The opportunity presented by the *Education*

in Employment innovative change management initiative and the lack of research in this area, therefore, led to the development of this research proposal and to the evolution of a number of research questions. Working through the project proposal stages and reflecting on the practical – theoretical – empirical realms I concluded that the central aim of this research is on identifying good practice in leadership of collaborative change initiatives in Irish Third Level Education. This is particularly relevant in light of both the OECD report (OECD 2006) and the report of the strategy group on higher education (Higher Education Strategy Group (Ireland) 2011) both of which clearly point to the need for inter-institutional collaboration in meeting the challenges posed.

The intermediate questions posed by the research activity focus on my investigation and observations and reflection on my own practice as change initiative leader. These are combined with external views and observations and are informed through literature review which develops the context through which practice can be theorised. Through an empirical research stage my learning is supplemented by the views of the significant participants in the process and the reflection on the learning is further distilled into findings which can be generalised in the practical domain.

The following sections will examine the background and rationale for this thesis. This chapter will then summarise the methodological approach used and will conclude with an outline structure of the thesis.

Context and background

One of the more significant forces for change within the third level sector in Ireland has come from changing employment patterns in the organisation of work. Employees are expected to be more flexible and adaptable and to have a broader range of skills to meet changing business models. Knowledge creation and the deployment of new knowledge in the workplace have given rise to the workplace itself being recognised as a valid source of learning and knowledge production. Brennan (2006) suggests that, if higher education is to continue to make a contribution to the knowledge economy, collaborative activities linking the higher education institutions and workplaces should be considered. According to Murphy (2007) the drivers of structural change in higher education in Ireland can be seen as two fold; first, the need to maintain and enhance economic progress through the generation of new knowledge and secondly, the need to facilitate social stability and democratic cohesion.

Ireland has a growing participation rate in full time undergraduate higher education with almost 46,000 acceptances of places in higher education programmes leading to awards at levels 6 to 9 in 2009. This represented an increase of 8% on 2008 figures. For programmes at level 8, which is the honours undergraduate degree level, acceptances of places in full time education have been rising steadily in recent years (by an average of 6% annually). (EGFSN 2010). While participation in full time education is rising, in a comparison of education/training of adults, Ireland lags behind many other European countries and in particular is considerably behind the Lisbon target that 12.5% of adults should be engaged in learning. According to a Eurostat survey (2007) Ireland performs poorly in terms of the percentage of persons engaging in lifelong learning with 7.6% of respondents aged 25 to 64 receiving formal education in the four weeks prior to the survey. An increase in our participation rate in lifelong learning is essential for the development of human capital which in turn is inextricably linked to personal social and economic development. Employees' individual skills, know-how and knowledge represent a significant part of an organisation's value and can represent a competitive advantage for an organisation, This learning and knowledge, however, can often be undervalued, particularly by the academic community. In addition the changing nature of the workplace means that most work contexts need renewed knowledge and skills in order to maintain relevance and currency. The Enterprise Strategy Group (2004) recognises that, for Ireland to compete effectively in the global market place, we need a well-educated highly skilled workplace with increased participation in learning. In real terms this will not be achieved through traditional classroom learning but through negotiated partnership approaches to learning incorporating the workplace as a learning environment.

The concept of lifelong learning according to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD 1998) encompasses the whole spectrum of formal, non-formal and informal learning. Lifelong learning is considered by the National Competitiveness Council (2009) to embrace all learning activities undertaken throughout the whole of life with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competencies. Recognising that learning occurs in many contexts throughout life, including work, voluntary activities and formal learning settings is both a challenge and an opportunity for higher education providers. However, while learning that takes place outside the formal classroom setting is more difficult to evaluate and to quantify, it is no less valid and forms a significant part of an individual's competency framework. Taking into account learning gained in all sorts of settings and developing learning plans and

pathways incorporating the full spectrum of an individual's learning requires developed structures and processes for the recognition of prior learning.

The economic environment underscores the need for those with low skills levels, and those in threatened employment situations particularly, to up skill and reskill. Higher education institutions, therefore, need to significantly improve access to appropriate learning opportunities to ensure that the workforce is better placed to avail of new job opportunities where they become available in new and emerging sectors. In *Building Ireland's Smart Economy* (Ireland, 2008) the Government recognises the importance of lifelong learning and indicates a number of initiatives to support lifelong learning:

- Restructuring the higher education system will be a priority with a new higher education strategy to enhance system wide performance
- Higher education institutions will be supported in pursuing new mergers and alliances that can improve performance through more effective concentration of expertise and investment
- Under the Strategic Innovation Fund priority will be given to flexible learning initiatives that can be targeted at up skilling people in the workforce.

In order to meet these changing and evolving needs of workplace learners Irish higher education systems need to adapt and to change. These realities and pressures for change provide the backdrop and the context for the change initiative described in this Professional Doctorate thesis.

Strategic Innovation Fund Aims and Objectives

The Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF) was announced by the Irish Government in the Summer of 2006. It is awarded by the Department of Education and Science (now Department of Education and Skills) and administered by the Higher Education Authority (HEA). It is a competitively-driven resource stream intended to support institutional reform. The Strategic Innovation Fund aims to support innovation and to foster collaboration between organisations competing for funding to:

- Incentivise and reward internal restructuring and reform efforts
- Promote teaching and learning reforms
- Support quality improvement initiatives aimed at excellence
- Promote access, transfer and progression and stronger inter-institutional collaboration

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- Provide for improved performance management systems
- Implement improved management information systems

All of the projects funded under the scheme were to be proposed as collaborative ventures with one institutional partner acting as project lead with responsibility for the project leadership and the full range of management and reporting activities. The OECD (2004) review of higher education in Ireland had made a compelling case for reform of third and fourth level education in Ireland. While the education sector is acknowledged as an important engine for economic development and recovery it was clear that higher education institutions needed to become more proactively involved in promoting access and progression opportunities and increasing participation by those already in the workforce.

The Strategic Innovation Fund became an important driver for investment and reform of higher education enabling, as it did, higher education institutions to meet the challenges presented by changing social and economic realities while building on their existing strengths. The intention was that the Strategic Innovation Fund would help partner institutions to realise their own potential while also improving the learning experience for a diverse range of learners at all levels.

In developing a proposal for SIF Cycle 1, Cork Institute of Technology endeavoured to ensure that the submission would build clearly on its existing priorities and strengths and would be informed by the learning and development needs of those already in the workforce. The resulting *Education in Employment* project focuses on ensuring that the higher education partners can serve the learning needs of those in the workplace in a partnership model, recognising the role of the individual learners and the employers in creating relevant, inclusive and accessible pathways to learning.

The Education in Employment Project and My Role

The *Education in Employment* project aimed to support the restructuring of the participating higher education institutions and higher education in Ireland generally in order to ensure that the learning provision offered more relevant and inclusive opportunities to workplace learners. This overall aim was subdivided into specific strands of activity under which the project was required to produce outputs and outcomes and to report progress at regular intervals.

Extract from the proposal submission:

The “Education in Employment” consortium is promoting a model of education development, delivery, support and assessment which is based on a number of underlying principles,

- *Learning (as a process rather than an event) is at the centre of the provision.*
- *Learning (formal, non-formal & informal) must be assessed and accredited.*
- *The workplace itself can constitute a rich learning environment and work-based learning should be integrated into learning programmes.*
- *A sustainable partnership between education and the workplace is necessary for the development, delivery, support and assessment of “Education in Employment”.*

Recent growth in “non-traditional” student numbers and demands for upskilling and upgrading qualifications is increasing the pressure on third-level institutions to provide efficient user-friendly routes to these qualifications. This must be achieved in a manner which retains the confidence of individual learners, employers and awarding institutions. Also, the requirement is for a process which offers a complete route to a qualification as opposed to a partial solution for learners.

A number of strategies/methodologies are required to meet learner needs in a manner which is sympathetic to their circumstances (e.g. many are time-poor) and varying motivations.

The work programme is divided into a number of interrelated strands of activity which will be implemented by Working Groups drawn from the collaborating institutions and managed by an overall project leader:

Blended Learning and Work-Based Learning (WBL)

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

Progression Routes and Diversification Opportunities for Craftspersons

Education & Training for Non-Nationals in the Workforce

The planned timescale of the project was to span three years from 2007 to 2010 and the overall budget was planned at €4.2million. My role was as leader of this change initiative. While I am directly employed by the lead partner Cork Institute of Technology, in my role as project leader, my line of reporting included a direct reporting

line to the Higher Education Authority (HEA), the administrative agency with responsibility for the overall SIF initiative. As a collaborative project involving nine different higher education institutions of varying sizes it represented a significant change management challenge and opportunity. A large, complex, collaborative change management initiative driven, as this was, from within the leading partner institution, was a new and innovative development within higher education in Ireland. This presented the author as leader of the initiative with a unique learning opportunity and an opportunity to contribute to the practice of management of such initiatives generally. I was driven by a desire to examine, explore and improve my own practice. Through the early stages of the professional doctoral pathway I recognised that I could explore my practice from within the practice domain through a consideration and reflection on my own actions and the impact of those actions in a reflective learning cycle. Through consideration of research paradigms I settled on action research as a framework which was eminently suitable for this type of practice-based research and which would facilitate the inclusion of considerable learning through reflection and action cycles.

The description of the various stages in the project work including the collection of information on the current situation within the partner institutions on the recognition of prior learning processes, procedures and experiences, on the provision of programmes suitable for workplace learners, on the progression opportunities and experiences of craft certificate holders into third level programmes and on the experience of migrants in accessing third level provision in Ireland are described in detail in this report.

The most significant published outcomes of the change initiative are included in Volume 2 of this document. They include:

- Framework for the progression of Craftspersons – a report detailing a reusable process for the mapping of craft certificate learning outcomes onto cognate awards on the higher education awards framework. The report forms part 1 of Volume 2.
- Work-based Learning; Graduating through the workplace – a report describing research into the current provision of part-time and accessible programmes suitable for workplace learners – part 2 of Volume 2
- Migrants and higher education in Ireland – a report outlining the challenges faced by migrants seeking access to higher education learning based on their

own views and those of admissions officers in higher education – part 3 of Volume 2.

- Recognition of prior learning; a focus on practice – a report detailing the prevailing practice and policies within the partner institutions and providing a framework for the support of developing recognition of prior learning processes generally – Part 4 of Volume 2.

In addition to the management of the change initiative and the attainment of the various outcomes required under the *Education in Employment* project, I sought to gain a number of dimensions of perspective on the initiative in order to draw conclusions about the management of such initiatives in future. To achieve this, an independent research piece was undertaken with participants in the *Education in Employment* project in order to gather their views on the project initiative, its impact within their institutions, their views on the changes required and the drivers for change within third level in Ireland and their own experiences of their novel positions as change agents within the cross-organisational change initiative structure.

The research undertaken included a reflective cycle based on my own actions as change leader, a series of in-depth interviews, and analysis of the themes which emerged from the interview process. The insightful and considered contributions from the research participants have made a significant contribution to the conclusions drawn on this work. The research findings were contextualised through a consideration of the change leadership challenges and opportunities which enabled a sense-making reflection on the research activities and findings.

Change Leadership

Change is inevitable, and it's better to lead than follow it (Stadler, 2007:71).

Changes occur within a person's everyday life whether it is in their social, work or personal lives; therefore, change is a constant entity. The difficulty in implementing changes successfully is illustrated in a study conducted by IBM (2004) which suggests that less than 10% of change programmes are successful. In order to reduce the possibility of failure, the change leadership within organisations should have an understanding of the complexities they face when implementing any change process. These complexities will depend on the organisation, or in this case organisations, involved in the desired changes sought. They must recognise how the change will

impact on the organisation and on all of the various stakeholders within and outside of the organisation itself. Prior to implementing any change, therefore, they must be clear about what they are trying to change and the reasons for that change. In this research the changes sought are considered against a background within which there are a number of different drivers for educational change.

Numerous researchers have examined how management within organisations must identify and anticipate the reasons for change and understand the pace of change that is required (Hornstein, 2008; Norton, 2007). According to Licata and Frankwick (1996) changes within higher educational institutes need to be implemented for a variety of reasons including an increase in competition, changing demographics and more sophisticated consumers. The management of such change is difficult because it requires that a complex organisation change practices and procedures and the underlying cultures and attitudes which may have prevailed for a very long time. Being able to clearly articulate the reasons for the changes sought plays a key role in effectively motivating staff to effect the changes sought. It is generally reported that involving those affected by the change at an early stage in the change process will bring about a sense of ownership and will help to alleviate the natural resistance which might otherwise oppose the change. Research has revealed that, within higher education organisations, the right motivational tools will lead to academics believing that senior management's agenda for change overlaps with their own, which will create an environment of inclusiveness which in turn will lead towards a more positive attitude to the change process (Karp and Helgø, 2008; White and Glickman, 2007). One of the challenges that face senior management within higher education is implementing changes within institutions where academics are considered traditionalists in nature, therefore, they are perceived as hesitant to embrace change (Daggett and McNulty, 2005). Leading employees through a change process amid the chaos, uncertainty and complexity that is associated with such changes within a public service organisation, such as higher educational institutions is one of the main challenges which faces the change leadership.

Within the change initiative described here, I had the sole responsibility as leader of the project to ensure that representatives of the nine higher education institutions involved worked effectively together to contribute as fully as possible to the change outcomes that were required. This change leadership role was the most complex and far reaching that I had held to date and it presented me with an opportunity to contribute to

improvements in my own practice and in the practice of the proposal and management of such initiatives generally.

The Methodological Approach

While Chapter Three details the methodological choices, it is appropriate to briefly outline the research approach adopted in this study. In addressing the central objective of this thesis, it was decided to adopt an action research approach. Action research is particularly appropriate for practice-based research activity. As outlined by McNiff and Whitehead (2002) and McNiff *et al.* (2002) action research focuses on learning and embodies professional practice and praxis. In this work I illustrate the steps on the way to the development of an epistemology of my practice through an exploration of and critical reflection on, the activities, actions and the actors in the practice setting. I was drawn to an action research methodology as it allowed me to use my practitioner knowledge, actions and reflections in the development of practice-based knowledge that could represent value to other practitioners. In this case the *Education in Employment* collaborative change initiative is a vehicle and my leadership of that initiative is submitted to scrutiny by myself and others in order to draw conclusions about the leadership of such innovative collaborative projects. In developing this methodological approach I came to an understanding of the similarities and differences between my role as practitioner in the practice setting and my role as a researcher into my practice. My focus as researcher is not just on the practice elements and the completion of tasks and targets but rather on the theorising of my practice through the development of a research question and the collection of research information through a process of informed enquiry in order to make a contribution to practice generally. This type of research where the theory/practice threads are intrinsically linked, where theories are developed through the exploration of practice and are then themselves used to improve and further explore practice is appropriate for the practitioner-researcher who is immersed in, and inseparable from the practice and the research.

Overview of the Thesis

This thesis follows a well-established pattern in its structure and the sequence is set out as follows:

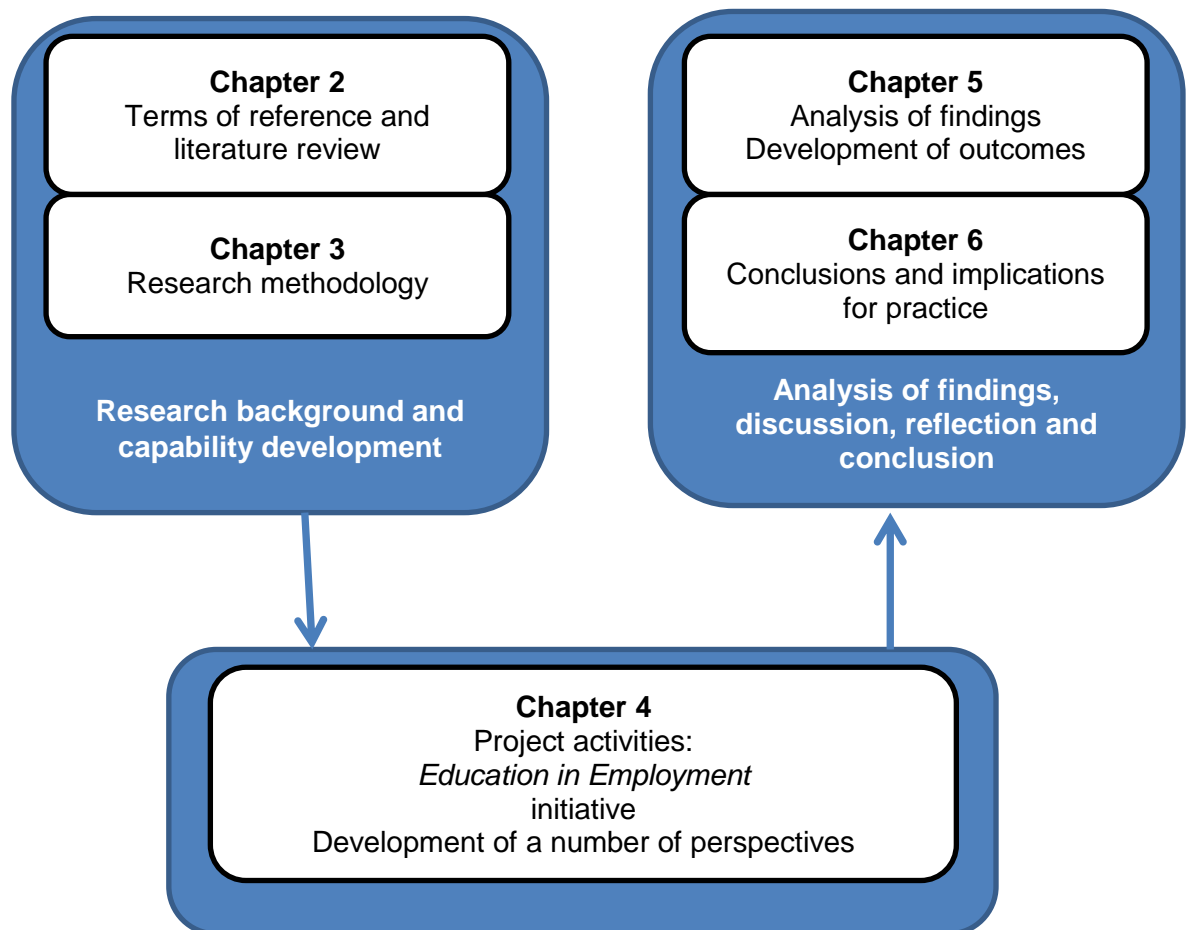


Figure 1: Overview of Chapters

Chapter 2 builds upon the introductory chapter and provides a review of existing relevant literature. This review begins by exploring the area of change and change processes. This exploration includes several different models of change processes and the identification of stages in the change process. It examines the forces for change and the cultural implications of changes within organisations and then acknowledges the importance of change leadership styles involved during a change process. The chapter also explores the forces for change within higher education and specifically in the Irish context. Finally, Chapter 2 addresses the literature relating to collaborative change management initiatives.

Chapter 3 sets out the research philosophy and methodology and the tools employed in this research study. The chapter begins by outlining the ontological and epistemological considerations underpinning this particular research journey. The particular nature of the insider-researcher is explored and the implications for the research design and research processes are developed. The choice of, and rationale for, the research methods employed are considered. Ethical considerations and concepts underlying research such as this are dealt with and the research methods and particular tools to be employed are further justified. The appropriateness of the qualitative paradigm and the use of in-depth interviews for primary data collection in this study are justified.

Chapter 4 works through the main activities undertaken in the change initiative and research processes. It details the project activity and presents a number of different viewpoints illuminating the research question. In addition, this chapter presents the main findings from the in-depth interviews with the change agents involved in the change initiative.

Chapter 5 presents the analysis and discussion of the findings in this study. This analysis is presented thematically, using the context of the research question and scope and the literature presented in Chapter Two. The reflection on the findings allows a set of conclusions to be drawn and provides input to the development of a framework to support such change initiatives in the future.

Chapter 6, the final chapter, seeks to bring closure for the reader, by offering a synthesis of the evidence and a discussion of the contribution of this study to professional practice. The contributions to knowledge and practice that have emerged from the current study are then presented and discussed. The chapter concludes by detailing the limitations inherent in the study, proposing practical implications for third level educational institutes and suggested directions for future research and the overall conclusions of the research.

Chapter 2: Terms of Reference and Literature review

This chapter addresses the particular research question and the scope of the research undertaken. By reflecting on the research question and through the extraction of key themes, an appropriate literature review has been undertaken. The structure of the literature review and the identification of the foundational research themes and seminal works are illustrated through a literature relevance tree. This serves to situate the current research within an appropriate conceptual and theoretical context. The literature review then, itself contributes to the further development of the research question and the identification of a suitably informed structure within which to conduct the research activities. An overview of the chapter is provided in the Chapter Map (Figure 2 below).

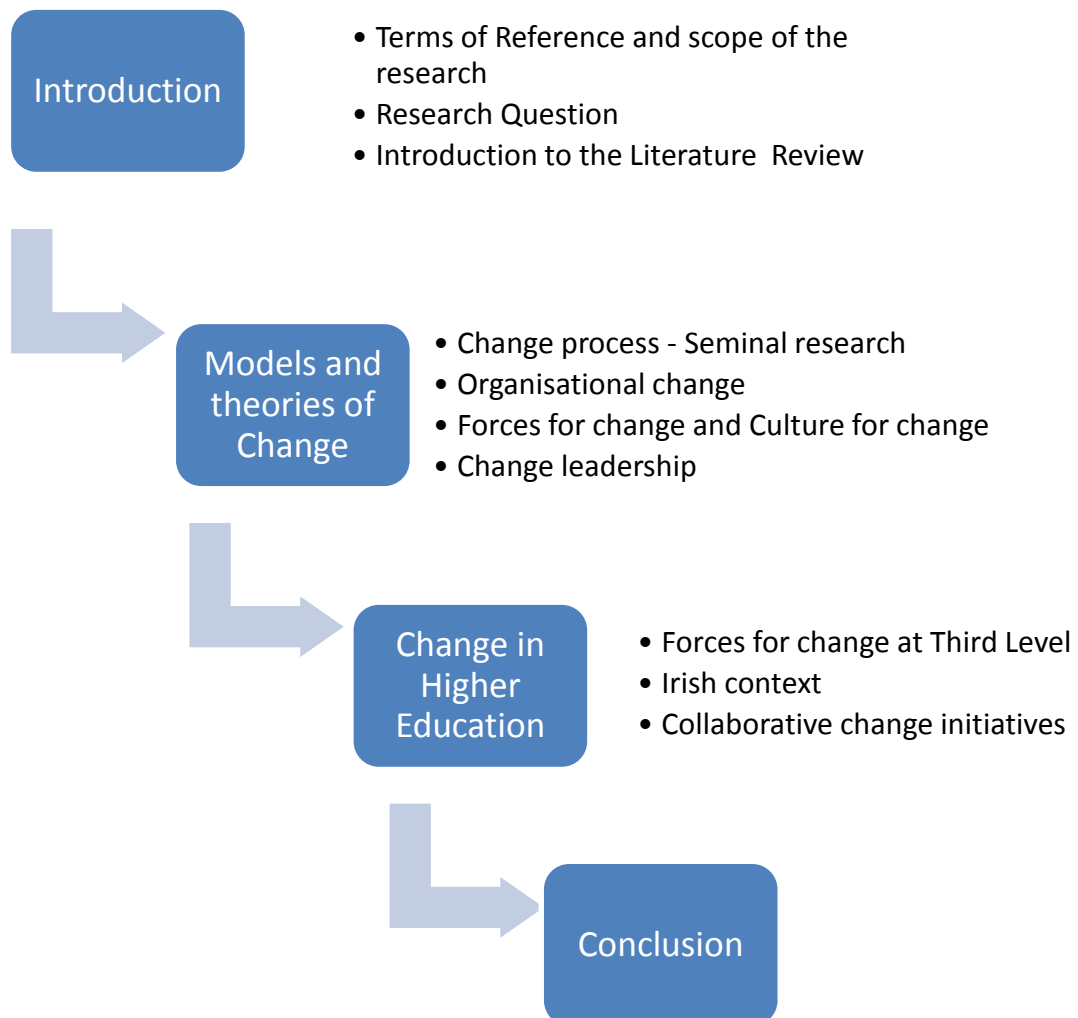


Figure 2: Chapter Map - Chapter 2

Terms of reference

This DProf project proposes to explore my practice as a manager of collaborative change initiatives and to draw on that exploration and reflection to inform my own practice and ultimately to make a contribution to the management of such projects generally. The work will be generalizable through a tangible output in the form of a Framework for Change which will have particular relevance for the leadership and management of cross-organisational change initiatives.

The journey leading to my research question was not a direct one. Initially, I focused on the day-to-day challenges arising from the change management initiatives for which I was responsible and was not in a position to take a reflective or reflexive view of my practice. It took some time for me to recognise the innovative and exploratory nature of the strategic reform initiatives that I led and, following that, I began to develop a view of the unique contribution that I could make to knowledge in the field. Unknowingly at first and more deliberately later, I began to reflect on and question the effectiveness of my management practice. While researching change management and leadership and considering how I could theorize my own practice, I recognised that the question that I sought to answer was both a question exploring the processes undertaken and the practices developed that seek to enact effective and sustainable change generally, and the means by which I, as a change agent, could improve my own practice in particular, in addition to making a valuable contribution to emerging practice generally.

My Research Question

Through this research I will identify optimum practice in the planning, leadership and management of cross-organisational collaborative change initiatives in Irish third level education leading to sustainable change. It is a study rooted in practice and action. It involves observing and reflecting on my own particular practice through the enacted change mechanisms and initiatives and collecting the views of others involved on the process itself, and the actions taken and resulting consequences. I articulate the question that I seek to answer as follows:

How can I use my leadership of this cross-organisational change initiative to contribute to the design and leadership of these initiatives in the future?

Some of the intermediate questions raised include:

- How do I effectively manage these change initiatives?

- What makes this particular change initiative different?
- How can my investigation contribute to my growing understanding of what I do and how I do it?
- How can I provide learning and outcomes that are useful to other change managers?
- How can I contribute to funding organisations and policy-makers?

The aim of this research project is to explore, through a qualitative research approach, a particular cross-organisational change management initiative in the Irish Higher Education Sector. Exploring my own leadership practice through informed enquiry and reflection with particular reference to the complexity of the project I will contribute to the development of my own practice. By exploring the actions and the impacts, and particularly by investigating the change processes and mechanisms used and probing the success of the planning and management activities in the context of innovative collaborative change initiatives, a valuable contribution will be made in the form of a Framework for Change processes in third-level providers in Ireland.

As the transformational change agent with overall responsibility for the planning, management, operation and reporting, I am well placed to direct the transformational agenda and through research, analysis and reflection to create a significant contribution to my own practice with transferable contributions to practice generally. The emerging framework will be developed from an abstraction of, and reflection on, actions, activities and consequences.

The scope of this research

In this work I will describe some significant stages in the innovative collaborative reform initiatives that form the context for this work and for which I was responsible. An exploration of some of the work undertaken, the specific actions and products and the consequences of those actions in practice, leading to impacts on action strategies in a first order-type effect aimed at reaching a particular intended outcome will be described.

As a reflective practitioner, I will describe a critical examination of my own views and reflections on the actions, as well as the intended and unintended impacts of those actions, leading to an emerging value system within which subsequent actions were undertaken. This would align with a second-order learning loop within which the reasoning and governing principles which frame the actions taken, are themselves questioned and reframed.

Finally, I will present my findings from an analysis of content-laden, qualitative research on the views of the significant change agents from nine different partner institutions who were directly involved in the reform processes. These viewpoints and perceptions will allow the generation of new perspectives and theories on the reform mechanisms undertaken and will inform the development of the framework for change.

Research Limitations

In exploring the reform initiatives undertaken in the collaborating institutions the project does not propose to act as a comparator or to aim to generate a league table or comparative analysis of reform processes or effectiveness between the different participating institutions. The research will be limited to the reform initiatives within my own range of responsibility and will not extend to other reform projects undertaken under the Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF) mechanism or any other funding mechanism.

In exploring the actions undertaken and their consequences, the project does not propose to undertake a longitudinal quantitative research work on potential indicators such as institutional income, student numbers or others. This would not be pertinent in this case as these are not stated aims of the reform initiatives and the impact of any specific initiative on these high level metrics would be difficult, if not impossible, to isolate. The consequences considered will be those identified by the specific reform initiative and reported on by the specific change agent within the particular institution.

Introduction to Literature Review

The literature review allows the doctoral researcher to gain and demonstrate an appreciation of the state of knowledge in their chosen field and related areas. This mastery allows the researcher to develop their research question within the framework of existent knowledge and to situate their work and their contribution to knowledge or practice or both. It allows an evolving graduation from breadth of knowledge to depth of knowledge and provides the backdrop for a reflective consideration of the originality of the contribution within the advanced practice domain. The review informs and supports the emerging research question and continues to inform the research process and is not a separate exercise to be completed and finished but is a thread which continues to run through and support the work and reflective elements throughout the process.

This study draws on journal articles, book chapters, theses and other articles where the themes of organisational change, forces for change, change management and

leadership, change in third level education and collaborative change initiatives are a prominent feature. The references draw on academic research as well as references to materials from relevant government publications.

The core focus of the review of knowledge is in the area of change and in particular organisational change and development. From this backdrop the forces for change, both internal and external are explored. This leads to a consideration of both the organisational culture as it impacts on change and change leadership. From this broad viewpoint, the research is brought more narrowly into focus, through a consideration of change in third level education. Finally there is a consideration of the literature on the subject of collaborative change initiatives which reveals the lack of literature on the subject of cross-organisational collaborative change initiatives in Higher Education.

The research structure is illustrated in the form of a literature relevance tree in Figure 3 below. Starting with the core research question, key research subject areas are identified and further subdivided into sub areas of relevance. Authors and seminal works which formed the focus of the research within the specific areas are included.

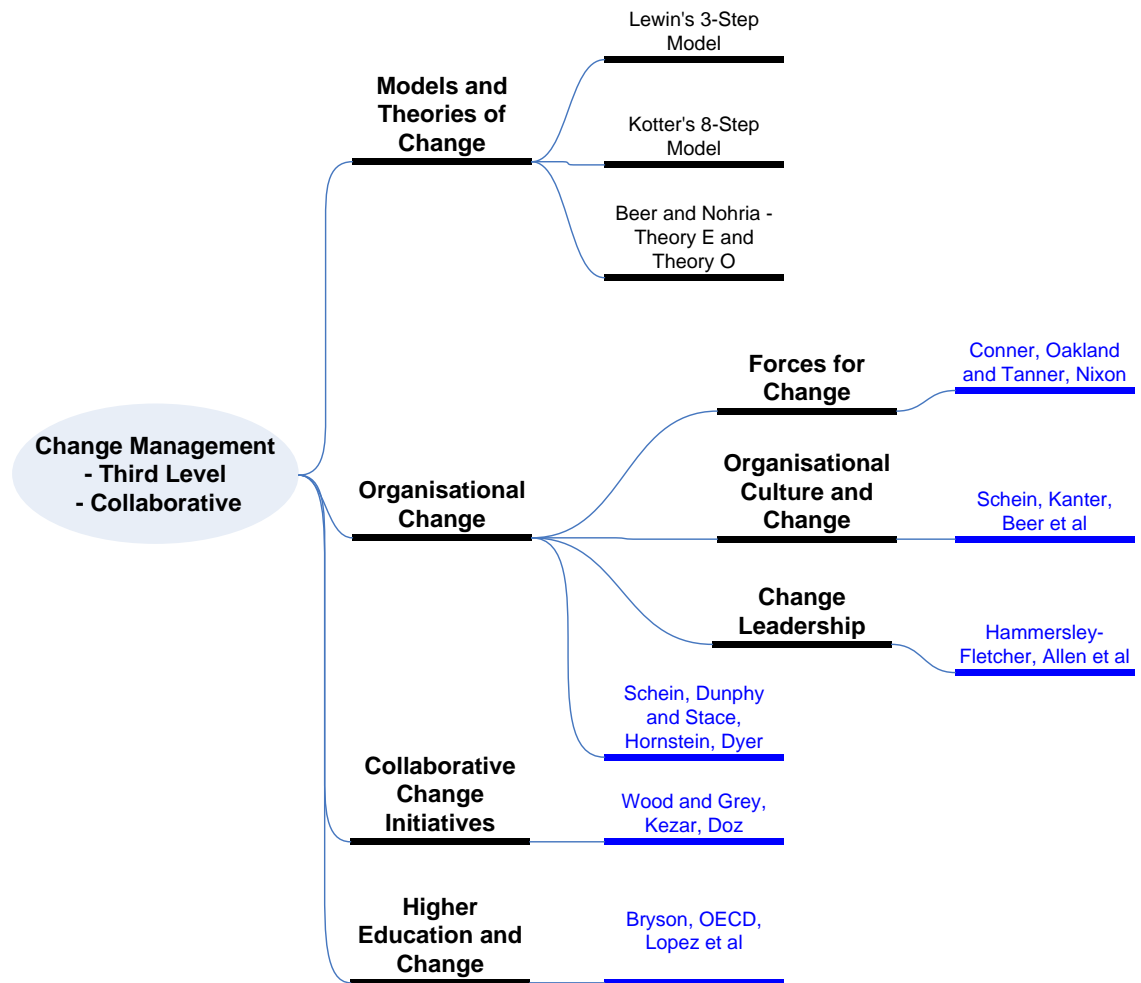


Figure 3: Literature Relevance Tree

Models and Theories of Change

There are numerous models and theories of change. For the purposes of this research I am concentrating this review on models that I feel have more application and are more pertinent within the context of change driven through a project model within the third level education environment.

Change is a permanent feature and an on-going process in organisations and institutions. Change can be proactive or reactive, incremental or discontinuous and through choice or due to an impending organisational crisis (Bezboruah, 2008:130).

Burnes (2004) believes that modern organisations are complex systems and in order for them to survive in modern society they must respond continuously to changes in their environments through a process of spontaneous self-organising changes. This view is in line with the commonly expressed adage 'the only constant is change'. One of the most influential contributors to the early development of change management models is Kurt Lewin (1890 – 1947).

Lewin's three-step model

As recently as 2004 Nixon (2004) asserted that Lewin's three-step change model is still recognisable as the most extensively used model by organisations as a means of negotiating the change process. Burnes (2004) highlighted that Lewin's approach to avoiding and resolving the potential social conflict resulting from the change process was to facilitate planned change through information, knowledge and learning which would enable individuals to understand and restructure their perceptions of the world around them. Lewin claimed that behaviour within an organisation can be categorised into two types of forces; those that seek to maintain the status quo and those that push for change. Lewin believes that change processes are more successful within an organisation if the force that seeks to maintain the status quo can be decreased or modified.

Lewin's model consists of three steps in the change process; unfreezing, change and refreezing. According to Lewin, each step should be fully completed before progressing onto the next. The first step in the model is the 'unfreezing' of the organisation. At this stage the organisation has identified the need for change and management prepare the affected employees by informing them why the change is necessary and how the change is going to be implemented. A comprehensive approach to communication and information on the imperatives for the change will help to overcome the resistance that is likely to emerge at this stage in the process. The

biggest challenge facing leaders during this stage of the model is dealing with the existing behaviours and beliefs of the participants towards the change process. Various researchers have found that no one likes to be told to change without having the chance to influence the new direction (Welford, 2006; Ouchi, 2004; Schwahn and Spady, 1998).

The second step is the actual implementation of the 'change' within the organisation. Schein (1996) found that while unfreezing may create a motivation to learn new practices, it does not, necessarily, control or predict the direction the change will take. Again, resistance to the change can be minimized by relentless communication processes, having clearly advised the reasons for the change, it is important that the implementation of the change is now clearly communicated.

The third and final step is the 'refreezing' of the organisation. Having implemented the change the newly learned behaviours and practices must be embedded within the system and must be firmly part of the organisational practice and policy and become the new norms. Cummings and Worley (2005) believe that in organisational terms, this refreezing often requires changes to organisational culture, norms, policies and practices in order for the change to be successfully embedded.

Lewin's force field analysis theory builds on his assertions of the existence of two forces within the organisation and is used to help identify whether factors within a situation or organisation are 'driving forces' for change or 'restraining forces' that will work in opposition to prevent the desired changes. Examples of 'driving forces' are ambition, goals, needs or fears that drive people towards or away from a situation. While Lewin sees 'restraining forces' as forces that act to oppose the driving forces rather than comprising of independent forces themselves. Back (1992) describes this analysis of the various forces at play within the organisational change dynamic as an approach by which group behaviour may be understood or appreciated through a consideration of the totality and complexity of the situation and circumstances in which the behaviour takes place.

Lewin also believed in the importance of groups within organisations in shaping the behaviour of its members as the individual in isolation is constrained by group pressures to conform, therefore, the focus of change must also focus at the group level within the organisation and should seek to impact on group norms, roles, interaction and socialisation processes. This view of the importance of the group within the

change process is also emphasised by a number of other researchers (Burnes, 2004; Dent and Goldberg, 1999; Bernstein, 1968). This aligns with the later consideration of the importance of the culture and norms within which the change is sought.

Kotter's eight-step model

Kotter and Schlesinger (1979) recognising the changing environment in which organisations operate, suggested that organisations need to undertake moderate changes at least annually and major changes every four to five years. They also point to the fact that few change efforts are either totally successful or complete failures but most are faced with resistance to change based on either parochial self-interest, misunderstanding or lack of trust, differing assessments of the situation or a low tolerance for change. Kotter (2007) stresses the importance of time in the change management process and outlines eight steps to transforming an organisation that may help to overcome the inherent resistance to change.

These eight steps are:

- Establishing a sense of urgency
- Forming a powerful guiding coalition
- Creating a vision
- Communicating the vision
- Empowering others to act on the vision
- Planning for and creating short term wins
- Consolidating improvements and producing still more change
- Institutionalizing the new approaches

A consideration of these steps shows that they align well with Lewin's three step model by identifying stages that address organisational preparedness and readiness for change (unfreezing), stages in the change implementation (change) and stages that are essential in embedding the changes into the system (refreezing). The focus on the preparatory or earlier steps in this eight step model is appropriate in overcoming any resistance to change as articulated by Kotter and Schlesinger's earlier work.

Theory E and Theory O

In more recent times Beer and Nohria (2000) identify two different approaches to change as Theory E and Theory O, contrasting between initiatives that seek to create a

prompt economic return for shareholders and changes that strive to develop an opening and trusting climate over a longer period of time.

The Theory E approach is usually associated with the type of change that involves downsizing, restructuring and resultant redundancies. It is generally a 'top-down' activity where the goals and the strategy are decided upon at the upper management levels and then communicated to the general organisation. Employee involvement in the planning of the changes sought or the means of achieving them is usually non-existent and the primary goal of upper management's approaches is profit and financial gain (De Freitas and Oliver, 2005).

Theory O involves developing corporate culture through individual and organisational learning. According to De Freitas and Oliver (2005) this type of 'bottom-up' approach can be characteristic of projects which are instigated by innovative employees within a supportive climate. The organisational environment wherein this theory flourishes is known as a learning organisation, where employees are found to be emotionally committed to solving the new challenges that arise during the change process.

These two theories are opposite in nature, Theory E concentrates on profit gain and the financial success of the organisation over a short period of time, while, Theory O is concerned with developing a corporate culture that is inclusive and open over a longer time period. These theories are not mutually exclusive and organisations and change leaders may find each of these approaches relevant and useful at different stages. It is likely that a combination of both, where change may well be driven by financial gain but be undertaken in an inclusive and open environment, would be advantageous.

In summary, there are many different types of theories available to management within organisations in considering and conceptualising the change process. All consider change a necessary part of organisational growth and survival. Most of the authors consider change to be presentable as a series of stages and most also consider the organisational climate and culture to be important in effecting change processes.

Organisational Development and Change

Organisational development theorists generally focus on large-scale, whole system changes often with the help of consultants. Ouchi and Price (1978: 26) describe Organisational Development (OD) as:

a people and process-oriented approach to change that relies on small-group techniques and whose objectives are the improvement of both organisational effectiveness and individual psychological success

Through organisational assessment techniques consultants guide the organisation to the development of new strategies which highlight the change and learning. Worren *et al.* (1999) define organisational development as having four main characteristics. Firstly, OD is, they say, aimed at increasing organisational effectiveness, secondly, it tends to rely on concepts from the behavioural sciences, thirdly, it is a long term and continuous effort and finally, it tends to be largely focused on human relationship issues. This view is supported by the work of French and Bell (1990) among others. Other authors emphasise the importance of OD being driven from the highest levels in the organisation. In terms of successful change initiatives Worren *et al.* (1999) state that any approach that takes a one-dimensional view is unlikely to succeed. Neither an extremely rational-empirical approach that does not consider the human element nor a traditional organisational development approach that only considers the people aspects and not the competitive markets, externally or internally driven strategies will serve the needs of diverse and flexibly changing contexts well.

Organisational Change

It is widely recognised that all organisations face change imperatives from internal and external sources. Within a transformational system the changes can be considered as changes either to the inputs, outputs or the process stages. Whether the changes are planned and anticipated, or, sudden and unexpected, the organisation will generally have to respond and adapt in order to remain relevant (Hornstein 2008, Dyer 2004). As a starting point for the consideration of the responses which organisations make to the various change drivers and the nature of organisational change, Dunphy and Stace (1993) propose a model which relates four different scales of change. In this model they identify *fine tuning* as an on-going process focused on keeping the 'fit' between the organisation's strategy, structure, people and processes. *Incremental adjustment* is defined as changes required to adjust to the changing environment in which the organisation operates. These first two might be considered to be examples of 'emergent' change. *Modular transformation* is described by Dunphy and Stace as a major realignment or radical change focused on one part of the organisation and,

finally, *corporate transformation* is defined as corporate-wide radical shifts in strategy. These last two can be considered as 'planned' changes.

In many cases, change cannot be neatly categorized as either emergent or planned, singular, separable, discontinuous events rather change tends to be a continuous process where the system under consideration reacts to different stimuli from different sources and tends to find something approaching a low-level or steady-state level of change between larger disturbances. Numerous researchers have examined how management and change agents within organisations should work to identify and anticipate the reasons for change and understand the pace of change that is required (Hornstein, 2008; Dyer, 2004) in order to respond effectively. Schein (2002: 34) states that in considering the planning and management of change

Whether we think of that as steering the evolutionary processes or as more actively controlling the direction of change and learning, what is implied is the assumption that one can control to some degree what is learned and the direction that change will take.

Within any system change is happening all the time, however, the tendency of the system is to reach some kind of equilibrium or stability. The change initiatives considered in this work are time-limited by funding agencies and do not immediately act on the whole organisation. They can be considered as 'bounded' change programs to which the Lewin model of unfreeze, change and refreeze applies. Echoing Lewin's earlier work Schein (2002) states that no change will happen if the system in which the change is sought is not 'unfrozen' and he goes on to say that no change will last if the system is not 'refrozen'. While these two stages are often forgotten it is also important for management to recognise what type of change is required and whether the change is internally or externally driven.

Forces for change

The pace of change impacting on organisations today may be ascribed to many different factors. Internal forces of change can come from new management structures and strategies seeking to reform systems and process in order to attain some agreed goals. Conner's research (1998) identified this type of force as first-order change. The first-order change is usually incremental in nature. In a higher education environment these internal, incremental forces for change can be reflected in the emergence of new strategic plans or the response to institutional review or self-study exercises. Change in senior management often results in this type of internal change and may lead to a gradual redirection or focus based on changing or evolving priorities.

In any organisation it can be difficult to identify internal forces for change that are not themselves the result of external pressures. Both Oakland and Tanner (2007) and Nixon's (2004) research findings have noted that many internal sources of change are the consequence of process owners and managers responding to developments in the external environment.

International economic changes and technological advances bring new challenges to organisations. Concentration of production in lower cost economies and the globalisation of goods and services are examples of a changing international environment in which many organisations operate. Economic, demographic and technological changes are creating significant pressures within organisations generally and in government and educational establishments. These externally driven changes can create pressures which are outside of the control of the management of the organisations. However in order to respond successfully to these forces it is preferable for the change management process to be proactive rather than reactive and where possible to anticipate the changes required (Hornstein, 2008; Harmon, 2003; Tucker, 2000).

Research findings have shown that, by anticipating the external pressures and the resulting changes that will be required within their organisations, management can play a key role in ensuring success and survival of the organisation in a turbulent and challenging environment (Oakland and Tanner, 2007). In order to anticipate and devise appropriate responses to these changes, management need to have a clear understanding of the external forces and their potential impact on the sphere of operations and strategy of the organisation. This is made difficult when the external changes are unexpected and unpredictable.

By their nature, these external unpredictable forces for change are difficult to anticipate and understand and according to Harmon (2003) management who partially understand external forces of change can only create partial changes that may lead to partial success for their organisations. This concurs with Drucker's (1954) research findings which suggest that one of the key factors in effective management is the ability to sense environmental change. This finding also concurs with Ilinitch *et al.* (1996) who found that many managers are seeking to restructure or reshape their organisation without a clear idea of the forces of change that exist and their potential implications.

In other words they are responding to 'unknowns' and founding change initiatives on the basis of incomplete or insufficient knowledge of the forces for change.

Acknowledging then, that the forces for change are not easily anticipated or understood consider the response to these forces by managers within the system. Generally the response is to identify the required response to reach the desired end state and articulate the process stages that should be undertaken within their own particular organisation (Duffy, 2004) driven by the particular change agenda that pertains. While it is to be expected that individual organisations need to respond to change imperatives in an informed and planned fashion where possible, it is uncommon for organisations who are competitors within a particular sector to work together to try to understand, predict and respond to changes in the external environment despite the fact that these changes generally impact on all of the organisations within a sector in the same or a similar fashion. This may represent a lost opportunity as the pooling of knowledge between organisations may contribute to a better informed change initiative.

Recent research conducted by Amabile and Khaire (2008) suggests that the usual top-down management response could be improved by encouraging a more collaborative approach and allowing employees to contribute to the development of new strategies and responses to challenges and change. Amabile and Khaire (2008) found that innovative ideas developed by employees at Google when tracked by senior manager had a higher success rate than top-down strategies.

Various studies have considered the more common external factors driving change including the economic, demographic, technological factors mentioned earlier as well as political and geographical factors among others. In the face of such considerable forces of change organisations must constantly implement changes in order to respond effectively to these growing pressures (Griffin, 2005; Nixon 2004; Marginson 2000; Ilinitch *et al.* 1996). Often the responses of organisations to change drivers and the success or otherwise of those responses is determined by the organisational culture.

Organisational Culture for change

As Quinn (1980) points out, a major consideration of change management professionals is the complexity of the organisation structure within which changes are sought. Likewise Schwartz and Davis (1981) agree that the organisational culture must be carefully considered as it is capable of significantly impacting on any change

management process. However, it is also clear that organisational cultures differ greatly, so the culture within any organisation may be more or less supportive of the changes sought. Weisbord (1987) recognised the need to consider cultural aspects in any study of organisational performance. Schein (1985) developed a three stage model of organisational cultural change based on the life-cycle elements of birth, midlife and maturity. Later Schein (1992:2) defined organisational culture as:

A pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to those problems.

This definition illustrates the power of the organisational culture and its essential role in change processes. If the organisational culture is not changed as a result of a change process then the previously existing culture will continue to be the one 'taught to new members' and will continue to define the way in which problems are interpreted. It is clear that changing processes without changing the prevailing culture will result in a transient change experience. This resonates with the view that the 'refreezing' stage of the Lewin change model is critical in ensuring that the change is incorporated into any new norms that are accepted.

Kanter (1983) provides details of two extremes of organisational culture, one which she calls 'segmentalist' which features problems and resources as being divided up between departments and specialists who then work in isolation. Her 'segmentalist' organisations avoid experimentation and tend to manage the flow of information very carefully. Praise is withheld but criticism is given freely. In contrast, the organisations that Kanter describes as 'integrative' are outward looking and are comfortable challenging established practices. They allow and facilitate free sharing of ideas and tend to create metrics based on future plans and not past practices. Kanter's 'segmentalist' organisation is similar to that identified by Argyris and Schon (1978) where information and issues are kept private and one never sees the 'whole picture' rather a vague and scattered view is maintained. It is clear from both Kanter and Argyris and Schon that a segmentalist or defensive, closed organisational culture will act to resist organisational change. This will be especially true where changes are sought across a number of organisations as in this change initiative.

One of the challenges that face senior management and change leadership within higher education is implementing changes within institutions where academics are

considered traditionalists in nature, therefore, they are perceived hesitant to embrace change. In considering the nature of an organisational culture, Johnson and Scholes (1999) propose a 'Cultural Web' which draws together the routine behaviours or norms of the organisation, the rituals of organisational life, the stories and symbols which are shared by the members, the control systems and power structures used to manage measure and reward and the formal and informal organisational structure and depict this in the form of an intricate web linking together to create the organisational paradigm.

Considering organisational change and culture, Beer *et al.* (1993) argue that attempting to change beliefs, attitudes and values in isolation is futile. They believe that behaviours must first be changed through changing processes and policies and people's roles and responsibilities. This is based on the view that changing the organisational structures will result in changes to the attitudes and values that comprise the organisational culture or paradigm as depicted by Johnson and Scholes. These structural changes are rarely easy to achieve in themselves even though they are visible and generally widely understood. By contrast the organisational culture which is much less visible and more complex is likely to be much more difficult to change. This change to culture is, however, the essential 'refreezing' part of the change process which allows the change to be firmly placed on a sustainable footing.

The human element is central to any successful cultural change process. Change is how organisations and individuals grow and thrive. Change is a complex process and should be approached simultaneously on two levels; the logical and the psychological. Change implies some uncertainty and thus has the potential to cause uncertainty and fear. According to Yemm (2007) an inclusive and consultative process is usually the best way to ensure an increased level of support for the changes sought. Commitment is a very important factor in ensuring support for change initiatives and Maurer (2005) identifies clarity of change imperatives and clarity of the communication process as essential if commitment is to be achieved. Beckham (2008) found that participation and involvement of employees in the implementation process increases their level of commitment to the change process. The impact of changes and the change process on the culture of an organisation and vice versa is the subject of varying opinion in the literature. Oberg (2003) found that a positive school culture provides a constructive environment for change in an educational establishment.

The impact of changes and the change process on individual employees is the subject of much research; with most agreeing that employees find the process difficult (Carroll 2007). Another significant consideration is the time afforded to ensure that all concerned can adapt and evolve new structures and personal ways of working to embrace the desired changes. The role of the different players within the organisational structure in driving change is of interest. While top-level management and executives tend to be responsible for designing changes it is, according to Lüscher and Lewis (2008), the middle managers who are the critical change agents. They have the responsibility to operationalize and realize the change initiatives while also managing the fears and anxieties that the change process can stimulate in the workplace.

While the culture of the organisation can have a significant impact on the ability of the organisation to respond to change initiatives and on the impact of the change process on the individuals within the organisation, the main consideration in organisations undergoing change is the strategic role of its leadership. The next section briefly reviews some of the relevant literature dealing with leadership of change initiatives within organisations.

Change Leadership

Statistical analysis shows over seventy percent of change initiatives fail (Beer and Nohria, 2000). Change, therefore, is difficult and the change process should be approached with care. Humphreys and Langford (2008) believe that the failure of these change processes is often due to senior management's view that change is a dramatic and monumental event rather than a subtle journey. It is this subtle journey that is of interest in this project and the exploration of the impact of the change interventions in shifting views and attitudes within the organisations in question.

Research by Hammersley-Fletcher (2007) asserts that any type of educational change is viewed as challenging and highly complex by teachers. To reduce the likelihood of failure it is important that organisations plan their responses to change imperatives carefully. Research supports the view that change in any organisation relies fundamentally on the quality of management as they play an essential role in the decision-making process when it comes to change and, therefore, their leadership capacity and their perceptions about real events will either promote or hinder change (Santos and Garcia, 2006; Maurer, 2005).

Leadership of the change process can be very effective in allaying the inherent uncertainties and in guiding or motivating employees in a particular direction in response to the changing needs of their organisation. An organisation, however, that depends solely on its senior managers to deal with the challenges of change risks failure. According to Heifetz *et al.* (2009) adaptive leadership is required to ensure that the inevitable conflict, chaos and confusion of change becomes a productive rather than destructive force in the organisation (Heifetz *et al.*, 2009).

A flatter organisational structure, which has a more inclusive model of leadership, can ensure that decisions regarding changes are shared between management and staff, thus encouraging an inclusive change process (Oakland and Tanner, 2007; Hammersley-Fletcher, 2007; Hersey, 1984, Hersey and Blanchard, 1977). This point is mirrored in the research of Sevier (2003) where he suggests that change can be facilitated by everyone in the organisation being clear about the need for the change and the implications of the change for their own role. He believes that every individual who is going to be affected by the change should understand the end goal. Sevier (2003) suggests that communication ought to be relentless. Management practices that tend towards more participation and communication will result in enhanced levels of trust in the organisation (Allen *et al.* 2007). The research findings of Krause (2008) state that employees' attitudes toward change are dependent in part on their perceptions of basic aspects of organisational life, which is based primarily on what employees think about the leaders within the organisation. Trust levels are important in the context of change, as employees who trust management may be less critical of the information and justification that they receive in the context of organisational change (Allen *et al.* 2007). An important aspect of the relentless communication that underlies effective change is that the process should be two-way allowing for questioning through participative strategies.

Ratcliff (2004) remarks that, while people are proactive agents in any change process they are often mistakenly viewed as passive variables. The interaction of the people involved in the change process and their sharing of ideas, actions and views results in the development of altered patterns of behaviour and new considerations that inform and become the new institutional practice which will work to guide future responses and actions. This incremental change in conventions and norms acts as a stabilizing effect throughout the dynamic change processes. Conner (1998) found that what is required from management is to have a menu of change-leadership styles when

implementing any type of change in order to ensure that the appropriate management response is available for a particular situation.

Recognising the importance of leadership in organisations leads to a focus on the members of management within the organisation who have been involved in these specific change processes as these will have the greatest impact in terms of effective change initiatives throughout their organisations. However, within the academic environment, change may be perceived to be more abstract than within the business or manufacturing environments. Goals and aims may be more abstract and difficult to quantify and individuals may have difficulty in seeing what, exactly, might be required of them personally. This is especially true for organisations who seek to respond to change imperatives through a broad collaborative approach.

Referring back to the Lewin model, a change leader must bring about an unfreezing of the current situation or status quo or must recognise an opportunity in a system that is already unfrozen. Bringing about this state requires developing a recognition that the current situation is no longer acceptable. Schein (2002) asserts that it is important for the change leader to take an open inquiring approach in opening up the system to change in order to ensure that a threat is not perceived prematurely which might cause forces to act against the unfreezing process. Creating the necessary disquiet or discomfort carefully in order to motivate the system to be involved in the search for new solutions and alternative ways of thinking requires a balance of support for the difficulties faced by the people involved and inflexibility in moving towards the change targets.

In creating the climate for change and in opening the system to change the change leader must be aware that observation of the system is itself intervention. The initial stages in the change processes described in this project involved the collation of information from the various partner institutions involved in the change initiatives. Schein (2002) clearly ties any questioning and analysis as 'diagnostic interventions' and points to the dangers of ignoring the powerful impact that diagnosis can have on the system being diagnosed. This is particularly true in the case of diagnostic investigations impacting on a number of organisations as the information gathering stages are influenced by the knowledge and awareness of the context in which the information will ultimately be viewed and interpreted.

Warrick (2011) states that the kind of change that is needed, in both private and public sector organisations currently, is revolutionary and transformational. Burns makes a distinction between transactional and transformational leadership (Burns 1978). Transactional leadership relates to the tasks in hand and to achieving the defined goals – in many ways it describes what is usually termed ‘management’. Transformational leadership is used to describe a process whereby a leader brings about positive changes using motivation, inspiration and vision. Bass (1990) also identified several dimensions of transformational leadership as idealised influence, inspiration, stimulation and consideration.

These definitions focus on the personal characteristics of the leader. Tichy and Devanna (1986) present their view of a transformational leader as a visionary leader with new ways of thinking about strategy, structure and people. The relationship between the leader and the members of the organisation are also considered by Bass as he described the transformational leadership process as stirring the emotions and passions of people and encouraging them to look beyond their narrow self-interests toward higher goals. Kotter and Cohen (2002) also emphasise the importance of engaging hearts and not just minds in committing to change. In the case of this research because of the cross-organisational nature of the changes sought the participants are expected to look beyond their own self-interests and (in some cases) those of their organisations toward a collective good. Warrick (2011) points out that while there is much literature on transformational leadership there is little guidance in the literature about how to actually go about transforming an organisation.

Having considered change management and leadership generally, as well as organisational culture and change initiatives, the climate and the drivers for change within the higher education environment are considered in the next section. Generally, but not exclusively, the research focuses on the higher education environment in Ireland and the United Kingdom as this forms the most relevant backdrop for the research.

Higher Education Institutions and Change

Similar to all other organisations, educational institutions face pressures for change. Although Baer *et al.* (2008) and Bezzina (2006) suggest that educational institutions are often accused of resisting changes and being slow to adapt in a rapidly changing environment. Hughes (2007) considers the paradox presented by the fact that

academics, who are at the forefront of knowledge generation and might be expected to embrace change, tend to react negatively or with mistrust. Hughes also refers to the gap between practitioner emphasis on change management tools and techniques and the emphasis in the academic domain on change management theories and concepts in a more abstract way. This apparent co-existence of radical chic and entrenched conservatism in higher education is highlighted by Becher and Trowler (2001). Despite what might be perceived as a reluctance to change higher education systems are experiencing unavoidable change pressures. These include pressures on resources, need for greater accountability, growing competition, increased student numbers and participation rates, new teaching practices, changing student profiles and new technologies among others.

Higher educational institutions in Ireland and beyond have been faced with significant internal and external pressures for change. Changes within higher educational institutes have also been driven by a more sophisticated and diverse consumer group. Students can no longer be seen as a homogenous mass. An increasing diversity in the student group has seen the inclusion of more mature learners and learners with a variety of experiences and backgrounds within the learning environment which has itself led to new challenges for educators. While in Europe, new educational policies and higher education structures are being developed with the implementation of the Bologna Process.

The rapid expansion of communication and networking opportunities for the exchange of information offered through the internet has changed dramatically, in a relatively short period of time, the way in which we assimilate, validate and use information in all aspects of life.

Technological change is inevitable, and, according to research by Hayes' *et al.* (2008), has placed added pressures on organisations within the educational sphere. Likewise, Jamali (2005) believes that increasing technological complexity and the need to diffuse information and technology within organisations is proving to be beyond the capacity of old rigid hierarchal management systems. Within educational systems technological change has impacted on the curriculum content, the teaching learning and assessment methodologies, the research spectrum and the supports in the form of assistive technologies for learners. It has also impacted on the accessibility of education through initiatives such as BlueBrick (www.bluebrick.ie) which provide learning planning information and admissions opportunities on-line and through the proliferation of

programmes inclusive of e-learning and e-supported learning. In this increasingly technologically-advanced age educators have to be cognisant of the possibility of proliferating inequities and creating barriers to learners through the 'digital divide'.

In addition to technological advances, Reily and Starr (1983) found that political, social and economic factors are external forces which, seem to modify the direction and focus of pedagogical activity within educational institutes. Educational institutions are subject to changes in the political and legislative landscape which can place significant pressure on organisations. Oakland and Tanner (2007) have recognised governmental and regulatory demands as some of the major triggers for change within organisations.

These pressures can arise from policy and strategy changes at a local or national level and also at a broader international level. Educational systems in Europe are increasingly subject to, and seek to respond to, policy and strategy changes at a European Level. Mapesela and Hay (2006) suggest that there has been an increased pressure on third level educational institutions to meet the expectations of a broad range of stakeholders, local, national and international. The OECD (2007a) report on Higher Education and regions notes that while higher education institutions have traditionally been self-contained autonomous organisations this has changed recently. The report points out that, third level organisations are expected to take an interdisciplinary approach and to be engaged in partnerships with a wide range of stakeholders. The OECD supports the view that a knowledge-based or learning economy depends on a growing number of graduates and also the provision of lifelong learning opportunities for a wide range of non-standard learners.

The tension to meet increasingly difficult targets set out by the various authorities and brought about by changing economic circumstances with fewer resources is widespread. Educational institutes are expected to implement the necessary changes but with no extra resources or help from government (Hammersley-Fletcher, 2007). Likewise, Marginson's (2000) research findings found that the decline in government commitment to the funding of higher education in Australia led to transformational changes in the third level educational system where the system was forced to respond to these changing external pressures in a time of declining education budgets.

In Ireland, a deteriorating economic climate has caused enormous pressure for change within the third level system with all third level institutions reporting increasing student numbers and an increased participation rate of school-leavers driven by a lack of

employment opportunities and a growing number of those who had been in the workforce returning to education having become unemployed. This increase in student numbers has coincided with a decrease in staffing and resources caused by rapidly increasing government deficits and the escalating cost of government borrowing.

In addition to unprecedented falls in employment in 2009 the Irish Economy experienced a sharp decline in economic growth of 7.1% in GDP (EGFSN National Skills Bulletin 2010). Overall employment has fallen by over a quarter of a million in the current recession (FÁS Quarterly Labour Market Commentary Spring/Summer 2010). At the end of 2009 the number in employment in Ireland was 1,846,000 representing the lowest employment rate since 1998. The construction and wholesale/retail sectors have experienced the biggest falls in employment. Of these 42% held third level qualifications, 39% held upper secondary or further education and 20 held lower secondary or below. This compares poorly to the National Skills Strategy Targets (EGFSN 2006).

Specifically, the Expert Group proposes that, by 2020:

- 48 percent of the labour force should have qualifications at NFQ Levels 6 to 10;
- 45 percent should have qualifications at NFQ levels 4 and 5; and
- The remaining 7 percent will have qualifications at NFQ levels 1 to 3 but should aspire to achieve skills at higher levels.

It is clear that considerable further progress is required if these targets are to be met – particularly in relation to those with lower secondary level education attainment, or below, in the labour force. It is interesting that in this time of falling full-time employment rates, part-time employment levels have seen an increase. This has implications for the ways in which the educational sector can respond to the national learning and development needs of those in the workforce and those aspiring to be in the workforce and it also points to a growing need for flexible and responsive learning pathways.

The Irish National Competitiveness Council's report (2009) on education and training states that diversity, inter-institutional cooperation and competition are critical to the success of Ireland's higher education system. They also point to the potential for Higher Education providers to become key drivers of national and regional competitiveness by responding rapidly and appropriately within partnership models to

business learning and research and development needs. The Council recognises that this will require significant organisational change within the higher education institutions.

According to Murphy (2007) the need to generate new knowledge through research and to bridge the commercialization of that knowledge to contribute to workplace innovation and improved balance of payments, combined with the need to provide flexible and accessible education structures to contribute to social equity, stability and cohesion, are the most significant drivers of change in higher education in Ireland.

In addition, most of the recent government policy documents refer to the role that the third level education system will need to play in the development of the economy and in workforce upskilling to meet new and emerging needs and to serve the needs of the 'Smart Economy' The Smart Economy document (Ireland, 2008) notes, in its identification of threats to the economy, that Ireland lags behind the EU-15 average in terms of life-long learning which threatens the adaptability of the workforce and will impact on our ability to respond to changing employment structures and realities.

Educational institutes are constantly trying to catch up with society's expectations and because of this the institutional pattern is likely to reflect the values and aspirations prevalent at least some years previously, therefore, there may be tensions and mismatches between the institutional pattern and aspects of society's current expectations (Wilkins, 2004).

In recent years there have been very significant changes within higher education (HE) systems. Bryson (2004) outlines some of the major changes that have impacted on the HE sector in the United Kingdom which are summarized as:

- Move from an elite to mass system of education – without concomitant increase in funding
- Ending of the binary divide between universities and polytechnics
- Increase in workforce
- Abolition of academic tenure
- Increasing emphasis on financial stringency
- Growing focus on standards and accountability – value for money
- Introduction of tuition fees

- Change in emphasis from teacher as a guardian of knowledge to student-centred learning, accompanied by semesterisation and modularization and advances in educational information technologies

All of these are equally applicable within the Irish system with the exception of the abolition of tenure and the introduction of fees which is still under consideration by the Irish government. In Ireland the binary divide has not been ended but the lines are certainly being blurred. Bryson (2004) points out that the common theme is the increased marketisation of higher education and he asserts that the expansion of the system is likely to continue apace as there is a continued pressure for increased participation and upskilling.

A significant impetus for change within the HE sector in Europe in recent years is the Bologna Agreement. The Bologna Process was initiated in 1999 when twenty-nine European ministers charged with higher education met in Bologna to lay the basis for establishing a European Higher Education Area by 2010 and promoting the European system of higher education world-wide. The primary principles of autonomy and diversity are respected as the commitment is freely taken by each signatory country to reform its own higher education system or systems in order to create overall convergence at European level.

While the issues mentioned indicate some of the significant recent challenges faced and illustrate the on-going volatile environment in which the organisations operate, this research project is particularly focused on the changing nature of the educational provision to the non-standard or part-time learner and the reform of processes and structures that relate to this provision. Some of the changes that have taken place in terms of the development and delivery of the learning provision in recent times include:

- Modularization and Semesterisation
- Learning outcomes approach
- e-Learning and e-supported learning
- Increased demand for up-skilling and reskilling of those in the workplace
- Increasing diversity of learners

These changes form the backdrop to the reforms sought and underline the fact that the systems are subject to change from a myriad of sources on an on-going basis. It is obvious that an impetus for change also arises within each particular discipline driven by advancing knowledge and research. This may be more pressing within disciplines

that are technology dependent but is just as applicable to all disciplines. Change within third-level institutions has the same complex mix of drivers and imperatives as change within any other organisation. Educational institutions cannot afford to ignore these change drivers occurring within the business environment in which they operate and therefore the institutions and as a consequence the employees must change (Passmore, 2003).

In summary, higher education providers in Ireland are seeking to address a growing fulltime learner cohort with fewer staff and resources while also providing for the learning needs of the unemployed and those in employment in innovative and flexible ways. Economic pressures are driving down the overall budget for education while also stimulating a greater demand for provision. Within this context the providers will need to become more agile and responsive while also providing 'more for less' (Devane 2010) This will only be achieved through collaborative measures that will ensure that resources are maximized and there is a rationalization of approach and provision.

Lopez *et al.* (2004) point to the increasing complexity, globalisation and dynamism impacting on organisations and they stress the key role that knowledge management plays in ensuring that organisations are able to both develop their knowledge base and maximise their use of existing knowledge. Their research demonstrates that a collaborative culture supports organisational development and learning and ultimately business performance. While there is a considerable volume of research on organisational change and the culture and leadership of change there is very little research on cross-organisational collaborative change and reform initiatives.

Collaborative Change

Wood and Grey (1991:437) define collaboration as

A process in which a group of autonomous stakeholders of an issue domain engage in an interactive process using shared rules, norms and structures to act or decide on issues related to that domain.

While the need for collaboration between HEIs is underlined by government and political agenda, and some researchers have documented the potential benefits of

institutional collaboration including greater efficiency and effectiveness, generally higher education institutions are not structured to support collaboration (Kezar 2005).

The term collaboration is used to convey collective action toward shared or mutually agreed and defined goals (D'Amour et al. 2005). In the context of this research between organisations which may be considered competitors, collaboration will require something of a paradigm shift to implement a logic of collaboration rather than a logic of competition (D'Amour, 1999). The concepts that arise in the literature related to collaboration commonly include: sharing, interdependence, partnership and power. (Liedtka and Whitten 1998, Evans 1994, Stichler 1995). Considering these elements separately, sharing includes shared perspectives and shared responsibilities. Partnership implies working toward common goals in a spirit of open communication. Interdependence implies that the actors in the collaborative process are not independent actors but that their success and the success of the outcome depends on others. In a collaborative relationship the power is shared between the actors.

Senge (1990) and Doz (2006) agree that departmental silos, hierarchical structures and inflexible administrations systems and processes all act as barriers to collaboration. While there has been valuable research in the corporate / industry sector on enabling collaborative work Kezar (2006) notes that there has been virtually no research on how to reorganise higher education institutions for collaborative work. Most research on collaboration has focused on the need to collaborate and the benefits of collaboration and not on the process of collaboration. In the literature on collaboration there is a considerable focus on internal collaboration between functions and departments with a particular organisation, and where the literature does focus on external collaboration, it tends to be on collaboration by academic institutions with business and industry and not on inter-institutional collaboration which is explored here.

Ring and Van de Ven's work (1994) examines corporate alliances and identifies three phases, negotiation, commitment and execution. These stages are applicable to most relationships built on partnership and for mutual benefit and development. In his address to the partnerships for progress conference Devane (2010) clearly identified the key parameters behind successful partnerships.

First, all partnerships need unity of purpose. Second, interdependence, is there interdependence in the partnership? Third, honesty, all partners have to deal

very honestly with the realities that need to be faced at any point in the partnership.

Change processes such as that undertaken here, that seek to further change initiatives in an inter-institutional context need to focus on the collaboration and partnership development aspects of the work and to be aware of the need to reach openness and trust in what is a naturally competitive environment.

Chapter 2 Conclusion

A review of the literature relating to change in organisations and the implications of the organisational culture and management on the change process has been presented. The forces and imperatives for change in the Irish third level education system have been explored and the particular issues relating to a collaborative and inter-institutional approach to a change initiative have been considered.

A number of foundational approaches to change were considered and compared including Lewin's Three-Stage Model and Kotter's 8-Step Model. These fundamental theories consider change to be presentable as a series of sequential stages which must be planned and managed in order to bring about effective change. Most theorists also recognise the organisational climate and culture and the management and leadership to be important in undertaking planned change processes.

Leadership of the change process can be very effective in allaying the inherent uncertainties and in guiding or motivating employees in a particular direction in response to the changing needs of their organisation. Agile and adaptive leadership is required to ensure that the inevitable conflict, chaos and confusion of change becomes a productive rather than destructive force in the organisation (Heifetz *et al.*, 2009).

In common with most other organisations higher education systems are experiencing unavoidable change pressures. These include pressures on resources, need for greater accountability, growing competition, increased student numbers and participation rates, new teaching practices, changing student profiles and new technologies among others. Higher educational institutions in Ireland and beyond have been faced with significant internal and external pressures for change. These pressures form the backdrop of forces for change which underpin the current research work.

While there is a significant body of research available on change theories and processes very little has been written on collaborative approaches to change, collaboration between competing organisations and development of partnership approaches.

The themes explored relate directly to the specific change management initiative which is the subject of the current research. The literature review undertaken provides the framework and fundamental knowledge set within which the current work is undertaken. It informs the work undertaken and also provides a reflective background and structure within which the research activities can be considered and supported.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

Introduction

This chapter will consider the background and rationale for the interpretative research approach chosen and the use of an action research design. The current research is situated within an appropriate research paradigm through an exploration of the underlying ontological and epistemological issues. The researcher as a practitioner is considered and the implications of this insider-researcher position for the nature of the knowledge sought and for the methodological approach are developed. Action research is defined and linked to the research stages and research question relating to the current research. The methodological approach is developed into the methods to be employed and issues relating to the reliability and validity of qualitative research data are considered as well as ethical issues which arise in relation to practice-based research.

This chapter links the responsibilities and actions undertaken as practitioner, with reflection on my personal ontological perspective and the journey to the development of the research question and methodology employed in the research. It includes an overview of the project activity linking the conceptualisation and formalisation of the research question, the empirical research and analysis and the development of the findings into the research product is provided.

An outline of the chapter is provided in the following Chapter Map (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Chapter Map - Chapter 3

Ontological and Epistemological Considerations

Consideration of research methodology cannot be undertaken in isolation from engagement with ontological and epistemological issues. Ontological and epistemological reflection is essential to support the development of a critical analytical approach to any system of informed structured enquiry that underpins the research process. Research is undertaken as a learning system and the assumption, if one recognises the possibility that something new can be learnt, is that one must consider the nature of being and of becoming. One ontological approach considers and explains the nature and essential properties and principles and causes of 'being' with

an emphasis on a permanent and probably unchanging reality which exists external to the viewer. An alternative view of ontology focuses on 'becoming' with consideration of a changing and emerging world to contribute to the observer's developing world view. In either case, ontology deals with the question of the nature and meaning of that which exists, within which reality and existence the researcher seeks to learn more (Bates *et al.*, 2007), (Hay, 2007).

Epistemology considers the origin, nature, and limits of human knowledge, beliefs and truths. Major questions include, whether knowing is possible, how human knowledge is gained and how knowledge is linked to justification, being and behaviour. Our ontological and epistemological positions are inextricably linked with our being, our beliefs and our perspectives. Heidegger contributes a concept of 'being-in-the-world' which recognises that we are intertwined with our world and not easily separable from it. Reality and our perception of the reality within which we exist, theories and systems of statements expressing beliefs and views on that reality, and methods by which we can compare theories with reality are the three main elements of empirical research. Research methods then help us to create the link between theory and reality and the choice of method will depend on the fundamental paradigm or basic set of beliefs that the researcher holds, as well as the theory to be tested or the information that is sought.

In my own case, the fundamental beliefs that I held in relation to my own world view and consideration of what I could know or what knowledge I could gain was largely unquestioned and unexplored before embarking on this professional doctoral pathway. My academic and practice background had been firmly rooted in a traditional positivist engineering approach and while an exploration of my experience would clearly show a migration from an individually contributing engineer/researcher to that of a manager and leader, the transition was supported sporadically by short training and development interventions none of which facilitated a fundamental reflection on, or questioning of, my beliefs or evolving world view. While I had considerable experience in both an operational and project-type leadership role, I had not developed a critical or theoretical approach to my practice and was unable to externalise or theorise an external view of the value system in which my own evolving change leadership practice was rooted. I operated firmly in the 'practice realm' at that point.

It was in this capacity that I gained the opportunity to propose, specify and lead a large collaborative initiative which had the potential to have an impact on a national scale.

Initially, my focus in leading the initiative was practice-oriented and embedded in traditional project management approaches. It presented both a significant challenge and opportunity to me as the primary change agent. It was only after some time that I began to question the parameters in which I operated and to realize that an ability to theorise my practice would be essential to the development of a critically informed perspective. Questioning my own practice and seeking to both understand and improve it, I grew to understand the value of the opportunity that I had to contribute, not just operationally within the context of the required outcomes of the initiative for which I was responsible, but conceptually to the framework in which such initiatives would be proposed and managed in the future. Reflecting on my own practice, I came to recognize that 'what I do' is inseparable from 'who I am' and that 'who I am' is not a fixed phenomenon but evolving in line with experiences, views, values and beliefs. I sought to understand and articulate my own personal ontology and to consider what knowledge or information I sought to understand, explain and/or change. In considering my own ontological evolution I needed to consider and understand the existing paradigms and approaches and develop a critical perspective.

Paradigms and approaches in research: Positivist versus Phenomenological

Two major paradigms or theoretical perspectives have dominated the social sciences. The first, positivism, traces its origins to the social theorists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and especially to Comte and Durkeim. Neale *et al.* (2005) suggest that positivist epistemology employs hard data to focus on objectivity and fact. The positivist seeks the facts or causes of social phenomena with little regard for the subjective states of individuals. As Gill and Johnson (2002) note, the foundation of a positivist paradigm is that subjective dimensions of human action, such as internal logic and interpretative processes, are ignored. Quantitative research methods are, in general, based on a positivist research paradigm. Typical quantitative research employs standardized instruments to capture data based on the assumption that reality is an entity that can be captured objectively. This type of research tends to be deductive where hypotheses are deduced from existing theories within the research domain which are then tested and confirmed or refuted based on the data collected (Bell and Bryman, 2007:11). In the main, positivist research is undertaken based on observable facts rather than on impressions. The underlying assumption is that the researcher is independent of the research.

While quantitative research methods are, in general, based on a positivist research paradigm, qualitative methods are associated with a more complex array of different

research paradigms. Lincoln and Guba (2003) identify three main alternatives to the positivist paradigm, namely post-positivism, critical theory and constructivism. A comparison of the ontology, epistemology and methodology associated with these paradigms is given in Table 1 below which is adapted from Lincoln and Guba (2003: 256).

Table 1: Comparison of different enquiry paradigms

	Ontology	Epistemology	Methodology
Positivism	Native Realism – based on a real and apprehendable reality	Objectivist – findings are viewed as ‘true’	Experimental, Verification of hypotheses, quantitative methods
Post-positivism	Critical realism – reality is real but only imperfectly apprehendable	Findings are seen as ‘probably true’	Modified experimental / falsification of hypotheses, may include qualitative methods
Critical theory	Historical Realism – reality is shaped by values and experiences, social political, economic, ethnic	Findings are value mediated and are considered in a more subjectivist frame	May be in dialogue and conversational form, linguistic interpretations
Constructivism	Relativism – realities are local and specifically constructed	Transactional / Subjectivist Findings are constructed and created	Seeks shared world view Includes linguistic and textual interpretations

An alternative set of research philosophies based in the work of Saunders *et al.* (2009) is presented in Table 2 below.

	Ontology	Epistemology	Methodology
Positivism	Clear external, objective reality – independent of social actors	Credible data provided by observable parameters	Highly structured – usually quantitative
Realism	Objective and independent reality – interpreted through the social conditioning of the viewer	Credible data and facts – open to possibility of misinterpretation	Chosen to fit subject matter, may include qualitative
Interpretivism	Socially constructed and changing subjective and multiple	Subjective meanings and observations considered within situations	Qualitative, small samples, in-depth investigations
Pragmatism	External and multiple, view chosen appropriate to the research question	Subjective meanings or observable parameters may be appropriate depending on the research questions	Mixed or multiple methods, may include qualitative and quantitative

Table 2: Comparison of different enquiry paradigms

This range of paradigms is an illustration of the ‘paradigm proliferation’ as referred to by Denzin (2008). In recent research Punch (2009) refers to a tendency towards convergence in the literature around a general interpretivist-constructivist paradigm employing qualitative research methodologies. Following the lead of Deutscher, the interpretivist paradigm comes from the intellectual traditions of phenomenology and stems most prominently from the work of Alfred Schultz, whose work was influenced by Weber (Bryman and Bell, 2003). The phenomenologist is concerned with understanding human behaviour from the actor’s own frame of reference. According to Bogdan and Taylor (1975), the phenomenologist examines how the world is experienced. For the phenomenologist, the important reality is what people imagine it

to be. Phenomenologists focus on how we put together the phenomena we experience in such a way as to make sense of the world and, in so doing, develop a worldview.

Bryman and Bell (2003) conceive that phenomenologists view human behaviour, what people say and do, as a product of how people interpret their world. To do this requires empathic understanding or an ability to reproduce in one's own mind the feelings, motives, and thoughts behind the actions of others. An integrating theme running through these perspectives is the notion that the study of human beings is fundamentally different from other scientific inquiries, such as agricultural and natural sciences (Patton, 1990). A phenomenologist also views human behaviour as a product of how people interpret their world (Bauer *et al.*, 2000). The task of the phenomenologist, and of qualitative methodologists, is to capture this process of interpretation (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975).

Having considered the range of inquiry paradigms I sought to reflect on my own perspective and motivation and to determine if I could identify with one or more of them. Through my review of, and reflection on, my learning and through the process of developing my research proposal I was able to separate the role that I held as practitioner wherein I was expected to lead change across an number of institutions, from the role of practitioner-researcher wherein I sought to explore my practice and to theorize that practice into an output which would be useful to change leadership practice generally.

In order to develop my research question I found that I needed to consider my motivation and how this motivation was informed by my values. In undertaking this learning pathway, I recognized that I was concerned about the evolution of my change leadership practice – how could I achieve the very significant and challenging tasks that I faced? I was concerned with how I might improve my own personal practice and to become the best that I could be. I was concerned by the scale of the investment in the Strategic Innovation Fund generally and the value of the outcomes that could be achieved. I was concerned to ensure that anything that I learned through this unique leadership experience could have value more broadly and could be of interest in establishing fund proposal mechanisms in the future. I knew that the measurable outcomes and financial management of the initiatives would be reported on regularly and audited externally by experts on behalf of the funding authority. Therefore, the question which I sought to answer was not just how well I performed these specific tasks and led this specific set of partners towards these particular goals and outcomes.

I recognized that that level of questioning was embedded in the practice realm. The question was: how could I improve my practice? What could I learn through my own observations and informed reflection? How could I generate new knowledge from a reflection on my practice? What could I learn through the situational meanings and observations of others involved in the change initiative? How could I interpret the views of others involved in the process? How could I develop the empirical research into theories that could be usefully applied in the practice realm?

I interpreted my own personal ontology as being based on a world view which is informed through experience, values and beliefs but which is also socially constructed and open to change. Considering just the measurable outcomes and financial management of the change initiative would be a contradiction as it would deny my own values. Through the process of reviewing and reflecting on my own learning and the guided learning through research methodology and practitioner research, I recognized that I had developed an ability to express and articulate why I wanted to understand and explain the phenomena that I sought to explore through this research. Through the insights that I gained into my own practice and the role of the practitioner researcher I recognized that my own ontological perspective had undergone a process of challenge and clarification as I engaged with the research process and I had clarified my own position at the centre of the research question and had reflected on my research approach. Through the process of the doctoral pathway I saw myself no longer as a professional practitioner embedded in the practice realm and collecting information on which to base actions and judgements. I now saw that the view of myself that emerged was one of a practitioner-researcher seeking new knowledge and insights within a structured research approach taking into account the complexity of the situation in which the knowledge is sought and applied. This approach asked not just for my own view of the world but to include the views of the others involved in the change initiative as these views and experiences will make a significant contribution to my knowledge acquisition in the empirical realm and the application of that knowledge into the practice realm.

Since positivists and phenomenologists approach problems in different ways and seek different answers, their research will typically demand different research strategies (Bryman and Bell, 2003). The positivist searches for 'facts' and 'causes', through methods such as measurements, survey questionnaires, inventories, and demographic analysis, which typically produce quantitative data and which allow him or her to statistically prove or disprove relationships between variables. The phenomenologist,

on the other hand, seeks understanding through such qualitative methods as participant observation, open-ended interviewing, and personal documents (Jary and Jary, 1991). These methods yield descriptive data which enable the phenomenologist to “see the world as subjects see it” (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975).

Qualitative methodologies refer to research procedures which produce descriptive data, people’s own written or spoken words and observable behaviour. According to Bogdan and Taylor (1975), this type of research views settings and the individuals within them holistically; that is, the subject of the study, be it an organisation or an individual, is not considered as an isolated variable or a hypothesis, but is viewed instead as part of a whole.

Bogdan and Taylor (1975) also argue that the methods by which we study people change the way we view the subjects. They add that when we reduce people to statistical aggregates we lose sight of the complex and subjective nature of human behaviour. Qualitative methods allow us to know people personally and to appreciate them as they are developing their own emerging definitions of the world. Those who conduct qualitative research face a difficulty as there is no one clear technique for the analysis of the information gathered. As Berg (2001) posits, ‘qualitative research takes much longer, requires greater clarity of goals during design stages, and cannot be analysed by running computer programmes’. Proponents of qualitative research designs do best by emphasising the promise of quality, depth, and richness in the research findings. Qualitative research enables discovery and theory generation while quantitative research tends to focus on confirming or verifying theories. Guba and Lincoln (1981) have made the point that qualitative methods are preferable to quantitative methods when the phenomena to be studied are complex human and organisational interactions and, therefore, not easily translatable into numbers. When researchers use such methods as interview, observation, use of non-verbal cues and unobtrusive measures they use tacit as well as propositional knowledge to ascribe meaning to the verbal and non-verbal behaviour that is uncovered (Guba and Lincoln, 1981).

In an interpretivist approach humans are considered to be continuously interpreting the world around them, the researcher seeks to enter the social world of the research subjects and to understand the world from their perspective (Saunders *et al.* 2009). Interpretivism can be considered as an inductive approach where the research does

not seek to verify existing theories but rather there is a circular relation between the research findings and the theory generation.

There are other points that should be borne in mind when choosing an appropriate research approach. These include (Bennett, 1991):

Answering the research questions - The method chosen must allow the research questions to be answered. It is clearly important to know and thoroughly understand what questions researchers are seeking to answer. A clear statement of the research questions will enable both the level of research and level of rigour to be more adequately determined. It will also enable a check to be made on the understanding of the nature of the research problem involved.

Current state of knowledge - If little is currently known about the nature of the variables involved in the research problem then it is likely that more qualitative, exploratory research methods will be needed. If, on the other hand, a review of the literature shows that a good deal is already known, it is then possible to isolate the key variables involved. This would then determine the extent to which a hypothesis or hypotheses could be established and made available for testing. This in turn would lead to a choice of method which allowed hypothesis testing to be carried out. However, even where the variables are known in advance their very nature may prevent the use of experimental research methods.

The nature of the variables involved - The choice of method will also be governed by the extent to which the variables involved can be manipulated and measured in a controlled way. In the physical sciences it is often possible to make the subject of the research do what you want it to do. In the social sciences this is not always the case.

In considering research methodology and research design the concept development needs to encompass more than the methods by which data is collected and analysed. According to Easterby-Smith *et al.* (2002:43) the concept of 'research design' embraces the overall configuration of a piece of applied research, including the kind of evidence-based enquiry system used, the type of evidence gathered and the

interpretation of that evidence to provide answers to the research questions and consequently to lead to improvements in practice.

In the case of the current research proposal the phenomena under investigation include the attitudes, perspectives, experiences and viewpoints of participants who have been involved in the change initiative which I had responsibility for leading. A positivist review of reported outcomes and funding for the initiative would be undertaken elsewhere by an independent expert on behalf of the funding agency. In order to make a unique contribution and to leverage most advantage from the opportunity presented, my research must take an interpretivist approach utilizing qualitative or phenomenological methods. My work as the main change agent is inherent to the research. My own actions, observations, reflections are cyclically related and are informed by my research journey. A major consideration in my research approach and resulting research design process is my role as the researcher within the process.

Role of the researcher as insider

The reflexive practitioner is by definition a researcher, researching not just their own professional context but, crucially, researching that context as they act within it Campbell *et al.* (2004: 10)

Practice-based research presents a considerable range of opportunities and challenges. The considerations raised by the insider undertaking research into practice as it exists within the professional setting in which they act is a complex interaction of potentially positive and negative aspects. Costley and Armsby (2007: 132) state that practice-led research projects are 'located within real-life social and work-based organisational community and give tangible meaning rather than in a hypothetical or devised scenario'.

A purely evidence-based approach to research into a particular practice would seek to abstract the researcher from the findings and to compile evidence through observable and measurable parameter(s). The compiled evidence would then provide a means of evaluating 'practice' and perhaps provide a basis for changing that practice. Recognising that practice is complex and that, while it is embodied to some extent within the practitioner, it is also impacted on by the social, historical and cultural setting in which it is enacted and indeed by all parties to the particular enactment of practice, it

becomes clear that it is not easy, nor perhaps desirable, to extract the practitioner from the practice setting.

There are clear advantages to the practitioner or actor undertaking the observer role within the research setting. The practitioner is intimately acquainted with the world within which the practice is enacted. Fox *et al.* (2007) take an ontological approach which suggests three world views, the *objective* world which exists independently of human beliefs, culture and language, the *socially constructed* world which is formed through the shared views, beliefs and realities of individuals and groups and the *individually constructed* world which is how each person constructs and experiences their own unique reality.

While there are advantages associated with research from within, there are dangers that the insider may overlook their own position in relation to the practice, the research or observations on that practice and the conclusions that are drawn from the work. The need to be reflexive within the practice setting calls for an awareness of self within the research and a deeper awareness of the motivations and reasons for constructing knowledge in specific ways. Fox *et al.* (2007) consider levels of reflection which include reflection on the research being undertaken, reflection on the self and reflection on the self within the research experience. The embedded nature of the participant within the change management research process as both the driver of the actions taken to bring about change and observer of the impacts of those actions brings their individually constructed worldview as a filter through which they perceive, frame and reframe the practice setting. The challenge for the practitioner-researcher is to have a level of self-awareness that allows this 'filter' to be well understood and to ensure that, through understanding, it can be taken into account in analysis and interpretation allowing for meaningful transferable outcomes (Attard, 2008).

The nature of research on practice and attempts to observe and improve practice can bring about discomfort and distrust in the environment in which the research is situated if the reasons for the research and the methodology are not clearly articulated in advance. An insider-researcher has the advantage of knowing the people involved, being seen as 'one-of-us' and being in a position to gain trust and cooperation in a way that might be more difficult for an outsider. On the other hand an insider must be aware of situations where they may be given information that the participants believe is what they want to hear, where theories and beliefs offered may be espoused theories.

In considering what I could know and how I could contribute to the development of my own practice and to practice in general I recognize that my own practice is part of the inquiry (McNiff and Whitehead 2002). My inquiry is not however based entirely in the practice realm as it is informed through my internalization of relevant underlying theory. Without this stage, in which I explored research methodology and methods and questioned my own world view, I could have considered my actions in the practice realm and the impacts of those actions through observation or measurement within the practice realm. This would have isolated my practice as just that of a practitioner. The prism through which I would have regarded the work would have been informed by the required outcomes of the change initiative only and I would not have raised the enquiry to that of a reflective researcher within the practice domain. Through time spent addressing and internalizing epistemological and methodological approaches I needed to be able to problematize the situation in order to explore my practice, critically appraise it and to generate fresh insights. A structured approach to the theoretical realm and the exploration of research questions and methodology allowed the development of a conceptual framework for the research work. I recognize that, as the primary change agent in the practice setting and as the sole researcher in the research domain, I needed to be able to generate new learning and insights from a multiplicity of perspectives and I could not, and should not, extract my own practice and actions from the core of the research as both the subject and object.

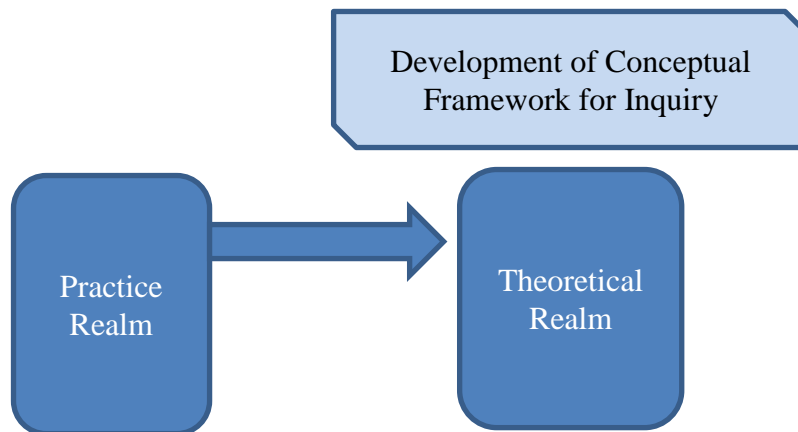


Figure 5: Personal Research Journey- Initial Stage

A level of awareness of the situation and of self in the situation is required to ensure that the research findings are valuable and valued and that the knowledge gained is meaningful and actionable at an individual and an organisational level. Allen (2002) believes that researchers' sensitivity to the social and cultural specificity of their study population can foster an awareness and empathy that encourages those being researched to disclose their vulnerabilities and their true feelings regarding the subject

matter. The insider-researcher will therefore have a significant advantage over the outsider in this kind of research.

Epistemology and the Practitioner Researcher

Epistemological considerations for the practitioner researcher extend beyond the nature of knowledge and of knowing and include the situations in which the knowledge is to be gathered, shared, tested, created or reapplied and where the 'research' or knowledge creation is intricately linked with the 'practice'. It is clear that this practice is always contextualized (Rycroft-Malone 2008). Practice has a value within a particular setting and many of the competencies and abilities of the practitioner cannot be meaningfully discussed independently of where they are situated. The nature of practice is that it is also embodied in the persons of the practitioners and in their progress through the profession. Within the context of practice-based research epistemology Kemmis (2006) argues that practice extends beyond the knowledge of the various practitioners and is formed socially, discursively, culturally and historically. My world view pointed towards the exploration of my practice and my own role as practitioner-researcher at the centre of the journey of discovery. The ability to capture and analyse a number of perspectives and to enrich my own reflection on my practice through the views of others pointed toward an operational paradigm which allowed these multiple perspectives to be accounted for.

Kemmis (2006) asserts that the nature of knowledge and knowing within the practice environment is both embodied within particular individuals and situational within a particular cultural environment and place and time. This situated nature of knowing will influence the research methods chosen and will have implications for an insider researcher in ensuring that the cultural context is well understood by the researcher from the outset.

The prevailing definitions of research epistemology and methodology are largely controlled by the traditional research community and the practitioner researcher challenges the notion of research conducted within the academic environment in the form of large 'stand alone' projects. It is recognised that the practitioner has more experience and knowledge of the practice in the particular area in question than the traditional researcher so that their research has the potential to be more insightful and relevant and may have the potential to add greater value. Anderson (2002) suggests

that practitioner research can make contributions beyond the scope of traditional research and it presents:

- (a) The potential for greater personal, professional, and organisational learning
- (b) An approach to authentic staff development, professional reward and reform
- (c) A new way of thinking about knowledge creation, dissemination and utilisation

Anderson also suggests that a broadening of existing epistemologies to include insider, practice-based research and the unique blend of epistemological, methodological, political and ethical dilemmas associated with it, is necessary.

A researcher conducting practice-based enquiry will usually combine practice and reflection stages. According to Price (2004: 47) the purpose of reflection is three-fold:

- To understand one's self, one's motives, perceptions, attitudes, values, and feelings
- Reflective practice is based on the notion that everyone constructs meanings for and explanations about events
- To reflect on the possible consequences of one's actions

Boud (1994) develops a model of learning from experience which recognises that the learners bring with them their personal foundation of experience to any learning event. It also takes account of the learner (or in this case researcher) being an active participant in the learning events of which they are part. This active intervention is part of the social, psychological and material environment in which the research is situated and in which the learning takes place. Boud goes on to develop a model which links the preparation or pre-learning event stages taking into account the learner, their experiences and learning situation, the learning experience in which the learner actively participates and to which the learner brings their entire personal foundation of experience and the reflective process which allows the learner to return to the learning experience and to evaluate and re-evaluate the experience and to contextualise it.

The Boud model was considered very relevant to the current research as it allowed me to develop deeper linkages between my role as researcher, the research experience and the situational view that relates the researcher within the research environment as an actor-observer within the context of the learning. In considering this deeper view,

the researcher also considers the reflective and reflexive elements that form part of the learning process and which allow the development of the learner within the learning process. A graphic adapted from the Boud model is developed in Figure 6 below.

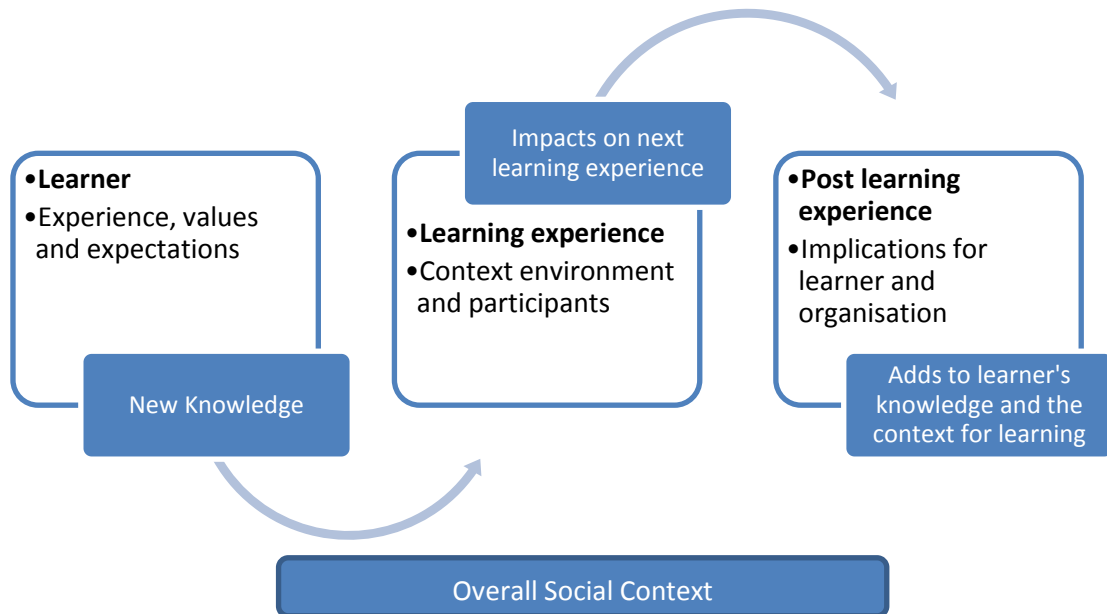


Figure 6: Indicative Learning Cycle

Research by Martensson and Lee (2004) suggests that a practitioner-researcher searches for new knowledge that is relevant to real-life practice and can make a contribution to the researcher's knowledge and that of the organisation in which the practitioner practices, which can be generalizable and applicable to similar organisations. The aim is that this knowledge will generate new theories but will also make a meaningful contribution to practice within the organisation. In conducting the research the practitioner is no less aware of the requirement for a rigorous, self-reflective, planned approach to a systematic enquiry and analysis than the traditional researcher. The consideration of epistemologies and research approaches relevant to this process have taken into account the practice-based nature of the proposed research.

McCutcheon and Jung (1990) identify practitioner-research as a systematic form of enquiry that is collective, self-reflective and critical. Such research is embedded in practice and is undertaken by experienced practitioners within an organisation with the

aim of contributing to knowledge and to improvements to practice. Generally, this kind of research is understood to be grounded in real situations and to have the potential to provide tangible benefits in a relatively short timeframe.

Conventional research might have seen the researcher extracting themselves from the work produced in a detachment of self from the subject matter where the researcher's beliefs, orientations and interests are considered marginal to the knowledge produced. Scott *et al.* (2004) believe that in the creation of professional knowledge the practitioner cannot afford this distancing. In this case, a reflexive approach is necessitated by the situation of myself as researcher as central to the research process and by the fact that my practice is itself part of the inquiry.

The deeper considerations of knowledge and the nature of knowing within the practice environment must take into account myself as professional, learner and researcher and my personal set of experiences, values and viewpoints, the knowledge or search for knowledge within the organisational setting, and the social, cultural and historical values and expectations of the organisation. Boud (2009) describes the process of noticing, intervening and reflection-in-action by which the learner negotiates their pathway through the situation in which their research or learning occurs. As researcher in a practice setting I recognize that I cannot be abstracted from that setting or the accumulation of lived experience that I carry with me to that setting.

In conclusion, when conducting research within a practice setting, the researcher must realise that the process of research or the search for knowledge within the setting may of itself impact on the situation. The observer role cannot be separated from the actor role. However the insider-researcher has a significant advantage in that they begin with an inherent understanding of the situation in which the research is being conducted – they have the insider view and understanding of the social, cultural and historical context or setting of the organisation in which they practice.

Research approaches relevant to the practice-led research are those that take account of the situated nature of knowledge and incorporate the researcher as an active intervention role within the practice setting. In designing the project proposal and consideration of the variety of research approaches available these considerations relating to the nature of knowledge sought and the situation in which the knowledge is to be sought and applied have been taken into account.

Epistemology and Research Design

Developing the concept of the nature of knowledge sought, generated and applied within the practice-based setting the researcher is also concerned with knowledge generation and how to add to the knowledge base in order to contribute to the store of knowledge. This leads to consideration of what can be known and the means by which knowledge can be generated. Consideration of epistemology, then, contributes to the formulation of the research question – the knowledge sought, and the methodology through which that question can be answered. Fuller (2002) has presented views of knowledge within social organisations as a motivator which can cause people to act in certain ways with regard to each other and their environment. This has particular relevance in seeking to establish the effectiveness of a series of interventions in bringing about changes to attitudes and actions within complex organisational settings.

Arbnor and Bjerke (2009: 50-57) present three methodological approaches and contrast those approaches within particular backgrounds and in practical and theoretical situations. The three approaches are the analytical approach, the systems approach and the actors approach. These are summarised below:

The Analytical approach seeks to generate knowledge independently of the observer. The whole is seen as no more than the sum of the parts and the individual viewpoint or observer bias is abstracted from the knowledge generated.

The Systems approach views the whole as being greater than the sum of the individual parts. The knowledge generated depends on the system or the interaction and behaviours of the individuals are parts of the overall system.

The Actors approach views knowledge as depending on individuals – the whole is constructed as an objectified reality from the intersection of the perceptions of the individuals.

The Actors approach is largely a phenomenological approach where the researcher can also be considered as an actor within the social reality construct. I found this concept particularly meaningful in the context of the current research as it prompted the visualization of an approach to research activity wherein, I, as the researcher ‘actor’ intervene in the process or knowledge-generation of the various actors within the system to bring about new means of thinking and then seek to establish the explicit understanding of the actors in response to each intervention. This was considered in the context of the cyclical nature of action research as described by Gill and Johnson (2002).

The challenge for any researcher is to develop a research approach that allows for deciphering the research problem in the best possible way, within the given constraints. The research design, therefore, should be effective in producing the required information within the constraints put on the researcher. Furthermore, Easterby-Smith *et al.* (2002: 2) advise that it is unwise to conduct research without an awareness of the background philosophical and political issues involved. This will be of particular importance to the insider practitioner researcher as they are not in a position to isolate themselves from the prevailing culture and knowledge within the organisation. Some of the philosophical issues involved in choosing a research approach and developing a research methodology are discussed below.

Burrell and Morgan (1979) note that all organisation theorists approach their work with a frame of reference consisting of a series of assumptions, whether they are explicitly stated or not. For the practitioner researcher this framework of assumptions, knowledge and experience is usually grounded in the organisational culture and can exert a positive influence on the work and an accelerated path to outcomes or can act as a barrier to fresh thinking. It is, therefore, important that the researcher be aware of the assumptions with which they approach their work. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), these assumptions come from theory and experience and often from the general objectives of the study envisioned. In considering knowledge arising from practice-based enquiry Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2007:201) describe

..knowledge production concerned with the identification and solution of practical problems in the lived professional lives of practitioners and organisations which are not encircled by the boundaries of single academic disciplines with their many rules and customary practices

Research design considerations for the practitioner researcher include the situations in which the knowledge is to be gathered, tested, created and reapplied and where the 'research' is intricately linked with the 'practice'. It is clear that this practice is always contextualised. Practice has a value within a particular setting and much of the competencies and abilities cannot be meaningfully discussed independently of where they are situated.

Action Research

Action research is a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by practitioners in order to improve their professional practices, their understanding of these practices and the situations in which the practices are carried out (Carr and Kemmis, 1986). Another definition of action research is offered by McNiff *et al.* (2000) who describe this research as a type of research where 'I' is at the centre of the process. In their work Kemmis and McTaggart (1982) emphasise how the linking of the terms 'action' and 'research' highlight the experimental nature of the process – trying out ideas through implementation and analysis and through this process making contributions to practice and improving knowledge.

Kemmis and McTaggart define action research as:

...a form of collective, self-reflective inquiry that participants in social situations undertake to improve ... the participants understanding of these practices and the situations in which they carry out these practices

(Kemmis and McTaggart 1988: 5)

Focusing on the role of the researcher in the process, Bassey (1995) explains that action researchers are intent on describing, interpreting and explaining events while they simultaneously seek to improve them. In this way the practitioner is considered to be central to the research process and not an impartial observer as might be the case in other forms of research.

The idea of reflection is pivotal to action research. Moving from the practice realm where actions are considered by the practitioner in terms of their impacts, meaningful reflection can only be undertaken in terms of the conceptual framework that has been developed through the theoretical domain. Action researchers enquire into their own practice and through enquiry and reflection as well as planned actions seek to improve that practice. A systematic investigation into particular phenomena and the underlying reasons for them will lead to a practical approach involving identifying the particular issue or question, imagining a possible solution, implementing an action, evaluating that action and changing of practice in light of the evaluation. In addition to implications for the researcher's practice and practice within the organisation in which the research is situated, the research findings will be developed into a framework that will be of value to other practitioners. McGill and Beaty (1995) describe this process of action research as a continuous one of learning and reflection, supported by colleagues with

an intention of getting things done. Reflection leads to an improved understanding of practice and also ensures that the researcher considers in-depth their own role within the practice and the improvements to practice that are sought.

McNiff *et al.* (2000) discuss the various means by which researchers attempt to describe Action Research and they agree that it is often represented diagrammatically as a cycle of continuous improvement or a spiral illustrating the steps of planning, acting, observing, reflecting, and re-planning and so on. However this representation can be somewhat idealised as the practical situation may appear chaotic due to the fact that such activities do not always follow an orderly linear progression. Unexpected issues can emerge in projects leading to a change of emphasis or additional factors might be found to be important. An important feature of action research is that the task is not finished when the project ends. It is a continuous and cyclical process of systematic observation and evaluation.

According to McNiff *et al.* (2000) action research shares the following characteristics with other research:

- It leads to knowledge
- It provides evidence to support this knowledge
- It makes explicit the process of enquiry through which knowledge emerges
- It links new knowledge with existing knowledge

Action research differs from other research as:

- It requires action as an integral part of the research process itself
- It is focused by the researcher's professional values rather than methodological considerations
- It is necessarily insider research in the sense of practitioners researching within their own professional actions

Kember (2000) agrees with McNiff *et al.* that Action Research differs from other modes of research in that it aims for the introduction of change and refinement of practice based upon experience. A model which closely parallels the cyclical action research spiral is that proposed by Kolb and Kolb (2005) who defines four stages; experience-reflection-abstraction-experimentation in an Experiential Learning Cycle. Kolb's model suggests that a participant has a concrete experience, then reflects on the experience and follows with the formation of abstract conceptualizations before finally experimenting with the new knowledge i.e. applying the knowledge.

In an Action Research approach, the reflective researcher is at the centre of the process. In beginning their research, practitioner-researchers should ask the question 'How can I improve my practice?' To answer this question requires that the researcher considers how they understand their practice and how their view of their practice is situated within the context of their ontological and epistemological assumptions. The action research cycle and the methodology of enquiry contributes at a micro level to the researcher's understanding of their practice and the improvement of that practice and also makes a contribution at a macro level to the general body of knowledge.

According to Carr and Kemmis (1986: 34) 'thought and action are dialectically related in praxis'. So that action is taken as a result of reflection, and, reflection on the action taken influences the original thinking that informed or drove the action in the first place thus resulting in a new mind-set which drives modified action. This interaction of theory (thought) and practice (action) also features in research by McNiff *et al.* (2000) and was central to the current research. Action Research recognizes and assumes that people will change over time – the researcher, undertakes the journey with the expectation of changing both their world view and their practices. This requires a critical engagement with their own work practices. The researcher is at the centre of the action research process is very clearly not the 'all-knowing outside expert' but both subject and object of the research.

Kemmis and McTaggart (2007) further develop the concept of 'participatory action research' as a social process. They hold that the 'subjects' of participatory action research undertake their research to study, reframe and reconstruct social practices, and argue that if practice is realised in the social interactions between people, then changing practice is a social process.

Participatory action researchers ... consider how, by changing the ways in which they participate with others in these practices, they can change the practices themselves, their understanding of these practices, and the situations in which they live and work. Kemmis and McTaggart (2007: 280)

This work aligns well with the concept of participatory action research as a reflexive process helping me to investigate my practice within the context of my work and to incorporate my experiences, observations and views on my actions, as well as the experiences, observations and views of others involved in, and affected by, my practice

in order to transform that practice. This research is undertaken within the context of my own practice but seeks to resonate beyond the individual and to yield value for a broader practice domain. Participatory action research aims to reach out beyond the specifics of a particular situation and to explore through a number of different perspectives how practices can be more generally transformed. It is aimed at transforming both theory and practice.

In attempting to 'map' action research Marshall (2011) acknowledges that action research is a term applied to a richly diverse range of approaches. She identifies the common thread through this diversity as concern for practice and reflection with potential for change. Marshall offers a framework based on the spheres of influence of the inquiry based on first, second and third person action research but goes on to acknowledge that these inquiry processes are usually interwoven and can contribute to an awareness-raising and potential for practice developments impacting on a wider sphere. Altricher *et al.* (2002) recognise that action research is inclusive in its relationship with many other research frameworks. They consider that:

- *action research is about people reflecting upon and improving their own practice*
- *by tightly interlinking their reflection and action; and*
- *making their experiences public to other people concerned by and interested in the respective practice.* Altricher *et al.* (2002: 128)

In seeking to undertake an informed inquiry into my practice as the director of a collaborative change management project I seek to observe and reflect on my actions through the lens of a review of relevant literature and a consideration of research mechanism. These observations and reflections lead to revised plans and changed actions in the spiral of action research as described by Zuber-Skerrit (2001). Further informed by my research and observations I seek the views of the direct participants in the collaborative project in order to inform not just my own actions in a new spiral but to draw conclusions that are applicable to similar change management projects within this context generally.

Justification of an action research approach

I chose an action research approach as it clearly aligned with my role as a practitioner-researcher and my research question, elaborated on below, which sought to explore

and transform my own practice in a way that could make contributions to practice generally. Action research facilitated the inclusion of a number of different 'voices'. The first person inquiry incorporated my own inquiring approach to my own practice, including my assumptions, purpose and meaning and my ways of relating and acting. This interpretive flexible approach is somewhat in contrast to my previously-held, positivist perspective and demonstrates the evolution of my own perspective into one which values the inclusion of the experiences, perceptions and realities of a variety of participants. This approach to the epistemology of action research sees myself, as the research instrument, leveraging collaboration, participation and critical reflection from others and, through this, seeking to develop meaning and understanding that can be of use to others.

This choice of 'action research' facilitated the reflective consideration of practice and the aspiration for the development of practice generally. It recognised the social context within which practice is practiced and experienced and made provision for the inclusion of participants. It allowed transformation of theory and practice and recognised the complex interlinked relationship between them in which neither is preeminent. Action research is not something that is undertaken or *done* by a researcher but rather a journey that involves the researcher at the core and is *experienced by* the researcher in the process contributing to the researchers evolving world view, knowledge, skills and competence.

As a practitioner researcher, an action research approach integrates systematic informed inquiry, critical reflection and strategic action in a unique way. It aligns and integrates the research and the action and *...rejects the concept of a two-stage process in which research is carried out first by researchers and then in a separate stage the knowledge generated from the research is applied by practitioners* (Somekh, 1995: 343).

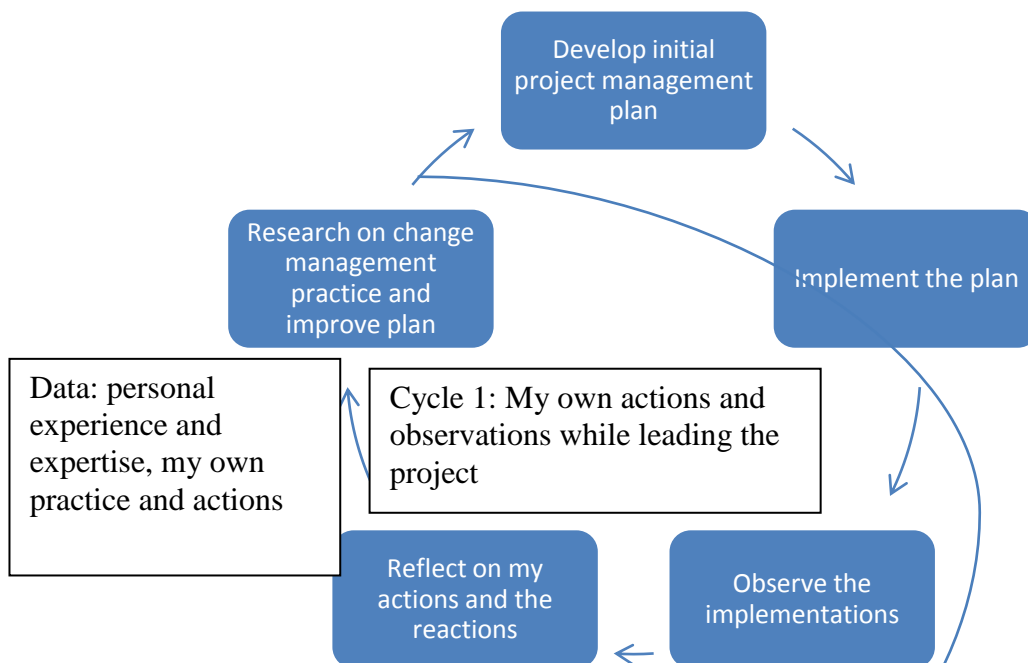
As project leader, I was immersed in the work I did not have the possibility of extracting myself from the work to research it through the dispassionate eyes of a researcher. The work centred on my practice and I needed to research it through my practice therefore an Action Research approach was more appropriate than others potential options such as case study, ethnography or discourse analysis.

Action Research Cycles

There are numerous ways of depicting action research but it is usually seen as a series of cycles based on stages:

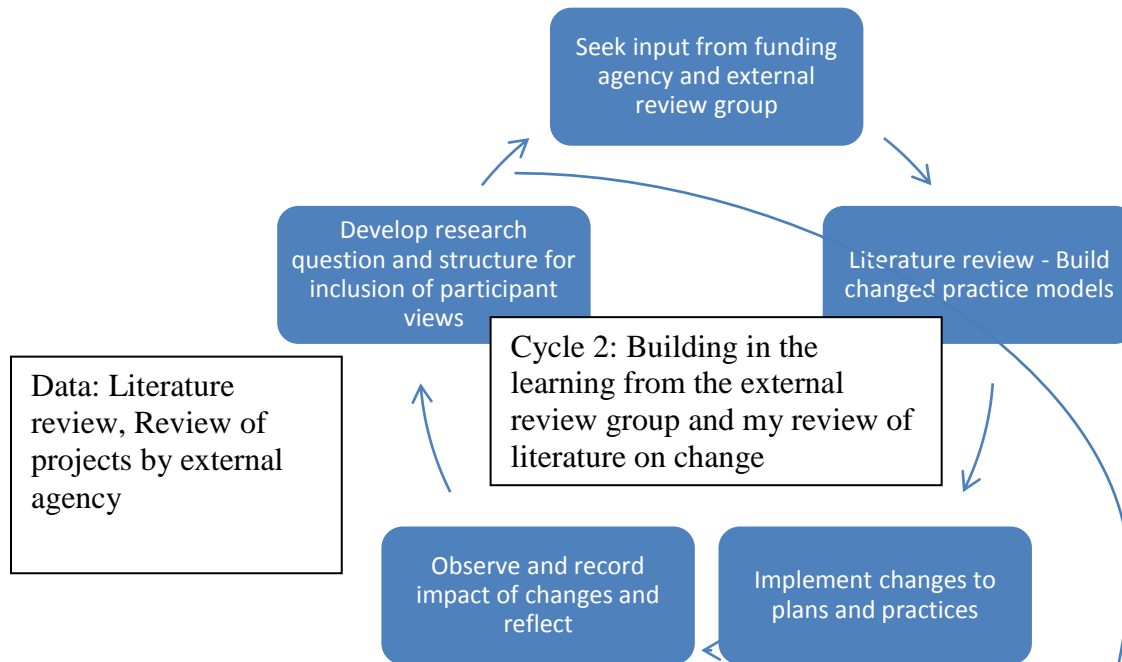
- Develop a plan
- Act to implement the plan
- Observe the action and reaction and collect the data
- Reflect on the action and the data and redevelop a plan.

While these are offered as the stages in most literature on the subject it is also widely recognised that the 'real-world' nature of the work means that a messy reality is often the experience of the action researcher. In this case, the Action Research approach can be viewed in a cyclical way with a series of stages being evident. Each stage involved action and collection of information, reflection on the data collected and the impacts of the actions leading to changed action. The linked diagrams below are an attempt to depict the work and the various sources of data primary and secondary which are included in the overall reflection and analysis and which contribute a rich tapestry from which the resultant framework for change is informed and evolves.

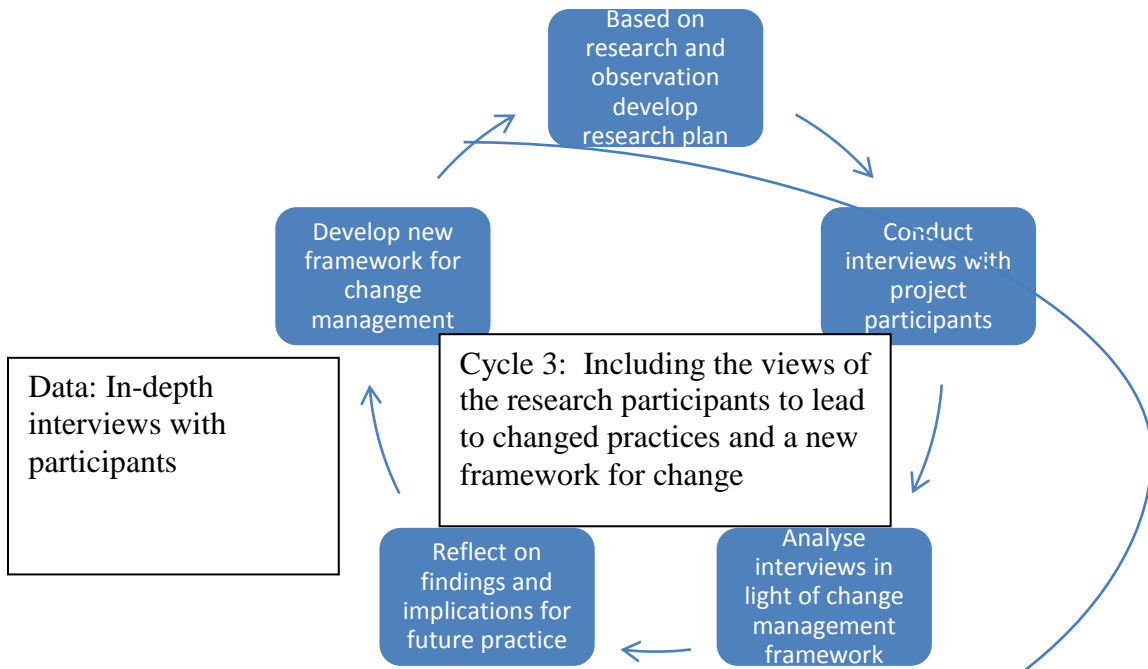


I began to lead the *Education in Employment* project based on the knowledge and experience that I had at that time and at an early stage I found that my actions did not have the desired outcomes in terms of project output etc. I

needed to consider the complexity of this particular change management task and set it within a more informed context. Based on my own observations and reflections some of my initial practices were changed and I developed a research approach to my practice which was supported and developed through the professional doctoral pathway.



Building on the external review of projects available through the funding agency and a review of extant literature I was able to reflect in a better informed way on the change management process and to consider a framework which might support that process. This in turn directly impacted on my own practice at that stage and resulted in the development of a structure through which the participants' views might be included in developing a new framework.



In-depth interviews allowed the collation of valuable information from the research participants which directly impacted on my own practice and actions but which also contributed to the development of a framework which will support the management of large collaborative change management projects into the future. Details on the interview data collection and analysis stages are included in Chapter 4 with particular attention paid to the collection, analysis and interpretation of the interview data.

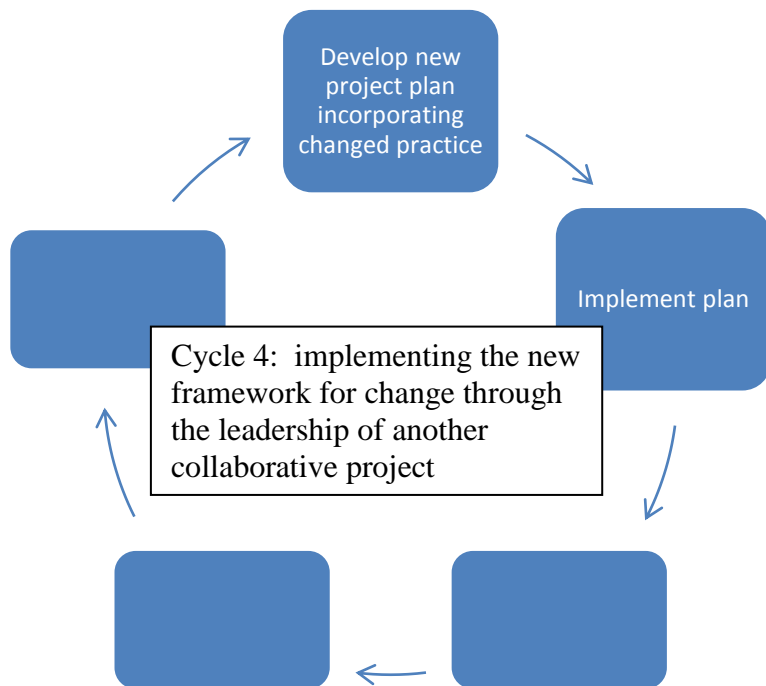


Figure 7: Action Research Cycles

Looking at the work in this way as a series of interlinked cycles of inquiry it becomes even clearer that the practice and the research are inherently linked and inseparable and that the action research approach is appropriate as it:

- Uses action as an integral part of the research;
- Allows the practitioner to research into their own professional activities;
- Aims to improve practice in the workplace;
- Helps managers to critically examine their own beliefs and practices;
- Helps to implement change effectively;
- Views managers as participants in the change process;
- Is problem focused and context specific. (French, 2009: 189)

It also became clear that the action research cyclical arrangement does not come to an end with the completion of this project but rather that the researcher, and the researcher's practice and worldview have been changed and this will lead to changes in the way all future activities will be approached.

The development of my own viewpoint was facilitated through the research process and in particular through my review of relevant literature and my reflection on possible research paradigms, approaches and methodologies. Having moved from the practice realm through the theoretical realm I was also able to develop a conceptual framework which informed and structured the inquiry that I would undertake in the empirical realm. This formed the basis of the empirical research which was undertaken in the form of second-person inquiry by investigating the views of the significant actors involved in the change management mechanisms and processes. The third person part of the research picture stemmed from the first and second person work and involved me as the individual researcher at the centre of the process distilling the research findings, identifying themes into a generally applicable extension to learning, knowledge and practice. Through this integration of first, second and third person inquiry the Action Research work gains integrity and relevance (Coughlan 2007). The reflexive and recursive nature of the process is depicted in Figure 8 below, showing the research spiral and its interrelated stages with the 'I' at the centre as described by McNiff *et al.* (2000).

The realisation is that I as the practitioner must work to complete the leadership task that I have undertaken and must also strive as a researcher to better understand and to explore my leadership actions 'in action' in order to contribute to an improvement in my

own practice and a contribution to practice generally as it applies to these complex change management roles. The practice cannot stop while the research is undertaken – the practice and research are intertwined and inseparable.

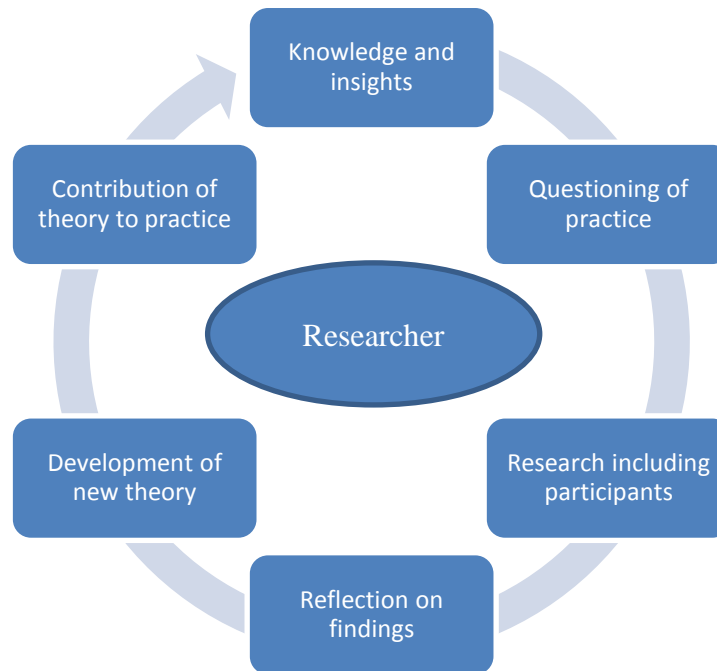


Figure 8: Overview of Current Research Perspective

The Current Research Question

The research question posed in Chapter 2 is revisited here in light of the consideration of the knowledge that is sought and the selection of an appropriate research approach and research methodology.

How can I use my leadership of this cross-organisational change initiative to contribute to the design and leadership of these initiatives in the future?

In the particular change management processes in higher education the researcher is the primary actor and change agent. The knowledge sought is related to the impact of the steps taken to bring about the changes sought in order to derive learning on a novel collaborative change management process and in order to interrogate and improve personal practice and organizational practice in the management of such processes.

Aims of the Research Project

The research is undertaken to identify optimum practice in the management of innovative collaborative change initiatives in Irish third level education leading to sustainable change. It is a study rooted in practice and action. Novel collaborative change initiatives in third level education have been undertaken, led by the researcher. The current work involves observing and reflecting on these change initiatives through the views of the major change agents involved and extracting from the experiences and views a blueprint for practice in future initiatives.

By exploring and investigating the impacts of the various initiatives, and particularly by investigating the change processes and mechanisms used and probing the success of the activities in the context of innovative collaborative change initiatives, a valuable contribution can be made in the form of a Framework for Collaborative Change processes in third-level providers in Ireland. This research is rooted in action and reflection – through the actions taken, the analysis of the experiences and views of the various actors in the process and reflection on the findings, knowledge is generated to guide new actions. This is the essence of an action research approach.

In this Research project the aims were:

- To develop my own critical reflection skills in the context of my practice as project leader through the professional doctorate pathway
- To put my learning in a theoretical framework through a literature review and the development of a research question
- To explore the experiences of the change agents involved in this project
- To distil my observations and reflections into new practice at a personal level
- To develop the research findings into a usable framework for change with relevant for the leaders of similar projects in the future

Having conducted a literature review and considered a number of different possible research approaches it is clear that a positivist approach is not suitable in this case as the researcher and the context of the investigation cannot be extracted from the investigation itself. A more holistic approach is required as I seek to examine how my practice is experienced and the important reality will be what those involved imagine it to be (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975). A phenomenologist's approach to research is to focus on how we put together the phenomena we experience in such a way as to make sense of the world and, in so doing, develop a worldview. This worldview is coloured

by our previous experiences and our situation and this will be the backdrop to our future actions. This approach is most relevant in this case as the research is situated within complex organisations and the most important findings that are sought are the views of the significant decision makers, actors and change agents within those organisations. This consideration of the nature of the knowledge sought and epistemological background contributes to the action research design chosen.

My overall research journey, then, is represented by the Figure 9 below. A transition from the practical to the theoretical realm undertaken through exploration of research methodology, review of seminal literature and development of research approach facilitated the development of a conceptual framework through which research data could be gathered and interpreted with assurance and validity. The empirical research stage is in the form of a systematic informed enquiry process involving capturing relevant information from the main actors in the Higher Education change initiative who were themselves change agents within their different organizations. In recognition of the complexity of the change process and of the practice domain within which the changes are sought and the project stages are enacted, the views and experiences of the research participants has been collected through a qualitative process in the form of semi-structured in-depth interviews. This process allowed the researcher to take advantage of the access that the work has afforded to influential individuals within higher education and policy-forming organisations in Ireland.

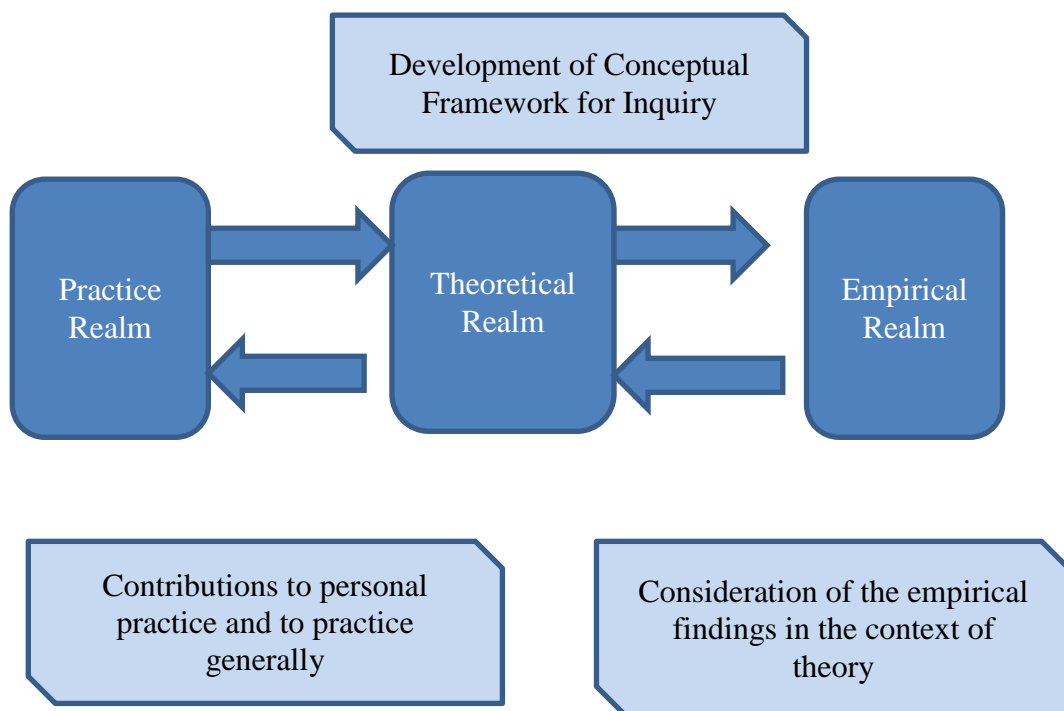


Figure 9: Representation of Full Research Journey

My own research journey began in the practice realm wherein I operated as a professional practitioner leading a change initiative. It was only through the process of engagement with the Professional Doctorate programme that I began to develop a conceptual framework through a questioning of my world view and a consideration of what I could learn about my practice and why I might want to learn it. I see this stage as a passage through the theoretical realm which yielded an informed conceptual framework within which I could draft an empirical approach. This then was a journey of informed inquiry. Reflection on, and interpretation of, the empirical findings and determination of validity again required a passage through the theoretical realm and consideration in light of the conceptual framework with an awareness of underlying assumptions and perspectives. The phenomena that I seek to understand and explain include my own actions in leading a change initiative and my informed reflections on those actions; in this way my own practice is central to the inquiry. I also seek to understand and explore the multiple perspectives of the others involved in the change initiative. A combination of these multiple perspectives and my own emergent epistemological view allowed me to identify questions and seek answers to questions in relation to my own practice as the major change agent and leader of a major collaborative change initiative, and in a more generalizable form, to seek improvements to practice in terms of the specification and leadership of collaborative change initiatives in higher education. These questions are rooted, not exclusively in the practice domain, but, in the transition through the theoretical realm. It is clear to me now that these questions could not have been formed without the development of a questioning process into not just my actions and results of those actions in the practice realm but a clarification of my ontological values and an understanding of why I wanted to seek the understanding and explanations that I sought. Understanding the unique nature of the circumstances in which I was leader of a large collaborative change initiative and realizing, on reflection, the valuable opportunity that was afforded me to explore not only that the initiative achieved its targets but to ask questions about:

- my leadership practice
- the experience of the participants
- how the initiative was formulated,
- if that was the best way to achieve success,
- how the participants experienced the process, their part in it and my part as leader,

- how best to structure and lead such initiatives based on the existing structures available through a review of the extant literature

In order to develop my understanding of the phenomena under investigation, I needed to develop a toolkit of research and investigation techniques and to select the appropriate methods to unearth the most relevant and useful data. I gave some consideration to use of questionnaires, surveys and statistics, with which I would have been most familiar; however given my role as the main change agent I had an opportunity to gain access to a number of key individuals who had the potential to provide key insights into the collaborative change process. In order to access as rich as set of information as possible and to provide a unique window into the perspectives of the various participants, I decided to consider the use of the in-depth interview technique.

The in-depth Interview

The long interview gives the opportunity to step into the mind of another person, to see and experience the world as they do (McCracken, 1988). It is usually considered as a qualitative research technique where the researcher asks the respondent a set of structured or unstructured questions (Saunders *et al.*, 2009). King (2004) argues that the goal of qualitative research interviews is, therefore, to see the research topic from the perspective of the interviewee and to understand how and why they come to have this particular perspective. By granting the interviewee opportunity to talk freely about events, beliefs and observations relating to the overall topic, the interview can uncover the complex personal framework of beliefs and values of the respondents.

According to Burgess (1982), the in-depth interview is a conversation in which the researcher encourages the informant to relate, in their own terms, experiences and attitudes that are relevant to the research problem. Easterby-Smith *et al.* (2002) suggest that one of the main reasons for conducting qualitative interviews is to understand how individuals construct the meaning and significance of their situations, from the complex personal framework of beliefs and values which they have developed over their lives in order to help explain and predict events in their world.

Researchers must, therefore, be able to conduct interviews so that the opportunity for these insights to be gained is present. Failure to achieve this could result in a

superficial exchange of information, which might have been better and more cost effectively achieved via a questionnaire (Bryman and Bell, 2003). However, in balancing the free-ranging and 'open' approach, the interviewer must also ensure that the interview relates to the research question while remaining flexible enough to follow lines of enquiry as they arise. In order to ensure that the material collected from different interviewees relates to the research question and is comparable and may be usefully analysed a semi-structured approach was adopted here. The interviews were broadly guided through an interview guide.

The Interview Guide

An interview guide is a list of questions or issues that are to be explored in the course of an interview. The interview guide provides topics or subject areas about which the interviewer is free to explore, probe, and ask questions that will elucidate and illuminate that particular subject, allowing for flexibility in conducting the interview (Bryman and Bell, 2003). Perhaps the most fundamental use for the interview guide is to serve as a basic checklist during the interview to make sure that all relevant topics are covered and to act as a sort of checklist that can be referred to when deciding what to turn to next as the interview proceeds. [The interview guide developed trialled and adopted for use in this case is included in Appendix A of this report.](#)

The interviewer is thus required to adapt both the wording and sequence of questions to specific respondents in the context of each actual interview as it occurs. According to Patton (1990), the interviewer then remains free to build a conversation within a particular subject area, to word questions spontaneously, and to establish a conversational style, but with the focus on a particular predetermined subject. King (2004) believed that the primary advantage of an interview guide is that it can help to make sure that the interviewer has carefully decided how best to use the limited time available in an interview situation. The interview guide helps make interviewing different people more systematic and comprehensive by delimiting the issues to be discussed in the interview (Patton, 1990). It also assists the interviewer in making connections between different parts of the interaction. While it is clear that interviews are time-consuming and expensive they allow access to valuable information about motives, expectations, experiences and attitudes that are difficult to collect by any other means. The development of an interview guide to allow a flexible but repeatable structure to be placed on the interview will facilitate both the conduction of the interview and the analysis of the findings.

During the interview the guide can act as a useful tool for the researcher but it should not distract attention from the respondent. It should not be too detailed or lengthy. While the guide can serve as a checklist to ensure that all desirable topics are covered it should not represent a rigid structure or sequence which must be adhered to. The interviewer should be free to follow or lead the conversation in a free-flowing way without losing focus on the specifics of the investigation (Patton, 1990).

The Interview Process

The interview should be conducted in a communication style as close to a natural conversation as possible. Spontaneous communication should be possible and encouraged within the predefined parameters of the research interests. The atmosphere should provide a safe and comfortable environment within which a rapport can be established and respondent's cooperation maintained. Appropriate opening questions can be chosen to establish a trusting exchange. During the course of the interview the researcher should adopt the role of attentive listener, providing an appropriate and encouraging response to the respondent's contributions.

By responding to and returning to markers in the conversation the researcher can reassure the respondent that the entirety of their views and experiences are important in the context of the research. Markers are passing references to views or feelings that occur naturally in the course of a conversation. Probing techniques that investigate a particular response more deeply are especially useful. It is also necessary to use particular techniques to curtail responses where they are not relevant to the research question. This requires a delicate judgement but can be achieved through the cessation of signals that encourage the respondent by ceasing to nod, or offer new questions for instance.

The Interviewer-Respondent Relationship

According to McCracken (1988) it is important to find the right balance between formality and informality in the interview setting. A certain level of formality in relation to presentation, timekeeping and the other logistical arrangements pertaining to the interview can ensure that the respondent is encouraged to trust the researcher and is reassured in relation to confidentiality and professionalism on behalf of the researcher in dealing with the information. On the other hand, informality supports the view that the researcher is involved and is capable of appreciating the complexities of the

respondents' worldview. Adapting the formality of the approach according to the situation and the subjects of the investigation will be important in ensuring a successful research interaction (Marvasti, 2004).

While detachment and lack of personal involvement is considered to contribute to objectivity in a positivist research approach, closeness to the respondent and empathy with their position are essential elements of qualitative research. This closeness and involvement are necessary to gain the required level of understanding and to facilitate the interpretation of the findings and the generation of new knowledge (Patton, 1990).

Recording of the interview

Some form of recording of qualitative interviews is essential if the information uncovered is to be revisited and reflected upon by the researcher. This generally means that some form of audio recording is usually employed (King and Horrocks, 2010). In practice, the researcher needs to consider the impact of the recording device itself on the interview process and on the respondent within the process. Any reluctance or reservation can usually be addressed by stressing the confidentiality of the participation in the research. As well as facilitating the accuracy of the data collected in the interview process, recording also ensures that the researcher is able to be more attentive to the subject. Recording does not entirely remove the need for note-taking; however, as note taking can be useful for the researcher in directing the conversation and identifying markers or opening new conversational topics (Patton 2004).

Validity of the Research

In the traditional positivist research approach the research data generated is considered valuable if it is valid and reliable. Although there are no specific tests which can be utilized to prove the validity of a qualitative research data set there are some guidelines for the process that can prove useful. Herr and Anderson (2005) refer to criteria such as credibility or workability in terms of how the research can be viewed as believable and useful by others. In action research the challenge is to demonstrate changes undertaken within the systems and to provide evidence of the evaluation of those changes in terms of the improvements attained and sought.

Validity or reliability in a qualitative research project can be understood as a process through which the researcher gains the confidence of the research participants,

stakeholders and the reader in the outcome of the research. It is the undertaking of a process of collaborative discovery rather than the search for a single truth (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006).

After the Interview

The period after the interview is critical to the rigour and validity of qualitative methods. This is a time for guaranteeing the quality of the data. The first thing to be done after a recorded interview is to check the recording device to make sure it was recorded properly (Bryman and Bell, 2003). This period after the interview is a critical time of reflection and elaboration: 'it is a time of quality control to guarantee that the data obtained will be useful, reliable and valid' (Patton, 1990). Since the raw data of interviews are quotations, the most desirable kind of data to obtain is a full transcription of interviews. Although transcribing is time consuming, transcripts are enormously useful in data analysis, or later, in replications or independent analyses of the data (Bryman and Bell, 2003). In this case the interview data was fully transcribed as this lends itself well to organisation and analysis; however, the recorded data is also maintained for reference when much can be gained from inflection and punctuation on the recording that might be lost in a transcription.

Organising Qualitative Data for Analysis

The analysis of qualitative data is a creative process; there are no formulae, as might be the case in statistically driven research (Bryman and Bell, 2003). It is a process demanding intellectual rigour and a great deal of hard, thoughtful work (Patton, 1990). Many researchers after collecting qualitative data spend a great deal of time turning it into numbers or otherwise attempting to quantify it. They recognise that numbers have a seductive air and, sometimes, thinking politically of the acceptability of their findings, they gear their data to quantitative statements. Others argue that doing this spoils the richness of the data, often so painstakingly collected, and fails to give the holistic view so important in qualitative research (Easterby-Smith *et al*, 2008).

According to Miles (1979), the analysis of qualitative data is perhaps the most demanding and least examined aspect of the qualitative research process. The exact manner in which the investigator will travel the path, from data to observations, conclusions, and scholarly assertion, cannot and should not be fully specified McCracken (1988). The broad aim of analysis is to look for meanings and understandings according to Gaskell (2000). The investigator comes to this

undertaking with a sense of what the literature says ought to be there, a sense of how the topic at issue is constituted in his or her own experience, and an overall sense of what took place in the interview itself.

Coding is a useful technique in developing themes from qualitative research findings. Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest that coding constitutes the 'stuff of analysis' allowing one to 'differentiate and combine the data you have retrieved and the reflections you make about this information' (1994: 56). They argue that coding is a process that enables the researcher to identify meaningful data and set the stage for interpreting and drawing conclusions. Miles and Huberman (1994) describe codes as:

Tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study. Codes usually are attached to "chunks" of varying size — words, phrases, sentences or whole paragraphs, connected or unconnected to a specific setting. They can take the form of a straightforward category label or a more complex one (e.g. metaphor) (1994: 56).

They go on to suggest that codes can be used to retrieve and organise data by devising a system for categorising the various chunks, so the researcher can quickly find, pull out and cluster the segments relating to a particular research question, hypothesis, construct or theme (Miles and Huberman, 1994: 57).

In summary, the main goal of coding is to facilitate the retrieval of data segments categorised under the same codes. Coding in the current study was essentially indexing the interview transcripts and reducing the data to equivalent classes and categories. Segmenting and coding the data enabled the author to reflect on the data, to break the data apart in analytically relevant ways in order to lead toward further relevant questions. This coding procedure assisted the author to think creatively within the data and generated theories and frameworks for consideration.

The nature of qualitative interview data meant that data relating to one particular topic was not found neatly bundled together at exactly the same spot in each interview; therefore, sifting through the transcripts to find preliminary emergent themes was a slow process. In some cases the main themes selected are driven by the literature review, reflection on my own practice experience and experiences throughout the initiative, and the interview guide, in other cases themes emerged from the research participants themselves.

Coffey and Atkinson (1996), recognize that in conversational talk, when we segment the data by attaching codes, topics run into one another and there may be multiple issues to concern ourselves with simultaneously (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996: 37). When the author had decided which aspects of the data to tag with codes, the next decision to be made was what level of generality or details to use. In this case, I used codes of varying degrees of generality to provide links between particular segments of data and the categories that were used in order to conceptualise those segments. Strauss (1987) suggests that the process of coding is about asking oneself questions regarding the data, and those questions help to develop lines of speculation and hypothesis formation. He suggests that in the course of coding, a researcher takes a topic or according to Strauss a 'phenomenon' and attempts to identify its dimensions, its consequences, and its relationships with other phenomena.

According to Donalek and Soldwisch (2004) research is not truly phenomenological unless the researcher's beliefs are incorporated into the data analysis. Easterby-Smith *et al.* (2002) recognise that the large amounts of non-standard data produced by qualitative studies make data analysis problematic. The challenge is to reduce the volume of information, identify significant patterns, and construct a framework for communicating the essence of what the data reveals (Patton, 1990). According to Munhall (2001) the researcher should view the data from various perspectives, imaginatively explore alternatives, identify potential emerging themes, entertain other possible configurations and then create the essential description. The problem is that there are 'few agreed-on canons for qualitative data analysis, in the sense of shared ground rules for drawing conclusions and verifying their sturdiness' (Miles and Huberman, 1994: 16).

The next step was cross-case analysis which meant grouping together answers from different people to common questions and analysing different perspectives on central issues. As an interview guide approach was used, answers from different people were grouped by topics from the guide. The interview guide, therefore, provided a descriptive analytical framework for analysis. The author agrees with Patton (1990) who suggests that there is not typically a precise point at which data collection ends and analysis begins. In the course of gathering data, ideas about possible analysis occur; those ideas constitute the beginning of analysis and they are part of the record of field notes. When data collection had formally ended, analysis of the data began by organising analytic insights and interpretations that emerged during data collection.

Patton (1990) further suggested that 'a classification system is critical; without classification there is chaos. Simplifying the complexity of reality into some manageable classification scheme is the first step of analysis' (1990: 382). In this study, various categories emerged from the classification scheme which enabled the data to be coded. These codes were then used to retrieve and organise the data and enable the author to locate segments relating to a particular research question. From the data analysis in this study, the main themes emerged and the findings relating to these themes are presented and analysed in detail in Chapters Four and Five.

Ethical Considerations

Beattie *et al.* (2002) state that paying attention to ethical issues in research design is necessary for significant and relevant management research to be undertaken. The ethical considerations in undertaking the current research activity included consideration of the regulations and protocols extant within third-level organisations involved. The nature of the project is linked with the practices and attitudes to institutional reform. There are a number of stakeholders and viewpoints and these have potential to be conflicting. Initially permission to conduct the research was negotiated with my employer organization and the Higher Education Authority in Ireland who are the funding agency for the collaborative change initiatives for which the researcher has responsibility and which act as the vehicle for this research journey.

In the overall perspective, the project aim is to ensure that funding and resources within third-level colleges in Ireland are more effectively applied to ensure greater access to learning opportunities for all. In setting out this overall aim it is clear that the project has a social as well as organisational value. At this level, we can see that the ultimate beneficiaries are potential and actual learners, employers, Irish society, the Irish economy, the Department of Education and Science, the Higher Education Authority and the third-level education providers including the organisational managers and employees. It is clear that the research will have a social and economic value. Consideration was given to any potential detrimental impacts of the research.

The main participants in the research were individuals who act as change agents in third level institutions or in government bodies. In agreeing a set of terms and conditions of engagement with these research subjects it was made clear that their contributions would be coded throughout the research findings and publications to ensure that their identities and that of their institutions will remain confidential

throughout. This is precisely in line with the work that has been conducted under the change initiative to date. As this current research is based on a change initiative which has been underway for some time a significant relationship has been developed between the researcher and the research participants meaning that issues around trust, confidentiality and access were not expected and were not encountered.

Ensuring confidentiality was important to ensure that all participants engaged with the research activity in an open manner, confident in the knowledge that the information sought would not be used in a way that might lead to a conflict of interests with their own organisation in what is a competitive environment. This practice of ensuring confidentiality is extended to the dissemination activities where no single organization or individual is identifiable in any of the reporting activities or the archived information.

Another ethical consideration was the position, the views and the ideology of the researcher which must be considered in preparing an impartial approach to research and the recording and reporting of research data. In many ways, as an insider researcher a significant effort must be made to ensure that one's preconceptions are not imposed on the research and that research findings are viewed dispassionately and reported accurately. Being an insider researcher brings with it access to a significant range of confidential and sensitive information. In the case of the current research this included access to information from a number of institutions who were working collaboratively for the purposes of this particular change initiative but who are also natural competitors at another level. Having given the matter considerable thought it was clear that the potential ethical dilemmas could be avoided through careful handling of information and a clearly laid out approach to confidentiality.

Intellectual property and the 'ownership' of research findings present a potential ethical dilemma in some cases. In this instance the researcher's role within the organisation has direct responsibility for the management of the initiative to bring about desired changes in the organisations in question. A major part of that role is the dissemination of the change initiative activity throughout the wider academic community. There are, therefore, no intellectual property issues at play here. The funding agency and the organisations involved are committed to the publication of reports and findings arising from the work. The major cycle of this action research project which concerns the analysis and exploration of the effectiveness of the collaborative project approach is of considerable interest to the funding agency and to the institutions involved as it will help to direct future change processes.

Miles and Huberman (1994) developed an ethical framework which is echoed in the work of Bell and Bryman (2007) who identify eleven categories of ethical principles in management research. These principles are:

- Harm to participants
- Dignity
- Informed consent
- Privacy
- Confidentiality
- Anonymity
- Deception
- Affiliation
- Honest and transparency
- Reciprocity
- Misrepresentation

Throughout the research activity it was necessary to ensure that the research participants were fully informed in an open and transparent manner about the research activity and were clear as to the motivation of the researcher. In order to ensure that informed consent was clear and transparent, all of the research participants were provided with a consent form which they were asked to consider and sign in advance of the interview process. An example of the consent form is included as Appendix B of this report. The manner in which the research was conducted was such as to protect the dignity and privacy of the participants and care was taken to ensure that the research data and findings are not misrepresented in any way.

In much that is said about interviewing, the stress is on the need to assure respondents of confidentiality, on using and developing the social skills (verbal and non-verbal) which we have all used at some time or other to convince others that we want to hear what they have to say, take it seriously, and are indeed hearing them (Jones, 1985). While the interviews provided a rich tapestry of information which lent itself to the extraction of direct quotations, care must be taken to ensure that such quotations are carefully chosen and edited to ensure non-traceability to individuals in the presentation of the data gathered, through the allocation of letters of the alphabet and numbers to each respondent's interview. In this research the researcher has had the experience of

working with the individuals and organisations concerned and has been able to build trust and confidence which laid the groundwork for meaningful exchanges.

Overview of the research stages

The stages of the current research project are outlined in Figure 10 below.

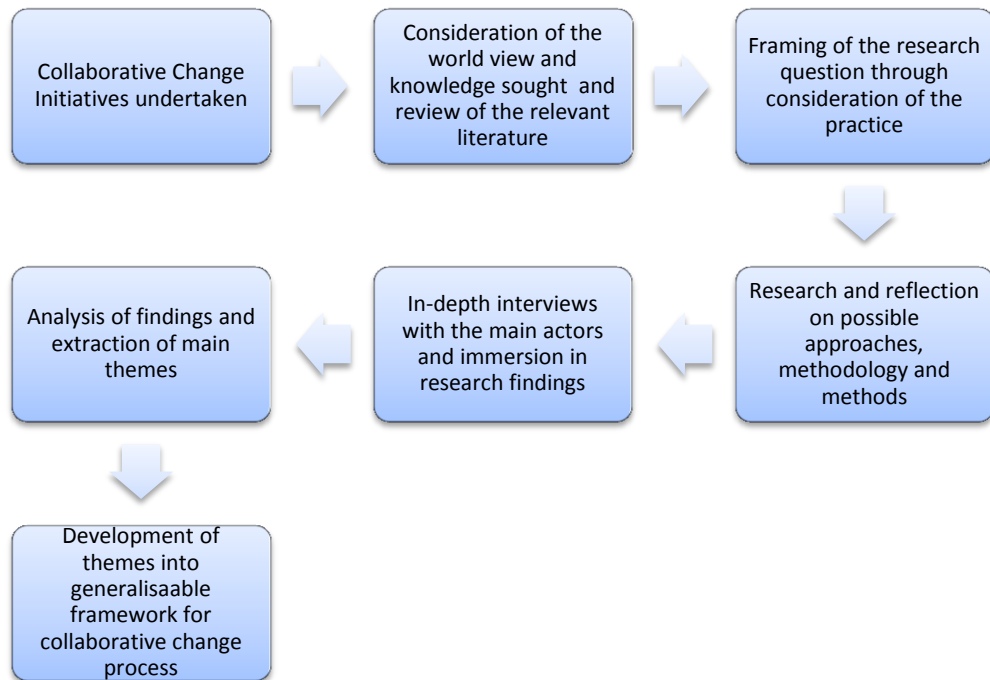


Figure 10: Overview of the Research Process

While leading innovative, collaborative change initiatives, consideration was given to how a research process could be developed to enable the researcher to explore her own practice in the leadership of such processes and to extend the learning to a more generalizable framework for change. Working through the stages of development of a research question and by gaining an understanding of my emerging ontological perspective I was able to separate my practice – in terms of my leadership role and the outcomes associated with that – from my research into that practice and my seeking a deeper understanding of my own awakening understanding, observations and reflections as well as those of the others involved. Through a process of research and reflection on knowledge frameworks and research paradigms a research question was formed and developed into an appropriate research approach. The work undertaken is detailed in Chapter 4 which follows.

Chapter 4 Project Activity and Findings

Introduction

This chapter presents the collection of the research data and the main inputs to the research process through an action research approach. It describes the change framework which was available at the outset of the project and also indicates the deficiencies in the existing framework when large cross-organisational collaborative change is sought. Some of the main activities undertaken in the change management initiatives are considered through the plan, do, observe, and reflect stages as described by Cohen *et al.* (2000). The actions undertaken and the reflection on the actions are then considered as the inputs to the next research stage which involves the development of a structure for the collection of rich data from the main change actors. In this chapter the actions undertaken are considered in depth and the main findings from the empirical research are collated and presented. The analysis of the findings and the development of the research output product are considered in Chapter 5.

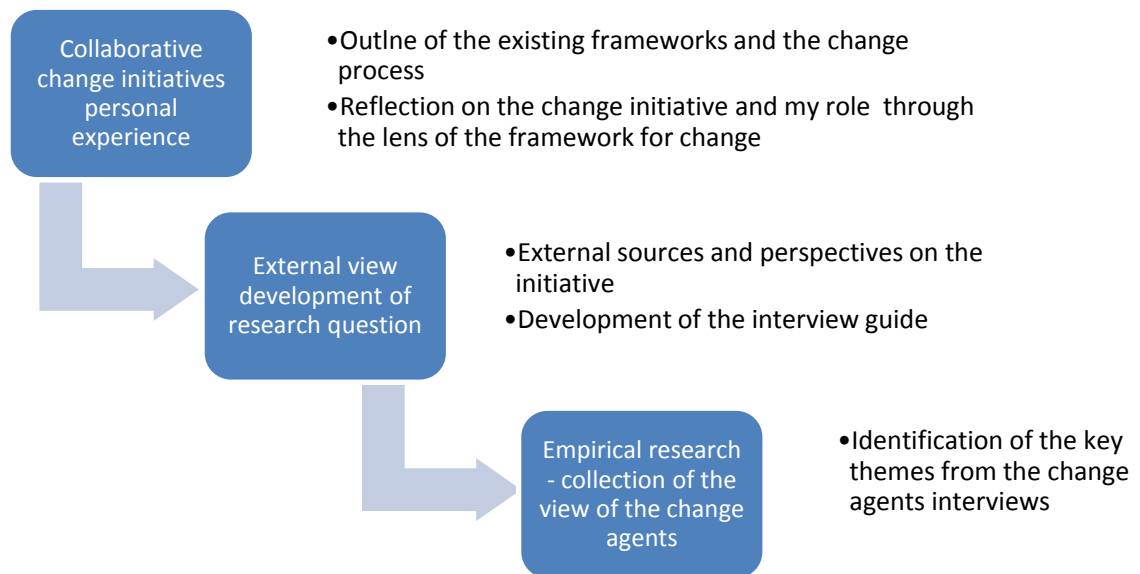


Figure 11: Chapter Map - Chapter 4

Change Management Initiative

This particular action research pathway is based on a change management initiative for which I was responsible and which was funded through the Irish Government's Strategic Innovation Fund. The Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF) was established by the Department of Education and Science in 2006 and administered by the Higher Education Authority (HEA). It is a competitively driven resource stream designed to stimulate and implement organisational transformation in higher education institutions. The fund is multi-annual predicted to amount to €510million over the period 2006-2014. SIF aims to support innovation and to foster collaboration between institutions competing for funding to:

- Incentivise and reward internal restructuring and reform efforts
- Promote teaching and learning reforms including enhanced teaching methods programme restructuring at third and fourth level modularisation and e-learning
- Support quality improvement initiatives aimed at excellence
- Promote access transfer and progression and incentivise inter-institutional collaboration in the development and delivery of programmes.
- Provide for improved performance management systems and meeting staff training and support requirements associated with the reform of structures and the implementation of new processes
- Implement improved management information systems

The collaborative nature of the funding mechanism has driven the development of new strategic alliances and has provided new impetus for enhanced quality and effectiveness within the sector. SIF has been an important element in the investment in, and reform of, Irish higher education institutions and in enabling them to meet the challenges presented by changing social and economic realities while building on their existing strength.

In developing a project proposal for SIF Cycle 1, Cork Institute of Technology (CIT) endeavoured to ensure that the submission should build clearly on existing leadership and strengths and align with CIT's mission statement and strategic plan. The resulting *Education in Employment (EIE)* initiative focused on the learning and development needs of those already in the workforce, through four distinct but linked strands.

- Recognition of prior learning
- Work-based and blended learning
- Progression routes and diversification opportunities for craft certificate holders
- Migrants and higher education in Ireland

In leading this initiative a review of the literature and my own experiences throughout led me to the conclusion that the change management structures and supports which were in existence at that time were not adequate for this type of complex collaborative cross-organisational approach.

Existing Change Management Framework

In approaching this leadership role, I sought to utilise the concepts of change management and leadership informed through the literature and through my own experiences to date. The structured process of change management from Kotter's (2007) and Lewin's work is clearly broadly applicable and generalizable to any particular change management initiative and this formed a starting point for my own consideration of the framework for the leadership of this change management initiative.

Taking into account the various aspects of the initiative and the considerations that I believed to be of most significance initially, I developed a view of the structures or framework outline which I would be required to utilize to effect the required changes which was informed through a consideration of the seminal works and a review of extant literature:

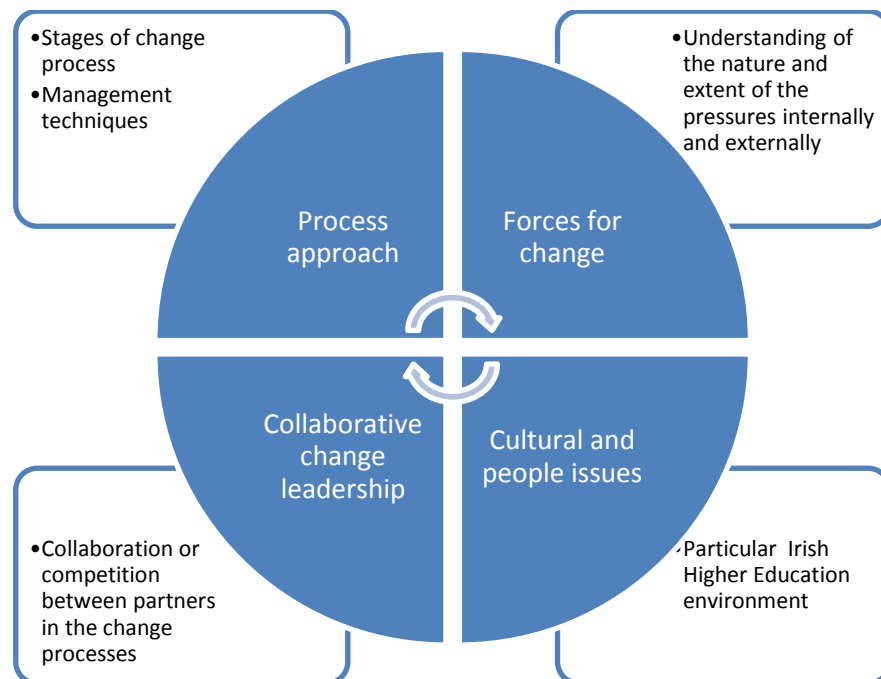


Figure 12: Change Management Considerations

Working through the process of the particular change initiative considered here, changes were sought in relation to processes and procedures relating to a number of different strands of activity. In all cases, the change processes concerned followed a particular outline structure.

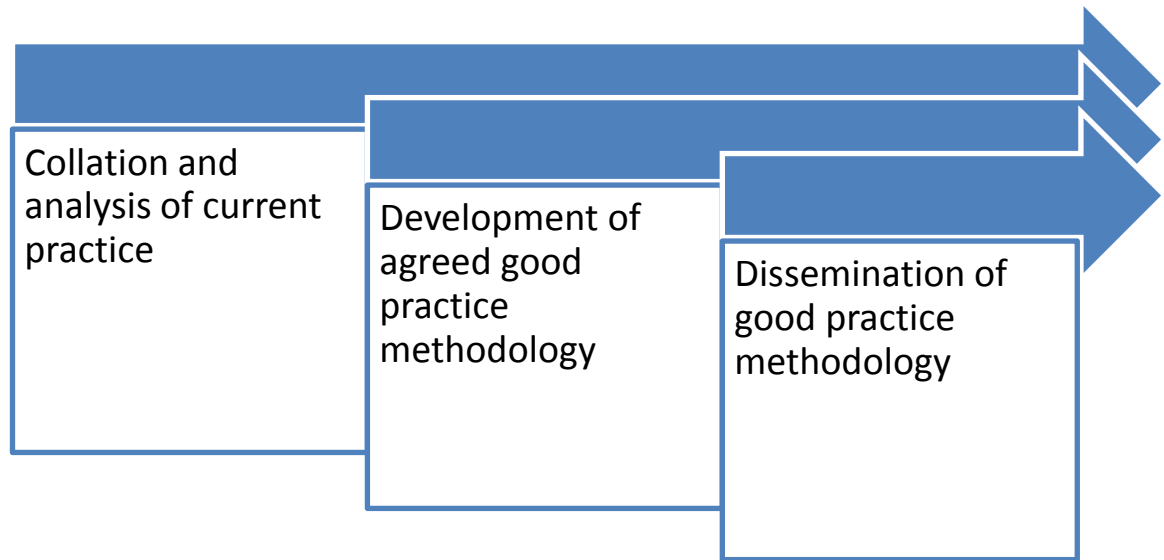


Figure 13: Collaborative Change Approach - Education in Employment

The overall collaborative change practice is illustrated above. This aligns well with Lewin's model of unfreezing, change and refreezing. It also recognised that a significant part of the unfreezing in this case is the investigation of existing practice which cannot be considered in isolation as the investigation process itself becomes an incentive for change and an impetus for action. My role as leader of the initiative required that I take responsibility for the overall outcomes and activities of the initiative but also that I lead the involvement of all of the institutions who were part of the process. I needed to constantly ensure the buy-in and involvement of all of the partners and to structure the activities so that they gained the maximum benefit from the full consortium.

The experience of this particular initiative is that the investigation stages became themselves the early stages of the change actions in an approach similar to that of Kotter. None of the extant literature related to the cross-institutional nature of this particular approach. The existing framework as I experienced it, lacked guidelines or supporting mechanisms for a change structure which crossed organisational divides. Considering the toolkit which was at my disposal as I began this challenge and, having an opportunity to review this in a reflective way from the perspective of my

current viewpoint, I conclude that while there was a considerable set of models for change to inform my activities there were also considerable deficits in both the models available and in my own practice and experience set.

Given my own professional training as an engineer and my experiences to date in leading research, projects and initiatives, I can now recognise my initial approach as a rational-linear one which focused on the outcomes and sought to use a task focused toolkit. I viewed the initiative as a linear process with considerable predictability and certainty.

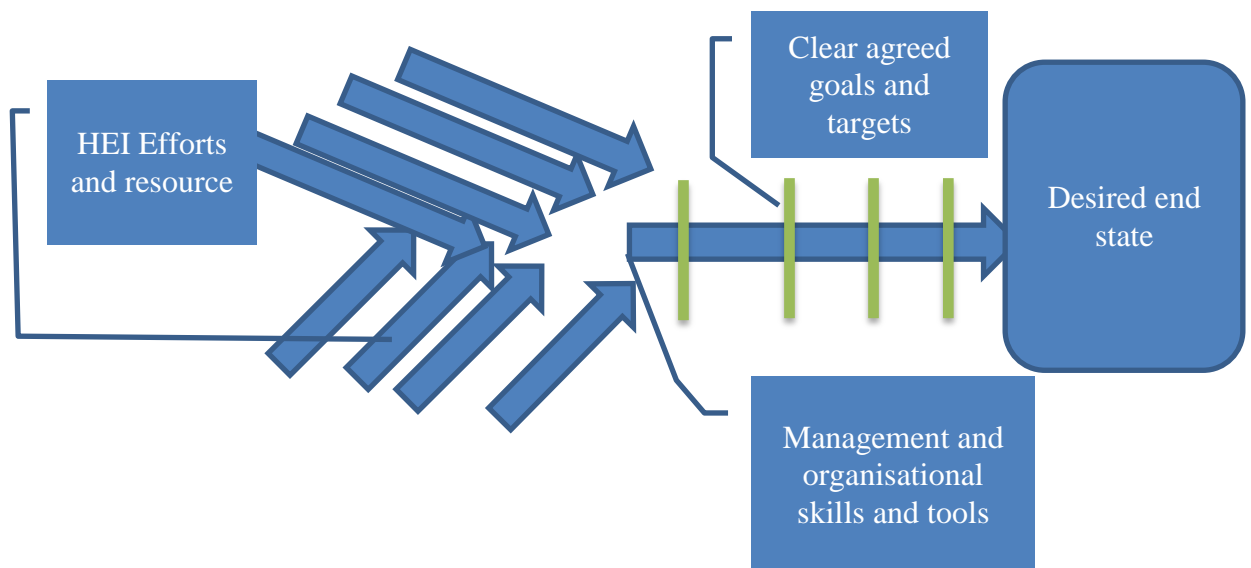


Figure 14: My Original Perspective

This is depicted in the perspective shown in figure 14 which attempts to illustrate my view of the harnessing of the various institutions' efforts in a planned and structured manner to move toward the desired end state through a series of pre-defined goals and targets using a set of existing management skills and tools. While there were a number of specific features of this particular endeavour which set it apart, it was the cross-organisational collaborative features that made it particularly unique. The change experiences and models reported in the literature and my own experiences to date supported this view in which a number of different participants could form a team which could effectively bring about change and reach a desired end state through a series of planned and managed stages in a linear manner.

To begin with, I drew on a staged model adapted from that of Kotter which identified clear steps in the change initiative. These stages were to act as milestones and as an overall guiding influence for me as the work progressed. At that stage I saw myself as the conductor of an orchestra composed of talented and willing performers. I believed that I knew the outcome that was required and I considered it a difficult, but satisfying, task to lead the performers through predictable steps towards a recognisable outcome.

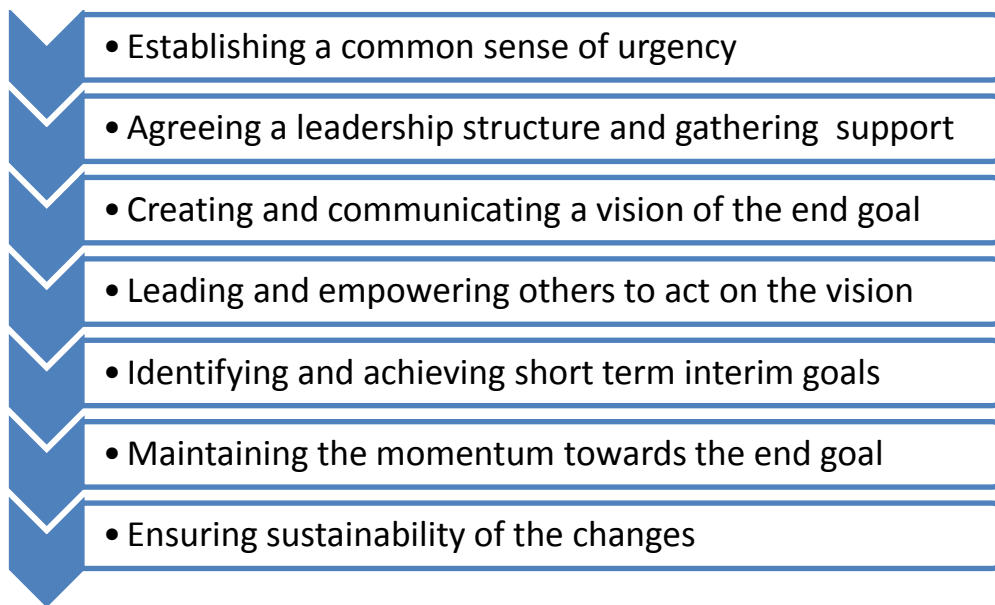


Figure 15 Outline Change Framework

Based on my experience and review of literature, the change management framework shown in Figure 15 was adopted. There is very little difference between this model and that of Kotter with the exception that in my case I have joined the steps 'Creating a vision' and 'Communicating a vision' as, within a collaborative initiative, I recognised that the vision would be created or validated through an open communication process and dialogue. This is the structure and the professional experience set and expectation, then, with which I approach the task.

The reality which this approach ignored was the complex context and environment within which each of the partner institutions operated. Without taking all possible parameters into account, I have attempted to represent the conflicting and aligning pressures which impacted on each organisation's main activities and on their participation in this endeavour in the following graphic. The illustration suggests that there are many simultaneous pressures and potential sources of tension acting on a

complex organisation and that these pressures and sources of tension are themselves interrelated and interdependent.

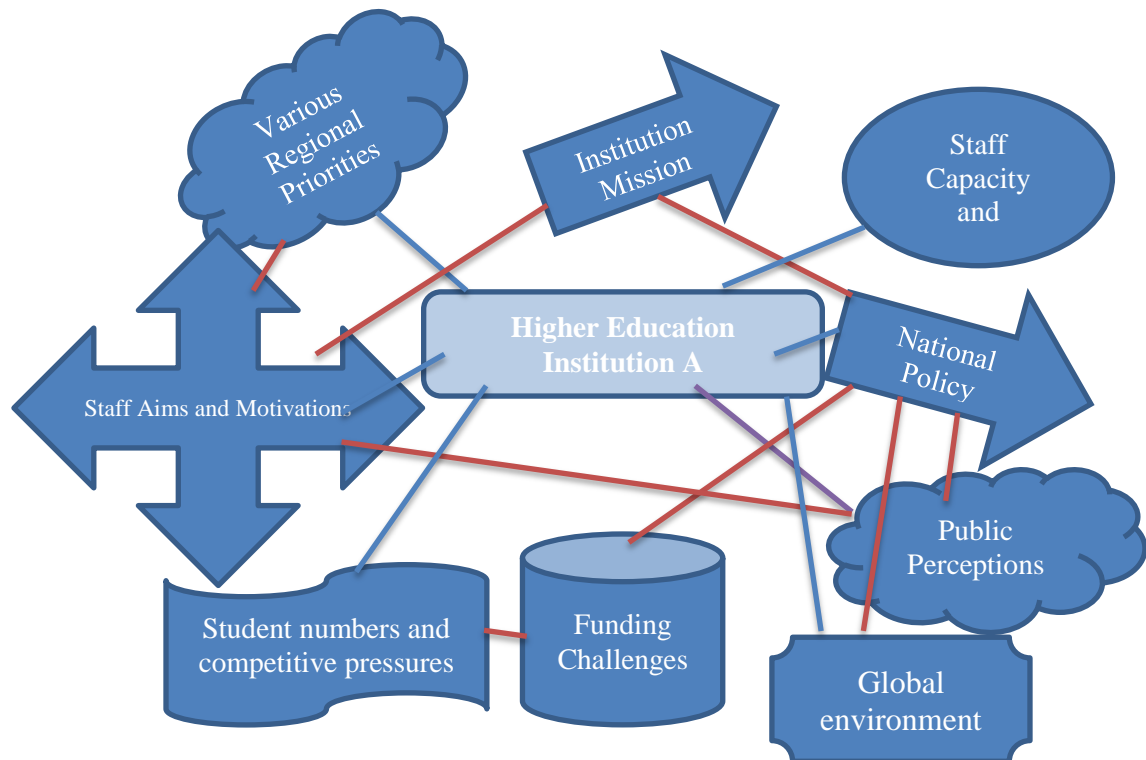


Figure 16: Higher Education Institutions - Complex Environment

This disparate and messy reality was replicated in each of the different partner institutions which lead to a mixed set of motivations and a mixed set of realities in which each project partner institution and each of the particular change agents representing those institutions operated. As the conductor of the orchestra, I, as project leader, began this journey without a real appreciation of how these conflicting pressures would impact on the work and on the participants. My focus was on the ACTIONS at that point and not on the RESEARCH. From the perspective of the change initiative and what I sought to achieve, a task and outcomes focused, action centred approach was an appropriate and sufficient response and would eventually have led to the outputs and outcomes sought by the funding agency. It was at a later stage in the journey that the opportunity to use this unique initiative and momentum as a vehicle for an action research investigation which would seek to explore and inform myself and my own practice and beyond became clear to me. This understanding of the opportunity for both personal growth and contribution to practice unfolded through the professional doctoral pathway.

Noting that I had an experience and practice base which leaned toward a linear rational approach and also that the existing research and change frameworks were deficient in addressing the complexity of the task at hand I can, with the benefit of hindsight and reflection, point to some of the main challenges encountered on the way. These particular challenges related to a number of aspects of the work and it was clear to me that, if this work is to make a generalizable contribution to the management of broad collaborative change initiatives in the future, the framework that arises from this work will need to address these issues.

The overall research question as developed in Chapter 2, related to the identification and development of optimum practice in the management of cross-organisational collaborative change initiatives in Irish third level education leading to sustainable change through an exploration

How can I use my leadership of this cross-organisational change initiative to contribute to the design and leadership of these initiatives in the future?

In terms of leading this collaborative change initiative across a number of organisations and revisiting the research question through the lens of my experiences, I encountered a number of specific challenges associated with the following themes.

- **My own practice-base and experiences** – I began the journey with a positivist approach to leadership and management.

I was task focused and I held a firm view that facts and measurements were the most important tools in leading change. My ontological position supported the view of the existence of a clear objective reality independent of social actors. While this position had served in the past it was severely challenged by the unfolding reality of the complex management role that I had undertaken

- **The scope and scale of the changes sought** – this was not a change sought within a single institution with recognisable boundaries. Rather these changes were to be effected collaboratively across nine different organisations with the aim of influencing the entire higher education system

It was apparent that there was no clear indication of an appropriate scale of approach to be taken under the Strategic Innovation Fund proposal mechanism. The initiatives funded ranged from those proposed by a consortium of as few as

two institutions to those involving as many as fourteen. The funding scale ranged from some hundred thousand euros to more than ten million euros. Specific planning, leadership and operational issues arise when assembling a meaningful consortium across a significant number of organisations. In addition there are specific issues relating to clarity of purpose and vision for complex endeavours which must be meaningful enough to attract funding and support from national agencies and yet must be translated into actions and activities which the various participant can relate to and achieve.

- **The spheres of influence within the organisations** – there were no direct reporting arrangements with the participants in the change process – they were employees of their own particular organisation and their involvement in the change initiative was often a small part of their role in their organisation

The structures in existence for collaboration were not sufficiently developed and not appropriate for this collective engagement or indeed for collaboration on as ambitious a scale as this. In response to the Strategic Innovation funding opportunity the staffing solutions sought by institutions ranged from the appointment of new external people on a contract basis to fulfil the roles established to the secondment of core members of senior staff with visible spheres of influence within the institutions. These widely differing solutions meant a complex matrix of involvement and led to significant challenges in ensuring that changes were centrally embedded within the participating institutions. The aim of the Strategic Innovation Fund initiative was to reform the higher education systems in relation to specific parameters. This systemic reformation was difficult to achieve and even more difficult to sustain. Where a decision was taken by institutions to assign the tasks of leadership of change or leadership of the institution's part in a collaborative change management process to a new hire obtained on a contract basis they were immediately cast into a situation which caused a conflict between their developing understanding of the organisation to which they now belonged and the overall cross-organisational project structure to which they were expected to make a contribution.

- **The maintenance of momentum and the development of a shared vision** among the participants to ensure that meaningful progress was maintained through persuasion, communication and influence.

While existing literature and experience pointed to the importance of communication and clarity of vision in the change management process it refers almost exclusively to change processes within a single identifiable organisation with clear boundaries. This particular challenge centred on a change process which would embrace a number of organisations and which would have wider application throughout the higher education sector generally.

- **The collection of meaningful information to be openly shared** within and among organisations who had never shared this information previously and who 'competed' for funding and for student numbers in the normal scheme of events

Where the existing literature refers to collaboration it is generally with respect to collaboration across sectors – such as collaboration between individual enterprises and individual academic institutions. There are no specific supports or guidelines to support the fostering of collaboration between higher education organisations in effecting collectively designed changes. Neither was there experience nor guidelines for the collation of information and data collection which had the potential to be as sensitive as this.

- **The development of a set of powerful outcomes** with the potential to impact on practice, decision making and policy setting throughout the entire higher education system

Through the leadership of the process I needed to ensure a set of meaningful outputs in the form of events, reports, papers, presentations, staff development workshops which would yield real outcomes in the form of policy and practice changes, more accessible education structures, improved capability and capacity. There was also the dual challenge of ensuring that the project activity, outputs and outcomes attained and maintained significant visibility at a national level in order to secure buy-in for the work at all levels.

These challenges would recur at different stages in the project timeframe and they were related to the main deficits of the existing change management structure in supporting the kind of change that was sought here.

In some cases these deficits in the pre-existing frameworks and structures for supporting change were evident at the outset and in other cases they arose as the work progressed. Some of these challenges resonate well with the Leadership for the

Common Good Framework presented by Crosby and Bryson (2005). Their Framework includes:

- Attention to the dynamics of a shared-power world
- Wise design and use of forums in which policy change is fostered
- Effective navigation of the policy change cycle
- Exercise of leadership capabilities

Crosby and Bryson (2005) state that while these elements of their framework are not a recipe for leadership success they do provide a structure for reflective practice in leadership aimed at tackling public problems. Throughout the work described herein my own personal experiences and reflections and in particular the insights of the other participants has contributed to the development of a framework for change which addresses the deficits that I experienced in the existing available structures and therefore makes a contribution to the support structure for other practitioners embarking on similar routes.

The following section outlines the detailed changes sought through this particular change initiative which acted as the vehicle for this action-research-reflection journey in order to set and illustrate the context within which the learning unfolded.

Education in Employment Outcomes and Objectives

The planned outcomes and objectives of each of the four strands are summarised below.

Strand 1: Work-Based Learning and Blended Learning (WBL)

Objectives

- Furthering the establishment of collaborative workplace-education partnerships to identify workforce upskilling needs and to develop education/ learning programmes to meet these needs
- Supporting the integration of work-based credit-earning learning into programmes, defined by learning agreements - jointly supervised and assessed by workplace and academic staff

Outcomes & Targets

- A report on current best-practice in the area of Higher Education–Workplace partnerships for the design and delivery of accredited programmes for the upskilling of workforces. The report will identify the critical success factors for

such partnerships and propose models for their implementation. Dissemination of the results of the above evaluation and research report findings

- Training and Development programmes for higher education staff for the support of learning in the workplace

Strand 2: Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

Objectives

- Further the standardisation of RPL policies and procedures in line with international best-practice.
- Development of a scalable approach to RPL where the cost per credit awarded decreases as the participation level increases. Embedding of RPL as a mainstream activity in all the schools/departments of the institutions

Outcomes and Targets

- Provision of training and development support in RPL for academic and administrative staff in participating institutions and within employer networks.
- Production of agreed guidelines and documentation (including on-line) for students, mentors and RPL assessors distinguishing the Advisory, Mentoring and Assessment roles.
- Publish agreed procedures and systems required to bring about the integration of RPL into admissions, accreditation and examinations procedures.

Strand 3: Progression Routes and Diversification Opportunities for Craftspersons

Objectives

- Support the development of pathways for apprentices into full-time Higher Certificate and Degree courses.

Outcomes and Targets

- Investigation and recommendation of generic principles for the development of user friendly and appropriate progression routes for craftspersons up to degree-level in engineering and related courses.

Strand 4: Education & Training Support for Non-Nationals in the Workforce

Objectives

- Conducting of a study of the experiences of non-nationals who have participated recently in the Irish third level system of education with a view to identifying the strengths, weaknesses and opportunities for improvement from their perspective.

Outcomes and Targets

- Report on “Non-Nationals in the Workforce”
- Seminar for staff in partner institutions on “Meeting the education needs of non-nationals in the workforce”

Change Management Structure

The participants in each of the separate strands of activity were different as the expertise and interest lay in different groupings within the partner higher education institutions. In general, the approach that I adopted as leader was to investigate the existing practice through a collaborative research tool, and to share that information openly within the group. This involved eliciting the support of the participants in gathering the information and practice setting details – giving them a sense of ownership of the outputs generated and fostering the teamwork. Following a period of reflection on practice and consideration of the outcomes required, the leadership role adopted was one of leading the group to a consensus on a good practice support structure which could be disseminated widely under each of the different strands of activity.

In the particular change management initiative in question, the nine collaborating institutions generally identified change agents familiar with the work under each of the particular strands who were to represent their institutions for the duration of the initiative. These change agents formed the collaborative team at the core of each of the change activities. The overall responsibility for the change initiative rested with myself as leader with responsibility for leading the change initiative and for reporting to the funding and policy making body on the output, outcomes and financial status. The change agents in the various institutions who collaborated on the separate strands of activity did so as part of the distributed initiative resources. They were mostly members of the senior staff of their institutions for whom involvement with the initiative was an additional or new short term role and not their core responsibility.

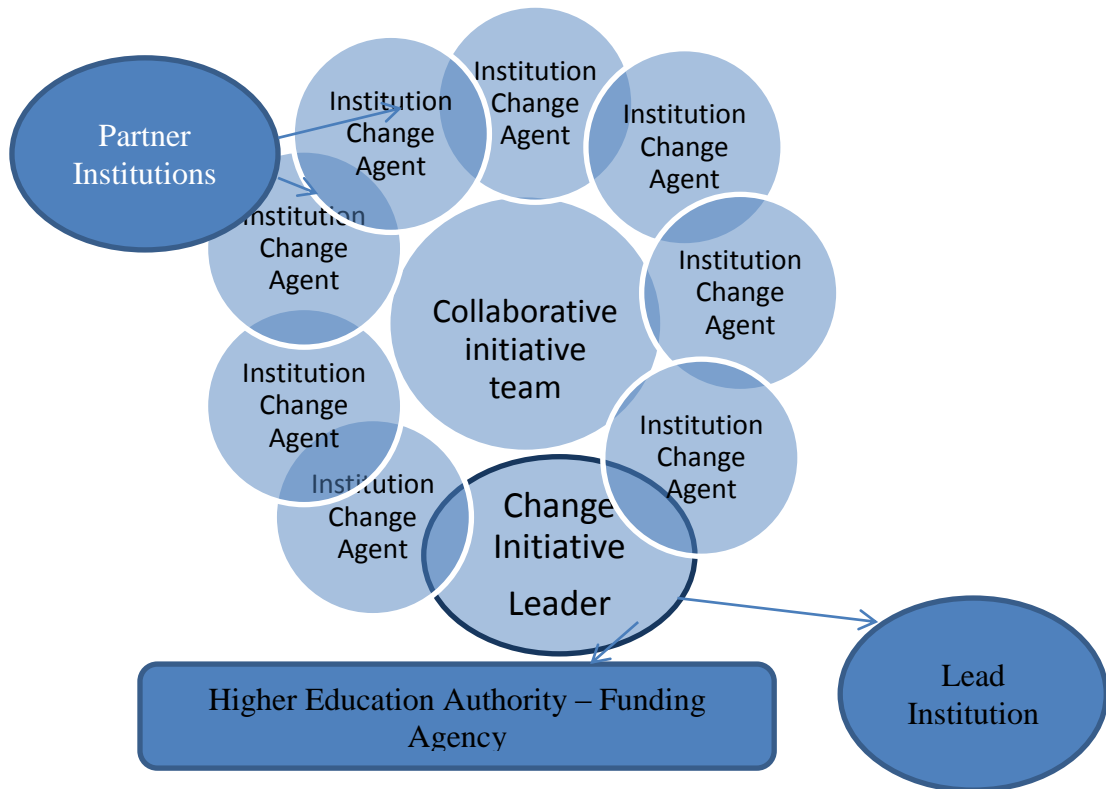


Figure 17: Change Agent Structure - *Education in Employment*

Figure 17 depicts the various institutional level change agents who represented their institutions on the separate change initiative teams as well as the lead institution and the overall funding agency. This structure was replicated for each strand of the project activity. This cross-organisational collaborative working structure was a novel and innovative arrangement. As leader of the collaborative initiative with overall responsibility for management of, and reporting on, the work stages undertaken, considerable effort was expended on ensuring real and active engagement by all of the institutions involved. This SIF funding mechanism was a new departure for the Higher Education Authority so there was no specific experience of working collaboratively within the team or of leading a cross-institutional team in this way outside of the normal authority and reporting structures.

The *Education in Employment* change initiative sought a number of specific changes under each separate strand of activity and generated a number of outputs over the three years of operation. The leadership role included managing the tasks and activities of diverse groups of individuals and negotiating practice with the various

partners while ensuring that the focus was maintained on achieving the planned outputs within the time and budget constraints. This innovative change management initiative was the most significant and complex leadership opportunity with which I had ever been presented. Each of the separate work strands required differing approaches and a variety of research methods were used in collating the appropriate information set, in order to ensure that a useful outcome was achieved.

The actions and activities undertaken as well as the research and the reflections are considered in the following sections. The intention is to give the reader a flavour of the unfolding learning without excessive detail on the particular activities that acted as a stimulus for the action research project. There are many different ways to present this exploration of the pathway taken which was neither linear nor predictable, however in this case the exploration is guided by the 'stages' in the change process which I have identified with from the literature. Taking this staged approach presents the danger that the journey might be represented as one guided by planning and certainty however as the following diagram seeks to illustrate the journey did follow certain identifiable stages but the complexity and non-linear nature of the underlying landscape was never far from the forefront.

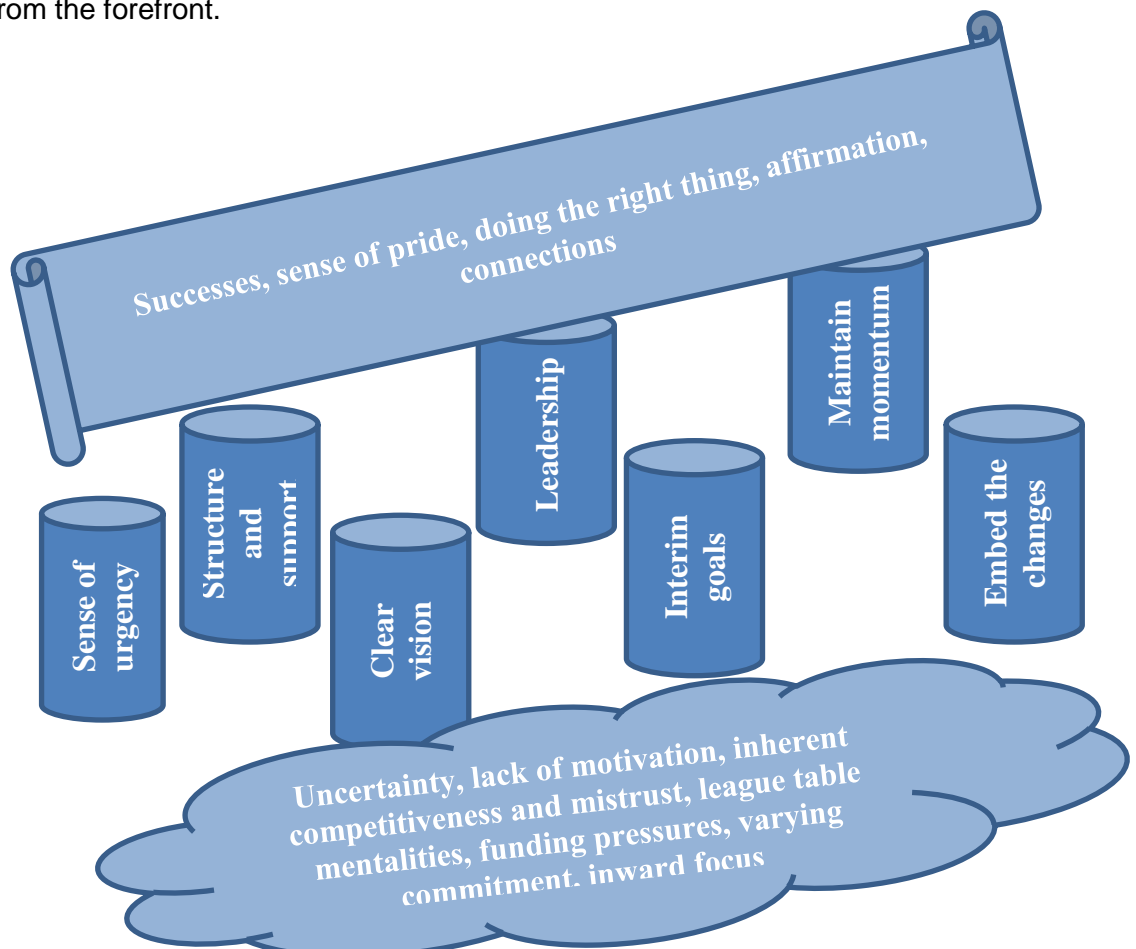


Figure 18: Steps of the change initiative and complex environment

In the following sections I consider each of the major stages as I experienced it and attempt to provide a flavour of the mismatch between my experiences and expectations and the reality. The tensions that were present in this multi-organisational initiative and the complex and interlinked nature of the work meant that the stages were not all experienced and completed in the linear format that might be expected but that there were times when stages had to be revisited or were influenced by subsequent actions and inadequacies were later exposed.

Creating a Sense of Urgency around the change required.

While the intention of the strategic innovation fund was that higher education institutions would collectively agree on and submit reform proposals which had been developed in cooperation, the practice was somewhat different. In fact, the short timeframe between the proposal and the submission date fell during the summer period resulting in a real practical difficulty in arranging meetings and in taking the time that would have been needed to collaboratively develop proposals from the ground up. The actual experience was that, the institutions who sought to take the lead on initiatives brought those 'almost fully formed' initiatives to their proposed partners and sought buy-in. In the submission stages the main sense of urgency that I felt, on reflection, was that of meeting the deadlines imposed by the funding agency. The impact of that was that the partner organisations in their haste to 'collaborate', at least on paper, spent more time collecting the requisite signatures than in questioning the different institutions commitment to the particular endeavour. At the proposal stages I was motivated by the HEA deadlines and the priorities and commitments of my own organisation. I mistook this sense of urgency for one of urgency around the change required and a lack of attention to the other partner organisations' sense of importance of the initiative meant that I revisited this step a number of times during the following three years.

In the context of the existing change management models this step and the sense of urgency it requires relate, generally, to a single organisation. In this more complex model I did not recognise for some time that the sense of urgency around the project was not homogenous and this relates directly to the diverse pressures and environment surrounding the higher education organisations leading to a divergence in institutional missions and resulting in differing goals and ambitions. The main impact of these differing missions in relation to this initiative was the varied commitment to, and

visibility of, the work within the institutions. Where organisations had signed up to collaborate without really evidencing that, for their organisations, the initiative was timely and relevant, the commitment was slow and reluctant and the reward for the organisation was not as clear.

As leader of the initiative I mistook willingness to be included for understanding of, and commitment to, what was involved and, in hindsight, I can see that I embarked on the next stages without paying due attention to this stage. The lessons that I learned in terms of my practice resulted from my own observations on the actions taken as well as from the perspectives of the other change agents involved who repeatedly expressed frustration at their own organisations' lack of clarity of direction in relation to the initiative and their feelings of being on the outside working from the periphery.

There is no doubt that, after the event and from the informed perspectives of others it is easy to see that the creation of the sense of urgency around the change has a lot to do with the nature and the scope of the change sought. The resonance of the change within the partner organisations is more likely if the change is one around which it is easy to build consensus. It also became clear, that later stages, including the building of an external imperative for the change can support the building and maintenance of a sense of urgency. My later actions relating to the collection of information to support and drive the changes sought and the sharing of this information within the consortium in some way compensated for this initial stage. The information itself and the parameters which were presented acted to develop urgency and an unstoppable force for change and in some ways compensated for the initial deficits. In my indepth interviews with the participants I found that, in fact, all of the participants regardless of their organisation or level within the organisation had very clear views on the forces for change and the imperatives for third level reform from a local, national and international perspective. If I had considered this stage more carefully at the outset I might have worked to ensure that there was a well-informed sense of urgency around this particular change initiative at both institutional and personal level. However, I did not realise that this common urgency was unexplored until later in the process. Initially, I forged ahead to the next stage without paying this stage much attention.

Agreeing a leadership structure and gathering the appropriate supports for the initiative

I embraced this process step in a structured and planned way as this aligned well with my logical, rational approach. I knew that success would be supported by the appropriate leadership structure and I recognised that it was particularly important in a complex cross-institutional project to gather that support from different levels and dimensions within the partner institutions and beyond, in the larger academic and educational community and from the policy setting and national funding agencies. Where the additional complexity arose in this case, related to the variety in structures within the different partner organisations. My own experiences to that point were in the leadership of complex projects and initiatives within a single organisation. Even in cases where the projects involved a number of different divisions or sites of a large organisation there was a certain homogeneity in approaches, cultures and attitudes within a particular company or organisation which makes the change leadership role less difficult.

I had not really considered the difficulties that the variety of parent organisations would bring to this stage in the change process. My initial leadership approaches were based on the assumption that all of the organisations were broadly similar and that the particular change actions and the resources committed to the change initiative by the different organisations would be generally comparable. It was really through the other participants' frustrations and dissatisfaction that I began to get a clearer picture that my own actions were based on an incorrect assessment of the situation and that there was a complex array of different approaches to, and support for, the work within the various institutions.

At first these views were expressed by the participants in a haphazard way and they were not formally sought or dealt with. This resulted in a certain negative sentiment and reaction to partners who were seen to be less committed and were less prepared to assign appropriate resources to work with the project team. The real tensions were experienced when a group of the partners sought to disconnect from one partner who had consistently underperformed for many months. My positivist project management tool set meant that I had maintained useful metrics including attendance at meetings, production or collaboration in output, reported spending and activity at each partner institution. However change initiatives within a single organisation would never have produced this type of a dilemma. I needed to persuade the partnership that it was to the benefit of all to keep all partners on board if at all possible but also to show

meaningful leadership which provided confidence and clarity for all. Over time and with some consideration of the influence of different actions I was able to persuade the particular partner to maintain some contact with the project in so far as it aligned with their own mission and to return unspent funding promptly for reallocation to other partner organisations. While this maintained the consortium it also aligned with a sense of justice of the participants. This caused me to consider carefully how organisations agreed to involvement, and structured their involvement, in collaborative initiatives and how they were best positioned to benefit from them.

Later when I began to formalise the consideration of my actions and to research the influence and impact of those actions in order to improve my own practice and that of others I sought the views of the participants on their own participation and the interface between their membership of the change initiative and their membership of their own organisation. As part of that study I also gained a very valuable insight into the views of the various participants on the participation of others and the variety of approaches to the activities and commitment to the activities and how that impacted on each of the participants.

Again, on reflection, I was able to see that this step is not one that is discrete and limited but one that continues throughout the initiative in that the appropriate structures and supports can change at various stages of the activities – being somewhat different in the early stages of gathering information and building support for the work needed to a later stage of dissemination of the activities and driving the sustainability and mainstreaming of the initiatives. This stage as part of the early ‘unfreezing’ of the organisation is dependent on the organisational preparedness and willingness to change. It is clear from Kotter’s work that attention to this stage will help in overcoming organisational reluctance or the natural resistance to change that is part of any organisation large and small. Neither the literature nor my own experiences prepared me for the complication arising from the involvement of a large number of organisations with different missions and motivations within the collaborative process and the additional difficulties that that presents for the leader and for the different participants. While I worked to prevent a league table mentality where organisations would be subjected to a public comparison it became clear from the participants’ views collected through in-depth interviews that this comparison was inevitably made by the participants and that, it was, in some ways when carefully used, a very useful tool for them to gather appropriate supports for the actions taken.

Creating and Communicating a clear vision of the end goal

While the overall outcomes were agreed by the funding agency at the beginning, it was clear that in this, as in any other unique initiative, the leadership would have to adapt and allow the end goal to evolve in line with the activities and the actions and reflections of the participants. While an unmoving and clearly stated end goal is desirable for any project leader, experience shows that the complex circumstances and environment in which most 'real-world' projects are undertaken and the connectedness of a vast range of circumstances means that goals often need to be reconsidered and reconfigured in response to those shifting realities.

There were a number of distinct aspects to this stage in relation to creating and communicating the developing and evolving end goal of the initiative. I was very conscious that the vision would be required to align as well as possible with the agreed priorities for the SIF funding model and with the agreed overall outcomes for this particular initiative as summarised in this document. I was comfortable with that outcomes-focused approach and with my own ability to keep the focus on the outcomes. It was a more difficult task to weave an overarching vision which linked the intricacies of each partner organisation's individual interpretation of their own involvement in, and responsibility for, an end goal which took into account their very different starting points and priorities. Despite having signed up to the initiative and indicated their willingness to be part of the overall initiative there was an underlying defensiveness and separateness which could only be overcome by ensuring that all of the participants were not just committed on paper to the work but that they really felt that they had played a part in developing the goal and that they had a sense of ownership of the vision.

Following the initial meetings of the working groups assigned to each of the initiative strands it became clear to me that the crystallisation of the participants around a particular vision or end goal was going to take more time and care than I had envisaged.

This manifested itself in the strand concerned with workbased learning through a considerable amount of time expended on attempting to come to a collective agreement on what was meant by work-based learning and how it might contribute to learning opportunities for learners in the workplace. There was considerable discourse around terms such as work-related learning, workplace learning and work placement learning. While there was some experience among the partners in the design and

development of programmes which incorporate elements of what was understood to be work based learning, there was not a great tradition in Ireland generally in this area evidenced by the lack of a common understanding at the outset. Through an exploration of international models and some consideration of the work of the Centre of Excellence for Work-Based Learning in Middlesex including attendance at a conference, I gained a better understanding of what was possible in the consideration of WBL as a mode of study and WBL as a field of study. I brought this learning and set of views to the group and I had at several stages to take time to overcome my own frustration at the lack of visible progress as I saw it. Later it became clear on reflection that these forming stages were very important in building the network and trust required to share information and to reach the goals in a collaborative and collective way. It was only at a later stage when I had embarked on the professional doctoral pathway that I was able to view these discourse-driven interpretive stages as part of my own shifting ontological position.

The initial exploration on the Strand of the initiative concerned with the Recognition of Prior Learning demonstrated the variety of practice and variation in scale of the recognition of prior learning processes within the partner institutions. The level of activity was markedly different varying in one academic year from as little as 10 reported applications processed in one institution to as many as 500 in another. Generating a shared vision of the end goal with such a varied set of experiences was difficult.

At the outset of the project, five of the nine partners had policy documentation surrounding RPL at some level within their institution or part of their institution. One of the most useful early exercises was the sharing of those policy documents where they existed and the exploration of the content in the light of national and international publications. Following considerable discussion among the group it was agreed that a single policy document would not be consistent with the autonomy of each institution's academic council. The aim therefore was to have a single top-level outline policy agreed by all partners and to ensure that the various partner policy documents to be developed and revised would be in broad agreement with the top-level document. By the end of the project period all partners had new or revised institution-wide policy documents governing RPL practices and procedures.

I knew, on reflection, that if we had sought to impose a 'one size for all' policy or process document the participants would find it difficult to agree on an outcome. With

some reasonably refined processes and some in their infancy the end goal needed to provide a stretching target for all, which would ensure that all institutions felt that they had benefited from their involvement. The agreement led to a situation where those who had much to learn could learn from those who had already made significant progress and where those who had made progress could continue to develop capacity and capability. This shared learning is reflected well in the interviews with the participants which strongly support the view that the collaborative nature of the project allowed each to progress appropriately based on their starting position.

Creating and communicating the vision for progression of craft certificate holders to higher education was simplified in some ways by the involvement of a number of national organisations who were involved as adjunct partners to the change initiative. These included FÁS, the national training and development agency, National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI), the Council of Registrars of Institutes of Technology Ireland, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) and the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) and ITAC (the Institutes of Technology Apprentice Council). A total of 14 different meetings were held with the various participants involved in the process over the initiative timeframe.

The standards-based apprenticeship is a structured system of skills development for craft workers across a range of work activities. The apprenticeship structure consists of 7 phases four of which are 'in-career' and three of which are on 'educational release'. The craft certificate obtained is a Further Education award on the qualifications framework which does not directly facilitate progression to a Higher Education award. The objective of this strand was to develop a pathway to facilitate the progression of craft certificate holders into higher education in a way that would recognise their existing learning and competence. In developing progression opportunities for craft certificate holders the end goal needed to take into account their existing training and education as understood by the higher education organisation and to facilitate the development of an appropriate training and development pathway. A considerable national focus on this work, particularly following significant falloff in employment opportunities for craft certificate holders following the economic downturn and the dramatic difficulties encountered in the construction and building sectors in Ireland helped to cement a vision and goal and to bring this work into the 'change' stages rapidly.

With the benefit of a consideration of the literature and the time to reflect on the experiences and actions undertaken I was able to see that the unfolding difficult economic realities and increase in the unemployment rate had themselves contributed to the 'unfreezing' by creating a troubled or unstable situation, and had overcome any resistance to change that may have existed.

In contrast, the Strand of the initiative which dealt with the difficulties faced by migrant workers in Ireland in accessing higher education, lost focus and momentum as the project proceeded. At the beginning, when the project was originally proposed in the summer of 2006, Ireland was still working to attract overseas workers to fill positions and was a major destination for workers from the more recent member states of the EU. It was felt that these 'new Irish' and their employers were not well served by the higher education systems which did not always recognise their learning and awards from the home countries and were not always accessible and sensitive to their learning needs. These views and the need to ensure that from a personal and an economic perspective their particular learning needs were recognised and served, helped the working group to develop a vision and an end goal. Over the project timeframe the rapidly deteriorating economic situation meant that many of these migrant workers left Ireland and that the sense of urgency surrounding this work was dissipated, meaning that the goal and vision were not as sharply focused as at the start.

I reflected that, while external factors could contribute significantly to the 'unfreezing' part of the change initiative and help to build momentum and drive, they could also work against particular changes sought to make them seem less desirable or less important. This again emphasised the importance of accepting that the end goal is not always fixed and determinate but may have to respond to complexities and realities that were not always clear initially or within the messy reality in which action research unfolds.

In creating the vision and the view of the end goal for the different elements of the project initiative it was very important to be able to communicate that vision clearly both within the working groups of the different strands of activity, within the partner organisation and my own lead organisation, to the national organisations responsibly for policy setting and to the wider society. By setting in place structures to create an identity for the project initiative and through the use of printed and online agreed information points the external message of the project team was communicated in an

ongoing way. These structures continued to be important in disseminating the outputs and findings of the work throughout the project timeframe.

Leading and empowering others to act on the vision

While the first three stages of this framework align broadly with the first four stages of the Kotter model and are generally the ‘unfreezing’ part of the process the next stages are the ‘change’ stages in which the actions leading to the changes or reforms are taken. Having taken some time to crystallise the participants around the central goals or vision for the change initiative the main actions that I took was around the collation and sharing of information on current practice. This priority was driven by my underlying approach which was based on the belief that action should be based where possible on a sound understanding of the facts and should be as well informed as possible. This approach was rooted in an objectivist epistemology as evidenced by my professional engineering training.

In relation to the first strand of the project initiative, I sought to ascertain the extent of work-based learning within the academic provision of the partner institutions. What appeared to be a simple observable parameter which would provide a useful and credible data set proved to be almost impossible to obtain. There was no general common understanding of a programme which included ‘work-based learning’. In fact there was still some debate as to what was meant by work-based learning. In order to move the work forward I took a pragmatist approach which sought to gain a better understanding of the general educational provision of the nine providers which they felt was relevant to work based learners. This allowed the partner institutions and their representatives to determine their own understandings of the programmes to be included BUT it also allowed conclusions to be drawn about the course provision which would act as catalysts for action. In this survey, which sought information on the course provision, the question set focused on questions which related indirectly to work-based learning. Thus providing a relevant and useful data set which was interpretable in the context of the data sought.

There would have been a general perception by the *Education in Employment* project partners that they were providing a range of courses in flexible and accessible formats which were of great relevance to work place learners in their regions. While there was a reluctance to explore programmes under a strict work-based learning theme, a compromise was reached on a piece of collaborative empirical research. This involved

designing a questionnaire which included fourteen questions in relation to the suite of courses offered at that time which were of relevance to learners in the workplace. The initial tasks in getting all institutional partners to agree to participate in the survey of courses including measures related to the building of trust and mutual understanding. The partners were assured that none of the information would be published in such a way as to make any individual partners identifiable. The information on the full cohort of programmes would be collated and aggregated and there would be no attempt to create a league table. Building this assurance meant that partners were confident that their participation on the work would be important in driving forward the agenda for workplace learners but would not in any way disadvantage their institution or their own role within their institution.

The survey sought to establish the 'state of play' of courses which may not necessarily have included what we understand to be 'work-based learning' but which were considered to be relevant to workplace learners. The survey aimed to develop a snapshot of the higher education landscape and to illustrate the ways in which higher education institutions interact with employers and learners in workplaces with a view to highlighting opportunities for advancement and improvement. It was broad-ranging and the criteria for the inclusion of courses was that they were targeted at students who were in employment and were not accessible through the Central Applications Office (CAO) which processes all school leavers' applications for full-time programmes in the Institute of Technology and the University sectors in Ireland. The completion of the survey was through the members of the various higher education institutions who were charged with collecting the information from the relevant course team or course coordinators within their own institutions. In this way the collaborative nature of the initiative provided unique access to information on the ground which facilitated a clear and valid picture of the landscape.

A very wide variety of programmes is offered by higher education institutions on a flexible or part-time basis providing for the learning needs of a range of different disciplines, including management, marketing, cookery, auctioneering, accountancy, energy management, palliative care, interior design, lean manufacturing and social care. The survey sought to ascertain a wide range of information relevant to programmes aimed at learners in employment, including duration, fees, National Qualifications Framework Level, minimum entry requirements and course delivery and assessment mechanisms. While some of the questions focused on the credits, duration and structure of the courses others focused on the partnership with the

employer or employer organisation in design, development and delivery of the course. These questions asked about the identification of the need for the course, the involvement of the employer or sectoral experts in the design, development, and delivery. The flexibility of the timing and the location for the course were also explored as well as the flexibility of entry mechanisms and specifically whether students could claim recognition for prior learning on entry to the course.

In total 433 courses were included in the data gathered. The findings indicated that while the institutions felt that they were offering relevant and flexible programmes there was considerable work to be done.

Some of the more interesting points raised:

- Over 60% did not consider claims for the recognition of prior learning on entry
- 84% are delivered on campus only
- In over 58% of cases the need for the course is identified by the HEI only
- 51% of courses are designed by the HEI alone
- 46% did not indicate the use of web-based tools to support the learning

Extensive details on the finding and the research methods employed are provided in part 2 of Volume 2. Pages 24-43 deal with this review of courses among the partner institutions. This initial research was intended to set the scene and to establish the extent of negotiated learning in the higher education institutions in Ireland. It was very clear from the findings that there was considerable work to be done in raising awareness of the workplace itself as a valid location of learning and in highlighting the importance of the employer as a workplace learning partner.

From Nikolou-Walker and Garnett's research (2004) it is clear that, if the need for a particular course is identified in partnership between the education institutional and the employing organisation, there are many advantages, for example:

- A partnership between an employing organisation and an educational institution specifically established to foster learning is seen as a relationship which has the potential to satisfy a need for the industry partner and to provide revenue for the education institution
- The course that arises from a partnership approach derives from the needs of the workplace and of the learner rather than being exclusively informed by the educational curriculum

- The starting point and level of the course are established through a structured review and an evaluation of current learning – meaning that the learning pathway developed builds on and does not repeat existing learning
- Significant elements of the course can be developed as work-based learning opportunities meeting the needs of the learner and the organisation
- The educational institution assesses the learning outcomes of the negotiated course with respect to a transdisciplinary framework of standards and levels

The survey reveals that in most cases learning needs are identified and courses are designed and delivered by the higher education institutions in isolation from the employer and the workplace knowledge. Advocates of workbased learning courses suggest that a main focus of these courses is on the inclusion of a significant work-based project which addresses real-life issues situated in the realities of the particular workplace. Bringing the realities of the workplace into the educational spectrum and ensuring that courses exploit every opportunity to marry the variety of learning opportunities on offer is of benefit to the learners, the employers and the higher education providers alike. The enhanced mutual understanding which jointly developed programmes of learning bring must be supported through flexible timing and supervisory arrangements (Garnett *et al.*, 2003).

A further reason for having the employer involved in the design of the course is the difficulty faced by many in the academic community in placing an appropriate value on learning. Particularly in difficult economic times budget cutbacks are often applied to the development activities as Shipley (2003) suggests this can be because it is difficult to demonstrate a cause and effect relationship between the expenditure on education and training and the resulting improvements in business parameters. Garnett *et al.* (2003) summarise that the crucial element of the joint development of courses is the gaining of a common understanding from all of what each needs to gain from the course and what each can contribute. In many cases academic staff relate anecdotally that these joint course developments have a very positive impact on all of the course provision by the particular academic unit as a greater appreciation of workplace priorities and new technologies or realities ensures the on-going currency and relevancy of all provision.

Garnett *et al.* believe that there are a number of essential requirements for a third level provider to develop effective and sustainable work-based learning provision in conjunction with employers and employer organisations:

- Recognition and enhancement of high-level learning, where it already exists within the employer organisation
- Flexibility in the pattern of delivery in relation to pace and place as well as content and assessment techniques
- Willingness to work in collaboration with other learning providers of relevance to the enterprise
- Customisation of programmes to meet the particular learning needs of the organisation and the individuals
- Tangible outcomes which have the potential to enhance the intellectual capital of the organisation
- Provision of a quality-assured and flexible route to reliable and internationally recognised qualifications

Adopting a truly partnership approach to course design and development would require that the higher education provider would itself act as a learning organisation and be open to reform and transformation in curriculum development and engagement generally which would impact on every aspect of the organisation structure.

A review of the findings of the survey of learning provision would starkly indicate that the higher education institutions in general offer programmes of learning for workplace learners:

1. for which the need is identified by the higher education institution in isolation,
2. which are offered in traditional formats on campus
3. which are not informed by workplace priorities or needs
4. and which are not sensitive to workplace learners existing knowledge

The course survey findings became themselves a very powerful instrument in furthering the discourse on work-based and blended learning provision in Ireland generally. While this survey was intended to gain a snapshot of practice – it is also an instrument which has the potential to further practice. Through reflection on the facts as uncovered by this research, the decision-makers within higher education were influenced to change the reality and therefore impact on the way that reality is perceived. In each of the strands of activity Schein's (2002) view of questioning and analysis as 'diagnostic interventions' was kept in the foreground and the powerful

impact that diagnosis can have on the system being diagnosed was leveraged in so far as was appropriate. The findings presented in Part 2 of Volume 2 pages 24-43 were presented as part of a Symposium on Work-based Learning to the higher education community in Ireland in May 2009.

In order to balance the perspectives presented and to influence in a positive way the inclusion of the employer partner in the development of new learning opportunities, each of the higher education institutions was asked to develop a short case study on an innovative and successful learning partnership in which their institution was a partner. These exemplars serve to balance the negative perspective of higher education performance in this domain and to illustrate the possibilities that are unveiled on entering into the partnership arena. All partners reported that these examples of innovative practice tended to operate in isolation within the institution and pointed to a lack of institutional learning whereby these interactions and the steps that made them possible were not embedded into the structure of the higher education institution generally. A summary of each of these work-based learning partnerships is included in part 2 of Volume 2 pages 64-73.

I had embarked on this initiative with an ontological position in which I was comfortable with sets of measurable, observable and comparable data. I learned through experience, observation and reflection that these 'observable parameters' often had a series of subjective meanings from the perspectives of different participants and that the observations should be considered within the context and the situations within which they were made in an interpretivist framework. Collecting the information on practice required a sensitive and interpretivist approach which took account of the potential impact of the data. Working in a collaborative way with a number of organisations meant that compromises had to be sought to arrive at solutions that maintained the momentum toward the end goals and allowed the various partners to satisfy multiple and occasionally conflicting priorities.

This was also evidenced by the strand of activity relating to the practice within the nine partner institutions in the operation of the recognition of prior formal and experiential learning for the purposes of admission onto programmes of learning or exemption from elements of programmes. The work on this initiative spanned a period of approximately 36 months and the main activities included:

- Regular meetings of the representatives of all nine institutions – totalling more than 15 meetings over the 36 month time frame

- Collection of details of initial existing policy within each institution
- Engagement with national and international experts and stakeholders on RPL practice
- Sharing of policy documents and compilation of agreed 'top-level' policy in line with national agencies
- Detailed exploration of practice in each institution including details of process flows, resources, costs,
- Workshops to develop practice guidelines and agree reporting format
- Participation in relevant national and international seminars
- Collation of contributions for collaborative report and editing of report
- Publication and dissemination of report
- Staff development activities to support practice development including workshops within the partner institution group and beyond

The initial exploration demonstrated the variety of practice and variation in scale of the recognition of prior learning processes within the partner institutions. The level of activity was markedly different, varying in one academic year from as little as 10 reported applications processed in one institution to as many as 500 in another. The apparently straightforward task of gathering information on the level of practice within the partner institutions proved much more complex than I had originally anticipated. I believed that I had learned a considerable lesson from the work on the Work based learning strand so I worked within the RPL working group to support a common definition of recognition of prior learning which accommodated the broadest possible interpretation and the broadest set of potential learners and then sought to gather quantifiable evidence on the level of practice. In most cases a reasonable figure was available which was recognised as not entirely accurate due to the lack of recording and reporting in most partner institutions. However I encountered some resistance and obstructionism on behalf of one of the partners. Again this was a valuable lesson in the dangers and difficulties of the reduction of practice to facts and figures. This is of particular relevance in the leadership of collaborative projects as where there is collaboration between institutions, I was to learn, there is also a potential for comparison. There was an underlying 'league table mentality' which was defensive about the disclosure of information in comparative formats or in formats which had the potential to be comparative.

I needed to adjust my practice to overcome this by ensuring that information was shared openly within the partnership but that individuals and organisations were protected in any information that was available to a wider audience. I also needed to reconsider the manner in which information was sought. The importance of these considerations and the attendant sensitivities are supported by the views of the participants as captured in this research.

Following the agreement on outline policy, it was agreed that a detailed exploration of existing practice at the partner institution would be undertaken. Again the engagement with this investigation depended on a significant trust and mutual respect between the partners. As leader, I clearly understood that the value of the sharing exercise would only be achieved if an 'unvarnished' version of the facts were available. This was achieved through clearly articulating the vision of the project and the objectives in relation to reform of third level provision in Ireland. The partners understood that the ultimate beneficiaries of the work would be the learners in the workplace and that their organisation practices would not be exposed in any way. Through a frank sharing of existing practice and a number of working sessions the team were led to a collaboratively generated agreement on process and practice maps and guidelines for implementation and upscaling of RPL. This was only possible as the earlier stages of the process had alerted me to the tensions and sensitivities that existed between the project partners and within the partner organisations. In this way my experiences and reflection on those experiences had led to changed practices.

The investigations into practice in the partner institutions took a number of forms. Policy documents and practice details were shared among the project team. The two main policy making entities in Ireland associated with practice in the recognition of prior learning were the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC). Both of these agencies had policies on RPL and both were interested in the integration of RPL into the structures and processes of the higher education institutions at a policy and an operational level. In order to ensure a joined-up approach and to raise the profile of the work being undertaken by the project team both of these organisations were invited to be part of the working group on the Recognition of Prior Learning. The inclusion of these organisations was very useful in gathering support and visibility for the work in a larger context and this acted as an incentive or a useful part of my toolkit in influencing and empowering others to act. They also contributed significantly to the dissemination stage and the international relevance of the work. Part 4 of Volume 2 provides a

review of the current RPL practice within the partner institutions including policies, scale of activity, practices, roles, timelines and costs (pages 19-36).

In the strand of the project aimed at developing progression pathways for craft certificate holders similarly a set of information to illustrate the need for such progression opportunities needed to be gathered in order to exert pressure on the institutions to act on the project goals. Three separate sets of data were collected and analysed, a survey of existing apprentice learners in participating institutions, a survey of craftspersons who were undertaking higher education programmes in two of the partner institutions where pathways to learning were in place and a survey of employers of craft certificate holders.

The survey of existing apprentice learners in partner institutions was intended to quantify the need for progression and to identify the progression discipline of choice of the cohort of learners. It went on to further explore the perceived barriers to learning and progression and the preferred modes of learning. A total of 1,130 current apprentice learners were surveyed the details of the survey of apprentices are included in Part 1 of Volume 2 pages 22-34.

In summary the survey illustrated that:

- 94.7% indicated that they would benefit from progression opportunities,
- The main interest areas for progression were construction, electrical engineering and mechanical engineering
- There was a strong positive relationship between progression routes and individual apprentice trade areas
- The main obstacles are perceived as financial constraints and lack of time

In the second survey, detailed on pages 34-40 of part 1 of Volume 2, a total of 45 craft certificate holders who have progressed to higher education courses were surveyed. The focus of the survey was on craft certificate holders from the electrical apprentice stream who had progressed to higher education programmes in Electrical Engineering. Through the mapping of their apprentice structured learning onto the learning outcomes of the year one modules in the electrical engineering programmes they had all gained exemptions at entry. The survey yielded the following information:

- 70% stated that their main motivation for progressing to a degree programme was for personal and career advancement

- 55% entered the higher education programme within 1 year of completing their apprenticeship
- 75% expressed their satisfaction with their programme of study

In exploring further the transition into the higher education programme the majority of the students indicated that they did not have any difficulties in fitting into their current degree programme. Those who had found some difficulties at the outset suggested that some bridging courses and improved prior knowledge of the higher education programme would have been helpful. In identifying their motivation for progression as personal and career advancement one must be aware that at the time of this particular study the early impacts of the slowdown in the construction sector in Ireland were being strongly felt and that the career and employment opportunities for craft certificate holders in the construction and related trades were very strongly impacted. It would be interesting to conduct a longitudinal study to plot the intersection between demand for progression opportunities and the employment opportunities for craft certificate holders in the economy. A very significant number (>80%) of those who had progressed to higher education considered the loss of earnings that they would suffer during their programme of study.

Understanding that the employers are very significant stake holders in the employment patterns and learning needs of this cohort an additional survey of employers of craft certificate holders was conducted in order to ascertain their views on the development and learning needs. A total of 195 employers participated in the final survey undertaken under this strand details are included on pages 40 to 47 of Part 1 of Volume 2. The vast majority of the employers (>90%) were in the private sector.

- 81% of the employers believed that their employees would benefit from higher education
- 68% would provide time for their employees to progress their studies
- 47% would provide some financial support for their employees in progressing their education
- >60% expressed their preference for programmes offered in a flexible night-time or block delivery mode

This suggested challenges for higher education providers in designing programmes with a view to flexibility and sustainability to meet the needs of the learners and the employers. The need to ensure financial or other support for the learners who engage in upskilling in this way arises, as in Ireland currently, part-time education requires the payment of tuition fees while in general full-time education does not.

To further illustrate the viability of the progression mechanism developed, statistics were collected on the number of students who had already progressed onto higher education programmes in two of the partner institutions detailed on pages 47 to 72 Part 1 Volume 2. Between the two programmes considered in detail and over the course of 4 years a total of 142 craft certificate entrants had progressed through the various stages of the Higher Education programmes with over 85% successful progression into following years.

Following this collection of a broad overview of the rationale for progression opportunities the work focused on exploration of the existing progression pathways. From a detailed exploration of the recognition of prior learning and progression development in two of the partner institutions an agreed structure or framework for the mapping of apprentice programme learning onto the learning outcomes of a cognate higher education award was developed.

Carefully collected information was used as a catalyst for action and as a very influential tool in empowering people to act themselves and to exert influence where appropriate to further the aims of the project. This was further used to stimulate and to bring about change within the participating institutions and at a national policy level.

Identifying and achieving short term interim goals

In the initial stages of the project leadership work the various working groups were brought together and a series of meetings were held to agree: resources to be allocated to the project at the various project partner institutions, responsibilities of the different players, structures of the tasks and targets in the longer and shorter terms over the three year period. This was a time of intense activity to ensure that the funding allocation which had been received would translate into the required outcomes and objectives.

Most of the participants who were to be the change agents representing the various partner institutions did not know each other prior to involvement in this project. Considerable time was taken at each meeting on the discussion of definitions and topics which I considered to be around the edges of the 'actions' required and while I was somewhat frustrated by this in the context of our reporting to the funding agency, the project partners were comfortable with the pace. My own complex project

management charts and communications tools received very little attention and a very lukewarm response. Each partner did want to leave the meetings with a clear idea of what they had to get done for the next meeting and they wanted to be reminded of the actions required on a regular basis. All partners agreed very quickly to rotation of the meetings to different locations among the partnership. An attempt to save time and money by video conferencing instead of a face-to-face meeting was very unsuccessful.

Some of the change agents experienced difficulty in bringing their work to the attention of the authorities within their own organisation. This was evidenced in real terms by the resources allocated to the work in practice and by the involvement of the staff within the institution in the discussion and dissemination activities and was reported as a frustration by the particular change agents at the project team meetings. This recognition that the individuals involved in the change process were themselves influenced by the organisational dynamic within which they acted, aligned well with Back's (1992) consideration of an approach by which behaviours may be understood or appreciated through a consideration of the totality and complexity of the situation and circumstances in which the behaviour takes place. As leader this required sensitivity to the situational dynamics within which the project participants acted in their own institutions. It also questioned the supporting structure within their institutions and the ways in which I, as project leader, outside of those organisations could exact influence.

The arrangements for meetings were of considerable importance as the meetings were the stimulus for much of the action and action planning. They also acted as the networking events during which the project players got to know each other and built up the trust and understanding that was necessary to ensure that collaboration was successful. I realised that I needed to step back from the actions focus, and that the long discussions around definitions and ultimate goals was part of the process of developing a common understanding and language. The detailed software-generated project plans which I had carefully produced were not contributing to the individual ownership of the project and were a barrier in some cases. The use of information technology as an alternative to face-to-face meetings was not successful and despite the costs and time involved the vast majority of people preferred to travel to meetings.

Meetings were planned to happen between a 10.30am coffee and a 1pm working lunch. There was plenty of time allocated at each venue for informal interactions. The use of VC facilities was shelved and meetings were planned to happen face-to-face. A simpler 'action list' approach was used to report on what had been achieved and what

remained to be achieved in place of more complex project management software and the general planning window was set at about three months for the project participants. While I needed to focus on the longer term goals and the overall outcomes the various participants needed that translated into a shorter time frame for their own participation. The time and effort which was expended on group meetings and the building of interpersonal relationships within the group contributed to the development of 'shared basic assumptions' referred to by Schein (1992: 2) in his definition of organisational culture.

This was my own first experience of leading a diverse group from different institutions without direct reporting authority over the participants. My engineering background meant that I was focused on actions and outcomes from an early stage and I sought to represent those outcomes within the formal project management structure with which I would have been most familiar. Over time, I realised that I would need to reconsider my leadership style in order to achieve the outcomes and to ensure that all partners were clear on what they could gain from their involvement and what they could contribute. In terms of the organisation and planning of meetings and partnership interactions my reflections centred on:

- The motivation for change and the motivation for each of the players to be involved
- Arrangements and structures of meetings, frequency, locations, use of IT to facilitate meetings in a broadly geographically distributed network
- Action planning mechanisms and use of project planning software and other means to manage the recording of activity and resource use
- Managing the longer term project goals and translating them into shorter term actions for the participants
- Building a collaborative framework – overcoming barriers to collaboration and overcoming threats
- Reporting on the project outcomes and ensuring that the project outcomes and outputs gained the support and attention of the appropriate national organisations and policy makers
- Development of a unique identity for the initiative and the building of a recognition and trust for the participants around that identity
- Identifying the right people to get the job done in this complex cross-organisational endeavour the particular skill set that would be needed to ensure success, was not obvious at the outset.

I embarked on this project leadership task with a set of project management charts and network diagrams developed from the top level proposal document and translated into project management software tools. I had resolved to keep all of the participants on all of the project strands informed and to feed appropriate information between the strands of the project to ensure alignment and complementarity where appropriate. Bringing these complex charts and information sets to the meetings of the project working groups soon proved to be counterproductive. Time was spent stating and restating long term goals and there was a sense of frustration in not making visible progress. Through listening, observation and reflection I learned that the various participants really needed to visualise and relate to shorter term deliverables which would provide a sense of achievement and direction and would help to maintain momentum. After a number of months I realised that the complex system of charts depicting the overall three year time span of the project was not helpful and that most of the participants wanted to leave each meeting or session with a clear idea of what they needed to achieve within a much shorter window. I developed a simple tabular system which showed last steps and next steps and the responsible individuals for the strands and provided an impetus for action for the participants which helped to translate the bigger picture into tangible deliverables within the semester-type timeframe within which most of them planned.

It took me some time to realise that while I was committed to the bigger picture and the fuller reporting mechanisms most of them were working as representatives for their institutions on this project as a small part of their overall responsibilities and they needed to be helped to recognise short term actions and imperatives.

There was another complexity added to the picture relating to the involvement of nine different institutions in the consortium. I was able to revisit the project plan and identify tangible milestones in the form of publications, events and staff development activities which were planned to occur as interim goals on each of the strands of activities. In order to ensure as much ownership and interest in each of the partner institutions as possible, these events were distributed broadly among the project partner institutions. This was a significant factor in building support for the project and the individual project participants and representatives within their own institutions.

Where possible these interim goals were used to gain support from as wide an audience as possible for the project outcomes as well as to foster progress and

commitment from within the consortium. In the case of the work-based learning strand of the activity a full report focusing on the research findings and the general understanding of work-based learning was produced by the partnership and published and made available through the project website. The report was endorsed and launched by the Irish Chief Executive Office of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD). This report represents a significant output from the project and is included as Part 2 of Volume 2 of this work. The report presents the collective output of research into current practice by the partner institutions involved in the project.

The report resulting from the Recognition of Prior Learning working group presented a policy framework and guidelines for learners and assessors in the RPL process. It also provided a useful support structure for the implementation or development of recognition of prior learning process and practice within higher education institutions. The intention was to provide a launching point for the further development and upscaling of RPL through a frank review of the issues and questions raised. The work highlighted a need for the development of capability and capacity among the staff of the institutions. The report was widely disseminated through the higher education sector, the project website and the National Qualification Authority of Ireland. It was launched by the Minister for Education. In addition to the report a number of staff development activities centred on awareness raising building capability and competence in RPL were organised in all partner institutions and in some cases shared among partner institutions.

The work of the craftsperson progression working group was compiled into a report entitled 'Framework for Progression of Craftsperson' which was launched by the Minister for Education and widely disseminated through the project website and through presentations and workshops in all Institutes of Technology. All of the relevant stakeholders were involved in the dissemination services and, in addition to promoting access and progression opportunities to potential learners and employers, the workshops which were delivered in each of the institutes of technology focused on the structures which were needed to ensure that craft certificate holders could be provided with valid and flexible pathways into higher education programmes which built on their existing learning.

In order to build awareness of the particular issues facing migrants a national seminar was held for higher education staff at which the findings of the various focus groups were presented along with migrants own voices in articulating their issues. A number

of representatives from policy making and advocacy organisations were included in the seminar. The report of the project consortium which presents the findings of the collaborative research together with a set of recommendations for practice was launched at this seminar. The report entitled Migrant and Higher Education in Ireland is included in part 3 Volume 2 of this work.

In the case of all of the strands of activity these interim milestones represented significant achievements for the groups involved and allowed a sense of satisfaction in the work done and contributed to a sense of team work and a positive progression toward the project outcomes. By listening to the needs of the participants and building in opportunities for them to focus on shorter term tasks and objectives the overall activity was translated into a stepping stone approach which ensured that all major outcomes were achieved. Moving the events and activities to include a geographical spread of the partners ensured that buy-in was achieved and maintained across the diverse collaborating consortium.

Maintaining the momentum towards the end goal

None of the participants had collaborated with other institutions or shared the detailed operation of their systems and processes in the way that this project required in the past. All of the organisations involved were funded through the lead partner for their part in the initiative. There was some disquiet at different stages about the link between partner effort and the funding for each partner. There was a view, particularly among the smaller institutions that they might be overshadowed by the 'bigger players' on the project or that they would be disadvantaged by a 'league table' approach which might reflect badly on them.

As leader, I needed to consider how to ensure that not only was each partner brought along with the project objectives but that they each believed that they benefitted from the project and that it reflected well on them and their institutions. As the project outcomes gained attention on a national stage this was facilitated as organisations sought to be seen as visibly engaged with the *Education in Employment* project – most notably after it gained the highest rank in a review of the Strategic innovation Fund initiatives.

One of the more significant early public symposia was organised in a smaller rural college. A unique identity was created for the project so that the partners could all become part of something which was not representative of just one institution. A decision was taken that there would be no comparative reporting or 'league tables' of different partner achievements under the initiative. This led to the development of a project brand and logo distinct from any of the partner brands and the agreement that all publications, reporting etc. would use only the general project brand. All reporting was written so that the project contributions were collated and not attributable to one partner or another. The logo for 'Education in Employment' which was developed is identifiable on all 4 parts of Volume 2.

As project leader, I circulated clear sets of information on the funding that each partner received at regular intervals throughout the process. This approach was in line with the integrative form of organisational culture as described by Kanter (1983). In contrast with the 'segmentalist' culture where the flow of information is managed very carefully, the organisations that Kanter describes as 'integrative' are outward looking and are comfortable challenging established practices. They allow and facilitate free sharing of ideas and tend to create metrics based on future plans and not past practices. This approach to leadership contributed to ensuring that the participants were engaged and that their institutions were well represented in both the research activities and the changes sought.

As this was a significant new venture on behalf of the Department of Education and the Higher Education authority it was important to ensure that a reliable view of the success or otherwise of all of the initiatives funded under the Strategic Innovation Fund was obtained. This would inform both the leadership of these projects and the future funding cycles as appropriate.

While it was important to set and achieve interim goals with realistic timelines and objectives which the participants could relate to and of which they could take ownership it was also important to keep the momentum toward the overall goal of reform which meant embedding the changes and the good practice guidelines which emerged from the research into the organisations and institutions to ensure sustainable and meaningful reforms with longevity and impact. My original approach would have been to assume that the partner institution representatives were responsible for their organisations commitment to, and embracing of, the changes and reforms arising. I did not anticipate, from my own experience or from my review of the literature, the

difficulties that would be experienced by the partner institution representatives in acting at the interface between the project structure and their own organisational priorities which was not always aligned with the project goals and objectives. The tensions between the individual change agent's roles within the project team and their roles within their organisation was something that emerged over time and became evident when breakdowns in communication and missed deadlines brought the issue to a crisis point.

It emerged that my leadership approach had not taken into account the complexity of forces operating on the change agent at the boundary between their organisation and others in a collaborative structure. Realising that the end goal could not be achieved by a consortium of the change agents only, I needed to actively ensure that the agents were supported and facilitated in influencing and penetrating within their own organisations. In order to have a far reaching and sustained impact this needed to be a collaboration of organisations and not of individuals.

Considering the motivation for the various players from the different institutions to be involved in the project I realised that these were a diverse group who were being asked by their institutions to act at the edges of the institutions and to be involved in representing their institutions at the interface with other institutions. This created a tension within each particular individual. They were motivated to be involved in the project and to be part of the process to bring about improvements in the higher education systems but they were also concerned that they may later face a charge of misrepresenting their institutions. The incentive for each of the participants being involved was complex but as project leader I needed to ensure that they would be empowered and supported at their own institutional level.

It was decided that each project participant would be visibly and publically supported by having access to a member of their institution's management team at a level above their own operational level as far as possible within the executive management level of their organisation. Where this was the case, the project initiatives and actions gained a clearer traction and the involvement of the particular institution staff was significantly increased meaning that the changes would be supported by staff development activities and were more likely to be sustained within the organisation. Where possible, it was ensured that each member of the team would have an opportunity to host a team meeting within their institution and to be seen to be part of this larger network.

I had to act to ensure that, in a system in which I did not have tangible authority, I could still exert influence to ensure the change agents were given the necessary support within their organisations and that the work of the project was embraced and supported by the partner institutions. I sought the assistance of the funding agency and also of my own organisation in establishing a system of support for the change agents participating in the project by identification and management of a structure of senior members of staff named in support of the agents and in ensuring the a visible link was made between project funding and meaningful activity by using the main resources at my disposal and in particular by making the distribution of finance clearly visible within the consortium.

Ensuring the sustainability of the changes

Recognising that reform could not be achieved without changes to practice and to culture, I sought to ensure that the change initiative would leave a lasting legacy by ensuring that the practice changes were well-established and that the systems were 'refrozen' in the new desired state. This took the form of widely publicising the project activities and findings. For instance in the work-based learning strand of the project following the initial research there was a requirement to raise awareness and to highlight good practice in the area of work-based learning and employer-academic learning partnerships. Three symposia were arranged focusing on different aspects of work-based learning and the challenges involved. These were held in May in three consecutive years in Sligo 2008, Cork 2009 and Dublin 2010. The Symposia, through exploration of practice and workshops in support of engagement and negotiated learning served to raise awareness of, and to generate interest in, work-based learning from within the academic and the enterprise domains. Again the proceedings were made available through the project website and through the consortium.

The impact of these events was to raise awareness among the staff of the higher education institutions and the policy makers in the Irish educational landscape of the power and potential of these partnership-based learning activities. In assessing the views of the participants related later in this chapter, it is clear that, what is known cannot be ignored and that this capability becomes part of their world view once they are exposed to it. The other aim of these fora was to raise the awareness of the industry sector and to increase the demand for such learning provision - leading to a 'pull' situation where the higher education institutions are influenced by the more clearly stated and better informed needs of their stakeholders.

A significant contribution was made to the embedding of improved processes and practices uncovered through the collaborative project into the main stream process and culture of higher education generally. It is unlikely that this kind of progress would have been possible without the collaborative nature of the project encompassing as it did, a number of higher education institutions in the university and institute of technology sector as well as national policy organisations. The cooperative work approach highlighted a significant disparity of practice among the collaborating institutions. The practice was explored through a number of mechanisms. Working together in an open collaborative format also facilitated an open discussion around the genuine concerns that were impeding more widespread adoption of practices. The work focused on clarity of vision, quality of the learning and assessment practices.

The sharing of good practice was evidenced by the interlinked network of training activities reported on by the participants themselves, wherein project partners have offered their expertise and experiences to other higher education institutions within the partnership and beyond. Further to this activity, a number of higher education institutions who were not among the original nine project partners have requested workshops in recognition of prior learning and I have continued to work with the Irish University Association to assist in the exploration of RPL practice and integration within that sector specifically. In addition a number of short courses and stand-alone modules aimed at higher education staff have been developed in the area of recognition of prior learning policy and practice.

In a real sense, the sustainability of the efforts have been made possible by the allocation of an increased funding to the consortium under a follow-on activity aimed at further developing partnerships between higher education providers and enterprises. Both the *Education in Employment* project and the subsequent *REAP* project which I lead had been referenced in the Irish Higher Education Strategy 2030 document thus ensuring the embedding and sustaining of the efforts in the wider higher education sector generally.

Summary of the *Education in Employment Change Initiative*:

The leadership of the *Education in Employment* project presented a significant challenge and opportunity. It involved collectively employing a number of investigation tools and techniques and the leadership of a diverse range of participants towards the

project outcomes. The four main reports developed through the project are included as indicative output in Volume 2 of this work.

	Work-based and Blended Learning	Recognition of prior learning	Progression for craft certificate holders	Migrants and Higher Education
Research techniques employed	Survey Sharing of practice	Detailed case analysis Sharing of policies and practice	Surveys Exploration of practice	Focus groups Interviews
Major Outcomes	Report Part 2 Vol 2 Three Annual Seminars	Report Part 4 Vol 2 Staff Development activities Shared Expertise	Report Part 1 of Vol 2 and shared presentations	Report Part 3 Vol 2 Staff Awareness Seminar
Dissemination activity	Website Conference papers Journal paper	Website Workshops Conference papers Presentation to Irish Universities Association and Expert Group on Future Skills Needs	Website Presentation at all institutes of Technology ITAC Conference	Website Staff awareness raising seminars Conference presentation

Table 3: Overview of the different activities in the *Education in Employment* change initiative

The work completed under each of the various strands of activity involved a research element which considered the current practice within the collective of nine institutions and in Ireland generally as well as internationally. A significant partnership effort was expended on developing this current practice view into a good practice structure with appropriate supports. In order to ensure that the outputs developed achieved significant outcomes and that the desired reforms of systems and practices were realised the dissemination activity was supported by the Higher Education Authority at the highest level. Two of the reports generated under the initiative were launched by the Minister for Education (Parts 1 and 4 of Volume 2).

The Education in Employment Change Initiative - Action Research Approach

Through my work as leader of this initiative I realised that this presented a unique opportunity to learn from this innovative collaborative change initiative. My progress on the DProf journey provided me with the structure through which I could further explore the process by which collaborative change was achieved and develop from that exploration guiding principles for such change initiatives in the future. My work as leader of this change initiative was then to become the subject and the object of my research enquiry. Through the time spent in consideration of, and reflection on, research approaches and methodologies, I developed a view of the research approach appropriate to provide an exploration of my practice from a number of perspectives such that a contribution to practice in the management and leadership of these initiatives could be developed.

An overview of the research development activity is given in Figure 19. While the different stages of the research activity are depicted as separate and discrete the reality is that they are a complex interacting web of knowledge generation and application which act to inform the process generally and to direct it while in action. So the personal observations and viewpoint formed throughout the project were informed by the literature review and the development of a methodological framework for the work. The research question was informed by the external view available on the SIF initiative. These viewpoints informed the development of the guide for the in depth interviews which itself evolved as themes emerged through the process. This flexible response to an evolving context is described as an evolving methodology by Herr and Anderson (2005).

The overall objective as described in the project proposal is to distil the findings into a transferable framework and toolkit for change through collaborative processes.

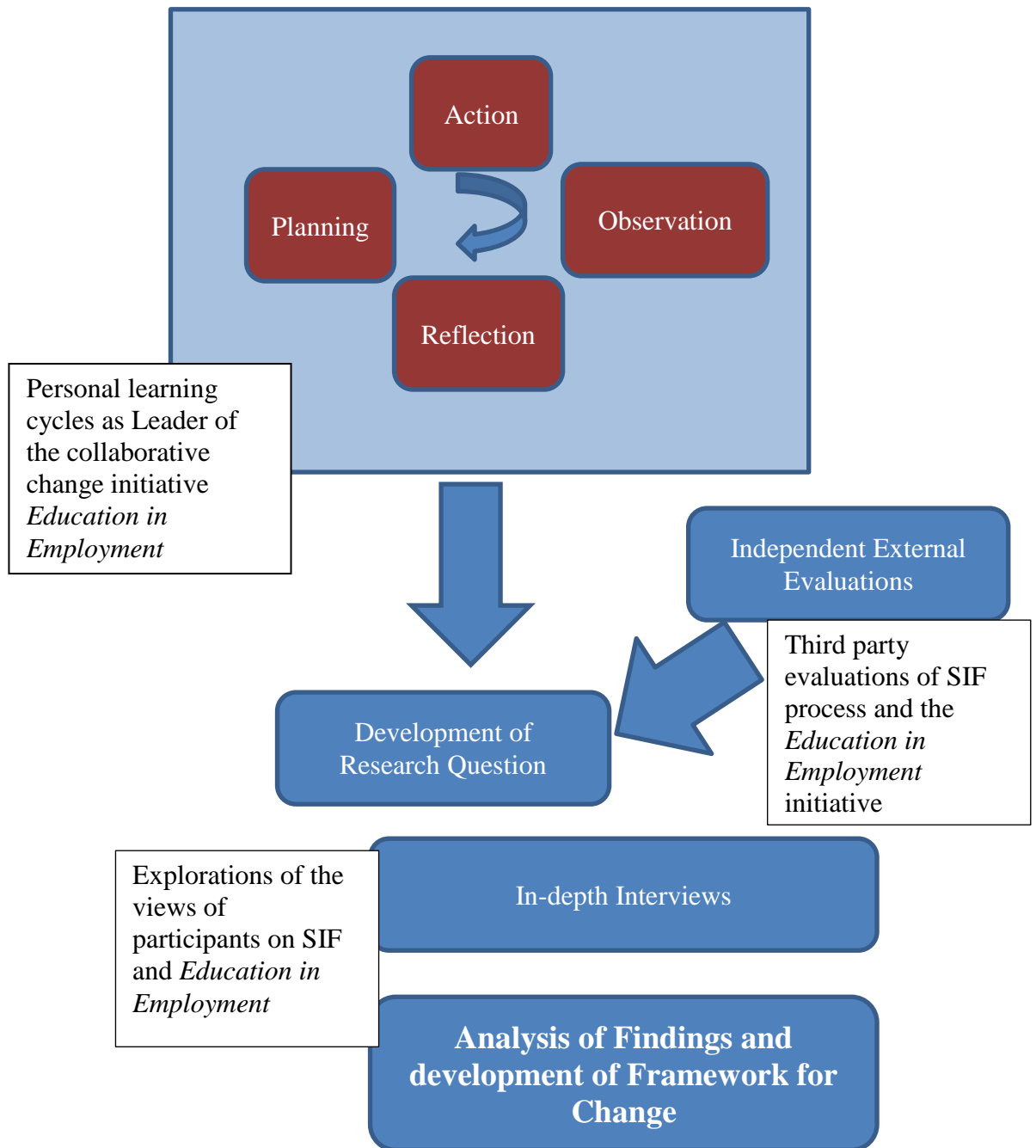
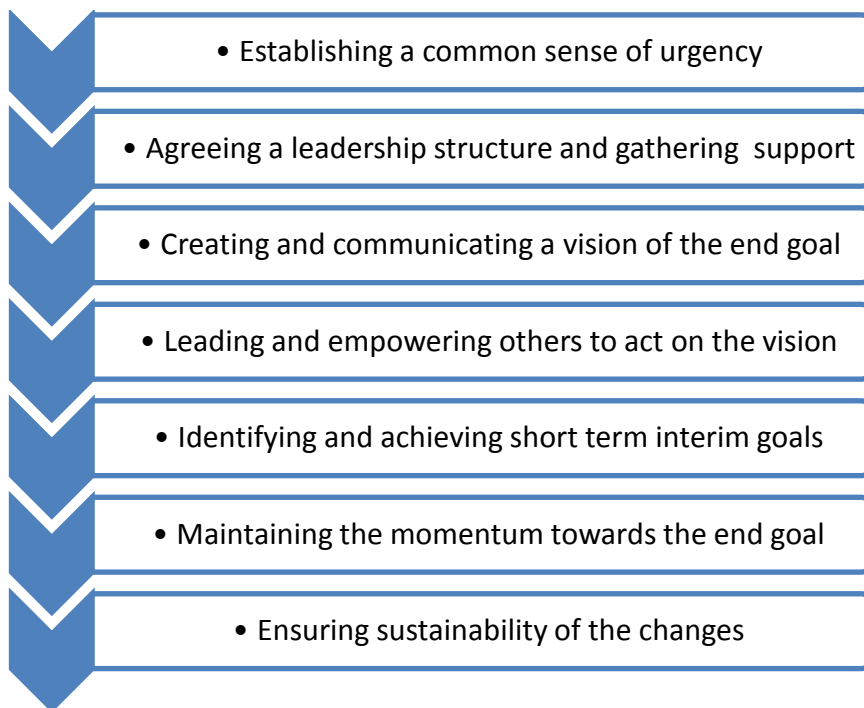


Figure 19: Overview of the Research Activity

As leader of the *Education in Employment* initiative I can plot my own personal journey which has been informed by the direct engagement with my colleagues as change agents. The really relevant learning has been gained through the cross-institutional collaborative process which offered a significantly different set of opportunities and challenges from the normal project management role. In order to illustrate my own personal learning and to demonstrate how that learning-in-action contributed to the

overall research process I have developed some of the more significant emerging themes from my practice and research and reflections on my actions and impacts as observed in leading the initiative and how they were dealt with in practice. These observations and reflections link directly to the early cycles of the Action Research approach as depicted in Chapter and the data in the form of explored experiences contributes to the later stages of the research and is, in turn, informed through the literature review and developing knowledge and experience.



In exploring the development of an enhanced Framework for change, I represent again my outline framework which was developed through my literature review and formed the *scaffolding* for the stages of the research project as presented earlier in this chapter. In order to illustrate my own personal learning and to demonstrate how that learning-in-action contributed to the overall research process I have developed some of the more significant emerging themes from the practice and research as observed in leading the initiative. These are the main issues which illustrate the tensions between the skillset and toolkit which I as a project leader brought to the task and the unique and novel difficulties presented by the task – in particular in relation to the multiple organisations structure which this project addressed.

In order to provide a clearer indication of the context within which the Education in Employment project unfolded as a vehicle for my own action research learning the following section provides a summary of an independent external review of the Strategic Innovation Fund initiative generally.

External view of the initiative

The first twelve months of the initiative was both challenging and satisfying for me as leader as I began to develop a reflective view of my work in the role which was removed from my analytical, engineering background. I was also naturally preoccupied with the success or otherwise of the initiative and how that might be achieved and evidenced. Fortunately during the second year of the project an external view became available. As the SIF funding mechanism was unique in the context of government funding structures for education in Ireland there were two independent evaluations of the SIF innovative funding initiative - one undertaken by Dr Gordon Davies and one undertaken by the Comptroller and Auditor General – these provide an objective analysis of this collaborative change initiative and they also concluded that the particular collaborative initiative under investigation in this current research project was particularly successful. These particular insights were part of an important framework of primary and secondary data which informed my own perspectives of my actions and also contributed to the research framework and methodology.

As a backdrop to the presentation of the research activity a summary of the findings of these two independent analyses is provided here.

In his report Davies states “collaboration is the key reason why SIF is essential to the future of Irish Higher Education”, however, he goes on to say “some partnerships are nominal formed on paper only because the competitive grant review process clearly favoured collaborative projects”. (Davies, 2010: 51)

One of the strong results of SIF that Dr Davies points out is that “institutions are learning that collaboration with one another can lead to stronger academic programmes and research, increased operating efficiency and significant cost savings”. (Davies, 2010: 5) In all there were 59 different initiatives funded under the first cycle of SIF funding SIF1 and a further 41 initiatives funded under SIF cycle 2. Dr Davies reviewed all of these initiatives and allocated a rating from 1 to 6 with 1 representing

projects that were contributing key outcomes of benefit to all of higher education and 6 representing projects that either never commenced or should be terminated. In total there were eight projects that attained a '1' rating. Of these eight projects four were 'sector wide' projects run through a national representative agency – either Institutes of Technology Ireland (IOTI) or Irish University Association (IUA) and one of the remaining four was adopted by Institutes of Technology Ireland. There were therefore just three collaborative projects managed by a lead institution from the total of 100 different initiatives that received the top ranking in this review.

In awarding the highest rank possible Davies commented on the *Education in Employment* project as follows:

Good use of limited resources. Practical outputs. Targets and objectives met under-budget and ahead of schedule; sustainability plan in place. This project is vital in today's economic climate.

In addition to Dr Gordon Davies mid-term review of SIF the Department of Education and Skills through the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General undertook an audit of the Strategic innovation fund in order to review the alignment of the projects with the overall programme objectives. While the review is not intended to compare or rate individual projects it does single out the *Education in Employment* project as an example of the collaboration achieved under the SIF initiative, and as an example of good management in the alignment of resources with outcomes and activities. It also points to the shared symposia and publications from the project as examples of the promulgations of learning so that the benefits can be spread throughout the sector.

Development of the research question

These external evaluations in addition to my own action, observation, and reflection cycles were assimilated into the development of the research question that guided this work. In further developing the research plan for this particular doctoral work and reflecting on my leadership of the change initiative I was concerned throughout with the success or otherwise of the change initiative that I led. Initially, I considered that the research work should focus on the question of *was the change initiative was successful?* However, while this perspective remained important to my own practice and to the funding agency, this question was largely answered by the two different processes which concluded that this was one of the most successful initiatives which emerged from the Strategic Innovation Fund process. Therefore the research question moved on to consider the question of how can I use my leadership of this cross-

organisational change initiative to contribute to the design and leadership of these initiatives in the future?

Answering this question led to a consideration of why this particular initiative was successful and in order to provide a structure which would ensure that the learning gained and knowledge generated would have broad applicability I determined that my research would seek to identify optimum practice in the management of cross-organisational collaborative change initiatives in Irish third level education leading to sustainable change.

Recognising the potential move toward this kind of collaborative initiative funding mechanism, this research will develop this further into a framework which draws from this particular initiative into principles or blueprints which can guide the development of innovative proposals and the allocation of funding in future. In particular my focus was on the specific aspects of this action research initiative which would support activities such as this in the future and address many of the gaps in structural support in the existing literature and change support frameworks.

From my own action-observation-reflection cycles presented earlier around the structure of the change framework I had grown to realise the significance of the particular change agents and the challenges presented by their role within collaborative cross-organisational change initiatives. I understood that their views would provide a valuable insight and would be essential to the development of a framework for change which would be applicable to cross-institutional initiatives.

In-depth Interviews with Change Agents

Adding to my own reflection on my actions and my learning which evolved into changed actions, and in order to get a broader set of informed views and perspectives, I resolved to develop a research strategy which would include the other significant actors in the process and would capture very valuable experiences and enrich both my own practice and other such processes in the future. The threads of the data from the early Action research stages including, my actions, observations and reflections, the external analysis of the projects, the review of literature all contributed to the development of the approach through which the interview data could be collected and interpreted, in this way the various threads from the Actions Research cycles depicted in Chapter 2 are woven together into the analysis and outcome in Chapter 5.

In order to explore in detail why the change initiative worked and how it was experienced by some of the more significant actors a series of twelve in-depth interviews were conducted with change agents who were deeply involved with the initiative from a variety of higher education organisations. The project structure itself determined the potential interviewees for this research. The nature of the project meant that there was a limited number of people directly involved with the overall change management project within the partner higher education institutions and a much smaller number of people with detailed knowledge of the change management project outside of those institutions. Over the years of the project some of those involved had changed role or function and were no longer involved. In selecting the people to interview consideration was given to ensuring that a spread of change agents from large and smaller organisations was included and that those with the greatest involvement in terms of time and effort were included where possible. The population of change agents considered for interview was considered in light of the following parameters:

- Individuals who had been involved on behalf of their organisation with the Education in Employment project for more than 2 years
- Individuals who had contributed to the work of the project and contributed to the decision making processes consistently over that timeframe
- Individuals who had been responsible for communication and negotiation between their organisation and the Education in Employment project
- Individuals with direct knowledge of the funding agency priorities and other SIF projects and in a policy influencing role locally and nationally

Using this process the group was self-selecting. Eighteen people were identified as potential participants and following, two pilot interviews conducted to refine the interview guide, twelve of these were selected for in depth interview.

Access and Cooperation

There was full cooperation of the research participants. All agreed to be part of the study and no restrictions were applied. Access to the research participants was freely available for the researcher facilitated by many years of working together on the project. In all cases the study being undertaken and the purposes of the research were clearly explained in advance of the interview and the interview guide and a consent form were provided in advance.

The research was viewed by the participants as an opportunity to influence the funding organisation and their own organisations in the selection and management of such projects in the future. This opportunity was not something that they might otherwise have had. In considering access and cooperation of the participants the researcher reflected on the particular roles – due to the nature of the distributed project organisation none of the research participants directly reported to the researcher in any way. They were senior actors with considerable influence on behalf of their own organisations and within the project framework. Due to the timing of the research at a late stage in the project life cycle all of the research participants were in a position to reflect in a meaningful way on the project output and outcomes and the implications for their own role and that of their organisation.

All of the interviews were conducted in a face-to-face mode in a location and at a time suitable for the interviewee, with the exception of one conducted by telephone when a face-to-face meeting with an interviewee had to be cancelled.

The interviews were conducted over a seven month period and were fully transcribed. The transcriptions are available from the author. In order to protect the anonymity of the participants and their organisations in the presentation of the research activity and findings, none of the quotations or observations presented is attributed to individual participants.

Semi-structured Interview Process

Qu and Dumay (2011) consider three broad categories in the continuum of interview methods as structured (tending toward positivist quantitative with a large number of cases) semi-structured and unstructured (tending toward romanticism with a single interviewee). They state that the localist sees the semi-structured interview as an opportunity to explore the research question with the respondent within a particular social context giving a situated account. In this research the research question to be explored is in a particular practice context and setting and the interviewees are those who are in a unique position to provide their personal situated accounts. The semi-structured interview, providing as it does an opportunity to guide the questioning along prepared themes, yields data which can be analysed along consistent themes.

One of the most important parts of the process was the development of an interview guide which would help to ensure that the same thematic approach was applied in all of the interviews. The development of the guide was informed by:

- Review of literature on change management
- Observations and reflections on my actions and practice in leading the project
- Analysis of Strategic Innovation Projects available from the Higher education authority

Two initial pilot interviews were conducted allowing the guide to be refined. The semi-structured interview process, while guided under planned themes was flexible enough to allow the respondents to answer in their individual conversational styles and to accommodate variations in the pace and ordering of questions suitable to the particular context. The conversational style was facilitated by the researcher and the respondents existing relationship.

Collection and analysis of the Semi-structured Interview Data

Having collected the interview data it was fully transcribed. The analysis took the form of a staged process which included immersion, familiarization and reflection. This included listening to the recording as well as reading the transcripts. While the interview guide provided a structure it did not serve to limit the themes that were explored as these were allowed to follow the participant conversation flexibly. At this stage in order to analyse the data and arrange it in usable forms, I took some time to reflect on the interviews in the context of research question and my own evolving view of my practice in the context of the literature review.

The process of organising the data for analysis centred around the printed transcripts and included:

Identification of concepts or themes:

It was established through reading and listening that concepts did recur within the interviews. Some of these concepts were predictable and arose from the interview guide directly. Some were less directly attributable to the interview guide and arose from the respondents. As can be seen from the interview guide the role of the individual change agent themselves, in relation to their employer institution and in relation to the project activity was not included as a questioning theme. However this role arose as an important theme in over two thirds of the interviews. When asked about their views in terms of the level of collaboration of the institutions and their views

in relation to the sustainability of the changes or structural barriers to this type of change initiative almost all of them related their own experiences and feelings in relation to their institutional support for them as a change agent at the periphery of the organisation and in relation to their participation in the project. In this way the interviewees contributed to the identification and development of themes which contributed to the research findings.

Cataloguing and coding themes

Once a set of themes had been identified they were catalogued and used as a reference guide for re-reading the transcripts. Within each of the transcripts sections of the responses relevant to each identified theme were grouped and coded. At that stage all references to particular concepts could be easily identified and these grouped references were reconsidered to see if what was actually said could contribute to refinement or reconsideration of the theme. This coding also facilitated the retrieval of data sections categorised under the same themes and allowed a rich set of quotations to be identified for inclusion.

I also considered carefully any of the interview content which did not seem to fit under the emergent themes to ensure that all of the content was included in so far as it contributed to the research question.

Analysing the data

Having identified and grouped the data the next stage undertaken was an analysis of what had been said and how it could be interpreted in the context of the research question, in the context of the framework for change which I sought to contribute and how could it contribute to my understanding of my own practice and of practice generally. To analyse the data I reconsidered what was being said within the framework of the themes. I considered each research participant's contribution under a particular topic or theme and questioned myself about what they meant – how what they were saying could be interpreted in the context of my practice and a framework for change management generally. Where they related something that they had experienced – such as a lack of visible support from an executive manager figure or a visible manifestation of a change of culture within their organisation - I worked to tease out the data in terms of what it might mean in the context of the project and whether it was supported by other participants. While not seeking to reduce the data to a quantitative data set I did seek instances of similar or dissimilar views around themes and the analysis of the data presented in Chapter 5 reflects this approach.

In the analysis I found that I had very little difficulty in clarification or interpretation of the views expressed probably due to the close working relationship that I had with the participants.

Contribution of the interview data to the research

While my own actions, observations and reflections combined with a review of relevant literature were significant in my development of my own practice as a project leader, the contributions of the research participants to my ability to critically reflect on my practice and to the development of a meaningful transferable framework for change management projects was immeasurable. The interviews provided a lens through which I was able to broaden my understanding of the impacts of my actions and to gain a greater appreciation of the complexity of the change management process and the implication for the various change agents and actors. The themes which emerged from the interviews are explored in the following sections of this chapter and those themes and viewpoints are directly embedded in the Framework for Change which is represented in Chapter 5. In particular the Framework for Change distils the views of the research participants relating to the roles of the funding agencies, change agents, participating organisations and project management

Validity of the Data

There are several things that can impact on the credibility, dependability or validity of the data gathered through the interview process. It usually is considered to depend on factors such as the ability of the researcher to gain the trust of the participant, the ability of the researcher to conduct the research and the analysis without bias, and the motivation for the participant in being involved in the process. In this case I was confident that the research participants were comfortable with the interview process and with the aims and objectives of the research. They all had a number of years in a working relationship with the researcher on the project and had no motivation for approaching the research with ulterior motive. None of the research participants would benefit from any particular outcome or finding. In terms of the researcher bias I needed to undertake the research as a practitioner-researcher recognising that I was at the core of the research question and also undertake the research in a reflexive way recognising and questioning any bias that I might have.

In this case I questioned the validity of the findings through the credibility or workability of the outcomes – whether the research finding have a resonance or relevance for

others. I undertook a process of 'sensemaking' wherein I discussed and considered the research with colleagues who were involved with projects in order to get a view on the usability of the data. I was also in the fortunate position of being able to test the validity of the work through another similar follow-on project which I was involved in leading. Through this process of consultation and trial I was able to build confidence in the research findings.

Main Themes Arising from the Interviews

From the literature review, my personal reflections and observations as the leader of the change initiative, and from the interviewees themselves several important themes emerged. These themes were:

- National and international drivers for change in higher education in Ireland
- Impact of this particular change initiative
- Aspects of the collaborative change approach
- Difficulties encountered
- Distinctive features contributing to the success

These themes then contribute to the overall development of a framework for future collaborative funding mechanisms. They relate to the chosen framework for change and will directly inform the development of those stages into a relevant framework which takes account of the complexity of the endeavour.

The findings will be presented here in the form of discussion and quotations under each of these headings.

Drivers for change in Higher Education in Ireland

All of the interview participants were asked to give their views on the drivers for change within the Irish higher education system generally and were then asked to consider the impact of the particular drivers shaping the change initiative under consideration. There was almost complete unanimity among the participants on the most significant change drivers that were mentioned. These are summarised as:

- Global context
- Economic imperatives
- Internal institutional drivers
- Technological developments
- Changing social and personal aspirations

This broad understanding of the forces and the drivers for change by the participants in this change initiative echoes with Oakland and Tanner's (2007) assertion that an appreciation of the external environment can contribute to the success and survival of organisations in a changing context.

Global Context

In considering Ireland's position globally the OECD (2004) report and Ireland study visits formed a significant backdrop to the participants' opinions. The Bologna agreement and the resulting structural and programme changes with particular relevance in terms of learner mobility and transferability of skill sets were mentioned. The global context was also considered in terms of the economic imperatives and the changing skillsets required within the Irish workplace as these are influenced by competitiveness and the movement of multi-national production facilities to lower cost economies as this has a significant impact on the up skilling and employability of the workforce.

The global context was also mentioned in terms of the performance of the Irish educational system in the various benchmarking studies.

For me it's the global context... the imperative to have a highly skilled flexible workforce and to be able to compete globally...

There is a very frightening possibility of a genuine deterioration in our schools and educational system

These global comparisons and an opportunity to look at ourselves from an external perspective help to drive change

Another driver is the internationalisation of the educational context, not just research and research benchmarking, but also in terms of differentiation and diversity of provision

Economic Imperatives

All participants alluded to the economic imperatives for change. In particular the changing economic climate in Ireland over the course of the change initiative duration and the policy directions that arose from that were of particular relevance. The initial *Education in Employment* project proposal and, indeed, all of the SIF Cycle 1 proposals, were developed during the summer of 2006 when the balance of payments

and the economic outlook in Ireland were very positive. Over the course of the following three years, there was a very dramatic and unprecedented change in the economic climate. Interestingly, the deteriorating national economy, while it could not be, and had not been, anticipated at the outset, probably gave an even greater impetus to the changes that this particular initiative sought to enact. The economic aspects included consideration of the current unemployment rate in Ireland, the reduction in resources available for higher education, the increased participation in full time and part time education.

A key driver is the economy with more and more people returning to education because they have been made redundant or for whatever reason, they want to return to education to get the skills and qualifications that will equip them better for future employment

Our education systems need to change and evolve to meet the changing needs of the workforce and of those who left education early and seek to return.

There is a strong policy drive to get us more involved in lifelong learning, providing opportunities for those who seek to update or change their skills – this drive is both at national and institutional level.

The Department of Education and the Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment are major drivers for change because of the need to up skill and reskill people within the current economic and social climate

Certainly at the moment cost is a major driver, I'd say that's driving collaboration, it's driving everything. And also related to cost is the increase in numbers coming through the system

Internal institutional change drivers

The interviewees noted that not all change is externally driven. Change is driven from within the institutions themselves in response to the external and internal factors. Change is often driven through regular institutional review processes, through changing management structures or personnel, through the search for on-going quality improvement or through changing demand populations and profiles.

Our processes and the educational product that is offered is constantly changing and evolving, albeit quite slowly to continue to remain relevant to the particular student population that we serve

The institutional leadership drives change from within, quite often a new president is expected to 'make a mark' and to, perhaps dramatically or perhaps subtly, change the direction

Our culture is probably one of continuous change – often driven by quality assurance processes

The second driver and it's sort of underpinning everything – it's almost like the elephant in the room, the issues around quality. Contributions from major multinationals, for instance, about the quality of our school leavers and graduates can have a major impact. So I think issues around quality at both second and third level and fitness for purpose and so on, are drivers for change and everyone in the system has a concern about them

There was also recognition that change is driven through knowledge developments – within particular disciplinary settings and often a major driver is the research that is conducted within the organisation which contributes to knowledge generation and also to learning developments through curricular enhancements.

Academic programmes are subject to change - driven perhaps from the research agenda and development within the institution and driven down into the teaching

Technological developments

All of the interviewees agreed that, within the higher education systems, new technologies are making an impact in the approaches to teaching and learning and in the advances in learning management systems. These changes are seen as supporting new developments and advances in teaching and learning and assessment of learning and as facilitating the move to valuing and recognising the learning that takes place outside of the traditional classroom setting.

We cannot over look technology and the impact that it has for supporting learning through e-learning etc.

We need to do more in the e-learning space – we are not at the table at all there at the moment and there are great opportunities to learn from what others have done and minimise the resource costs. Employers are going to demand this of us so that'll drive it forward at any rate

We have moved from a system that was less flexible to one that is more flexible, we have made advances in the number of students registered on distance learning and e-learning but there is considerable work to be done

Changing social and personal aspirations

Ireland has undergone a significant change over the past three decades. Access to third level education and the resultant participation at third level has increased dramatically. Employers now expect job applicants to have attained levels of learning beyond upper secondary and parents' expectations for their children's education extend to third level generally.

Some of the drivers are internal to the people themselves, in Ireland it's certainly every parent's determination that their child do better than they did

People expect more of us – they expect more places, more courses, more supports for students, we are dealing with a more and more demanding cohort and that means we have to change

This particular change initiative

All of the participants were asked their views on the particular *Education in Employment* change initiative in which they were involved. They were asked if changes had resulted in their organisation due to this initiative, if those changes were to policy and practice in the organisation and if changes have been made to the culture within the organisation as a result of the initiative. They were also asked to express their opinion on the sustainability of those changes.

The participant responses will be considered under the following headings:

- Impact of this initiative
- Policy and practice changes
- Culture changes
- Top down versus bottom up changes
- Sustainability of the changes

Impact of the initiative

All participants agreed that the SIF change initiative that is the subject of this research made a significant impact within their particular organisation or in higher education generally.

It gave us targets, it gave us something to aim for – prior to this project we would have been involved a bit with employers but it wasn't structured

It gave us a greater focus to achieve our aims and we've learnt a lot

I have been enormously impressed by the impact that it has had and by the potential of collaboration to leverage change

I would be very positive about the institution's involvement and about the SIF as an enabler of change

We learnt a lot about other institutions but also a lot about ourselves that we hadn't known or hadn't put together prior to this

There have been very positive outcomes – some arising from self-examination by institutions and the dissemination of good practice within and between institutions

The project achieved a common understanding and achieved common processes and procedures that wouldn't have happened without it. That was a very positive development.

Policy and practice changes

From the beginning, the change initiative was intended to bring about changes to policy and practice within the participating institutions. The funding agency was clear that SIF funding was intended to impact in a meaningful way on higher education providers. Many of the interviewees pointed to the difficulty in isolating the impact of a single initiative from all of the other factors in a climate where there are many different drivers. All interviewees indicated that involvement with the initiative had resulted in actual changes to policy and practice within their organisations. For example, at the end of the initiative all partners had developed and adopted institution-wide policies in relation

to RPL and had shared a number of examples of practice in relation to work-based learning in partnership with employers.

Policy and procedures in our institution have changed dramatically since the start of this initiative and they are much more clear and transparent

We never had developed a formal policy prior to this and we have now – that is a major step forward for us

There is an internally agreed policy, procedures, processes rather than what was previously done in an ad hoc system – there is an awareness of the new systems and a new body of knowledge

We have real practice changes on the ground – staff who had never been involved before are now and they have been supported by a staff development exercise that means more people are considering these aspects of teaching and learning and it can be kept going

In relation to RPL, I think that my organisation got a serious wakeup call when they saw the institutional practices elsewhere. I don't think that we had every seriously considered the potential of RPL. I've been at so many meetings lately and I have been kind of smiling to myself because RPL comes up and I know that it only happens because of the work that we did on Education in Employment – the conversation here has moved from the rhetorical to the practical conversation of how important it is and how we are going to do it.

The changes that we have made are completely operationalized from next year, so the changes are happening that quickly. Again it shows that given the right circumstance there is a lot of commitment to introduction policy changes that are seen to support student or potential students, and that is completely due to our involvement in Education in Employment

It was great to be involved with the national agencies in developing policy – that gave the work a bit of a cachet internally

We have put together a workshop from the work that we did together on the project and we have delivered it in a number of different colleges – we have

also been asked to participate in international events by some of the national agencies – so we are now disseminating the practice - that has been great leverage for the work internally in the institution

Cultural Changes

While it is relatively straightforward to identify and report on changes to policy and practice it is more difficult to identify change to attitudes and culture within a complex organisation. All of the interviewees were asked to consider the impact on the attitude and culture of their organisation brought about by their involvement in this change initiative and to identify, if possible, how that changed culture manifested itself.

If we see culture as 'the way we do things around here' then that has changed – yes. There has been a change – maybe a very slight change - in the value system as it relates to education for people in the workplace – culture tends to change very slowly

Changing thinking is difficult; you have to bring about a change in mind-set and in some ways that only happens over time. Changes to culture evolve through the opening up of ideas and we achieved that through exposure to other people's thinking and through various fora allowing the presentation of different perspectives.

You have to remember that the outside culture changed enormously in the time involved and no organisation can be immune to that. It meant that the changes that we were making together could not be just lip service they had to be real and embedded and here to stay

Changes to culture are hard to tie down but you can see them most evidently in the informal communication channels. Our seeing ourselves in terms of the contribution that we make to the community. You can also see changes in the willingness to be involved in these initiatives and to volunteer. Viewed in this way we have made an impact on the attitudes and culture.

My organisation was approached by another similar organisation to explore the possibility of a joint submission for funding – that sort of direct approach would never have happened before this. So this collaborative work has allowed a

great number of institutions to talk to each other and perhaps to dispel some of the preconceptions that they had about each other.

Sustainability of the changes

In all change initiatives a major consideration is the 'refreezing' of the organisation when the changes have been effected and are adopted back into the organisation's standard 'way of operating'. If this stage is not effective then a change initiative cannot be considered to be sustainable and embedded. In this particular initiative the funding from the higher education authority had a time scale of three years and the initiative was funded on the basis that the changes would be incorporated into the partner institutions structures and would be mainstreamed so that they would continue to impact well beyond the funding window.

In order to establish the sustainability of the changes the interviewees were asked if the changes made were sustained within their institutions. At the time of asking the project funding had been ceased twelve to eighteen months previously depending on the timing of the particular interview.

We don't have a choice really these changes had to happen and they have to be sustained and we have managed to sustain them but we can't operate at a loss either – there is a funding implication

Well the project is over for a year and a half now and we haven't reduced our linkages with companies, in fact we've increased them. But I don't know if that would be happening if we didn't keep a dedicated resource in place. I would say to a large extent the work has been sustained and is sustainable

Perhaps the question of sustainability asks us to reconsider the funding model. We are all expecting changes in the short term in the way that part-time and full time education is funded and we expect this to help significantly in sustaining this type of work

The network of contacts that I have built up is still there – I'm still in touch with the people - that didn't stop with the funding and I've been asked to visit several other colleges to talk about what we've done so I'm actually enlarging my network of contacts

The collaborative aspect of the change initiative

As a change leader trying to drive collaborative change the view of the various participants is of enormous importance. In each of the interviews the participants were asked to talk about their experiences of the collaborative nature of the initiative and the impact that this had on the work of the group during the change initiative and after it had ended.

The responses broadly divided into a consideration of the:

- Collaboration prior to the SIF initiative
- How the collaboration was experienced by each of the change agents
- How collaboration developed
- Is there a lasting impact

Collaboration prior to the SIF initiative

All of the participants agreed that they had no experience of collaboration on a process such as this with other institutions prior to this initiative. That is not to say that there are no joint or collaborative endeavours undertaken by third level institutions in Ireland. Most, if not all, of the research funded through Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) or Enterprise Ireland (EI) is collaborative in one way or another. There are also fora in which the higher education leaders work together on issues of mutual concern and to establish top-level policy including the Irish university Association (IUA) and the Institutes of Technology Ireland (IoTI). However, this process through which groups of institutions joined together to agree on aims and objectives and to bid for funding to achieve those aims, working together under a single leadership to devise and combine research and analysis and produce joint collective outputs resulting in changes to internal process and procedures and structures was unique in the Irish context.

There was very little culture of collaboration within the Irish system,

Because of the nature of academic systems there tends to be very little collaboration between schools and departments within an institution not to mind between institutions

One of the main challenges was that it asked the organisations to work together in order to define the required changes and to bring them to fruition

It seems very difficult to work collaboratively with someone that's your competitor, we wouldn't have had any experience of that prior to the initiative.

It was certainly new for me. As far as I was aware, institutionally, it hadn't happened before, a sharing of information, a sharing of experiences, at a level that I don't believe happened before

In fact the benefits of the collaboration initiatives formed under the first cycle of the SIF funding had an immediate benefit for the second cycle projects. Our SIF 11 project benefitted from the groundwork that was done by say your Education in Employment project. It had set a way of doing business, everyone sitting down together, people had got used to working like that

How the collaboration was experienced by the change agents

The interviewees were asked their views on how they experienced the process of collaboration and the networks of contacts that were made during the work on the projects.

It was slow and had to be worked on

Institutions never see themselves fully internally, you get a much clearer sense of your own institutions when viewed from outside. It's the same as leaving Ireland, just when you are on the plane and you see the country from a distance, it's like you've extracted yourself and now you can see it from a distance

We swapped common experiences, common frustrations, that's where a lot of the value was.

The first year it was difficult to see what we were doing at all but at the end you could see new relationships were built. Personal trust takes time to build up.

It was good to talk to people in other colleges, and to compare yourself against them and you like to think that you could get to where they are and that you could find out how they got there

The whole idea of the collaborative approach is that this information is shared, it gives us something to aim for but also a resource in that you can get help from other colleges along the way, I found it very useful in that way.

It gave me a leverage to get things done, I could come back to my college and say this has been done elsewhere and we could do it here, it gives extra back-up to what you are proposing

What SIF has done is ended the isolation of the enthusiast and given people great courage and endorsement that their enthusiasm has relevance for nationally desirable reforms.

Not alone did we not know things about other colleges before we started, we didn't know about ourselves until we saw ourselves reflected in other mirrors

We had an opportunity to get a real view of what was happening in other colleges – sometimes the practice differed from the rhetoric

What SIF allowed us to do was give us a bit of time, breathing space, money to be more coherent and better informed about what it is that is important to us

The value was in the groups getting together, common interests, interests in students and so on

How the cross-organisational collaboration was developed

From the outset collaboration was a very unique and important feature emphasised by the funding agency. Without experience of involvement in such project, collaborating on a peer-to-peer level within institutions, there was a considerable learning curve in establishing what was to be a successful collaborative change initiative. The interviewees were asked their views on how the collaboration was made to work.

Projects that tried to impact on society quickly appreciated that they could not do it alone. You can tackle internal issues in isolation but if you really want to impact on the educational profile, skills development, or economic wellbeing of a region you can do very little on your own

Whereas here we had cross-institutional collaboration from the beginning and we had that commitment from the actual individuals who were concerned with the issues and could then disseminate the findings within their own institutions

The interaction between the organisations was at the level of the 'do-ers'. You got the real information because you had the process owners at the table. It was much more believable and useful at that peer-to-peer level

I suspect that we have underestimated the realisation by staff on the ground that there is a lot more to be gained by working together collaboratively

It was important to have the same people at the table all the time. You need one person and that person should be going to 90% of the meetings. At some of the meetings where colleges were sending different people they weren't up to scratch and you were a bit frustrated with the process.

If you don't have that immediacy of meeting people face to face it can fade into the background – the personal contact reinforces the commitment to the project

SIF as an enabler of change is a no-brainer in my opinion, a prerequisite from learning from one another is collaboration and information sharing and SIF enabled that sharing

Will the collaboration have a lasting effect?

During the course of this research work the Higher Education Authority was in the process of coordinating the development of a Higher Education Strategy for Ireland and while that Strategy was only published in January 2011 (Higher Education Strategy Group (Ireland) 2011) it was widely speculated for a considerable time in advance of publication that the strategy would recommend a reduction in the overall number of publically funded higher education providers. This is, in fact, the case and while the document does not prescribe exactly how, it does urge institutions to seek partners and to create more effective and efficient merged entities. The interviewees were all aware of this background during the course of the research work so the exploration of sustainable impact of the SIF collaboration initiatives is considered in light of this larger background for collaboration.

I suppose it's hard to isolate SIF from the general environment – it's clear that we will have to work together

I would have talked to my colleagues in other colleges 4 or 5 times between meetings. Because, you know them, you've seen them, and I can still do that after the project is over. It's established now and I have a network to consult – that's a lasting change for me

Sure, we'll have to continue to share. The government can't afford to fund things separately in all of the colleges, what took one college a few years to learn shouldn't take another college a few years to learn, the learning from the first college should be passed on and in turn they should receive learning from other colleges.

You can't rule out the developing Higher Education Strategy and the discussion that preceded it, to put it bluntly, some of the smaller institutions are too small to survive – they do not have the critical mass and the only way that they are going to be able to move forward is through collaboration

Collaboration has to happen, I remember having a discussion with XX in Institution X and it was clear that we had gone as far as we could go alone – to go further we had to get the sector moving. So collaboration was selfish in a way, it was about sharing what your own organisation had done but recognising that you could only grow and develop if others were growing and developing too

We're a small country we should be able to share and disseminate.

The collaboration was an underpinning thing. In fact it was something of a Trojan horse for the broader strategy which is likely to call for more collaboration in future, and it has given the Irish third level education sector a taste for what can come in terms of the potential and difficulties associated with collaboration

Top down versus bottom up change

One of the distinguishing features of this initiative and of the Strategic Innovation Fund generally was the fact that the participating institutions were asked to agree and propose their own change initiatives, defining the goals and objectives collectively

under the leadership of the lead institutions. The proposal stages also included the requirement to cost the change initiative and outline the activities, outcomes and sustainability strategy. The interviewees were asked their views on this innovative change model where the changes sought were agreed by the institutions and not proposed by the Government, Department of Education or other national agency.

The bottom up approach was important but it is also important to capture the learning and to use it to inform strategic thinking within the institutions.

SIF was a very valuable experience in working together and driving change and I hope that they continue to fund those kinds of initiatives, but the HEA should ensure that the SIF findings are used and are fed back into policy

None of the national agencies is resourced or intended to manage the details of the institutions. This funding mechanism was to incentivise the development of outcomes that were desirable but were institutionally driven. In some ways SIF was bribery for change

The ideas came from the institutions but they had to be aligned with the strategic plans. That has developed thinking around the strategic plans of the various institutions and the distinct institutional missions

Because the plans weren't handed down in a decree you felt more ownership over it. We felt that we'd come up with the idea so we'd better implement it. Whereas if you were told that this is what you have to do, it would be a case of 'who are they telling' wouldn't it?

The real drive came from the ground up. We were exploring practice and using it to develop policy. Not trying to drive a new policy into practice

How's culture or practice ever going to change unless you get participatory involvement from the people within the institutions? If it's a constant top-down filtering through then nothing will ever change in the culture. It's very important that people at all levels within the institutions and across institutions can work together to develop and contribute to an understanding of what we are about and what our priorities are

SIF looked for bottom-up change but they should have been more selective and put more strategic thought into what they funded

It's alright looking for bottom up change but to make things really happen they need to be visibly driven and prioritised from above

Difficulties encountered

All of the interview participants were asked their views on what difficulties arose and what they might have done differently in hind sight. In many cases the respondents had experience of being involved in a number of projects funded under the SIF initiative and were able to reply from the perspective of a number of different initiatives

It does take time to for it to start up and you need the same people from each of the colleges – if it's a new person you end up back at square one

It was quite difficult – especially when there were difficulties in terms of getting institutional support for actually releasing people to work on the project – there was a lot of goodwill but unless it is recognised as being important institutionally it is very difficult

There were teething problems – there was a lot of shuffling of participants but that comes back to institutional commitment and it shows the importance of getting the right people involved from the outset

There weren't really structural barriers – more like commitment barriers – did you have the right person there representing the institutions

Where there was just an internal focus of the initiative it was a waste of money in my opinion. Where the collaboration was not real and where it was not embedded where institutions were taking the money and then working separately to different goals it was just a waste of time and money

A big difficulty with some of the SIF projects was a lack of ambition

There was some ambiguity about the funding mechanisms and the level of funding at different stages during the project and that caused problems when it was not clear for a while that the projects would get the planned level of funding

Money is the measure of everything, what gets measured get done

I've never believed that money is the main issue, it can be an issue; often it's an issue only if the idea is not right

The HEA did not have the staffing or the resources to analyse the submissions and to identify the really strategic initiatives and to play a matchmaking role ensuring that they were joined up and aligned

We're not able to develop sophisticated metrics to gauge how successful this is – we need to know what the mission is – are we doing this for profit or for the public good and then measure ourselves against mission. Some of our missions are not well enough defined

Institutional collaboration requires institutional commitment – what's the level of commitment at management level

We all came to it from different perspectives, different mind-sets and different organisation sizes

It was very slow to start – maybe three years is not long enough.

Money is a barrier not just to us in the institutions but to students as well – particularly part time students who have to pay fees

Jargon can be a huge barrier – we need to break down the inaccessibility of the higher education ivory towers

There was fear because we didn't know how to work together – in some cases people started out thinking 'that college could take away half my students – I might have no class next year' – it made people slow to share initially

One of the big difficulties is that most colleges are full to the brim with students anyway. There have already been really significant changes modularisation and semesterisation brought about big changes and challenges for lecturers, so there may be significant resistance for future changes.

There was a lot of bureaucracy in the process; ironically as the funding dropped the bureaucracy went up

I saw a lot of the same people at different meetings and I was very concerned that the change initiatives were only reaching a small number of people initially

Distinctive features of successful initiatives

All of the interview participants were asked to identify the reasons why some initiatives were successful in achieving goals and objectives. The participants generally had personal experience of being involved in a number of different SIF initiatives and they all had access to the external reporting and comparison of initiatives.

The responses identified some of the significant features contributing to success as:

- Scale and ambition of the projects
- Leadership and management
- The particular focus
- The individuals involved

Scale and ambition of the project

In responding the participants comments on the scale of the projects relate generally to the number of participating partners and the scope of the changes sought and not necessarily to the funding allocated.

Projects that were ambitious and far-reaching were more successful.

It's about scope and scale and the Education in Employment project was right up there in terms of mission – our own project should never have been funded – and there were lots more like that with a good idea but too small – they should have been told to go off and find a mothership

The (successful) proposal was very far reaching and stretching

The themes that were successful were themes that resonated with the greater number of players – they emerged from real needs or ambitions and were likely to have more partners

Leadership and Management

All of the interviewees considered the leadership and management of the particular change initiative as a key element of the determination of the success. They commented on the particular complexity of managing cross institutional projects.

I have been struck enormously by the impact of individuals. Individuals drive change. All of the successful projects have key individuals that just have a ruthless determination to deliver on the project and have a kind of patriotism or a determination that the Irish higher education sector will be enhanced.

The leadership and management was key – Education in Employment had a clear, well-organised, well-motivated leadership and that can't be separated from the success of the project

The impact of the leadership of the project cannot be overlooked. There was a huge responsibility for the leader and the lead institution. Managing people with different views from different institutions and fostering collaboration was really important

Project management has been vital; the key people hadn't just an ability to manage projects but to generate a shared sense of purpose around a project and a feeling that it is relevant.

This particular project, for the record, was a model of organisational drive and financial management.

Communication was important – the meetings and the emails and updates

I think politically this project was handled very, very well and sold itself well at the appropriate levels – it was good to be linked to it. Overall it managed to influence the people who have the power

Branding and identification for the project meant that there was something that we all felt a sense that we belonged to – we weren't experts in branding and marketing but the brand did gather value and we did feel happy to be associated with it.

The particular focus

In further exploring why some initiatives 'worked' many of the respondents commented on the particular nature of the endeavour.

Why were some of the projects successful – they were coherent with mission and were seen to be of real value, they were believed in and they were tightly managed?

That's not unrelated to the fact that the larger collaborative projects probably had a greater coherence with mission

The emergent themes...

This project reached a stage where the external appreciation of the relevance of the work was magnified beyond all expectations and the project kept delivering outputs to feed the emerging appetites. It was brilliant

The successful projects have leveraged permanent reform in how Irish education operates and how it does its business – there is no way back now.

The individuals involved

Separating out the project management and leadership role from the role of the team members of the projects the interviewees identified the particular people who worked on the projects as important to the project deliverables.

A lot of it comes back to the individuals involved – that they are willing to share and willing to help and a culture of openness

Putting the right people out there was the real enabler so that the collaboration worked at a peer level but it could be brought back into the institution as well – you had to be listened to when you brought back the ideas and the plans

What happened is that the individuals involved in the broader seminars and conferences got a huge sense of enthusiasm and rejuvenation through the intensive but informal and pleasant academic professional development

I think that the projects were successful because we've moved beyond getting everyone to agree on everything

Leading large collaborative endeavours there was a subtle shift from the position that you couldn't move on until everyone agreed to a situation where you move with what appears to be the majority consensus and deal with the fallout – manage by exception and make no apologies for confronting people with performance.

Conclusion

This chapter presents the research activities undertaken in this collaborative change initiative in Higher Education in Ireland. It begins by drawing an outline of the existing change support frameworks and identifying a framework for change which is evolved from the relevant literature and used as a structure around which the stages of the project actions are presented and considered. The *Education in Employment* change initiative is detailed and an outline of the learning gained in leading the initiative is provided as well as the leader's reflection on the actions and how an insight into how those reflections translated into changed actions and contribute to the development of a new framework.

Through the work presented here the learning journey of the action-research approach provides an insight into the gaps or deficiencies in the existing change frameworks and my own practice and approach in dealing with the particular complexities and the messy reality of a cross-organisational change initiative. The change initiative was the subject of a number of reviews and the findings of those reviews is presented as a third person perspective underlining the success and the particular features of the initiative.

Finally a series of in-depth interviews with the main change agents and participants is described and the themes are grouped and extracted in preparation for the analysis of those findings which is developed in Chapter 5. Analysis of these views detailed in Chapter 5 helps to highlight the importance of a number of key players in the process and makes a significant contribution to the development of a new framework.

In Chapter 5 the various perspectives on the experience are woven into a re-usable framework for change which builds on the learning gained here and themes which emerge are further developed into a Framework for Collaborative Change across organisational divides which addresses the deficits identified in the existing structures and which will be applicable generally.

Chapter 5: Analysis of Findings

Introduction

The actions undertaken in each stage of this action research project are summarised in Chapter 4 wherein the project activities and findings and my own learning through the action-research process were described through the lens of a framework for change. This chapter will detail the analysis of those findings and will further explore the outputs which will be developed from the project activity. The findings will be developed into a more evolved and applicable framework for change with particular relevance for collaborative initiatives in higher education. Chapter 4 explored the steps undertaken throughout the project stages and illustrated those activities through a summary of the findings and the cycles of influence where one set of observations and activities impacted on the next. Chapter 5 brings all of the knowledge generated together in the context of the output sought. The rich contributions collected in the in-depth interview stage are combined with the personal observations and reflections of the researcher and the third party evaluations undertaken. The findings are not exhaustively represented in this analysis. Rather, an overview approach is taken to combine, analyse and frame the findings in a format that will lend itself to the generation of a framework for change.

Following the analysis of the themes emerging from the research activities described in Chapter 4 these are further developed into an output in the form of a Framework which is intended to support and inform such collaborative change initiatives into the future. The structure of the framework is devised such that it meets the needs that were outlined in the review of existing structures to support this type of change considered in Chapter 4. The output is a framework which addresses the design stages, the operational stages and the dissemination and embedding stages of cross-organisational collaborative change initiatives in a useful and meaningful structured format.

The overall structure of this chapter is summarised in the Chapter map shown below.

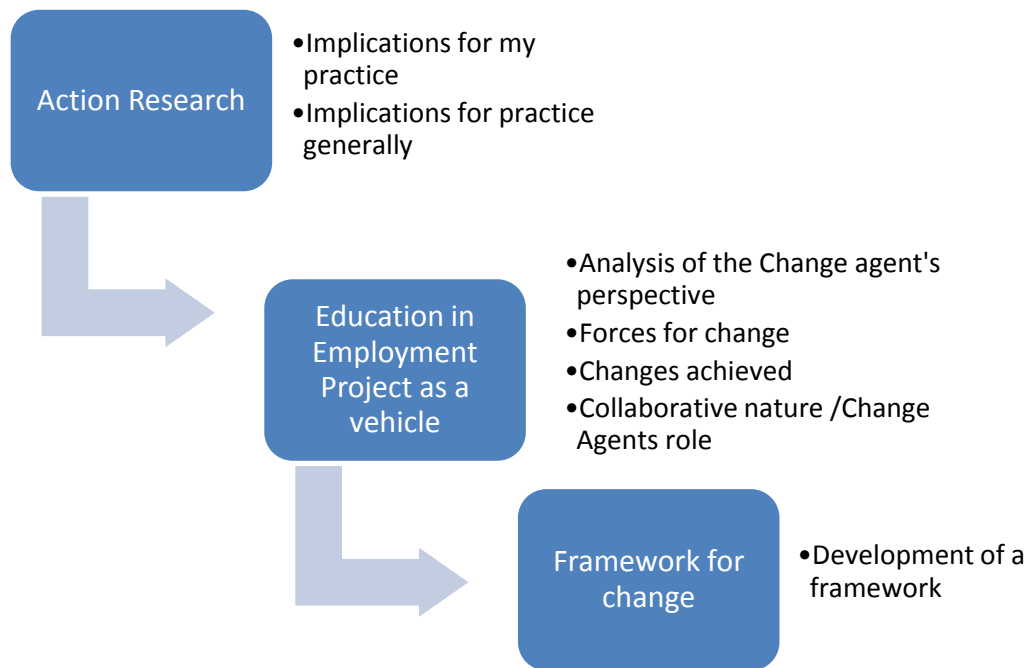


Figure 20: Chapter Map - Chapter 5

Action Research

Through the action research journey undertaken in the research project I have been able to develop an ability to critique my own practice. McNiff (2010) describes self-critique as probably the hardest discipline to develop. The ability to ask questions about 'what I am doing' and 'why I am doing it' and 'whether I am doing what I should be doing' requires an ability to see beyond individual tasks and activities and to question a broader basis within which the task is undertaken. It leads to a questioning not just of what the impact of the particular action is, but of why, and how, it might have been done differently. It also questions oneself and one's worldview and understandings in undertaking the actions.

In presenting this work I realise that the actual strands of activity undertaken under the *Education in Employment* project as described here have happened and have been influential within the broader context of higher education in Ireland. However, the change initiative itself has been just the vehicle for the research; the true outcome of this journey has been my own development and learning. In chapter 4 an outline framework for change was developed which acted as a skeleton structure through which the initiative was explored and my own personal learnings were presented. In addressing the stages of the structure for change through my experiences and the tools kits which I possessed at the outset I was able to plot the emerging development of a new world view and a toolkit with which I will approach all future activity.

The most significant feature of the work undertaken, and the feature which made this an innovative and unique learning experience, was the involvement of nine different potentially competing institutions in a collaborative change endeavour.

It was this aspect that challenged my existing framework and worldview. It meant that in each of the stages of the change initiative, I, as leader, had to consider a complex interplay of organisations and their representatives with varying motivations for, and commitment to, the change initiative. On reflection, it is clear that it was this very feature of the complex environment that exposed the flaws in my positivist approach and ultimately shifted my management and leadership style from a task-focused towards a more people-focused approach.

In developing this more people-focused approach and in attending to the complexity of the reality within which the change agents and their organisations exist in this collaborative change structure, I have sought to present this analysis of the research findings in a structured way drawing out the key roles of the policy setting or funding agency, the collaborating organisations and the change agents, supported through my own observations as a reflective and reflexive leader and through the insights of the agents themselves.

In my review of literature and my development of a model for change management the main insight that I have gained through my own practice and the 360 degree perspective gained from external experts and the participants themselves is that the framework for change must address change leadership, management and support from a number of different players' perspectives. In the next sections the valuable insights gained from the change agents are considered in light of my own experience and reflection and are developed into findings which support the emerging framework for change.

Motivation and Forces for Change

As discussed in Chapter Two, and as observed by Bowman (2000), some elements in any organisation will inevitably change. These changes will either be made voluntarily within the organisation, forced on it or just occur spontaneously from within. Change, however, is never complete as it is a continuing element in any organisation. When an organisation fails to recognise the need for change this can lead to its failure. For an organisation to be sustainable, it must adapt to ever-changing environments. Like any

business organisation, educational institutes must recognise that they need to constantly evolve and be aware of the forces of change in their environment before they can be competitive and attractive to potential customers, i.e. students. According to Jamali (2005), educational institutes must meet the needs of the ever-changing business environment and educate their students to cope with changing business requirements and to equip them for future challenges they will face in the workplace.

During the course of the four years since the first allocation of funding under the Strategic Innovation Fund the national context has changed significantly in terms of the performance of the Irish economy and in addition the Higher Education context was subject to a major review prior to the development of a Higher Education strategy document. Given this dynamic context, as might be expected, all of the research participants in this study spoke animatedly and authoritatively about the various drivers for change within their organisations and in higher education generally. Their views were largely well aligned, with most of the participants pointing to the global context, the economic context and a variety of internal institutional drivers. The perception of the change agents and through them an understanding of the collaborating organisation's perceptions of the change imperatives is an important underlying parameter in the first stage of the Framework outline – that of Creating a Sense of Urgency. Their contributions are explored and analysed in the following subsections.

Global Context

All twelve of the participants alluded to the performance of the Irish education system within the global context. This was referred to in a number of ways. Some of the participants regretted the lack of greater internationalisation within the Irish system. The relatively low numbers of non-EU students and the reluctance of Irish students to study abroad in large numbers were referred to by one respondent. Particularly in relation to research funding and collaboration there was a general view that Ireland needs to compete on an international stage and a recognition that in international comparisons in Education such as University rankings and OECD reports Ireland does not perform particularly well. However the most commonly raised issue, referred to by eight of the interviewees, in terms of the globalisation agenda related to the economic context and Ireland's national competitiveness and productivity on an international scale including the skills base challenging our ability to increase skill and reskill the workforce in response to changing economic imperatives. Our view of education as an export business was referred to by one of the respondents who went on to comment:

Another major driver is the whole internationalisation agenda, and that is tied to resourcing in many respects, strategically internationalisation is very important but is that driven by the desire for Ireland to be a more internationally relevant higher education sector or is it back to money? Do we seek to double our international numbers in order to increase our income?

Economic Context

Not surprisingly, in the current economic climate all of the interview participants quoted economic imperatives as significant drivers for change. These impact on the educational environment both in terms of the demand for education and, for instance, the growing cohort of unemployed who seek education and in terms of the overall national funding for education including the availability of resources within the system. There is a general acceptance that change and, in this context, collaborative change is inevitable. Many of the participants stated that working together in this way is a 'no-brainer'. With one participant in particular stating clearly that the government could not afford to keep funding the same things in different colleges. There was a general recognition that Ireland as a country is too small to have 21 separate, publically-funded higher education institutions and that some coherence would become inevitable. This view was more clearly articulated by those at higher levels of management within the partner organisations. In terms of the economic drivers for the particular kinds of change sought in this initiative, five of the research participants made reference to the ability of employers and the unemployed to pay for the lifelong learning agenda and the inequity of the funding model which sees higher education provided without fees to full-time learners while part-time learners pay.

The recently published *National Strategy for Higher Education* (Higher Education Strategy Group (Ireland) 2011) clearly indicates that this funding model will be changed and it heralds a new era of collaboration at an institutional level which will have far reaching effects on the system. This issue of institutional merging or the creating of a smaller number of providers and the issue of fees for part-time and full time students are very important for the higher education system in Ireland but are beyond the scope of this work and remain within the remit of the policy makers as the higher education strategy is adopted into policy and practice in the coming years.

Internal Institutional Drivers for Change

In considering the internal drivers for change within the particular institutions there was recognition that the nature of education and of programme and curriculum development

will ensure that there is a continuous stimulus for change. Another participant particularly pointed to quality in this respect and referred to it as the 'elephant in the room'. The influence of quality assurance processes and the various external review activities to which higher education providers are subjected by professional bodies, awarding councils and quality boards are a continuous background driver to change within the institutions.

In driving successful change the participants pointed to the importance of the commitment of the institutional management to the change and to the operationalization of the changes. A number of the interviewees talked of management paying 'lip service' to particular initiatives. This was particularly evident with some of the respondents who felt that where a change initiative was undertaken somewhat at 'arms-length' within their institutions and that there was an element of being seen to be involved and working on it but without real institutional backing or commitment which emerges as a key parameter in the success or otherwise of change initiatives. This was expressed as a feeling of being left somewhat adrift by a number of the participants at the early stages. Without a sponsor at the executive table and without visible commitment from the institutional executive the change agent can become powerless at the interface between their own particular organisation and the collaborating partners. It will militate against the penetration of the learning and the knowledge collectively generated into the organisation. This was expressed as the frustration of not being able to successfully 'bring it all back home' in the early stages. One of the respondents stated:

Projects led by champions who were institutionally supported – who were central people, or who were brought into the centre, and brought into the strategic thinking of the institution – those worked well.

Another driver which was mentioned by approximately half of the respondents was recent technological developments in teaching, learning, assessment and learning management systems. This was considered to be particularly important in the context of the learning developments of relevance to workplace learners. Employers consider the use of e-learning and e-supported delivery to be a significant differentiator in terms of accessibility of education. Where technological advances were mentioned it was accompanied by a regret that the particular organisations had failed to embrace the potential of this type of provision fully as yet.

Summary

All of the respondents considered a wide range of different drivers for change and all were in agreement that change is an inevitable feature of life within the higher education system. This was reinforced by the publication of the *National Strategy Higher Education* (Higher Education Strategy Group (Ireland) 2011) document which signals significant change. These findings in relation to the main changes and change drivers experienced in the higher education system in Ireland had some similarity with those identified by Bryson (2004) in relation to changes impacting on the sector in the United Kingdom. As might be expected there were some specific differences relating to the Irish context. In particular the economic imperative while mentioned in Bryson's work emerges much more significantly as a theme in this work.

The majority of the respondents pointed to some significant external drivers for change over which they felt that they had very little power. These were considered to be contextual conditions which were somewhat a fact of life and inevitable. The particular higher education provider's internal commitment to the changes sought was considered to be of significant importance in the successful involvement of the institution in a change process. In other words, the change sought has to be aligned with the institutional ambitions and reality and driven or owned internally in order to be successful. This requirement for internal drive or oversight of the change process at a high level within the institution was illustrated through the interviewees recounting of their varied experiences with change processes. This recognition of the role of senior management in supporting and driving change was in line with the research of Heifetz *et al.* (2009) who stress the importance of an appropriate and in some cases adaptive leadership to successfully guide change.

The interviewee attitudes to the reality of the external change conditions contrasted somewhat with their experiences in the SIF change initiative. In reporting on their involvement in the *Education in Employment* project, all but one of the participants reported positive feelings that could be interpreted as empowerment resulting from their involvement. One of the main positives emerging from the research participants' opinions was their experience of the collaborative process and the opportunity that it afforded to them to develop a network of contacts throughout the participating institutions. This points to a particular feature of collaborative change initiatives which is derived from the camaraderie and togetherness that can result from combining efforts and gathering momentum behind a particular end goal. The unique, collaborative nature of the change initiative is developed in the next section.

The Education in Employment collaborative change initiative

The stages of the framework for change which relate to the development of a structure and the identification of, and movement toward, long and short term goals and ensuring the sustainability of the changes are particularly influenced by the collaborative nature of the initiative in question. In order to arrive at a particular framework for change which addresses these particular aspects the perspectives and experiences uncovered in Chapter 4 are further explored and analysed below.

Strategic Innovation Fund Proposal Stages

The Strategic Innovation Fund sought proposals from collaborating institutions under a number of broad headings. This call for proposals instigated a process whereby institutions initially attempted to establish their own internal priorities and then sought partners for their chosen initiatives. It was not, however, a one-pass linear process and following consultations and meetings between potential partner institutions there was a series of iterations leading to an agreed set of proposals signed off by the presidents of the partner institutions. Ideally, the mutually agreed project proposal would then have been in complete alignment with all of the partner institutional missions and also aligned with the parameters set by the funding agency to determine the funding decision support structure. However the experience in practice was that the people involved in the range of funded initiatives are, in some cases, cynical about their institutions motivation for involvement. Others pointed clearly to situations where the collaborative element of the project proposals was seen as a box ticking exercise where an institution would agree to be involved in a project which benefitted one institution in exchange for that institution agreeing to be involved in another project. This view is supported by Dr Gordon Davies review wherein he points clearly to a lack of real collaboration in some funded initiatives. Some of the interviewees refer to the 'made-up collaboration' or 'convenient collaboration' of some of the initiatives funded. My own experience and my involvement at the planning stages of a Strategic Innovation Fund proposal was that the timing of the call and the need for a detailed proposal preparation including funding details at a granular level caused great preparation and logistical difficulties for institutions in negotiating truly collaborative proposals. Meaning that unless the collaboration underlining the proposal was based on some already existing mutual respect and trust it was going to be difficult to achieve in the timescale.

What emerged clearly through the research was that where the initiative proposed was sound, clearly aligned with institutional mission, and had ambitions supported through multiple partners then the collaboration was more likely to be embedded within the institutions. As one respondent put it 'large-scale projects like *Education in Employment* had a greater coherence with mission – not that the projects had to be large to succeed but you were less likely to get a multiple of partners to unite behind something that was not seen as important'.

Argyris and Schon (1996) consider the steps necessary to combine a collectivity into a coherent 'organisation' which 'cannot just shout and mill about together but which can make decisions and translate those decisions into action'. The stages which they identify are:

- Devise agreed-upon procedures for making decisions
- Delegate to individuals the authority to act for the collectivity
- Set boundaries between the collectivity and the rest of the world

It is clear from the research that the intention of the initiative needed to be supported by the project partners in order to ensure that they collectively gathered behind it and that the necessity for change crystallised into shared purpose, shared vision and especially shared values leading to success in achieving the project outcomes (O'Toole, 1995).

Involving the partners in the change initiative in the early design and planning stages as well as the implementation and process changes is supported by Schultz's (2007) and Piderit's (2000) research which suggests those who are going to be affected by the change process should participate and be involved in order to ensure a successful change process. The interviews pointed to the importance of this kind of ownership of the initiative where the partner organisations had an involvement in setting the goals and targets.

I don't think that a decree from the department for a particular change without any evidence is of any use to anyone. Something that is emergent and collaborative is a much more sensible way to go in a small country like Ireland.

Changes Achieved Through the Initiative

All of the participants agreed that the initiative under consideration had contributed to changes within their institutions. The nature of the changes achieved was explored, and it emerged that, in the case of all interviewees, there had been tangible changes in policy and practice resulting from their involvement in the *Education in Employment* initiative. Nine of the twelve interviewees reported less tangible changes to the culture of the organisation. Consideration was given to the difficulty of isolating the impact of this particular initiative on the culture from the broader context in which the organisations operate. There was a broad view that the changes achieved would be sustainable and would become part of the way that 'we do business' into the future. It was suggested that the context and background of the development of the *National Strategy for Higher Education* (Higher Education Strategy Group (Ireland) 2011) provided added impetus to the sustainability of the changes sought. In a few cases, questions were raised about management commitment to sustaining the initiative and whether they would be sufficiently embedded within the system to remain in the absence of funding in the longer term. However there was ample evidence that particular changes were sustained sometime after the funding phase of the project was completed. Some of the more significant outcomes include:

- All institutional partners reported that institute-wide policies on recognition of prior learning had been developed in line with the *Education in Employment* RPL report and all have reported increased demand for RPL. The report contained in Section 4 of Volume 2 details the policies and processes supporting RPL within the institutions as developed through the project work.
- Throughout the project partnership timescale more than 16 WBL partnerships including flexible work-based learning provision have been developed. Some examples of the partnership models developed are detailed in Section 2 of Volume 2.
- At least eighteen different progression pathways for craft certificate holders into cognate higher education programmes have been identified and developed. These new pathways into Higher Education have been developed based on the examples provided in Section 1 of Volume 2.

All of the interviewees who were directly involved on behalf of their institutions in the *Education in Employment* project pointed to specific changes in policy, practice,

behaviour, staff development or attitudes as a result of their involvement. Some expressed concern about the slow pace of change 'responses for a big organisation can happen locally first but now centrally the response is coming as well, it can appear slow but it is difficult to shift a big organisation but it has now been happening'. All were confident that there was no way back and that the changes were 'here to stay'. One respondent put it succinctly in relation to their own views developing through interaction with project partners 'once you are exposed to new information it becomes part of your thinking'.

Collaborative nature of the endeavour

The novel and innovative feature of the change initiative under research was the requirement for the participating organisations to work together to share their practice and agree on good practice parameters collectively. The particular collaborative nature of the initiative was explored with all of the participants and in reviewing the responses this featured largely in all of the respondents' interviews highlighting the novel approach being taken. All of the participants reflected on the fact that this was their first experience of being involved in this type of an initiative and all of them responded very positively at a personal level and noted their access to a network of colleagues within other organisations which they developed through the initiative. This informal network was pointed to as one of the lasting positive experiences to come from involvement by the particular change agents. Their own narrative and anecdotes pointed to a new openness at a personal level between institutions. This was described as a 'personal steering group' which was created and would help the change agents to remain at the interfaces of the organisations and to continue to build a matrix of interaction at a variety of levels.

At an institutional level the vast majority reflected positively on the impact of the collaborative nature of the endeavour but others were more sceptical about the level of collaboration between organisations that was achieved and would remain. In line with the consideration of the proposal process, one observed that in the cases of some of the other initiatives funded under the SIF fund the collaboration was 'pretend'. This was also observed by the external reviewer Dr Gordon Davies who commented on organisations who put forward collaborative proposals for funding in order to meet the funding criteria but without actually working together in any meaningful way. This was a feature of some of the projects which were rated badly in his evaluation. One of the participants in the *Education in Employment* project was positive about their own involvement at a personal level but felt that the organisational involvement was less

than it should have been. Two others stressed that they had benefitted significantly from their involvement and that policy and practices had been changed particularly through exposure to information about practice within other organisations but that the management commitment in their organisations had been lukewarm and was not likely to continue without directives from the Department of Education. Another talked about their ability to bring the changes back home and to apply them and be heard within their organisation. That particular respondent was clear that at a personal level their collaborative work was a very positive and lasting outcome and that their organisation was happy for them to be part of the project and to contribute meaningfully within the project but they felt that they were not heard when they tried to bring the learning back within their own organisation in terms of influencing changes to strategy at an organisational level. It was felt that this was something of a lost opportunity. This was referred to by one respondent as the ‘peripherally’ of some of the initiatives:

It's not the peripheral innovation fund it's the strategic innovation fund and as such it should be at the core of strategic change. If you believe in that concept it's not a 'nice to have' it's a 'need to have'. It goes back to the concept that some projects were driven out of small units at the periphery of the institutions without a central core champion – that's not strategic...

One of the particular benefits of the collaborative process which was pointed out clearly by all was the opportunity to develop an informed view of their own organisation from an external perspective. Seeing their organisation through other eyes and having an opportunity to gain an inside view into other organisations was beneficial both in informing the change process and was also used in some ways to leverage change within their own organisations. Six of the respondents pointed to the impact internally of using their knowledge of practice in other places against which they might benchmark themselves. These change agents used the ‘they are doing it like this in XX’ as a very real stimulus and found that this was very effective. Another pointed to the futility of trying to bring all opinions to a complete consensus and the efficacy of the approach which undermines opposition by highlighting good practice and gradually raising the bar for all. This was referred to in one case as ‘confronting people with performance’. By sharing details of practice, outcomes and outputs, good practice emerged as a silent but powerful driver towards the desired project outcomes.

In the words of one of the interviewees:

We've moved from thinking that collaboration is about research projects to the realisation that collaboration is something that can be achieved across these messier nebulous systems and processes that are more on-going. One of the biggest things that was achieved was a common understanding and language. We got comfort out of realising that what was completely dysfunctional in XX was equally dysfunctional in YY!

Another, noting the important of the initiative in fostering collaboration within, as well as between, organisations, said:

You're seeing collaboration now across the functional units in institutions that would never have thought to step outside their own office to talk to anybody, that's really important.

In considering the development of the initiative ten of the respondents talked about the time taken for trust and relationships to be developed. However all agreed that these relationships and the levels of trust achieved were essential for the initiative to work. It meant that the information that was shared was considered to be real and to reflect actual practice. Every single participant pointed to the physical interactions and the face-to-face meetings and the informal interactions that were developed as key to the creation of the network of change agents which is a legacy of the project. O'Toole (1995) points to trust as the one element powerful enough to bind together independent units in a world characterised by forces of entropy and fragmentation. He goes on to say that trust emanates from leadership based on clear purpose, vision and values which are shared.

Relating this back to the development of a definition of collaboration in Chapter 2 the major elements of collaboration from the research included sharing, partnership, interdependency and power (Liedtka and Whitten 1998, Evans 1994, Stichler 1995).. The participants pointed to the lack of sharing at the early stages in the development of the overall aims and the vision for the project. It was not at all clear that the participants knew what was meant by collaboration or how collaboration differed from other ways of working. Identifying the importance of the development of trust and relationships clearly contributes to the development of sharing and partnership. Developing the sense of purpose around the work and ensuring that all change agents 'bought in' to the process provides a framework for interdependency.

Based on the observations of the researcher and the reports of the research participants in the interviews a number of observations can be made about the nature of the collaboration. At the project proposal and signup stages the stated collaboration

was clearly a paper exercise to meet the requirements of the funding agency. There was no real sharing or interdependency. It is arguable that the interviews point to developing partnership and interdependency relationships between the participating members of the project team but it is unclear whether this level of collaboration extends beyond the individual level and into the organisational level. The majority of the interviewees point to growing trust and shared experiences among the project team members but this does not directly translate to the organisational level. The question remains as to whether this was cooperation or collaboration within the context.

Bottom-up versus top-down change

In considering the change initiatives all of the respondents with the exception of two welcomed the opportunity for the institutions, through their change agents, to take responsibility for the planning and implementation of the changes under the SIF project as opposed to the top-down changes that would have been driven through the system by the Department of Education or the various funding authorities in the past. Most agreed that this opportunity for self-direction was very welcome and allowed greater ownership of the change process and the outcomes. One dissenting voice here was the participant who was of the opinion that bottom-up type change is not effective in the long run and that it is much more efficient and effective for the policy makers at government level to decide on the direction required and drive it through the system, this would contradict Ouchi's (2004) research which found that no one likes to change without having the chance to influence the plan of change.

However, it is interesting to note that, despite the participants generally welcoming the opportunity to propose initiatives under the funding scheme, it was almost universally agreed that the funding authority should have been more restrictive in terms of what was funded. The general respondent's view was summed up by the interviewee comment that 'they funded a whole range of conflicting or overlapping projects and it wasn't clear to anyone what was going on', 'they should have been much more focused in terms of what was funded', they should have forced mergers or demarcated work between institutions at an early stage in the process', 'one of the projects that we were leading should never have been funded'. Two respondents referred to a range of wishy-washy endeavours which were funded but had very little value in their view. One clearly stated that it had been a free-for-all and that the funding agency should have been a lot tighter on the thematics in the call for proposals and far stricter in the evaluation criteria. So, despite the view that the institutions welcomed the autonomy to

combine to propose initiatives, there was a feeling that the parameters under which this was done should have been more tightly controlled by the funding agency, more selective and more transparent.

The Role of the Change Agents

In considering their role in the *Education in Employment* change initiative all of the institutional participants reflected that their role required them to act both externally to their own institution and also internally. All participants referred to the difficulties that this posed for them and to the importance of the individual involved and the support that the individual enjoyed from the executive level of their home organisation. This was mentioned in some cases as a sense of frustration with other colleges in their choice of individual or their lack of consistency of involvement. In other cases it was expressed as a personal frustration in the difficulty that was experienced in trying to get traction internally for the changes that were sought. Nine of the respondents pointed explicitly to the importance of getting the 'right person' involved in the project. Interestingly the 'right person' was not identified as someone at a senior management level but rather a process owner or as one respondent put it 'the do-er'. It was felt that the value that was gained from involvement in the initiative stemmed from sharing real information and analysis of processes and procedures and practical implementation within the organisation. This meant that the most important participants were the owners of that information.

In analysing and combining what the participants said about the role of the institutional level change agents in the process, the role can be identified as:

- Bringing to the collaboration a knowledge and understanding of the process under exploration
- Being empowered to explore the process within their own organisation and bringing those findings openly to the group
- Contributing to the discourse and the development of an agreed way forward in collaboration with the group
- Bringing that message back to their own organisation and influencing the internal system to implement the desired changes
- Being an advocate for the embedding of the changes within the system and for the establishment of the staff development exercises that might be needed to support the changes

- Continuing to leverage the strengths of the team in overcoming internal barriers and identifying continuous improvement opportunities

From my own notes of meetings and correspondence with the change agents over the years it was clear that where there was lack of consistency in the individuals (change agents) representing the partner organisations there was a sense of frustration on the part of the others that this was slowing the process. Where the person at the group discussions was unsupported from within their own organisation there was a sense of futility. New contract hires who were appointed to represent their organisation's involvement in a specific cross-organisational endeavour suffered from a lack of understanding of, and a lack of penetration into, their home organisation. Sevier's (2003) research points to the need for all of the people in the organisation who will be impacted by the changes to be clear as to the goals and processes. Even this basic communication chain is difficult within large complex often multi-site education provider organisations. For those who are seen as being in some way peripheral to the core mission of the organisation it is even more difficult. Therefore, as leader of the initiative, I needed to identify the difficulties in penetration of the endeavours and to address them through the project initiative structure as far as possible.

This need for support from the institutional executive level for change agent was identified and addressed at an early stage of the process through the creation of a Steering Group formed from members of the executive management of the partner organisations who took on the role of advocate or sponsor of the project within their own organisation and who were asked to meet internally with their change agents. This allowed the formation of a matrix within each participating institution where the change agent representing that particular institution on each of the different strands of activity of the overall *Education in Employment* project had an opportunity meet together in order to provide a joint approach and where they had a clear pathway to the executive table of the organisation it presented an improved opportunity to meet the objectives.

The move to ensure visible support at a high level within the organisation was in line with Karp and Helgø's (2008) assertion that those who seek change need to seek out the natural supporters of that change within the organisation. One of the disadvantages that a new hire has in this situation is a lack of the organisational intelligence that would help them to identify the internal supporters and opponents of change. According to Saunders (2005) the organisation will generally break down

along the lines of 20% who will tend to be supportive, 50% who will be on the fence and 30% who will oppose the change (cited in Karp and Helgø, 2008).

From the in-depth interviews and the change agents' reflections on their own roles in the collaborative change initiative, it is clear that they recognised over time that this dual role which was expected of them had a number of significant challenges. Over time, reflecting on my own experiences in leading the change initiative and informed by the respondents views, I recognised the unique nature of this role of these particular individuals who are charged with acting both inside and outside their organisations in the change process and I will term them ***Boundary Spanning Change Agents***. While the literature supports the importance of leadership in the change process and that would be supported by this research, the distinguishing feature of this particular change initiative is the requirement for collaboration between organisations in the change process and this role of the individual who needs to act outside their organisation and then to influence developments inside their organisation is one that does not feature in the literature.

Where the literature refers to boundary agents it is in general in relation to relatively long term and economically-driven contractual arrangements between organisations – in terms of sub-contracting or supply chain management for instance. Organ (1971) reflects that 'it is not really organisations that interact - it is people'. He goes on to consider the role of the boundary agent in acting as a source of knowledge about the external organisation and environment for members of their own organisation and about the potential conflict that role may bring. The boundary agent is grappling with at least two different sets of goals and values – those of their own organisation and those of the organisation with which they need to interact. By nature of the role, the boundary agent is acting outside authority and normal power structures. Organ (1971) does recognise that the boundary agent, in having the opportunity to view their own organisation from an external vantage point, will often become a change agent. In recognising the role of interpersonal forces in shaping inter-organisation relations Marchington and Vincent (2004) consider the importance of the role of 'boundary spanning agents' in overseeing and monitoring contracts on behalf of their organisations. They recognise that inter-organisational relations cannot be developed or maintained without significant links at a variety of levels in the organisation in addition to the top-level contract signing.

Change in organisations, according to Karp and Helgø (2008), is about the shifting of identities and the subtle formation of new relationships brought about by communication and the evolution of new shared understanding. They go on to say that leaders in seeking to lead change should find ways that influence the development and direction of change by changing the on-going communication within the organisation. Difficult as this might be for one organisation it is increasingly complex in an interrelated web of nine organisations where the communication processes seek to span organisations. The role of the various actors in this shifting sense-making was one of the key themes that emerged from this research into the various participants' views of this cross-organisational change initiative.

In this current research what has emerged from an analysis of the interview data is that the participants who took part in the *Education in Employment* collaborative change initiative were acting in a role which will be described here as Boundary Spanning Change Agent. While none of the participants used this term it is clear from the research that they were charged with both representing their organisation externally and conversely representing the collaborative initiative grouping internally. The most significant difference between this role as encountered here and that described in the literature is that these change agents are identified and came together specifically to effect change. The Strategic Innovation Fund was intended to bring about reform. The boundary spanning roles described in the literature are intended to deliver on inter-organisational economically-driven contractual arrangements and their role in forwarding institutional change, where it is mentioned, is considered incidental.

Having recognised and begun to draw out the role from the experiences reported by the interviewees it is clear that the characteristics and behaviours of the individuals involved are important.

The interviews support this view:

Individuals are key – their influence cannot be over-estimated, the people and the vision that they bring

I found that the people who got involved were champions and people who were interested in change, so it probably attracted a certain type of person

The people that I met on Education in Employment were people who were fairly keen on something different and doing things in a different way

If you have the right individuals representing the different partners and they are the kind of individuals that are open to sharing and open to cooperating that helps as well

At the outset and in bringing together the project team my neither my organisation as lead partner nor myself as project leader had authority or influence over the selection of representatives at the project partner institutions. From reflection on my own experiences and observations and the interviews conducted it is clear that there was an element of self-selection among those involved in some cases. In other cases representatives from an institution would attend group meetings intermittently and would change from time to time. Most of the interviewees commented that consistency and commitment in representation, having the right person at the table was vital in terms of project success.

While the selection of the individual and their particular characteristics were not considered explicitly in advance in this instance, it is clear from the research that they will have a significant impact on the outcome of the change initiative and that greater consideration of this role can contribute to such initiatives in the future.

Leadership of the collaborative change management process

While each of the individual change agents involved in the change initiative undertook a leadership role at an appropriate level within their organisation and their span of influence, the overall leadership of the initiative also emerged as a strong theme throughout the interviews. All of the respondents viewed the leadership of the initiative positively and linked the leadership with the success of the initiative.

It was a very positive experience and very well run

The leadership was extremely important – in this case you were well-organised, well-motivated, and clear about what you are trying to do so the chances of a good project were extremely high

The process can go so far but the people and the drivers are the main thing

Leadership can determine the sincerity with which people pursue change and the shared sense of what the change might look like

I've been struck enormously by the impact of individuals – the successful projects have key leaders who have a ruthless determination to deliver on the objectives of the project

The leadership qualities of senior management were linked to the success or other wise of the projects... where it remained the work of a peripheral office within the institution it was not strategically embedded and is unlikely to be sustained.

Kellerman and Webster's (2001) research defines a leader as a person who creates or attempts to create change, whether it be large or small. In the context of these specific change initiatives the leadership which crossed institutional boundaries needed to work to create a coherent strategic unit with which the members could identify within a chaotic external environment (O'Toole 1995). Kotter's (1995) research suggests that the creation of any type of change in an organisation always places great demands on the leadership abilities of the change managers. The complexity and challenges of the external environment impact significantly on the leadership challenges. As Zaccaro and Klimoski (2001) note higher level executives in an organisation tend to be more concerned with the external environment and the alignment of their organisation with the realities of that environment and less with the leadership of individuals through defined tasks.

In the case of the management of this particular initiative my own experiences and observations led to an uncompromising focus on broader outcomes and objectives as a leadership tool. While this contributed to the sense of autonomy and diversity between the different institutional partners it was also a pragmatic approach in view of the fact that the leadership role was one without any clear authority or direct reporting lines from the contributors and change agents distributed within the partner institutions. I was particularly interested in the research of Karp and Helgø (2008) who assert that:

The mainstream practice of change management is dealing with organisational complexity by adding more complexity – the use of sophisticated change management tools, concepts and models. This is arguably a paradox.

They go on to comment that the reality in which we operate is complex and fragmented and that the complex and fragmented reality for public service organisations includes:

- Operating in a complex internal and external environment wherein vital assumptions tend to change due to dynamic developments in society
- The multiplicity of accountabilities, government, media, citizens, society and the need to balance the overall power play and influence of all of these
- Public sector is not valued on the basis of profit making ability, but by its capacity to create social value for its citizens. The valuation of the amount of social value created in the public sector is a more complex and ambiguous undertaking than that of valuing an organisations profit-making abilities and performance.
- The richness in people diversity, structures activities, processes and cultures and the impossibility of interpreting and understanding cause and effect loops and systemic connections within the complexity of the structure

Again reflecting on the complexity of change leadership challenges within and between large organisations, Diefenbach (2006) asserts that change initiatives within public sector organisations are not about rational responses but are about influence, personal interest, power and control. Following review of the literature and reflection on my own observations and experiences a view of transformational leadership has emerged.

Transformational leadership according to Bass (1999):

Transformational leadership refers to the leader moving the follower beyond immediate self-interests through idealized influence, inspiration, intellectual stimulation or individualised consideration. It elevates the follower's sense of maturity and ideals as well as concerns for achievement, self-actualisation and the well-being of others, the organisation and society.

While the respondents in the interviews did not use the term 'transformational leadership', one did refer to the project success being related to the personal characteristics of the project leadership. Another referred to the leadership in the context of a generating recognition that there's a job to be done in the greater interests of the students and society that we serve. Yet another pointed to the willingness of staff to be involved in additional measures despite time pressures which might be seen as acting against their own narrow self-interests where the overall value of their actions can be clearly demonstrated as being for the common good. This relates well to the

consideration of transformational leadership and the definitions developed in Chapter 2.

Dissemination of the Change Initiative

As leader of the *Education in Employment* collaborative change management process I was responsible for the development of several defined outcomes which would stimulate and support specific change within the partner institutions and in higher education in Ireland generally. Chapter 4 described the research actions which lead to the collation of information from partners on their process and procedures and existing practice in respect of the development of programmes incorporating work-based learning, in the operation of the recognition of prior learning of applicants to their programs, in the provision of progression opportunities for craft certificate holders and the access of migrants to higher education. Working together with the change agents from the partner institutions the *Education in Employment* initiative collated information and the collective experiences of the partners were placed in a wider international context and eventually a cooperatively developed structure for improved practice in respect of each of the strands of activity was developed and a report or report(s) produced. A major part of the initiative was the dissemination of the activities to ensure that the changes sought and the practice developments advanced would impact on the broader higher education landscape in Ireland.

The structured approach adopted was to establish clearly the current activities and behaviours – this aligns well with Karp and Helgø's (2008) view that what we need for effective change management is not more theories but rather a better understanding of what people in organisations are already doing. The majority of the interviewees (ten out of the twelve) expressed the view that their involvement in the *Education in Employment* initiative had facilitated a better understanding of their own organisation as well as a better understanding of what was happening in other organisations. The focus for change managers and leaders is less on the tools, theories and techniques and more on the fostering of an understanding and developing a listening ability in dealing with the participants in the process. The publications included in Volume 2 have been an important part of ensuring that we 'know ourselves' and develop an informed view of our practice in these areas as well as contributing to the policy making and goal setting for the sector in a well informed and meaningful way.

Since the publication and dissemination of the documents and activities the team has participated at the request of individuals, institutions, policy-making bodies in

workshops, seminars, training days and peer learning events in Ireland, Italy, Holland, Belgium, Scotland and England focused on the various aspects of activity relation to the general up-skilling and reskilling agenda throughout the higher education sector. This initiative and its outcomes also played a central role in the successful submission of a proposal for funding a larger project (€8.4m) under SIF Cycle 2 entitled *Roadmap for Employment-Academic Partnerships (REAP)* which I currently lead.

Summary of key findings

In summary a number of conclusions can be drawn from the above which facilitate the development of a relevant framework for collaborative change:

- ❖ The nature of the change sought through the collaborative mechanism will have a significant impact on the success or otherwise of the project
 - Is it in alignment with the various organisation missions?
 - Does it resonate with the forces for change as understood and experienced by those who will participate in the change initiative?
 - Can external influential policy-setting organisations identify with and support the changes?
- ❖ There is a distinct role for the funding organisation in aligning project goals and aspirations and in funding collaborative projects in an efficient and effective way to make best use of capacity and capability at organisational level
- ❖ The change agents themselves acting on behalf of their organisations in a collaborative structure experience a number of unique forces and the choice of these boundary spanning change agents is of particular importance
- ❖ Sustainability of the changes will depend on the penetration of the change agents influence and support into the different organisations but it can also be secured through the influence and support of appropriate external agencies
- ❖ The leadership of a collaborative change initiative will need to spend considerable time and effort and focus on the people in addition to the tasks and particularly on the people acting at the fringes of their organisations.

In the following section, the development of a framework informed by these findings is further considered. It is clear from the research, reflection and analysis, that the framework for change to support collaborative change initiatives will need to address the role of the funding agency, the role of the various collaborating organisations, the role of the change agents, the role of the project leadership and the implications for sustainability of the changes.

Reflection on a Framework for Collaborative Change Initiatives

My own reflections on the experience of leading this initiative and on the wider educational community's response to the initiative made a significant impact on my leadership style and has meant that I have endeavoured to maintain this focus on ensuring that initiatives that I lead continue to effectively translate from the research domain through analysis into practice.

From my consideration of my leadership in practice I explored and reflected on my observations of situations as they arose and my responses to those situations. As a researcher into my practice I sought to ensure that the learning and benefits achieved through this collaborative change initiative would not be lost but could contribute to the design of such initiatives into the future and could be generalised to apply across a broad spectrum of change initiatives. At the outset in leading this collaborative change endeavour I could not have predicted the recently published *National Strategy for Higher Education* (Higher Education Strategy Group (Ireland) 2011) document which points directly towards greater collaboration between institutions and brings this work into sharper focus.

In the following sections the key thematic areas which emerged from my action research approach to the activities undertaken and the in-depth interviews with change agents in the collaborative change process are further developed into recommendations which contribute to a framework for change.

The key themes that emerged in terms of guiding the design, selection, funding, resourcing, leadership, support and dissemination of strategic, innovative and collaborative change initiatives in the Irish Higher Education Sector can be summarised as follows:

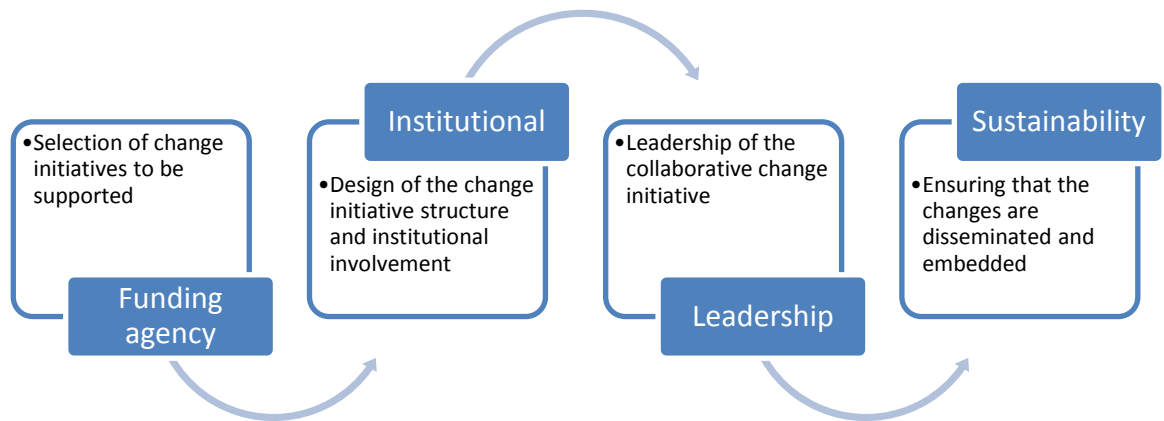


Figure 21: Key Themes Emerging

What is developed here is a set of considerations for the funding agency in setting out the parameters and criteria for funding collaborative change initiatives, a set of considerations for institutional management in deciding the approach to their involvement in collaborative funding initiatives and a set of considerations for the leadership role of such endeavours. Collectively these address the deficits in structured support for these cross-organisational collaborative change initiatives as elaborated on in Chapter 4 and they form the framework that will support such activity in the future.

Funding Agency

The general view is that the funding agency should be more prescriptive in the focus of the initiatives to be funded and to more narrowly define the objectives in the context of current or future drivers for change. The research found that all of the interviewees had well-developed and largely aligned views on the national and international context within which higher education operates and the particular internal and external drivers for change. It is reasonable to suggest that change initiatives that are aligned with and cognisant of these drivers are more likely to resonate with the institutional staff.

It was no surprise to me that the larger more strategic projects were ranked higher in the analysis because they were obviously meeting needs or aspirations that were common to a large number of institutions and they were the subject of significant strategic thinking. Some of the smaller projects could

never have achieved the kind of system transformation that SIF sought. They weren't relevant and they were never going to end up being embedded in a large multi-functional educational organisations such as ours

Another priority for the funding agency would be to fund only projects that clearly align with the particular institutional strategy and mission. This would have the benefit of ensuring that opportunistic collaboration is less likely to appear. It would also have a benefit for the change drivers within the institutions as an ability to point clearly to the benefit and impact on institutional mission can be a significant assistance in overcoming internal roadblocks.

As it is clear from the research that collaboration and the underlying trust required for it to happen cannot occur in the very short term the funding agency should allocate clear multi-annual funding to initiatives that have been selected for support. The funding should of course be based on satisfactory interim outcomes and financial supports but in the event that the project is performing satisfactorily it should be clearly protected. An interesting observation is that very few interviewees referred to inadequate levels of funding for the initiative examined here. Many expressed the view that, in fact, significant changes could be achieved with fairly modest amounts of money but they also pointed to the importance in terms of visibility or perceived value to the initiative of maintaining the funding. The clear signal given by multi-annual funding allows the allocation of resources and facilitates the maintenance of consistent resource allocation.

Under the two cycles of SIF funding to date a total of 100 different initiatives were funded. One respondent talked about this as 'letting a thousand flowers bloom'. For most respondents this was a source of deep frustration as they were convinced that there were other initiatives 'out there' attempting to implement the same or similar changes. In another funding cycle the funding agency should consider publicising the proposals in a pre-approval stage and seeking mergers, differentiation or abandonment of duplicated or overlapping endeavours. It would be expected that, where the project proposals were sought under a much more focused set of parameters and criteria, there would be far fewer projects and far more partners in each.

I think that the smaller projects have a challenge and I don't think that they should ever have been funded. The HEA should have set a sort of limit in terms of the critical mass of a project, in order for it to be strategic and

innovative. Some small scale projects might be innovative but will it actually make a change or reform in the way a particular institution works – and is there a real sharing and applicability of the learning for other projects? Many of the funded projects were too small and too disparate. I would say that XX is a classic example of a project that shouldn't have been allowed to develop on its own.

Before, during and after the initiatives there should be a wider sharing of information. Consideration should be given to developing a regular outputs and outcomes project reporting format that is made publically available to all. This would ensure that the aims, activities and aspirations of the project teams are more widely disseminated allowing patterns of complementarity and alignment that emerge to be identified and leveraged.

If there had been clarity on the key themes and transparency on the proposals there would have been a role for the HEA to act as match maker and to set the bar higher and allow people with similar emergent themes to work together in a 'knocking heads together' type of role.

The funding agency should act as champions for the projects that are performing well. Greater selectivity in the project selection and the increased accountability of the aims and objectives and actions should be rewarded with very visible and transparent support through events, website and other dissemination mechanisms of the outputs from the change initiatives. Some of the frustration expressed by the respondents related to not always having a clear opportunity to disseminate outputs and outcomes to the policy makers in higher education.

Participating institutions

The individual institutions proposing change initiatives or participating in initiatives proposed by others should be very selective about their decisions and choices. A focused strategic approach should be taken where the choice is based on the particular priorities for the current strategic planning period. The context should be such that institutions do not feel pressured to be involved in everything at once, but rather, can be confident in stating that, while 'x' is important to the institutional mission, efforts are being devoted to 'y' at the moment, either because the institution is confident about their performance in relation to 'x' or because 'y' is of more immediate importance to the strategy and mission. This implies that institutions are clear and confident about

their identity, mission and priorities. It is recognised that in the current climate and particularly in relation to the recently published National Strategy for Higher Education (Higher Education Strategy Group (Ireland) 2011) document institutions will be challenged to redefine their identity and to differentiate their mission. It is also recognised that an institution's mission is not static and will itself change in relation to national and international priorities and emerging knowledge and contexts. In certain circumstances an initiative may emerge that is not in line with an institution's current mission and it may be considered appropriate that the mission be changed dynamically in response to strategic initiatives and opportunities.

A very significant factor in a particular institution's involvement in a collaborative change endeavour will be their selection of the individuals who are to act as change agents in a boundary spanning role on behalf of the institutions. The interviewees point to a number of characteristics and behaviours including, openness, passion for change, knowledge of the internal environment and sensitivity to the external environment, which are relevant for the particular role. Organ (1971) refers to the intelligence, verbal and memory skills, sensitivity and flexibility required of a boundary agent. In considering the value system he states that:

a boundary agent, because of his concern for the organisations dependence on other agencies and the larger set of forces and constraints within which the organisation exists, must necessarily evaluate his behaviour within a larger framework than is true for internal organisation members

Recognising from this research, the important role played by boundary spanning change agents at different levels within the organisation, institutions should carefully consider their choice of resources to commit to particular change initiatives and should engage in staff development and succession planning which recognises and provides opportunities for the development of these individuals.

Having selected the initiative to lead or in which to participate very carefully, and having identified and enabled the appropriate individuals to act on behalf of the organisation, the institutions should ensure that the change agents are adequately and visibly supported through the management structure of the institution. Some of the interviewees reported difficulties in articulating the change imperatives within their own organisation structure. Organ (1971) refers to this as the difficulty that the advocate of change has with organisation officials who do not see the organisation from the

external vantage point of the boundary agent and therefore feel obliged to defend the status quo. One of the interviewees refers to this external view that is achieved as akin to that moment when you are flying out of Dublin airport and you suddenly get that glimpse of the whole country of Ireland and realise that it is so small in relation to the rest of the world. The view of a particular organisation 'from the outside' is an important facilitator of change as it implies an opportunity for comparative analysis or benchmarking of the organisation against others. All of the interviewees believed that their organisation was receptive to this type of pressure. All of the people who had been directly involved in the *Education in Employment* project reported that having information about how another organisation worked to address particular issues was very effective in moving the discourse forward. Boundary spanning change agents should be given formal and informal opportunities to impart this kind of information and should be visibly supported from the senior management levels.

Leadership

From the current research it is clear that the leadership of a collaborative change initiative is important in ensuring its success or otherwise. In particular the nature of the collaboration model which sees a number of different individuals acting for their own organisations and forming a loose and temporary group for the attainment of specific outcomes and goals provides a challenging leadership and management task.

My own experience in leading two such projects has facilitated the evolution of a more transformational than transactional leadership style. In the first instance the leader will need to allow the disparate group to coalesce and to develop one-to-one and one-to-many trust relationships. In this case, the interviewees all pointed to the important of regular face to face meetings in developing these relationships which have proved to be lasting beyond the funding timeframe of the particular initiative. Uniting the various representatives of the partner institutions in pursuit of a common goal was enabled by the early development of a separate recognisable 'project identity'. This gave all partners an opportunity to have ownership of, and an input into, a separate coalition which was not uniquely associated with the lead partner institution. It was agreed at an early stage that all project output and dissemination activities would be under the 'project logo' only. Closely associated with this agreement was the clear message at the outset that none of the information sharing or process evaluation would appear as a league table. This meant that partners could come to the project table and share information on their particular institution knowing that the information would be used to develop new good practice frameworks but would never be used to indicate specific

deficiencies in their institution's practice or to compare them unfavourably with other institutions.

Forming into a group allows the development of shared goals, shared vision and shared values. This is not a linear process and the leader will need to keep sight of the defined project endpoints but to encourage and engender 'ownership' of the processes required to reach those goals. In most cases the various project partner institutions will be at very different stages of development and readiness and a major part of the role of leader will be to ensure that the end goals are delineated into meaningful intermediate goals for all of the partners regardless of their starting point. The appropriate processes to achieve this will need to be selected. In this instance a number of communication techniques were used to manage the project activity at an operational level.

Most of the interviewees commented favourably on the clarity of the focus of the initiative and on the focus on the outcomes and 'always having the end game in sight'. My own notes and reflection on my practice as leader showed that over the first 9 months my style changed from one where I attempted to continuously translate the end outcomes into specific time limited deliverables for each partner using complex project management software to one where the outcomes were in focus and the participants were empowered to develop, individually and collectively, their particular paths and contributions. This necessary change in style is informed by Karp and Helgø's (2008) argument that the change management challenge in public service organisations has less to do with structures and strategies and more to do with the nature of the human condition and our instinctive reaction as human beings to change and to those leading change. Moving away from the mechanistic approach to the process I learned to appreciate that the change process and leadership would have to deal with conflicting values, varying opinions and a multiplicity of stakeholders. In line with Bass' (1999) research my experience showed that over time the participants had developed a collective identity and a sense of the importance of their contributions and the 'meaningfulness' of the outcomes sought and in these ways united in a sense-making struggle to re-formulate their contributions.

As leader of such an endeavour it is important to work to gain recognition for the work of the collective at the appropriate levels in a meaningful and timely manner. The nature of the publically funded higher education sector in Ireland is that there is very little opportunity to reward success other than through public recognition of

achievements. Project participants were anxious to have their work recognised within their institutions. One interviewee reported that, while the President of their institution was exercised by the *Education in Employment* initiative and was interested in the outcomes, their direct line manager knew nothing about it and was not supportive of the work at all. Due to the nature and the scope of major collaborative initiatives it is likely that the appropriate audience and span of influence of the work will extend to a larger and more national and international platform. As leader I sought to ensure that all opportunities to bring the work to the attention of policy-makers and decision makers at the appropriate level were sought and taken advantage of. In this way, as much recognition as possible was gained for the work of the collective at a national and international level. It was also important to seek and manage collaboration between the collective and other national or international groups of interest both to ensure that the work of the collective was appropriately informed and that dissemination channels were adequately enabled. These links with national groups of importance in higher education in Ireland were mentioned by many of the interviewees as developing their own sense of value in the work of the initiative and also influencing institutional thinking in support of the work. Two of the interviewees mentioned a 'sense of patriotism' in doing what they saw as being the 'right thing' particularly in times of great economic challenge.

Sustainability

While there are considerable challenges afforded by the leadership of a process aimed at bringing about systemic change, one of the most significant challenges arises when the change stages have themselves been completed and the leader seeks to 'refreeze' the process so that the changed systems have themselves become part of the systemic culture and of the operational reality of the organisation or organisations involved. These stages align with the later stages in Kotter's (2007) eight steps to organisational transformation.

- Consolidating improvements and producing still more change
- Institutionalizing the new approaches

In this initiative actual changes to policy and practice have been achieved in all nine partner institutions. Ensuring that the changes have a wider impact on the system generally has been achieved by the intersection of the efforts of this initiative and a significant number of actors within the policy-making structures in higher education in Ireland. The collaboration systems extended beyond the organisations directly involved and funded under the project. In addition to the funding agency the Higher

Education Authority throughout the work links were created and maintained by the project consortium with :

- Department of Education and Skills- higher education policy
- NQAI National Qualifications Authority of Ireland
- FÁS – the Skills Training Agency
- Forfás
- Expert group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN)
- Skillnets
- Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC)
- Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC)
- Irish Business Employers Confederation (IBEC)
- Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU)
- Irish Universities Association (IUA)
- Institutes of Technology Ireland (IoTI)

Through visible links with these agencies the consolidation of the changes was facilitated. It was also possible to contribute to future policy and decision making at national level through these agencies.

In addition to raising the profile of the work and drawing attention to the outputs a concerted staff development exercise was an important part of the embedding of changed practice within the operational life of the organisations. The change initiative facilitated this and the participants were able to share resources and expertise. Under the initiative several of the institutions contributed to training and development exercises across the consortium through exchange of personnel and resources. This had the added benefit of enhancing on-going cooperation and networking and growing understanding across organisational barriers. By raising the awareness of the negotiated and flexible learning solutions among the employers and employees organisations the expectations of employers and employee learners were raised and this created the necessary 'pull' factor to support the changed practices and to ensure that they became part of the business model.

Development of the framework for change

In consideration of the state of the discourse on change leadership Kellerman and Webster (2001) welcome the lively debate that exists between practitioners and scholars, contrasting as it does the views of those who insist that change leadership scholarship has real world applicability and those who hold the view that pure academic research should drive leadership studies. Hughes (2007) asserts that although there is a close relationship between the theory and practice of change management, the academic change management literature tends to avoid the terminology of management tools and techniques.

This innovative research seeks to bridge this gap through a practice-based change leadership initiative, informed by the academic literature and theories, which addresses the real world tools and techniques deficit facing the leader of collaborative cross-institutional change initiatives. It takes a particular interest in the appropriate tools and techniques for those faced with leading collaborative cross-organisational change initiatives, and presents a novel applicable solution in the form of a framework addressing the main actors in the design, development and operational aspects of such change initiatives.

The framework is informed by reflection on, and exploration of, my own experiences in the leadership of the *Education in Employment* change initiative which spanned three years and directly involved nine higher education institutions and a number of policy making bodies. This change initiative resulted in a number of significant outputs (which are included under separate headings in Volume 2 of this work) and a number of tangible outcomes in the form of changes and reforms to organisations and across organisations. The framework is further informed by a lengthy process of research into the views and experiences of a range of actors in the change process and a number of external evaluations of the initiative. In this way, a three dimensional image is built up and distilled into a toolkit which has the potential to make a significant contribution to the practice of management and is a valuable addition to the change manager's collection of resources.

In summary, the Framework provides a structured approach to cross-organisational change management initiatives applicable to the funding agencies, the organisations involved and the change management leadership. The separate structures that

emerge are provided in the tables that follow and the overall framework is then presented in summary in the final table.

In setting the appropriate parameters for change initiatives the particular funding agency is in a unique position to influence the scope and scale of the changes sought and the practice of the organisations in operationalizing the changes. Careful planning and structures can have a significant impact on the quality of the proposals and the outcomes obtained.

The emerging practice framework is developed from the perspectives of a number of the key stakeholders below

Funding Agency – Practice Framework
Narrowly define the objectives at the proposal stage in the context of the extant major change drivers. Support an iterative process which will allow time for collaborative endeavours to develop. Insist on a review of proposals and the alignment of similar initiatives
Fund projects that clearly align with institutional strategy and mission – and where appropriate drive the institutional mission. Recognise that this may be a cyclical process in which mission may respond to change initiatives and vice versa.
Support clear multi-annual funding to facilitate consistent resource allocation. Clarify funding report mechanisms to more clearly align activities and outcomes with funding allocation and spending.
Publish interim reports – in particular interim outcomes and activities reports. Support fresh opportunities for collaboration and alignment of initiatives that should emerge from the sharing of interim report stages
Visibly support initiatives that are meeting the objectives. Build on the internal and external opportunities presented by successful initiatives and leverage value for both the participants and the funding agency through a structure which visibly identifies performing initiatives
Build in appropriate dissemination opportunities – recognising that the funding agency is likely to have an extensive national and international network of contacts who would form part of the appropriate audience to critique and support the change initiatives

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Table 4: Practice Framework for the Funding Agency

As this research and framework addresses cross-organisational change, a significant consideration is the practice of each organisation involved in the process. The research clearly indicates that the overall organisation’s attitude and response to the change initiative will largely dictate the success or otherwise of the initiative within and beyond the particular organisation.

Participating Institutions – Practice Framework
Be selective in project choice and be clear in institutional mission and alignment. Ensure that the initiatives which the institution leads or is involved in are aligned and clearly mutually supportive.
Select institutional representatives with care and where possible from within core staff to ensure that the change is not viewed as peripheral. Carefully select and identify those who will act as boundary spanning change agents and consider the role that they will play internally and externally.
Support the institutional representatives visibly and provide appropriate access to senior management through structured and visible channels. Consider mechanisms which raise the profile of the efforts through executive committees or governance structures as well as through wider communication channels. Allow the internal and external change agents to be clearly identified within the change initiative.
Support a culture of openness and change within an organisation which is willing to learn. Develop processes within which exploration and exposition of current practice and sharing of experience are facilitated.
Promote accountability and foster high standards in project reporting and accounting methods – encompassing activities and outcomes reporting as well as financial and spending reports.

Table 5: Practice Framework for the Participating Organisations

Understandably, the change initiative leadership will have the most significant role to play in ensuring the success of change endeavours. The development of this framework has been informed by the gaps in the existing cross-organisational change endeavours which I had experienced in my own leadership. Incorporating the many

perspectives which were collected and analysed has ensured that this practice framework has relevance and applicability generally. The structure has been divided for clarity into those elements that support the project management practice and those that support the sustainability of the changes sought.

Collaborative Initiative Leadership – Practice Framework
Project Management
Allow time and space for relationships and networks to form between the various participants and include significant face to face meetings and appropriate communications tools. Recognise that complex structures may distract from the central role that individuals and relationships play in change initiatives.
Be sensitive to the dual role of the boundary spanning agents, recognising that their role within their own 'home' organisation should be supported in addition to their role in the project initiative.
Foster a clear separate identity for the project team and follow this through in documentation, website etc. Development of this separate identity at an early stage will support the early development of a shared identity and vision which can be difficult particularly across-institutions.
Ensure that the participants are not disadvantaged by their participation. Recognising the role that the participants play within their home organisation and the potential for sensitivities around the ways in which organisational comparisons can be inadvertently facilitated through the information collection stages.
Build the trust necessary to ensure that there is real engagement. This is particularly important as the change initiative outcomes will only have relevance and validity where they are based on open exchanges of information and experiences.
Promote the project and the team at every opportunity – linking well with the development of the project identity this will mean that the leader ensures that the identity is given meaning and kept at the forefront of organisational learning and knowledge.
Develop an adaptive leadership style with a balanced focus on the outcomes and the individuals – adapting to the particular circumstances and individuals and choosing tools and techniques accordingly.

Table 6: Practice Framework for the Change Leader - Project Management

Collaborative Initiative Leadership – Practice Framework
Sustainability
Ensure that the change stages of the initiative are based on a sound understanding of the current situation and the desired outcome. Meaningful changes will have a lasting impact where they are developed with informed relevance and application.
Participation and involvement in the planning and design stages will ensure that there is significant buy-in throughout the sector of interest and this will support the sustainability and embedding of the changes within core activities.
Build networks with the appropriate policy making and national agencies to gain visibility of the work and the outcomes and credibility for the collective and the collaborating institutions.
Support change structures through collaborative staff development exercises. Recognising that changes to policy and practice will bring challenges for all of the institutional structures, these changed circumstances must be supported through appropriate training and development structures. This should be recognised at the outset and built into change initiative proposals
Leverage every opportunity to disseminate findings which will support changed structures. Through highlighting findings and outcomes wherever possible the changed structures will become part of the new dialogue.
Use both ‘push’ and ‘pull’ techniques by building demand for the reformed structure within the ‘client base’. Changes within organisations have impacts beyond the core organisation. Change leaders can build support for changes and demand for changes by working closely with the client or customer base of the organisation. Equally support for changes within institutions can be driven through the use of the natural inter-institutional rivalry

Table 7: Practice Framework for the Change Leader: Sustainability

In Table 8 below all of these considerations and viewpoints are taken into account and a framework is developed which is broadly related to the original 7-stage framework which was considered in Chapter 4 but which is enhanced and enriched by the project activity and findings from all of the key players.

Table 8: Overall Framework for Change

Change Framework Stages	Funding Agency	Participating Institutions	Collaborative Initiative Leadership	
			Project Management	Sustainability
Establishing a common sense of urgency	Narrowly define the objectives at the proposal stage in the context of the major change drivers. Support an iterative process which will allow time for collaborative endeavours to develop. Insist on a review of proposals and the alignment of similar initiatives to avoid expensive duplication of efforts	Be selective in project choice and be clear in institutional mission and alignment. Ensure that the initiatives which the institution leads or is involved in are coherent, aligned and clearly mutually supportive.	Allow time and space for relationships and networks to form between the various participants and include significant face to face meetings and communications tools	Ensure that the change stages are based on a sound understanding of the current situation, the change drivers that exist and the desired outcome
Agreeing a	Fund projects that clearly	Select institutional	Be sensitive to the dual	Participation and

<p>leadership structure and gathering support</p>	<p>align with institutional strategy and mission – and where appropriate drive mission</p>	<p>representatives with care and where possible from within core staff to ensure that the change is not viewed as peripheral</p>	<p>role of the boundary spanning agents. Build the trust necessary to ensure that there is real engagement</p>	<p>involvement in the planning and design stages at institutional level and at participant level will ensure that there is significant buy-in</p>
<p>Creating and communicating a vision of the end goal</p>	<p>Support clear multi-annual funding to facilitate consistent resource allocation in line with national policies and informed by global perspectives.</p>	<p>Ensure linkage and coherence with institutional strategic plans and reviewing cycles so that the goals remain relevant to the emerging missions</p>	<p>Foster a clear separate identity for the project team and follow this through in documentation, website etc. While encouraging the attainment of the short term goals maintain focus on the longer term end goal</p>	<p>Build networks with the appropriate policy making and national agencies</p>
<p>Leading and empowering others to act on the vision</p>		<p>Provide opportunities for the internal dissemination of the work of the boundary agents</p>	<p>Ensure that the participants are not disadvantaged by their participation.</p>	

		Support the institutional representatives visibly and provide appropriate access to senior management	Develop an adaptive leadership style with a balanced focus on the outcomes and the individuals	
Identifying and achieving short term interim goals	Request focused interim reporting structures based on outputs and outcomes and publish the reports to support and encourage cross-fertilization of project activity.	Support a culture of openness and change and provide access to decision making and policy setting structures for participants in cross-organisational reform projects.	Break down the end goal into shorter term objectives and translate these into attainable outcomes for the participants. Make sure that the tools and structures act to support the work and not as a barrier to participation.	Leverage every opportunity to disseminate findings which will drive and support changed structures
Maintaining the momentum towards the	Visibly support initiatives that are meeting the objectives	Promote accountability and foster high standards in project accounting	Promote the project and the team at every opportunity.	Support change structures through collaborative staff

end goal		methods	Celebrate the achievements.	development exercises
Ensuring sustainability of the changes	Build in appropriate dissemination opportunities Work with appropriate policy makers and external stakeholders to support and maintain changes	Continue to support the changes and take actions to embed the changed practices into the institutional structures at all levels.	Maintain support and visibility, work to create informal networks which will enhance and strengthen individual activity	Use both 'push' and 'pull' techniques by building demand for the reformed structure within the 'client base' and among external policy makers and stakeholders

Conclusion

This chapter has presented an analysis of the current research findings and has further developed that research into a useful framework for change based on a number of different viewpoints and experiences explored through the use of the *Education in Employment* collaborative change initiative as a vehicle. Through the experiences and reflections of the initiative leader, external objective views of the initiative allowing comparison with other funded initiatives and in particular in-depth interviews with the change agents involved in the change initiative, valuable insights are identified which will guide the funding agencies in their approach to innovative funding streams based on collaborative change initiatives, institutions in their decision-making in terms of involvement in collaborative change initiatives and how to maximise the benefits for their institution and leaders of such initiatives. This new overall framework is enriched and enhanced by the inclusion of a number of the key players in cross-organisational reform and by the consideration of the role of the funding agency in driving the appropriate and desired change and developing a sense of urgency around the changes sought.

Chapter 6: Conclusions and Recommendations

Introduction

According to Bass (1981) leadership is an interaction between two or more members of a group that often involves a structuring or restructuring of the situation and the perceptions and expectations of the members. Leaders are agents of change...

This project has explored the stages undertaken in leading an innovative change initiative funded through the Strategic Innovation Fund aimed at reforming structures and processes in higher education in Ireland. The change initiative considered in depth here, involved nine of the 21 publically funded higher education institutions in Ireland and was one of a number of initiatives funded in a competitive funding mechanism through the Higher Education Authority. The change initiative is explored through the leadership role for which I have been responsible for the three years of the initiative, through a number of external evaluations of the initiatives undertaken and through the experiences of the research participants. This chapter will serve to summarise the findings of this research project and will contextualise those findings within the reform structures. It will draw a number of conclusions from the work and will seek to contribute to the proposal, structuring and management of such change initiatives in the future. In this way it will prove valuable to the policy making and funding agencies as well as to the leaders of change initiatives.

Revisiting the research question

Numerous articles and books have been produced regarding change and change management but detailed empirical data regarding change initiatives in the Irish Higher Educational context is limited. As the area of change management is so vast in nature, this study is confined to an examination of the *Education in Employment* change initiative. A collaborative endeavour funded through the Higher Education Authority. My research question developed through my own aspirations and experiences as leader of the *Education in Employment* change initiative, and informed by the Professional Doctorate pathway, crystallised to the following::

How can I use my leadership of this cross-organisational change initiative to contribute to the design and leadership of these initiatives in the future?

This will lead to the identification of optimum practice in the management of cross-organisational collaborative change initiatives in Irish third level education leading to sustainable change.

The development of a research approach and the choice of a particular methodology were informed by a literature review which contributed significantly to my own developing ontological world view. I explored the extant literature on change and models and practices used in bringing about change. This led to a consideration of the impact of change within organisations and on the people who are inevitably disrupted by the changes brought about. Literature on higher education institutions and change and on collaborative approaches to change was further explored to provide an informed context within which the research approach was developed.

In developing the scope of the research some intermediate research questions were raised including:

- How do I effectively manage these change initiatives?

Considering this particular issue I focused on my leadership role and the different styles of leadership that are appropriate in response to different and differing situations. Through the professional doctoral development pathway my considered reflection on my own practice was developed and informed. In reflective observation of the approaches taken in this particular project pathway it becomes clear that a migration from a more task-focused to a more people-focused style was appropriate.

- What makes this particular change initiative different?

By helping to bring the particular situational aspects of the work into sharper focus this question contributed to the consideration of the unique issues raised by collaborative change initiatives and the unique responses that are needed for them. The vast majority of the change leadership literature relates to the leadership of change within a single organisational entity. The additional complexity of change leadership across organisational boundaries and the additional burden and challenges that this means for the change agents provided some of the more significant insights and the most useful contributions to practice emerging from this work.

- How can my investigation contribute to my growing understanding of what I do and how I do it?

The heightened self-awareness and critical questioning that was required and supported by my professional doctoral programme elevated this work from a functional analysis of a particular set of initiatives and related actions in a simple cause and effect type of relationship to a journey of exploration which yielded a greater appreciation of

the translation process which saw the research progress from the practical to the theoretical to the empirical realms returning through the theoretical realm to make a real contribution in the practical realm.

- How can I provide learning and outcomes that are useful to other change managers?

From the outset I was motivated to make a contribution to knowledge and practice which would be of use to other change leaders. This required an ability to generalise findings informed by the literature review and to develop from them useful insights for the general practice domain.

- How can I contribute to funding organisations and policy-makers?

Recognising from the beginning the unique and novel learning opportunity provided by the collaborative change initiative, it was important, in terms of my own deeply held value system that the initiative would represent the best possible value for the investment at a national level. This could only be achieved if a concerted effort was sustained not only to achieve the stated aims and objectives of the initiative but to ensure that as much learning as possible was gathered in the process. The Higher Education Authority as the funding agency were supportive of the work throughout and are interested in ensuring that the findings herein are incorporated into future funding and policy initiatives.

Research Approach

The development of the research approach was informed by my own world view and my desire to contribute to knowledge. By exploring and investigating the impacts of the various initiatives, and, particularly, by investigating the change processes and mechanisms used and probing the success of the planning and management activities in the context of innovative collaborative change initiatives, a valuable contribution can be made in the form of a Framework for Change processes in third-level providers in Ireland.

An Action Research approach allowed me to explore the change journey from a practitioner-researcher perspective, as well as my role a change leader as my own ontological views developed, my reflective critique of my practice, and the implications for other participants from their perspective. Using an action research approach to investigate practice with the intention of involving others and improving practice is a

suitable strategy to introduce and manage change in a workplace (Waterman *et al.*, 2001). This particular change initiative of necessity involved others and this research would be of very limited value without the frank and insightful observations of the major change agents involved. Action research provided the flexible and versatile framework within which I was able to lead the various action stages required by my leadership of the *Education in Employment* project and through enquiry and reflection to develop an improved understanding of my own practice. By incorporating a considered external view of the actions and the impacts of those actions and developing an empirical research methodology which allowed the collation of the significant change agents who were involved in the actions I was able to develop a 360 degree view from which to draw a set of guidelines for practice that will impact on the change management process for higher education institutions or indeed large publically funded institutions in any sector was developed. An existing framework for change based on that of Kotter was used as a lens through which the stages in the project were considered and the consequent learning was viewed. The research findings were then distilled into a new framework which addresses the deficiencies in the existing structure and will be an invaluable guide for such initiatives in the future.

Implications for Practice

To date the work of the *Education in Employment* project has made a significant impact on policy and practice within the higher education institutional partners and beyond. One of the most significant early impacts was the funding and support received for the follow-on *Roadmap of Employment Academic Partnership* REAP project in Cycle 2 SIF funding. Through each of the different strands of activity the work of the partnership consortium was disseminated widely and has made impact at a national level. A number of examples of the impact of the project at a wider level are evident through the inclusion of the project work and findings in a recent publication by the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs and another by the Irish University Association. At a local institutional level all partners reported a positive and lasting impact on the awareness and practice within the higher educational institutional partners. The impact has extended beyond the consortium through a sharing of practice and the delivery of workshops on project themes and findings at a National and an International Level.

In addition to the specific change interventions which were sought and achieved through the *Education in Employment* change initiative, there is a further significant and innovative contribution to practice through the Framework for Change which has been framed and informed by a critical analysis of the *Education in Employment* project

leadership and the perceptions of the participants. The current climate in third level education in Ireland following the publication of the Higher Education Strategy document could not have been anticipated at the Strategic Innovation Fund proposal stages in 2006. Now, more than at any stage in the past, higher education institutions in Ireland are being challenged to work together and to collaborate more closely. It is clear that funding models will depend on this close cooperation. The report on a national Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 states that 'the HEA should promote such regional clusters by providing incentives and by requiring institutions to build regional collaboration into their strategic plans'. It goes on to state that the formation of such collaborative clusters of higher education organisations can yield benefits as 'critical mass can be created or enhanced through institutional cooperation and collaboration'. In relation to the future governance and funding the report states that 'the strategic dialogue between the HEA and the universities should examine the extent to which the institutions are exploring and exploiting the potential for inter-institutional collaboration'.

These recent developments ensure that the findings and recommendations of this work as they relate to the leadership of collaborative change initiatives in the Irish higher education have even broader relevance and greater currency.

Recommendations

This project has provided a unique insight into the leadership of collaborative change management initiatives. The recommendations emerging from this work which support the development of the framework for change as elaborated on in Chapter 5 can be summarised as follows:

- The funding agency for collaborative change endeavours should refine the criteria for the collection of proposals to include consideration of the nature and scale of the initiatives proposed recognising that proposals which win the support of a large number of institutions are more likely to be meeting a real need and are therefore more likely to get meaningful institutional support and buy in to ensure sustainable change. By allowing a process for proposals to merge and align in a refinement stage it is likely that fewer overlapping proposals will be funded.
- A clear alignment of the proposals with the proposing institutions' missions will support the embedding of the changes into the institutions culture in a 'refreezing' phase following the change initiative. This will also require a climate within which diverse institutional missions are appropriate and expected.

- Clear multiannual funding and support structures for change initiatives which are meeting or exceeding their goals within a framework of good practice in outcomes and financial management will ensure maximum return for the investment.
- Institutions participating in collaborative change initiatives should choose those initiatives with care and ensure that they are strategically aligned with the institutional mission.
- Having decided to be involved institutions should carefully select their change agents recognising the complex environment within which they will operate and the particular traits which such agents should possess.
- Visible support of the change initiative and the change agents should be in evidence including access to the senior institutional decision makers and policy setting structures.
- Through an adaptive management style the change leadership should ensure that all participants in a collaborative change initiative are afforded opportunities to build networks and relationships to foster a climate of trust and engagement. This will be facilitated by building an identity for the collaborative endeavour supported through communication and media outlets.
- The change leadership needs to be particularly sensitive to the dual role that the boundary spanning change agent plays in representing their institution within the change initiative and representing the change initiative within their institutions.
- By ensuring that the changes proposal is based on sound knowledge and understanding of the underlying structures the change leadership can help to ensure that it leads to sustainable change which is embedded within the institutional structures
- Changes will require buy-in at all levels within the institution and are likely to require staff development or awareness raising events. Support is more likely if there is as wide a participation as possible in the design and planning stages and as much openness and communication as possible throughout.
- The change leadership should ensure that the change initiative is supported widely beyond the participating institutions by building networks with policy making and national agencies.

Future Research

This work has dealt with a complex collaborative strategic change initiative involving nine different higher education institutions in Ireland. The recently published Higher Education Strategy document raises the question of the possible future merging of higher education institutions in the University and the Institute of Technology sectors. This has the potential to create a more coherent and efficient higher education system, however, it does raise a number of interesting questions about how effectively the mergers could be brought about and how the leadership of the institutions could bring about such fundamental changes. The institutional cooperation and collaboration as witnessed through this Strategic Innovation Initiative could provide a useful background for further research centred on the leadership of future institutional mergers if they are to be pursued.

Conclusions

This professional doctorate project has been based on an action research approach to the leadership of a strategic change initiative undertaken over more than three years. The changes sought related to the policy and practice of nine higher educational institutions in relation to their learning provision for specific categories of workplace learners. As leader of the change initiative and an insider-researcher I undertook the project to explore my own practice from a number of perspectives and to distil the findings into a contribution to leadership of such initiatives generally. While it has been gratifying to see the work transform practice within the higher education institutions and within the higher education system generally, it has been even more satisfying to explore my own practice and to develop my abilities of informed enquiry and questioning supported through the professional doctorate pathway.

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Change Management using Action Research and Action Learning: Concepts, Frameworks, Processes and Applications. Southern Cross University Press, Australia

Appendix A: Interview Guide

Interview guide: Exploration of Cross-Organisational Change Initiative

Topics for consideration in in-depth interview process and prompts

Drivers for change in higher education

Prompts: Main national and international drivers and context

Strategic Innovation Fund projects as a stimulus for change

Prompts: Impacts – changes to policy, processes, culture
Sustainability

Collaboration as a particular feature of the SIF Projects

Prompts: History or experience of collaboration
Level of collaboration achieved
How it was achieved
Will it last?

Difficulties encountered

Prompts: Barriers in attitudes and culture
Barriers in structures and processes
Resources

Why were the successful projects successful?

Prompts: Outputs and outcomes
System-wide implications

Future change initiatives

Appendix B: Consent Form

Participant Information and Consent Form:

Title of Project : An exploration of a collaborative project approach to change management in third level institutions in Ireland

Dear

This letter is an invitation to take part in a research study aimed at investigating the collaborative project approach to change management through the Strategic Innovation Fund initiative. You are being invited to participate because of your role within your own organisation and in this project. The study will explore the Education in Employment SIF collaborative project as a process to enact change within the third level education project partners.

The study will contribute to the design of such initiatives in the future and will also be used by Irene Sheridan as part of a Doctoral Studies programme.

Your participation in the study will involve an in-depth semi-structured interview which will be recorded for analysis. The interview structure will be made available to you in advance and the interview will take place in a location and at a time of your choosing.

Your participation is completely voluntary. Your contributions will be kept confidential and the analysis of the contributions will be anonymised so that individual contributions or individual organisations will not be identifiable and you or your organisation will not be identifiable in any publication that is written as a result of this research.

1. I agree to take part in this research and I understand that my participation is voluntary.
2. I agree that the planned interview may be recorded for the purposes of this research only.

Name of Participant:

Signature:

Date:

Researcher contact details:

Irene Sheridan

021 4326585

irene.sheridan@cit.ie

Change Management in Higher Education

- **An exploration of a cross-organisational change initiative and the development of a framework to support such endeavours**

A project submitted to Middlesex University in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of *Doctor of Professional Studies*

Irene Sheridan

Institute for Work Based Learning
Middlesex University

Volume 2

June 2012

Contents:

Reports:

Framework for Progression of Craftspersons

Work-based Learning; Graduating through the workplace

Recognition of Prior Learning; A Focus on Practice

Migrants and Higher Education in Ireland

Papers:

Workplace Learning Courses in Irish Third Level Colleges

Work-based Learning: Challenging Irish Third Level Education Provision

Recognition of Prior Learning in Irish Third Level Institutions; a Focus on Practice



FRAMEWORK

for Progression of Craftspersons

Edited by Irene Sheridan

www.eine.ie

This Progression Framework is intended to advise learners, employers and higher education providers on an overall progression route to allow holders of Advanced Certificates-Craft to progress to Level 7 degree programmes on the National Framework of Qualifications.



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This document is based on contributions from both individuals and organisations. The membership of the working group is set out in Appendix E and these are the principal contributors – there are, however, many other unnamed individuals within the partner organisations and elsewhere who helped to make this work possible. This document would also not have been possible without funding received under the Strategic Innovation Fund Cycle 1 from the Higher Education Authority under the National Development Plan 2006 - 2013

Foreword



The *Education in Employment* project funded through the HEA's Strategic Innovation Fund represents a significant development for Cork Institute of Technology and its partner institutions. The project itself was a natural progression for CIT; building on its leadership in career-focused education and delivering on the lifelong learning agenda that is fundamental to economic and social progress. This framework document is the result of the dedicated efforts of the working group charged with the development of progression and diversification opportunities for craftspersons.

The national economic climate has changed somewhat since the summer of 2006 when this project was initially proposed and, consequently, this focus on progression opportunities for craft certificate holders has become even more relevant.

Throughout, the work on this project has been a cooperative effort and I would like to acknowledge the collaboration and sharing of resources and experiences that has led to this publication. All six partner institutes of technology have dedicated considerable time and effort but there has also been very valuable input from outside the project team – in particular from the NQAI, HETAC, HEA, FÁS, FETAC and the many craftspersons and employers who made important contributions and I would like to thank everyone for their efforts.

The progression framework document sets out clear mechanisms for the design of routes to qualifications at Level 7 and beyond for craftspersons. One of the most useful features, I believe, is the illustration of those routes through the successful case studies presented.

This publication highlights some excellent current practice within the partner institutes and indeed the institute of technology sector as a whole and will also encourage the development of more pathways in a flexible and accessible manner. I would like on my own behalf and on behalf of the overall project steering group to thank the members of the working group for this important piece of work and to congratulate the chair of that group on bringing this document to fruition.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael Delaney". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a horizontal line.

Michael Delaney,
Head of Development,
Cork Institute of Technology



Executive Summary

This Progression Framework is intended to advise learners, employers and higher education providers on an overall progression route to allow holders of Advanced Certificates-Craft to progress to Level 7 degree programmes on the National Framework of Qualifications.

To illustrate and quantify the need for progression opportunities, three separate surveys were undertaken - a survey of apprentices in a number of partner institutions, a survey that polled craftpersons currently undertaking undergraduate programmes in CIT and DIT and a survey of employers of craft certificate holders. The surveys confirmed the strong desire of many apprentices to progress to higher education programmes. Detailed case studies based on learners who availed of progression opportunities specifically into electrical engineering programmes also demonstrate that apprentices who do progress do so very successfully.

In order to facilitate real engagement and to recognise the learning that is achieved through the craft certificate programmes, the focus here is on the granting of academic exemptions from modules or groups of modules on the target courses. The suggested procedure for establishing exemptions takes the form of identifying the learning outcomes of the relevant craft programme and mapping these against the relevant degree programme module learning outcomes from which exemption is sought. This mapping exercise is illustrated through a number of detailed case studies. For learners with qualifications additional to their Advanced Certificate-Craft or significant experiential learning a Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) process should be considered for further exemptions.



The proposed framework acknowledges that to make progression available to all those who may wish to participate, irrespective of geographic location, there is a need for innovative and novel provisions on the part of the institute of technology sector. This could include collaboration between institutes, the sharing of programme delivery, franchising of programmes, the sharing of module delivery and the use of distance learning.

A number of key recommendations are included dealing with the provision of information, focused progression opportunities for craftspersons, modes of programme delivery and the provision of financial support to the learners.

This document addresses a practical framework that can be used to facilitate development of progression pathways for craft certificate holders to Level 7 and beyond on the National Framework of Qualifications and illustrates the need for progression opportunities through a number of surveys and the practical implementation through a number of case studies. In developing this document and through the engagement of the working group it became clear that there is a diverse range of programmes available in many different formats – full-time, part-time and flexible learning into which craft holders are currently progressing in many institutes of technology. It is hoped that the publication of this document will facilitate the further development of these routes.





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1

Education in Employment project

The development of this progression framework is undertaken as part of Cork Institute of Technology's participation in the Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF) Programme (under the auspices of the Higher Education Authority - Department of Education and Science). The overall SIF Cycle 1 CIT-led project is titled *Education in Employment* and this third strand of that project is focused on *Progression Routes and Diversification Opportunities for Craftspersons*. The collaborating partnership on this strand consists of representatives from Athlone Institute of Technology, Dublin Institute of Technology, Dundalk Institute of Technology, Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology and Institute of Technology, Sligo, with Cork Institute of Technology as the lead partner. The working group was formed in April 2007.

The planned outcomes under strand 3 of the Education in Employment project were:

- Investigation and recommendation of generic principles for the development of user friendly and appropriate progression routes for craftspersons up to degree-level in engineering and related courses.
- Publication of a framework for progression for craftspersons in disciplines related to their specialist craft areas.
- Progression of 40 students to degree programmes in electrical engineering in collaborating institutions by the end of year 1.
- Establishment of a bespoke business course for owner-managers of companies providing services to the building and domestic sectors.
- Establishment of a programme for craftspersons working in the construction sector to meet the needs of those wishing to move into management/supervisory roles in construction companies.

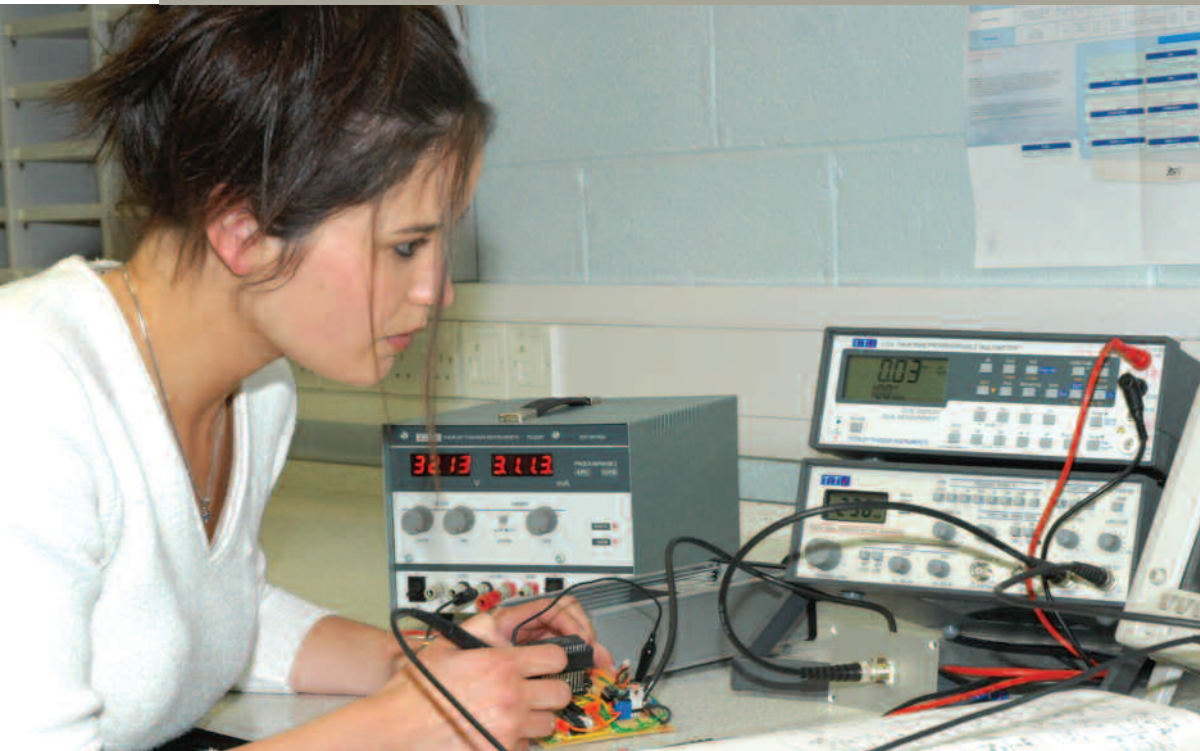
Much of the early work of the working group focused on an agreed framework for progression and this document is the outcome of that work. The specific targets in relation to progression to engineering degree programmes have been achieved and are evident through the case studies presented in Appendix D.

The FÁS Standards-Based Apprenticeship is a structured system of skills development for craft workers across a wide range of work activities. The apprenticeship involves 7 phases, four of which are 'in career' and three on 'educational release'. Recent reports (FÁS 2000, FÁS 2006) show that the intake to apprenticeship programmes has ranged from 8,000 in 2002 to 7,900 in 2006. Most of those taking apprenticeship as an option are male and these numbers represent at least a quarter of all young males leaving school either post Junior Certificate or Leaving Certificate and half of all young males who do not go on to full-time, third-level education. The population of registered apprentices as of December 2006 was 29,800 (FÁS 2006).

Some craftspersons have undertaken further academic studies taking advantage of progression opportunities provided in a number of institutes of technology but it is recognised that this number could be increased by the provision of more diverse and accessible progression opportunities. According to a recent report from the Expert Group on Future Skills (2007) it will be necessary by 2020 that 48% of the labour force should have qualifications at NFQ Levels 6 to 10.

Research conducted in the UK (Kappia et al., 2007), focused on career development priorities and aspirations of trade and craft employees in the construction sector found that trainees aspired to develop their career beyond the confines of the specific craft specialisation. O'Connor (2004) reports that, in a survey of former apprentices in the construction sector, the majority of respondents indicated that they believed that their apprenticeship prepares them to pursue further learning at a later stage in their career. Unwin and Fuller (2004) report that the apprentice develops confidence as a learner and ability to take personal responsibility and demonstrate autonomy, and the ability to set and strive for personal learning goals, all of which contribute to a strong basis for lifelong learning.

We can conclude, therefore, that there is and will continue to be a demand for higher skills levels in the workplace, that the aspirations of craft workers extend to higher education and that the apprenticeship is seen as a good preparation for continuing education. These are important drivers for the provision of more focused progression opportunities for holders of craft certificates. In the current economic climate it is accepted that the slowdown in the construction sector will also be a factor in the engagement of greater numbers of craft workers in higher education.



This progression framework is intended to advise learners, employers and higher education providers on an overall progression structure and to illustrate through specific case studies successful mechanisms for progression. Initially, the progression framework is as generally agreed by the project partners, however, it is envisaged that following its publication and contributions from stakeholders and interested groupings, a nationally agreed strategy would emerge.

Institutes of technology will determine how best to approach the provision of progression initiatives in line with their own priorities, resources and strategic planning. However, it would afford national access to progression programmes if institutes of technology were to act in concert for the provision of such progression programmes.

In order to illustrate and quantify the need for progression opportunities three separate surveys were undertaken - a survey of apprentices in a number of partner institutions, a survey that polled craftspersons currently undertaking undergraduate programmes in CIT and DIT and a survey of employers of craft certificate holders. The aim of the survey of apprentices in the partner institutions was to gain an overall view on the demand for progression among apprentices as well as to identify the progression discipline of choice by apprentices in the various trades. The survey attempts to identify perceived barriers to further learning and preferred modes of learning. A total of 1,130 current apprentices were surveyed – of these 94.7% indicated that they would benefit from progression opportunities leading to a higher qualification. A detailed review of the survey findings is presented in Appendix A.

In addition to this group of current apprentices, figures provided by FÁS indicate that there are 35,885 Craftspersons in the workforce who have completed their Advanced Certificate-Craft (previously National Craft Certificate) and have been in full-time employment for some time. Among this cohort there is an appreciation of the need for a further qualification in their particular area in order to avail of opportunities for promotion and self development. It is also clear that this group are more likely than most to be self-employed and to employ others. O'Connor (2004) reported that of a group of apprentices in the construction industry, 18% were self employed within a year of qualifying as a craftsperson. This indicates a need for accredited diversification opportunities from their particular craft specialisation into qualifications in broader areas of management and supervision. Kappia (2007) points to this lack of suitable routes towards managerial and professional positions for craft workers.

The purpose of the second survey involving craftspersons presently pursuing undergraduate engineering programmes was to ascertain their views of the programmes they are undertaking and to identify any issues they may have encountered. The findings are presented in Appendix B.

The survey of employers found that a large percentage of employers support the need for further learning among their employees and a number of questions were raised around the financial support of such opportunities. These results are reported in Appendix C.



Academic and experiential learning through the craft certificate programmes is well defined and well understood and it is proposed here that these learners be treated as a coherent group in developing and defining progression pathways as outlined in Section 4 of this report document. Obviously, all additional formal and non-formal learning can be submitted through the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) process on an individual basis to apply for further exemptions against specific modules where appropriate. This will be a matter for the individual and the appropriate institution. The *Education in Employment* project includes a significant strand on alignment of RPL policies and practices in partner institutions and will result in the generation of a set of agreed guidelines for learners, mentors and assessors.

National Framework of Qualifications

The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQA) was established in 2001 with the principal aims of establishing and maintaining a National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) and promoting and facilitating access, transfer and progression. The outline framework of qualifications is usually seen in the form of the ‘fan’ diagram shown below in Figure 1.

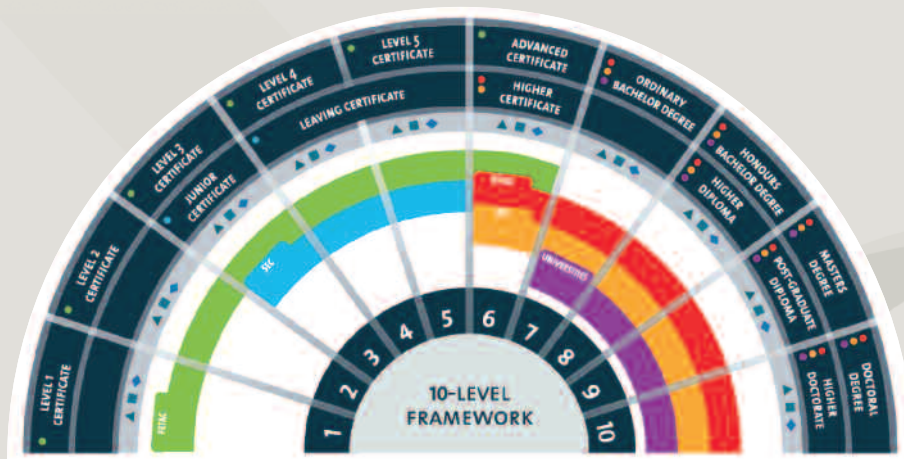


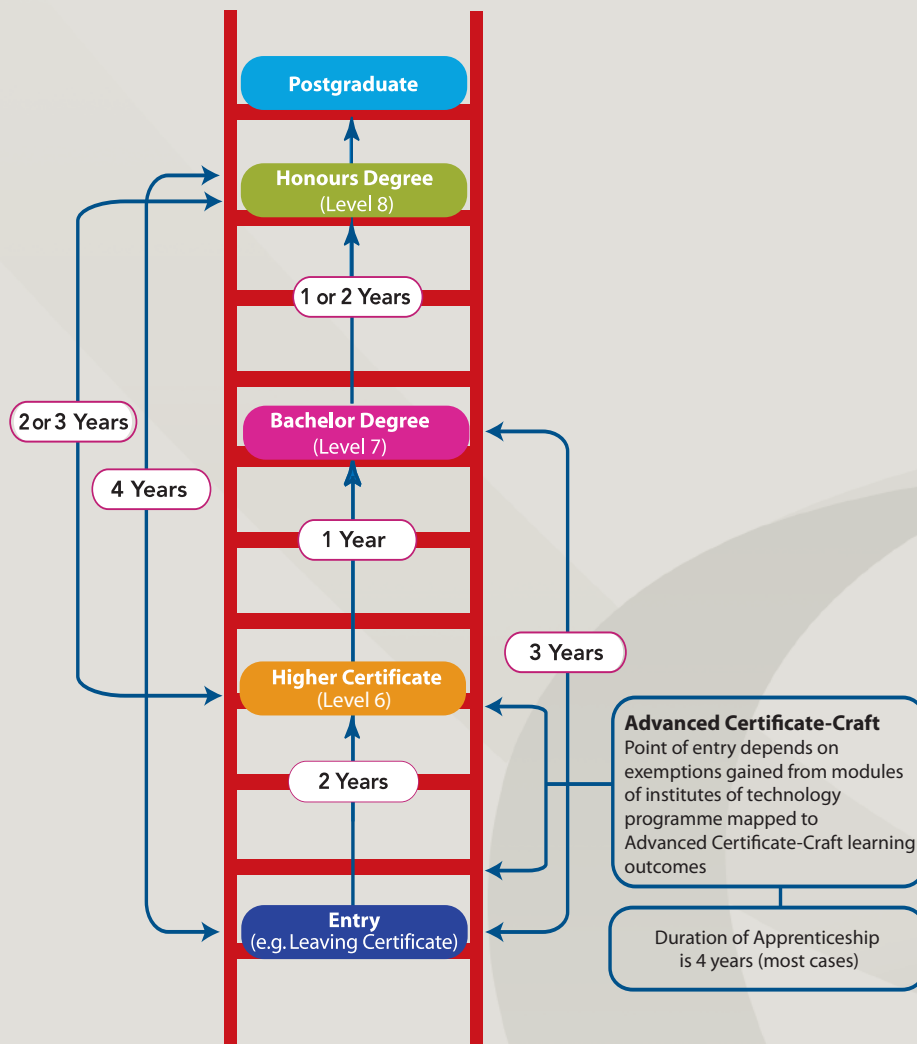
Figure 1 National Framework of Qualifications



The development of the National Framework of Qualifications was a fundamental step in achieving clarity for the learner and the provider in relating learning and learning achievements and in facilitating transfer and progression. The framework lays out clear 'levels' with one or more award types at each level. Level indicators give broad descriptions of learning outcomes in terms of knowledge, skills and competence. Awards at the same level on the framework may be different award-types because they reflect different mixes of knowledge, skills and competence. NQAI states that: *While all of the eight sub-strands of knowledge, skills and competence have been determined for the major award types, it is not the case that all of the named major awards will be as comprehensive. They may not encompass learning achievements for all of the sub-strands. Also, individual sub-strands of a named major award may be at a different level to the overall level of the major award-type.*

The basis for distinguishing between awards in the further education and higher education sectors at the same level on the framework is the comparison of the learning outcomes achieved under the knowledge, skills and competence headings. Inevitably there will be a requirement to evaluate the learning acquired by those who have obtained qualifications in the further education sector and who wish to seek exemptions on progressing on to programmes leading to a higher education award. Such evaluation is best undertaken using a *mapping exercise* involving the comparison of the learning outcomes for each programme and where an adequate match is made, exemptions will be applied subject to meeting the academic regulations associated with the programme onto which the learner wishes to progress.

The institute of technology sector has long operated on the basis of ladders of opportunity designed to facilitate the progression path described above thus ensuring that learners are given appropriate opportunities to progress their learning – from Level 6 to Level 10 on the framework. A typical 'ladder of progression' diagram from the CIT student prospectus is shown in Figure 2.



This progression framework document will focus on the progression from a FETAC award at Level 6 on the NQAI Framework to a HETAC Level 7 award in a broadly related discipline. It is understood that further progression opportunities from Level 7 exist in all partner institutions. In general, the progression path is as shown in Figure 3 below.

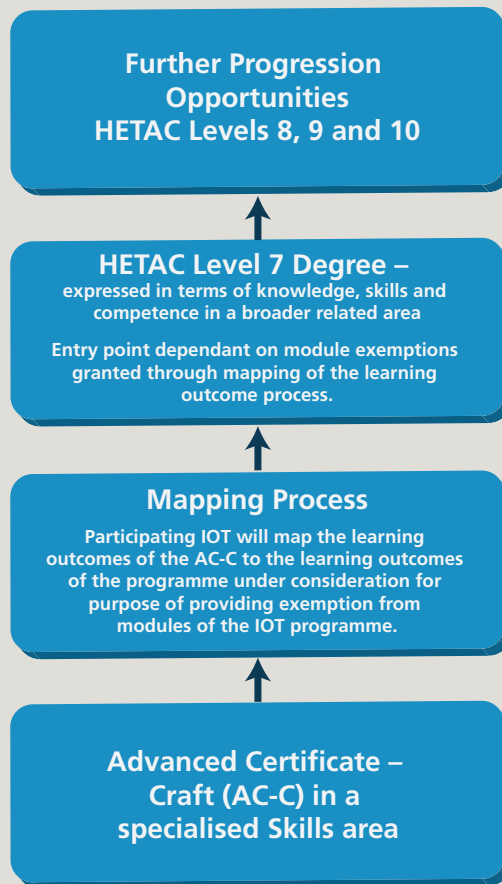


Figure 3 General outline of progression pathway

Knowledge, Skills and Competence approach

In order to plot progression pathways for craftspersons both the Advanced Certificate-Craft (AC-C) and the destination programme must be clearly articulated in terms of the National Framework of Qualifications. A detailed comparison of the knowledge, skills and competence outcomes in the AC-C apprenticeship programme and the descriptors for the destination Level 7 degree programme will indicate the learning required to 'bridge the gap'. The narrower the discipline in which the degree is sought and the more closely it is aligned with the craft specialisation, the better the match and the greater the exemptions applicable.

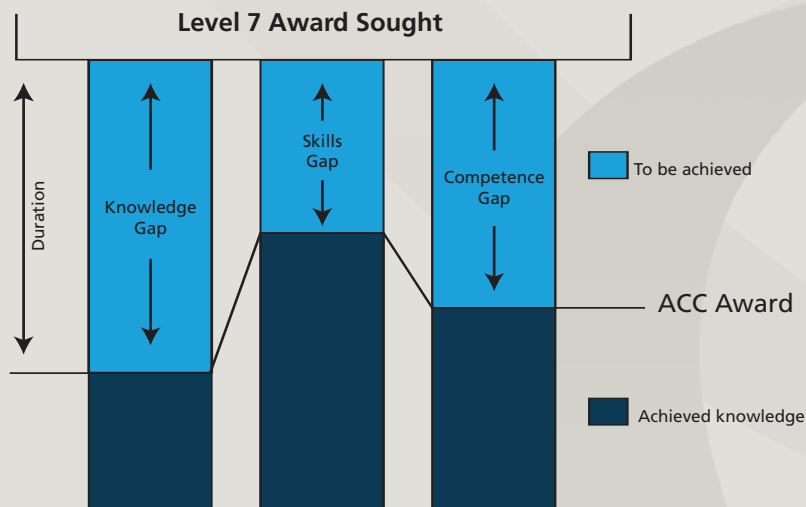


Figure 4 Advanced Certificate-Craft mapped to Level 7 Award Descriptors



5

Exemption from Modules within a Programme of Study

This progression framework is intended to outline a means by which holders of advanced craft certificates can, as a group, be afforded advanced entry to programmes that lead to awards at Level 7 on the National Framework of Qualifications. As programmes of study in the partner institutes of technology are described in terms of learning outcomes and programme outcomes in a modularised format, it is suggested that these existing approved modules act as the basis for the formal procedure.

Exemption is a key aspect of this proposed progression framework and the suggested procedure for establishing exemption should take the form of identifying the learning outcomes of the relevant craft programme and mapping these against the relevant degree programme module learning outcomes, from which exemption is sought. Furthermore, such approved modules may be utilised for the design of new programmes where such a need is identified. Detailed examples of the mapping process have been appended to this document for the purpose of demonstration in the case studies provided in Appendix D.

The award being sought will determine if additional prerequisites need to be considered. For instance, if learners seek to progress toward a Level 7 qualification in engineering, Leaving Certificate Mathematics or equivalent may be required – unless their craft certificate can be shown to have met the equivalent mathematics standard.

Institutes of technology will be encouraged to include such exemption information in their respective programme information brochures and it is desirable that a national organisation would prepare a specialist brochure embracing programmes with exemptions for distribution widely within the FÁS and institutes of technology sector principally aimed at craftspersons.

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

Where a learner has gained additional formal or informal learning this can be submitted through the formal Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) procedures to be considered for additional exemptions. In this case the applicant will submit that extra learning to the formal RPL process of the institute of technology to which they are making application. It is acknowledged that the outcome of such an RPL process is confined to each individual applicant and is not normally expected to establish further general exemptions.





6

Modes of Delivery



It is recognised that most craftspersons will be engaged in full-time employment and many of those who wish to embark on a progression route are not likely to enrol as full-time students. Interestingly, students from a craftspersons background already engaged on study programmes in DIT and CIT leading to a Level 7 Bachelor Degree indicated a significant preference (91.1%) in favour of the full-time mode. The survey of current apprentices also showed the main obstacles to progression as being financial burden 51.4% (to be interpreted as loss of future earnings if embarking on a full-time programme) and 20.4% lack of time for self-study. These two different responses can be understood in the context of the respondents' current experiences. The current apprentices are engaged in the workplace and their study programmes are considered as

necessary interruptions to their working life. The craftspersons who have progressed to third level education have, in many cases, chosen to study on a full-time basis and could therefore be expected to express a preference for this mode.

The progression framework acknowledges that to make progression available to all those who may wish to participate, irrespective of geographic location, there is a need for innovative and novel provisions on the part of the institute of technology sector. This could include collaboration between institutes of technology, the sharing of programme delivery, franchising of programmes, the sharing of module delivery and the use of distance learning. The sector is encouraged to consider all options to ensure that the provision of progression opportunities be as flexible and wide as possible. Consideration should also be given to collaboration with agencies and providers outside the institute of technology sector.

Development of shared consortium programmes and new collaborative activities could be facilitated through HETAC. Under the outcomes of the *Education in Employment* project, it is intended that a bespoke business course for craftspersons who are owner-managers will be explored. Preliminary work in this area will focus on a review of current provision and exploration of possible synergies with other agencies and providers.

It should be noted that significant funding has been received under the Strategic Innovation Fund Cycle 2 for an institute of technology sectoral project 'Addressing the Needs of the Knowledge Economy' which is aimed at supporting the further development of flexible learning within the sector. Overall, it would seem apparent that a diverse range of delivery options, including flexible and shared development and delivery will enhance the participation of craft workers in higher education.



7

Recommendations

Marketing this framework is viewed as an essential element of its implementation since its success will only be achieved on the basis of widespread dissemination to all the players expected to engage in the process. The roll out of the framework will see an intensive set of information sessions to key educational personnel across the third level sector and will also embrace the publication of appropriate literature for distribution to the potential users of this framework.

It is clear that where opportunities exist these must be effectively marketed to potential learners and that these learners should be supported in their efforts to progress. The level of support that the learner might expect will vary from organisation to organisation. A particular difficulty in encouraging SME's to take up training opportunities is reported by Holifield et al (2008) due to the 'survival mode' of operation of many smaller organisations. Larger employers and multinational organisations tend to have greater training and development budgets.

Other recommendations arising from this work are as follows:

- A central repository of information on progression pathways and opportunities for craft holders in all disciplines should be established and maintained;
- Information on further learning opportunities should be made available to apprentice learners at all appropriate levels;
- Development of further focused progression opportunities for craftspersons should be actively promoted within higher education institutions;
- Consideration should be given to flexible learning opportunities within any programmes developed;
- The issue of financial support for craftspersons progressing onto higher education on a part-time or full-time basis should be the subject of a national debate.

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Appendix A

Apprentice Survey Results

Introduction

This report presents the findings from a survey conducted by the collaborating partner institutions (AIT, CIT, DIT, DKIT, GMIT, and ITS) as part of the rationale for a national framework on progression routes for craftsperson. The main purpose of this survey was to examine the perceptions of the current apprentice students in relation to further education and progression. This was achieved by a quantitative assessment using student questionnaires. The questionnaire was developed by the project working group members. In total 1,130 apprentices participated in this survey.

Research Sample

The groups that participated in this survey were the FÁS Programme Apprentices at 'Phase 4' and 'Phase 6' level attending AIT, CIT, DIT¹, DKIT, GMIT², and ITS in Term 1 2007/08. The trade areas involved are Electrical, Welding & Fabrication, Fitting, Motor, Plumbing, Carpentry, Bricklaying, Plastering and Painting.

Geographical Spread

Apprentices attending an institute of technology do not necessarily attend the one nearest to them. The placement of each apprentice is actually chosen independently by FÁS. Therefore, an apprentice from Donegal could in fact attend CIT and not IT Sligo for phase 4 and 6 of their chosen apprenticeship. With this in mind the apprentices were asked to state (1) the institute they attended, (2) their home county, (3) their current trade and (4) their current phase of apprenticeship. This provides the survey with a physical and geographical breakdown on the apprentices. Figure 1 and Tables 1 and 2 give a full breakdown on this spread.

1 DIT results taken from Term 2 2007/2008

2 GMIT results taken from a pilot survey carried out on electrical apprentices during the initial registration on the 24th September Term 1 2007/2008.

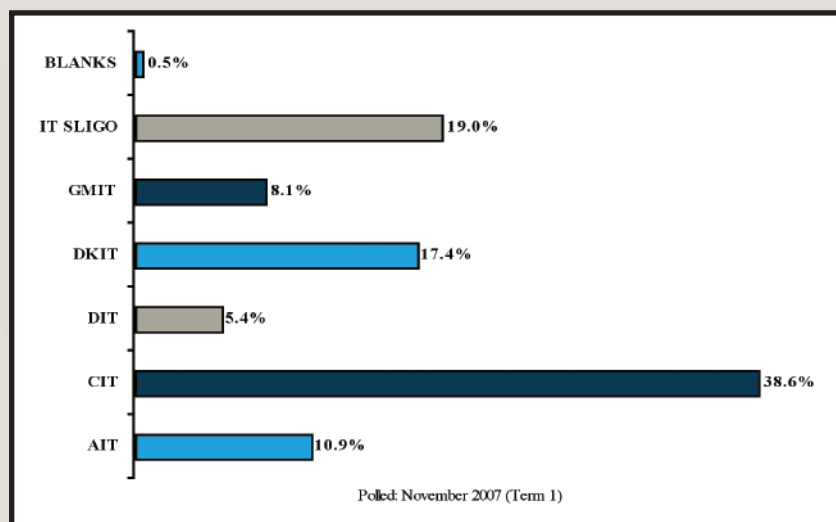


Figure 1 Number of apprentices surveyed in each institute of technology

County	%	County	%
Armagh	0.1%	Limerick	4.9%
Carlow	0.7%	Longford	0.3%
Cavan	2.9%	Louth	3.7%
Clare	3.3%	Mayo	3.2%
Cork	19.2%	Meath	5.5%
Derry	0.3%	Monaghan	3.5%
Donegal	4.3%	Offaly	1.9%
Dublin	6.2%	Roscommon	1.3%
Galway	12.7%	Sligo	3.9%
Kerry	5.0%	Tipperary	2.9%
Kildare	2.5%	Waterford	1.8%
Kilkenny	2.5%	Westmeath	1.4%
Laois	0.9%	Wexford	1.3%
Letrim	2.6%	Wicklow	0.7%

Table 1 Geographical spread



Trade Area	Number of Apprentices	% Value
Bricklaying	29	2.6%
Carpentry	296	26.2%
Electrical	412	36.5%
Metal Fabrication/Welding	27	2.4%
Heavy Motor Vehicle	48	4.2%
Motor	30	2.7%
Painting & Decorating	22	1.9%
Plumbing	219	19.4%
Plastering	31	2.7%
Tool making	16	1.4%
Total	1130	100%

Table 2 Number of apprentices surveyed in each trade area.

Of those surveyed, 52% were in phase 6 and 48% in phase 4 of their apprenticeship.

In the survey, the apprentices were asked if they could benefit from opportunities to progress to further education after completing their apprenticeship. This question is important in identifying the demand and need for such opportunities. The results from the survey shows that 94.7% of the apprentices surveyed believed that they could benefit from such opportunities while 5.2% said 'No'. The remaining 0.1% did not answer. This is illustrated in Figure 2.

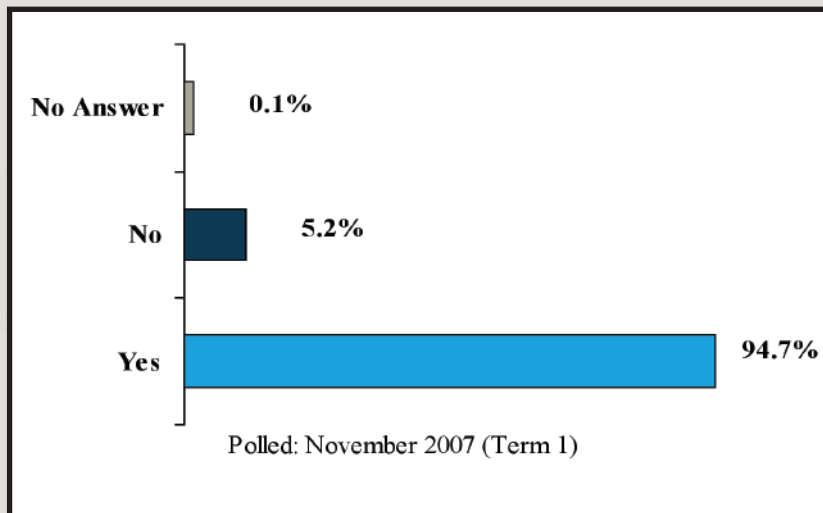


Figure 2 Do you feel you could benefit from opportunities to progress to further education, after completing your apprenticeship?

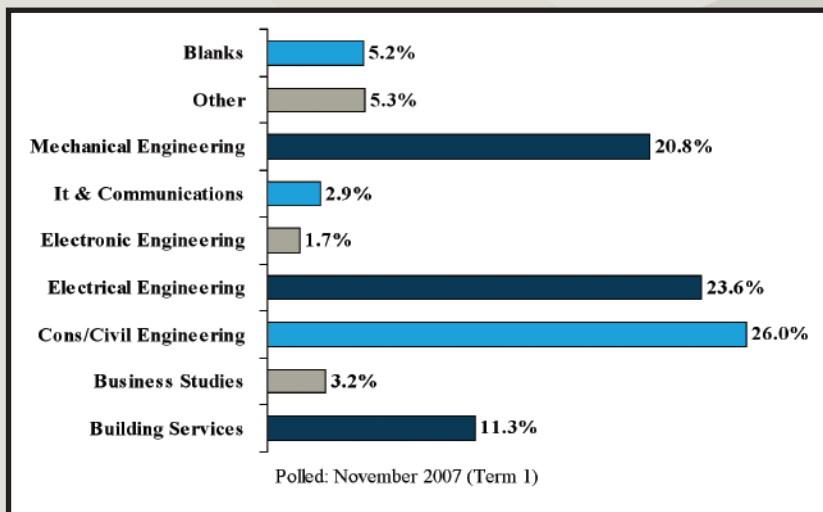


Figure 3 First preference for areas of progression

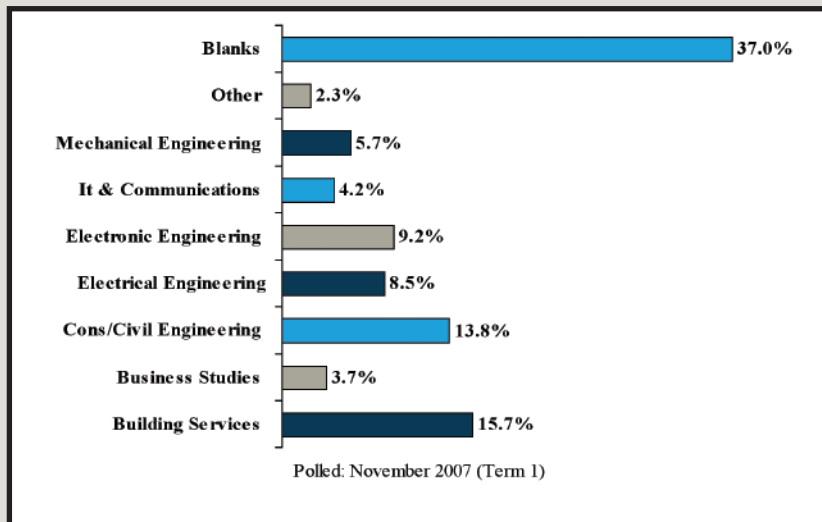


Figure 4 Second preference for areas of progression

The respondents were also asked to identify their preferences in relation to disciplines for progression. Three separate questions asked for their first, second and third preference. Seven specific progression choices were provided with an opportunity to identify another area. The findings from the survey show that areas such as Construction/Civil Engineering (20.6%), Electrical (23.6%) and Mechanical Engineering (20.8%) featured high on first preference for progression among the cohort questioned.

Building Services Engineering, Construction/Civil Engineering, Electrical/Electronic Engineering and Mechanical Engineering again featured high on their second and third preference for progression, although many respondents chose to give their first preference only as illustrated by the 'blanks'. Figures 3, 4 and 5 give a full breakdown on preferences.

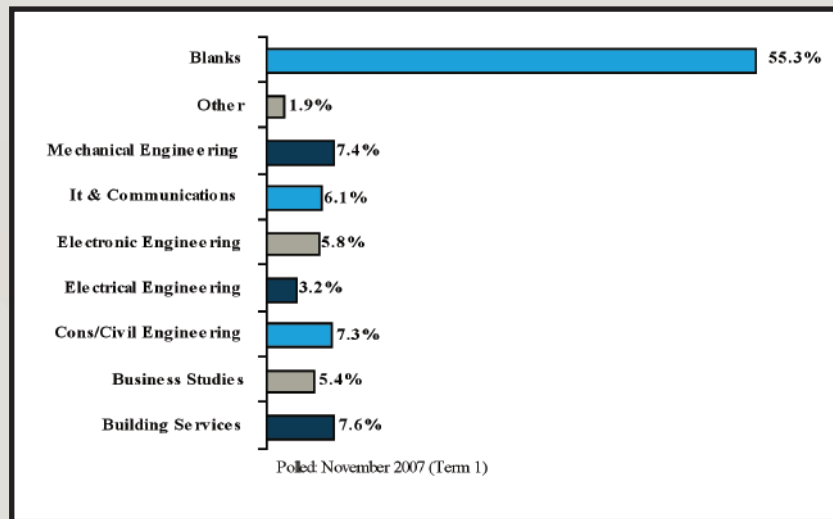



Figure 5 Third preference for areas of progression

These responses in terms of preferred discipline for further study should be considered in conjunction with the question relating to the relationship between the current trade and the preferred area for progression detailed below. It is noteworthy that in the vast majority of cases the respondents have chosen the 'expected' route. Those in the electrical trade area have indicated a preference for electrical engineering and so on. It is also interesting to note that very few participants chose a progression pathway other than the seven presented as options in the survey form.



Trade	Preferred Progression Route
Metal Fabrication	Mechanical Engineering (74%)
Heavy Motor Vehicle	Mechanical Engineering (75%)
Motor	Mechanical Engineering (60%)
Plumbing	Mechanical Engineering (42.9%)
Tool making	Mechanical Engineering (88%)
Electrical	Electrical Engineering (70.7%)
Carpentry	Construction/Civil Engineering (64.2%)
Cabinet Making	Construction/Civil Engineering (64.7%)
Bricklaying	Building Services Engineering (55%)
Painting	Business Studies/IT Communications (23% each)
Plastering	Construction/Civil Engineering (65%)

Table 3 Correlation between current trade and chosen progression route

Another question asked the apprentices to indicate what they perceived as the greatest barriers to continuing with their education. They were asked to choose their top 3 from 5 options provided with an opportunity to add another. In many cases, the respondents chose only to give their first reason. The findings from the survey show that 51.4% of the group stated 'financial burden' as their main difficulty. Lack of time for self-study also proved a difficulty with 20.4% of the students while distance from education centre and lack of recognition were other difficulties with 11% and 6.8% of the apprentices respectively. Again, lack of recognition, lack of time for self-study and distance from education centre proved a difficulty with the students second and third reasons. Figures 6, 7 and 8 give a full breakdown on the perceived difficulties/obstacles associated with further education among this cohort.

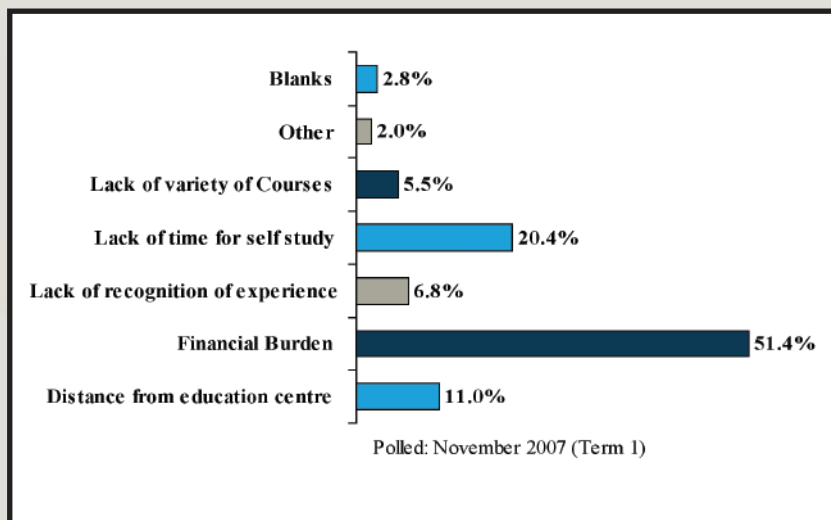


Figure 6 The largest difficulty or obstacle for further education (1st reason)
 Note: The amount of 'blank answers' increased for the second and third reasons

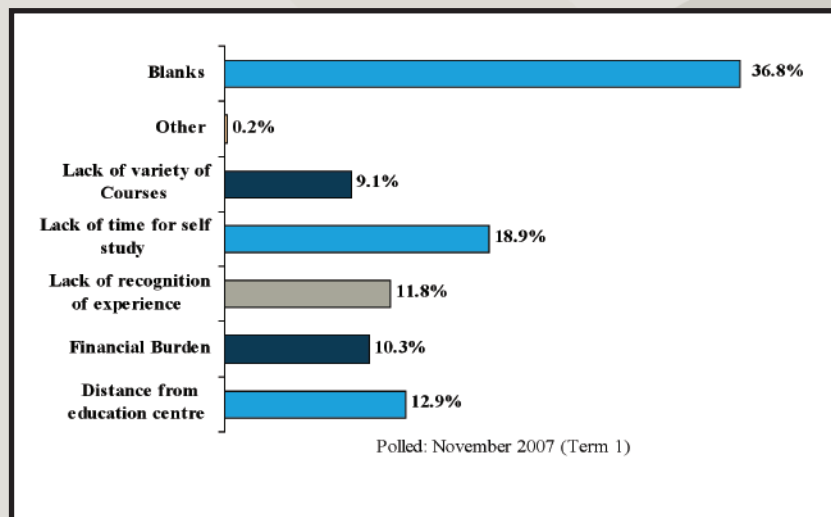


Figure 7 The largest difficulty or obstacle for further education (2nd reason)

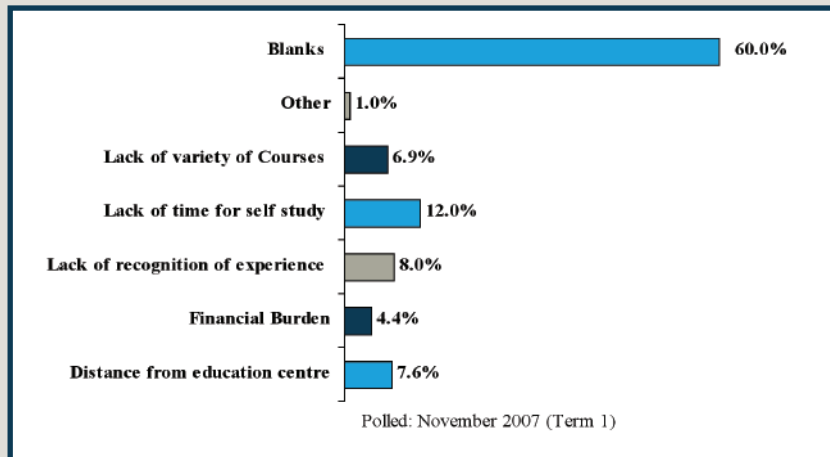


Figure 8 The largest difficulty or obstacle for further education (3rd reason)

A further question asked the apprentices to identify whether financial support or the provision of part-time versus full-time options might best benefit them. The findings show that 52% of the group would best benefit from Financial Support while 17.4% said 'Part-time study' with many choosing to indicate just their first preferred option. These responses are illustrated in figures 9, 10 and 11.

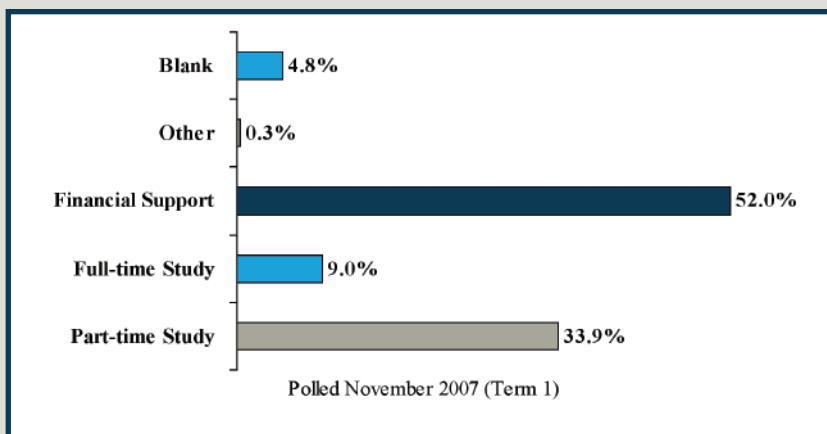


Figure 9 How could you best benefit from supports to further education courses? (1st choice)

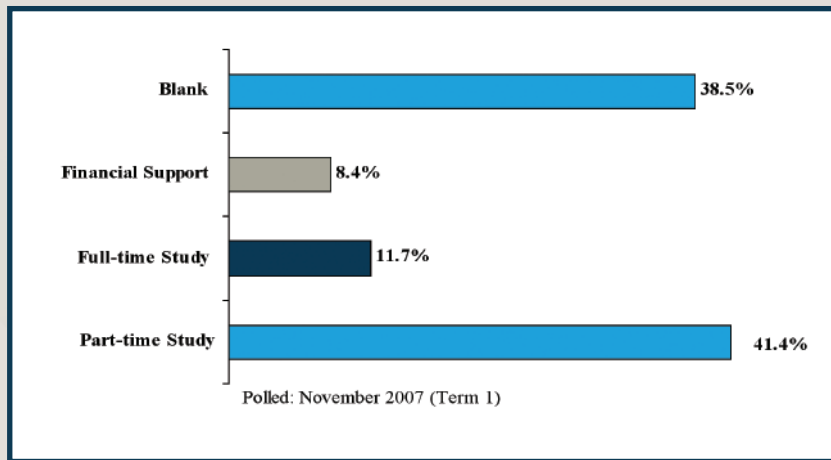


Figure 10 How could you best benefit from supports to further education courses? (2nd choice)

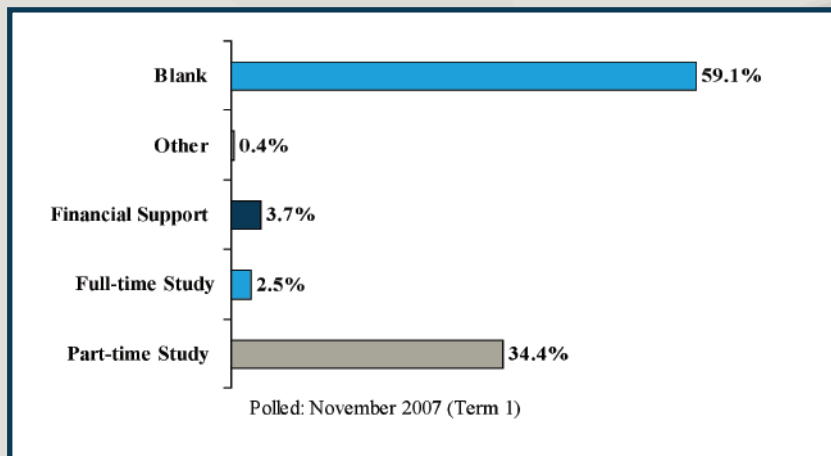


Figure 11 How could you best benefit from supports to further education courses? (3rd choice)



The final question on the questionnaire dealt with the area of prior education. Apprentices were asked to state the highest certificate that they had been awarded prior to commencing their apprenticeship programme. The findings show 79.5% of the survey achieved Leaving Certificate while 15.1% achieved Junior Certificate. Figure 12 gives a full breakdown on the findings.

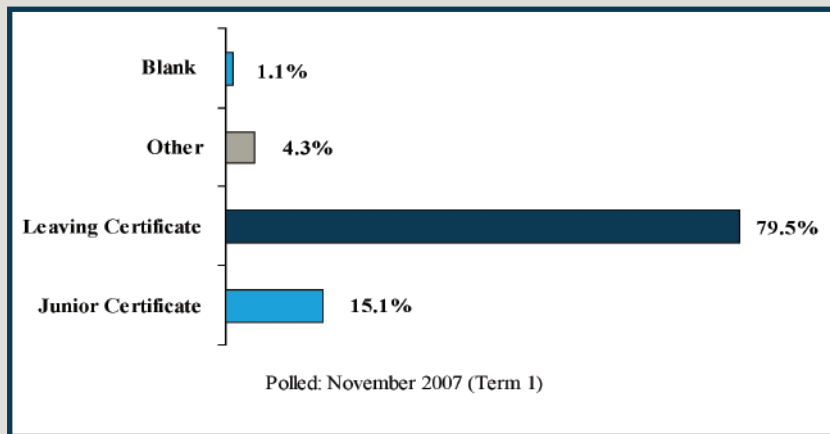


Figure 12 What is the highest education certificate you have been awarded?

Key Findings from the Survey of Apprentices

- 94.7% of the group surveyed felt that they could benefit from opportunities to progress to further education after completing their apprenticeship.
- The main areas of progression that the survey identified are Construction/Civil Engineering (26%), Electrical Engineering (23.6%) and Mechanical Engineering (20.8%)
- There is a strong relationship between progression routes and individual apprentice trade areas.
- The main obstacles or difficulties seen by the apprentices towards further education are financial support (51.4%), lack of time for self-study (20.4%), distance from education centre (11%) and lack of recognition of experience (6.8%).
- The provision of focused financial support and part-time flexible learning opportunities would best assist the apprentices in accessing higher education.
- 79.5% of the group surveyed have achieved Leaving Certificate award.



Appendix B

Current Student Survey Results

Statistics from survey of students (qualified craftspersons) currently engaged in higher education programmes

As a focus of the project is on the progression of electrical apprentices onto programmes in electrical engineering, it was decided to ascertain the views of this group on their experiences to date. The participants attended either CIT or DIT. All of the students surveyed had completed the electrical apprenticeship programme and were now enrolled on Level 7 engineering degrees in the area of electrical engineering. Table 1 gives the breakdown of the students. The craft certificate holders gained exemptions at entry into the Level 7 programme based on their apprenticeship. Figure 1 reflects the level achieved in Leaving Certificate mathematics. It is interesting to note that the average Leaving Certificate points in 310.7.

Degree Titles	No of Students
Bachelor of Engineering in Electrical Engineering (CIT)	14 (31.1%)
Bachelor of Engineering in Electrical Services Engineering (DIT)	31 (68.9%)

Table 1 Degree titles and student numbers

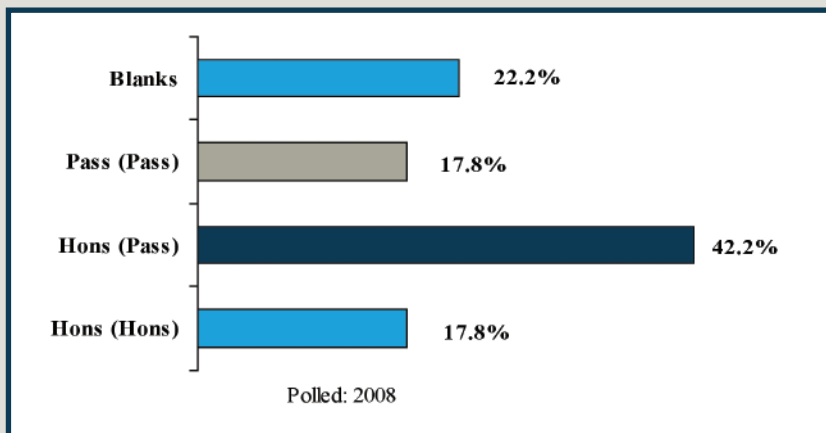


Figure 1 Respondents Leaving Certificate results in Mathematics

The survey found that 33.3% of the students had considered a full-time engineering programme before finally deciding to do an apprenticeship. Students were asked to indicate their reasons for deciding on an apprenticeship and the answers are illustrated in Figure 2 below. As these learners have completed their apprenticeship and spent some time in the workplace it may be the case that they feel at some remove from their earlier post Leaving Certificate decision and this may explain the number of students who did not indicate a reason.

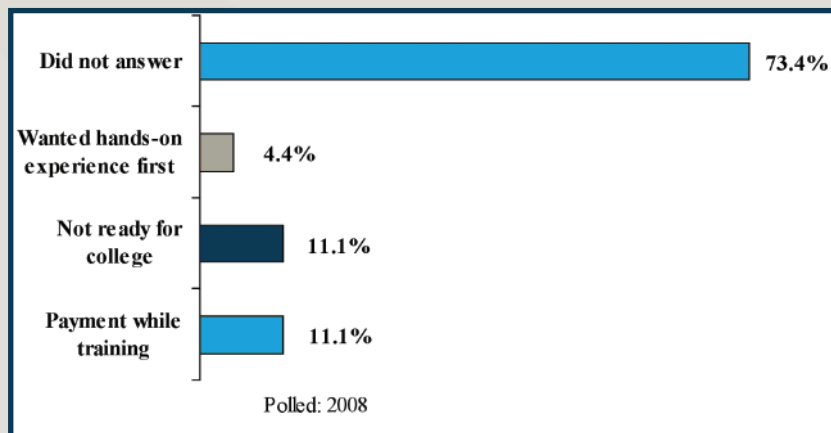


Figure 2 Reasons for choosing an apprenticeship vs full-time engineering programme

When asked if they had experienced any difficulties in their programme, 55.6% of the students did not have any problems fitting into the current degree programme and 35.6% who said "they had difficulties" only experienced them at the very beginning.

Out of the 35.6% who indicated that they had experienced early difficulties 70.6% of them stated that "bridging courses and better prior knowledge would minimise or resolve this".

When questioned about the motivation for progression to a degree programme 69.8% of the students surveyed stated the main reason they decided to apply for a place on a degree programme was "for a personal and career advancement".

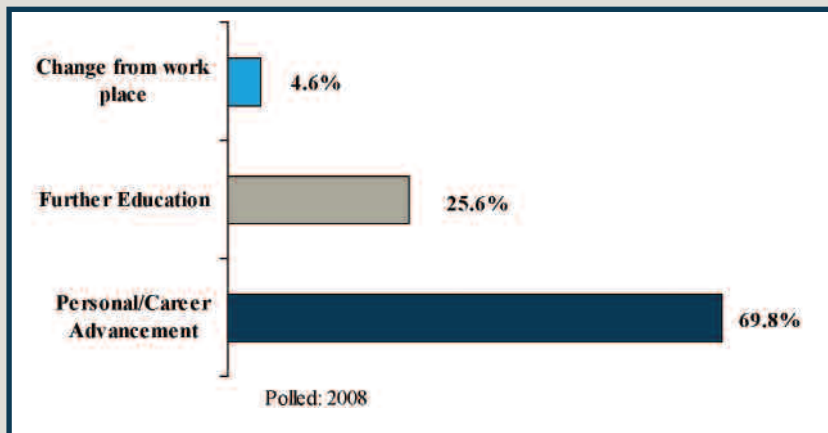


Figure 3 Why did you decide to undertake this degree programme?

Another question attempted to probe this motivation further by asking the students to indicate the role that they would expect to undertake after completing their studies. As might be expected the students responded that they expect to acquire jobs as design engineers, 41%, or electrical engineers, 31%.

When questioned about the preferred mode of study the vast majority, 91.1%, of the students surveyed said that full-time was the best mode of delivery. As mentioned earlier in this report, this must be influenced by the fact that these learners have already chosen a full-time programme in many cases and they are therefore not representative of potential learners in general.

The survey found that 45% of the students entered a degree programme within one year of completing their craft apprenticeship while 10% entered immediately on completion of their craft apprenticeship. This raises some interesting questions. As the students surveyed for this report all embarked on higher education programmes in September 2007, there may be a link between the decision to opt for higher education qualifications and the beginning of a slowdown in the construction sector at that time.

It would be interesting for further study to plot the demand for higher education programmes among recently qualified apprentices against the demand for skilled craftspersons in the workplace.

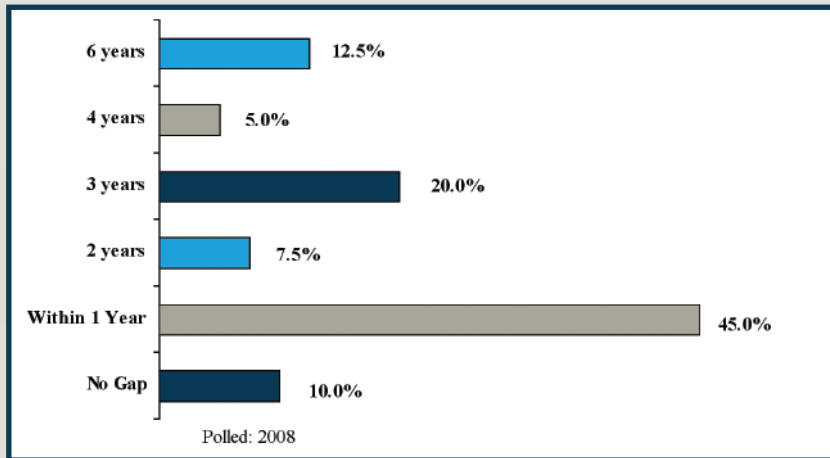


Figure 5 How long after qualifying as a craftsperson did you enter this degree programme?

82.2% of the students surveyed did give consideration to the earnings they would be foregoing while studying. As shown in Figure 6, 75.5% indicated they are satisfied or very satisfied with the programme they are undertaking.

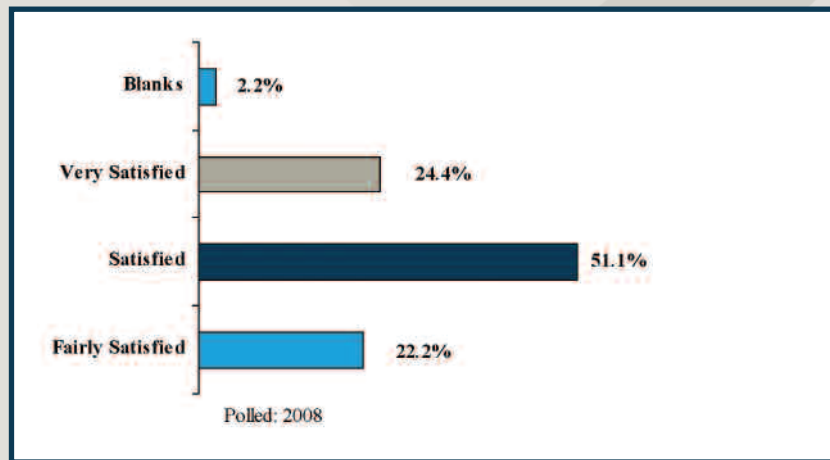


Figure 6 Are you satisfied with the course so far?



Order of difficulty	Subject
1st	Mathematics (67.5%)
2nd	Building Services Project Management Power Systems (18.5%)
3rd	Electronics Electrical Services Plant Electrical Services Design (14%)

Table 2 List the subjects in order of difficulty



The students were asked to indicate subjects that had caused them the most difficulty in returning to education. As might be expected in a Level 7 engineering programme, a majority of students indicated that mathematics was the most difficult subject. It is interesting to note that the case studies in Appendix D giving statistical analysis of the students from the trades area who have progressed into higher education show that these students overcome these difficulties and attain high standards in their award years.

Key findings from the survey of students currently engaged in progression programmes.

- 77.8% surveyed indicated they had Leaving Certificate Mathematics, 17.8% at honours level.
- Average Leaving Certificate Points are 310.7.
- 69.8% of progression students surveyed stated the main reason they decided to apply for a place on a degree programme was “for a personal & career advancement”.
- 91.1% of the students surveyed said that full-time was the most suitable mode of delivery for them.
- 55% of the students entered the degree programme within one year of completing their craft apprenticeship.
- 55.6% of the students surveyed did not have any problems fitting into the current degree programme. Although 35.6% said “they had difficulties” such difficulties were only experienced at the very beginning of the course.
- 75.5% are satisfied or very satisfied with their course while 22.2% are fairly satisfied.
- Most of the progression students surveyed did give consideration to the earnings they would be foregoing.
- The positions that the students expected to acquire on completing the course are Design Engineer (41%) and Electrical Engineer (31%).

Appendix C

Employers Survey Results

Introduction

This report presents the findings from a survey conducted by the partners on a cross-section of employers from all trade areas who had apprentices attending an institute of technology in 2008 as part of their apprenticeship training programme. The main purpose of this survey was to get feedback from the employers which may help in the implementation of the framework. In total 195 employers participated in this survey. The geographical spread of the employers is shown below in Figure 1.

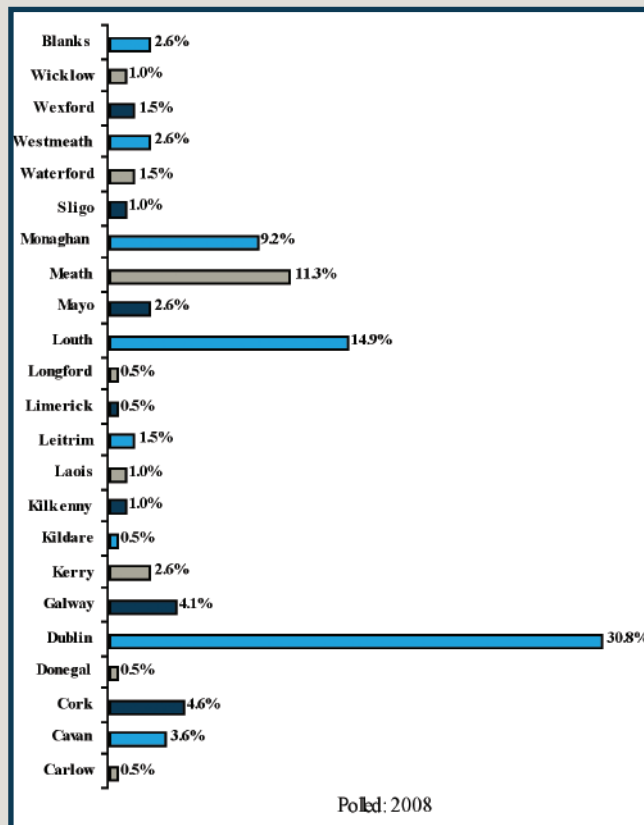


Figure 1 The Geographical Spread of the Surveyed Employers

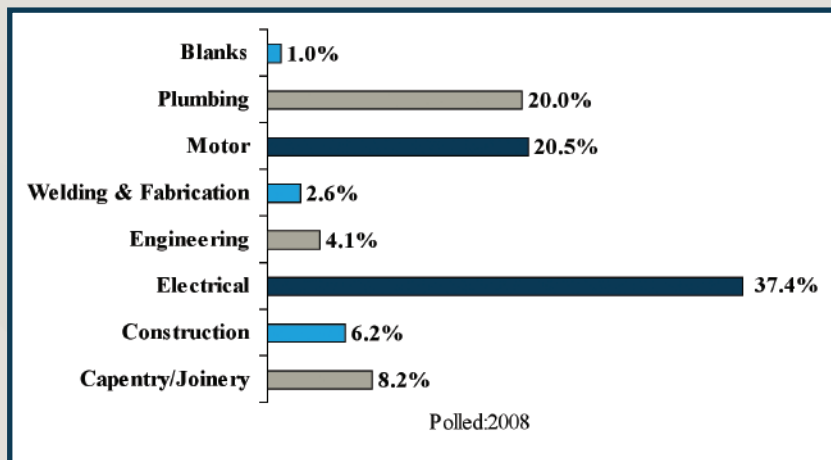


Figure 2 Area of Speciality

In the survey, the employers were asked to state their 'area of speciality'. The main area of speciality the survey found was electrical with 37.4%. Plumbing and motor were also well represented with 20% and 20.5% respectively. The areas of speciality are shown in Figure 2. The survey also found that the average number of employees for each company was 118.4. Figure 3 shows the breakdown between the public and private sectors.

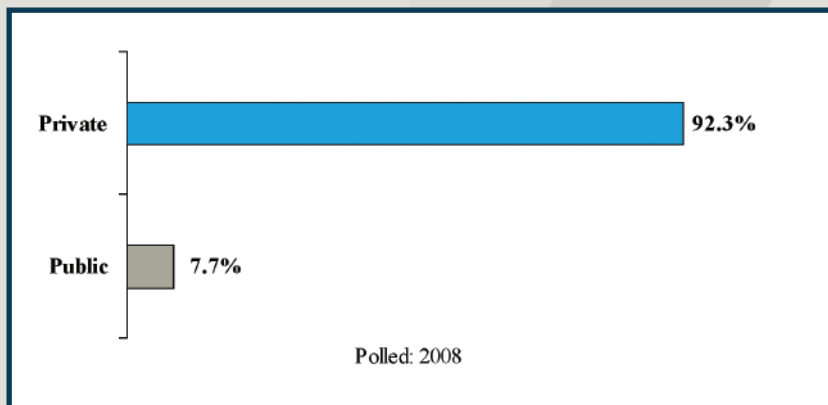


Figure 3 Public or Private Sector



In the survey the employers were asked if they believed that their employees would benefit from progressing onto further education programmes . Results from the survey show that 81% of the employers did believe their employees would benefit from this. The full breakdown is shown in Figure 4.

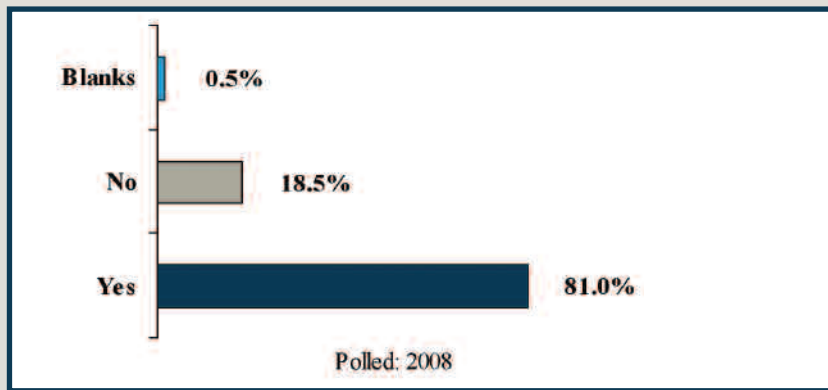


Figure 4 Do you think that your employees could benefit from progressing onto further education programmes ?

On a follow up to the previous question the employers were asked if they considered that their company would benefit from their employees progressing onto education programmes . 72.8% of the employers said 'Yes'. Figure 5 shows the full breakdown on this question.

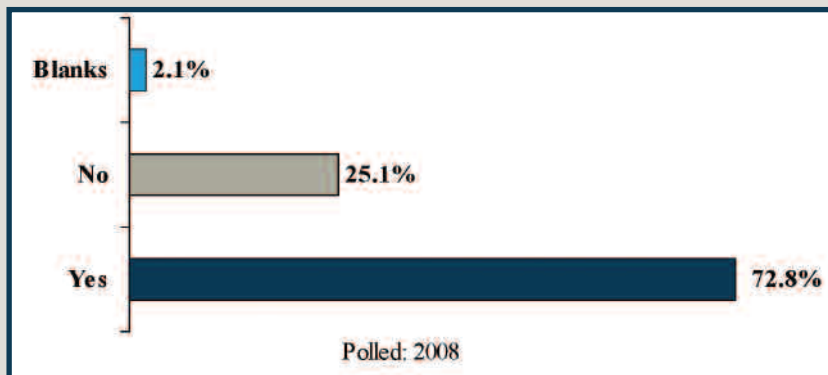


Figure 5 Do you consider that your company could benefit from employees progressing onto education programmes ?

Another important finding from the survey was that 69.7% of the employers would provide some type of time-allowance for their employees if they decided to progress onto higher education programmes. Figure 6 gives the full breakdown.

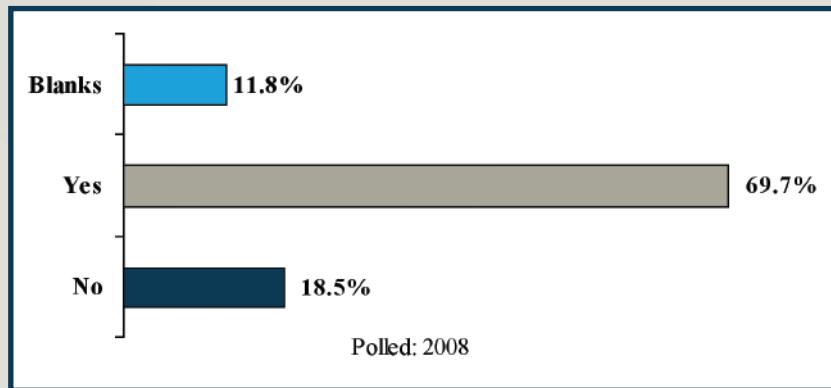


Figure 6 Would you provide time for your employees to participate in higher education programmes?

Employers were also asked to state their preference in relation to the most suitable times to deliver such education programmes. The employers were given 4 different options to choose from. Results from the survey show that 28.2% of the employers preferred 'night-time', 8.2% stated '2/3 day blocks' while 31.1% of the employers indicated a 'mixture' of delivery modes might be appropriate.

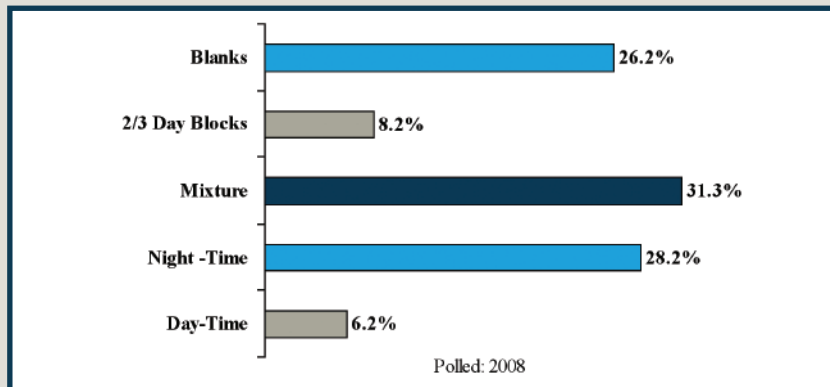


Figure 7 Which of the following times would best suit your company?

There are challenges here for higher education to ensure that programmes are designed with a view to flexibility and accessibility to meet the needs of the learners and the employers. Moreover, in the survey the employers were asked if they would be willing to help their employees financially while attending college and studying. Results from the survey show that 47.7% said 'Yes' while 35.9% said 'No'. Figure 8 gives the breakdown on this.

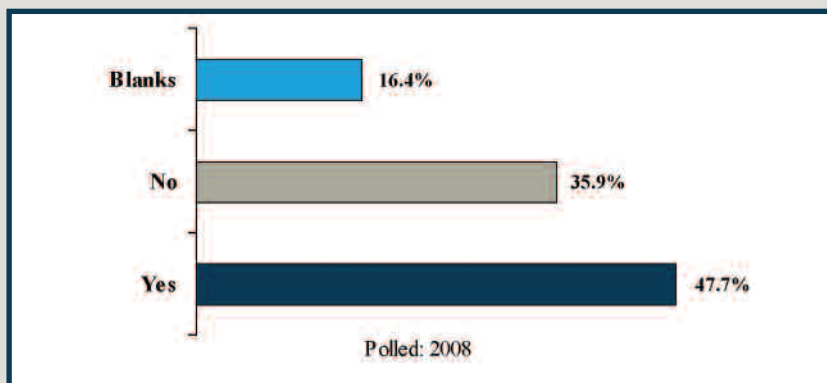


Figure 8 Would you be willing to help your employees financially while attending college/ studying etc?

In a follow up to the previous question the employers were asked to state what they considered would play an important role in gaining their support. Again, they were given 4 choices to choose from with an option to state a reason of their own. Findings from the survey show that 41.5% of the employees would like some 'state financial support'. Further employee commitment (17.9%) and achieved qualification suitable to company development (14.9%) also were high requirements for the employers. Figure 9 gives the full breakdown.

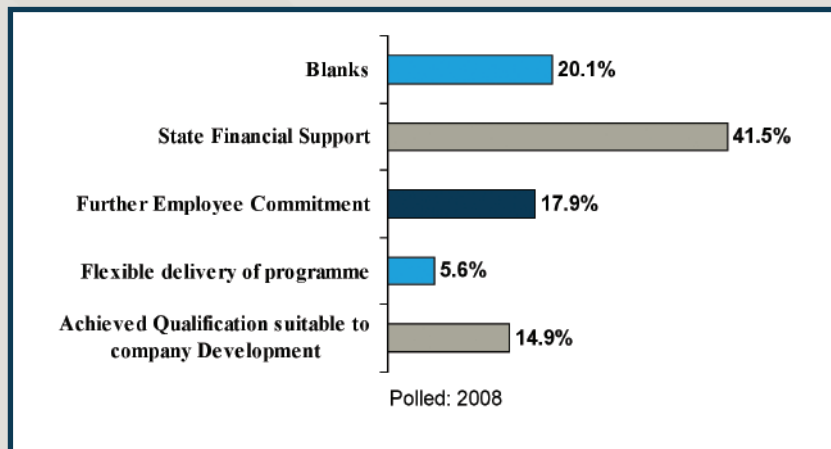



Figure 9 Which of the issues listed would you consider to play an important role in gaining your support for education for your employees?



Key findings from the survey of employers

- The main areas of speciality among the group of respondents are Electrical (37.4%), Plumbing (20%) and Motor (20.5%).
- 92.3% of the surveyed employers were in the private sector.
- 81% of the employers believed that their employees would benefit from further education programmes.
- 72.8% of the employers believed that their company would benefit from their employees progressing onto further education programmes.
- 67.9% of the employers would provide time for their employees to pursue further education programmes.
- 47.7% of the employers would financially support their employees while on further education programmes.
- A mixture of night-time, day-time and 2/3 day blocks would be the most suitable mode of delivery for further education programmes.
- 41.5% of the employers said 'state financial support' would play an important role in gaining their support in further education programmes for their employees.

Appendix D

Case Studies

Case Study D1

Progression of Craftspersons into an existing Level 7 Electrical Engineering programme

Institution:	Cork Institute of Technology
Programme:	Electrical Engineering
Programme Title:	Bachelor of Engineering in Electrical Engineering
Level:	7
Mode:	Full-time
Normal Duration:	3 years
Number of Students:	Usual intake to Semester 1 (year 1) is 40 students from CAO entry

Programme Philosophy

The programme is designed to educate and train graduates for employment as electrical associate engineers in the design, planning and maintenance of large-scale industrial and commercial complexes, or as sales/marketing executives or technical support personnel with major suppliers of electrical, control and automation equipment. The graduate will be able to calculate electrical parameters of a system/facility/component and from this be able to specify and execute all relevant drawings, lists and material procurement for the system realisation. The graduate exercises independent technical judgment and work, as an engineering technologist, with significant autonomy within his/her allocated responsibility.

The programme employs an applications-orientated industry-related approach to produce associate engineers capable of making an early contribution in the working environment across a wide range of employment positions.



Need for the Programme


The present programme has its origins in a two-year, full-time National Certificate in Electrical Engineering developed in 1975 to meet the local needs of the electrical construction firms, the consulting engineering organisations and the manufacturing industries. Responding to the demands of employers an add-on, one-year Diploma in Electrical Engineering was provided in 1997. The programme was subsequently converted to a Bachelor Degree in Electrical Engineering in 2004 in line with the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) transformation of its award system in response to the launch of the National Framework of Qualifications in October 2003.

Graduates from the programme find ready employment in the industrial, manufacturing, contracting, utility/process, sales/marketing and electrical engineering consultancy areas, and in the public sector dealing initially with technical and engineering aspects. Having acquired suitable work experience the graduates may expect to progress quickly to positions of responsibility where independent technical judgment will be exercised and will work with a significant level of autonomy.

Programme outcomes

The programme outcomes of the Bachelor Degree in Electrical Engineering outlined below have been aligned with the HETAC Descriptors for Engineering Programmes.

PO1	Knowledge - Breadth	A specialist knowledge of areas of electrical circuitry and practice, installation and equipment. A knowledge of mathematics, ICT, design, safety, business and engineering practice relevant to the electrical engineering technician.
PO2	Knowledge - Kind	The ability to apply analytical knowledge of electrical science, practice and design, to the solution of well-defined electrical engineering technology problems.
PO3	Skill - Range	The ability to use techniques, skills and modern computer-based engineering tools and packages necessary for engineering practice.
PO4	Skill - Selectivity	The ability to design system, component or process to meet specified needs and to contribute to the assessment of the technical performance of the design.
PO5	Competence - Context	The ability to implement the solution of common engineering technology problems in electrical engineering.
PO6	Competence - Role	The ability to work autonomously and as a member of a multidisciplinary team in well-defined work settings.
PO7	Competence - Learning to Learn	The ability to identify and address learning needs within a structured learning environment and an awareness of the need for continued professional development.
PO8	Competence - Insight	An understanding of the wider social, political, business and economic context within which engineering operates and the need for high ethical standards in the practice of engineering, including the responsibilities of the engineering profession towards people and the environment.



Mapping exercise

In order to address the issue of the advanced craft certificate holder gaining entry to the degree programme at the appropriate level a detailed mapping exercise was undertaken to compare the learning gained in the craft certificate with the learning outcomes of the year 1 modules of the degree programme. This is illustrated in the following pages.

Table 1 illustrates the overall match between the relevant FÁS programme and the year 1 modules on the 3-year degree programme. Table 2 gives the detailed matching exercise – matching the learning outcomes of the modules on the engineering programme with those of the relevant FÁS modules.



Cork Institute of Technology – Department of Electrical Engineering

	Module 1	Module 2	Module 3	Module 4	Module 5	Module 6	
Semester 1 (year 1)	Exemption Sought	Electrical Science 1 ▲	Electrical Power Systems ▲	Electrical CAD★	Electrical Practicals	Technological Mathematics 1★	Creativity, Innovation & Teamwork
	Previous relevant learning	Phase 2 - Electricity 1 Phase 4 - Electricity 2 Phase 4 - Electronics 1	Phase 4 - Power Distribution 1	Phase 4 - With the exception of AutoCAD all other material is covered	Phase 4 - Electricity 2 Phase 4 - Electronics 1	Phase 4 - Electricity 2 Phase 6 - Electricity 3	Having completed 7 phases of an apprenticeship the content of this module is covered
	Learning outcomes match	95%	95%	50 - 60%	90%	50%	100%
Semester 2 (year 1)	Exemption Sought	Electrical Science 2 ▲	Electrical Installation Practice	Electrical Draughting★	Engineering Practicals	Technological Mathematics II (Electrical)★	Installation Practicals
	Previous relevant learning	Phase 2 - Electricity 1 Phase 4 - Electricity 2 Phase 4 - Electronics 1 Phase 6 - Electricity 3	Phase 4 - Power Distribution 1 Phase 6 - Power Distribution 2	Spread across the entire apprenticeship a knowledge of wiring diagrams/ circuit diagrams are continually used	Phase 4 - Electricity 2 Phase 4 - Electronics 1 Phase 6 - Electronics 2		Phase 2 - Installation Techniques 1 Installation Techniques 2 Panel Wiring and Motor Control Phase 4 - Electricity 2 Phase 6 - Automation Control
	Learning outcomes match	100%	95%	70%	80%	0%	100%

Table 1 Mapping of FÁS Programme for Electrical Apprentices to Year 1 of Bachelor of Engineering in Electrical Engineering

★ Bridging is provided to students on start of Semester 3

▲ Sample mapping for these three modules follows

Cork Institute of Technology Programme Bachelor of Engineering in Electrical Engineering

Table 2 Detailed comparison of specific module learning outcomes (three different Year 1 modules) and relevant FÁS programme learning outcomes

Module 1 - Semester 1 Electrical Science 1 Module ID: 2751	FÁS Programme - Electrical
<p>LEARNING OUTCOMES</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Describe and define electrical, magnetic and physical terms and quantities and perform fundamental calculations involving these quantities. 2. Apply DC theory to the solution of practical problems involving electrical quantities. 3. Apply a knowledge of electrical and electronic components, their characteristics and how these components are utilised in basic circuits. 4. Build and construct basic series and parallel circuits in an electrically safe manner. 5. Measure parameters within basic circuits to examine circuit/component behaviour. <p>INDICATIVE CONTENT</p> <p>Fundamentals SI system, prefixes, scientific & engineering notation; Introduction to current flow; electrical units. Conductors, insulators, resistivity, temperature coefficient of resistance. Ohm's Law; Kirchhoff's Laws; DC network solutions.</p> <p>Electrostatics Electric fields. Electrostatic charges; field strength; flux density; permittivity; dielectric strength. Capacitance, capacitors, energy stored. Electrostatic shielding.</p>	<p>PHASE 2 - MODULE 1. ELECTRICITY 1</p> <p>Unit 4: Ohm's Law/The Basic Circuit Learning Outcome</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Define the quantities associated with the flow of electric current: Pico to Mega - State the units relevant to each electrical quantity: Volt, amp, ohm - Calculate circuit values using Ohm's Law <p>Unit 5: Resistance Network Measurement Learning Outcome</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Test circuit continuity and resistive component values using a multi-meter - Calculate the total resistance of series, parallel and series/parallel circuits - Calculate and measure the voltage, current and resistance aspects of circuits - Control lamp circuits using on/off, two way, and selective switching - Connect cells in series and in parallel, measure output voltage <p>Unit 6: Power and Energy Learning Outcome</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Determine the relationship between potential difference, current and power in circuits - Connect instruments to measure power in a circuit <p>Unit 7: Magnetism, Electromagnetism and Electromagnetic Induction Learning Outcome</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - State Faraday's Law of electromagnetic induction - Apply the corkscrew, right hand grip rules



**Module 1 - Semester 1
Electrical Science 1
Module ID: 2751**

Magnetism and Electromagnetism

Magnetic fields. Ferromagnetism; hysteresis loops; saturation. Electromagnetism; fields; magnetomotive force; magnetic flux, electromagnetic devices. Electromagnetic induction; Lenz's Law transformers. Magnetic screening. Force on current-carrying conductors in magnetic field; application to motors.

Thermal Energy

Heat and energy - Heat capacity, calorific value, change of state and Latent heat Transfer of heat - conduction, convection and radiation.

Practical exploration of Basic Electrical Circuits

Electrical safety, Circuit Connections Ohm's Law, Series Resistors, Parallel Resistors, Series Parallel Resistors, Kirchhoff's Current Law, Kirchhoff's Voltage Law, Kirchhoff's Laws with two sources.

FÁS Programme - Electrical

- Discriminate between magnetic and non-magnetic materials
- Construct a circuit which will demonstrate the effect of switching inductive loads
- Explain how the growth of current in a coil is accompanied by a flux which produces an EMF in opposition to the applied EMF.

Unit 8: Capacitance

Learning Outcome

- Select capacitors by type, capacitive value, tolerance and maximum working voltage
- Calculate values of capacitor series and parallel networks

PHASE 4 - MODULE 1 - ELECTRICITY 2

Unit 7: Magnetic Circuit

Learning Outcome

- Define units of magnetic flux, magneto-motive force, magnetic flux density, magnetizing force and reluctance
- Calculate values of magnetic flux density and relative and absolute permeability
- Differentiate between hysteresis loss and eddy current loss and state methods to overcome both
- Compare electric and magnetic circuits in relation to quantities and units

PHASE 4 - MODULE 3 - ELECTRONICS 1

Unit 1: RC Networks

Learning Outcome

- Calculate RC network charge and discharge rates, plot curves and confirm by measurement



Cork Institute of Technology Programme Bachelor of Engineering in Electrical Engineering

Module 1 - Semester 1
Electrical Power Systems -
Module ID: 4275

LEARNING OUTCOMES

1. Describe the general characteristics of electrical supplies and loads.
2. Perform calculations to establish operating conditions in electrical circuits.
3. Demonstrate an understanding of the conditions arising in a faulted circuit and their solutions.
4. Explain the outline of the national supply system.
5. Understand the dangers of electrical shock and evaluate the practical protection methods available.

INDICATIVE CONTENT

Domestic and similar installations

Types of supply, AC and DC. Earthing. Introduction to electrical circuits. Lighting, socket-outlet, fixed appliance circuits. Wiring methods. Supply intake. Consumers control unit.

Power, energy and cable ratings

Calculations to establish values of circuit power and cable current requirements. Factors of simultaneity and utilisation. Factors effecting cable rating. Final circuit arrangements and calculations. Radial distribution.

FÁS Programme - Electrical

PHASE 4 - MODULE 2 - POWER DISTRIBUTION 1

Unit 1: Cables

Learning Outcome

- Select a cable for a given application
- Compare copper and aluminium cables under the headings of conductivity; current density; mechanical properties; cost
- State the procedures for connecting cable cores to high temperature busbars
- List the methods of reducing iron losses in steel conduit/trunking and armoured cables
- Select and install Category 5 and 7 Cables for a given application and state precautions necessary during installation

Unit 2: Three Phase Distribution and Protective Devices

Learning Outcome

- Draw a line diagram for a distribution board which includes both single and three phase loads
- List the ratings and sizes of protective devices, isolators, busbars and main supply cables for a given load
- Assemble a distribution board from discrete components and terminate supply and load cables

Unit 3: Wiring Systems

Learning Outcome

- List the advantages and disadvantages of the hazards involved and the segregation requirements for choosing a wiring system for a particular location and application
- Given a stated load, determine the method of connection, cable sizes and material/equipment requirements for connection to the following systems; rising main and overhead busbar



**Module 1 - Semester 1
Electrical Power Systems -
Module ID: 4275**

Faulted circuits and protection devices

Concepts of overload, short-circuit and earth fault. Effects of overcurrents. Relationship between load, protective device and cable ratings. Protective devices, fuses and MCBs. Discrimination. Max. short-circuit current and breaking capacity.

National electrical network

Introduction to generation, methods, fuels, voltages, ratings. Transmission and distribution system. Final distribution transformer. LV distribution to consumers. Earthed system.

Consumer safety

Direct and indirect contact. TT and TN systems of supply. Consumers earthing. Loop impedance. Equipotential bonding. RCD construction and operation. Alternative protection arrangements. SELV/PELV/FELV/Class II. Special locations.

FÁS Programme - Electrical

- State the hazards involved and precautions to be observed when installing underground cable
- List the advantages of installing power link trunking and state suitable applications for same

Unit 4: Batteries and Emergency Lighting Systems

Learning Outcome

- Inspect, carry out instrument tests on, and charge lead acid and alkaline batteries
- Inspect and test, maintained, non-maintained and sustained emergency lighting circuits and control equipment.

Unit 5: Discharge Lamps

Learning Outcome

- Describe the construction and operation of SOX, SON, MBF and MBI discharge lamps
- List the factors which affect lamp life, colour rendering, efficacy and applications

Unit 6: Domestic, Industrial and Commercial Heating


Learning Outcome

- Select the cables, accessories and protective devices required to install storage heating circuits
- Design and install a heating system incorporating a programmable timeclock

Unit 7: Earthing and Testing

Learning Outcome

- Perform the installation completion tests set down in the ETCI Rules for domestic type installations
- Record the results of domestic installation completion tests
- Diagnose faults on simulated test board using appropriate test equipment.



Cork Institute of Technology Programme Bachelor of Engineering in Electrical Engineering

Module 1 - Semester 2 Electrical Science 2 - Module ID: 2784	FÁS Programme - Electrical
<p>LEARNING OUTCOMES:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Apply single phase AC theory to the solution of practical problems involving electrical AC quantities. 2. Describe and define electrical, magnetic and physical terms and quantities and perform fundamental calculations involving these quantities. 3. Design and examine circuit/component behaviour to determine parameters within circuits. 4. Make meaningful measurements on electrical circuits and interpret the information from these measurements to assess the circuit and fault find. 5. Build and construct series and parallel circuits in an electrically safe manner. <p>INDICATIVE CONTENT</p> <p>Sinusoidal Waveforms R.M.S. values. Solution of AC circuits involving resistance, inductance and capacitance. involving simple series or parallel combinations of these.</p> <p>Electrolysis Primary and secondary cells; characteristics of lead acid and nickel alkaline cells.</p>	<p>PHASE 2 - MODULE 1. ELECTRICITY 1 Unit 7: Magnetism, Electromagnetism and Electromagnetic Induction</p> <p>Learning Outcome</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - State Faraday's Law of electromagnetic induction - Apply the corkscrew, right hand grip rules - Discriminate between magnetic and non-magnetic materials - Construct a circuit which will demonstrate the effect of switching inductive loads - Explain how the growth of current in a coil is accompanied by a flux which produces an EMF in opposition to the applied EMF <p>Unit 9: Introduction to A.C.</p> <p>Learning Outcome</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - State how an alternating EMF is generated by rotating a coil in a magnetic field - State the relationship between average, root mean square and maximum values of alternating current and voltage - State the effect of passing alternating current through resistive, inductive and capacitive circuits - Construct simple circuits which demonstrate the effect of connecting a resistor, a capacitor and an inductor in an a.c. circuit <p>PHASE 4 - MODULE 1 - ELECTRICITY 2 Unit 1: Single Phase A.C. Circuits</p> <p>Learning Outcome</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Explain the behaviour of R.L.C. combinations in single phase a.c., series and parallel circuits. Calculate circuit conditions - Explain the conditions which cause the effects of resonance in series circuits - Measure power and power factor of series and parallel circuits



**Module 1 - Semester 2
Electrical Science 2 -
Module ID: 2784**

Measurements

Techniques for measurement of voltage, current, resistance and power. Wheatstone Moving coil meter; moving iron meter; dynamometer; electronic voltmeter; thermocouple digital meters. Range extension: multi-meters. Errors in measurement.

Mechanics

Vectors and scalars. Dynamics - Newton's Laws of motion, conservation of linear power, friction and efficiency Linear Motion, Rotational motion, moments, couple.

Practical exploration of A.C.

Electrical Circuits

AC Waveforms, AC values, Resistance in AC Circuits, Inductance in AC Circuits, Work, Capacitance in AC Circuits, Impedance in AC Circuits, Resonance in AC Circuits.

FÁS Programme - Electrical

Unit 3: Three Phase A.C. Circuits

Learning Outcome

- State the principles and advantages of three phase systems
- Measure power in balanced three phase loads using one, two and three watt meter methods
- Measure the output voltage waveforms of three phase half wave and three phase full wave rectifier circuits, using an oscilloscope

Unit 7: Magnetic Circuit

Learning Outcome

- Define units of magnetic flux, magnetomotive force, magnetic flux density, magnetising force and reluctance
- Calculate values of magnetic flux density and relative and absolute Permeability
- Differentiate between hysteresis loss and eddy current loss and state methods to overcome both
- Compare electric and magnetic circuits in relation to quantities and units

PHASE 4 - MODULE 3 - ELECTRONICS 1

Unit 1: RC Networks

Learning Outcome

- Calculate RC network charge and discharge rates, plot curves and confirm by measurement

PHASE 6 - MODULE 3: ELECTRICITY 3

Unit 1: Single and Three Phase A.C. Circuits

Learning Outcome

- Describe the behaviour of single phase a.c. parallel circuits involving resistance/inductance and resistance/capacitance in individual branches
- Determine the relationship between line and phase currents in star and delta systems for balanced and unbalanced loads
- Calculate the current in the neutral of star connected balanced and unbalanced loads
- Calculate the values of total power in balanced and unbalanced star and delta connected loads
- Measure the power in balanced and unbalanced three phase loads using one, two and three wattmeter methods
- Construct circuits which improve circuit power factor
- Calculate phase currents only for unbalanced delta connected loads

Admission to Cork Institute of Technology Programme

Admission for holders of Advanced Certificate-Craft is to Year 2 of the 3-Year, Level 7 Bachelor Degree in Electrical Engineering programme following a bridging course in mathematics. The mapping exercise demonstrates that the learning outcomes of most of the Year 1 modules [semester 1 and semester 2] (with the exception of the mathematics elements) are substantially met by the FÁS Apprentice programme for Trade of Electrician. An additional bridging module in mathematics is provided prior to Semester 3 to prepare the students for the programme. The following tables giving the progression statistics for these learners over 5 years shows that retention and attainment of these learners has been above average.

Progression statistics to date

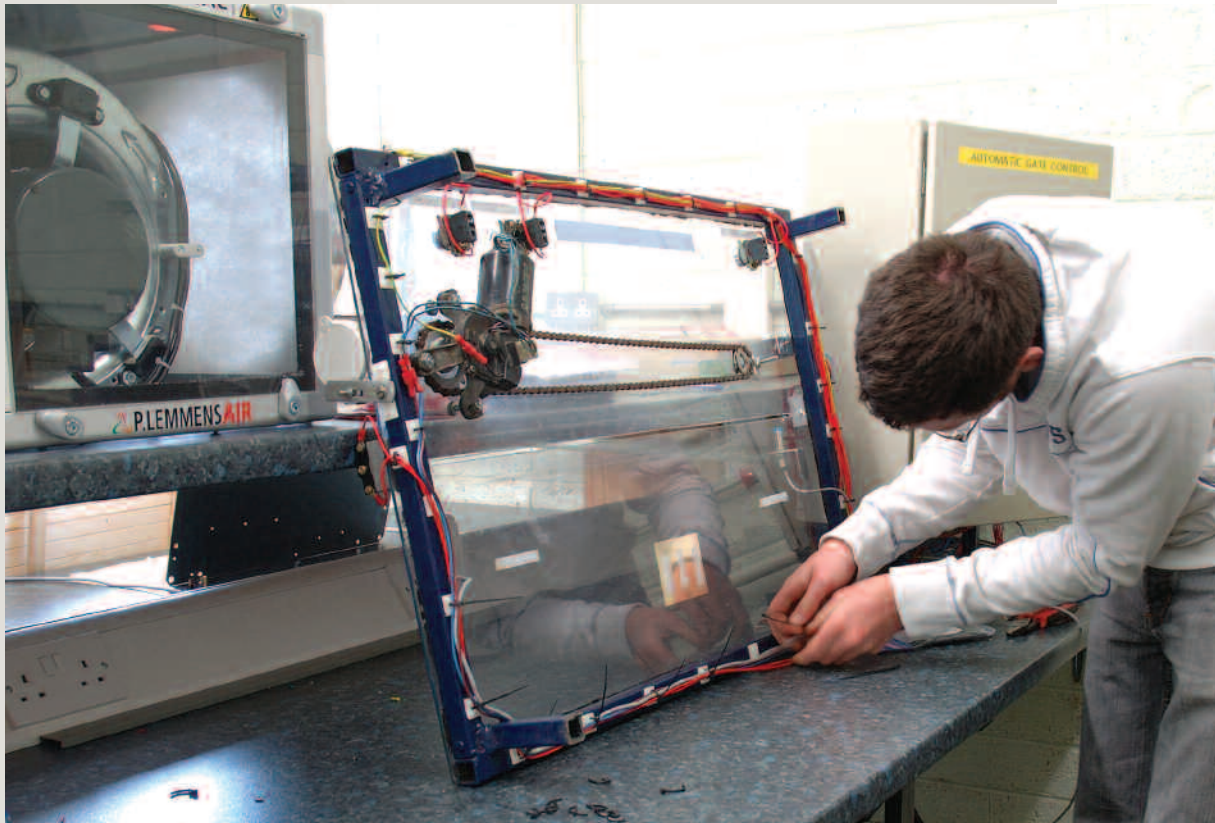
These tables provide the statistics for the craft certificate holders in each of these years only.

Year 2 Year	Total	Graduated	Retention	Pass	Merit 2	Merit 1	Dist
2003	11	11	100%	0	1	1	9
2004	5	5	100%	1	2	0	2
2005	10	10	100%	0	0	1	9
2006	10	10	100%	0	2	1	7
2007	14	14	100%	0	0	4	10
Year 3 Year	Total	Graduated	Retention	Pass	Merit 2	Merit 1	Dist
2004	9	9	100%	1	1	3	4
2005	5	4	80%	2	1	0	1
2006	10	10	100%	0	0	0	10
2007	9	9	100%	1	2	2	4
2008	15	15	100%	0	6	2	7

Table 3 Progression statistics for Craft Certificate holders

Comments

CIT's experience of students coming through the progression route has been a very positive one. It is acknowledged that such students are highly focused and motivated as witnessed by the large number exiting with distinction in their Level 7 degree as documented previously. Their involvement in the course provides significant positive influence within the classroom and they bring that very important ingredient of practical experience to discussion and project work.





Case Study D2

Progression of Craftspersons into programmes in Electrical Services Engineering

Institution:	Dublin Institute of Technology
Programme:	Electrical Services Engineering
Programme Titles:	Bachelor of Technology in Electrical Services Engineering (Full-time) DT010
Associated Programmes:	Bachelor of Technology in Electrical Services Engineering (Part-time) DT083 Higher Certificate in Electrical Services Engineering (Part-time) DT078
Level:	7 (6)
Mode:	Full-time and part-time options
Normal Duration:	3 years

Background

This ordinary degree programme is a development of the certificate/diploma in Electrical Services Engineering, which was validated in March 2002. This certificate/diploma programme has been redesigned as an ordinary degree. There is strong demand for this change from the current cohort of students and strong support is also given by the Chartered Institution of Building Services Engineers (CIBSE) and representatives of the Electrical Services Industry. There is presently no other institute in Ireland offering Electrical Services Engineering programmes. The increase in complexity of electrical services in recent years has been such that practitioners must now possess a wide range of skills.

Graduates from this programme will possess a wide range of personal, interpersonal, communication, and management skills as well as the traditional technical/professional skills. This will ensure a well-rounded graduate capable of lifelong learning who will be able to take up gainful employment in a diverse range of areas such as: Electrical Services Contracting, Electrical Services Design, Building Services Consultancy, Industrial Services, Engineering Systems Support for Manufacturing, Technical Sales and Environmental Control.

Programme Duration

The Bachelor of Technology programme (DT010) is a full-time *ab-initio* three-year modular programme with the option of the Higher Certificate award as an exit award after the successful completion of two years study. The exit award is ungraded and is available for students who do not complete the third year of the programme.

Programme aims

The aims of the programme are to:

- Address the current skills shortage of electrical services technicians;
- Provide a deep seated learning environment for students;
- Produce graduates who will exercise engineering skills in a scientific and reflective way, which will enable them to perform to a high level of expertise in modern industry;
- Enable graduates to be creative and to think critically;
- Enable graduates to develop communication, managerial, personal and interpersonal skills;
- Allow graduates attain skills which will allow them address the challenges of lifelong learning, thus overcoming the problems associated with the short life cycle of modern engineering information;
- Allow linkage and transfer to DIT Electrical, Building Services and other engineering post graduate programmes within the DIT and further afield.



Applicants holding the Advanced Certificate-Craft (Electrical) are required to furnish proof of having achieved an appropriate level of competence in Computer Aided Design (AutoCAD) and must also have passed the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) to allow advanced level entry into year two of the full-time programme.

Dublin Institute of Technology Department of Electrical Services Engineering

Mapping of FÁS Advanced Certificate-Craft to the Programme Module Outcomes for Year 1 of the Bachelor of Technology in Electrical Services Engineering (DT010)

This section will show how the particular Advanced Certificate-Craft (Electrical) meets the learning needs for entry to this programme / progression opportunity. In cases where the craft certificate holder is being granted advanced entry into an existing 3 year Level 7 programme this section will clearly show the modules that are required to gain entry into Year 2 of the programme.

		Module 1	Module 2	Module 3	Module 4
Semester 1 & 2	Exemption sought	Electrical Science	Electrical Services Design/Safety/ Environmental Engineering	Computer Aided Design	Industrial Automation
	Previous relevant learning	Phase 2 - Electricity 1 Phase 4 - Electricity 1 Phase 4 - Electronics 1 Phase 6 - Electricity 3	Phase 2 - Unit 2 - Health & Safety Phase 2 - Electricity 1 Phase 2 - Installation techniques Phase 4 - Power Distribution 1 Phase 6 - Power Distribution	Spread across the entire apprenticeship a knowledge of wiring diagrams/circuit diagrams are continually used AutoCAD is not offered to Apprentice Electricians	Phase 6 - Automation Control Phase 4 - Electronics 1 Phase 6 - Electronics 2
	Learning outcomes match	95%	100%	0%	100%
		Module 5	Module 6	Module 7	Module 8
Semester 1 & 2	Exemption sought	Engineering Mathematics 1	Professional Development	Engineering Science	Engineering Computer Applications
	Previous relevant learning	Phase 2 - Electricity 2 Phase 4 - Electricity 2 Phase 6 - Electricity 3 Phase 2 – Phase 4 Phase 6 – included in integrated curriculum further studies	Having completed 7 phases of an apprenticeship the content of this module is covered.	Phase 2 - Unit 5 - Power and Energy Phase 2 - Installation Techniques 1 Phase 4 - Electricity 2 Phase 4 - Electronics 1 Phase 4 - Power Distribution	Phase 2 - Phase 4 - Phase 6 - included in integrated curriculum further studies
	Learning outcomes match	100%	100%	90%	100%

Table 1 Mapping of FÁS Programme for Electrical Apprentices to Year 1 of Bachelor of Technology in Electrical Services Engineering



Allocation of marks Year 1 Examination and course work marks

Table 2 Year 1 course outline

Year 1	Written Exam %	Course Work %	Total %	Subject weighting	Exam Marks	Course Work Marks	Total Marks
MATH 1111 Engineering Mathematics	70	30	100	1	70	30	100
PROF 1102 Professional Development	0	100	100	1	0	100	100
ELSC 1103 Electrical Science	70	30	100	2	140	60	200
ESDS 1104 Electrical Services Design Safety/ Environmental Engineering	70	30	100	2	140	60	200
ENSC 1105 Engineering Science	70	30	100	1	70	30	100
INAU 1106 Industrial Automation	50	50	100	2	100	100	200
ENCA 1107 Engineering Computer Applications	0	100	100	1	0	100	100
CAD 1108 Computer Aided Design	0	100	100	2	0	200	200
Total	N/A	N/A	N/A		520	680	1200

Note: Subject weighting 1 = 5 ECTS
Subject weighting 2 = 10 ECTS

Transfer and Progression

On successful completion of the programme, graduates of DT010 will have the option of going directly into employment or continue their education to honours degree level. A part-time honours degree programme, Bachelor of Science in Electrical Services Engineering & Energy Management has been introduced in DIT.

Progression Statistics

The following table summarises the progression statistics for the craftspersons who have entered the programme to date.

Year of Entry	Total Entries	Progress to Year 3	Year Graduated	Graduated	Retention	Pass	Lower Merit	Upper Merit	Dist
2003	10	10	2005	10	100%	2	2	2	4
2004	12	11	2006	11	92%	0	3	4	4
2005	25	21	2007	21	84%	1	2	8	0
2006	45	40	2008	Results Pending	89%				

Table 3 Progression statistics for the Craft Certificate holders.



Case Study D3

Progression of Craftspersons into Level 7: Bachelor of Science in Construction Management

Institution: Institute of Technology, Sligo

Programme: Bachelor of Science in Construction Management

Introduction

The Institute of Technology, Sligo offers a two-year Level 7 on-line Bachelor of Science in Construction Management. The course is specifically designed to facilitate qualified carpentry and joinery craft persons who wish to acquire construction management expertise as a career progression route.

The course commenced in September 2006.

Structure and organisation of Programme

The course is delivered in two years and a special preparatory module and bridging studies programme is provided at the beginning of each year. The course consists of eight subject modules and four are delivered each year by a combination of on-line lectures and in-house tutorials. Learners may take as many as or as few modules as they wish and complete the programme over a number of years to suit their own circumstances.

Learners will be required to attend the institute for one week at the beginning of September during which they will be trained in on-line learning and they will receive introductory tutorials and bridging studies in each of the four modules to be delivered in the following academic year. A course schedule summarising the programmes is given in Table 1.

Learners will also attend at the institute for a number of days in January and April to take practical and written continuous assessment examinations. The course includes a significant amount of on-line testing in each of the modules and the objective of the in-house written and practical examinations is to ensure the validity of the on-line test results. Written examinations will be held in the institute at the end of each academic year.

This course will provide qualified carpenters with a qualification and training that will allow them to progress to positions of management particularly in contracting.





Rationale for the Programme

Despite the recent sharp downturn in house completions most commentators believe that the long term outlook for the construction industry is positive. For example a recent report by A&L Goodbody Consulting¹ predicts that the population of the State will increase to 5.1 million by the year 2020 and this will of necessity be accompanied by increased capital investment in infrastructure.

In a report entitled “Ahead of the Curve”, the Enterprise Strategy Group² identifies the need to provide upskilling opportunities for the workforce and the proposed B.Sc. in Construction Management is part of IT Sligo’s response to this need.

The 2005 National Skills Bulletin published by FÁS identifies shortages of management skills in the construction sector and it is predicted that in this environment there will be increased demand for construction management personnel at all levels.

One of the core aspirations stated in the Mission of IT Sligo is that of meeting the needs of the region and of industry. Underpinning this is the value the Institute sets on its learners and on the quality of its programmes of education. In this regard, the Institute strives to attain the highest level of recognition for its graduates – both in terms of academic qualifications and professional standing.

¹ Ireland’s Strategic Infrastructure Investment 2020. A&L Goodbody Consulting, September 2005

² Ahead of the Curve, Enterprise Strategy Group, Forfás Secretariat, July 2004

Programme Aims

The primary aims of the Bachelor of Science in Construction Management are:

- To produce graduates who can assume positions of management in the construction industry. It is envisaged that graduates of the course could hold any of the following positions:
Site Manager,
Site Agent,
Project Manager,
Self-Employed Contractor or Sub-Contractor.
- To provide enhanced career and educational opportunities for qualified carpenters.
- To provide graduates of the course with the management skills required, enabling them to take up positions of responsibility both on and off site.
- To provide graduates of the course with a level of skill and knowledge which will provide a basis for further education and training.

The philosophy of the course recognises the trade background of many of those in managerial positions in the construction industry and seeks to provide a route to formal qualifications for such people.

Eligibility

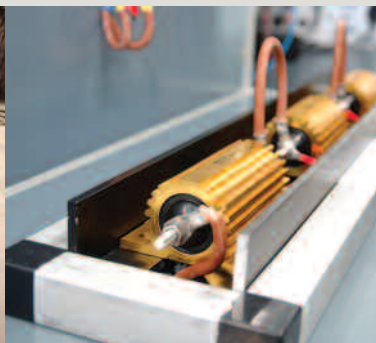
The requirement for entry to the Bachelor of Science in Construction Management is a minimum of a Advanced Certificate-Craft in Carpentry and Joinery with Merit, or equivalent. Applicants who hold an appropriate Level 6 award will also be eligible to apply. Applications will also be considered from individuals who do not hold any formal qualifications but who have suitable experiential learning. If the number of applicants exceeds the number of places available, selection will be on the basis of interview.



Internet Supported Distance Learning

A Virtual Learning Environment (currently Moodle) is used by each lecturer to direct and manage the learning process for their own modules. The VLE facilitates the following:

- group and individual communication (including posting messages to students, posting of queries by learners and peer discussion);
- posting of documents by lecturers for access by learners;
- posting of links to websites for access by learners;
- electronic logged submission of assignments;
- electronic feedback on assignments;
- automated objective tests (e.g. on-line multiple choice tests);
- remote collaboration on group work (discussion boards, collaborative, document editing);
- viewing of student activity and progress;
- social communication between learners (including chat);
- polls and surveys of learners;
- Learner journals.



COURSE SCHEDULE – STAGE 1

Title of Award: Bachelor of Science in Construction Management – Level 7
Area of Specialisation: Construction Management
Learning Modes Offered: On-Line
Date Effective: September 2006

Module Number	Module Title	Credits	Contact Hours		Marks Allocation			
			On-line per week	In-house per year	CONT	PROJ	EXAM	TOTAL
CM001	Construction Technology	10	2	4	30	20	50	100
CM002	Drawing & CAD	5	2	12	25	50	25	100
CM003	Measurement & Costing	10	1	4	20	30	50	100
CM004	Site Surveying	5	1	18	40	20	40	100
Total		30	6	38				

COURSE SCHEDULE – STAGE 2

Module Number	Module Title	Credits	Contact Hours		Marks Allocation			
			On-line per week	In-house per year	CONT	PROJ	EXAM	TOTAL
CM005	Building Services	5	1	4	20	50	30	100
CM006	Building Surveying	5	1	2	30	20	50	100
CM007	Contract Administration	10	2	6	30		70	100
CM008	Project Planning	10	2	12	20	30	50	100
Total		30	6	24				

Note:

In-house contact hours do not include in-house examinations.
 An additional 12 hours per week of self-directed learning will be required.
 Self-directed learning: 12 hours/week (indicative).



Appendix E

Working Group Membership

Chairperson

Mr Barry Leach

Organisation

Cork Institute of Technology

Representative

Mr Kieron Heavin

Athlone Institute of Technology

Mr J.J. Curran

Athlone Institute of Technology

Mr Adrian McAuliffe

Cork Institute of Technology

Dr Felix Raekson

Cork Institute of Technology

Mr Kevin O'Connell

Dublin Institute of Technology

Mr Thomas Nugent

Dublin Institute of Technology

Mr Richard O'Rourke

Dublin Institute of Technology

Mr Peter Carolan

Dundalk Institute of Technology

Mr Chris Ryan

Dundalk Institute of Technology

Mr Barry Finnegan

Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology

Mr Jim O'Connor

Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology

Mr Michael Casserly

Sligo Institute of Technology

Overall Project coordinator

Ms Irene Sheridan

Cork Institute of Technology

Project administrators

Ms Helen Flynn

Cork Institute of Technology

Ms Vera Barrett

Cork Institute of Technology

WORK-BASED LEARNING

Graduating Through The Workplace

Dr Margaret Linehan

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Thanks to Sharon Burke, Cork Institute of Technology, for advice and research on Individual Learning Plans and for the analysis of the pilot study of these plans.

Thanks to Audrey Jennings, Dublin Institute of Technology, for sourcing existing literature on work-based learning partnerships, and for analysing these partnerships in third-level colleges who are part of this project.

Thanks to the Human Resource Managers and Training Managers in various organisations for their valuable advice regarding work-based learning partnerships and individual learning plans, and for piloting the learning plans with their employees.

This report would not have been possible without funding received under the Strategic Innovation Fund Cycle 1 from the Higher Education Authority under the National Development Plan 2006-2013.

Foreword



The *Education in Employment* project funded through the HEA's Strategic Innovation Fund represents a significant development for Cork Institute of Technology and its partner institutions. The project itself was a natural progression for CIT; building on its leadership in career-focused education and delivering on the lifelong learning agenda that is fundamental to economic and social progress.

One of the most significant challenges undertaken by the project consortium was that of reviewing the current position with regard to work-based learning and partnerships with individual workplaces. This interim report serves a significant need in providing a well-researched framework as a backdrop for the presentation of the findings of the survey of current practice within the eight partner institutions. These findings set out the challenges to be met in addressing the needs of the lifelong learner. These challenges and the recommendations and conclusions presented here will, I believe, provide a significant impetus for change and real engagement with the work-based learner.

The working group includes members from Athlone Institute of Technology, Dublin Institute of Technology, Dundalk Institute of Technology, Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology, Institute of Technology Sligo, Letterkenny Institute of Technology and University College Cork, in addition to Cork Institute of Technology, and I would like to acknowledge the sharing of resources and experiences which contributed to this publication.

It is important to point out that this is not the group's final report. It is intended to act as a catalyst for further focused action by the project group and this explains its timing. The remaining outcomes of this project strand will include significant efforts around learning partnership, appropriate and focused staff development, the development of learning plans, and systems for the integration of good practice into work-based learning partnerships.

I would like on my own behalf and on behalf of the overall project steering group to thank the main author and all of the contributors for this important piece of work and to acknowledge the chair of the group on the publication of this document.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Michael Delaney'.

Michael Delaney,
Head of Development,
Cork Institute of Technology



Executive Summary

Higher education is currently undergoing rapid, unprecedented, and accelerating change. Employers and individuals are demanding an increase in the diversity of curricular choice and mix, reflecting increasingly rapid changes in the workplace and in society generally. Much of the rate of change has been driven by exponential advances in information and communications technology over recent decades.

Until recent years, the emphasis in state-funded third-level education was almost entirely towards “for-employment” rather than “in-employment” education and training. In-employment training has, for the most part, been largely disconnected from the formal education qualifications system. The newer emphasis on upskilling of persons already in the labour force poses new and significant challenges. This is particularly true for those at the lower skills level who find it difficult to access education and training opportunities.

Learning for Life (2000), Ireland’s first White Paper on Adult Education, confirmed that skill shortages continue to threaten Ireland’s economic prospects, a view endorsed by all stakeholders, who also agreed on the priority status of the skill shortage issue. The White Paper, however, reported that “there is less agreement as to how workplace education should be organised and financed” (Department of Education and Science, 2000: 76). Since the publication of the White Paper, educators, employers, and politicians have given increased attention to the concept of learning as a lifelong activity. Within the context of lifelong learning, learning required by the workplace and which takes place at work and through work has a predominant role in determining the content and direction of learning. As work environments increasingly move to knowledge-based environments, with their increasingly dynamic and changing contexts, ongoing upskilling of employees is required. Work-based training and education is ideally suited to serve this need. Rapidly changing contexts now require training and education curricula that are fluid, dynamic, and continually responsive to volatile workplace environments and to societal change. Third-level institutions need to continually engage with the crucible of changing work environments, where newly created contexts continually demand educators to respond quickly to new and ever-changing circumstances.




In 2006, the Government introduced a Strategic Innovation Fund through which €510m is allocated for spending, between 2006 and 2013, in higher education institutions for projects to enhance collaboration in the sector; to improve teaching and learning; to support institutional reform; to promote access and lifelong learning; and to support the development of fourth-level education. Through the Strategic Innovation Fund, the development of new strategic alliances creates new synergies and potential for higher education systems. Through the range of initiatives it supports, the Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF) is providing new impetus to the development of system-wide quality. SIF is driving reform of structures and systems within and across institutions to cater for growing student numbers at all levels; for greater teaching and learning quality; to ensuring graduates are equipped for a lifetime of innovation and change in the workplace; and to enhance research and innovation capacity.

The *Education in Employment* project is one of the initiatives funded under the first cycle of the Strategic Innovation Fund. The Education in Employment consortium is led by Cork Institute of Technology, which coordinates the work contributed by the other members of the consortium: Athlone Institute of Technology, Dublin Institute of Technology, Dundalk Institute of Technology, Letterkenny Institute of Technology, Sligo Institute of Technology, University College, Cork, and National University of Ireland Galway. Education in Employment focuses on the learning needs of those already *in* the workforce, and includes lifelong learning as a central aim by placing significant emphasis on continuous professional development and upskilling in the workforce.

This interim report is based on the activities in year one of the Work-based Learning strand, one of four linked sub-strands in the Education in Employment project. Members of the Work-based Learning group will continue to collaborate for the two remaining years of the project, building on their progress to date. Three main outcomes were proposed for year one of this project strand: (i) an audit of courses which contain elements of work-based learning, and which are currently offered, by partner institutions, to persons *in employment*; (ii) the design and piloting of individual learning plans for learners *in* the workplace; and (iii) the establishment and evaluation of work-based learning partnerships. These three outcomes have successfully been achieved and provide the basis for this report.

In order to contextualise work-based learning for this report, an extensive review of the extant literature on work-based learning was conducted. These literature findings are summarised and presented in Chapter 2. One of the key messages arising from the literature search was succinctly stated by Connor (2005) who suggests that defining work-based learning is recognised as highly problematic. For the purpose of this report, however, work-based learning is considered to be learning at a higher education level, and which largely takes place at and through work, not only to meet individual learning and development aspirations but also to serve the performance objectives of an organisation (usually the employer). This suggests that work-based learning depends on three interrelated components: (i) the individual; (ii) the organisation; and (iii) the academic institution.

Acknowledging the importance of the individual, of the organisation, and of the academic institution, and recognising knowledge created outside of academia to meet the skills needs of employers, an investigation of courses which contain elements of work-based learning was carried out in academic partner institutions to



ascertain the current provision of work-based courses for those *in employment*. The findings from this research illustrate that work-based learning is already challenging the current structures of third-level academic institutions, requiring them to be flexible (i) in terms of mode of delivery, (ii) in the context of the accreditation of prior experiential learning, and (iii) in the accreditation of in-company training or work-based projects. It is also clear from the findings that, for the successful operation of work-based learning programmes, there is scope for developing further employer engagement with higher education institutes in the design, development implementation, and delivery of such programmes. As work contexts are now considered important for curriculum developments, this emphasis highlights the need for a sharing of the responsibility for creating new learning opportunities. This should better assist the student to achieve both academic knowledge and higher level skills to meet the needs of employers. From the current findings, a further challenge emerging for third-level institutes emphasises the need to take on a more flexible approach to delivery, by utilising a mixed mode or blended approach to learning. Blended Learning combines multiple approaches to learning, including virtual and physical resources. This would typically integrate e-learning and distance learning with more conventional face-to-face sessions and some traditional or more rigid approaches to education. The blended learning approach enables the student to have greater control over when and where the learning takes place, and is particularly suited to those learners *in employment*, as it allows the learning to be built around other work and lifestyle commitments.

Cognisant of the requirement for individual learning, which underpins all work-based learning, the current project developed Individual Learning Plan (ILP) forms and piloted them with learners *in employment*. Individual learning plans should enable learners to be proactive in their individual learning and development. The first pilot test of the newly devised individual learning plans took place during the academic year 2007/08. Based on the constructive feedback received from learners, a revised paper-based version of the ILP form will be tested during the academic year 2008/09. This, in turn, will enable the development of an electronic version of the form, which will be distributed to 1,000 learners before the end of the project. During the development and design of the ILP form, it became clear that the workplace is not a standard environment for all learners. Workplaces in different fields have different working cultures, and learners in the workplace are from different age groups, different educational and professional backgrounds, and in different positions in organisations. While the workplace creates learning possibilities, what is most central to individual learning is how the individual participates and interacts with possibilities in their workplace. It is important, therefore, to acknowledge workplaces as sites for learning, and the unique learning needs of each *individual* has to be emphasised and considered by education providers.

During year one of the current project, work-based learning partnerships were examined within each of the participating education institutions. Many of the developments reported here on these partnership are at the early stages of their implementation. As collaboration between education providers and employer organisations is now recognised as fundamentally important to enhancing learning in both environments, it is envisaged that these partnerships should continue to grow and evolve. The experience of developing work-based partnerships for this project illustrated to those involved how such partnerships are based on mutual trust and recognition; requiring a significant investment of time, energy, enthusiasm, information exchange, and goodwill from all stakeholders.

Finally, work-based learning is becoming increasingly important (i) for organisations needing professional development to create dynamic, flexible workforces, and (ii) to higher education institutions, recognising the workplace as a legitimate and fundamental site of learning. Work-based learning programmes will take time to develop, and third-level institutes need to address the issue of participation, which is greater in some areas of education than in others. An attitudinal and cultural shift must be engaged with to overcome the traditional reliance on classroom-based programmes in order to successfully develop new work-based learning programmes.



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1.0 Background

The development of a world-class base of skills has become the key driver of economic growth in the developed world. It is widely recognised that it is only through enhancing people's skills that future competitive advantage will emerge. Ireland's early recognition of this factor has been one of the outstanding contributors to the economic growth it has enjoyed since the early 1990s. Markets, however, are becoming much more open; competition is more international and intense; technology is enabling global trading and new business models; the value chain in enterprise is increasingly disaggregated with activities distributed to their most economic or strategic location. Organisations need to identify the precise areas where they have, or can build, distinctive strengths that will enable them to compete effectively. In the past, Ireland benefited significantly from the international expansion of markets for trade, capital and labour. Today, with the rapid opening up of markets in Eastern Europe and Asia (especially China and India), globalisation presents both opportunities and threats. The primary source of continuing skilled labour supply is, and will continue to be, achieved through the training, development, and learning of individuals. In effect, from an employers' perspective, the focus is on workforce (or professional) development – the upskilling and reskilling of an organisation's employees at a higher level. Work-based learning, unlike other forms of learning, tends to be directly related to the needs of employers and/or the employment needs of those *in work*.

Changing employment patterns in the organisation of work have impacted on the demand for higher-level skills. Employees are expected to be more flexible, have a broader range of skills and be better able to manage their own career and development. Graduate level skills and qualifications are seen as increasingly important in the changing workplace. Knowledge creation and the deployment of new knowledge in the workplace have given rise to the workplace itself being recognised as a site of learning and knowledge production. Brennan (2005) suggests that, if higher education is to continue to make a contribution to the knowledge economy, collaborative activities based in and around the workplace should be considered.


According to Murphy (2007), contemporary drivers of structural and political change in higher education in Ireland, and in Europe generally, are identified as two-fold. First, the need to maintain and enhance economic progress through generation of new knowledge through research and the application of that new knowledge in the world of work. Second, the need to facilitate social stability and democratic cohesion. Higher education institutes, therefore, are expected to be responsive to the needs of the economy and of the labour market, while



at the same time affording citizens their right to appropriate levels of education to sustain economies in stable societies. The growing interest in the interface between traditional higher education and the world of work at European Union and national levels is evident as an increasing number of research projects, incentives and initiatives now have a labour market focus. Additionally, support for workforce development is seen as one means by non-traditional students, who are beyond the age when individuals are likely to participate in the traditional route from school to accessing third-level education. Research suggests that over 70% of learning comes from experiences, either planned or unplanned, thus emphasising the need to 'learn from real work' (Nixon *et al.*, 2006). Such learning is also seen as a means by which the economy can respond more rapidly to changing skill needs, when compared to 'campus-based learning'. Until relatively recently, however, the value of experience-based learning in higher education has been recognised only in very specific contexts, for example, in practice placements on professional awards. This recognition of the importance of practice experience in such awards is also usually accompanied by a tendency to treat practice assessment differently, in that it has often been assessed on a pass/fail basis, which means that it is unable to contribute to the classification of the academic award (Walsh, 2008).

The Irish labour force is projected to grow to about 2.4 million by 2020. Approximately 1.4 million of the current workforce will still be in the labour force by 2020. An additional 640,000 young people will come into the labour force from the formal education systems. The remaining additional 310,000 will be made up of immigration and increased participation by the existing population. The Forfás Expert Group on Future Skills Needs proposes a vision of Ireland in 2020 in which a well-educated and highly skilled population contributes optimally to a competitive, innovation-driven, knowledge-based, participative and inclusive economy. The Expert Group suggests that if Ireland is to realise this vision of a new knowledge economy which can compete effectively in the global market place, it requires enhancing the skills of the resident population, increasing participation in the workforce, increasing third-level participation, and continuing to attract highly-skilled migrants (Forfás, 2007a). The upskilling of 500,000 persons already in the labour force is a significant challenge. This is particularly true of those at the lower skills levels, i.e., those with qualifications below Level 5, who find it difficult to access training and education opportunities, in some instances receive little support from their employers and many of whom have low levels of literacy. Employees also may experience practical barriers in attending courses or may lack the confidence or knowledge to seek appropriate training. Equally, employers and employees sometimes do not recognise the value of training. Additionally, employers may find it difficult to release employees to attend training.

The existing arrangement of programmes, schemes and grant aid is not sufficient to deliver the target skills-profile set out by the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs. If that is to be achieved, a number of innovative initiatives need to be taken which will foster a culture of lifelong learning. The government currently funds full-time education, up to third level, and training primarily aimed at the low-skilled cohort. Until recently the emphasis in state-funded third-level education has been almost entirely towards "*for-employment*" rather than "*in-employment*" education and training. *In-employment* training has, for the most part, been largely disconnected from the education/qualifications system. Only about half the number of Irish adults undertake any recognised form of learning activity in each year (including formal, informal and non-formal education and training). Comparisons of education/training of adults show that Ireland lags behind many countries and, in



particular, is considerably behind the Lisbon learning target that 12.5% of adults should be engaged in learning. Currently, the Irish rate is 7.4%. Thus, there is a need for approximately 50% increase in formal adult learning to achieve the Lisbon target. Lifelong learning is essential for the development of 'human capital', which in turn is inextricably linked to personal, social and economic development.

Organisations and enterprises which want to develop their knowledge base and to engage with higher education institutions, however, face a confusing array of schemes and an inconsistency of approaches. There is a need for the education sector to proactively facilitate and simplify the engagement process. Educational provision for workplaces must be context-sensitive, flexible, innovative and adaptive. Developments must be informed by an understanding of the needs and opportunities, by region and by sector. The need for workplace innovation and the transformation of the concept of work from the static use of previously acquired skills into a dynamic of continuous learning is accepted as essential for the Ireland of the future.

The "knowledge worker" and "organisational learning" have become important concepts in popular business culture. Knowledge has long been correlated with power. The Information Age has made information, and the knowledge of how to use it, more powerful than ever, but in the same instant it has reduced the "shelf-life" of information. While knowledge provides a competitive advantage, it is now more broadly distributed. Knowledge is an asset, but it is not usually accounted for on the bottom line, as it can leave an organisation and suddenly emerge at a competitors' organisation. According to Appelbaum and Gallagher (2000) the market value of many organisations is now several times its book value. The difference between the two is found in an organisation's employees. Their individual skills, know-how, information systems, designs, supplier relationships and client contacts add value and generate wealth. Boud and Solomon (2001: 3) argue that work-based learning is ideally placed for developing these skills, as it is "one of the very few innovations related to the teaching and learning aspects of post-secondary education that is attempting to engage seriously with the economic, social and educational demands of our era". Current policy developments in Europe have also stimulated wider interest in experience-based learning, as it has been recognised to be an important element of lifelong learning. As Pouget and Osborne (2004: 46) note, "One of the outcomes of the consultation launched by the *Memorandum of Lifelong Learning across Europe* has been to highlight the importance of 'valuing after learning' be it informal, non-formal or informal settings". Similarly, The European University Lifelong Learning Network argues that the recognition of experiential learning is an opportunity to meet the needs of individuals, employers and institutions (Conradi *et al.*, 2006). According to Harris and Chisholm (2008), early twenty-first century society is increasingly concerned with the delivery of learning which can be measured and awarded credit, therefore it is valid to develop an off-campus learning model which facilitates quality assurance, valid assessment, and the award of credit where this is desired by the individual or organisation involved.

1.1 Strategic Innovation Fund Aims and Objectives

The Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF) is awarded by the Department of Education and Science and is administered by the Higher Education Authority (HEA). SIF is a competitively driven resource stream to implement organisational transformation. The fund is multi-annual, amounting to €510 million over the period 2006-

2013. SIF aims to support innovation and to foster collaboration between institutions in competing for funding to:

- Incentivise and reward internal restructuring and reform efforts;
- Promote teaching and learning reforms, including enhanced teaching methods, programme restructuring at third and fourth level, modularisation and e-learning;
- Support quality improvement initiatives aimed at excellence;
- Promote access, transfer and progression and incentivise stronger inter-institutional collaboration in the development and delivery of programmes;
- Provide for improved performance management systems and meet staff training and support requirements associated with the reform of structures and the implementation of new processes;
- Implement improved management information systems.

Through the collaborative nature of the projects, new strategic alliances have been developed and supported, providing new impetus for enhanced quality and effectiveness. The OECD Review of Higher Education in Ireland made a compelling case for reform of third and fourth level education in Ireland. While the sector is acknowledged as an engine for economic development, higher education institutions need to rise to the challenges of increasing their relevance through promoting access and participation by those already in the workforce. The Strategic Innovation Fund is an important element in the investment and reform of higher education institutions that will enable them to meet the challenges presented by the changing social and economic realities while building on their existing strengths. In this way, the projects funded through the Strategic Innovation Fund will help the partner institutions towards realising their full potential while also improving the learning experience for a diverse range of learners at all levels. A feature of the initial evaluation of the proposals and an important criterion for reporting is the sustainability of the projects. This focus will ensure that reforms are embedded within structures and practices and will outlive the project funding cycle.

In developing a project proposal for the Strategic Innovation Fund Cycle 1 deadline, Cork Institute of Technology (CIT) was clear that the submission should build on existing leadership and strengths and align with CIT's strategic plan and those of its partners. The resulting 'Education in Employment' project is focused on the learning needs of those already in the workforce through four distinct but linked strands. The initiative is a Cork Institute of Technology-led consortium comprising Athlone Institute of Technology, Dublin Institute of Technology, Dundalk Institute of Technology, Letterkenny Institute of Technology, Sligo Institute of Technology, National University of Ireland Galway, and University College Cork. The work-based learning group is one of four strands of the Education in Employment project. The members of this working group are proposing a model of education development, delivery, support and assessment which is based on a number of underlying principles, namely:

- Learning (as a process rather than an event) is at the centre of the provision;
- Learning (formal, non-formal, and informal) must be assessed and accredited;
- The workplace itself can constitute a rich learning environment thus work-based learning should be integrated into learning programmes;
- A sustainable partnership between education and the workplace is necessary for the development, delivery, support and assessment of 'education in employment'.



The main aims and objectives of the work-based learning working group are:

- To provide those in the workplace, wishing to attain a third-level qualification, the opportunity to avail of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), and to do so in a flexible cost-effective manner;
- The establishment of collaborative workplace–education partnerships to identify workforce upskilling needs and to develop education/learning programmes to meet these needs;
- The development of flexible delivery and support for learners in employment using a ‘blended approach’ integrating face-to-face delivery in institutions and in the workplace, e-learning, mentoring and coaching;
- The integration of work-based credit-earning learning into programmes, defined by learning agreements – jointly supervised and assessed by workplace and academic staff.

Overall, it is apparent that virtually all sectors of industry are becoming more knowledge-intensive. This involves a change in the types of skills required, with a rise in the importance of generic skills, including: the ability of individuals to work more autonomously; self-managing; working as part of flexible teams; adapting to change; solving complex problems; thinking creatively; and, engaging with innovation as a continuous process. The work-based learning group proposes developing these skills in the workplace in conjunction with a third-level education provider. Successful interaction between the education sector and workplaces is essential for developing innovative practices in work-based learning.

1.2 Methodology

This report is divided into six distinct chapters. The first chapter serves as a general introduction and provides a background to the report. Chapter 1 also outlines the aims and objectives of the report, and briefly highlights the aims and objectives of the Strategic Innovation Fund.

Chapter 2 introduces the concept of work-based learning and explores definitions of work-based learning from the relevant literature reviewed. The impact that the learning society and lifelong learning has on work-based learning is highlighted. The chapter also investigates what people learn at work and, more importantly, how they learn at work.

Chapter 3 presents the findings of empirical research that was conducted in each of the partner institutes in relation to courses which include elements of work-related learning. The members of the working group devised a questionnaire which included fourteen questions in relation to the current suite of courses currently offered. The findings from the audit of these courses that are relevant to people in the workplace provide the first outcome that the working group was required to deliver, as set out in the original Strategic Innovation Fund proposal.

Chapter 4 introduces the concept of individual learning plans. A summary of the relevant literature reviewed in relation to individual plans is presented in order to contextualise the importance of these plans. A further requirement of the working group, as set out in the original Strategic Innovation Fund proposal, was to develop individual learning plan forms and to pilot these ILP forms with employees working in diverse industries

throughout the country. Each third-level institution had different levels of involvement with the industries they selected for piloting individual learning plans. Each third-level institution partaking in this strand piloted a sample of ten individual learning plans in their organisation(s) of choice. The findings in relation to the development of these plans are also presented and the feedback from the pilot study is evaluated and analysed. Individual learning plan forms are the second outcome of the original proposal. It is envisaged that at the end of the three-year project, one thousand individual learning plan forms will have been completed.

Chapter 5 presents theoretical and empirical data on work-based learning partnerships. A third outcome for the first year of this project was to develop a working partnership with a local industry. Members of the working group developed a questionnaire and a partnership continuum to explore these education–industry partnerships. Some third-level institutes already had well-established partnerships, whereas some other institutes formed new partnerships to fulfil this requirement. An evaluation of these education–industry partnerships is presented. The questionnaire is in Appendix B.

Chapter 6 outlines some of the challenges for work-based learning. The chapter also presents some recommendations regarding work-based learning for third-level education institutes and industrial organisations. A conclusion to the report is also presented.



2.0 Introduction to Work-Based Learning

Work-based learning is not a new type of activity. It has a long history associated, for example, with various types of apprenticeships. It is also not new within higher education, in so far as areas such as medicine, education, and social work have included work-based learning as central elements in their programmes for many years. Higher education has always been associated with preparation for work, particularly in relation to entry to the professions. Once entry was achieved, being a member of a profession was regarded as a 'job for life'. Employment patterns, however, in most industrial societies have undergone considerable upheaval over the last fifteen to twenty years. Traditional career patterns are breaking down and full-time permanent employment is no longer the predominant pattern. In a number of enterprises, full-time employment has been replaced by 'non-standard' work, particularly part-time, casual and contract work. Of particular relevance to the present context, is the rise in 'portfolio' or contract workers who must undertake the responsibility for managing their own careers and skills development in order to become, or remain, employable. Upskilling and lifelong learning have become the new 'buzz' words associated with the move away from the 'job for life' and the need for individuals to develop new skills and to update existing skills throughout their working lives.

Interest in work-based learning has expanded since the beginning of the 1990s, and currently research in this area is wide-ranging and interdisciplinary. One of the reasons for this expansion is the unprecedented rapid change in society and working life that has taken place during the past few decades (Tynjala, 2007). The rapid development of information and communications technology, the growing production of knowledge in the economy, increasing internationalisation and globalisation, as well as changes in occupational structures and in the content and organisation of work have all challenged not only education institutions but also work organisations to engage with new ways of ensuring that the workforce can successfully meet these challenges. Thus, continuous learning has become important both for individuals in the learning society and for organisations competing in international markets.

Research by Eraut (2004a) on the outcomes of education, particularly at the tertiary level, reported the existence of a gap between the knowledge needed at work and the knowledge and skills produced through formal education. Eraut classifies the types of knowledge which vocational and professional education programmes claim to provide as follows: (i) theoretical knowledge, (ii) methodological knowledge, (iii) practical skills and techniques, (iv) generic skills, and (v) general knowledge about the occupation in question. He states that although most of these types of knowledge are described as transferable, there is little evidence on the extent to which methodological knowledge, generic skills, and general knowledge about an occupation are acquired by students, and about the chances of theoretical knowledge and practical skills being subsequently transferred into the workplace. Recent studies conducted by Stenstrom (2006) and Tynjala *et al.* (2006) confirmed Eraut's concerns. Two separate studies in Britain on university and polytechnic graduates with 2-10 years work experience produced similar findings: both university and polytechnics graduates found their education for working-life skills inadequate, as the majority of them stated that they had learned the necessary skills at work, and not during their formal education.

Work-based learning is playing an increasingly important part in the development of lifelong learning and affording company employees worldwide in all fields of work the opportunity to begin, update, or improve their higher education qualification by obtaining credits for negotiated learning completed flexibly in the workplace. It is also increasingly advocated in policy literature as an important form of provision which will establish new relationships between higher education and the world of work (Gallacher and Reeve, 2002). This can be seen as part of a wider set of changes in the economy, society and the role of higher education.

Work-based learning has also been identified as a means of responding to the needs of employers, particularly those in small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). It is suggested that the pressure to compete in increasingly global contexts means that employers need their workers to engage in continuous skills development, to improve productivity and to enable organisations to meet the challenges posed by countries such as China and India (Brennan, 2005). A further consequence is that responsibility for career-management and skills development is seen to reside more and more with individuals rather than with organisations; workers are now expected to be more flexible, to have a wider range of skills, and to be able to take on responsibilities previously undertaken by managers and supervisors. In this context, technical skills alone are not considered to be sufficient, as cognitive skills, together with an array of generic skills and dispositions, come to be regarded as the essential ingredients of successful performance in the workplace.

The central feature of investing in the workforce is that it provides multiple benefits:

- for *employees*, by raising employability and earnings;
- for *businesses*, by raising productivity and profitability;
- for *economies*, by raising competitiveness and growth.

In effect, investment in human capital, of which training of the existing workforce is a major component, is at the centre of a dynamic economy. A key aspect of work-based learning is the direct involvement of employers. Employer involvement can range from hosting a period of work experience to delivery of training entirely in the workplace. Employer-led training is increasingly considered an important source of skills development as employers are the end-users of the skills created (McIntosh, 1999).

Work-based learning, however, is much more than the familiar *experiential* learning that consists of adding a layer of experience to conceptual knowledge. In work-based learning, theory may be acquired in conjunction with practice. Theory-building, for example, may be viewed as a practice because those in practice are fully capable of producing theory (Vaill, 1997). The theory produced by the practitioner may be more a practical, commonsense theory, but a theory nonetheless. Practitioners build theory as they consciously reflect on challenges of their practice; engage in problem posing, data gathering, action, evaluation, and reflection; and then share the knowledge produced with others in practice.



2.1 The Learning Society, Lifelong Learning, and Work-based Learning

The concept of a learning society has emerged as a key idea in a number of influential policy documents which have appeared from the mid 1990s onwards. The European Commission White Paper on Education and Training (1995), for example, was entitled *Teaching and Learning: Towards the Learning Society*. This document argues that, in response to the fundamental process of change or 'upheaval' in European society, tomorrow's society should be one 'which invests in knowledge'. A number of factors are recommended to achieve this, including bringing the school and business sectors closer together. It is made clear that this refers to 'the world of learning in the widest sense, stretching from primary to higher education' (European Commission, 1995: 36). In this context it is recognised that much learning does and should take place in the workplace, and the importance of establishing workplaces as centres of learning is emphasised. In 2001, the European Commission offered the following definition of lifelong learning as: 'all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment related perspective' (European Commission, 2001: 9).

The interest in providing learning opportunities at work has also been strengthened among employers by the growing emphasis on the learning organisation (Pedler *et al.*, 1991). Embedded in this idea is not just that additional learning opportunities will be provided for employees, but that a continuing process of learning for employees will be at the heart of achieving organisational success and at enabling the organisation to achieve its goals. Organisations, therefore, become much more interested in creating the conditions within which this learning can take place. This will be done partly through in-house provision, but also through appropriate partnerships with other organisations which can support this learning.

The Irish *Lifelong Learning Index 2007* reveals that lifelong learning continues to play a major part in the personal and professional lives of the Irish public. The 2,278 respondents to an online survey illustrated that 75% have taken an adult education course, with 87% intending to enrol in training or adult education during the next twelve months. Learning new skills continues to be the most popular reason for enrolling in adult education. The survey also reveals that certification of courses is 'hugely important' to those choosing evening classes, reflecting the growth of the National Framework of Qualifications. 59% of respondents suggest that it is a 'significant factor' in choosing a class, and for 25% of respondents it was the most important aspect of completing an evening course.

Garavan *et al.* (2003: 3-4) view learning as a process rather than simply an outcome. They suggest that learning is now likely to embrace the following ideas:

- Learning is not just about knowledge. It is also about skills, insights, beliefs, values, attitudes, habits, feelings, wisdom, shared understandings, and self-awareness;
- Learning outcomes can be incremental (building gradually on what has already been learned) or transformational (changing ways of being, thinking, feeling and action);
- Transformational learning, for some learners and for some organisations, may be a struggle, may take time, and may involve conflicts over aims and outcomes;

- By its very nature, learning is essentially individual, but it can also be collectively generated in teams and organisations;
- There is no one right way to learn for everybody and for every situation;
- Questioning, listening, challenging, and enquiring are crucially important to effective learning;
- The learning process occurs inside the person, but making the outcomes explicit, and sharing them with others, adds value to the learning;
- When the learning process is self-managed, it becomes more effective.

The articulation of clear learning objectives is considered to be a central feature of any type of learning. Learning objectives have the potential to provide learners with an understanding of what is trying to be accomplished.

The developments associated with the idea of the learning society, lifelong learning, and the learning organisation have encouraged change within higher education in a number of ways. First, there is greater pressure on the higher education institute to work more closely with employers in contributing to the processes of economic change and development. Second, higher education institutes are expected to be increasingly flexible in their modes of delivery in meeting the lifelong learning agenda. Third, the role of an increasingly wide range of organisations and agencies in meeting learning needs has been emphasised.

Proponents of work-based learning claim that it should be associated with an academic qualification or, minimally, an industry-recognised credential. The education institution needs to be assured that any programme meets rigorous academic standards, whereas the employer needs assurance that the programme has prepared its employees to contribute to the field in question with the highest attainable quality standards. An academic qualification will typically require an assessment that through diverse means – testing, supervisory evaluation, individual portfolio, learning contract – can identify the necessary learning outcomes, the level at which these outcomes are being achieved, the criteria for achieving the outcomes, and evidence of their achievement. In work-based learning, in particular, the volume of learning activity needs to be established to support the accreditation. Although the ultimate award of credit rests with the academic institution, other parties, such as the employing organisation, programme deliverers, and associated consultants and facilitators, have their respective interests to sustain. Brodie and Irving (2007) through their work at the University of Chester suggest that, given the interdisciplinary nature of work-based learning, assessment should focus on three components. The components are learning ('how to learn' and make the most of learning opportunities); critical reflection (reflecting on learning, applying models and theories to aid understanding); and capability (what the student is able to do). Capability is believed to be the most important component, yet it is potentially the most problematic to assess. Equity and quality-assurance issues militate against the involvement of employers in the assessment of learning, even though they could (and, in some instances, do) contribute. Where employers are engaged in the assessment process their role tends to be in mentoring students on the technical aspects of work-based projects and providing feedback on the performance (or 'capability') of the student to the academic staff.



2.2 What is Work-based Learning?

Work-based learning is situated within the context of the paradigm shift from an 'industrial society' to a 'knowledge society' (Rohlin *et al.*, 1998). While the term knowledge economy is used in a variety of ways, at its core are the ideas that future economic performance will be closely based on the skill and innovation level of the labour force, underpinned by effective research, and research and development capacity (Fisher, 2001).

Work-based learning is a subset of workplace learning. It refers specifically to the achievement of 'planned learning outcomes' derived from the experience of performing a work role or function. Work-based learning is part of a cluster of concepts including 'lifelong learning', 'employability' and 'flexibility'. One of the main differences between learning in the formal educational system and learning at work is that the former is based on formal, intentionally planned educational activities, while the latter is mostly informal in nature (Eraut, 2004b). Informal work-based learning is unplanned and implicit, often collaborative and highly contextualised, and the learning outcomes unpredictable, whereas institutional learning and organised on-the-job training is often formal, planned, largely explicit, focused on individual learning, and the outcomes are often predictable (Hager, 1998). The different attributes of work-based learning and institutional learning can be seen as weaknesses and as strengths. Formal education is intended to produce general skills that can be applied and transferred to a variety of situations. In order to be a true expert, however, in working life one has to develop situation-specific forms of competence, and this is possible only in authentic situations. On the other hand, situation-specific learning by itself may be very limiting. Something learned in one situation might not easily be transferred to another type of situation. Despite the differences between institutional and work-based learning, there are similarities as well. The workplace may also function as a context for formal employee training. Large companies, in particular, put a lot of effort into corporate training. In recent years, the role of universities and institutes of technology are often important for corporate training programmes.

Recent research by Raelin (2008) suggests that there are three critical elements in the work-based learning process:

- (i) learning is acquired in the midst of action and dedicated to the task at hand;
- (ii) knowledge creation and utilisation are collective activities wherein learning becomes everyone's job;
- (iii) learners demonstrate a learning-to-learn aptitude, which frees them to question underlying assumptions of practice.

Work-based learning, therefore, differs from conventional education in that it involves conscious reflection on actual experience. Walsh (2008) suggests that reflection on practice offers an advantage of providing a way in which learners can be supported in structuring their workplace experience to identify their learning from that experience. One thing, however, is clear: there is no single or simple definition of what work-based learning entails beyond the notion that it is about learning (not teaching) and occurs in the workplace (rather than on campus). It should not be assumed that work-based learning in the higher education context is specifically about training; work-based learning may take many forms and be undertaken for a number of different purposes; and it is not restricted to performance-related learning in a narrow sense. Instead, the emphasis is on

identifying and demonstrating learning that has occurred through work-based activity, wherever and however this may have been achieved. Gallacher and Reeve (2002) suggest that four concepts are regarded as particularly important to understand work-based learning in higher education:

1. Partnership
2. Flexibility
3. Relevance
4. Accreditation.

Partnership

A partnership between an external organisation and an education institution specifically established to foster learning is seen as a relationship of satisfying need by the external organisation in return for revenue to the education institution. Partnership is increasingly regarded as key to the development of lifelong learning, in which boundaries between previously separate organisations or sectors become blurred. This emphasises the importance for higher education institutions of developing partnerships with employers and other organisations, and recognising the growing number of partners who may be involved in negotiating the structure and content of higher education programmes.

Flexibility

Flexible learning has come to be associated with the concept of 'capacity building', incorporating notions of investment in social and human capital, flexible and innovative problem-solving, and reciprocal transfer of knowledge between structures. Capacity building, in turn, is linked to individual 'capability' and with the belief that employees have to reconceptualise not only their tasks and roles but also themselves – their identity and subjectivity. Capacity building is, therefore, about developing a workforce of 'enterprising selves' with capabilities that enable them to successfully engage with the unpredictability of the market-place. Work-based learning satisfies the criteria for flexible learning by being flexible in terms of time, place, and mode of learning. It transforms the role of higher education into one of facilitating and supporting learning, rather than delivering pre-specified programmes of study. In order to effectively provide this support, when and where it is needed, flexible learning has come to be associated with e-learning and distance learning and with negotiated learning outcomes.

Relevance

The need for relevance is frequently used to justify changes to the curriculum and to support the growth in work-based learning. Relevant knowledge is increasingly defined as knowledge which is characterised by being produced in the context of application, as distinct from traditional discipline-based knowledge. Work-based learning has been presented as having a key role in helping higher education institutes to "meet the needs" of collaborating employers.



Accreditation

Accreditation refers to the process of recognising and giving value to a wide range of learning experiences, many of which have previously not been recognised or deemed worthy of credit within higher education. Within this context, it is argued that all forms and modes of learning may be regarded as having equal value to traditional academic learning, and should receive recognition in the form of equal credit (Brennan, 2005). The ability to award credit for learning achieved in the workplace rests on particular approaches to the curriculum in which learning is defined in terms of sets of learning outcomes, grouped in terms of units or modules, and at an identified level and volume.

Overall, a key aspect of work-based learning is the direct involvement of employers and their commitment to providing the context for learning (Boyer, 2000). Employer involvement can range from hosting a period of work experience to delivery of training entirely in the workplace. Employer-led training is increasingly considered an important source of skills development as employers are the end-users of the skills created. Work-based learning is also regarded as particularly effective as it gives trainees realistic hands-on experience and develops skills relevant to employer needs.

2.3 Definitions of Work-based learning

A wide range of terms is used interchangeably for the concept of work-based learning, including: workplace learning, work-related learning, vocational learning. This leads to some confusion and undervalues the potential benefits of work-based learning as a mode of learning at a higher level. Furthermore, since the mid-1990s, there has been a gradual shift in language and techniques used to describe steps taken by employers to help employees perform their jobs more effectively – a point emphasised by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) which records that learning, development, and training are often used in the same context. This has again led to some confusion. The CIPD consequently defined work-based learning as “a self directed, work-based process leading to increased adaptive capacity. Individuals ‘learn to learn’ and possess the capabilities that enable them to do so to help to build and retain competitive advantage” (CIPD, 2005).

Work-based learning is often used in the literature to describe any form of learning in the workplace. Work-based, however, can convey the notions both of:

- learning that takes place *in* the workplace, and
- learning that takes place *for* the workplace, or the employer more specifically (Glass *et al.*, 2002).

The term work-based learning is used to describe a diverse range of learning situations which have differing influences on higher education, students, employers and employees (Foster and Stephenson, 1998). Gray (2001) identified four different forms of work-based learning:

1. Work-based learning used to access higher education programmes – wherein the previous/current experience of employees is recognised by higher education institutions as a valid form of learning. In addition to allowing these employees to enter higher education programmes their experience

may count towards credits for particular units through the recognition of prior learning process.

2. Work-based learning as general preparation for the real world – whereby higher education institutions include work-based competency skills in course programmes, e.g., numeracy, communication, and problem-solving.
3. Work-based learning as the primary form of study – whereby full-time employees take on the additional role of student. Learning takes place within the workplace with support from higher education institutions to discuss and share ideas generated from the workplace.
4. Work-based learning as preparation for future employment – wherein a period of work-experience in an industrial, commercial, or service environment is incorporated into higher education courses.


Most providers of programmes that include at least an element of work-based learning make a distinction between:

- | | |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| ■ learning <i>at</i> work | in the workplace |
| ■ learning <i>through</i> work | learning while working |
| ■ learning <i>for</i> work | doing new or existing things better |
| ■ learning <i>from</i> work | using the experience of work. |

Some of the characteristics of work-based learning have been described as:

- *Task-related* – Learning frequently arises from the performance of tasks in the workplace;
- *Problem-related* or *Issue-led* – Much work-based learning is associated with tackling problems of production, design, or management. Some work-based problems are very complex, involving state-of-the-art techniques at the frontiers of knowledge;
- *Innovative* – New techniques or approaches are constantly being devised to meet new situations, creating many opportunities for learning, and providing experience of managing change;
- *Both strategic and just in time* – Many people have to think and operate at both levels: strategic in terms of working towards medium- to long-term goals; just in time in terms of learning what is necessary for tomorrow;
- *Autonomously-managed and self-regulated* – Learning often takes place without direct instruction or formal tuition. Learners are expected to take responsibility for ensuring they learn from their work activities;
- *Self-motivated* – Many people are motivated to achieve beyond basic expectations;
- *Team-based* – Tackling problems in the workplace requires effective co-operation between people with different roles and expertise, leading to the development of a range of skills and personal qualities as well as a sharing of expertise;
- *Concerned with enhancing personal performance* – Constant updating and upgrading of expertise is now a normal part of most people's work;
- *Concerned with improving the performance of a business, enterprise or organisation;*

A spectrum of interpretations therefore exists, especially in relation to work-based learning, and this has led to a rather prolonged debate concerning both what work-based learning means and the exact form work-based learning should take to best achieve its learning outcomes. The narrow interpretation of work-based learning relates to learning in the workplace that is driven by employer needs and motivations, whereas the broad perspective focuses on learning that relates to work and is driven more by individual and societal needs.



Terminology and definitions can get in the way of exploring the subject and dealing with what really matters, notably influencing policy environment, dealing with issues and challenges from a structural perspective, and sharing, promoting and encouraging effective pedagogical practice. An inclusive approach that accepts the variety of interpretations is a prerequisite in order to avoid over-compartmentalising provision and straight-jacketing institutions by trying to shape an absolute definition. Nevertheless, it is critically important to establish a shared understanding of the particular area of focus from both an academic and employer perspective, regardless of the terms used.

2.4 What do People Learn at Work and How?

There has been a considerable shift in the way that individual learning and development is understood and characterised. There has been a move from identifying training needs to identifying learning needs, suggesting that development is owned by the learner with the need rather than by the trainer seeking to satisfy that need (Nikolou-Walker, 2008). In other words, learning is demand led rather than provider driven. This has implications for who identifies the needs and the way that those needs are met. Current thinking suggests that needs are best developed by a partnership between the individual and the organisation, and that the methods of meeting these needs are not limited only to formal courses, but to a wide range of on-the-job development methods and distance/e-learning approaches. There has also been a shift in the type of skills that are the focus of development activity. Hallier and Butts (1999) for example identify a change from an interest in technical skills to the development of personal skills, self-management, and attitudes. Recent studies have summarised that people learn at work as follows:

- by doing the job itself,
 - through co-operating and interacting with colleagues,
 - through working with clients,
 - by tackling challenging and new tasks,
 - by reflecting on and evaluating one's work experiences,
 - through formal education, and
 - through extra-work contexts
- (Heikkila, 2006; Tikkamaki, 2006; Billett *et al.*, 2005; Collin and Valleala, 2005).

Eraut (2004b), after developing a typology of learning outcomes at work, summarised that there is little that people cannot learn at work. The typology includes the following categories of learning outcomes:

- (i) Task performance, including sub-categories such as speed and fluency, range of skills required and collaborative work;
- (ii) Awareness and Understanding, involving understanding of colleagues, contexts and situations, of one's own organisation, problems, risks etc.,
- (iii) Personal Development with aspects such as self-evaluation and management, handling emotions, building and sustaining relationships, and the ability to learn from experience;
- (iv) Teamwork with subcategories such as collaborative work, and joint planning and problem solving;
- (v) Role performance, including leadership, supervisory role, delegation, crisis management etc.,

- (vi) Academic knowledge and skills, such as assessing formal knowledge, research-based practice, theoretical thinking and using knowledge sources;
- (vii) Decision making and problem solving, involving, for example, dealing with complexity, group decision making, and decision making under conditions of pressure; and
- (viii) Judgement, including quality of performance, output and outcomes, priorities, value issues and levels of risk.

It is clear from the above learning outcomes that employees learn by working with their colleagues. Group working in one way or another is a factor which seems to promote knowledge exchange and the sharing of expertise, and thus enhances learning by individuals. Furthermore, it has been argued that not only individuals but also groups can learn in organisations. The ability to learn in collaboration with other people, both within and outside one's organisation, often makes the difference between success and failure. According to Slotte and Tynjala (2003), employees who cannot network with others to share and construct knowledge will fall visibly behind their peers in the possession of such abilities. Interaction between novices and experts is also of crucial importance in work-based learning. Billett (2004) has distinguished between direct or close guidance and indirect guidance. The former is salient to knowledge that would be difficult to learn without the assistance of a more experienced and knowledgeable partner. Learning processes or concepts that are hidden require close interaction with more experienced co-workers who can make these practices or concepts accessible. Indirect guidance contributes to how tasks are undertaken and completed.

The studies cited above deal with informal workplace learning and learning outcomes that come about incidentally, as a side effect of work. In recent years, some attention has also been paid to the ways in which learning can be intentionally promoted in the workplace. Poell (2006), for example, proposed a model of learning projects through which employees learn something new by solving work-related problems. A learning project is organised by a group of employees who participate in a set of activities centred on a work-related problem with a specific intention to learn and to improve their working at the same time. The activities include different kinds of learning situations: both on-the-job and off-the-job, both self-organised and facilitator-directed, action-based and reflection-based, group-focused and individual-oriented, externally and internally inspired, and pre-structured and open-ended. Poell's studies have shown that in organised learning projects participants are able to combine developing their competences with improving their work. While work-based learning programmes can be constructed from any coherent mixes of activities it is the pursuit of learning projects in the workplace that tends to characterise such programmes. These projects could form a major or a minor part of the overall activities. Learning is designed not just to extend the knowledge and skills of the individual, but to make a difference to the organisation. Projects are undertaken not just to equip students to contribute to the organisation, but to make a tangible step towards doing so. Organisational and individual capabilities are thus linked. Boud *et al.* (2003) suggest that this grounds learning and gives a focus to it. It enables managers and supervisors to see that learning is not a self-indulgent activity, but actually contributes to the organisation and needs to be supported by it.

Overall, individual and group learning in the workplace can be characterised as a highly social activity which requires interaction and dialogue, requires the kinds of challenges that make learning necessary, and involves reflection on past experiences and the planning of future activities.

3

Summary of Courses which include Work-Based Learning

3.0 Introduction

This chapter summarises the current 'state of play' of courses which include elements of work-based learning currently offered by the partner institutions surveyed. A questionnaire was developed by a sub-group of the work-based learning members in order to gather data on such courses. The survey aimed to illustrate a snapshot of the higher education landscape by highlighting 'what we know' and 'what we do not know' about work-based learning, and in doing so identify areas on which to focus attention in the future from an institutional and pedagogical perspective. The questionnaire was aimed at course co-ordinators and was available to be filled in electronically or at a face-to-face meeting with a member of the working group. The criteria for inclusion of courses were that they were targeted at students who are in employment, i.e., courses which are not accessed by CAO (Central Applications Office) entry, and usually delivered through part-time provision. The summary data presented here represents four hundred and thirty-three courses, which is the total number of courses accounted for by all partners. A very large variety of courses is currently offered to the workplace by the third-level education providers, these include management, marketing, professional cookery, energy management, auctioneering, accountancy, palliative care, interior design, lean manufacturing, retail management, and enterprise development. The questionnaire aimed to ascertain a wide range of information relevant to work-based learning, including: course duration, course fees, NQAI (National Qualifications Authority of Ireland) level, minimum entry requirements, recognition of prior learning, and course delivery, in order to assist third-level institutions and employers in identifying available approved modules which will benefit learners.

3.1 Course Duration

The first question enquired about the duration of each course. Figure 1 illustrates the replies to this question:

What is the Course Duration?

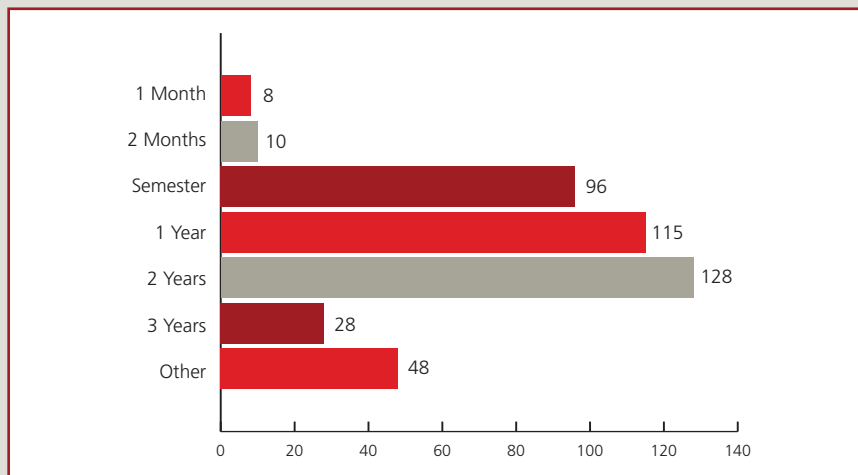


Figure 1: Course Duration

As illustrated, the duration of courses on offer ranged from one month upwards. Most courses were offered over one or two years: 115 courses took one year to complete, and 128 courses took two years to complete. These results suggest a reliance on more traditional timetables, whereby the learner attends a higher education institute on a part-time basis for either one or two years to gain their qualification.

3.2 NQAI Level

The second question asked what level each course on offer was classified by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) in the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). The need for work-based learning to operate in the dual worlds of work and education means that a common language must be used to describe the outcomes of what is being undertaken. This language is represented in the national framework of qualifications. The NFQ comprises ten levels of qualifications, with each level based on nationally agreed standards, skills and competence. These standards define the learning outcomes to be achieved by learners seeking qualifications at each level. The ten levels include qualifications gained in settings from schools to places of work, the community, training centres and to colleges and universities, from the most basic to the most advanced levels of learning. Figure 2 presents the replies to this question:

What is the NQAI Level?

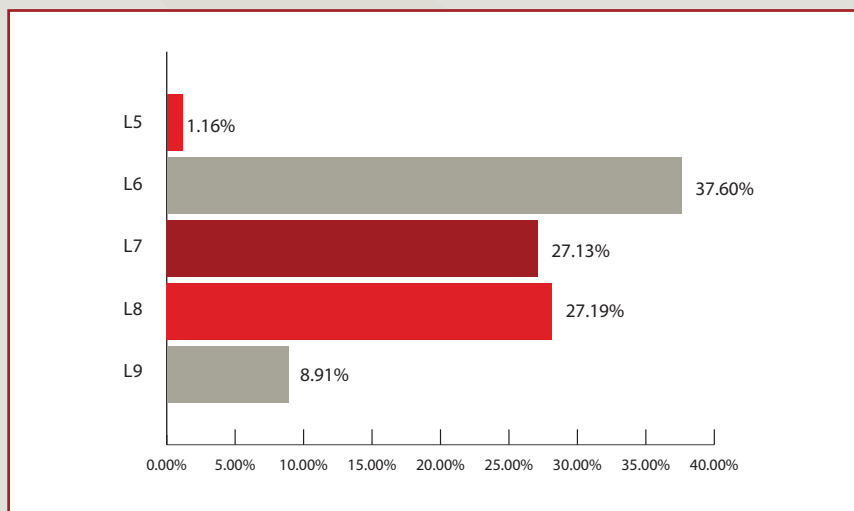



Figure 2: NQAI level of courses

As illustrated above, only 1.16% of courses are offered at Level 5. In general, courses ranging from Level 1 to Level 5 are offered by the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC), while courses from Level 6 to Level 10 are offered by the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC), the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) and the universities.



From the responses received, most courses (37.60%) are offered at Level 6, whereby the learner receives a certificate on completion of the course. 'New Economy' theory suggests that advanced countries are witnessing a growth in 'knowledge jobs' and there is an emphasis placed on knowledge-rich employment. One of the challenges, therefore, for higher education providers and employers is to promote further learning and to increase participation rates at Levels 7 and 8. The requirement to enhance the skill level of the working population presents a substantial task as Ireland's participation rate in continuous learning (non-formal learning) is relatively poor. Only 14% of the 25-64 years age-group in Ireland engaged in non-formal learning in 2002, contrasting with a 16.5% average in the twenty-five European Union states, and 34.5% in Britain. The Forfás report (2007a) suggests that the National Framework of Qualifications is a vital tool for progressing the development of skills in the Irish knowledge economy and that the availability of data based on the NFQ is of the central importance. For employers and employees, the NFQ provides a means of assessing or demonstrating that particular skill levels have been achieved. Qualification systems clearly add value to training and learning investments at the level of the national economy. Qualification systems promote labour mobility and the more effective matching of candidates and vacancies.



3.3 Course Accreditation

The third question asked related to the accreditation of courses. As can be seen from the results presented below, most (289) courses are accredited by the higher education provider. One hundred and twenty-five courses are accredited by outside organisations such as London's City and Guilds, various accountancy bodies, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, the Marketing Institute, etc. Only nineteen courses are accredited by FETAC and this reinforces the distinction between further and higher educational provision. It is clear from the results that courses currently on offer are primarily accredited by the education provider. There is a need, however, to establish if recognition of prior learning and of informal learning in the workplace contribute towards the learner gaining exemptions as part of the accreditation process. Recognition of prior learning involves students preparing a portfolio that documents the learning outcomes and the evidence of the learning achievements they undertook informally or in a non-accredited course. Such a portfolio is submitted and credit allocated on the basis of the extent to which it demonstrates equivalence to learning outcomes from formal courses. Boud (2003), however, suggests that most learning developed in the workplace has until recently been unaccredited, but it provides the foundation on which students will build their work-based learning studies.

Who offers Accreditation?

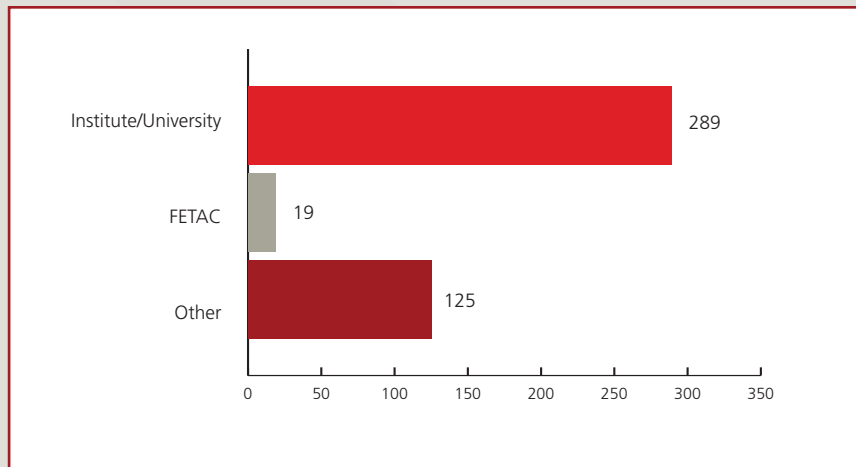


Figure 3: Course Accreditation

3.4 Recognition of Prior Learning

The next area to be investigated was the recognition of prior learning. Recognition of prior learning (RPL) is the generic term for systems such as Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) or Advanced Academic Standing, which are used within higher education to describe the awarding of credit to students on the basis of demonstrated learning that has occurred prior to admission. RPL is also used to refer to the recognition of (prior) non-formal and informal learning for qualifications. The term 'prior' concerns learning that has taken place, but has not been formally assessed or measured, prior to entering a programme or seeking an award. The philosophy underlying the recognition of prior learning is to enable and encourage people to enter or re-enter formal education, leading to qualifications, by awarding or recognising credit for what they already know in the course curriculum. Workman (2008) summarises that academic recognition and academic assessment of experiential learning are the essential features of the recognition of prior learning. The measurement activities within the assessment process relate to two key factors: the volume of credit and the level of learning which reflect academic level equivalence to undergraduate or postgraduate learning. The onus is on the student to demonstrate the prior learning, by preparing and submitting adequate evidence, under the guidance and advice of the academic institution and employer.

As illustrated by Figure 4, there was no recognition of prior learning for 267 of the 433 courses surveyed. This finding suggests that significantly greater emphasis needs to be placed on recognising prior learning by third-level education providers. Recognition and accreditation of prior learning enables non-traditional entry into third-level courses as well as earning credit for advanced standing. A recent OECD report (2007) on RPL observed that an awareness of RPL among Irish employers, workers, and the general public is low. Until now, awareness of RPL has been limited to a small number of policy makers, education professionals, and people partaking in RPL.

Have you processed Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) requests in relation to this course?

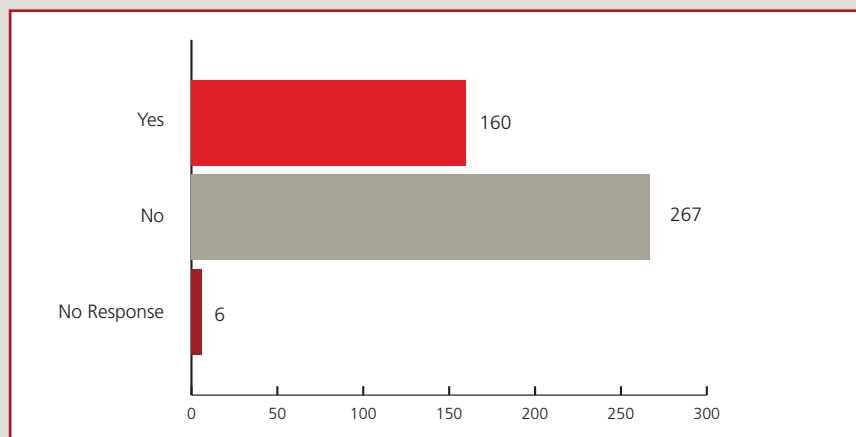


Figure 4: Recognition of prior learning

Three purposes of RPL are set out in the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland's *Policies, Actions and Procedures for Access, Transfer and Progression* (2003):


- Entry to a programme leading to an award;
- Credit towards an award or exemption from some programme requirements;
- Eligibility for a full award.

The recognition of prior learning in Ireland is closely associated with the promotion of lifelong learning and the full implementation of the NFQ. For some decades, the recognition of prior learning has been used in Ireland to facilitate broader access to education and training programmes (particularly by mature learners in further and in higher education and training), to meet workplace requirements and personal needs/interests of learners. The number of learners who avail of the recognition of prior learning has been and continues to be relatively small in comparison to the number who access education and training qualifications by formal routes. There is, however, a range of practice and experience in the recognition of prior learning in many fields of education and training.

The OECD report (2007) on the recognition of non-formal and informal learning notes that in Ireland “while RPL for access, credit/exemptions is generally practised, the concept of making full awards on the basis of RPL is a relatively new one (there is some international practice of this)”. Ireland’s Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999, however, sets out that learners may seek awards directly from HETAC or FETAC without having participated in specific programmes. The OECD also noted that RPL practice in Ireland is mainly funded from Government sources (project based), by education and training institutions (financing RPL from their regular budget), and from international funds. The OECD recommends that Ireland should increase the availability of part-time education, and other flexible forms of education and instruments such as RPL, to facilitate access to education.

Recognition and accreditation of prior learning are important and necessary for work-based learning courses. A process of portfolio development and assessment is needed for students to identify the point at which their formal work-based learning should commence. A major objective of the NFQ is to recognise all learning achievements. The NFQ aims to do this by supporting the development of alternative pathways to qualifications/awards and by promoting the recognition of prior learning. Boud (2003), however, suggests that there are important adaptations needed for work-based learning courses: First, the prior learning documented in the portfolio must relate directly to the proposed programme of study to be undertaken for work-based learning; credits given must be allocated in terms of the actual curriculum proposed for work-based learning. Second, it is important that only current competencies are recognised; since the knowledge identified in the portfolio is to be used immediately as part of the course, it must be current and deployable.

Many Irish third-level institutions are now moving towards modularisation – organising academic courses in smaller rather than larger units, which should make it easier to adopt the accreditation of prior learning. This move to modularisation, as well as enabling learners to gain credit for their learning in Irish third-level institutions, helps individuals to transfer easily to third-level institutions across Europe. The change to modularisation is largely driven by the Bologna Declaration, convened in Bologna on 19 June 1999 and signed



by 31 representatives of 29 EU member states and accession candidates. By 2010, the Bologna Declaration aims to have full student mobility through the transferability of their achievements (European Credit Transfer System), with credits also being obtainable in non-higher education contexts such as lifelong learning.

Overall, the OECD report summarised that the recognition of non-formal and informal learning is closely associated with work-based learning. The report suggested that learning outcomes are fundamental to the development of programmes by employers, and these outcomes can be supported by continuous assessment. Additionally, the report recommends that some smaller awards are “ones that could be picked up in the workplace” (2007: 31). These awards could be supplemental or could focus on specific skills for competences to support continuous professional development.

3.5 Applicants and places for courses provided

Question 5 dealt with the demand for courses, and asked if there were more applicants than places for the courses provided. A very clear result emerged: 333 courses can accommodate more students, but 100 courses are over-subscribed.

Is the course over-subscribed?

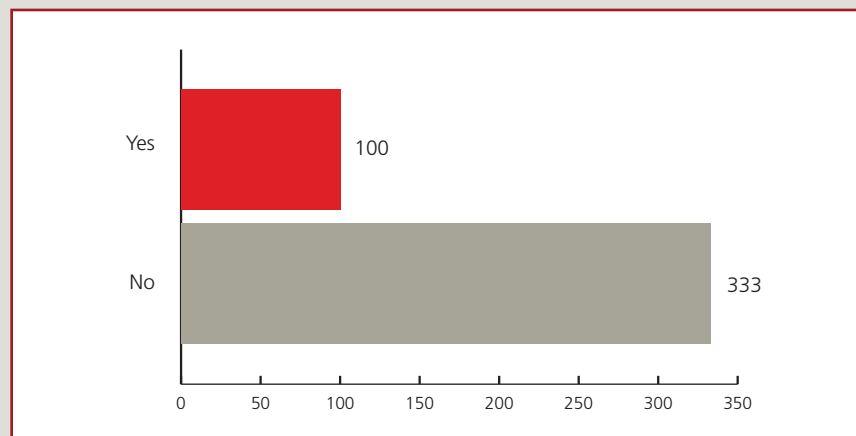


Figure 5: Applicants versus places

Ireland's participation rate in continuing learning is relatively poor. Only 14% in the 25-64 year age-group in Ireland was engaged in non-formal education and training in 2002, compared with 16.5% in the EU25 and 34.5% in Britain. An OECD (2006) report illustrated that Ireland was ranked fourteenth out of 27 selected OECD countries in 2004 in terms of the proportion of the labour force with tertiary education. The report also highlighted that 37% of the Irish labour force had not completed upper secondary education and this represents a far larger proportion than among other leading performers. These statistics leave Ireland educators with significant room for improvement and do not allow grounds for complacency.

A number of studies, including one in 2005 by the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (Forfás, 2005), have analysed education and training participation of those in the workplace. Summary findings of these reports illustrate that:

- Younger persons receive more training than older persons;
- Higher educated persons receive more training than lower educated persons;
- Employees receive more training than self-employed;
- Professionals and managers receive more training than craftspersons and labourers;
- Full-time employed receive more training than part-time;
- Permanent employees receive more training than temporary employees do;
- Those employed in the Dublin region receive more training than those in other regions;
- Union members receive more training than non-members;
- Women receive more training than men.

A challenge exists for third-level education institutes to target those in employment, as engagement with continuing learning should facilitate workers to achieve both personal and organisational goals and objectives.

3.6 Delivery Schedule

The sixth question asked when the course is delivered. As illustrated below, 394 courses are delivered every year or semester, with only 39 courses delivered on demand/request.

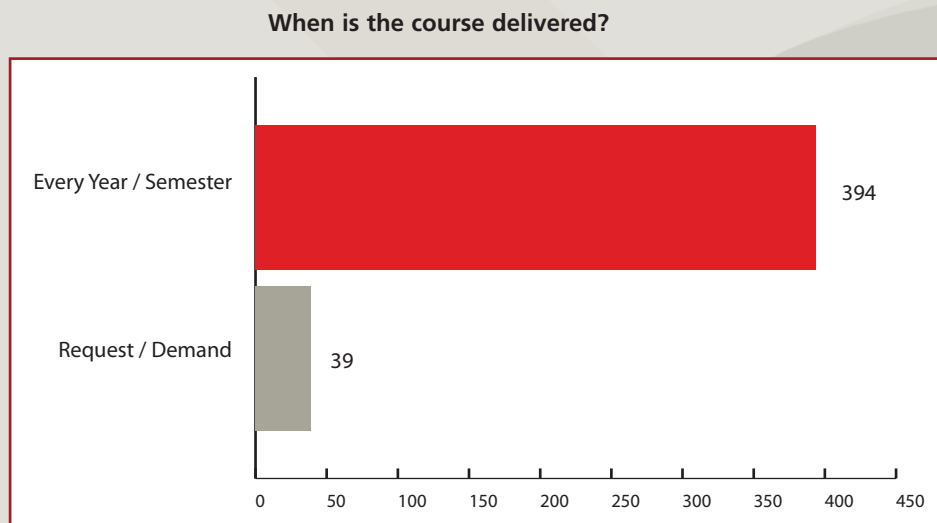


Figure 6: Delivery Schedule

This finding suggests that the third-level education provider takes the decision to provide courses based on the traditional annual college calendar. It is clear that education providers need to re-examine their timeframes and to commence their courses at times which would be more user friendly for adult learners. Specific steps may be required to tempt people already in employment to re-engage with non-formal education through work-based learning projects and initiatives. This finding further suggests that academic staff involved in designing courses aimed at those *in* employment should form stronger links with industry partners to establish time periods which may be more suitable for course delivery.

3.7 Delivery Location

Question seven addressed the issue of where courses are delivered. As illustrated, 366 courses are still delivered on campus, with only two out of the 433 courses surveyed delivered in industry/workplace.

Where is the course delivered?

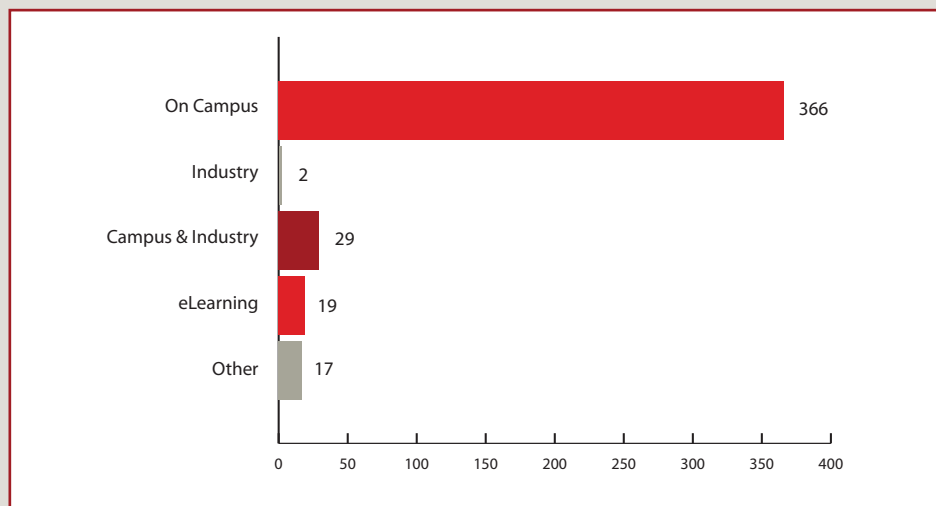


Figure 7: Delivery Location

This finding poses some serious challenges for Irish third-level education providers, and particularly for the delivery of work-based learning programmes. Most education providers have become conditioned to a classroom model that separates theory from practice, which can risk making learning seem impractical and irrelevant. Work-based learning, however, merges theory with practice and knowledge with experience. It recognises that the workplace offers as many opportunities for learning as the classroom does. While the workplace creates possibilities for learning, it is how individuals participate and interact in their workplace that is central to learning by individuals.

Learning in the workplace can occur at different levels and is different to classroom-based learning. Learners may be individuals, groups, whole organisations or inter-organisational networks. The nature of the learning varies as well. Although formal learning and informal work-based learning are different in nature, both are equally important for the development of vocational and professional expertise. Formal learning usually produces explicit knowledge, whereas informal learning largely produces tacit or implicit knowledge.

Martineau and Hannum (2003) believe that organisations will gradually turn towards approaches that address immediate corporate issues rather than those that “subject their executives to lengthy and lofty theoretical lectures or even worn-out case studies”. Similarly, Raelin (2008) suggests that the classroom need no longer be the primary sanctuary for learning but, instead, that the workplace can be viewed as a prime location for learning. Third-level academic providers are now facing the challenge of working with course modules that require them to deal with converting work practices into learning practices that meet both education and industry standards. There are also issues regarding the place of theory and critical reflection for courses delivered in the workplace rather than those delivered in the classroom. The third-level providers also need to make the adjustment that courses delivered off campus enables the learner to be responsible for, manage, and to timetable one’s own learning, and to provide courses that require minimal attendance at a third-level institution.

3.8 Methods of Assessment

The next issue to be addressed was that of assessment methods. As can be seen from the results, very traditional modes of assessment are still utilised by mainstream education providers. Exams and continuous assessments remain the favoured means of evaluation. One of the more interesting findings emerging from the research is that only two courses were assessed by means of project work.

What assessment methods are used?

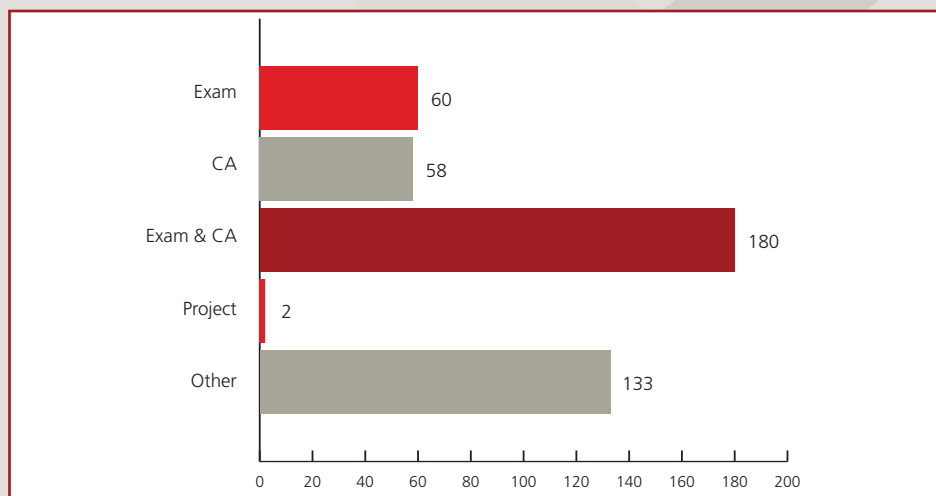



Figure 8: Methods of assessment



Currently, most education institutions organise courses around credit points. These credits represent a discrete component of a course with specific learning outcomes and assessment processes. A challenge for education providers is to move from traditional class-based examination and assessment procedures to more innovative project work which could be completed in the workplace. This means that work-based learning programmes must be flexible and responsive to the circumstances of the learner and of the work setting but without compromising on quality and standards from the perspective of the third-level institute. Boud (2003) suggests that work-based learning provides an excellent example of a learner-centred approach to curricula. The focus is on what students wish to learn, not just on what is provided for them to learn. The need for work-based learning, however, to operate in the dual worlds of work and education means that a common language must be used to assess the learning and describe the outcomes of what is undertaken. This language is represented in the NFAQ. Assessment of work-based learning must meet the quality challenge as specified by the education institution, and should have reliable measures of the volume and level of work-based learning required. Lyons and Bement (2003) advise that once the learning has been delivered its assessment must be based on appropriate standards. In order to plan, manage, and measure learning from experience, work-based projects, or from other sources, Lyons and Bement suggest that three sets of tools are required:

- (i) Means by which volumes of credit can be standardised;
- (ii) Means for establishing appropriate levels for learning outcomes;
- (iii) Criteria by which work-based learning may be judged and graded.

Overall, academic institutions need to be assured that all courses meet rigorous academic standards, and the employer needs assurance that courses will prepare employees to contribute to the workplace with the highest attainable quality standards. Although the ultimate award of credits rests with the education provider, the employing organisation has to sustain its own interests. By reducing on-campus assessment methods, such as examinations, work-based learning can be responsive to the needs of those *in* employment who have multiple responsibilities in their lives.



3.9 Identified Need for Particular Courses

Question nine asked who identified the need for particular education/training courses, i.e. whether it was the education provider or the industrial partner. From a work-based learning perspective, it is interesting to note that of the 433 courses on offer, industry identified the need for only 27 of these. Perhaps of greater interest, given the importance of educational and industrial partnerships in relation to work-based learning, the need for only 60 of these courses was identified by such partnerships. As illustrated below, the need for 254 courses was identified by the third-level education provider.

Who identified the need?

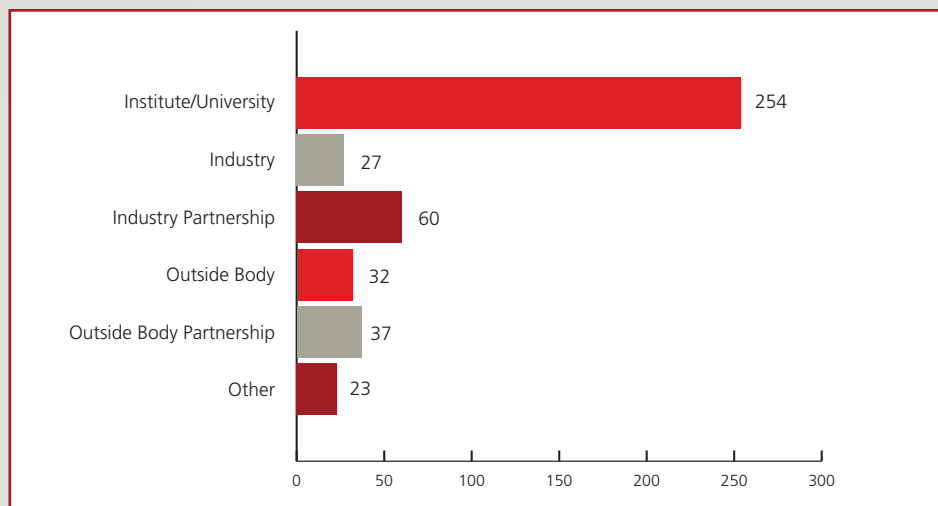



Figure 9: Identified need for particular courses

Nikolou-Walker and Garnett (2004) believe that, if the need for particular courses are identified in partnership by both the education institution and the employing organisation, there are many advantages, for example:

- A partnership between an industrial organisation and an education institution specifically established to foster learning is seen as a relationship to satisfy a need by the industry partner in return for revenue to the education institution;
- The course followed derives from the needs of the workplace and of the learner rather than being controlled only by an educational curriculum;
- The starting point and level of the course is established after a structured review and evaluation of current learning;
- A significant element of the course is work-based learning projects that meet the needs of the learner and the organisation;
- The education institution assesses the learning outcomes of the negotiated course with respect to a transdisciplinary framework of standards and levels.



The central feature of a work-based learning course is the selection of learning activities the learner undertakes. This should be equivalent to lectures, tutorials, practical work, and placements undertaken by students on conventional courses. Ideally, the nature of the course should be driven by the identified needs of the learner and of the workplace, but at all times it must satisfy the requirements of the education provider by meeting optimal standards and levels.

3.10 Course Design

After examining some of the issues relating to identifying the need for particular courses the next question to be asked related to the design of such courses. A similar pattern emerged: the education institutions were responsible for designing 221 courses; only 10 were designed by industry; and 47 were designed by both the education providers and industry. These findings, relating to course design, provide a challenge to third-level education providers, particularly because of the limited consultation with industry. It is clear that, if academics develop courses in conjunction with employers, academics will necessarily lose much of their traditional role as the sole or primary course designer. The curriculum for the newer model is ultimately located within the workplace, and is individually renegotiated with each learner. Actual teaching is seldom required. It is replaced by two important new roles: that of the assessor and that of manager of the learning process. As assessor, the academic is required to evaluate learning in the workplace and determine its academic merit and worth. The role of the academic manager is about identifying, structuring, providing opportunities, mentoring, assessing, but not teaching or lecturing (Onyx, 2003).

Who designed these courses?

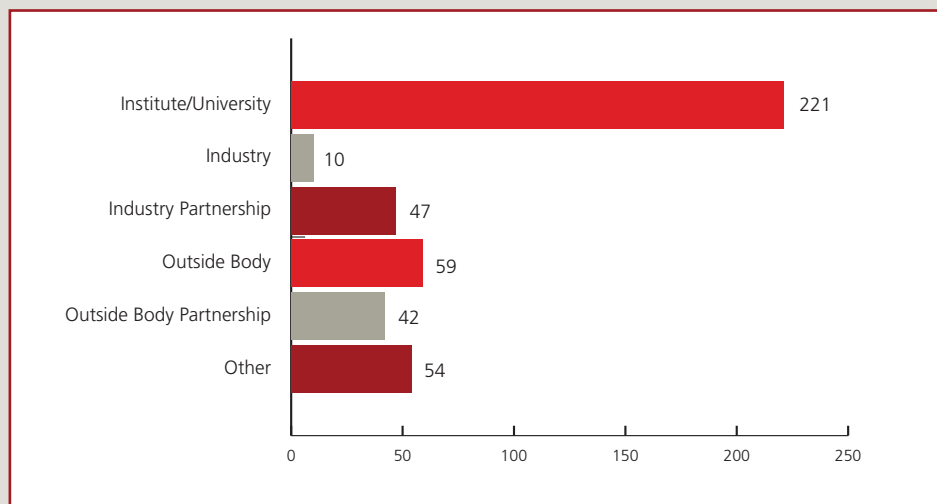



Figure 10: Course design

Traditionally, courses have been designed by the education providers, however, current thinking on work-based learning provision is that initiatives should be 'learner' and 'employer' centric rather than being developed from the perspective of education or training providers. This in turn should give both the learner and employer greater ownership of newly developed courses. The design of work-based learning courses requires an appreciation of the complexities of learning and of the circumstances in which it can take place. Considerable design preparation is needed if meaningful and worthwhile courses are to be planned to suit the diversity of students in the workplace. One of the valuable features of courses designed by the industrial and educational partnership is the potential richness of resources and support available to learners. They can draw not only on the resources of the education institution but also those of the workplace. Boud (2003) suggests that the level of resources, reference materials, and expertise is often greater in the organisation than in the third-level institution. Additionally, when a course is designed in partnership by the educator and the employer its role becomes one of assisting learners in identifying, developing, and recognising their individual learning in the context of their current jobs and future professional development.

The formation of a partnership between academics and employers should bring a new perspective to course design and development. Participation by employers in course design (covering duration, timing and content) should ensure that their employees would be beneficiaries of the course. One of the methods of achieving success for work-based learning courses is the inclusion of a work-based learning project which would be designed by the employer and the third-level educator. Advocates of work-based learning courses suggest that a main focus of these courses is on the delivery of a major work-based project (whether on an individual or collaborative basis) which addresses real-life issues and has the capacity to have an impact on the organisation. Garnett *et al.* (2003) caution that, to be effective, it is necessary for the third-level provider to be flexible in the timing of project work and the provision of supervisory support. Once again, this reinforces the importance of a partnership between the learner, the educator, and the employer.

A further reason for having the employer involved in course design is because of a difficulty faced by many organisations in placing due value on learning. While it is broadly accepted that learning is an essential capability for organisations, it is often among the first areas of activity to face budget cutbacks in times of difficulty. Shipley (2003) suggests this is because it is difficult to demonstrate a cause-and-effect link between the expenditure on learning and training and improvement in business performance. Traditional approaches to business performance measurement have focused chiefly on financial performance. If the employer has co-designed a course tailored to the needs of both employees and organisational needs, it is more unlikely that the course will suffer financial cutbacks.

Garnett *et al.* (2003), in agreement with previous research on course design and development, emphasise and propose an approach to work-based learning based on partnership – in the design, development, delivery, and assessment of the programme – between employers and third-level providers. The third-level institute provides a quality assured framework within which individual employees and their organisations negotiate courses of study which meet the personal development and career needs of individuals, the developmental objectives of the employing organisation, and the academic requirements of the third-level institute. Garnett *et al.* summarise that the crucial part of the joint development of courses is gaining a common understanding from all the partners of what each wishes to gain from the course and what each can contribute.



Finally, in relation to course design and development, Garnett *et al.* believe that there are a number of essential employer requirements for a third-level provider to develop an effective and sustainable work-based learning programme. These include:

- Recognition and enhancement of high-level learning, where it already exists within the organisation (e.g. training courses, the experiential learning of individual employees);
- Flexibility in the pattern of delivery, pace of the programme, and the particular approach to pedagogy;
- Willingness to work with other providers of high-level learning utilised by the employer (e.g. independent training providers);
- Customisation of programmes to meet the needs of the individual and the organisation;
- Tangible outcomes which have the potential to enhance the intellectual capital of the organisation;
- Provision of a quality-assured and flexible route to reliable and internationally recognised qualifications.

The partnership approach to course design and development demonstrates that the third-level provider is itself a learning organisation as it is able to transform the curriculum and develop new ways in which individuals and organisations can engage with higher education.

3.11 Support Services from Employers

Question 11 investigated the types of support services students receive from their employers while studying. As can be seen from Figure 11, the largest bar chart shows that no response was available for 156 of the courses surveyed. This finding may suggest that the course coordinators who were asked to partake in this survey were unsure of the support services (if any) that students received, and therefore may have chosen not to respond. Two other interesting results to this question which emerged were the low levels of (i) mentoring, and (ii) workplace support.



Do students receive any of the following support services from employers?

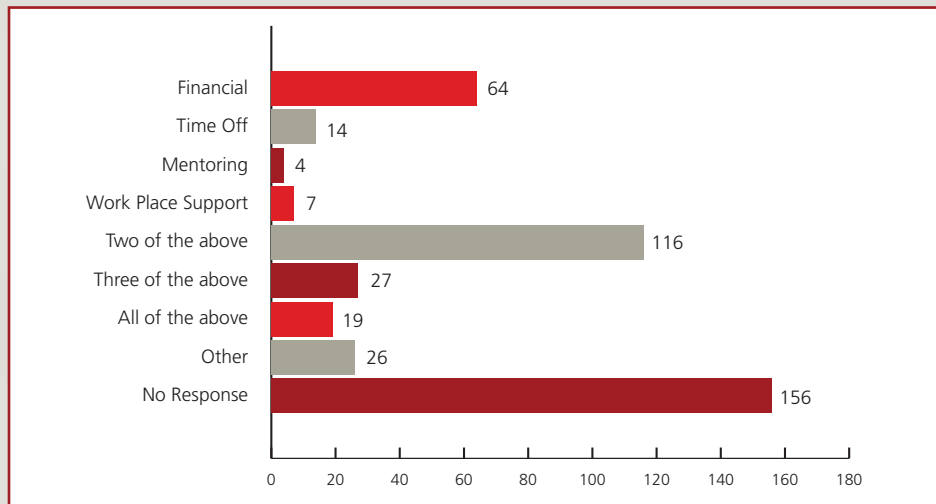


Figure 11: Support services from employers

Raelin (2008) suggests that learning at work can be facilitated by the advice of a significant individual with whom the learner can engage with in a reflective process about their thoughts and behaviours. Clearly, for a mentoring relationship to work, learners need someone who can be committed to them and who can afford the time for the mentoring relationship to evolve. A mentoring role is frequently performed by a training manager in an organisation, but it could also be another senior figure within the organisation. Mentoring is usually a one-to-one process. The role of a mentor is to provide a junior employee with guidance and a clear understanding of how an organisation operates. The mentor also focuses on enhancing an employee's fit within an organisation. In the context of an employee pursuing a third-level course, the role of the mentor is to offer support and help in the completion of work-based projects etc. Garavan *et al.* (2003) suggest that it is important that the focus of the mentoring is on helping the employee to learn. They caution, however, that while direct advice and instruction from the mentor can be helpful, it is important to ensure that employees learn to think for themselves and that the mentoring process does not, either intentionally or unintentionally, create dependence where they just blindly follow the mentor's instructions and cannot take action without advice.

Workplace support in the form of resources, organisational reference material, and expertise are all valuable features of work-based learning. Workplace supervisors also have an important support role, but their prime responsibility is to ensure that work is performed effectively. It is important for learners and their workplace supervisors and managers to agree on learning plans and to provide the conditions in which learning can take place at work. A useful device is a learning journal or learning portfolio. This provides for the ongoing keeping of records on learning and allows for reflection. Critical reflection is important because it is only through deeper

critique that work situations can be improved, workplaces transformed, and productivity significantly enhanced. It is about noticing and critically questioning the taken-for-granted assumptions held by oneself and by others.

3.12 Financial Support for Students

Building on the previous question, which related to support services from employers, the next question specifically dealt with the availability of financial support. As can be seen from Figure 12, students were unable to avail of any financial support for 292 of the courses on offer.

Can students avail of financial support from FÁS or other bodies?

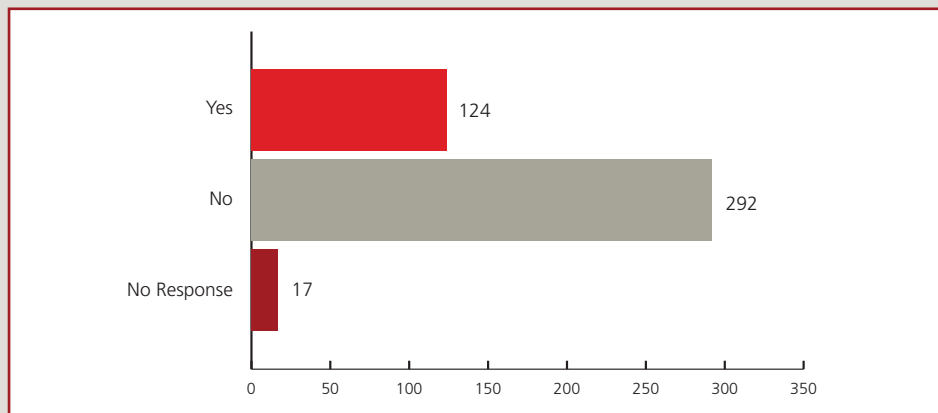


Figure 12: Financial support for students

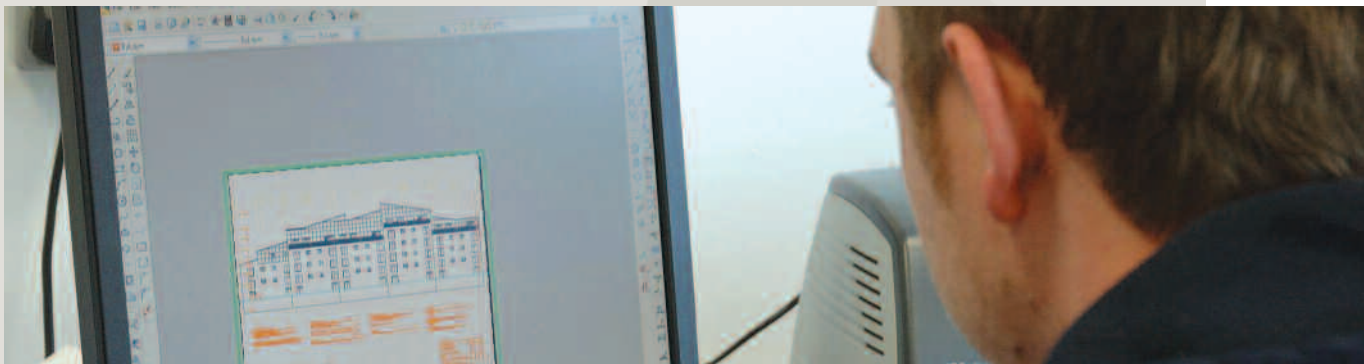
The Expert Group on Future Skills Needs report (Forfás, 2007a) noted that public expenditure on education and training for those in employment is on a very modest scale. The majority of public expenditure on continuing vocational education and training in 2003 was related to the training of the unemployed rather than on those in employment. The Forfás report further suggests that organisations are generally slow to invest in training that equips workers with transferable skills (i.e. general training), because such training would make an employee attractive to other organisations. Firms are generally more likely to invest in specific training, so that they can reap some of the benefits for their own organisation when the worker becomes more productive as a result of training. They recommended that the State should fund targeted, specific cohorts of the population, primarily low-skilled individuals, who would otherwise be unlikely to partake in either education or training. Currently, there is a substantial number of low skilled workers employed in Ireland. This has significant implications both for the individual (in terms of their employability in a rapidly changing workplace) and for the economy as a whole (in terms of their impact on overall productivity levels). The Expert Group on Future Skills Needs further outlined that there is a similar return from investing in the low skilled as there is from investing in those with intermediate or high-level skills. The main distinguishing factor, however, is that the low skilled are less likely to

be offered, seek, or avail of learning or training. There is a greater need, therefore, for proactive intervention at the low skilled level by the State.

Despite the benefits accruing to the State, individuals, and employers from education and training investment, expenditure in Ireland on education and training lags behind leading OECD countries. Policy-makers here, therefore, need to focus on ways of providing financial support for the part-time learner. The Expert Group on Future Skills Needs suggests that, as a general principle, those that do not currently hold a qualification commensurate with a qualification at Levels 4 and 5 on the NFQ should be able to achieve such an award through full-time or part-time study, without incurring tuition costs. Additionally, there is a commitment in *Towards 2016* (Government of Ireland, 2006) to establish a fund which will alleviate fees in public institutions for part-time courses at third level for those at work who have not previously pursued a third-level qualification. This policy has yet to be implemented. The Expert Group on Future Skills Needs summarises that the accelerating pace of change at all levels within the economy, and particularly in relation to skills, necessitates flexible and responsive education and training provision. An ongoing radical and meaningful dialogue must be engaged with by those providing education and training and those demanding it. This approach is reflected in the recommendation of the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs that “the provision of workplace-based training which is fitted around working hours needs to be actively promoted” (Forfás, 2007: 98).

3.13 Use of Web-based Learning Tools

The next question dealt with the use of Web-based learning tools. As illustrated in Figure 13, no responses were received in relation to 201 courses surveyed. This finding suggests that Web-based learning tools are under-utilised in the delivery of work-based learning courses. As noted earlier, the traditional classroom style of delivery of courses is still very much used by the institutions surveyed. The use of Web-based learning tools is a growth area for both academic institutions and employers and has many advantages for those learners *in* employment. Web-based tools and their wide availability is an area which should be further explored for delivery of work-based learning courses. The use of Web-based tools provides learners with the chance to maintain a flexible schedule. There is also the opportunity to build a virtual network of others studying the same course, enabling the learner to gain the benefit of group learning without having to attend a college or an off-site training course.





What web-based learning tools do you use?

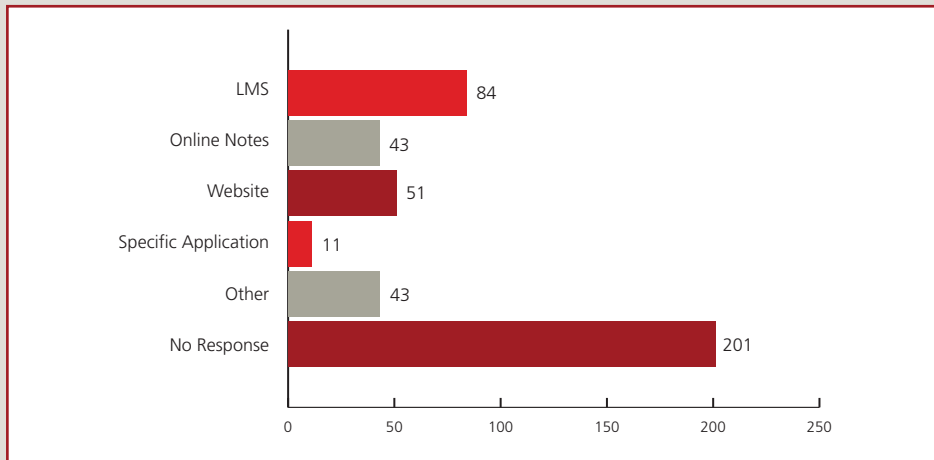


Figure 13: Use of Web-based tools

Eighty-four of the courses surveyed use a learning management system (LMS). A LMS is a set of software tools designed to manage user learning interventions. LMSs go far beyond conventional training records management and reporting. Some of the additional dimensions to a LMS include: computer-based training, online assessment, management of continuous professional development, and collaborative learning. A LMS also provides the tool for control, monitoring, and evaluation. While free and open-source LMS models are available, most LMSs are commercially developed.

Given the relatively low level of LMSs used in the courses surveyed, third-level education providers might usefully consider moving from the traditional classroom-based delivery to 'user-friendly' on-line systems of delivery. LMS is suited for the delivery of work-based learning courses because:

- it is flexible: the person can learn at their own pace and at a time that is convenient for them. This increases commitment to the learning as well as benefiting those who work shifts, weekends, or are trying to fit their learning around other commitments such as work and family;
- it is learner centred: as it gives the learner control over the pace, level, and sequence of learning. Learners can concentrate on the part of the course they need. For example, in a six-hour module, participants might find they already know two hours of the material and do not need another two hours, so two-thirds of a conventional classroom course could be a waste of time;
- it is time effective: it takes less time to deliver than traditional classroom methods;
- it is cost effective: there are no travel or accommodation costs, and it can be used more than once;
- Information can be presented in a variety of ways: the use of multimedia such as graphics, audio, video and diagrams allows information to be presented in a way that is attractive to different learning styles;
- it offers potential for a virtual classroom: once set up, people from different areas can be connected to share experiences and knowledge (Clifford and Thorpe, 2007: 54).

Online notes were only used in 43 of the courses surveyed. This finding again illustrates the relatively conservative and traditional delivery methods still used by third-level providers. In contrast, according to Garavan *et al.* (2003), online learning is used increasingly in organisations, with some companies having set up open learning centres, so that employees at all levels can follow a variety of general educational courses. As well as benefiting the learner, online notes allow for greater flexibility of delivery and can be linked with employers' needs to fit work-based learning around staff working hours with the minimum disruption to production. The research conducted by Garavan *et al.* (2003) also illustrated that many organisations are increasingly using online learning tools as part of continuing training and development of their employees. Their research noted that fewer employers are prepared to give day release to employees and, even if they do, the employees may not feel able to do their jobs in four days a week. Additionally, Garavan *et al.* suggest that employees frequently have evening commitments that prevent them from attending conventional courses, and many people prefer to study on their own time. Online learning tools also reduce commuting time, thereby proving to be more cost effective for both employees and their employers. A further advantage of using Web-based learning tools is that learning is self-paced, so for slow and quick learners stress is reduced. The Forfás Enterprise Strategy Group (2004) also suggested that the future of the higher education sector in Ireland will require all institutions to be flexible and adaptive to the needs of students and employers. They also recommended that third-level institutes need to be creative and innovative in their delivery methods, together with supporting high levels of participation in lifelong learning.

3.14 Blended Learning

Question 14 asked if blended learning is incorporated in the delivery of work-based learning courses. As illustrated by Figure 14, currently 248 courses do not include blended learning, this finding again emphasises the reliance on the traditional mode of course delivery.

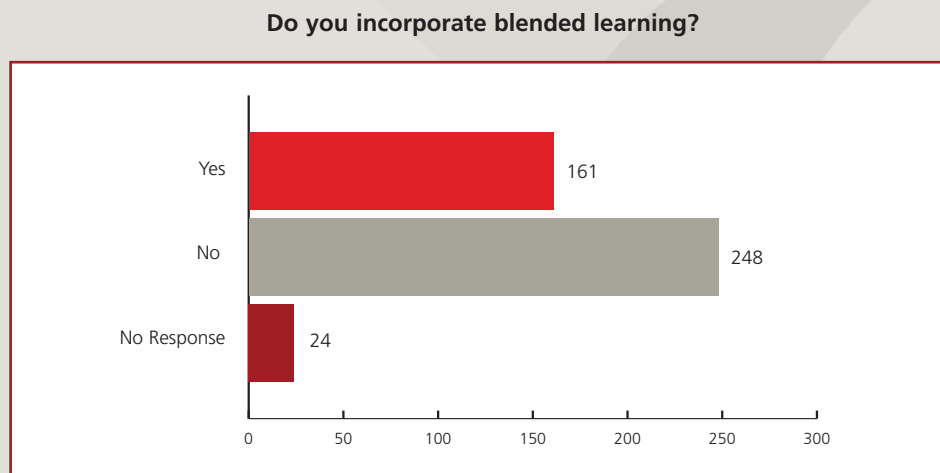



Figure 14: Use of blended learning



Blended Learning is an approach to course design that brings together the best of both online and face-to-face learning strategies. It is not intended to replace either of these two approaches, but rather to build from each to create an innovative and more effective learning experience for students. Blended learning is a combination of multiple approaches and can be accomplished by utilising both virtual and physical resources. Typically, technology-based facilities and face-to-face sessions would complement each other throughout this learning process. In the strictest sense, blended learning is when an educator combines two methods of delivery of instruction, normally combining e-learning with other educational resources. E-learning is naturally suited to distance learning and flexible learning but can also be used in conjunction with face-to-face teaching, in which case the term blended learning is commonly used. Generally, blended learning initiatives have attempted to leverage what is best done person-to-person (group presentations; debates; reflexive response/thought) in combination with what is best done online (deeper, reflective discourse; document management, and organisation). The major aims of blended learning are to:

- Use information and communication technologies to support more active approaches to student learning;
- Support learning activities that extend outside face-to-face sessions;
- Assist students in being better prepared for face-to-face sessions.

Research conducted in Britain by Sharpe *et al.*, for the Higher Education Academy (2006) emphasises the need for education institutions to take on a more flexible approach to delivery that utilises a mixed mode or blended approach to learning, integrating e-learning and distance learning alongside more conventional and formal approaches to education. The report outlines that this enables the student to have a greater say over when and where the learning takes place, and allows the learning to be built around other work and lifestyle commitments. Similarly, Clifford and Thorpe (2007) suggest that the blended approach is the key to success for workplace learning and development. They believe that mixing e-learning with tutor support and/or classroom sessions reduces the loneliness of one learner with a computer and maximises potential for practice and improves motivation. They further suggest that e-learning can contribute greatly to training and education but only as part of an overall learning strategy.

The expressed vision of the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs poses significant challenges for third-level education providers to effect a well-educated and highly skilled population in Ireland. Current education and training courses on offer and their delivery mechanisms are not sufficient to upskill 500,000 persons already in the labour force by 2020. The Expert Group suggests that innovative programmes need to be implemented to foster a culture of continuous lifelong learning. The increased use of blended learning should be one of these initiatives.

Overall, the survey results demonstrate that higher education institutions are in a transition period where they are moving to place more emphasis on work-based learning. Currently, the provision of work-based learning courses varies from institution to institution. It is clear from the results of the research carried out that third-level institutions need to adopt a more proactive approach in developing work-based learning courses and, in particular, engaging in consultation with employers and employees. There are many opportunities for third-level providers to utilise more distance-learning tools and to make the transition from an over-reliance on traditional

course delivery mechanisms which are currently in place. There is little doubt that current models of work-based learning and practices are evolving and will change considerably over the next decade. There are varied levels of emphasis and extent of provision of work-based learning courses, which in some instances are driven by the institutional mission, while in others it happens as a by-product. In tackling the work-based learning agenda, institutions have started to create an environment that enables them to respond in a timely manner to identified employer needs. Building and sustaining longer-term closer relationships between the higher education providers and employers will have to underpin any drive by higher education institutes to expand their role in supporting workforce development.



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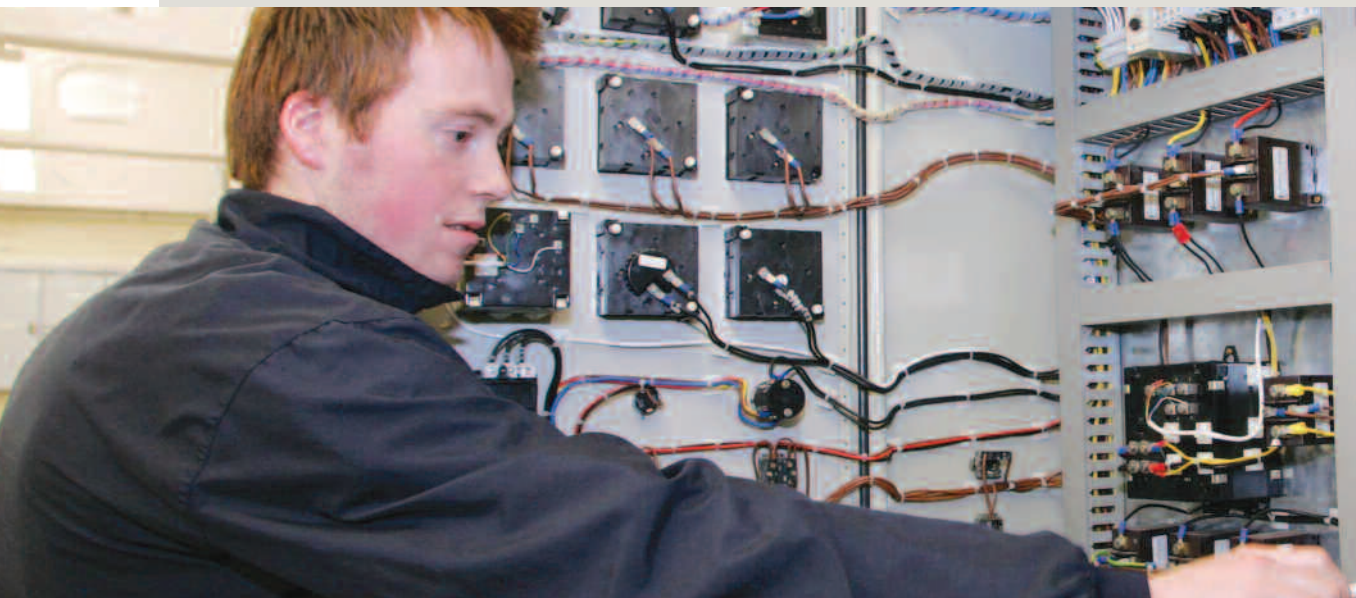
Individual Learning Plans

4.0 What are Individual Learning Plans?

Individual learning plans (ILPs) are a statement of the intended learning of an individual over a specified period. A learning plan relies on an assessment of learning needs, usually identified jointly by the individual and his/her manager. An individual learning plan involves establishing what a learner wishes to achieve, deciding where they want to go in the short and long term, and identifying the learning needs in terms of knowledge, skills, or competence. The process also defines the learning and development that is appropriate to meet perceived needs. Learners have different needs and these needs change over time. Their particular requirements typically do not fit into any standard pattern of courses. A learning plan, therefore, has to be created for each learner. In order to ensure that this plan can be supported and resourced, it has to be agreed on by all the parties concerned. The development of a plan goes beyond mere evidence collection, "it aspires to form an intermediary stage leading to continuous professional development and lifelong learning" (Pickles, 2000).

According to Garavan *et al.* (2003), learning and development is a lifelong process of nurturing, shaping and improving skills, knowledge and interests in enhancing effectiveness. It does not necessarily imply upward movement; instead, it is concerned with enabling the individual to improve and realise their potential. The personal development cycle is one of continuous learning, with a longer time span than a specific training need would require, and requires considerable reflection and thought. Successful planning for learning is very dependent on the individual's willingness and ability to develop.

Dearing (1997) defined an individual learning and development plan as "a structured and supported process undertaken by an individual to reflect upon their own learning, performance, and/or achievement, and to plan for their personal, educational, and career development". Key elements from this definition are:




- A structured and supported process, where an individual's needs are clearly identified and correct measures are made available for employee upskilling;
- Undertaken by an individual, so a focus on the development of the individual employee occurs;
- Reflect upon their learning and/or achievement, allowing for individual self-assessment;
- Plan for their personal, educational, and career development, which can be very beneficial for individuals to identify and plan future career progression avenues.

According to Brennan and Shah (2003), the primary objective of such a plan is to provide a means by which one can monitor, build, and reflect on their development, and enables individuals to:

- Become more effective, independent, and confident self-directed learners;
- Understand how they are learning and relate their learning to a wider context;
- Improve their general skills for study and career management;
- Articulate personal goals and evaluate progress towards their achievements;
- Encourage a positive attitude to learning throughout life.

Garavan *et al.* further suggest that the characteristics of these plans are:

- *Personal document*: The most significant feature of a personal learning and development plan is that it is personal and specific to the individual producing it, as it represents their goals and ambitions. While it is personal, it is important that management communicate that they also place value on the plan;
- *Individual-oriented*: The personal plan is a tailor-made statement. It reflects the ambitions, aspirations and learning needs of that person. The individual has full responsibility for producing the plan.
- *Individual ownership*: The personal development process is the responsibility of the individual, so each employee has ownership of the plan. If an individual has the responsibility for their own learning and development, they are more likely to learn and develop. The personal plan puts the individual learner in control.
- *Management support*: There may be a tendency for line managers to make the mistake of assuming that the introduction of personal learning plans frees them of responsibility for the training and development of staff. While the plan is the responsibility of and is owned by the individual, the manager has a key role in supporting the process. The manager should be prepared to provide guidance and assistance to help the employee achieve their learning and development goals.
- *Time for reflection*: Personal development planning demands that learners engage in self-reflection. Individuals must understand themselves before they can decide what to improve. Thus, adequate time for self-reflection is crucial to prepare a useful personal development plan.
- *Personal development planning is a continuous process*: The development process is continuous as there is always something to learn and always room for improvement.
- *Provision of learning resources*: Training and development resources relevant to the individual's learning needs should be made available. Where the organisation might not have appropriate resources to meet identified personal development needs outside resources must be availed of.
- *Balancing the past and future*: When an individual produces a personal learning and development plan, it is essential that they review past achievements as well as mistakes. Although there is a lot to be learned from the past, there must be a strong focus on the future. Learners who over-analyse the past may be expressing a reluctance to change (Garavan *et al.*, 2003: 437-8).



The existence of an up-to-date individual learning plan demonstrates a professional approach to continuing professional development. It is a mechanism by which educational needs are identified and prioritised, and commitments made to address those (Rughani *et al.*, 2003). Each plan is personal and helps to direct an individual's learning, specifically in relation to professional development.

A report by The National Committee of Inquiry into higher education in Britain introduced the concept of a 'progress file', as part of an individual development plan, to be implemented across all British higher education institutions. The term 'progress file' represents a transcript of individual learning and the opportunity for engaging in the individual development planning process. Progress files, in particular the self development planning aspect, are artefacts which articulate a particular meaning of learning (Haigh, 2008: 57). The Quality Assurance Agency (the organisation in Britain responsible for defining and making explicit standards for higher education institutions) required that undergraduate and postgraduate students have the opportunity to engage in the process of creating individual learning plans by 2006/07 (Clegg and Bufton, 2008: 1). While advocates of individual learning plans highlight their many benefits, Fry *et al.* (2002: 108) claim that the extant relevant literature is quite ambiguous: "several concepts are ill-defined, and often used with multiple meaning, are under-researched, poorly problematised, and very often dependent on context".

4.1 Individual Learning Plan Construct

An individual learning plan is not a new concept and many incarnations exist within secondary education and more recently in higher education institutions. An individual learning plan is a proxy for a number of different constructs that attempt to draw benefits from recording information, reflecting on the information recorded, and devising an action plan to enable the learner to identify current gaps in knowledge and to devise a plan of action which enables the learner to take progressive steps to upskill and close-in on gaps identified. While terms such as 'progress file' exist in Britain, the terminology used in North America presents itself differently and is articulated as 'self regulation' and 'portfolio building'. Such variety in terminology, however, embraces a similar range of actions. Some terms which are frequently used in the literature include:

1. *Transcript records*, which provide a record of assessed achievement, drawn from a Managed Information System (MIS);
2. *Personal Development Records*, denoting achievements and aspirations recorded by the learner and drawn from the private personal records the learner has developed through a Personal Development Planning (PDP) process. It may also consist of a testimonial from a person who has supported the learner's personal and educational development.
3. A *portfolio*, which is also drawn from the learner's records, and presents evidence of assessed or non-assessed achievements that are identified through the learners PDP (Grant *et al.*, 2003: 3).

The personal learning and development record is, therefore, owned by the learner and arises from the individual development planning process. A learner's progress file emerges when a personal development record is combined with a formal transcript. While individual development planning promotes learner ownership, this is

a process which can be facilitated or self directed. Both approaches place responsibility on the learners to plan their learning, embark on training that acts on the plans and then generate evidence of learning.

Activities such as reflection (self-review, skills auditing, evaluation) and planning (learning goals, career planning) are central to developing a learning plan. Individual plans generate outputs or products which act as an archive of evidence of learning. A number of common activities are associated with an individual learning plan:


- Drawing up a short personal reflective statement;
- Completing a skills audit or SWOT analysis;
- Developing or setting out career goals and action plan;
- Building a curriculum vitae.

A wide range of activities has been identified as useful for supporting the individual learning and development planning process. It is important, however, not to reduce the individual plan to skills auditing and skills development. An individual learning plan is at its best when it is motivated by and tied closely to the individual's learning goals. A professional development portfolio offers individuals the opportunity to share their learning with others, thereby promoting on-going professional development.

When individual learning plans are being developed the learner should, therefore, create a portfolio which may include their personal development record as evidence made in associated with their individual development plan. Today, many companies and institutions are choosing to implement individual learning plans, or may have systems already in place to aid in professional development. The most preferred medium for implementation is through electronic means, which encourages learners to manage their development records in a structured manner, also confirming that the individual learning plans and e-portfolios are linked.

4.2 Individual Learning Planning as a Reflective Learning Process

'Reflective practice', a term used in education pedagogy, was a concept introduced by Donald Schön in 1983. It refers to a continuous process from a personal perspective, by considering critical incidents within the experiences of one's life. As defined by Schön, reflective practice involves thoughtfully considering one's own experiences in applying knowledge to practice while being coached by professionals in the relevant discipline. He identified a critical evaluation process whereby beginners in a particular discipline could recognise their own individual practices and those of successful practitioners. Schön believed that learners should be helped to reflect on their experiences and to learn both the process and the outcomes of that reflection. He suggests that the learner should focus on the process of building a mental map or framework within which one can locate one's learning and to which one can make explicit reference in subsequent situations. Garavan *et al.* (2003) suggest that reflection is a process of thinking through, or mulling over, a particular learning experience in order to draw out lessons that can be applied in the future. It is the basis of much managerial and professional learning. Clifford and Thorpe (2007) also believe that reflection is an essential part of the learning process and that reflective practice is the method by which reflection is made a deliberate and structured activity.



While the idea of reflection is at the core of individual learning plans, neither defining nor carrying out the process of reflection is easy. Reflection demands a rigorous level of mental effort and critical self-analysis that many are unwillingly to engage in. Sometimes resistance arises simply because the learner recognises that the reflection will lead to uncomfortable conclusions, such as a need to change practices or to work harder. It is simply easier to deny the need to reflect in the first place. Even if learners are willing to change habits, they will not necessarily continue to engage in reflecting unless they can see a rapid benefit from their efforts, but any such speedy reward would typically be elusive. Initially, learners who are asked to engage in reflection tend not to go beyond simply recording recent events, outcomes, etc., sometimes in a very superficial way. Learners may simply not have the ability to go beyond superficial descriptions, either simply through lack of practice or because they just do not have the mental tools to analyse. It is not until deeper analysis leads to plans to modify behaviour and until that modified behaviour is seen to produce an increase in desired outcomes that the process will be perceived as worthwhile. Learners can start reflecting only when they are given:

- Clear guidance, in terms they can understand, on what they should be achieving. This includes explicit intended learning outcomes, assessment criteria, and detailed guidance for the process;
- Detailed feedback on their work, in terms that they can understand, that sets out the differences between what they have done and what they should have done.
- Guidance on how they might repeat the learning activities more successfully. They might know that what they have done is not satisfactory, but might be unclear of ways in which they should do things differently;
- The opportunity to repeat activities so they can see the effects of trying new approaches.

According to Raelin (2008), two valuable tools for reflective learning practice are journals and portfolios. The journal helps participants to distil lessons from everyday experience in order to help them track their learning. The journal is viewed most often as a powerful technique to enhance self-reflection. It is often used as an introspective tool for personal growth, but, it can also serve as an aid to bring together the inner and outer part of a person's life. It offers a lens to view experience – before, during, or after the event under scrutiny – and it even allows further reflection on the journal entries themselves. The journal also helps learners more deeply to understand their current reasoning and associated behaviour, or it can spur their consideration of new methods or skills introduced through the course.



Cunliffe (2004) suggests that many academic courses use the journaling process as a strategy to spur metacognitive thinking from a reflective learning perspective. Metacognitive thinking constitutes a thinking about self, others, context, and even about one's own thinking in action. It asks learners to be more self-conscious about their assumptions and their ways of being, acting, and relating. Hogan (1995) believes that, within the academic setting, journaling can enhance learning in a number of ways:


- It can promote learner autonomy to work on areas of personal and professional interest;
- It can enhance associated experiential learning activities;
- It can encourage critical reflection in order to challenge personal and organisational practices;
- It can enable holistic learning involving all the senses;
- It can promote self-development and self-understanding through real-world experience.

While journals allow for focus on the self, the primary aim is, however, to learn more about oneself and one's reasoning about phenomena rather than to merely describe what one does. Students, therefore, should be encouraged to critically question their past actions and future possibilities as a way to become reflective about their being in the world. Clifford and Thorpe (2007) also recommend the use of reflective journals because:

- True learning cannot take place without reflection;
- Reflection and review of situations and experiences help the learner and the organisation to make sense of situations, to view them from different perspectives, and, in some cases, to reframe them, i.e. to put them into a different, usually more positive, context;
- Reflection gives learners the chance to 'hold up a mirror' to their experiences and to potentially see themselves as others see them;
- Reflection has benefits for all levels of an organisation;
- Reflection provides the opportunity to consider not just the 'how' but 'why' things are done.

In summary, according to Clifford and Thorpe (2007), many professions now encourage the use of reflective journals as part of the continuing development process; others – such as practitioners in teaching, health, and social care – regard it as essential to everyday work.

Although similar to the journal, the *portfolio* tends to be more inclusive and is often more a public document. Richardson and Ward (2005) suggest that the term portfolio generally describes a collection (or archive) or reflective writing and associated evidence, which documents learning and which a learner may draw upon to present her/his learning and achievements. Similarly, Larkin *et al.* (2002) defined a portfolio as a collection of documents and other evidence illustrating progress towards a goal. The portfolio, now increasingly produced in electronic format, can include the journal. Heath (2004) noted that portfolios tend to contain collections of self-generated artefacts and reflections that demonstrate the author's knowledge, skills, dispositions, and growth over time. A portfolio allows learners to illustrate their work in a self-directed and comprehensive fashion, well beyond the presentation of a curriculum vitae. Within the realm of work-based learning, portfolios are inherently developmental, helping the learner to focus not only on current accomplishments but also on future needs. When using portfolios, learners become engaged as they record, interpret, and evaluate their own learning. When reviewing one's portfolio with workplace supervisors and academics, one can extract the skills already possessed and those in need of development. In addition, the comprehensive account in a portfolio can



provide the workplace supervisor and academic with a basis for providing useful feedback to the learner. Portfolios also have a number of purposes beyond their use as a reflective tool in work-based learning. They are often employed to showcase the knowledge and skills of the writer for job-seeking or promotion purposes. They are also designed to meet the needs of courses to satisfy institutional standards (Heath, 2004).

4.3 E-Portfolios

As information and communications systems become more sophisticated, the emergence of the e-portfolio (or digital portfolio) is becoming more prevalent than materials-based portfolios, giving rise to a technology dedicated to valuing and celebrating achievements of the individual. The growth of e-portfolios is fuelled by three broad factors: the dynamics of functioning in a knowledge economy, the changing nature of learning, and the changing needs of the learner. In a knowledge economy, the most valuable resource is, axiomatically, knowledge. A person's ability to express his/her knowledge effectively (through artefacts, examples of work, progression of growth, and instructor comments) improves their opportunities for employment and access to education. More effectively than a static transcript, a portfolio permits the learner to display competence. The richness of an individual's learning can be portrayed through multiple media. Using a particular website, for example, to communicate web development skills is far more effective than simply presenting a certificate on a CV. Learning is also changing. The traditional classroom model is being replaced with alternative approaches like problem-based learning, competency-based learning, and work-based learning. Learning is now arguably a process of living, which means that learning continues in virtually all aspects of life. The ability to include these experiences is an important motivation for e-portfolio development. The needs of learners are also being recognised, especially in light of the social impact of technology. The majority of learners entering higher education are now technically proficient. They are familiar with the online domain. Seely-Brown (2002) describes these learners as multi-processors who think in hyperlinked fashion (not linear), and are comfortable with a range of media. He suggests that e-portfolios may be as familiar to many of today's learners as writing pads were to previous generations.

One of the key motives behind the growth and development of the e-portfolio, therefore, has arisen from a desire to have learners take responsibility for planning, documenting, assessing, and reflecting on their own learning (Cambridge, 2001). The e-portfolio is a dynamic online personal resource which allows learners to build, manipulate, and present portfolios to different audiences. An e-portfolio is a digitised collection of artefacts including demonstrations, resources, and accomplishments that represent an individual, a group, or an institution. This collection can include text, graphics, or multimedia elements archived on a website or on other electronic media such as a CD-ROM or DVD. An e-portfolio is more than a simple collection: it can also serve as an administrative tool to manage and organise work created with different applications and to control who can see the work. The learner is in control and is solely responsible for his/her portfolio. E-portfolios can enable individuals to learn from one another by sharing ideas and opinions about their work, and they provide individuals with an opportunity to talk about factors that have a positive impact on their professional development. An e-portfolio is a reflective tool that demonstrates growth over time. Learners create 'presentational' e-portfolios through the use of e-portfolio tools or systems, and in the process (depending on

the tools or systems used) can be helped to develop one or more key skills, such as collecting, selecting, reflecting, sharing, collaborating, annotating and presenting (all of which are suitably e-portfolio related processes). Descriptions of the use of e-portfolios tend to include the concepts of learners drawing from both informal and formal learning activities to create their e-portfolios, which are personally managed and owned by the learner, and where items can be selectively shared with other parties such as peers, academic assessors, or employers.


E-portfolios are defined in different ways by different people (e.g. Truer and Jenson, 2003), as the term is not fixed and, thus, confusion can arise from different or ambiguous definitions. E-portfolios have been referred to as knowledge builders and vehicles of radical change. Nevertheless, some common features of the e-portfolio include:

- A digital archive, which enables the learner to keep a record, and to maintain and organise materials or outputs from their learning;
- A learning environment, which allows for a range of activities such as preparing a learning plan, or building a CV;
- Information exchange, which is important when developing an individual development plan as one can share/exchange information with employers, mentors, tutors or peers and obtain feedback electronically.
- The provision of an authentic record, related to an individual's status, particularly associated with learning.

E-portfolios provide many benefits, they can be used for many purposes, and they provide a structured and organised format for presenting personal and professional evidence of achievements. The practice of e-portfolio usage aims to foster the skills of independent learning, reflection, and the individual planning process that supports lifelong learning by drawing on personal and academic information. Roberts *et al.* (2005) suggest that the e-portfolio reduces contact time, stimulates reflection, contributes to lifelong learning, and facilitates progression of learners within and between institutions. A recent study by Meyer and Latham (2008) reports that e-portfolios are being increasingly adopted as they are more manageable than paper copies, display appropriate evidence, and demonstrate a learner's performance and mastery. Heath (2005) summarises the advantages of e-portfolios as:

- Many artefacts – reports, presentations, websites – are already in electronic format, so it is much easier and less cumbersome to report them digitally;
- Since they are portable, e-portfolios can be easily reproduced and distributed;
- They capture the dynamics of knowledge work by employing and combining a variety of media, such as text, graphics, audio, and video;
- The structure of e-portfolios can be hierarchical rather than linear by showing the relationships among major headings, thereby reflecting the complex interactions that exist in most professional practices.

While many benefits accrue to e-portfolios, there are also some potential weaknesses: Like any computer-based tool, one can avail of an e-portfolio only if one is computer proficient and not technophobic. Additionally, as learners control the portfolios they have complete control over what parts of their portfolio can be viewed and by whom. McMullan (2006) cautioned that while e-portfolios can be very effective as assessment and learning tools both students and mentors need to receive clear guidelines and support on how to use them.



Standardisation of e-portfolios is also a potential challenge. Heavily regulated efforts may stifle creativity and innovation. Ultimately, in order for a tool of technology to succeed, it must be adopted at the end user level.

In many work-based learning contexts, learners construct their individual development plan within an e-portfolio system. This system supports the creation of a CV and the uploading of multimedia files – comprising assignments, presentations and resources – in addition to a reflective journal. An individual development plan allows an individual to set their own personal targets and find the best way to achieve them through constructive self reflection and through mapping out a progression path. This allows for the improvement of individuals in understanding what and how they are learning, and to review, plan, and take responsibility for their own learning. Cambridge (2008) observed that various types of e-portfolios exist. These include:

- Student e-portfolios, which support student advisement, career preparation, and credential documentation;
- Teaching e-portfolios, which allow for the sharing of teaching philosophies and practices;
- Institutional e-portfolios, which give rise to institutional and programme accreditation processes;
- Professional e-portfolios, which are responsible for producing and maintaining records for individuals in the workforce, and support continuing professional development and re-certification.

E-portfolio implementations can best be viewed as a continuum. E-portfolios are driven by the intended task: assessment, professional/personal development, learning portfolio, or group portfolio. The expressions of learning in an e-portfolio can range from simple blogs to enterprise-level implementations. The intended task of the portfolio is the ultimate determinant of value. For certain courses, a blog may be all that is required. Regardless of the format selected, each e-portfolio effort should encourage learners to develop skills to continue building their own personal portfolio as a lifelong learning tool. Implementing an institutional approach for e-portfolios can be a difficult task. To be effective, the concept needs to be embedded in the process of instruction and assessment. Siemens (2004) suggests that for an education institution to implement a learner's e-portfolio system it should possess the following characteristics:

- The e-portfolio should be viewed as a personal learner-in-control tool, and treated as central to the learning and assessment process;
- Learners should be introduced to the concept, and instructed on how to use the system (both from a technical perspective and from a perspective clarifying its personal benefits);
- The curriculum should be designed to require learners to use the e-portfolio in completing their course work and assignments;
- The e-portfolio should be used for assessment of learning objectives. Instructor feedback can be integrated to the portfolio and treated as an artefact;
- Learners should be provided with staged advisory sessions evaluating their effective use of e-portfolios (i.e., metacognitive evaluation of portfolio use);
- An e-portfolio culture should prevail, encouraging learners to include personal life experiences, awards, non-academic activities, and other character/learning-revealing artefacts in their portfolio;
- Dialogue, debate, discussion, and examples of e-portfolio use should be commonplace;
- Time should be allotted for e-portfolio development;
- Academic staff should understand and promote the value of e-portfolios;
- Technical details should be well managed, resulting in straightforward, positive end-user experiences.


McAlpine (2005) believes that e-portfolios have the capability of changing learning and assessment paradigms currently in place. The manner in which change occurs will be an important factor to the future success and benefits to learners, educational establishments, and awarding bodies. A key consideration for the development of an e-portfolio strategy should be the responsibility that the awarding bodies have, and a distinction needs to be made to highlight whether the e-portfolio is owned by the awarding body or the candidate. McAlpine further believes that e-portfolios present immense potential in terms of enhancing the validity and authenticity of candidate assessment, as well as assessing learning processes.

4.4 Learning Contracts/Agreements

In traditional education the learning activity is structured by the academic instructor and the institution. The learner is told what objective to work toward, what resources are to be used and how (and when) to use them, and how any accomplishment of the objectives will be evaluated. This imposed structure conflicts with the adult's deep psychological need to be self-directing and often induces resistance, apathy, or withdrawal. Learning contracts, instead, provide a vehicle for making the planning of learning experiences a mutual undertaking between a learner and any helper, mentor, or teacher. By participating in the process of diagnosing personal needs, deriving objectives, identifying resources, choosing strategies, and evaluating accomplishments, the learner usually develops a sense of ownership of (and commitment to) the plan. Learning contracts are a means for making the learning objectives of any field or practical experience clear and explicit for both learners and facilitators.

Learning contracts also allow for shared responsibility of the planning and learning experiences. This allows for the learner to actively participate in the learning process from start to finish. Students begin to feel the need to learn because the learning objectives become their own personal goals. In turn, students begin to take responsibility and control over their own learning. In this way they are an effective teaching strategy in helping students to become intrinsically motivated and responsible for their own learning. There is more, however, to the principle of the learning contract than a convenient administrative device. It is based on the principle of the learners being active partners in the teaching-learning system, rather than passive recipients of whatever it is that the academic thinks is good for them. It is about their ownership of the process.





According to Boud (2003), negotiated learning has become accepted in most higher education institutions, even if it is far from pervasive. Negotiated learning commonly uses the form of a learning plan, often called a learning contract or learning agreement. A learning contract is a written agreement between a learner and others which sets out a range of activities that will need to be undertaken if certain learning outcomes are to be achieved. The typical components of a learning contract are statements about the learning goals to be pursued, the strategies and resources involved, what is to be assessed, and the criteria for assessment. These are normally summarised in a short document and signed by the student, an academic adviser, and a workplace supervisor. Learning contracts have contributed to the array of individual development planning templates which exist today. To ensure that an individual learning plan can be supported, and resources to pursue it made available, the plan has to be agreed between the learner, the education institute, and the employing organisation. The negotiation of the learning plan provides an opportunity for the learner, the educationalist, and the employer to communicate their respective needs clearly to each other and to illustrate their respective commitments to the plan.

Brown and Knight (1994) specify four stages in learning contract development:

- The skills, knowledge and understanding profile which can be constructed using specifically designed proformas;
- The needs analysis, specifying the learning outcomes learners need to achieve;
- Action planning either individually, in small groups, or with a tutor, to identify what learners are going to do, and the timescales and resources (particularly tutor and peer support) required;
- Evaluation of how successfully, or otherwise, learning outcomes have been achieved.

Bement (1993) proposes that, during the development and subsequent delivery of these contracts, students are faced with a number of real quality management tasks, for example:

- The work planned forms a unified and achievable package;
- Work-based learning and the third-level course are complementary;
- The course provides sufficient opportunities for the assessment of progress and achievement;
- The time within which the course is to be completed is defined;
- The resources necessary to achieve success are made available;
- The volume and level of the credit that the work-based learning is worth is made clear;
- The criteria by which the work-based learning outcomes will be graded.

The contract must justify the total study programme, the relationship between the parts, and the connection to the recognition of prior learning. For the education institute, the only limitation is that the contract should cover only areas of learning in which the third-level institute has the expertise that would enable it to contribute meaningfully to its assessment. Contracts are only accepted when all three parties have reviewed and accepted the proposed programme and signed up to the contract.

4.5 The Use of Individual Learning Plans in Organisations


The individual development cycle is one of continuous learning, with a longer time horizon than a specific training need and requires considerable reflection and thought. Successful planning for development is very dependent on the individual's willingness to develop, as well as having the ability to develop. As Kneale (2007) observed, the individual planning process is not a 'one-size fits all' concept, as what is effective for one person might not work for the next person. Individual learning plans, however, have a significant contribution to make to training and development in organisations. Like any strategy for growth, individual learning plans must be managed and monitored effectively to yield results. They provide a structure, facilitate motivation, and offer a useful framework for monitoring and evaluating achievements. An effective plan can lay the basis for continuous learning processes in organisations, ensuring that employability issues are addressed and that a learning culture within the organisation is established. Individual learning plans are a statement of the intended development of an individual over a specified period. Individual learning plans, therefore, provide a powerful yet flexible way to link employees' professional and personal development with the development of the business. While individual learning plans in industry do not always need to be directly related to specific work tasks, the overall benefit to the company, for supporting the particular personal aspiration of the employee, usually accrues from developing a more accomplished employee, whose motivation and self-esteem grow through achieving an objective identified in the individual learning plan.

A key question a manager/supervisor asks when devising the training and development schedule might be, "Is my reportee currently capable of achieving his/her annual objective?" If not, then a learning gap exists. In order to bridge the gap one must first identify what exactly an employee needs to learn or change in order to achieve his/her objectives. Newby (2003) suggest that the 'SMART' acronym which sets out the key elements of the learning objectives should ensure that the individual development plan is successful. This means that an employee needs to:

- Be **S**pecific about the change one requires;
- Have **M**easurable actions to assess if the activity worked;
- Make the learning **A**chievable; development actions should be limited to approximately three per person;
- Ensure that all learning activities should be **R**elevant to the annual objectives or the person's development;
- **T**ime the activity appropriately to fit in with the work schedule.

Garavan *et al.* (2003: 441) suggest that development plans provide benefits both for organisations and individual learners in organisations. Organisational benefits include:

- *Reputation of organisation*: Organisations that adopt individual learning plans to support the continuous development of employees will gain a reputation as leading edge employers;
- *Increased productivity*: An increased concern for an employee's development is likely to lead to better performance;
- *Shifting responsibility to employees*: The introduction of individual learning plans is a strategy to shift responsibility for career management to the employee. It encourages individuals to be independent and proactive;

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- *Retention*: Organisations that place a greater value on employees and demonstrate interest in individual development are more likely to retain high performing employees;
 - *Flexibility*: Individual learning plans are an effective mechanism in producing a more flexible workforce in the organisation;
 - *Developing Competence*: Employers are increasingly seeking individuals who will work hard but also be innovative. Individual development can contribute to producing employees that have initiative, and are proactive and innovative;
 - *Pool of Talent*: Some employers use individual learning plans to scout for talent and in assessing employee progress and suitability for senior positions. This represents a continuous use of the individual development planning process;
 - *Enhanced Communication*: The individual development planning process is a useful mechanism to enhance communication between a manager and a subordinate.

Learner benefits include:

- *Job Satisfaction*: Individuals who engage in personal development are more likely to experience satisfaction with work. The perception of support and encouragement from management also enhances job satisfaction;
- *Identifying Learning Needs*: The individual development plan process enables the learner to focus on learning needs and to influence and shape the priority of these needs;
- *Employability*: Producing an individual development plan enables the learner to acquire knowledge and skill that will make him/her more employable in the event of job loss. Learners may have less fear of losing a job because of the potential job opportunities arising from this employability;
- *Investment in Training*: Individual learning plans are more likely to stimulate investment in training. The learner and/or the organisation may resource this;
- *Self-Awareness*: The individual development plan allows the learner to identify strengths and weaknesses and to develop self-awareness – a necessary precondition for personal change;
- *Enhanced Self-Efficacy*: Learners who participate in self-development are likely to gain increased self-confidence. This self-confidence relates to the learner's belief in his/her ability to perform to a high standard;
- *Net Worth*: Individual learning plans provide evidence of a learner's skills and knowledge and signal important and positive messages to the employer.

In summary, having an up-to-date personal learning plan demonstrates a professional approach to continuing professional development. According to Rughani *et al.* (2003), a personal learning plan is a mechanism by which educational needs are identified, prioritised, and commitments made to address them. Each plan is personal and helps to direct an individual's learning, specifically in relation to professional development. Knowledge gained through an undergraduate qualification has an average life of four years before it requires updating. Many professionals are, therefore, engaging with continuous professional and individual development as a commitment to lifelong learning.

4.6 Designing Individual Learning Plan Forms for the Current Project

One of the outcomes to be achieved from the current project is the design and implementation of one thousand individual learning plan forms. An outcome for the first year of the project specifies that individual learning plans should be designed and piloted on a sample population of work-based learners. The primary focus of these plans is on *learning* and development, rather than performance review and reward. One of the main purposes for developing these plans is to enable the learner to be proactive about their learning and to identify their learning needs. Additionally, the development of the plans should help the learner in a structured and supportive process to reflect upon their own learning, performance, and achievement and to plan their personal, educational, and career development. This section details the steps taken in the design and piloting of the individual learning plan forms during the first year of the project.


Step 1

Research Conducted on Existing Individual Learning Plans

Lengthy discussions took place regarding the terminology to be used in relation to the design of such plans, in particular, the use of *personal development* plans versus *individual learning* plans. This dilemma was resolved after a discussion with a training manager from one of the industry partners who suggested that he would have difficulties approaching his staff using the word *personal*. It was, therefore, agreed that the group would adhere to designing a form for individual learning plans. It also became clear from the research conducted that these terms are used interchangeably and there is no one definition of either a personal development plan or an individual learning plan. For the purpose of this project, however, it is important to restate that the emphasis is on learning and on the planning of individual learning, and the completed plans will be used in third-level institutes by staff dealing with career guidance and by staff dealing with the recognition of prior learning.

In assessing the existing plans the model deemed to most closely meet the needs of the group was the plan used by the University of Ulster (www.ulster.ac.uk). This model was considered attractive as it includes both a reflective process and an exercise on self-assessment of skills. A further advantage of this plan is that it can be completed online. It was agreed that a paper-based model of an individual learning plan form would be developed initially and at a later stage an online version would be used.

From the literature reviewed and the Internet searches conducted it was clear that many of the existing plans were developed for full-time third-level students. It was, therefore, decided that new empirical research needed to be conducted to develop a template suitable for work-based learners. This research concentrated on two main areas: research with training managers in various industries, and research with career guidance/advisory professionals in some of the third-level institutes partaking in the project. First, the research conducted with the training managers attempted to ascertain the tools they currently use to determine the upskilling needs of employees as part of their career progression, broadly in support of company objectives. Second, the objective of the research conducted with the career advisors was to review the tools they use when working with adult learners and with third-level learners who wish to progress or to change their careers.



The results of the research conducted with the training managers illustrated that, in general, they assess the training needs of employees as part of the organisation's overall objectives. The research also illustrated that the organisations were primarily focused on training rather than learning. From the research conducted with the training managers it was evident that some organisations operated a casual approach to assessing training needs, for example, conducting only one face-to-face meeting on an annual basis. Other organisations operated a more structured approach using variations of a performance management development system (PMDS), the results of which were used to determine the training plan for the entire organisation. This was often supplemented by employees doing online skills assessments and career planning exercises and, in some industries, this was linked with continuous professional development. The research revealed that individual learning plans were not used in any of these organisations. The training managers, however, willingly and enthusiastically agreed to pilot the plans in their respective organisations with the intention of using such plans over the duration of the project.

The research conducted with career advisors showed that they frequently direct learners to websites such as www.windmillsonline.co.uk and www.prospects.ac.uk. Both of these websites involve a reflective process on values, interests, motivations and skills emphasising self-assessment and reflection in a holistic context. Both of these website tools include skill definition and rating descriptors for learners to rate themselves, usually on a scale of 1-5. The career advisers emphasised the role of reflection in developing self-awareness as a first step in the career planning process. The career advisers also believed that it is often necessary to meet with individuals to discuss the learning from the self-assessment exercises and to give guidance on the possible career options arising from the exercises completed.

The outcomes of the primary research, together with the secondary desk-research, allowed for the creation of a new paper-based template focusing solely on learners in the workplace rather than on full-time third-level students. The next step summarises the issues considered in the development of the template.



Step 2

Designing an Individual Learning Plan Form

Designing a generic learning plan form for learners across a broad spectrum of industries was a difficult task. Consideration had to be given to the myriad of industries involved and the very broad range of educational qualifications. The instrument would need to capture as much information as possible regarding long-term and short-term goals and objectives, and also need to focus on individual development. Throughout the design stage it was important to bear in mind the realistic outcomes which were to be achieved on the completion of the template, and not give false expectations to the learner. If a learner, for example, identified that he or she would benefit from completing a course which is not yet in existence, it would be necessary to point out that this was outside the scope of this exercise.

It was agreed that individual learning plan forms would include sections which were relevant to all learners, for example, transferable skills and career progression planning. It was also decided that a number of discipline-specific skills would be included with a rating of 1-5 (description of ratings provided) to gain a more comprehensive viewpoint of individual learners. Additionally, the need for confidentiality and data protection needed to be observed. To protect the anonymity of the learner, it was agreed that each plan would be given a unique number and, when completed, the first page of the plan would be removed and stored in a locked cabinet.


Step 3

Pre-pilot survey of Individual Learning Plan Forms

Ten individual learning plan forms were distributed to each of the third-level institutes participating in the project. It was decided that these forms would be pre-piloted with learners in each of the industrial partners. In order to reach work-based learners from a wider variety of backgrounds (rather than receiving ten from the same organisation) it was also agreed that a pre-pilot survey would be conducted with a class of evening students in one of the institutes. The students chosen were studying for a Higher Certificate in Business Studies.

The pre-pilot study was a beneficial process in identifying areas within the template which need to be improved. All respondents were asked to critically evaluate the form and were advised that all comments, both positive and negative, regarding the structure and content would be welcome. On average, the learning plan took between twenty and thirty minutes to complete. The following observations represent the general feedback from the pre-pilot study:

- Respondents who partook in the pre-pilot survey as part of their evening class were briefed by a member of the work-based learning working group in relation to completing the instrument and specifying the main aims and objectives of individual learning plans. The working group member was also present to provide assistance (if required) while learners completed the form and in turn to gather feedback. These completed learning plans offered more insights and details of the learners than those which were completed by the industry sample. A number of sections were not completed (they remained blank) where respondents were not briefed.

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- No difficulties were reported by respondents in relation to completing the employment history and current employment section of the plan. Respondents, however, noted that completing the first three sections of the template were the most time consuming, but agreed that these details are necessary for formulating learning plans.
 - In relation to the section dealing with completed education and training courses, many respondents did not know what 'NFQ level' meant and as a result this section remained blank. From this feedback, the next version of the learning plan will explain academic terms such as 'NFQ level' and 'awarding body'.
 - The feedback in relation to the section of the plan which dealt with career and learning progression goals suggested that the amount of space allocated to this particular area was insufficient.
 - Positive feedback was received from the majority of respondents in relation to the section which dealt with transferable skills and competencies. Respondents suggested that this was a useful exercise as it stimulated reflection on skills that need to be improved. A further analysis of this section highlighted that, as no descriptor of skills or benchmarking rating was provided, the transferable skills and ratings provided by respondents are open to interpretation and are deemed less objective.
 - The discipline-specific skills section does not represent an exhaustive list and many respondents believed that their particular discipline was not portrayed effectively. Respondents, however, selected a discipline from the list which they believed was most suited to them. This difficulty will be overcome when the template is converted to a Web-based version, as there will be much more scope for inclusion of different sectors, as this would have been too cumbersome for a paper-based version. As with the transferable skills section, no descriptor of discipline-specific skills or benchmarking rating was provided, thereby, allowing for subjectivity. The majority of respondents rated 5 for their desired proficiency level of their discipline-specific skills. One possible interpretation for this rating is that most people like to portray themselves positively in questionnaires as they perceive that they are being evaluated in some way.
 - The final part of the template dealt with future directions, and responses to this section were simply 'yes' or 'no', or were left blank. A possible reason for the blanks could be because the format of the questions were of a closed nature, and it might have appeared that only a 'yes' or 'no' response was required. These questions also came at the end of a learning plan which required a large deal of self-examination in relation to one's career (not an easy process for many people), and respondents may have just wanted to complete the exercise quickly.

Step 4

Evaluation and Recommendations for Future Improvements

Having received the completed pre-pilot individual learning plans, an evaluation process took place. Overall, respondents suggested that the terminology used was clear and unambiguous. Respondents welcomed the concept of individual learning plans and believed that it was a very useful tool in assessing their current proficiency levels and desired proficiency levels. They further suggested that individual learning plans are also helpful for identifying gaps in their education and training. Building on the feedback, a number of recommendations for future improvements will be adopted. These include:

- A short introduction to individual learning plans will be included to clarify the purpose of the exercise. It is considered important to highlight that the plan is a development tool used to promote individual career and professional development and is not linked to performance appraisal or any form of assessment.
- When rating skills and competencies, a rating scale of 1-5 will be included, with a brief explanation of what is meant by each rating. Terms such as 'limited' or 'advanced' could also be explained to allow respondents to rate themselves more accurately.
- Questions relating to career goals and learning goals will be rephrased from a closed line of questioning and will include more open questions. Replies to open questions should ideally produce more qualitative responses rather than simply 'yes' or 'no' answers.
- A representative from each of the higher education institutes will visit the partner organisation to meet employees before they complete the learning plans. A brief introduction to the learning plans will be given, together with an explanation of the purpose of the process. The higher education representative will be available to answer any questions while employees are completing the plans. The confidentiality of the responses will be emphasised, the value of their cooperation in the research exercise will be acknowledged, and all feedback will be encouraged.

Step 5

Design of New Improved Paper-based Version of Individual Learning Plan Forms

Following the pre-pilot survey and having incorporated the feedback received, a revised paper-based form will be piloted with a sample of employees in all industrial partner organisations during the academic year 2008/09. An evaluation of the replies will subsequently be carried out before introducing the final paper-based version of the learning plans.

Step 6

Convert from Paper-based ILP Form to Web-based ILP Form

As noted earlier, the potential of a Web-based individual learning plan form has far greater capacity to record information and to reach a much wider target audience. Members of the Education in Employment working group have met with colleagues from the University of Limerick led SIF funded Individualised Digitised Educational Advisory System (IDEAS) project, and have arranged to cooperate in developments in this area.

In summary, it is envisaged that individual learning plans will enable learners to understand and reflect on their achievements and will facilitate them in identifying gaps in their skills, training, and learning. The completed ILP forms will be treated in the strictest confidence in each academic institution and will be analysed by a career advisor and by a recognition of prior learning expert.

5.0 An Overview of Higher Education and Industry Partnerships

Alliances between higher education institutes and business organisations have existed for decades, mostly in research and development. The types of partnerships established between industry and higher education institutions vary greatly, depending on the needs of the parties involved. Additionally, motivations to develop partnerships vary according to the needs of both parties involved. The collaboration process between industry and a third-level education institute often starts with some kind of solicitation from each part. The basic collaboration process between academia and industry usually begins with each party identifying what can possibly be acquired from the partnership and the potential needs of the other party. The goal of partnerships between a higher education institute and a business should not be a merging of mission, culture, and philosophy; rather it should be to establish an effective working relationship that benefits both parties. Partnerships are required to established infrastructures to enable and support learning. If learning is to occur in the workplace, then it is necessary to ensure that the conditions which prevail are suitable and that learning projects are undertaken in cooperation with the given needs of a workplace. Work-based learning requires formal arrangements, which are overseen by the establishment of partnerships. These partnerships are of benefit to both parties. For the employer, partnerships support the needs of the organisation while providing a flexible approach to the learning needs of employees and the organisation itself. For the education institution, partnerships create links with new areas of educational need and diversify the institution's sources of income (Boud *et al.*, 2003).

Lloyd (2008: 56) suggests that outside providers – whether in the private, public or voluntary sector – have historically been too timid to approach or engage with a third-level institution because of an 'untouchable' or 'ivory towers' perception that such institutions are purely academic centres of learning. Lloyd argues that third-level education institutes need to proactively open up new dialogues with outside providers and must break down any traditional perceived barriers of not being receptive to being approached or of not wanting to engage with outside partners.


Partnership is an important underlying concept for the development and provision of work-based learning courses at all levels. Work-based learning, unlike other forms of learning, tends to be directly related to the needs of employers and/or the employment needs of those in work. It is important, therefore, to recognise that growing, understanding, building and sustaining long-term relationships between higher education and the workplace has to underpin development in this arena. The partnerships, therefore, focus on the use of work-based courses as a process for recognising, creating, and applying knowledge through and for work rather than simply at work. This approach challenges the position of the third-level education provider as sole validator and evaluator of high-level knowledge (Garnett *et al.* 2003). A work-based learning course not only has to satisfy academic scrutiny by the third-level institute but it must also embrace fully the complexity of the specific context. The work-based learning course has to demonstrate 'fitness for purpose' at the level of the individual, the immediate community of practice, and in some instances the wider professional community. A Forfás report (2007b) recognises that closer interaction between public knowledge institutions and enterprise is increasingly important. The report suggests that by working closely with knowledge institutions companies gain access to new knowledge, specialist skills, and the latest technologies.

Stoney (2002: 58) asserts that “partnership and learning organisations have emerged as two of the most powerful metaphors of the last decade”. Stoney suggests that partnership and learning organisations symbolise the shift from conflictual to consensual workplace relationships, both groups underscore stakeholder cooperation as the core of enlightened management and commercial success within the modern economy. Work-based learning is a central element of the partnership approach. It is argued to be a particularly powerful means of developing employees. What is actually experienced at the workplace is seen to have a much greater impact and relevance. Learning is drawn out of experience rather than bolted on as an added extra (Keithley and Redman, 1997). Partnerships can take a number of forms and vary in intensity of collaboration and scale of intervention. They range, for example, from the provision of a short course to a consortium of courses to sponsoring and facilitating applied research to more ad hoc relationships involving secondments. Boot and Evans (1990) conceptualise this diverse array of co-operative relationships along a “collaborative continuum”. At one pole, an organisation simply purchases a product, such as an MBA from the third-level provider. At the other pole, Boot and Evans locate such ventures as the validation and accreditation of the organisation’s own management programme(s). This latter form of partnership is one that is predicted to grow considerably as general ‘open’ management development programmes fall into decline due to organisations demanding the customising of programmes to meet their specific needs (Keithley and Redman, 1997). Similarly, Patel (1996) believes that the traditional customer–supplier model in management development is being replaced by a ‘learning partnership’ involving a mixture of learning, consultancy, and research.

Researchers have highlighted many characteristics necessary for successful partnerships. Mohr and Spekman (1994) believe these characteristics include commitment, coordination, interdependence, and trust. Communication behaviour is another factor identified by Mohr and Spekman which contributes to the success of a partnership. Communication behaviour includes the quality of communication, information sharing, and participation. Communication quality includes the accuracy, timeliness, and credibility of the information shared, while information sharing refers to the extent to which critical information is exchanged. Participation has been described as the degree to which the partners jointly plan and set goals. Without effective communication, partnerships fail, as a result of doubt and mistrust which inevitably result in the absence of adequate communication. The final factor described by Mohr and Spekman is the type of conflict resolution technique used by the partners. They identify joint problem solving, persuasion, smoothing, domination, harsh words, and arbitration as possible techniques, but note that the most successful partnerships will rely primarily on constructive resolution techniques such as joint persuasion and problem solving.

Research by Boud and Solomon (2001) focuses more specifically on highlighting the education–industry link and they suggest six key characteristics for successful partnerships:

- The partnership between the organisation and the third-level institute must foster learning;
- Learners are employed or in a contractual relationship with the external organisation;
- The programme followed derives from the needs of the workplace and the learner: work is the curriculum (i.e. the vehicle through which the curriculum is critically explored);
- Learners engage in a process of recognition of current competencies prior to negotiation of the programme of study;
- A significant element of the programme is through learning projects undertaken in the workplace;

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- The third-level institute assesses the learning outcomes against a trans-disciplinary framework of standards and levels.

More recent research by Shiel *et al.* (2007) suggest that for the partnership to be successful certain conditions need to be in place in both higher education institutes and partner organisations. They believe that in making a judgement on the feasibility of embarking upon the development of a work-based learning partnership it is important to consider whether the partnership organisations:

- are receptive, responsive and sufficiently visionary;
- are supported by senior management;
- have sufficient funding and resources;
- understand the underlying pedagogical ethos of work-based learning;
- have procedures in place to approve/accredit and quality assure flexible learning programmes;
- have key practitioners with a sufficiently broad repertoire of expert knowledge and skills of work-based learning that incorporate a 'toolbox' of work-based learning and teaching competencies;
- have a detailed understanding of relevant institutional policy, politics and procedures, curriculum development, consultancy and project management skills.

In addition to the above factors, financial considerations must also be recognised. Evidence suggests that work-based learning can be more resource intensive than other models of learning. A study undertaken in Britain by JM Consulting (2003) aimed to cost different types of pedagogy, including e-learning, distance learning, foundation degrees, workplace learning, and accreditation of prior learning. These various modes of learning were identified as being more resource intensive than conventional approaches. Similarly, Rose *et al.* (2001) observed that establishing and operating a work-based learning partnership is not a low-cost exercise. They suggest that additional infrastructure needs to be provided, for example, videoconferencing equipment, laboratory equipment. etc. General administration costs, such as time working on projects and time provided by workplace mentors also need to be considered.


A further consideration for developing an education–industry partnership is the role that trade unions play in both organisations. Stoney (2002) suggests that the emphasis needs to be on co-operative partnership in contrast to the adversarial approach sometimes used between unions and management. Stoney acknowledges that partnership cannot remove the tensions and contradictions inherent within the employment relationship, but, “the unitarist overtones used by both parties indicate a willingness to resolve issues before they escalate into conflict or protracted disputes that may undermine company performance” (2002: 60). Similarly, Forrester (2001) recognises the important role of trade unions in workplace learning. He suggests that they play a pivotal role in encouraging members to talk openly about their learning needs, especially where they might be reluctant to admit perceived weaknesses (for example in basic literacy or numeracy) to line managers. Forrester further believes that union representatives have a key role to play in helping members to overcome resistance to learning which may have built up due to age, low self-esteem, an unhappy time at school, cynicism etc. Consequently, by actively encouraging applications from less qualified employees and those for whom English is a second language, Forrester believes that trade unions are helping to extend training and workplace development to employees who have previously been overlooked or underrepresented in terms of personal development.

The literature on industry–education partnerships has highlighted many commonalities, such as improving the quality of the workplace and providing employees with unique learning experiences and a new understanding of the educational system. From the extant literature, the objectives of industry–education partnerships can be summarised as:

1. To facilitate learning for students, employees, and educators;
2. To improve the education setting through upgrading facilities or equipment;
3. To foster student success by learning new skills and knowledge;
4. To integrate learners into the labour market by involving them in cooperative education experiences;
5. To connect education institutions with local businesses so that each partner becomes more familiar with the role of the other partner within community;
6. To assist with curriculum development, new learning opportunities, and skill development;
7. To meet the labour market needs of business and industry.

For students, therefore, partnerships provide opportunities for career exploration. For educators, partnerships can bring new resources to enrich the curriculum and to ensure their teaching is relevant to the skill sets required of the private sector industry. It is clear that there are many advantages to partnerships between academics and industry. On one hand, academic institutions are interested in practical learning opportunities and the real-world experience gained through these partnerships. On the other hand, organisations value lower research and development costs and the cutting-edge knowledge and technology transfer opportunities that directly affect their competitiveness in the market. Partnerships between academic institutions and industry, however, have some drawbacks. First, each party has a different working culture and values. Third-level institutions may sometimes consider a partnership to be successful only when there is a new research finding, when the discovery is published, or when an innovation is patented. Likewise, some organisations might consider a relationship to be fruitful when an innovation or discovery can be commercialised. As long as the value gained from the partnership is seen as beneficial to both partners, the basis of the partnership is established. This foundation must be supported by continuous learning and by restructuring processes to overcome the divergent or conflicting approaches between the partners (Roth and Magee, 2002). Project management capabilities are, therefore, required to address differences in priorities, cultures, and individual strengths. Emulti *et al.* (2005) optimistically concluded that the different points of view are the surplus of such cooperation, and when this is accepted and valued the gain from partnerships will follow.

Research by Foskett (2003) concludes that it is important for both partners to have complementary aims, compatible missions, good personal relationships, clear responsibilities, trust in each other, and that they are prepared to sign up to a common agreement on respective roles and commitments. Foskett, however, cautions that the reality of bringing these varied factors into alignment, however, is not always as easy as the rhetoric of employer engagement and work-based learning might imply. Similarly, research by Rowley (2005) suggests that “working in partnership is not easy”. Rowley believes that successful partnership working requires: clear objectives and strong commitment, clear statements of the respective partners’ responsibilities, schedules and staff resources that allow for individuals from different organisations to learn how to work effectively together, effective communication, and persistence in managing the partnerships.



Keithley and Redman's (1997) experience of setting up an education–industry partnership leads them to conclude that it can be a highly rewarding joint venture, with both sides developing new organisational competences. Their experience leads them to summarise that “despite the claims of much of the literature, such benefits are not gained easily but are painstakingly acquired” (1997: 164). They believe that the acid test for successful education–industry partnerships is if they can prosper over the long term and accommodate new contexts in a turbulent and highly competitive business environment.

5.1 Implementing Academic Industry Partnerships in the Current Project

One of the outcomes of the Education in Employment project proposal was to establish a workplace–education partnership in each of the collaborating institutions. The following table lists the partnerships which are currently in existence:

Higher Education Institute	Industry Partner
Athlone Institute of Technology	Bord na Móna
Cork Institute of Technology	Thomas Crosbie Holdings Ltd (TCH)
Dundalk Institute of Technology	Health Service Executive (HSE) Northeast – Education and Training Division
Institute of Technology Sligo	Masonite Ireland Ltd
Letterkenny Institute of Technology	Pramerica Systems Ireland Ltd
University College Cork	Musgrave Retail Partners Ireland Ltd

Some of the participating third-level institutes had previously established workplace partnerships but, generally, these partnerships were perceived as *informal*. Working group members were requested to either (i) establish a new partnership, or (ii) build on the goodwill with an existing partner, and in turn establish the partnership on a more formal level. The following provides a brief summary of the partnerships listed in Table 1 above.

5.1.1 Athlone Institute of Technology and Bord na Móna

Bord na Móna, established to develop Ireland's peat resources in the immediate post war years, is now active across a range of peat-based and other industries. Through the acquisition of complementary skills and experience across sixty years, it now has established skills in resource management and development, manufacturing, distribution, science, engineering, and human resource development. It owns 80,000 hectares of peat land, employs approximately 1,800 people, and operates out of thirty localities mainly in Ireland, but also in Britain and the United States. It has a turnover of nearly €296 million.

Bord na Móna supplies peat as a fuel for the generation of electricity; a range of peat-based fuels, coal and oil for residential and industrial heating; horticultural products for commercial horticulturists and home gardeners; and pollution abatement products, environmental consultancy and commercial laboratory services to industry and public authorities. It is a leading international supplier of products and services based on peat.


A partnership between Athlone Institute of Technology and Bord na Móna had already been in existence. Bord na Móna approached Athlone Institute of Technology Business School to provide a programme to upskill up to thirty of their Regional Operations Leaders (formerly foremen) to Higher Certificate level using a part-time delivery mechanism. The education and experience of these potential students were assessed and a customised programme was proposed that took account of prior learning, following previous training programmes undertaken by the group.

Thirteen modules were identified for inclusion on the course. Eight modules are to be delivered over a two-year timescale. These modules are to be delivered in classroom mode and amount to 80 credits of the required 120 credits. The remaining five modules are assessed using recognition of prior learning, over the first year, and credit is given where learners demonstrate achievement of the learning outcomes through prior knowledge or work-based learning. Learners must present a portfolio of learning for each of these five modules that will include evidence of their learning to the required standard.

5.1.2 Cork Institute of Technology and Thomas Crosbie Holdings (TCH) Ltd

Thomas Crosbie Holdings Ltd (TCH) comprises eighteen newspapers: *Irish Examiner*, *Sunday Business Post*, *Evening Echo*, *Waterford News & Star*, *The Kingdom*, *Western People*, *Roscommon Herald*, *Sligo Weekender*, *Newry Democrat*, *Down Democrat*, *The Nationalist*, *Leinster Times*, *Kildare Nationalist*, *Laois Nationalist*, *New Ross Echo*, *Gorey Echo*, *Wexford Echo* and *Irish Post*. Thomas Crosbie Media (TCM), the electronic media division of TCH, comprises *RecruitIreland.com*, *BreakingNews.ie*, and *Motornet.ie*. In addition, TCM manages all TCH group newspaper websites. TCH also has shareholding in the following radio stations: WLR FM, BEAT 102-103, Red FM, 4FM, and Mid West Radio.

Cork Institute of Technology has been a close partner to TCH for many years, originally through its School of Printing and its training of printing apprentices. This programme was discontinued, but a new course in Print



Media Communications evolved into the current Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in Visual Communications, and many graduates of these programmes have found employment with TCH over the last 20 years.

In September 2004, TCH Ltd was recognised by HETAC as an accredited provider of academic programmes, the first of which was accredited shortly afterwards. CIT worked in partnership with TCH during the preparation of TCH's submission document for the HETAC-accredited Higher Diploma in Journalism Practice, a Level 8 award.

In autumn 2006, CIT was one of two providers who assisted TCH Ltd with its submission for a Level 7 Bachelor of Arts in Sales; the other provider was the Sales Institute of Ireland. This submission was successful and the programme commenced in October 2006, with the Sales Institute providing 30 of the 60 total credits from a blended learning delivery model, and CIT delivering the other 30 credits through three modules delivered in the more traditional manner in CIT. The first graduates were conferred in autumn 2007.

5.1.3 Dundalk Institute of Technology and the Health Services Executive (HSE) Northeast: Education and Training Division

The HSE is responsible for providing health and personal social services for residents in Ireland. These services include, for example, providing public health nurses, treating older people in the community, caring for children with challenging behaviour, educating people on how to live healthier lives, planning for major emergencies, and controlling the spread of infectious diseases.

The establishment of the HSE in 2005 represented the beginning of the largest programme of change ever undertaken in the Irish public service. The HSE is now the single body responsible for enabling everybody to access cost effective and consistently high quality health and personal social services. The HSE is the largest employer in the State, and also has the largest public sector organisation budget of almost €15 billion.

Dundalk Institute of Technology and the HSE Northeast have worked closely for a number of years to develop nursing, health studies, and management education programmes for regional HSE staff. It seemed a natural option to consider work-based learning as part of the cooperative partnership already in place. At present the partnership is embryonic and informal.

5.1.4 Institute of Technology Sligo and Masonite Ireland Ltd

Masonite Ireland Ltd is based in Carrick-on-Shannon, Co. Leitrim, and is the Irish division of the US multinational Masonite company, specialising in the manufacture of wood-based building products – primarily doors, door facings and wood panelling. The Irish operation supplies products to Masonite distribution outlets across Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa. With 13,000 employees worldwide, some 350-400 of these are attached to the Co. Leitrim plant. Winners of the Fás-promoted Excellence Through People gold award, the

project of collaboration with IT Sligo was also shortlisted for the 2006 Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development awards.

In 2002, following discussions between staff at the Institute of Technology Sligo and Masonite Ireland Ltd, it was agreed to concentrate on training in engineering for the company's manufacturing facility. The company had initiated the discussion, displaying a firm understanding and commitment to a staff development programme. The company had identified a particular cohort of employees with specific training needs, but the concept of accredited learning, with consequent progression opportunities, had not been high on its agenda. In follow-up discussions it was agreed to offer a National Certificate in Engineering in Combined Studies using the ACCS (Accumulation of Credits and Certification of Subjects) mechanism. The delivery would take place primarily on the company premises, the company having agreed to the establishment of a learning centre that was equipped to Institute specifications. The company agreed to organise shift work, to facilitate access by all participants to all scheduled classes. Transport to the Institute for essential practical work, as well as examinations, would be provided by the company. The examinations were initially held in the Institute and later in the company learning centre. The programme would be delivered over two and a half years, to help the student to achieve a full 120-credits. Senior managers from the company were invited to deliver guest lectures. Work-based projects are an integral part of programme. Shortly before completion of the Certificate programme, negotiations were finalised on a progression programme – a Level 7 BEng in Mechatronics.


In February 2005, a new Level 7 add-on degree targeted at front-line management was introduced. In January 2007, talks commenced on the design and delivery of a course in Occupational Safety and Health to be delivered online to Masonite staff across Europe and the Middle East, involving collaboration between the company, the School of Engineering, and the School of Science. This course leads to a ten-credit Special Purpose Award.

5.1.5 Letterkenny Institute of Technology and Pramerica Systems Ireland Ltd

Pramerica Systems Ireland Limited is a technology development subsidiary of Prudential Financial, Inc (USA). Pramerica commenced operation in Letterkenny, Co. Donegal, in July 2000 where it supports a wide range of technology, including mainframe, client server, internet, and integration between legacy systems and systems involving more modern technology. Pramerica currently employs 670 people making it the largest employer in Donegal and the largest software development company outside Dublin.

In late 2003 Pramerica approached Letterkenny Institute of Technology because it was encountering difficulty recruiting Cobol Programmers. At that time no third-level institution in Ireland or in Britain was offering Cobol Programming. Letterkenny Institute of Technology responded by training a number of its lecturers in mainframe computing and associated technologies and leased a mainframe environment from IBM at its Atlanta US facility.

Simultaneously, Letterkenny Institute of Technology in partnership with Pramerica and Allstate Insurances in Northern Ireland developed a Higher Diploma in Financial Services Technologies, specifically to equip graduates with the technology and commercial and managerial skills required of next-generation team leaders. Currently,



in addition to this full-time Level 8 Programme, Letterkenny Institute of Technology is offering a variation of the Higher Certificate in Computing in Information Technology Support programme for Pramerica Call Centre operators to allow them to progress to the software development environment. Letterkenny Institute of Technology is also delivering specific training programmes in aspects of mainframe technologies for Pramerica. 80% of Letterkenny Institute of Technology graduates of the Higher Diploma in Financial Services Technologies programme have gained immediate employment with Pramerica.

5.1.6 University College Cork and Musgrave Retail Partners Ireland Ltd

Musgrave Retail Partners Ireland Ltd work with entrepreneurial food retailers to provide the consumer with a food offer that is different and better. Their approach is to equip independent retailers that are associated with their brands with sales, marketing, information technology, finance, and logistical expertise accompanied by an advanced retail model. Musgrave Retail Partners and their staff work hard to ensure that their stores will thrive through excellence – including well-trained staff; strong lines in fresh, local produce; superb in-store experience; and high standards of hygiene.

The current partnership between UCC and Musgrave Retail Partners Ireland is symbiotic in nature and involves informal interactions but presents great potential for future development. To date, many employees of Musgrave Retail Partners Ireland have graduated with NUI qualifications from programmes delivered by UCC. They have studied on programmes such as Supply Chain Management and Food Retailing, which were designed to aid the upskilling and continuous professional development of employees. The interaction with Musgrave extends beyond this, as they have contributed and provided expertise, guidance and support for the development of a number of programmes. The Food Retailing programmes were first launched in 2000-01 as a result of industry demand. Modules such as buying and trading were added to the programmes to facilitate the specific needs of the Musgrave partner. The programme development committee for the new undergraduate programme, BSc (Hons) Food Marketing & Entrepreneurship, worked closely with the Training & Development Manager in Musgrave Retail Partners Ireland on programme design and content. Furthermore, Musgraves have also provided many UCC students with industry experience. This type of relationship is seen as critically important to UCC when developing innovative programmes. When choosing a partner to be involved in UCC's Education in Employment project, it was judged fitting to contact Musgraves because of their previous involvement and experience. Both parties believe that through close collaboration many opportunities can be explored. UCC and Musgraves are both very open to exploring new opportunities that can be identified by working together on the Education in Employment project.

5.2 Evaluating Existing Partnerships

It can be seen from the summary descriptions of the education–industry partnerships that a variety of levels of involvement exist. A questionnaire (Appendix B) was designed to evaluate the partnerships in the current project. A representative from each of the participating third-level institutes met with a senior manager from their respective industry partner in order to complete the questionnaire. A brief summary of the findings from this research is presented below.

Background to Partnerships

Eight questions focused on obtaining background information on the partnerships. In all of the partnerships, it was perceived that the higher education institute takes the lead role, but there is a shared management of the partnerships. All partnerships have existed for at least two years, the longest fifteen years, and all of indefinite future duration.


Continuing Professional Development

When designing the questionnaire, it was deemed important to investigate the activities associated with continuing professional development within each of the partner industries. Nine questions, thus, focused on issues associated with staff training in these industries. In particular, there was an emphasis on gathering data in relation to: the training relationship between the industry partner and the higher education institute; the development of training programmes; the extent to which employers support staff in continuing professional development activities; and, individual learning plans, and if these plans formed part of professional development.

Staff training needs were identified by the Training Managers or Human Resource Managers in the organisations involved. Three organisations had annual or biannual Personal Development Planning meetings with staff to identify their needs. The training needs identified were then discussed with the respective organisation's in-house experts and with external training providers to implement the most appropriate type of training. All industry partners had approached the higher education institutes to source training expertise and to have programmes tailored to suit their specific requirements. Programmes had been put in place where employees attended the higher education institute during work hours. One higher education institute had delivered programmes within the workplace. Overall, staff were supported by their employers while undertaking courses at the higher education institute. This support included the funding of fees and books, travel and accommodation, and study and exam leave. Individual learning plans were in use in four of the organisations and steps had been taken to introduce them in other organisations.

Work-based Learning Support Activities

Six questions focused on a variety of learning activities in organisations which support staff engaging in continuing professional development. These supports ranged from using technology to enabling distance and Web-based learning, the recognition of prior learning, and the assessment of workplace learning. Additionally,



workshops, projects, task-based activities, supervised activities, on-the-job learning, secondment, and mentoring were in place to support staff in their professional development. Distance and Web-based learning was utilised in five of the higher education institutes; one institute has plans to implement distance learning; and one institute does not use this form of learning. All of the industries use a combination of individual and group learning activities, with all activities supported by a workplace mentor. Professional development is also supported by the enrolment of staff on accredited courses. The recognition of prior learning is acceptable as a route into higher education courses by all institutions. Five of the seven higher education institutes have worked with the industry partner on the recognition/delivery/assessment of workplace learning.

Higher Education Institute–Industry Partner Interactions

Six questions focused on the level of interaction between the industry partners and the higher education institutes. These questions related to interactions such as the industry partner's involvement in: hiring graduates, participating in career days and open days, providing work placements, acting as course advisors, providing course review panel members and external examiners, or providing a guest lecturer for the course. Six of the industry partners hire graduates and provide work placement for students from the higher education institutes. This was not the case for one of the industry partners because its level of entry to the organisation was at apprentice level. Staff from each of the industry partners have acted as a course advisors or review panel members. Staff from two of the industry partners currently act as external examiners for the higher education institute. Six of the industry partners have presented guest lectures and seminars, and one organisation is preparing to becoming involved in contributing to the programme in this manner.

Research and Postgraduate Interaction

Five questions focused on the relationship between the industry partner and the higher education institute regarding research and interaction at a postgraduate level. These particular questions were not relevant to one of the industrial partners as the entry level to the organisation is at apprenticeship stage. Two of the industry partners have sponsored research projects in their partnering third-level institutes. To date, industry partners have not engaged in research partnerships with any of the higher education institutes. All of the six industry partners who have the capacity to hire postgraduates have done so from their local third-level institute. Staff from three of the organisations have attended research seminars in those third-level institutes. Additionally, staff from four of the organisations attend research-project demonstrations and open days, and staff from another one of the organisations expressed that they would become more involved in such activities during the following academic year.

Values/Benefits of Partnerships

Five questions focused on the perceived values/benefits of the partnerships. The industry specialists believed that the values/benefits for the learner include: accreditation and qualification, upskilling and wider development, the recognition of workplace learning, and participation in tailored programmes to enable career progression locally.

The perceived benefits for the employer included: the opportunity to hire qualified, upskilled staff who have benefited from participation in a programme tailored to suit the needs of the organisation. This enables succession planning, a greater business understanding across units, ability to grow the business, and increased productivity and flexibility. A further benefit reported was accessibility to third-level courses, which are provided locally, which in turn encourages retention of employees.

The participating industry specialists believed that, for the higher education institute, the benefits include their employees bringing rich experience and industry knowledge to classroom discussions that in turn influence the relevance of courses. Additionally, the delivery of relevant courses to local industry partners enables regional development. Interestingly, four of the higher education institutes have other partnerships, two of which are more mature partnerships, including one partnership that has progressed to enable the delivery of a Masters programme.

Future Directions of the Partnerships


As stated earlier, the existing partnerships tend to be at the informal level. Two of the questions focused on whether there were plans for growing and formalising the partnerships. All respondents envisage formalising and developing the already established partnerships. Respondents indicated that they would be interested in introducing more diverse programmes, to Levels 7, 8, and 9. They also expressed an interest in using individual learning plans, providing guest lectures, and developing closer relationships overall.

The third question in this section related to the plotting of the partnership on the Partnership Continuum, devised for this project (Appendix C). The Partnership Continuum is a model for plotting five different levels of engagement between a higher education institute and its industry partner. The five levels of the Partnership Continuum are: Awareness, Involvement, Active Engagement, Long-term Partnership, and Strategic Partnership. Ideally, it is envisaged that the partnerships between the higher education institutes and their industrial partners would progress and evolve through the various levels over time to reach a strategic partnership. There were various responses to this question for example, one of the respondents indicated that they are at the Involvement level, one positioned themselves as moving between Involvement and the Active Engagement level, three respondents indicated that they are at an Active Engagement Level, one at Long-term Partnership level, and one at Strategic Partnership level.

Individual Learning Plans

Eight questions focused on the implementation and use of individual learning plans in the industry-partner organisations. Four organisations currently use individual learning plans. Two of these organisations use learning plans for all employees, one organisation uses them for employees who want to engage in further learning, and the fourth organisation did not provide any data in relation to their use.

In two of the organisations, the learning plans are aligned with an individual's specific skills and career plans, together with their industry's strategic planning goals. The use of individual career plans in one of the organisations is specifically driven by its strategic plan with the individual's career plan taking a secondary



position. In three of the organisations, the responsibility of the career plans rested with the line managers and the individual employees. In two of these organisations, however, the performance and development division or senior learning and development specialist are also involved. Currently, online templates are used in two organisations and a combination of online and paper format is used in one organisation. Two organisations provide additional support through mentoring, additional documentation, online guides, and online biographies. No e-portfolios are in place in any of the organisations. The remaining organisations expressed an interest in investigating and implementing individual learning plans, with one respondent adding the comment: "Subject to clarifying implications for staff".

Current Education and Training Provision

Five organisations responded to questions seeking to establish who provides training for their organisations. All five organisations use an amalgam of their local third-level institute, corporate training provided through headquarters, private local providers, and in-house training. In addition to the above, two organisations used online training modules.

Criteria for Choosing Course and Provider

After establishing the education and training providers, respondents were asked to rank their criteria for choosing particular courses and course providers. Respondents were given a ranking of 1-5, with 1 being rated as most important. The results received from five organisations are as follows:

Criteria for Choosing Course & Provider	Level of Importance
Cost; Customised Provision	1
Direct Relevance Duration & Time Commitment	2
Convenience & Location	3
Staff Motivation; Credit Earning against National Framework of Qualifications	4
Delivery Method format (including online)	5

Current Most Urgent Education/Training Need in the Workplace

Only four organisations completed the questions in relation to their perceptions of the current most urgent education or training need in their workplace. Respondents suggested that a gap exists in the provision of job-related technology courses and also in the provision of specific job-related modules. The next perceived need was management training, followed by generic skills such as communication, presentations, conflict resolution, quality, and safety. One organisation suggested that corporate compliance training was required.

In summary, from the initial evaluation of the partnerships currently in existence, it is clear that there are many perceived benefits for developing educational relevance in the workplace and in third-level education institutes, and as well as benefiting the student's career prospects. The interaction between the working group members and the industry representatives to date has been very positive. All of the industry partners have indicated that they are willing to build on the partnership foundations which are currently in existence and are interested in continuing to be actively involved in such partnerships.



6.0 The Challenges of Work-based Learning

There are many challenges that higher education institutes are confronting in the design and delivery of work-based learning programmes, not least the widespread confusion on what constitutes work-based learning, which is also referred to by a variety of terms, such as: workplace learning, work-related learning, and vocational learning. Such confusion, arguably, leads to an undervaluing of the potential benefits of work-based learning as a mode of learning at a higher level. A focus on terminology and definitions could, however, get in the way of exploring and dealing with what really matters, notably influencing the policy environment, dealing with issues and challenges from a structural perspective, and sharing, promoting and encouraging effective pedagogical practice. Nixon *et al.* (2006) suggest that an inclusive approach that accepts the variety of interpretations is a prerequisite in order to avoid over-compartmentalising its provision and the risk of “straight-jacketing” institutions by trying to shape an absolute definition. Nixon *et al.* believe that it is critically important to establish a shared understanding of the particular area of focus from both an academic and employer perspective, irrespective of the terms used.

Academic standards continue to be a key challenge for academics involved in work-based learning. While concerns regarding academic standards are not confined to work-based learning practitioners, they are fuelled by a fear that work-based learning is contributing to a more general lowering of standards by making such qualifications available to all employees. Academics working in work-based learning programmes are confronting the challenge of articulating not only conventional academic standards but also how the learning outcomes in work-based learning programmes are equivalent to those standards. The movement to cross-disciplinary and transdisciplinary knowledge, the participation in partnerships with organisations, and the reframing of entry requirements that allow non-graduates to access some postgraduate awards mean that the traditional predictability of knowledge learnt and the actual academic standard of that knowledge are no longer certain or easily measurable. This is particularly the case for work-based learning awards. The challenge for academics is to work within an educational framework that recognises and accredits learning that occurs outside the higher education institute. The framework needs to acknowledge that the work-based learning arrangement accommodates notions of academic learning and at the same time legitimises ‘working knowledge’. The challenge is not to apply the same criteria as one might for conventional awards.

Symes (2003) observes that another challenge is caused by ‘the flirtation’ with non-academic organisations that work-based learning necessarily entails, and this is seen by many academics as a threat to higher education institutes, which might risk undoing its standards and academic standing. Symes believes that, in this respect, work-based learning has to prove itself far more than the more orthodox forms of third-level learning and to demonstrate that what is happening under its banner is worthy of being within the preserve of the third-level institute. Hence, according to Symes, work-based learning seems to have been subject to more interrogation and surveillance than is usual in the case with standard third-level courses. Symes also observes that a further challenge in the provision of work-based learning courses is the degree of control which surrounds it. This is evident by the “web of documentation” that surrounds it: portfolios, learning agreements, contracts, memoranda of understanding, assessment inventories, reports, and so on. Symes suggests that in some

respects, such documentation makes the learning processes involved more transparent, but more susceptible to challenge and renegotiation, much more so than in the case of traditional academic courses.

Boud and Solomon (2003) believe that an immediate challenge for all institutions adopting work-based learning is to select staff who can cope with working with students operating outside their “disciplinary comfort zone”. Work-based learning courses require teaching staff to change their role from being experts on the content of what is being learned to becoming animators and assessors of learning. This might often be in areas of learning and knowledge in which students and their workplace colleagues may be more expert. They may also have to engage in knowledge generated through work that does spring from structures they are most familiar with.

A further challenge identified by Boud and Solomon (2003) is in relation to research. They observe that at present there is a large gap between work-based learning and collaborative research. They suggest the reason for this is a structural one. This division also often exists at third-level institute level and faculty levels. Work-based learning is, for the most part, located within the area of teaching and learning, while research is located in the area of research and consultancy. Boud and Solomon believe that the prospects for associating research with work-based learning partnerships are more problematic than they might first appear. They suggest that the great potential for research is unlikely to be realised if work-based learning is seen only within a framework of course delivery and as an adjunct to more conventional work in third-level education institutions. Work-based learning programmes, however, are far more worthy than just as sites of interest in terms of their potential for establishing collaborative research partnerships with organisations. These organisations also provide a location conducive for researching new kinds of teaching and learning practices associated with the concept of ‘work as the curriculum’ (Boud and Solomon, 2003: 222).

Another important consideration in the fostering of work-based research through to work-based learning should be an examination of what calibre of person represents the third-level institute when interacting with organisations. There is a risk when structuring work-based learning that the most skilled research academics might have the least likelihood of interacting with partners. All too frequently, staff negotiating partnerships, coordinating courses, and undertaking assessments of work-based learning are neither research trained nor active researchers.

6.1 Recommendations for Implementing Work-based Learning

For many practitioners, work-based learning is already a vital and legitimate mode of learning which offers significant value for the strategic teaching and learning agendas of higher education institutions. Work-based learning also acts as a driver for greater innovation in the broader third-level education system. Extending this legitimacy, however, will necessitate developing strategies which cross the cultural bridge between learning and work, address the issues and challenges throughout the system, and demonstrate how the practices of work-based learning have wider applicability in the higher education sector. Based on a review of the relevant extant literature and drawing on the experiences of working group members, a number of recommendations for implementing work-based learning programmes can be suggested. These recommendations for higher education institutes and industry should enable significant progress on work-based learning agendas in the next number of years.



For Higher Education Institutes

- Acknowledge and provide a variety of approaches for those in employment to avail of work-based learning offered by higher education institutes;
- Provide support for the development of academic staff who are operating at the interface between higher education and the world of work, through internal programmes of staff development;
- Assist academic staff in their transition from being a lecturer of a specific body of knowledge to being a facilitator of learning;
- Ensure that the recognition of prior learning is an integral component of all work-based learning programmes;
- Design user-friendly approaches for the recognition of prior learning and continuous professional development;
- Promote teaching and learning reforms, including enhanced teaching methods and e-learning;
- Identify ways of improving support for the provision of cost-effective work-based learning solutions;
- Establish strong industry partnerships as a means to ensure participation and progression into higher education;
- Involve the employer in the design of the programme, particularly in relation to work-based projects and assignments to support the assessment of learning;
- Develop customised programmes to meet the needs of the individual and the organisation;
- Address the diverse range of knowledge and skills possessed by learners at the commencement of work-based learning programmes;
- Ensure work-based projects and assignments fulfil the essential measurement criteria of validity, reliability, and authenticity;
- Provide learners with frequent feedback on their progress and achievements;
- Encourage critical reflection throughout the programme;
- Provide accreditation for work-based learning programmes through the National Framework of Qualifications.

For Employers

- Identify ways in which to provide financial and other support for those wishing to avail of work-based learning courses;
- Direct more energy and effort towards motivating employees to see value and to engage in higher-levels skill development;
- Allocate a workplace mentor to help the student identify their individual learning needs, apply knowledge to practice, and act as a resource for the student's development;
- Encourage employees to have a greater sense of responsibility for individual and continuing professional development;
- Develop a clear sense of purpose for work-based projects and assignments and the personal rewards that can come from them;
- Promote more online learning to overcome the barrier of lost production time, with employees having to spend less time away from the workplace, a benefit for SMEs in particular;
- Accommodate and exploit informal peer networks of support in the workplace;

- Provide an informal culture of support and official recognition of achievement;
- Promote the use of individual learning plans for all employees;
- Place greater weight on encouraging high level engagement for work-based learning within organisations, reaching above human resource management professionals to chief executives and managing directors;
- Recognise and encourage the role of trade unions in work-based learning processes (if operating in a unionised environment);
- Consolidate the workplace as a place of knowledge production.


It is clear there are many considerations for the implementation of work-based learning for both third-level institutions and employers. Work-based learning, however, also presents considerable implications and challenges for learners. As identified by Boud and Solomon (2003), work-based learning is a very attractive option. Its relevance is clear and it provides an opportunity to gain qualifications through drawing on recent or current everyday work practices. It enables one to be responsible for, manage, and timetable one's own learning and it is likely to require minimal third-level attendance. Such freedom, however, often presents its own problems. While some learners easily manage the work-based learning experience, many find the increased responsibility a struggle. In work-based learning programmes, learners have to deal with the complexities of being both a worker and learner, and having increased responsibility in the learning process. While flexibility in both process and content is an important part of the appeal for both the organisation and the learner/employee, flexibility has to be provided and timetabled. Learners, their organisations, and academics demand this. It is important that boundaries are constructed within an educational framework that maintain academic standards while at the same time provide guidelines and practices that make explicit the educational parameters within which work-based learning partnership awards are to be negotiated, organised, and assessed.

6.2 Conclusions

As the work-based learning strand of the Education in Employment project has a three-year schedule, definitive conclusions are not available after just one year of activity. Some interim suggestions for the future of work-based learning, however, can be highlighted, and these suggestions can be built on over the remaining two-year project duration. From the experiences and activities of working group members, and in agreement with Boud and Solomon (2003), work-based learning is still in its infancy and there are many different directions in which it might develop.

Based on the original Strategic Innovation Fund project proposal, the work-based learning strand of the Education in Employment project set out to achieve three outcomes during its first year:

- Identify courses which are delivering elements of work-based learning programmes in each of the third-level institutes participating in the project;
- Develop and pilot an ILP form with employees in industrial partner organisations;
- Establish a third-level education partnership with industry.



As outlined in this report, these three outcomes have been achieved, but further work is required to build on what has been established, and this work will continue over the next two years. It is envisaged that in relation to the maintenance of the education and industry partnerships, and the utilisation of individual learning plans, that the timeframe will extend far longer than the duration of this project. A brief number of concluding remarks may be drawn in relation to the three outcomes.

First, in relation to the audit conducted of courses which provide work-based learning, it is clear that none of the participating third-level institutes offers a full programme leading to a qualification in work-based learning. For work-based learning programmes to be truly work-based and learner-centred, they typically commence with a structured review and evaluation of current learning. This, in turn, challenges the education institution to move beyond the traditional concept of the recognition of prior learning, to formally recognise learner-defined learning for possible inclusion in a future work-based learning programme. Currently, most of the third-level institutes incorporate elements of work-based learning at varying levels, through programmes offered on a part-time basis. In general, accessing information on these programmes from academic staff was a difficult and time-consuming exercise. Departmental heads and course coordinators were often unsure of what constitutes work-based learning for the purpose of the audit. If, for example, a programme contains one work-based assignment, and if this is the only element of work-based learning evident in that programme, it was unclear if that programme should be considered to be offering work-based learning. There was also widespread variation and a lack of clear policies within the third-level institutes on the issue of giving credits for recognition of prior learning. The working group members, however, have plans in place to raise awareness and offer staff training sessions in each of the institutes regarding the recognition of prior learning and work-based learning practices.

Second, in relation to the development of individual learning plans, working group members have been evaluating and incorporating the feedback received. As outlined earlier, very positive responses regarding the potential use of these learning plans have been received. A subgroup of working group members are redesigning a further paper-based version of an ILP form which will be piloted during the 2008/09 academic year. The original target for one thousand learning plan forms to be completed by employees, in various organisations, before the remaining two years of the current project is completed, should be reached. Further work will continue regarding moving from a paper-based form to an electronic version of these ILP forms.

Third, in relation to academic–industry partnerships, it can be seen from the research conducted for this project that the partnerships are at a different developmental levels. Most of the partnerships, however, have been established at an informal level, but it is intended that these partnerships will be established on a more formal basis. To date, the experiences of all staff members from both the academic institutes and the industrial organisations involved in these partnerships are very positive, with reports of a win-win situation from all participants. The participants have expressed interest in further developing the partnerships. There are also plans in place for each academic institute to establish a further partnership with a different industry in their locality. As proposed by the partnership continuum, it is hoped that, in practice, each of the current arrangements will move to the level of a strategic partnership. The SIF cycle 2 Roadmap for Employment-Academic Partnership (REAP) project will further develop concepts and models of partnership.

Overall, the workplace holds the promise of a powerful learning environment. Work-based learning is becoming increasingly important both for organisations – which need professional development to create a dynamic, flexible workforce – and for higher education institutions that recognise the workplace as a legitimate site of learning. Work-based learning deliberately and perceptively merges theory with practice, and acknowledges the intersection of explicit and tacit forms of knowing at both individual and collective levels. It recognises that learning is acquired in the midst of practice and typically occurs while working on the tasks and relationships at hand. Applebaum and Reichart (1998), however, note that “there is no roadmap available to follow that will take a traditional organisation down the path to being a learning organisation. There is no single right way or only one way” (1998: 52). They observe that, in many ways, it is the journey that creates the learning organisation. They conclude that the journey is not a simple one, as it requires challenging many fundamental beliefs and operating principles.

Delanty (2001: 103) also believes that knowledge creation is no longer solely assumed to be the responsibility of the third-level institute and this has led to the establishment of other centres of knowledge production, such as “industrial laboratories, research centres, think-tanks, and consultancies”. Work-based learning within higher education recognises the legitimacy of the workplace as a source of learning and it is increasingly recognised that developing higher level skills is not restricted to the learning gained within the protected confines of the higher education environment. Work-based learning, however, poses real and wide-ranging challenges to higher education structures, procedures, and practices. A key challenge for work-based learning is to develop structures, contacts, and ways of working which effectively draw upon and enhance subject disciplines without being restricted by them. Work-based learning is now challenging most of the conventional assumptions about teaching, learning, knowledge and course curricula. Boud and Solomon (2003: 225) suggest that work-based learning “is a disturbing practice – one that disturbs our understandings about our academic identity and its location”.

Rapidly changing workplace environments, increasingly influenced by accelerating developments in information and communications technology, require new models of training and education from higher education institutions. Higher education in general, as well as organisational learning and workplace learning in particular, has to draw on the valuable resource of prior learning in the workplace. Prior learning must be more readily and formally recognised for its solid and valuable contribution to third-level education. The more static curricula of yesterday’s education systems cannot serve the demands of today or tomorrow. As change in the workplace is at the cutting edge of new demands for training and education, it is the workplace that has, of necessity, to inform much of the training and education curricula of tomorrow. A paradigm shift is required in third-level education, as new and ever-changing curricula will continually and dynamically be informed by the workplace, to address student requirements in the twenty-first century.



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Appendix A

Individual Learning Plan

Individual Learning Plan	
	The purpose of this survey is to develop a useful template for an Individual Learning Plan for learners in the workplace taking account of their current formal and experiential learning, career aspirations, and the availability of suitable programmes of study.
	Learner Details
Name	<input type="text"/>
Address	<input type="text"/>
	<input type="text"/>
	<input type="text"/>
Phone Number	<input type="text"/>
Email	<input type="text"/>
	Survey #1
Disclaimer	In completing these pages I agree that the information given can be used in the research activities of the Education in Employment (EIE) Project and the Individualised Digitised Educational Advisory (IDEAS) project. I understand that this first page will be removed and maintained separately within CIT (and the institution where the data was collected) under the provision of the Data Protection Act and that all analysis and processing of the information contained on the following pages will be by Number only. All information supplied is treated in the strictest confidence and is used for Institute/ University purposes only.
	Signed <input type="text"/> Date <input type="text"/>

Current Employment & Employment History

Please complete or tick (✓) the appropriate box.

Gender	
---------------	--

Male	<input type="checkbox"/>
Female	<input type="checkbox"/>

Age Range	
------------------	--

Under 20	<input type="checkbox"/>
41-50	<input type="checkbox"/>

21-30	<input type="checkbox"/>
51-60	<input type="checkbox"/>

31-40	<input type="checkbox"/>
Over 60	<input type="checkbox"/>

Employer	
-----------------	--

Commencement Date	
--------------------------	--

Job title/ Role	
------------------------	--

Department/Function	
----------------------------	--

Previous job titles/roles with current employer	Title	From	To

Key duties/ responsibilities in my present role	

Previous Employment History	Employer	Position Held	From	To



Education & Training Completed

**Inter / Junior Certificate
(or equivalent) completed**

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
No	<input type="checkbox"/>

**Leaving Certificate
(or equivalent) completed**

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
No	<input type="checkbox"/>

Post-Leaving Certificate / Third Level Education:
(Include Degrees / Diplomas / Certificates/ Trade Certificates etc.)

Award	College/University	Awarding Body	NFQ Level	Year

Professional Body Membership

Level

Year

Professional Body Membership	Level	Year

Additional Training/Continuous Professional Development

(Please include all types of training: in-house, online courses/modules, workshops, evening courses, part-time courses etc)

Course Title	Duration	Accrediting Body	Certification	Motivation

How has this training benefited you in your job? Please be as specific as possible.

Additional comments

Career & Learning Progression Goals

In the next 12 months do you plan to:	Y	N	If yes please specify
Stay in current post			
Seek promotion / progression			
Seek opportunity to change role			
Other – specify:			

What will you need to achieve your 1 year career plan?	Y	N	If yes please specify
Additional transferable skills.			
Additional discipline skills			
Additional academic qualification(s)			
Training courses: (Internal or external)			
Additional workplace experience			
Other - specify:			

What post do you hope to hold 5 years from now?	Y	N	If yes please specify
Same as now			
Higher level			
Transfer into a new post			
Transfer into a related post			
Other – specify:			

What will you need to achieve your 5 year career plan?	Y	N	If yes please specify
Additional transferable skills.			
Additional discipline skills			
Additional academic qualification(s)			
Training courses: (Internal or external)			
Additional workplace experience			
Other – specify:			

Transferable Skills / Competences

Please indicate with a tick (✓) your current proficiency level for each of the following skills on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is limited proficiency and 5 is a high level of proficiency. Also please indicate your desired proficiency level for each of these skills.

Skills	Current proficiency level					Desired proficiency level				
	Limited			High		Limited			High	
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Communication										
Presentation										
Creativity										
IT										
Leadership										
Managerial										
Negotiation										
Numeracy										
Conflict Resolution										
Problem-solving										
Report writing										
Team work										
Time management										
Stress Management										

If there are any other transferable skills relevant to you that you have or desire to enhance please add in the blank cell provided and indicate your current and desired proficiency levels.

Skills	Current proficiency level					Desired proficiency level				
	Limited			High		Limited			High	
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5

Discipline Specific Skills - Business Knowledge

Please indicate with a tick (✓) your current knowledge level for each of the following on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is no knowledge and 5 is advanced knowledge. Also please indicate your desired proficiency level for each of these skills.

Skills	Current proficiency level					Desired proficiency level				
	None			Advanced		None			Advanced	
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Management Accounting										
Law										
Business planning										
Economics										
Consumer behaviour										
Financial accounting										
Government and policy										
Management										
Marketing										
Information systems										
Taxation										

If there are any other areas of Business relevant to you that you have or desire to enhance please add in the blank cell provided and indicate your current and desired knowledge levels.

Skills	Current proficiency level					Desired proficiency level				
	Limited			High		Limited			High	
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5

Business Specific Skills - Recognition of Knowledge

Please specify if your current knowledge level is recognised by a qualification or not.
(Please tick (✓) the appropriate box).

Business Knowledge	Recognised	Not recognised
Management Accounting		
Law		
Business planning		
Economics		
Consumer behaviour		
Financial accounting		
Government and Policy		
Management		
Marketing		
Information systems		
Taxation		

If there are any other areas of Business relevant to you that you have or desire to enhance please add in the blank cell provided and indicate your current and desired knowledge levels.

Business Knowledge	Recognised	Not recognised

Future Directions

From the previous pages in your opinion should you:

Seek formal awards or qualifications and academic progression?

Seek recognition for learning acquired informally in the workplace?

Seek additional workplace relevant skills?

Seek career guidance assistance in setting career goals?

Additional comments

* The above sample ILP relates to a business discipline. ILPs are available for various other disciplines.

Partnership Questionnaire

General Information

- 1 Organisation name?
- 2 Type of business and number of employees?
- 3 Which Higher Education Institution are you partnered with?
- 4 Contact name(s) for workplace partnership?
- 5 Which academic departments do you interact with for this partnership?
- 6 When was this partnership established?
- 7 Who has prime responsibility for the partnership?
- 8 What stage of development is your partnership (on the relationship continuum)?

Continuous Professional Development (CPD) Activities

- 9 How are CPD requirements of your staff identified and managed?
- 10 How are staff training needs addressed?
- 11 Has your workplace approached the higher education institute (HEI) to source training/development expertise?
- 12 Have your staff attended part-time or CPD programmes in the HEI?
- 13 Have HEI staff delivered programs within your workplace?
- 14 Have the HEI developed tailored programmes for your workplace?
- 15 Are staff supported while taking programmes in the HEI?
- 16 Are individual learning plans used as part of CPD process, if so who is responsible for facilitating this process?
- 17 Is training tailored to the needs of staff as identified through individual learning plans?

Work-based Learning Activities

- 18 What kinds of methods are used to support staff CPD in the workplace e.g. workshops, projects, task-based or supervised activities?
- 19 Do staff undertake distance/Web-based learning modules from external providers e.g. HEI?
- 20 Are work-based learning activities undertaken individually, as part of a group, or with a supervisor/mentor?
- 21 Is learning supported through accredited courses?
- 22 Are staff aware of RPL routes to HEI courses?
- 23 Has your organisation worked with the higher education institute on the recognition/delivery/assessment of workplace learning?

Workplace and HEI Interactions

- 24 Does your organisation hire graduates from the HEI?
- 25 Does your organisation participate in career fairs or open days?
- 26 Does your organisation take students on work placements from the higher education institute?
- 27 Does any staff member act as course advisor or review panel member for the HEI?
- 28 Does any staff member act as an external examiner or provide guest lectures, or present seminars?

Research

- 29 Has your organisation sponsored undergraduate projects in the HEI?
- 30 Does any staff member participate in research demonstrations, or attend research open days?
- 31 Does your organisation engage in a research partnership?
- 32 Does your organisation hire postgraduates?
- 33 Does any staff member engage in joint research with HEI students?

Values/Benefits of partnership


- 34 What are the benefits of this partnership to the learner?
- 35 What are the benefits of this partnership to your organisation?
- 36 What value does your involvement in this partnership add to the HEI?
- 37 Does your organisation have partnerships with other HEIs?
- 38 If you are involved with other HEI partnerships, how does it compare?

Future Directions

- 39 Do you envisage further growth of this partnership?
- 40 What plans have you for future development of this partnership?
- 41 Where is your partnership currently on the partnership continuum?
(See Appendix C)

Individual Learning Plans

- 42 Are individual learning plans developed and used in your organisation?
- 43 If yes – are they used for all employees?
- 44 Who is involved in the individual learning plans process?
- 45 Are individual learning plans aligned with your organisation's goals as well as with the individual's career plans?
- 46 What form does the individual learning plan take, e.g., paper based, or online templates?
- 47 Does your organisation use an e-portfolio system?
- 48 If yes, which one?
- 49 Would your organisation be willing to assist the EiE project team in developing/piloting individual learning plan forms?



Current Education and Training Provision

- 50 Who provides education and training in your organisation?
- 51 Do you employ university staff?
- 52 Do you employ staff from institutes of technology?
- 53 Do you engage with corporate training?
- 54 Do you employ private training providers?
- 55 Do you develop training programmes in-house?
- 56 Other

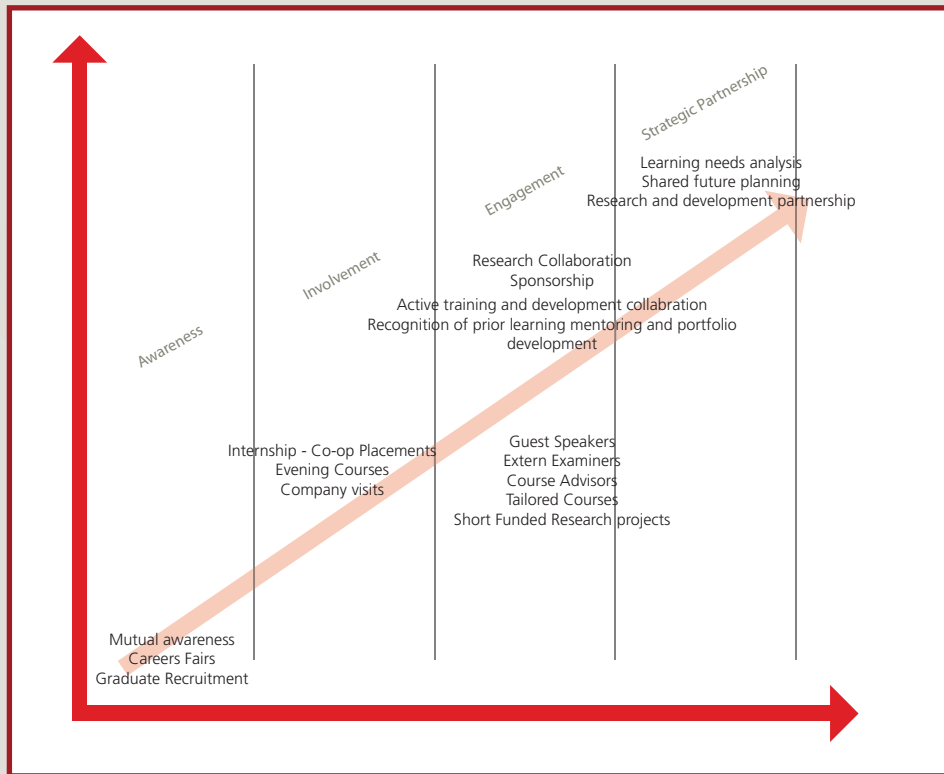
Criteria for choosing course and provider (Rate 1 to 5 – 1 most important)

- 57 Cost
- 58 Duration and time commitment
- 59 Convenience and location
- 60 Direct relevance
- 61 Customised provision
- 62 Staff motivation
- 63 Delivery method format e.g. online
- 64 Credit earning against National Framework of Qualifications

What is the most current education or training need in your workplace?

- 65 Technological skills
- 66 Generic transferrable skills – communications, presentations skills, conflict resolution etc.
- 67 Environmental issues
- 68 Language skills
- 69 Management training - including finance management
- 70 Other

Partnership Continuum



Appendix D

National Framework of Qualifications

The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) was established in 2001 with the principal aims of establishing and maintaining a National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) and promoting and facilitating access, transfer and progression. The outline framework of qualifications is usually seen in the form of the 'fan' diagram shown below in Figure 1.

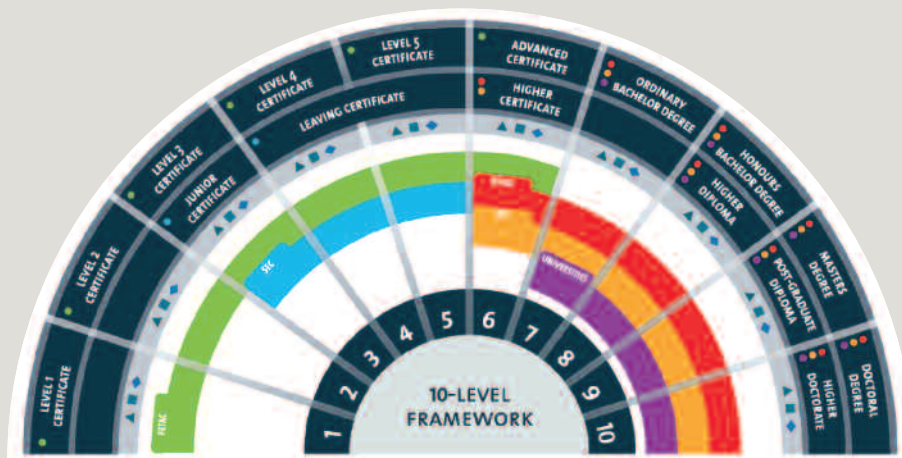


Figure 1 National Framework of Qualifications

List of Acronyms

ACCS	Accumulation of Credits and Certification of Subjects
APL	Accreditation of Prior Learning
CAO	Central Applications Office
CIPD	Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development
CSO	Central Statistics Office
FETAC	Further Education and Training Awards Council
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HEI	Higher Education Institutes
HETAC	Higher Education and Training Awards Council
HSE	Health Service Executive
ILP	Individual Learning Plan
LMS	Learning Management System
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
NQAI	National Qualifications Authority of Ireland
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PDP	Personal Development Plan
PMDS	Performance Management Development System
SIF	Strategic Innovation Fund
SME	Small to Medium-sized Enterprise
TCH	Thomas Crosbie Holdings

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Foreword



The *Education in Employment* project funded through the Higher Education Authority's Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF) has made a significant contribution to date in promoting work-based and blended learning, progression opportunities for craftspersons, and a greater understanding of the challenges in meeting the learning needs of migrant workers in Ireland. The work detailed in this report, however, on the practical implementation of the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) will, I believe, be its most fundamental and long-lasting contribution to elaborating and enabling learner-centred lifelong learning throughout the third-level educational institutions in Ireland.

Led by the Cork Institute of Technology, the working group established under the *Education in Employment* project to address the RPL issue comprised members from Athlone Institute of Technology, Dublin Institute of Technology, Dundalk Institute of Technology, Galway–Mayo Institute of Technology, Institute of Technology Sligo, Letterkenny Institute of Technology, NUI Galway, and University College Cork. In addition, there was a considerable and welcome input from outside the original project working group from the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) and the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI).

This document meets the stated outcomes of the *Education in Employment* project, in the development of policy and the publication of guidelines for learners and assessors, but it goes further in bringing together, for the first time in a single publication, a useful framework for the implementation or development of the RPL process and practice within educational establishments. This document provides a unique starting point for the further development of RPL through an exploration of the details of the practices as they currently exist within the partner institutions and through a frank review of the issues and questions that are raised.

I know that this publication will be welcomed by those developing policy, those in third-level education, and those who want to engage with third-level providers in a meaningful and accessible way. I would like to acknowledge the tireless efforts of the working group in bringing this work to fruition.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael Delaney". The signature is written in a cursive style and is underlined with a single horizontal stroke.

Michael Delaney

Vice President for Development
Cork Institute of Technology



Executive Summary

The nature of work and employment is changing rapidly and pervasively. A reliance on traditional manufacturing and low-skilled services will not be sufficient for developed countries like Ireland to remain at the forefront of economic and technological advancement. The world is becoming flatter and basic tasks are now outsourced as low-tech businesses and contract manufacturing migrate to low-cost economies such as China, India, South America and the newer EU Member States of Central and Eastern Europe, while developed countries become more expensive. Developed countries can no longer secure their future on continuing to perform tasks that can easily be moved to low-cost environments. Instead, these countries must provide services higher up the value chain, in areas that are less cost sensitive but require ingenuity and creativity (Ireland, 2008: 36). Reflecting this need, there is a widespread and increasing emphasis on lifelong formal and informal education and training, which are seen as critical components to ensure a highly skilled workforce that maintains and manifests currency of knowledge and skills. In this context, recognising *prior* learning can make a significant contribution to providing responsive, relevant, and integrated learning, which are all necessary for the ongoing maintenance of a quality workforce in Ireland. Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is critical to the development of an open, accessible, inclusive, integrated and relevant education and training system, and is a key foundation for lifelong learning policies that encourage individuals to participate in learning pathways that include formal, non-formal, and informal learning. RPL has a potential role to play in meeting individual, societal, and national needs; as an instrument for providing people with access to education, training, and formal qualifications; and to help meet the ongoing and fast-changing requirements of the workplace.

Widening access to higher education through RPL is not about introducing less qualified graduates, but rather about supporting learners with the potential to benefit both themselves and society through participating in higher education. This means reaching out to an increasingly broad range of learners with different motivations and interests.

In 2006, the Government introduced a Strategic Innovation Fund through which €510m is allocated for spending, between 2006 and 2013, in higher education institutions for projects to enhance collaboration in this sector; to improve teaching and learning; to support institutional reform; to promote access to lifelong learning; and to support the development of fourth-level education. Through the Strategic Innovation Fund, the development of new strategic alliances creates new synergies and potentials for higher education systems. Through the range of initiatives that it supports, the Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF) is providing new impetus to the development of system-wide quality. SIF is driving reform of structures and systems within and across institutions to cater for growing student numbers at all levels; for greater teaching and learning quality; to ensuring graduates are equipped for a lifetime of innovation and change in the workplace; and to enhance research and innovation capacity.

The *Education in Employment* project is one of the initiatives funded under the first cycle of the Strategic Innovation Fund. The *Education in Employment* consortium is led by Cork Institute of Technology, which coordinates the work contributed by the other members of the consortium: Athlone Institute of Technology; Dublin Institute of Technology; Dundalk Institute of Technology; Galway–Mayo Institute of Technology; Institute of Technology, Sligo; Letterkenny Institute of Technology; National University of Ireland Galway; and University College, Cork. *Education in Employment* focuses on the learning needs of non-traditional learners and includes lifelong learning and the recognition of prior learning as core aims by placing significant emphasis on continual professional development and up-skilling, for learners in employment and for jobseekers.

This report is based on the collective activities of the RPL strand, one of four linked sub-strands in the *Education in Employment* project. The main focus of the report is to provide a practical guide for recognising *all* prior learning in third-level institutions.

In order to contextualise prior learning for this report, a review of the relevant existing literature on prior learning was conducted. These literature findings are summarised and presented in Chapters 1 and 2. One of the key messages arising from the literature search was that there is no clearly agreed definition on what constitutes prior learning. Defining prior learning is recognised as problematic. There is no clear agreement among writers, researchers, and major policy-influencing agencies on standards or even guidelines for the recognition of prior learning, or what precisely RPL involves or what it encompasses. Views vary from simply defined notions of RPL as providing an alternative access to a programme or to a qualification, through to conceptions of RPL being a reflective process that can directly influence the nature of learning and the process of training. For the purpose of this report, the recognition of prior learning is considered to be the generic term for a variety of approaches such as Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning (RNFIL), the Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) and the Recognition and Accreditation of Learning (RAL). The term 'prior' concerns learning that *has* taken place but may not have been formally assessed or accredited prior to entering a programme of study or prior to seeking an award. The core philosophy underlying the recognition of prior learning is the enabling and supporting of people entering or re-entering formal education, leading to a qualification, by awarding or recognising credit for what they already know in the course curriculum.

Acknowledging the importance of recognising prior learning for individuals, third-level institutions, employers, and employer organisations, an investigation of the recognition of prior learning practices was carried out in the *Education in Employment* partner institutions. The findings from this research illustrate that the recognition of prior learning is already challenging the current structures of third-level academic institutions, requiring them to be flexible in terms of mode of delivery and accrediting prior experiential learning. The findings also emphasise the importance of inter-institutional co-operation and highlight the need for sharing information and expertise to further progress the recognition of prior learning nationally.

Finally, in the current economic climate, the recognition of prior learning is becoming increasingly important for jobseekers and for those in employment who wish to up-skill and re-skill. Third-level institutions need to address their respective levels of RPL provision, which is greater in some areas of education than in others. An attitudinal and cultural shift must be engaged with to overcome the barriers and negative myths associated with recognising prior learning in order to successfully address learner requirements in the twenty-first century.



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1.0 Background

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 to remedial 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).

The concept of lifelong learning, referred to by the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) above, indicates that learning should encompass the whole spectrum of formal, non-formal, and informal learning. Lifelong learning is defined as all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competencies (National Competitiveness Council, 2009). Learning occurs in many contexts including work, involvement in social and community activities, or learning through life experience. In order to enable an individual to learn throughout life, equal value should be given to all these forms of learning regardless of source, how it is achieved, or when in life it is achieved. Lifelong learning, therefore, is about making use of personal competencies. Duvekot *et al.* (2007: 9) suggest that:

Everyone should be aware that people are always learning everywhere and, above all, not always in a conscious or self-chosen learning situation. The degree in which individuals and the knowledge society consciously build on this is still strongly underexposed and under-utilised. In the knowledge society, the focus should be on the individual learning process.

Competencies acquired, therefore, in non-formal and informal situations rather than solely in formal situations are essential parts of individual learning. Learning that takes place outside the formal systems for education and training, however, is much more difficult to identify and value. As a result of taking all types of learning situations into account, the focus on lifelong learning policy has slowly shifted from the traditional approach of 'learning in the classroom' to incorporate 'other learning environments'. This actually means giving value to non-formal and informal learning.

One of the distinguishing features of non-formal and informal learning is that the experience of the learner occupies central place in all considerations of teaching and learning. This experience may comprise earlier events in the life of the learner, current life events, or those arising from the learner's participation in activities implemented by teachers and facilitators. It supports a more participative, learner-centred approach, which places an emphasis on direct engagement, rich learning events and the construction of meaning by learners.

According to a Eurostat survey (2007) Ireland performs poorly in terms of the percentage of persons engaging in lifelong learning, with 7.6% of respondents aged 25 to 64 receiving formal education in the four weeks prior to their survey. This remains below the Lisbon target of 12.5%, the EU-15 average of 12%, and considerably behind the leading countries (National Competitiveness Council, 2009). The *National Skills Strategy* sets an ambitious target of up-skilling an additional 500,000 individuals within the workforce by at least one level in the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) by 2020. A National Competitiveness Council (2009) report suggests that this target presents a challenge for Government, employers, and employees in terms of how to create a culture and sense of shared responsibility for lifelong learning and decisions on appropriate investment levels and sharing of costs.

The current economic downturn underscores the need for everyone, particularly those with low skill levels and those in vulnerable firms, to upgrade their skills. The aim is to significantly improve access for unemployed persons to job search, training and education, community and employment programmes, and to maximise opportunities for up-skilling and re-skilling so that people will be better placed to avail of new job opportunities where they become available, including in new sectors such as energy efficiency (Government of Ireland, 2008: 54). In order to facilitate the required up-skilling and re-skilling, a particular focus needs to be placed on efforts to increase participation in lifelong learning by providing opportunities for education and training. The Irish Government recognises the importance of lifelong learning, and its publication of *Building Ireland's Smart Economy* document (Ireland, 2008: 13) indicates that a number of initiatives to support lifelong learning will be implemented, for example:

- Restructuring the higher education system will be a priority with a new Higher Education Strategy to enhance system-wide performance;
- Higher Education institutions will be supported in pursuing new organisational mergers and alliances that can advance performance through more effective concentration of expertise and investment;
- Under the Strategic Innovation Fund, priority will be given to flexible learning initiatives that can be targeted at up-skilling people in the workforce.





1.1 What is the Recognition of Prior Learning?

Recognition of Prior Learning is a process by which learning that has already taken place prior to enrolment on a programme of study is given a value. This learning process may have taken place formally through a further or higher education provider or informally or non-formally through work/life experiences. The Commission of the European Communities (2000) suggest that for the purposes of developing a national approach to the recognition of prior learning, prior learning encompasses:

1. **Formal learning** which takes place through programmes of study or training that are delivered by education or training providers, and which attract awards
2. **Non-formal learning** that takes place alongside the mainstream systems of education and training. It may be assessed but does not normally lead to formal certification. Examples of non-formal learning include learning and training activities undertaken in the workplace, in the voluntary sector, or in communities
3. **Informal learning** that takes place through life and work experience (experiential learning). It is learning that is quite unintentional and the learner may not recognise at the time of the experience that it contributed to his or her knowledge, skills and competences.

A broad aim of RPL is to enable and encourage people to enter or re-enter formal education, leading to qualifications, by awarding or recognising credit for what is already known of the course curriculum. The purpose of RPL may be formative (supporting an ongoing learning process) as well as summative (aiming at certification). In higher education institutions, two main categories of prior learning for the purpose of RPL are

- (i) Certified learning
- (ii) Experiential learning

Certified (accredited) learning is learning that has previously been accredited, formally recognised or certified. This is the recognition of formal learning for which certification has been awarded through a recognised educational institution or other higher education/training provider. The process of identification, assessment and formal acknowledgement of prior learning and achievement is commonly known across the higher education sector as 'accreditation'. The term 'accreditation of prior learning' is used to encapsulate the range of activity and approaches used formally to acknowledge and establish publicly that some reasonably substantial and significant element of learning has taken place. The recognition of this category of learning will normally result in:

- The admission to a programme or course of study;
- The award of advanced academic standing (entry to a programme beyond year one); or
- The award of exemption from module(s) of a programme.

Experiential (unaccredited learning) is learning which has not been previously accredited or recognised and is typically uncertified. This is learning which has been gained through life experiences in work, community, or other settings. It is often unintentional learning. The learner may not recognise at the time of the experience that it contributed to the development of their skills and knowledge. This recognition may happen only retrospectively through the RPL process. The process of giving formal recognition to non-formal or informal learning can be described as the accreditation of prior experiential learning. The recognition of this type of learning will normally result in the awarding of credit attached to the learning outcomes for the learning achieved by the learner. While it is useful to understand the differences between these different types of learning, it is likely that an individual's learning experience will have a combination of formal, non-formal and informal aspects. Engaging in RPL allows people to systematically look at their own experiences, to reflect on them, and perhaps look at them in a different or new way. Through informal or experiential learning people are regularly acquiring and renewing their skills and knowledge, and RPL enables people to consider and reflect on how these have developed and changed.





1.2 Defining RPL

RPL has been defined in a number of ways, some more expansive than others. All definitions, however, include the key notion that RPL involves the assessment of previously unrecognised skills and of knowledge an individual has acquired outside the formal education and training system. The process of RPL assesses hitherto unrecognised learning against the requirements for a qualification or for a course leading to a qualification, in respect of both entry requirements and outcomes to be achieved.

By removing the need for duplication of learning, RPL encourages an individual to continue upgrading their skills and knowledge through structured education and training towards formal qualifications and improved employment potentials. UNESCO defines RPL as:

The formal acknowledgement of skills, knowledge, and competencies that are gained through work experience, informal training, and life experience (Vlăsceanu, et al., 2004: 55).

The Australian National Training Authority (ANTA, 2001: 9) defines recognition of prior learning as 'recognition of competencies currently held, regardless of how, when or where the learning occurred'. Evidence may include 'any combination of formal or informal training and education, work experience, or general life experience', and may take a variety of forms, including 'certification, references from past employers, testimonials from clients and work samples'. The assessor must ensure that 'the evidence is authentic, valid, reliable, current, and sufficient'. ANTA places significant emphasis on the nature and processes of assessment, and is heavily focused on system and institutional administrative needs. Interestingly, ANTA does not specifically identify a functional link between RPL and workplace learning or workplace competencies. ANTA provides an administratively focused view of RPL, emphasising notions of rigour, standards and quality control. The Australian Qualifications Framework Advisory Board (1997: 13) suggests that RPL 'involves a case-by-case assessment of the individual's knowledge and skills, which may be derived from a whole range of learning experiences, including workplace learning and general life experience'. The Australian focus of assessment, however, is primarily technical knowledge and skills rather than generic employment attributes.

The Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA) in Britain also places an emphasis on assessment and has defined the recognition of prior learning as:

A method of assessment that considers whether a learner can demonstrate that they can meet the assessment requirements for a unit through knowledge, understanding or skills that they already possess and do not need to develop through a course of learning (QCDA, 2009).

The QCDA underlines one of its main aims to respond to the needs of individual learners. In support of this, it contends that learners should not be required to 're-learn' something that they already know, understand, or can do.

Wheelahan *et al.* (2002: 4) suggest that RPL involves a process that 'assesses the individual's learning to determine the extent to which that individual has achieved the required learning outcomes, competency outcomes, or standards for entry to, and/or partial or total completion of, a qualification'. Furthermore, they suggest RPL involves an access mechanism when the normal education or qualification prerequisites are not present. They clearly separate the notion of RPL from that of credit transfer, which they define as a mechanism

that: 'assesses the initial course or subject that the individual is using to claim access to, or the award of credit in, the destination course to determine the extent to which it is equivalent to the required learning outcomes, competency outcomes, or standards in a qualification.'

Overall, in line with the definitional frameworks discussed above, Wheelahan *et al.* (2002) and Wheelahan (2004) summarise that RPL literature focuses mainly on supporting learners through the assessment process. They comment that while the intention of including RPL as part of a broader assessment process was to incorporate it holistically into learning and assessment, the result, however, has been that the overwhelming focus of RPL has been on assessment. Wheelahan *et al.* further argue that the greater focus of RPL on assessment may well limit the extent to which it is used because people may 'be unaware of what they know and the extent to which they know it' or 'not have the language to describe what they know' or 'not be able to move from the discourse of their everyday practice to the discourse required to substantiate their claims' (2002: 13). Another problem identified by Wheelahan *et al.* is that RPL primarily requires learners to translate their industry-based practice into academic discourse which requires learners to understand and articulate notions such as 'competency standards, elements of competency, performance criteria, evidence and range of variables, codes, and institutional processes' when their education and work backgrounds have not provided significant development of this specialised skill (2002: 13–14). They conclude that insufficient attention has been paid to the individual learners and their ability to claim recognition for their prior learning.

In summary, there is no clear agreement among writers, researchers, and major policy-influencing agencies regarding what RPL is, what it does, or what it encompasses. Views vary from quite tightly defined notions of RPL as a means of access to a training programme or a qualification, through to conceptions of RPL as a reflective process that can directly impact on understandings and applications of the learning process, both for learners and educators.





1.3 Who Can Use RPL?

RPL should be an accessible and inclusive process, applicable to all learners at all levels. RPL can be used by a wide range of learners to help them either re-enter learning or as a contribution towards a programme including:

- Adults returning to higher education;
- Employed and unemployed people seeking recognition for skills gained through informal learning;
- People wishing to improve their existing qualifications;
- People wanting to re-train or change careers;
- People who have undertaken non-formal learning or training in the workplace or through community-based learning;
- People who have gained a range of skills and knowledge through volunteering or through activities or projects in their community;
- People in occupations requiring formal qualifications.

A variety of different approaches to RPL can be developed and used by higher education institutions to meet the needs and goals of learner groups across the different sectors. All RPL provision, however, whether for personal/career development or for credit should be an effective, quality-assured practice that will enable all users to have confidence in the outcome of the process. RPL should be a gateway, and not a barrier to learning. RPL should promote the positive aspects of an individual's learning experience (as opposed to its deficiency). The learner's needs and reasons for recognition should be paramount.

1.4 Strategic Innovation Fund Aims and Objectives

The Strategic Innovation Fund is awarded by the Department of Education and Science and is administered by the Higher Education Authority (HEA). SIF is a competitively driven resource stream to implement organisational transformation. The fund is multi-annual, amounting to €510 million over the period 2006-2013. SIF aims to support innovation, and to foster collaboration between institutions competing for funding to:

- Incentivise and reward internal restructuring and reform efforts;
- Promote teaching and learning reforms, including enhanced teaching methods, programme restructuring at third and fourth level, modularisation and e-learning;
- Support quality improvement initiatives aimed at excellence;
- Promote access, transfer, and progression, and incentivise stronger inter-institutional collaboration in the development and delivery of programmes;

- Provide for improved performance management systems and meet staff-training and support requirements associated with the reform of structures and the implementation of new processes;
- Implement improved management information systems.

Through the collaborative nature of the projects, new strategic alliances have been developed and supported, providing new impetus for enhanced quality and effectiveness. The OECD *Review of Higher Education in Ireland* made a compelling case for reform of third- and fourth-level education in Ireland (OECD, 2004). While the sector is acknowledged as an engine for economic development, higher education institutions need to rise to the challenges of increasing their relevance, for example, through promoting access and participation by those already in the workforce. The Strategic Innovation Fund is an important element in the investment and reform of higher education institutions to enable them to meet challenges presented by changing social and economic realities while building on their existing strengths. In this way, the projects funded through the SIF will help the partner institutions towards realising their potential while also improving the learning experience for a diverse range of learners at all levels.

In developing a project proposal for SIF Cycle 1, Cork Institute of Technology (CIT) endeavoured to ensure that the submission should build clearly on existing leadership and strengths and align with CIT's strategic plan and those of partner institutions. The resulting *Education in Employment* project focuses on the learning needs of those already in the workforce, through four distinct but linked strands. The four strands are:

- (i) Recognition of Prior Learning
- (ii) Work-based and Blended Learning
- (iii) Progression Routes and Diversification Opportunities for Craftspersons
- (iv) Migrants and Higher Education in Ireland.

The project is a Cork Institute of Technology-led consortium comprising Athlone Institute of Technology, Dublin Institute of Technology, Dundalk Institute of Technology, Galway–Mayo Institute of Technology, Institute of Technology, Sligo, Letterkenny Institute of Technology, National University of Ireland Galway, and University College Cork.



1.5 Education in Employment Project

The *Education in Employment* consortium is promoting a model of education development, delivery, support and assessment which is based on a number of underlying principles:

- Learning (as a process rather than an event) is at the centre of the provision;
- Learning (formal, non-formal, and informal) must be assessed and accredited;
- The workplace itself can constitute a rich learning environment and work-based learning should be integrated into learning programmes;
- A sustainable partnership between education and the workplace is necessary for the development, delivery, support and assessment of '*Education in Employment*'.

Recent growth in 'non-traditional' student numbers and demands for up-skilling and upgrading qualifications is increasing the pressure on third-level institutions to provide efficient user-friendly routes to these qualifications. This must be achieved in a manner which retains the confidence of individual learners, employers and awarding institutions. There is also a requirement for a process which offers a complete route to a qualification as opposed to a partial solution for learners.

The main aims and objectives of the recognition of prior learning working group of the *Education in Employment* project include:

- Standardisation of RPL policies and procedures in line with international best-practice;
- Development of a scaleable approach to RPL where the cost per credit awarded decreases as the participation level increases;
- Embedding of RPL as a mainstream activity in all the schools/departments of the institutions;
- Recognition of RPL by all stakeholders as an important input for the identification of existing skills levels in the workplace;
- Delivery and support of a technology facilitated RPL provision;
- Development of a research capability in RPL;
- Development of on-line tools for RPL administration, portfolio preparation (e-portfolio) and assessment and integration with existing Learning Management Systems.

These objectives led to a number of key outcomes:

- Training and development in RPL for 205 academic and administrative staff in participating institutions;
- Consolidating links with external stakeholders and organisations;
- Training mentor networks in key employer organisations;
- Developing a specification for on-line resources, e-assessment, e-portfolios and RPL administration;
- Marketing of RPL to approximately 2,000 potential applicants;
- Production of agreed guidelines and documentation (including on-line) for students, mentors and RPL assessors distinguishing the Advisory, Mentoring, and Assessment roles;
- Publishing agreed procedures and systems required to bring about the integration of RPL into admissions, accreditation and examinations procedures;

- Development of a series of accredited modules on Portfolio Development and Mentor Training;
- Pilot “RPL Procedures” as part of a modular taught Master’s programme.

Additionally, through institutional collaboration, members of the *Education in Employment* project have developed principles and operational guidelines to provide information and advice at a national level in relation to RPL. These principles aim to provide:

- Opportunities for learners to have their non-formal and informal learning recognised and counted towards a qualification;
- Greater awareness and understanding of RPL and how it can be used;
- Diverse and inclusive pathways to lifelong learning;
- Consistency in the principles used in implementing RPL within higher education institutions;
- Guidance to education providers on managing the process of recognising informal learning within the context of the NFQ;
- Greater transparency of the principles and processes used by third-level institutions to implement RPL;
- Support for the practice of recognising prior learning as part of the lifelong learning agenda in Ireland;
- Quality and integrity of previous qualifications.

From the outcomes above, it is evident that the focus of the project is on practical issues relating to RPL. Through a collaborative approach, members of the *Education in Employment* project aimed to produce useable generic RPL guidelines. These guidelines are based on the many years of ‘on the ground’ practical experiences members of the working group shared in conjunction with a review of best practice of RPL internationally. The project funding allowed the allocation of dedicated personnel in many of the partner institutions and this made a significant contribution to the development of policy and practice. The determining factor in developing the above principles was that the recognition of prior learning should meet the needs of learners. In particular, the learning needs of part-time students, mature students, disadvantaged groups, learners in the workforce, and those unemployed should be supported by recognising their prior learning.

From the empirical research conducted with third-level partner institutions in the *Education in Employment* project it is clear that there is not a uniform approach to recognising prior learning. It is also evident that there is no one RPL model that is suitable for all qualifications and all situations. In particular, different sectors give rise to different models. It can be suggested, however, that the RPL model which is implemented must be aligned with the outcomes, goals and objectives of the qualification.



1.6 Structure of Report

This report is divided into four chapters. The first chapter serves as a general introduction and provides a background to the report. The chapter introduces the concept of RPL and explores some definitions of RPL from the relevant literature reviewed. Chapter 1 also illustrates some groups who may benefit from RPL. The chapter briefly highlights the aims and objectives of the SIF, and particularly focuses on the *Education in Employment* project.

Chapter 2 presents some of the key driving forces for RPL internationally and nationally. The chapter also highlights the impact of RPL on lifelong learning and briefly presents data on the European and Irish frameworks under which the recognition of prior learning systems are developing.

Chapter 3 presents the collective findings of working-group members on the practices of RPL among the partner institutions represented in the *Education in Employment* project. One of the main aims of this chapter is to provide some *practical* guidelines for promoting RPL policies and practices in third-level education institutions. The empirical work conducted for this report included both primary and secondary research. Chapter 3 begins by exploring the RPL practices which were in existence in partner institutions prior to the commencement of the project. Through the collaborative nature of the project, partners with existing policy and practice documentation made these available to the working group and these documents were subsequently compared to international best practice RPL procedures. Due to the tight three-year project deadline, it was decided to subdivide the working group in order to achieve the project outcomes more efficiently and effectively. Consequently, three sub-groups were formed. These sub-groups were required to focus on the practical advancement of RPL in relation to:

- (i) policy;
- (ii) learner guidelines;
- (iii) assessment guidelines.

The primary research consisted of two sets of questionnaires, which were completed by working group members in each of their respective institutions. On analysis of the questionnaire findings, a subsequent focus-group workshop generated more in-depth findings, which are also represented in Chapter 3.

Chapter 4 summarises some of the challenges that exist for RPL and also presents some RPL recommendations for third-level education institutions. This chapter also presents a conclusion to the report.

The report also contains a number of appendices devised by members of the *Education in Employment* RPL working group. These appendices provide a useful toolkit for the implementation of RPL. Each appendix is intended as a stand-alone document which can contribute to the development of RPL policy and practice or as a basis for the development of appropriate learner information.

Appendix A simplifies some general terms and definitions associated with RPL. Appendix B provides some policy guidelines which could be used by higher educational institutions for best practice in RPL. Appendix C presents some assessment guidelines which could be used in assessing prior certified learning, prior experiential learning, and learning portfolios. Appendix D provides some practical learner guidelines intended to assist the learner in the preparation of their RPL claim. Appendix E consists of a set of RPL frequently asked questions which are

directed towards the learner. Appendix F presents brief information on the NFQ. Finally, Appendix G lists the membership of the RPL *Education in Employment* working group.

This work should be of interest to policy makers, higher education providers, and all who want to engage with RPL. In particular, and in keeping with the *Education in Employment* project remit, the main aim of this report is to provide an impetus to upscale existing RPL activity and to initiate activity where it has not yet begun. Through exploring existing practice and articulating many difficulties and inconsistencies where they exist, this work should contribute in a meaningful way to the development of RPL practice.



2.0 Recognition of Prior Learning in the Context of Lifelong Learning

The nature of work and employment is changing rapidly and pervasively in a global economy where the fundamental sources of wealth have moved from the ownership and exploitation of natural resources to the created resources of knowledge and communication (Smith and Riley 2003; Stewart 1997). Competitive advantage now lies in the ability of businesses to respond rapidly and flexibly to change. As a result, there is an increasing emphasis on lifelong formal and informal learning and training as a critical component in ensuring a highly skilled workforce that maintains and demonstrates currency of knowledge and skills. The traditional notion of obtaining one set of skills or qualification(s) that would suffice for a lifetime of permanent employment, generally with the one employer, is no longer the dominant model (Nicolescu, 2002; Howkins, 2001). Contemporary employees, therefore, require the capacity to work across a range of contexts in an integrated manner which acknowledges that “life, content, ideas, and knowledge are not divided into separate, segregated clusters” (Spady, 2003: 18). More recently, Coughlan (2007) cautioned that learning in the workplace is seen as separate to that attained in higher education institutions. Coughlan emphasises that the workplace should be seen as an integral contribution to the learner in third-level education institutions. Education and training providers, policy-makers and curriculum developers need to acknowledge that the present, past and even future ‘real life experiences’ of those undertaking education and training are an inseparable and essential ingredient of quality programmes. Goggin (2008) also emphasises the importance of workplace learning and upskilling workers and, in particular, the removal of barriers discouraging people from partaking in third-level education and continuing professional development.

The complexity of individual learning and the opportunities it offers for the knowledge society were recognised in Europe in 1995 in the White Paper of the European Commission: *Towards the Learning Society*. While learning within the formal system for education and training is a distinguishing factor of a modern society, learning that takes place outside this sphere is much more difficult to identify and value. The proposals of the White Paper have slowly shifted from the traditional approach of ‘learning in the classroom’ to utilise ‘other learning environments’ such as work environment, independent learning, remote learning, implicit learning and leisure activities. The European Commission published Common European Principles on the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning (2004) in order to value competencies developed in all possible learning environments and also to make use of non-formal and informal learning. Developing a set of common principles for RPL is a way to bring added value to ongoing work at local, regional and national level. According to the Bologna Process the main motivation for developing such principles is to strengthen the comparability (and thus compatibility) of approaches at different levels and in different contexts. Methods and systems of RPL had largely been designed and set up in isolation from each other and could not easily be linked and combined. Lack of comparability, therefore, makes it difficult for individuals to realise lifelong learning by combining qualifications and competences acquired in different settings, at different levels, and in different countries. Since 2004, common European principles have been used by many countries as a reference for national developments, underlining their usefulness as a checklist for developing high quality, credible validation approaches.


The common European principles for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning are based on the following agreements:

- Validation must be voluntary;
- The privacy of individuals should be respected;
- Equal access and fair treatment should be guaranteed;
- Stakeholders should establish systems for validation;
- Systems should contain mechanisms for guidance and counselling of individuals;
- Systems should be underpinned by quality assurance;
- The process, procedures, and criteria for validation must be fair, transparent, and underpinned by quality assurance;
- Systems should respect the legitimate interests of stakeholders and seek a balanced participation;
- The process of validation must be impartial and avoid conflicts of interest;
- The professional competences of those who carry out assessments must be assured.

According to the European Commission, the European principles will provide a reference point and checklist for developing validation methods and systems, making it possible to systematically take into account and build on experiences across Europe. Each country and stakeholder will decide if they want to use the guidelines. Their value and status will be entirely based on their ability to capture existing experience and communicate sound practice.

The OECD's review of the role of various national qualifications frameworks in promoting lifelong learning places a major focus on the link between recognising the prior learning of students and qualification outcomes, arguing for the need to improve opportunities for people to use their informal learning to gain recognised qualifications. Furthermore, the OECD review adds the concept of 'articulation to the concepts of RPL and credit transfer, defining articulation as 'opportunities for mobility and progression between different types of qualifications and between qualifications for different occupational sectors' (Young 2001: 4). Additionally, the OECD sees RPL (and the associated credit transfer and articulation) as being 'intrinsic to lifelong learning', the creation of opportunities, and the provision of access (Wheelahan *et al.*, 2002: 3). The OECD also asserts that RPL is itself a 'learning concept' that must be 'personally meaningful' and have 'social recognition and status'. The OECD framework positions RPL as both an assessment and a learning process. This framework provides a holistic view that incorporates system and institutional demands and personal goals and benefits for individual learners.

The OECD moves away from a 'definitional' approach addressing what RPL *is* to an approach which seeks to convey what RPL *does*. Smith and Keating (1997), focusing their discussion on the use of RPL, also adopt this approach. They broadly designate RPL as determining current competency in the workplace and as a learning process in its own right. Smith and Keating believe that the focus of the learning process should be on how the learner can best meet the prescribed learning outcomes of the particular subject, course, or training programme. The articulation of clear learning outcomes is considered to be a central feature of any type of learning. Learning outcomes have the potential to provide learners with an understanding of what is trying to be accomplished. Raggatt *et al.* (1996) suggest that by focusing on learning and learning outcomes, in contrast to education or training, attention is directed to the individual. It is the individual who has to take responsibility for learning and for selecting what, where, and how to learn.



Bjornavold (2007) observes that the shift to learning outcomes promoted by the European Qualifications Framework, and rapidly followed by the setting up of NQFs all over Europe, may prove to be very important for the promotion of validation of non-formal learning. Bjornavold believes this is due to the general shift in emphasis through the learning outcomes approach, whereby the focus is firmly on the results and outcomes of a learning process and less on the particularities of the process itself. Bjornavold concludes that many important external pressures have contributed to triggering the development of the European Qualifications Framework and of the corresponding National Qualifications Frameworks together with the development of methods and systems for the validation of non-formal and informal learning. Migration rates are increasing, technological change is rapid, globalisation has become a reality, lifetime jobs are no longer part of career plans, and lifelong learning is a challenge for most individuals. Combined, all these factors require more flexible, inclusive and open qualifications systems.

2.1 RPL and the National Framework of Qualifications

In the European Union, a set of common principles regarding recognition of non-formal and informal learning with the aim of ensuring greater comparability between different countries and at different levels has been developed. One of the key functions, therefore, of the National Qualifications of Ireland (NQAI) is to facilitate access, transfer and progression to learners through the spectrum of educational provision. The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999, defines access, transfer, and progression as follows:

- *Access*: the process by which learners may commence a programme of education and training having received recognition for knowledge, skill and competence required;
- *Transfer*: the process by which learners may transfer from one programme of education and training to another programme having received recognition for knowledge, skill and competence acquired;
- *Progression*: the process by which learners may transfer from one programme of education and training to another programme, where each programme is of a higher level than the preceding programme.

The role of the NQAI in this area is to lead the development of the NFQ; facilitate the necessary changes in education and training systems to support access, transfer and progression; develop supplementary policies on credit, to support the recognition of prior learning and transfer and progression routes.

The NQAI, therefore, after consultation with relevant stakeholders set out principles and operational guidelines for a national approach to RPL (NQAI, 2005). These were developed as a first step in co-ordinating the work of awarding bodies and providers of RPL. They address quality, assessment, documentation, communication and guidance. These issues are critical to building confidence in recognition processes and to meeting learner needs. They draw upon national and international practice including the common European principles on the recognition of non-formal and informal learning (2004) which were adopted during the Irish Presidency of the EU. The principles and guidelines address issues of quality, assessment, documentation and procedures for the review of policy and practice.

The principles are intended to encourage the development and expansion of processes for the recognition of prior learning by education and training providers and awarding bodies so that they may:

- Communicate their commitment to the recognition of prior learning;
- Bring coherence and consistency to the recognition of prior learning;
- Remove difficulties that may confront an applicant wishing to transfer within and between the different education and training sectors.

This can be for the purposes of

- Entry to a programme leading to an award;
- Credit towards an award or exemption from some programme requirements;
- Eligibility for a full award.


The development and introduction of the NFQ since 2003 is also facilitating and encouraging RPL. The NFQ is an integrated and inclusive one and is defined as:

The single, nationally and internationally accepted entity, through which all learning achievements may be measured and related to each other in a coherent way and which defines the relationship between all education and training awards (NQAI, 2009: 4).

The rationale for the NFQ is that it will contribute to lifelong learning – in personal, social, economic and civic contexts. The recognition of prior learning in relation to achieving qualifications is part of this vision. A major objective of the NFQ is to recognise *all* learning achievements including prior learning. The NFQ provides a means by which prior learning is formally identified, assessed and acknowledged. This makes it possible for an individual to build on learning achieved and be formally rewarded for it. It aims to do this by supporting the development of alternative pathways to qualifications (or awards) and by promoting the recognition of prior learning. The NFQ does this by:

- Establishing a national point of reference or basis for RPL – learning outcomes;
- Promoting alternative pathways to qualifications;
- Promoting a more flexible and integrated system of qualifications.

The NFQ, therefore, forms the basis of a new, more flexible and integrated system of qualifications (Appendix F provides an outline of the NFQ). The need for such a system arises mainly from the national objective of moving towards a 'lifelong learning society', in which learners will be enabled to take up learning opportunities at chosen stages throughout their lives. Coughlan (2006) stated that the issue of accreditation of prior learning has long been "the subject of major debate across all sectors of the Irish educational system". Coughlan concluded that he believed the accreditation of prior experiential learning would become a central element of the development of lifelong learning in Ireland. One of the main reasons for the sense of hope was based in the work of the NQAI and its commitment to ensure that all types of learning within the educational system are recognised.



The NQAI recommends that in developing policies and operational guidelines for the promotion of RPL that co-operation and co-ordination between awarding bodies would be helpful and appropriate. The following operational guidelines build upon the principles above and are in line with the approach set out in the Policies, Actions and Procedures for Access, Transfer and Progression for Learners published by the NQAI (2003):

- Prior learning should refer to learning which has occurred before admission to a course or to the relevant stage of a course;
- Policies and procedures should clearly differentiate between the recognition of prior certified learning and the recognition of prior experiential learning;
- Prior learning should encompass all forms of learning – formal, non-formal and informal;
- The modules, programmes and awards that can be achieved on the basis of recognition of prior learning should be identified;
- The process should ensure that, where possible, the applicant can complete the recognition process in a shorter time than it would take to achieve the relevant module, programme or award;
- All programmes open to the recognition of prior learning must be expressed in terms of learning outcomes. The same learning outcomes should be used to assess all learners for a module or programme;
- Recognition of prior learning should provide opportunities for access, transfer and progression to education and training and for the achievement of an award;
- The process of recognising prior learning should maintain the standards of the NFQ and its awards;
- Recognition of prior learning should be embedded within the quality assurance procedures of the institution;
- The policies, processes and practices for the recognition of prior learning should be clearly stated and documented and be available to all potential applicants academic and administrative staff and assessors;
- Assessment criteria for the recognition of prior learning should be published, made explicit to applicants, and applied consistently and fairly;
- Assessment criteria should be based on learning outcomes of awards or standards of knowledge, skills and competencies set out in the NFQ and by the relevant awarding bodies;
- The grading and classification of awards should be available to all applicants;
- Guidance and support should be made available for applicants and all involved in the processes of recognition of prior learning;
- An appropriate appeals mechanism should be in place, and applicants should have the right of appeal;
- Policies and procedures for the recognition of prior learning should be monitored and reviewed periodically as part of the general review of quality assurance procedures in place to determine effectiveness;
- Appropriate resources to support the processes for the recognition of prior learning should be in place;
- Collaboration across sectors and between awarding bodies, providers and stakeholders should be encouraged.

As stated previously, the NFQ was introduced in 2003. The NQAI, therefore, considered it timely to investigate the extent to which the Framework and its related policies on access, transfer and progression have been implemented during its first five years in existence. The NQAI commissioned an international study team to undertake such research on its behalf. The findings of the *Framework Implementation and Impact Study* (2009) underscore a demand for greater availability of RPL from many stakeholders, for example, Skillnets; Irish Small and Medium Enterprises (ISME), and the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA). Other issues in relation to RPL include:

- *Inconsistency in how RPL is used for the entry of mature students to higher education.* There is no transparent system in place to gauge how prior non-formal or informal learning is valued in entry processes.
- *Different weightings associated with RPL.* Different weightings are being given to RPL in relation to nurses, in particular to qualifications achieved by nurses prior to those currently required for registration (e.g. for entry and exemptions to postgraduate programmes). Similar differences appear to apply to craft awards and to the recognition of qualifications in the workplace.
- *Lack of recognition of awards through RPL.* Learners who have accessed and successfully completed postgraduate programmes (e.g. conversion type diplomas at Level 8) on the basis of RPL may find that they are disenfranchised from entry to higher education programmes or to employment where they have not achieved the requisite Honours Bachelor Degree.
- *Resource requirements for RPL.* These are significant at both further and higher education training levels (NQAI, 2009: 28-29).

The study team observed that the adoption of RPL policies is dependent on an acceptance amongst providers and professional accreditation bodies of Framework learning outcomes and a deeper embedding of the Framework. Overall, the report concluded that there continues to be considerable scope for the acceptance and use of RPL across the education and training system. The overall position in Ireland is typical of the situation in relation to RPL in other OECD countries (OECD, 2008).



3.0 Introduction

This chapter summarises the varying RPL practices within the project partner institutions and uses them to develop proposed generic process maps for RPL and to explore various roles and other related issues typically encountered in developing RPL. During the course of the project, the working group members presented a set of questions and a workshop discussion on the existing RPL practices within each partner institution. In this way, the varieties and similarities in practice were explored and the different actors in the processes and their varying roles and responsibilities were discussed. The underlying RPL enablers were sought in order to determine factors that might facilitate development, and an attempt was made to identify the barriers to further development or scaling up of RPL activity.

The chapter also highlights some of the policy and practice issues within third-level *Education in Employment* partner institutions. While the autonomy of any individual institution must be paramount, the research findings point to a set of issues or questions which may arise and, where feasible, suggests approaches for addressing some of these issues.

3.1 Pre-existing RPL Practices

The national report on RPL compiled for the OECD (2007) was the first attempt to report comprehensively on RPL policy and practice in Ireland. The report revealed a lack of comparative data on practice, participation rates, and outcomes for learners. A wide range of RPL practice, policy, and procedures was evident. The report also illustrated that much RPL practice is localised: specific to particular groups of learners, programmes, or sectors. The report concluded that awareness and understanding of RPL was limited and the numbers of learners involved were relatively few (www.nqai.ie).

Despite the findings of the 2007 report, it is now widely acknowledged that the Recognition of Prior Learning is not new within the Irish third-level system. In particular, there has been considerable development since the 1990s, facilitated and supported by the National Council of Educational Awards (NCEA) and the NCEA Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning process and by its successor organisations, Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) and Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC). The increasing importance attached to lifelong learning provision and the introduction of higher standards/qualifications as a requirement for professional practice have acted as a catalyst for RPL developments in some areas, for example the changed qualification requirement in the nursing profession in recent years. In some cases the need for certification in a particular sector has been the driving force. Over the last decade, within the Institutes of Technology, RPL policies and practices have been developed and, in some cases, resources applied to RPL at varying degrees. Within the University sector, generally, there is less formal development of RPL practices, but there are instances of RPL, in particular for entry to programmes where the entry requirement may not have been met formally. In some cases, for example, learners can access Level 9 Master's programmes without having achieved the usually required Level 8 qualification for entry.

The Lónra Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) project 2006-2007 received funding from FÁS, the National Training Authority, under the 'Training for People in Employment Initiative'. Lónra, the higher education network for the Border, Midland and Western (BMW) region of Ireland was established in 2001. Membership of the network


comprised five Institutes of Technology: Athlone (AIT), Dundalk (DKIT), Galway–Mayo (GMIT), Letterkenny (LYIT), Sligo (IT Sligo), the National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG), St Angela’s College, Sligo, and the BMW Regional Assembly. The Lónra APL project aimed to provide a collaborative response to the education and development challenges facing the BMW Region. The project sought the development and application of a standard model to recognise and accredit prior learning in Information Technology for companies operating in the BMW region. While considerable work had been undertaken by academic institutions and policy makers, the Lónra project’s collaborative approach, similar to that later adopted by the *Education in Employment* project, presented an opportunity to explore RPL issues and opportunities in a shared and co-operative way and made a practical contribution to future developments.

At the initial stages of the *Education in Employment* project, it was recognised that the academic partners, some of whom had been participants in the Lónra APL project, as well as other European-funded initiatives were at very different stages of RPL readiness and engagement. The focus of the *Education in Employment* project, therefore, was to facilitate continued RPL engagement and ensure the development of RPL opportunities through sharing experiences and identifying good practice within the consortium.

It is evident that formal and official policy and support, including adequate resource allocation, is required to make RPL processes effective and sustainable over the longer term. It is clearly recognised at the level of an individual applicant and at a political level, that enabling people to build on, rather than repeat, their learning is cost effective and readily facilitates individuals, organisations, and society when responding to challenges in a flexible and dynamic manner.

While the focus of RPL within Europe is underpinned by the European Union principles (2002), practice varies significantly from country to country, and within Ireland the practice varies from institution to institution. The *Education in Employment* project recognised that, for meaningful change to be implemented, open dialogue between organisations, employers, education providers, and employment agencies must take place in a positive and supportive climate. The *Education in Employment* project aimed to stimulate such discussion and, through sharing knowledge and experience, to identify good practice. In working together, it was not expected that a uniform approach should necessarily be adopted but rather that appropriate and informed practices should be developed in organisations, resulting in clear guidelines and expectations for learners. Within the Irish education system the general principles for RPL have been set out by the NQAI (2005). These include the following tenets:

- The recognition of prior learning will give value to all learning, no matter how that learning is achieved;
- Participation in recognition is a voluntary matter for the individual;
- Recognition of prior learning will be part of an inclusive approach to learning by the education and training providers and awarding bodies;
- Recognition of prior learning will provide opportunities for access transfer and progression to education and training providers and for the achievement of an award;
- Recognition of prior learning will provide opportunities for learners to participate on an active basis in society in general and within a workplace context.



In third-level institutions in Ireland, the RPL process generally functions as a mechanism by which prior learning is measured and assessed against an existing programme or award standard. In the case of a claim for access or entry, the learner seeks to have their learning recognised as generally meeting the award standard required for access to the destination programme. In the case of a claim for exemption, the learner seeks to have their learning recognised and measured against a module or modules of the destination programme to allow them to gain exemptions from those module(s). In the case of a claim for an award, the learner seeks to present their learning against an entire award standard and to be granted that award based on their learning as presented and evidenced. The systems in other jurisdictions vary: in some cases RPL is a process that recognises experiential learning in its own right in the context of personal development and labour-market priorities and not referenced against a programme or award. In yet other jurisdictions RPL is a process that sees the awarding of 'open' credits that can be used against a number of programmes or in their own right.

The *Education in Employment* project recognised that RPL practice, capacity, and capability varied significantly between the academic partners. The project, therefore, did not seek uniformity; rather it sought to ensure that RPL policies and practices in individual institutions were appropriate to their overall educational strategy and state of readiness for RPL. The practice between organisations varies, not only in scale but also in respective levels of requirements for advanced entry or exemptions awarded. Organisations who have focused only on accreditation of prior *certified* learning tend to view the process as merely administrative whereas those who have developed expertise in evaluating and assessing prior informal and non-formal learning tend to see the process as one involving academic staff across all disciplines and at all levels. These different approaches reflect the current status of practice within organisations, including that some institutions are neither ready nor even willing to embrace RPL.

In general, it was evident that the *Education in Employment* partner institutions do not process claims for full awards. The focus of this work, therefore, is on the recognition of either certified or experiential prior learning, or a combination of both, for the purpose of gaining entry to a course of study or for the purpose of gaining exemption from a module or modules.

3.2 Scale of RPL Activity within *Education in Employment* Partner Institutions

When assessing the level of RPL activity in partner institutions some fundamental difficulties arose when setting up a series of metrics for comparable measures. As the processing of applications for entry, based on prior certified learning, can be treated as an administrative task which can occur at the admissions, departmental, or other functions, application processing was not included in the first measure of activity. For the purposes of comparison and to ensure that progress could be mapped under the project, we asked all partners to enumerate the number of RPL applications that were based, in part or solely, on the presentation of a 'portfolio' of evidence of experiential learning by the learner. The level of activity was markedly different between the project partners: varying within an academic year from less than 10 such applications to more than 500. Rather than making a comparison, as such, between partners, the purpose of this discussion was to quantify the existing level of activity and to monitor the relative increase in activity over the lifetime of the project. It also became evident that the national and regional imperatives for developments in RPL increased over the lifetime of the project to date. The number of RPL applications increased, either due to a better understood RPL capability and increased capacity within the partner institutions or due to economic imperatives encouraging more learners with experience back into education.

3.3 Agreement on and Implementation of Institutional Policies on RPL

At the commencement of the project, five of the project partners had policy documents on RPL agreed within their academic system. One of the most useful exercises conducted was the sharing of those existing policy documents and the exploration of the content in the context of national and international publications. Following considerable discussions it was agreed that a single RPL policy within institutions was not achievable. The aim, therefore, was to have a single 'top-level' outline policy agreed by all partners and to ensure that the various institutional policies as implemented within the individual institutions would be in broad agreement with the single top-level document. During the course of the project the majority of partners' policies were reviewed, revised, and adopted by their respective institutions. By August 2009 a high level policy document was agreed, and all *Education in Employment* project partners had an RPL policy/practice document in their institutions. The partners also had the advantage of familiarity with the other partners' RPL policies. It was agreed that project outcomes would be disseminated as generic documents, rather than the product of an individual partner. The guideline document on RPL policy and policy issues, included in Appendix B, is one of these documents.

3.4 RPL: Learner Information and Quality Assurance

The working group agreed that all third-level institutions should develop and maintain quality assured procedures for RPL, including the promotion of RPL to the learner and to the employer where appropriate. RPL policies, procedures, and processes should be explicitly included in quality assurance procedures within institutions to ensure that qualifications achieved in part or in full through RPL are of the same quality and have the same standing as qualifications achieved as a consequence of formal education and training.

Information for learners and prospective employers might include:

- Information and advice on subjects, modules, competencies, courses, and qualifications for which RPL can be used to establish access and exemptions;
- Information on how to apply for RPL, contact details for further information and for support in preparing applications, and information about timelines, appeals processes, and fees;
- An outline of the learning or competency outcomes against which learners will be assessed;
- Information about appeal mechanisms, which should be provided at the commencement of RPL procedures and made available throughout a learner's enrolment in a programme;
- Advice to learners on the RPL assessment process, the kind of evidence they can use, the forms in which it can be presented, and, where appropriate, a guide as to what is considered sufficient and valid evidence;
- Information on administrative processes for receiving RPL applications, administering assessment, recording results, advising students of the outcome, and administering appeals processes;
- Designation of responsibilities and accountabilities for undertaking RPL assessments;
- An outline of different assessment processes that may be used;

- 
- An outline of the manner in which RPL policies, processes, and assessments are quality assured.

Clear and transparent quality assurance mechanisms are essential for ensuring confidence in RPL decisions. These quality assurance arrangements should be included in negotiations with all stakeholders. The findings from the Lónra project also underscore the need for clear information and transparency. An example of a learner guideline document, including guidance on the process of developing the required portfolio of evidence, is provided in Appendix D.

3.5 RPL Process Map

Exploration of policy and practice on RPL throughout the consortium through questionnaires and in-depth discussion fora allowed a generic process map for different elements of RPL to emerge. This process map does not represent any particular process within a specific institution but is broadly representative of good practice emerging from a discourse on existing RPL arrangements and from an amalgamation of inputs from the contributing academic institutions. This illustration of the Recognition of Prior Learning process is intended to be a sample guide and is in no way meant to be prescriptive. In this case the map allows an exploration of roles often encountered in the systems and of the issues that arise in practice which were explored through the *Education in Employment* project deliberations.

Figure 1 illustrates a process whereby RPL is sought for exemption from an element of a programme. In this case, the learner is generally required to demonstrate that they have met all of the learning outcomes of the module(s) for which exemption is being sought. The partner institutions reported that these cases are most often encountered for part-time programmes where non-standard learners bring significant learning to a particular programme. Non-standard learning can be certified or experiential, or in some cases a combination of these. The process map attempts to identify various roles and stages and to show the relationships between these. While these roles are shown separately, single individuals can be responsible for a number of these roles in any institution. For instance the administrative and academic guidance roles may be carried out by a single individual in some cases. Separating the roles is meant to draw attention to the different stages of the process and to contribute to the discussions on appropriate resourcing levels.

Figure 1: RPL for Exemption – Experiential and/or Certified Learning

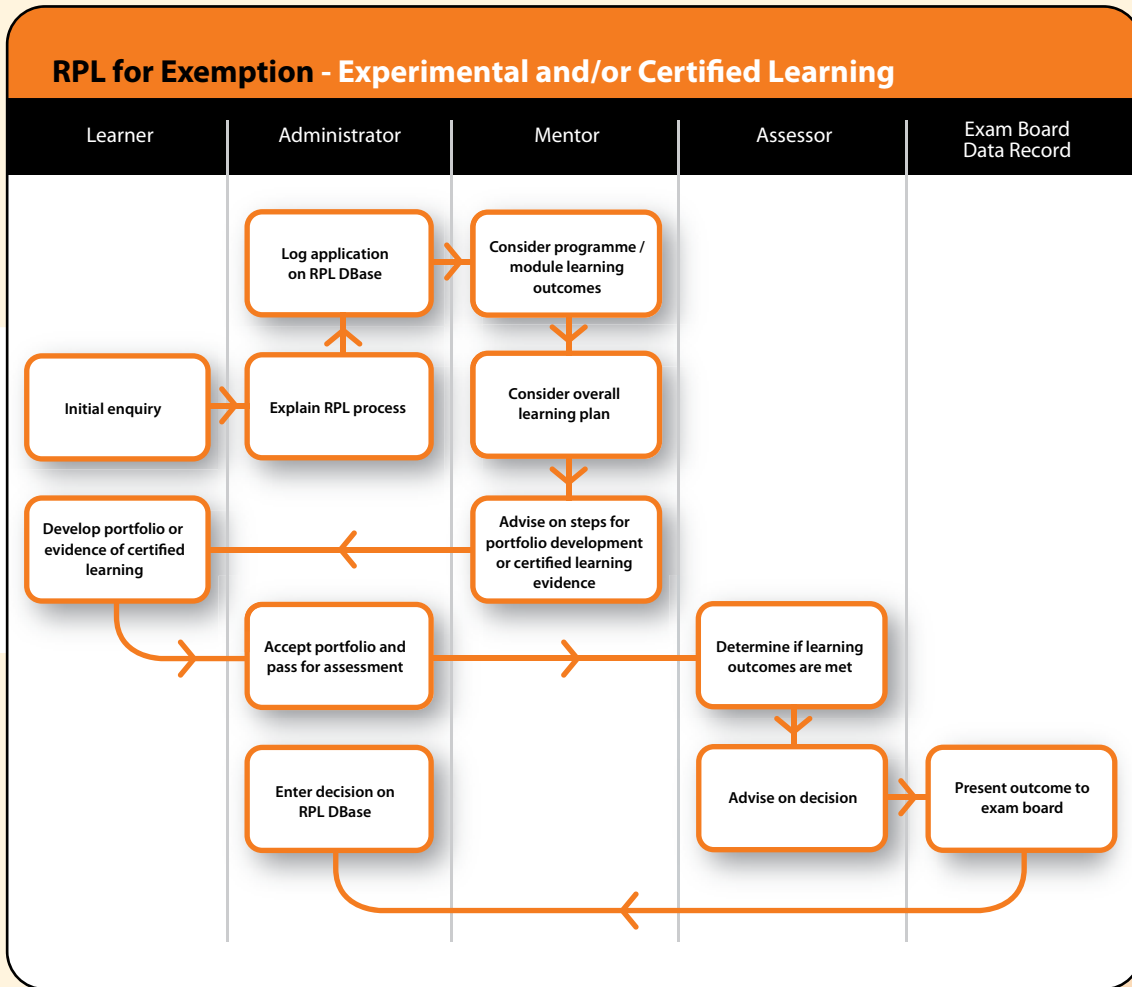


Figure 2: RPL for Entry

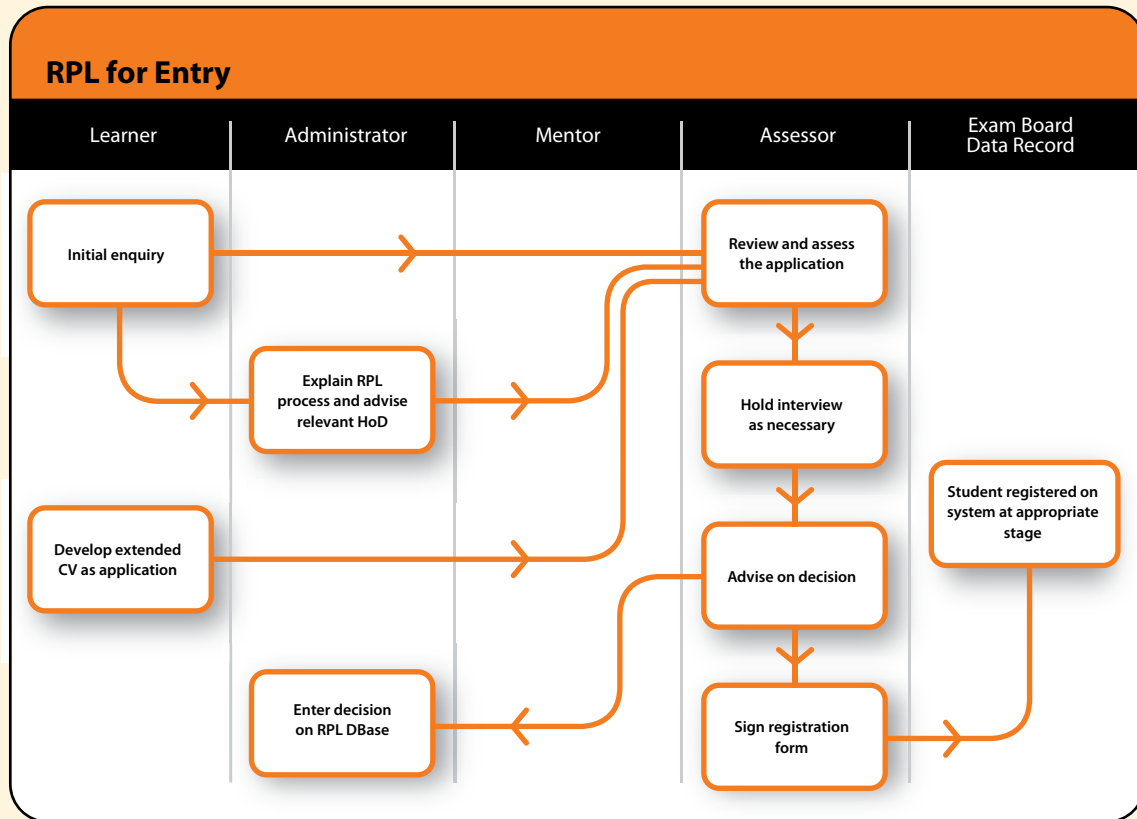


Figure 2 shows a RPL process for entry to a programme. In this case, the learner is seeking to enter a programme for which they do not have the required formal prerequisite, for instance, a learner who enters a Master's programme without the cognate Level 8 honours degree. In these cases, a more holistic approach is generally taken where the responsible academic, with sanction from their Head of Department, makes a general decision about the eligibility of the learner to enter a programme. Typically, this requires the learner to present an extended curriculum vitae (CV) and to undergo a semi-formal interview. In this case, a learner's prior learning can be formally 'recognised' for entry but is not usually considered to be 'credited'. The learner, for example, applying for entry to a Level 9 course would not be granted the Level 8 award in such cases. It is generally understood that this use of RPL for entry is under-reported as in many cases the learner engages directly with the appropriate academic department and may not go through a central RPL advisory body or office, even where such a service exists.

In the case of the processes represented above, the major considerations focus on roles and responsibilities, the timing of various processes, and the thresholds and limits placed on the use of RPL, and these are explored in more detail.

3.6 Roles in the RPL Process

Where RPL is to be marketed and scaled up as an entry mechanism and as a service to employers, sufficient resources must be provided to ensure that the learner and, where appropriate, the employer receive an appropriate level of service. Identifying a number of different RPL roles, the process maps can be used as reference points for informing institutional decisions on RPL resources. Most institutions have not decided whether RPL roles should be administered centrally or if these functions should be distributed throughout the administrative and academic resources of the various Faculties/Schools and Departments. There are arguments supporting both approaches. One benefit of having at least some dedicated RPL resource or function centralised would be to facilitate the collation of overall RPL data. Where there is a central RPL administrative resource, the central admissions, registration, and examinations processes of the institution must also play a role. Distributing the RPL functions has the advantage of ensuring a greater spread of RPL awareness, capability, and credibility throughout the staff cohort. From the perspective of academic quality and of quality assurance the academic assessment role must, however, be independent of the advisory role.

The working group agreed that RPL processes should include and clearly indicate academic and administrative responsibilities and accountabilities, and these should be widely publicised both within institutions and to potential learners. The potential for RPL should be offered prior to or when enrolling, and RPL follow-up processes should continue to be available while the learner is enrolled in a programme. Support should be available to learners in either a formal group or an informal setting to learn the skills needed to gain RPL. Processes should be timely and, where possible, decisions should be made as close as possible to the commencement of a programme. The main roles in the RPL process typically include: the learner; the RPL mentor; and the RPL assessor

The Learner

The learner is the person who applies to have their prior learning assessed. All RPL processes require the applicant to provide evidence of appropriate past learning, whether certified and/or experiential learning. Guidance, support, and mentoring should be provided for applicants wishing to submit evidence for assessment. Contact points for advice, support, and mentoring should be clearly signposted. The learner should be:

- Fully informed of the application process, including its different stages, and of the nature and range of evidence that is considered appropriate to support an RPL claim;
- Supported in developing their understanding of the intended learning outcomes, against which prior learning will be assessed;
- Supported to develop reflective capacity skills in the identification of learning outcomes;
- Informed in relation to fees that are payable for the consideration of claims for the accreditation of prior learning;
- Given clear guidance on when a claim for the accreditation of prior learning may be submitted, the timescale for considering the claim, and the outcome;
- Required to provide an original transcript of previous results and relevant syllabus information, if possible, where prior certificated learning is the basis of RPL.



The RPL Mentor

Mentoring helps people to realise their potential and can combine elements of giving advice, counselling, and coaching. The RPL mentor should discuss the role of both the learner and mentor at the beginning of the process to ensure a mutual understanding of the relationship. Morton (2003) advises, "there must be clarity as to the purpose of mentoring and what it is intended to achieve. All parties involved in the process must be clear about the intended outcomes." The role of the RPL mentor is to advise the applicant on RPL planning, evidence gathering, and portfolio building. The mentor should provide the applicant with relevant information and guidelines on RPL policy and procedures and should provide information on the assessment process. The RPL mentor may include meeting with learner(s) on an individual basis and/or group basis to discuss progress. Meetings with learners should be timetabled to take place at appropriate points during the RPL process. The content of those discussions should be kept confidential.

The RPL mentor should:

- Provide initial guidance on the RPL process;
- Provide guidance on the gathering and presenting of evidence of learning;
- Facilitate opportunities for the applicant's further learning and development;
- Support applicants in the reflective process, for identifying learning through experience (skills, knowledge, and competence);
- Support applicants in selecting and producing evidence of that learning, and identify areas for further learning;
- Provide unbiased constructive criticism, guidance and feedback;
- Avoid or be prepared to explain academic jargon;
- Encourage applicants to make links between learning and their work practice;
- Help applicants with any practical or conceptual difficulties with the RPL process;
- Encourage applicants to take responsibility for their own learning and help to build their confidence.

Garavan *et al.* (2003) assert that the focus of mentoring must be on helping the learner. They further suggest that, while direct advice and instruction from the mentor can be helpful, it is important to ensure that learners think for themselves and that the mentoring process does not, either intentionally or unintentionally, create a dependence where they just blindly follow the mentor's instructions and cannot take action without advice. Both the Lionra APL project and the *Education in Employment* project have explicit aims relating to the development of workplace mentors. The two projects acknowledge that in many cases the recognition of prior learning can be initiated, supported, and facilitated through employers and employer organisations. The development of well-informed workplace mentors can play an important role in reducing demand for more resources from the third-level provider.

The RPL Assessor

The assessor is responsible for the assessment of the individual RPL case. The assessor should be a subject specialist with experience of using a range of assessment techniques. Assessors should be requested to assess only learning outcomes which they are competent to assess. Each case is assessed against the learning outcomes of the destination module or programme. Training is required for the assessment of prior experiential learning as this type of learning normally takes place in an unstructured way and in many different and untypical learning contexts.

When assessing **prior certified learning** the assessor will consider the following:

- **Level of prior award in the NFQs:** The prior learning must be at the same level or higher in the NFQ in comparison to the programme the learner is currently undertaking or proposing to undertake. An applicant, for example, seeking an exemption from a Level 7 module must have completed an equivalent Level 7 module or higher. In the case of international awards clarification can be sought from the NQAI as to the comparable level in the Irish system;
- **Learning outcomes:** The learning outcomes of the module(s) previously certified must be similar to the learning outcome of the module(s) the learner seeks exemption in;
- **Timeframe of Learning Outcomes:** The prior certified learning must have been achieved within a relatively recent timescale, but the currency of the learning can depend on the particular discipline.

When assessing prior experiential learning, the assessor will consider the following:

- The likely ability of the applicant to meet the learning outcomes;
- The ability of the applicant to meet the standard of learning on the NFQ;
- The ability of the applicant to demonstrate that they are capable of applying the learning in a new context;

The assessment process is essential for quality assurance and for building confidence in the RPL process. The *Líonra* project recognised this issue of assessment as difficult and highlighted the need for fairness between traditional and RPL assessment processes. In order to contribute to the debate on and development of appropriate assessment methodology and practice, a summary of the assessment guidelines developed through the *Education in Employment* project is provided in Appendix C.



3.7 Timelines in the RPL Process

One of the major points of discussion in any RPL process is the timing of the various trigger events and the impact that timing has for both the learner and the institution. Generally, most RPL applicants begin the process of making their application at approximately the same time, or at best a few weeks before, the module delivery begins.

Most of the *Education in Employment* third-level partners agreed that, while there should be a lenient policy in terms of the opportunity for learners to apply for RPL and to prepare their portfolios, from the assessment and administration perspective, there should be a date beyond which an application cannot be considered within a given semester. From a learner perspective, learners usually require an outcome of the RPL process as soon as possible so they will be able, for example, to make a decision to enrol for a particular module if their RPL application is unsuccessful.

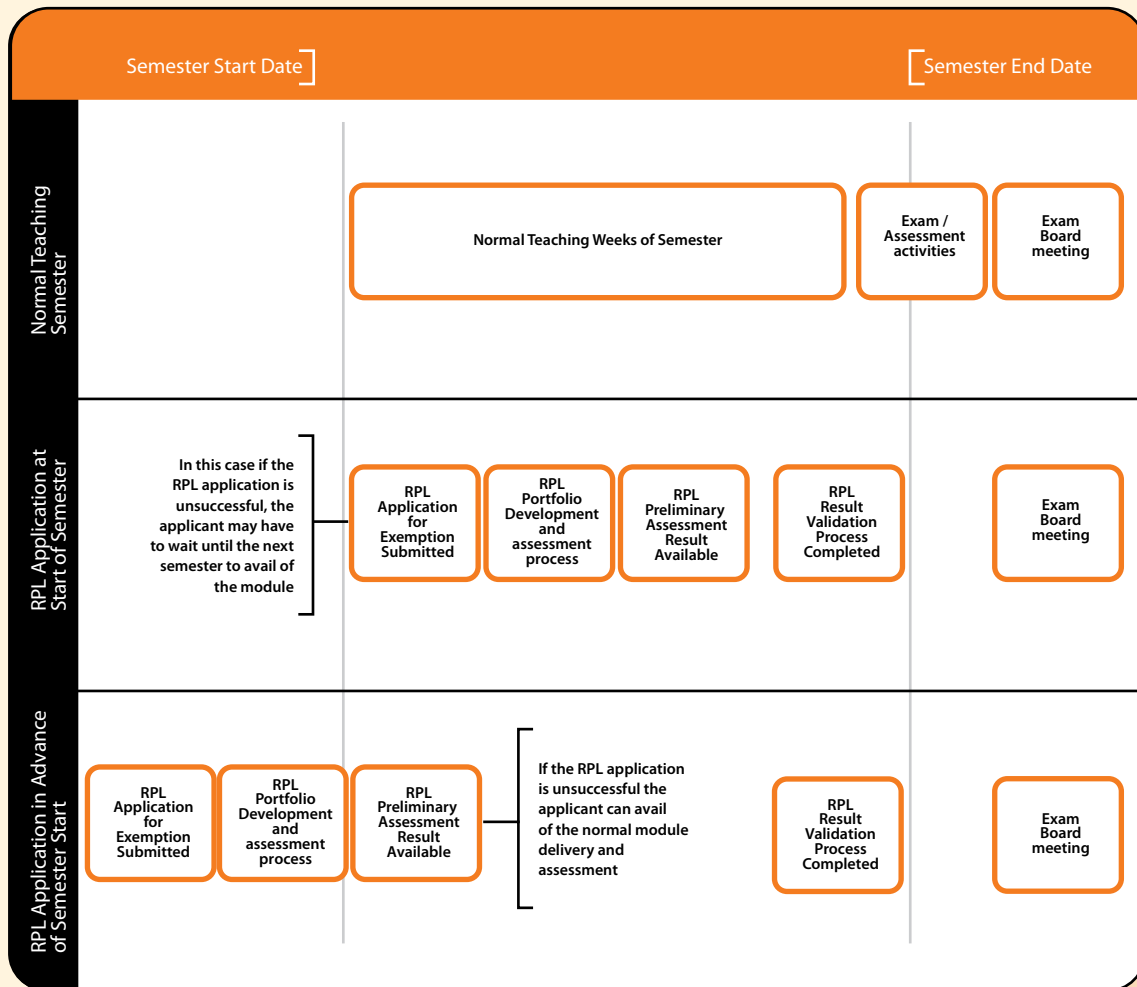
In a modularised and semesterised system, semester duration is usually 12 to 14 weeks. In the case of prior certified learning, the preparation and assessment of the evidence can be reasonably straightforward. In some cases, however, complications can occur when supporting documentation is in a foreign language. In the case where claims are based on prior experiential learning, the timeline is very demanding when providing guidance on the preparation and assessment of a portfolio of learning mapped to the learning outcomes of the module in question.

The RPL process should be marketed, supported, and assessed in advance of the semester in which the module is delivered, to allow learners whose application is unsuccessful the option of conventional enrolment and assessment. Allowing the learner to register for a particular module in advance of the delivery schedule has implications for the institution. A question that arises here is if one can register a learner on the institutional records system and charge them the appropriate fee for a particular module before that module is delivered or available. There is an issue, therefore, about the timeline when an 'official' admission/registration form for RPL applicants is completed and entered in official records. This can be especially fraught where the RPL route is separated from the standard application route.

Another issue that arises is the point in time when the result of the RPL application is entered into the official examination records. Following the assessment of the portfolio or consideration of the certified evidence, the result in most cases is subject to ratification by a modular exam board or a specially convened RPL validation board, in line with the QA processes within the particular RPL system. If this board is not convened until the end of a given semester, the learner cannot get an 'official' answer to their application until that time. Ideally, the learner should be advised of the outcome of the assessment process at the earliest possible opportunity.

Where an institution is working with a group of learners in partnership with an employer, the timing issue is often dealt with by a customisation of the destination programme so that it would incorporate an RPL process, in some cases, including a credit-earning module around the development of a portfolio. Figure 3 depicts the normal teaching semester and an indication of the timing involved if the RPL application is made the start of Semester or in advance of the Semester beginning.

Figure 3: Examples of RPL Timelines





3.8 Awarding Grades for RPL, and Limits on Attainable Credits for RPL

In the case of any application for RPL exemptions from programme modules, much concern and discussion centres on the outcome of each particular assessment process. Across all project partner institutions, when prior certified learning is presented for an exemption an 'X' is entered on the examination transcript to indicate that the learner has been exempted from that element but, generally, no grade is awarded. In non-award stages this usually has no implication for the learner but in award stages this may lead to an 'unclassified' award. A core issue arises where prior experiential learning is presented against the learning outcomes of a particular module. In this case, some of the *Education in Employment* project partners award a grade based on an assessment of the portfolio regardless of the stage. With some of the project partners a grade was awarded only if it was at an award stage, while in yet other cases only an exemption, 'X', is offered, regardless of stage.

In the case of experiential learning, the learner usually presents material which has not been previously assessed or granted credits, and also provides evidence of meeting the learning outcomes of the relevant module for the first time. The capability of the academic institution to validly assess and award grades to evidence of learning outcomes achieved, regardless of where the learning was gained is what is challenged here.

A further issue relevant to the RPL process is the limit or threshold on the number of RPL credits that can be attained at any particular stage in a programme. Where a limit is applied, it is generally 50% of the available credits in a non-award stage, and less in an award stage. Limits on the presentation of prior certified learning are usually more restrictive than those on the presentation of prior experiential learning. As it is at least theoretically possible under the NQAI guidelines for a learner to claim a full award through the RPL route, there is some disagreement about the appropriateness of limits in this context.

3.9 Costs of RPL Provision

An analysis of RPL processes and roles would not be complete without discussing the issue of costs associated with RPL. There are a number of perspectives on the issue of costs. From an institutional perspective a clear picture of the cost of providing an RPL service is difficult to arrive at for a number of reasons. First, many of the costs associated with the process are hidden or absorbed into other cost centres. Second, most institutions do not gather information on RPL activities centrally and where this information is gathered centrally it is generally only the number of processed applications for exemption that are counted and not the number of enquiries or engagements that do not yield a completed application. Third, an exact measure of the administration processing, guidance, mentoring, and assessment associated with each learner is not captured in any institution within the partnership. In the case of RPL for entry there is even less information available.

From the perspective of the learner and costs associated with the RPL process, the learner usually pays less for an application based on certified learning than for an application based on experiential learning. The learner applying for entry based on RPL usually does not pay a separate RPL fee. The fee for certified learning is of the order of the examination fee for the module from which exemption is sought, and the fee for exemption based on experiential learning can range up to the full module tuition fee. In some cases there is a separate 'processing' fee charged. These fees generally apply to part-time learners only, with no fees applied in most cases for full-time learners who apply for exemptions. The full-time student, however, is liable for the full registration fee.

In the case of some of the partner institutions, a fee is paid to assessors for appraising portfolios. This practice would reflect practices developed by institutions previously involved in the *Líonra* project. In other institutions there is no separate fee for assessment. In discussions on payment for portfolio assessment, the working group proposed that the assessment of experiential learning should be viewed in line with the assessment of project material at the appropriate level, and be remunerated accordingly. The working group agreed that, ideally, RPL processes should generally be aligned between the various institutions. Any future reintroduction of fees for full-time students might also have implications for the costing of RPL processes within institutions.

3.10 Capacity and Capability for RPL

Through the *Education in Employment* project, significant training activities on RPL at various levels have taken place both within individual institutions and inter-institutionally. Regional symposia on RPL which have taken place have been open to institutions outside the *Education in Employment* partnership. Training has included sessions on awareness-raising, sessions on promoting better practice, and the presentations of case studies. In addition, a Level 9 module on RPL was piloted by Dublin Institute of Technology in the second semester of 2008/09 and offered again in the first semester of 2009/10. These training activities are aimed at enhancing RPL provision through better informed dialogue and by facilitating the mainstreaming of RPL activity. If RPL activity is to be sustained and scaled up within a given institution then academic staff need to be involved as assessors, mentors, and supporters of the process. It is also recognised within the partner institutions that training and development in the areas of non-examination assessment has implications for all forms of flexible and work-based learning and will act as an enabler for more open and responsive assessment methods throughout the sector.

3.11 Engagement with Employers and Employer Organisations

The progress within the *Education in Employment* partner institutions in engaging with the workplaces has varied, largely because of regional and institutional priorities. In the case of some of the higher education institutions, there is a clear strategy to develop RPL in line with employer or other sectoral needs and to market RPL through workplaces rather than to individuals. Other institutions have developed both approaches, putting resources in place to facilitate individual RPL claims and also marketing RPL through workplace partnerships. A number of partners have been involved in offering RPL training and/or mentoring to employers and employer organisations, for example, the Irish Naval Service, Skillnets, ICTU, etc. The function of RPL engagement with employers has a number of facets. It acts as a marketing device for RPL and an incentive for workplaces to engage with third-level education generally. The employer can also take on a supporting role in the process and, by taking part in the mentoring and guidance process, can alleviate the resource load within the third-level provider. This building of the mentoring role within employer organisations has led to formal training being offered by some of the participating institutions to their workplace mentors, and in many cases these mentors also acted as facilitators for work-based learning. Another advantage of a partnership approach to RPL is the resulting growth in RPL awareness and understanding within the employer organisation, which in turn builds trust in the process and value in the outcomes.



3.12 RPL Barriers and Enablers

The *Education in Employment* project did not focus solely on enabling the development of relevant learning opportunities for the workplace learner. One of the main objectives of the project was to contribute to the reform of systems and structures within the higher education institutions in relation to workplace learning and to bring improved practices into the mainstream activity of the institutions.

In attempting to identify potential areas for reform or for restructuring the *Education in Employment* project, partners were asked to identify the main barriers to and enablers of the enhancement of the RPL process in their individual institutions. The responses received are summarised below.

3.12.1 Barriers to RPL

Student Record Systems

When asked to identify the main barriers to development and scaling up of RPL activity in individual institutions, working party representatives from a number of institutions — notably institutions with the most significant RPL practice built up — identified problems relating to student records and management information systems as barriers to successful RPL. Difficulties or deterrents included: rigidity of the institutional record system, difficulty in clearly and consistently recording students who are granted exemptions, implications for the students' full-time status and delays in the portfolio development and assessment process. It was agreed that these are not insurmountable difficulties but would need to be addressed for the development of robust RPL systems. These system issues were also reported in the *Lionra* project. The recording of the outcome of the process and how this is translated to the Diploma Supplement was also considered. The working group recommended that, where experiential learning is awarded a grade and included in a final award, these grades should not be differentiated on the Diploma Supplement.

Time Involved in the Preparation and Assessment of Portfolios

The length of time required to prepare and assess a portfolio of experiential learning was identified as a concern and, often, an RPL barrier at some of the institutions. Where the preparation of the portfolio is contemporaneous with the delivery of the module in question there can be serious concerns over any delay in portfolio preparation. The major concern is that the learner may fail in their bid for RPL and may have opted not to take the lectures or tuition in that subject, thereby missing their chance to undertake the conventional assessment methods on offer. It was noted that learners initially often underestimate the time and effort required to complete a portfolio and, following mentoring and advice sessions, some of the potential RPL applicants opt to undertake the modules through the conventional route. Particular circumstances, however, can vary significantly and the timing issue is often not a difficulty where a cohort of learners is progressing through the RPL process in a planned and managed way in collaboration with an employer partner.

RPL Costs

RPL costs can be a barrier for the learner and for the provider. One of the issues explored by the RPL working group is the lack of clarity and transparency around RPL costing. As referred to above, the process to recognise prior certified learning has a very different resource requirement than that required to advise and guide a learner on the preparation and assessment of a portfolio. The working party agreed that the RPL process could be

important for incentivising learners towards third-level education, therefore neither the costs nor the process should act as a barrier to the learner.

Academic Language and Jargon

In some cases, the language in which the learning outcomes are couched, even terms such as 'learning outcomes', can deter potential applicants who have not previously engaged in third-level education. Some of the *Education in Employment* partners have already engaged with the process of re-phrasing terminology concerning the learning outcomes of modules which are often the subject of RPL claims. The working group is also providing examples of prior learning evidence at the appropriate level that can be used to meet specific requirements. In cases where an institution is working with numbers of learners, the provision of readily understandable exemplars can be very effective in encouraging RPL applicants.

3.12.2 Enablers of RPL

Policy and Process

An approved policy on RPL is one of the main building blocks for successful development of RPL. Currently, the build-up of practice and experience based on an approved RPL policy within any institution acts as an incentive for developments. In the case of many of the partners the ongoing development of RPL policy and the clear upholding of academic standards are facilitated through a sub-group of Academic Council or equivalent.

Institutional Capacity and Capability


An institution's RPL capability requires adequate staff capability in RPL-related administrative, mentoring, and assessment functions. Building this capability and, as far as possible, ensuring that the required capacity is quantified and available, will result in enhanced opportunities through RPL. Building assessment capability as it relates to problem- and project-based learning, and work-based and flexible learning will translate well into RPL and vice versa.

Point of Contact

Some partners believed that a clearly identifiable point of contact and a dedicated resource and/or office for RPL was a significant factor in growing and developing RPL activity and ensuring that the learner believed that this resource was readily accessible to them. Under the SIF *Education in Employment* project funding many partners put a dedicated RPL resource in place or supplemented resources that already existed. One of the significant questions at the close of the project will be the sustainability of this dedicated RPL resource.

Robust Quality Assurance (QA) Systems and Well Designed Programmes

A perception can be held by some people in the academic community and in other areas that the recognition of prior learning allows an easy or easier route to an award for a learner, or that the learner does not hold the same level of knowledge, skills, and competence as a learner who went through the traditional learning route. The experience of learners and academics involved in the RPL process, however, is that the route to exemption, based on prior experiential learning is difficult and rigorous. The application of transparent and robust QA systems should help to build more widespread confidence in RPL systems.



Experience and practice would indicate that there are modules which are commonly the focus of RPL claims — modules where the learning outcomes focus on particular skillsets and application of those skillsets, for example, computer programming or project management. On the other hand, there are some modules which may never be the subject of an RPL claim, for example, advanced mathematics, or other highly analytical elements. The onus is on the academic institution to ensure that programmes leading to awards consist of an appropriate mix of knowledge, skills, and competence at the appropriate level. This should enable the guidance and mentoring function to clearly identify and distinguish modules and learning outcomes as either inside or outside the normal range of experiential learning.

Compilation of RPL Data

It was clear that information on the RPL process and RPL applications was not collected in a uniform and comparable manner among the institutions represented by the project partners. It was agreed that the availability of information on RPL practice within institutions would serve a number of purposes. From an internal organisational perspective, the availability of a precedence database would allow an assessor to view the outcome of previous cases and assist in the consistency of assessment processes. The compilation of information on certified cases could, for instance, allow the granting of exemptions on a cohort basis to holders of particular certified learning pathways. The collection and sharing of information could, as a matter of course, allow recognition of learning from professional bodies and private providers. For example, an in-depth consideration of a set of Irish Management Institute (IMI) examinations against the learning outcomes of a stage 1 module in Business Studies might be accepted as a precedent and allow other learners to have such learning recognised without the need for further in-depth consideration. Equally, success in the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) could be accepted against an introductory level computer skills module once the institution had completed one comprehensive mapping exercise. As well as ensuring greater internal consistency this can be seen as a marketing opportunity which could be advertised to potential learners.

Compilation of information on experiential learning cases could assist in developing exemplars for potential learners to illustrate how evidence can be successfully presented against particular learning outcomes. The compiled information should also assist the higher education provider in identifying the discipline and modules which are most commonly the subject of RPL claims and should therefore assist in the identification of resources and capability required.

Collection of data on earlier RPL queries and unsuccessful bids should assist in the development of advisory information which can be made available to learners in advance and to avoid similar unsuccessful applications in the future.

3.13 Concluding Remarks

This chapter draws on the work completed under the RPL strand of the SIF *Education in Employment* project and uses the findings as a basis for contributing to the development of a roadmap for RPL. The chapter summarises the work undertaken for the project and, where appropriate, contributes suggestions and outlines for further development. The focus of the *Education in Employment* project was on practice rather than theory, therefore, these research findings should contribute to the practical development of RPL in institutions where RPL is still very tentative. Through the collaborative nature of the project, the information presented here represents a unique multifaceted contribution on RPL practice in Ireland. During the course of this project, a significant project on Flexible Learning, led by the Institutes of Technology Ireland (IOTI), brought a greater focus on the learning needs of the part-time and workplace learner. It is expected that the Flexible Learning project and the learning portal (www.BlueBrick.ie), developed to make flexible learning opportunities more accessible, will become a significant driver of RPL activity. The *Education in Employment* project has agreed to supply the IOTI-led flexible learning project with all relevant information on RPL, including a set of data from which a precedence database can be developed. This engagement with the IOTI-led project will help to ensure sustainability and the broader dissemination of the contributions and outputs from the *Education in Employment* project.



4.0 Challenges of RPL

There are many challenges that higher education institutions are confronting in RPL provision, not least the widespread confusion over what constitutes RPL, which is also referred to by a variety of terms, such as: **APL** (accreditation of prior learning), **APCL** (accreditation of prior certified learning), **APEL** (accreditation of prior experiential learning), **RNFIL** (recognition of non-formal and informal learning), **PLAR** (prior learning assessment and recognition), and **RAL** (recognition and accreditation of learning). For the purpose of this report, members of the SIF *Education in Employment* project decided to adopt an all-inclusive approach to RPL, accepting the variety of terms outlined above. A focus on terminology and definitions could, however, get in the way of exploring and dealing with what really matters, in particular, deliberately and strategically influencing the overall RPL policy environment, dealing with structural issues and challenges, and sharing, promoting, and encouraging effective RPL practices.

According to Adam (2007), there have been significant developments in the area of international recognition since the inception of the Bologna educational revolution in 1998-99. A formidable array of recognition tools, techniques and processes now exist. Adam suggests that the main challenge is not to create more RPL devices but to ensure the existing ones are properly and extensively employed.

The findings of the research conducted for this report suggest that academic standards continue to be a key challenge for third-level education providers involved in RPL. Concerns regarding academic standards are fuelled by an unfounded fear that RPL is contributing to a more general lowering of standards by making RPL available to all learners. A challenge for RPL providers, therefore, is to ensure that RPL activity is recognised as part of the quality assurance mechanisms within their institutions. A robust quality assurance system also enhances the comparability of validation processes across institutional, regional, and national borders.

Another challenge for academics championing RPL is to ensure that *all* staff in their institutions recognise that learning also occurs outside the higher education institution. This requires well-defined standards, accessible information on learning outcomes, clear information on how assessments are conducted and jargon-free policies. It is important, however, to ensure that RPL systems are not made unnecessarily complicated, too time-consuming, too bureaucratic, or too expensive to administer.

4.1 Recommendations for Implementing RPL

The empirical research conducted during this project confirms that many third-level educational institutions now have policies and procedures for formally recognising prior learning. Many RPL developments have taken place in the past five years, contrasting with the previous years, when Murphy (2004: 8-9) concluded that, "in Ireland the application of the accreditation of prior experiential learning related in the main to existing course provision across a relatively small range of fields of learning". Murphy further noted that only four institutions had organisation-wide policies in place and these were mainly driven by external forces rather than an active desire from the institutions to promote RPL. The new *Education in Employment* project now fosters RPL developments and has achieved the main SIF objectives by:

- Enhancing collaboration between higher education institutions;
- Improving teaching and learning;
- Supporting institutional reform;
- Promoting access and lifelong learning;
- Supporting the development of fourth-level education.

As argued throughout this report, RPL is already a vital and legitimate mode of learning, offering significant value for the teaching and learning agendas of higher education institutions. Based on a review of the relevant literature and drawing on the experiences of the RPL working group members, a number of recommendations for higher education institutions should enable further progress on RPL agendas in the near future. It can be recommended, therefore, that higher education institutions should:

- Recognise that a learner already has certain insights, experiences, and knowledge;
- Design user-friendly approaches for the recognition of prior learning and continuous professional development;
- Encourage collaboration between different institutions in order to meet the needs of the learner more effectively;
- Recognise that RPL has to be underpinned by quality assurance mechanisms;
- Clearly define the roles and responsibilities of the learner, the RPL mentor, and the RPL assessor;
- Provide appropriate training and support to staff involved in managing and supporting the RPL process;
- Provide guidance on portfolio preparation, including advice on clarity of language to be used, and volume of evidence to be included;
- Recognise that RPL is an integral component of any work-based learning programme;
- Promote awareness and knowledge of RPL arrangements widely to potential learners;
- Monitor and review policies and procedures for the recognition of prior learning;
- Gather appropriate information on the RPL process within their organisation;
- Provide effective, timely, and appropriate feedback to learners;
- Work in partnership with employers, where appropriate, to develop negotiated pathways to learning for cohorts of workers while taking account of their prior learning.

There are many considerations for the implementation of RPL for both third-level institutions and for learners. RPL is a very attractive option for learners as its relevance is clear and it provides an opportunity to gain qualifications by drawing on recent or current everyday practices. It is important that boundaries are constructed in an educational framework maintaining academic standards while at the same time providing policies, guidelines, and practices that make explicit the educational parameters within which RPL is to be negotiated and assessed.



4.2 Conclusions

The economic and employment climate in Ireland deteriorated significantly in the two years since April 2007. Ireland thus faces a harsh new fiscal environment. Economists recognise that enhancing people's skills gives future competitive advantage to a workforce. The current economic downturn makes a strong case for reforming aspects of third-level education in an effort to strengthen economic growth. The formal recognition of prior learning is now accepted as an essential element in educational reform. This change should encourage the building of a culture of up-skilling for jobseekers and for the continuous development of skills among those already in employment. The development of RPL processes should play a more significant part in the development of pathways to learning for those whose job functions are under threat or those who are unemployed. The recognition of prior experiential learning can also be used to foster a culture of lifelong learning and to provide opportunities to meet the newer needs of individuals and employers. As Pouget and Osborne (2004: 46) note, "One of the outcomes of the consultation launched by the *Memorandum on Lifelong Learning across Europe* has been to highlight the importance of 'valuing after learning' be it informal, non-formal or informal settings."

The developments associated with the concept of the learning society, lifelong learning, and the learning organisation are promoting change in higher education in a number of ways. There is increasing pressure on higher education institutions to work more closely with employers and thus contribute to the processes of economic change and development. Education and industry partnerships are increasingly regarded as essential to the development of lifelong learning, resulting in the blurring of boundaries between these sectors. This reflects a growing emphasis on the importance for higher education institutions to develop partnerships with employers and other organisations. Partnership is an important catalyst for the recognition of prior learning at all levels. RPL can also provide significant assistance to employers because of the added value contribution employees can make to the organisation. Partners in the *Education in Employment* project have welcomed the opportunity to work with employers in their local regions in order to encourage further recognition of *all* prior learning, which in turn promotes the lifelong learning agenda. Recognising prior learning, however, must not only satisfy academic scrutiny by the third-level institutions but it must demonstrate a 'fitness for purpose' at the level of the individual, the employer, and, in many instances, the wider professional community.

Higher education institutions are expected to be increasingly flexible in their modes of delivery when meeting lifelong learning agendas. Recognising all prior learning complies with criteria for flexible learning by being adaptable in terms of time, place, and mode of learning. This newer flexibility transforms the role of higher education from merely delivering pre-specified programmes of study into one of proactively facilitating and supporting learning in response to new societal demands. The recognition of prior learning across all disciplines provides many opportunities for such flexibility. Many Irish third-level institutions are now delivering courses in modules, that is, organising academic courses in smaller rather than larger units, thus making it easier to formally accredit prior learning. As well as enabling learners to gain credit in Irish third-level institutions for their learning, modularisation helps individuals to transfer more easily to third-level institutions across Europe.

Further flexibility is offered to learners through the partnership developed between the *Education in Employment* consortium and BlueBrick.ie, a student-focused information portal developed by the IOTI-led flexible learning project. Through a modular approach, BlueBrick.ie will enable learners to register for modules in their area of interest, from modules on offer by third-level institutions, and to accumulate credit towards a graduate or postgraduate award. Bluebrick.ie aims to allow individuals to continue their learning through taking subsequent modules at their own pace, in their choice of institution, and still be able to group those modules to create

a national award. This approach allows maximum flexibility to the individual while steadfastly protecting the autonomy of the institution and rigorously upholding academic standards.

The SIF *Education in Employment* project members, reflecting the report of the National Competitiveness Council (2009), agree that inter-institutional cooperation is critical to the continuing success of Ireland's higher education system. The National Competitiveness Council further suggest that higher education institutions can provide value for money and can enhance efficiency by reducing duplication through rationalising courses and developing critical mass through greater sustained cooperation. The National Competitiveness Council views the establishment of the SIF as a positive step in this direction. Inter-institutional cooperation further underlines the need for clear, unambiguous, transparent, comparable, and accessible policies and procedures. Unnecessary complexity in procedures, even if only in jargon-laden guidelines, acts as a disincentive for learners seeking RPL.

This report, resulting from inter-institutional cooperation during the past three years, should illustrate some of the outcomes which can result through such inter-institutional cooperation and, as a result, should encourage further collaboration in future. In addition to inter-institutional cooperation within higher education institutions, an inter-disciplinary approach should, ideally, be established to progress the RPL agenda. At the same time, RPL in each discipline within each third-level institute must meet national and international requirements for quality assurance. By placing RPL high on the quality assurance agenda of each institution, such prioritising should help to dispel a common myth — that RPL is an 'easy option' or a 'back door' to a qualification.

Overall, the findings of the SIF *Education in Employment* consortium underscore that higher education institutions are in a transition period as they move to place more emphasis on recognising *all* prior learning. As indicated above, the current provision of RPL activity varies from institution to institution. If higher education institutions aim to adopt a more proactive approach to developing RPL practices, fundamental decisions will need to be taken in relation to costs and human resources. The costs associated with RPL, both in time and budgets, appear to be a significant disincentive both for learners and higher education providers and may help to explain why the service is underexposed and underutilised. Working group members, however, argue that the benefits to both the learner and the higher education institution outweigh arguments focused on cost savings. Additionally, working group members agree that a dedicated resource in each third-level institute should actively promote the provision of the service. A dedicated RPL resource should play a strong role in the process, not only for providing support, advice, and guidance to the learner, but also for promoting RPL to employers.

There are significant RPL advantages for learners and employers from the information gained through engaging with the process and systems, and not just in the advanced standing RPL can provide towards a qualification or programme of study. Recognising prior learning will ensure better access to high quality education and should raise both economic competitiveness and the wellbeing of society. It is critical that Ireland continues to provide and maintain a highly skilled and well-educated workforce to successfully compete in global markets, and to combat the recent sharp rise in unemployment, as higher skill levels boost labour participation rates, productivity, and economic growth. Prior learning must be more proactively recognised for its solid and valuable contribution to third-level education, and thus ultimately enhancing the economic and general well being of individuals and society generally.



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Appendices: Introduction

The report focuses on the practicalities of implementing RPL. The appendices are intended to form part of a practical toolkit for higher level institutions for developing and standardising RPL policies and practices. These appendices are drawn from the practical experiences of the working group in their respective institutions and from the primary and secondary research conducted as part of the SIF *Education in Employment* project.



RPL Terms and Definitions

Accreditation

Accreditation is a term frequently used as a synonym for the recognition of learning. It is, however, more properly used to signify the most formalised and widely practised forms of recognition of learning.

Accredited Programmes

Learning that is validated and recognised by an official state-recognised educational institution.

Accreditation and Recognition of Prior learning

This is a process for assessing and, as the standard is reached, recognising prior experiential learning or prior certified learning. The process for presenting prior learning for recognition typically involves describing experiences, reflecting on those experiences, identifying the learning associated with the experiences and defining this learning in terms of knowledge, skills, and competence. This makes it possible for an individual to build on learning achieved and to be formally rewarded for it within the NFQ. Recognition occurs when the learner has demonstrated that learning has taken place. The learning experience is not recognised simply because it has occurred. The role of the provider is to provide effective support to the learner in this process and to manage the process of recognition in a clear, fair, consistent, and timely manner. The learner must provide verifiable evidence to demonstrate that the learning achievement has taken place.

Advanced Academic Standing

Advanced academic standing refers to exemption from a year, or stage, or group of modules on the same level so that a learner can progress to a more advanced part of the programme. This does not involve the awarding of credit. This is generally the same as RPL for entry.

Assessment

The credibility of higher education and training qualifications relies on the validity and reliability of the procedures for the assessment of learners: "The assessment of students is one of the most important elements of higher education. The outcomes of assessment have a profound effect on students' future careers. It is therefore important that assessment is carried out professionally at all times and that it takes into account the extensive knowledge which exists about testing and examination processes. Assessment also provides valuable information for institutions about the effectiveness of teaching and learners' support" (ENQA, 2005: 17).

Learner assessment means inference (e.g. judgment or estimation or evaluation) of a learner's knowledge, skill, or competence by comparing it with a standard based on appropriate evidence. The intended learning outcomes for a programme define the minimum learning outcomes for a particular programme. A learner who completes a programme is eligible for the relevant award if he or she has demonstrated, through assessment, attainment of the intended programme learning outcomes.

Adequate assessment mechanisms are required even where the intended programme learning outcomes are not known, for example, in the case of general credit and the recognition of (uncertified) prior learning. The learner's learning attainment may not be fully known to the subject assessor(s), in which case a staged assessment process may be required which brings the learning attainment into focus in a step-by-step manner until the required level of detail is reached.

Awarding Credit

This describes the outcome of the recognition process when a learner with prior experiential learning (uncertified learning) demonstrates that the prior learning satisfies the learning outcomes or standard for the module, subject, or other unit of learning. The learner then gains the credit value attaching to the relevant learning outcome(s).

Credit

Credit is an award made to a learner in recognition of the verified achievement of designated learning outcomes at a specified level. Credit refers to the European Credit Transfer Scheme (ECTS) as part of a national approach to credit. A unit of credit is equal to approximately 25 to 30 hours of learner effort.

Formal learning

Learning which takes place through study/training programmes that are delivered by education or training providers, and which attract awards.

Gaining an Exemption

This describes the outcome when a learner with prior certified learning demonstrates that the prior learning satisfies the learning outcomes or standard for the relevant module, subject, or other unit of learning. The exemption releases the learner from having to enrol for the module, subject, or unit of learning.

General Credit

This refers to credit which is linked to a programme, either without predetermined module learning outcomes or with learning outcomes, which promotes reflection which is generic to a number of prior learning experiences.

Informal learning

Learning that takes place through life and work experience, sometimes referred to as experiential learning. Such learning is usually unintentional and the learner may not recognise at the time of the experience that it was contributing to his or her knowledge, skills, and competencies.

Learning Outcomes


Learning outcomes are educational goals which are represented under the headings: Knowledge, Know-how and Skill and Competence. The NQF is a standards-based framework with learning outcomes as a central underpinning concept.

Non-formal Learning

Learning that takes place alongside the mainstream systems of education and training. It may be assessed but does not normally lead to formal certification.

Prior Learning

This refers to learning, knowledge, skill, or competence that has already been acquired, but which has not necessarily been assessed or measured through formal processes. It is learning which has taken place prior to entering a programme (or the relevant stage of a programme) or prior to seeking an award. Prior learning may have been acquired through formal, non-formal, or informal routes and should encompass all forms of learning. In all cases the onus is on the learner to demonstrate the prior learning, by preparing and submitting adequate and verifiable evidence, under the guidance and advice of the institution. The two main categories of prior learning for the purpose of these guidelines are:

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1. **Accreditation of Prior Certified Learning (APCL):** learning which has been previously accredited, formally recognised, or certified. The recognition of formal learning for which certification has been awarded through a recognised educational institution or other higher education/training provider.
 2. **Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL):** Learning which has not been previously accredited or recognised, and therefore usually uncertified. The process of giving formal recognition to non-formal or informal learning can be described as the recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning or the accreditation of prior experiential learning. Credit can be awarded only for achievement of learning outcomes as a result of a learning experience and not for the experience itself.

Recognition of Learning

Recognition of learning is any process that acknowledges and establishes publicly that some reasonably substantial and significant element of learning has taken place and can be assessed to have done so.

Specific Credit

This is credit attached to specific, programme, module or subject learning outcomes.



RPL Policy Guidelines

This section addresses the basic policy parameters recommended for inclusion in institutional policy and procedures for the recognition of prior learning. These guidelines are intended to assist higher education institutions when developing policy within their systems:

Summary Policy Considerations:


- a. The recognition of prior learning should be embedded in the institution's quality assurance programme;
- b. The range and scope of RPL availability should be stated clearly;
- c. Policies and procedures should clearly differentiate between the recognition of prior certified learning and the recognition of prior experiential learning;
- d. Where possible, limitations should not be placed on the extent to which prior experiential learning is recognised;
- e. Limitations on the recognition of prior certified learning should apply;
- f. All programmes open to the recognition of prior learning must be expressed in terms of learning outcomes. The same learning outcomes should be used to assess all learners on a particular programme or module;
- g. The assessment of prior learning should be considered and devised as part of the overall assessment strategy to ensure fairness and consistency for all learners and for each individual programme and module;
- h. The grading and classification of awards should be available for learners involved in an RPL assessment process;
- i. The basic minimum support in place for learners engaging in the recognition of prior learning should be clearly stated at policy level;
- j. The role and responsibility of all stakeholders involved in the recognition and accreditation of prior learning should be explicitly stated, including that of the learner;
- k. A learner who has benefited from the RPL process should not be subsequently disadvantaged in terms of access, transfer, or further advancement;
- l. Institutions should monitor and evaluate RPL procedures and record statistical information on the number of learners undertaking RPL processes;
- m. The processes and assessment mechanisms supporting RPL learners should rely on supportive and verifiable evidence to demonstrate attainment of the learning outcome;
- n. Policies, procedures, and guidelines established for the recognition of prior learning should be monitored and revised periodically.

The Recognition of Prior Learning and Quality Assurance

The policy and procedures for the recognition of prior learning should be embedded in the institutional quality assurance procedures and should form part of the typical arrangements in place for higher education and training provision, such as the external examining process. Quality assurance procedures underpinning RPL assessment processes should promote RPL to the learner.

Scope and Range of RPL Policy

The range and level of programmes, modules, and awards available under the policy of the recognition of prior learning should be clarified at policy and programme level. Higher education and training awards range from Level 6 to Level 10 of the National Framework of Qualifications. Research degree awards include the Master's Degree, Doctorate of Philosophy, and Higher Doctorate. Other categories of awards include the Minor, Supplemental, and Special Purpose awards at Levels 6 to 10 on the National Framework of Qualifications.



The scope of the NFQ policy on RPL also refers to a broad variety of issues, including:

- Entry to programmes or exemption from parts of programmes or full programmes through RPL assessment;
- Status of the learner when RPL assessment process is initiated;
- Implications, if any, for the RPL learner for a typical learning pathway in terms of access, transfer, and progression;
- Defining 'recognition of prior certified learning' in the context of what will be deemed recognisable;
- Limitations refer to the volume of recognition that can be achieved through RPL and limits or barriers on modules/subjects that cannot avail of RPL processes;
- Policy for dealing with grades awarded by another higher education provider when a learner has successfully achieved recognition of prior certified learning;
- Classification of awards assessed under the recognition of prior learning.

Limitations on the Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning

The concept of placing a limitation on the amount of demonstrated experiential learning achievement which will be recognised by an institution against the standards of a programme is not supported by the objectives of the NFQ. Where limits are in place on the proportion of learning that can be recognised as prior learning, however, these should be explicitly stated at policy level and derogations should be explicitly stated at programme level in all the information published for the programme.

Limitations on the Recognition of Prior Certified Learning

Policy limitations should apply to the recognition of prior certified learning for the purpose of gaining a recognised award of the NFQ. In particular, limitations should apply where the prior certified learning achievement is being used by a learner or graduate to gain a new award at the same level which represents the learning previously achieved.

Learning Outcomes

Learning outcomes are essential to the successful recognition of prior learning. They represent the standards of the national framework of the individual awards and of the field of learning. Intended programme and module learning outcomes should be established by the institution and periodically reviewed to ensure these keep pace with evolving needs. The learning outcomes of any programme or module should be readily understood by all learners and by all involved in the assessment of the learning achievement. Assessment of the submitted prior learning achievements should be conducted against the learning outcomes of the relevant programme module or other units of learning. The same learning outcomes for a programme and/or module should be used to assess all learners.

Assessment Strategy for Programmes and Modules

Assessment (including tasks, criteria, procedures, and inferences) should be unbiased so that no particular person or group (traditional or non-traditional learner) is unfairly advantaged or disadvantaged. Great care must be taken with the construction and conduct of assessment tasks and criteria, and any prejudice or conflicts of interests must be avoided. Fairness requires transparency of assessment processes and of criteria — at module, programme and provider levels. It is essential that learners are informed about and understand the precise criteria that will be used to assess them.

Support for Learners

Policy parameters should clearly indicate the basic minimum support in place for learners engaging in the recognition of prior learning process, including the procedures that automatically apply as part of the quality assurance systems in place, such as recheck, or appeals mechanisms. Each stage of the RPL process should be defined in terms of:

- Information;
- Timeframe and related implications;
- Implications for exemptions, assessment, or reassessment grades;
- Mentoring and other key points of contact to enable reflective skills development;
- Key points of contact.

Electronic and other types of model-based support for RPL learners are known to reduce the resource implications for supporting RPL applicants.

Learners should be supported in developing their understanding/internalisation of the intended learning outcomes. For RPL learners this involves a reflective capacity and skill in the identification of learning experiences.

Assessors

Assessors should be requested to assess only learning outcomes which they are competent to assess. Training is required for the assessment of prior experiential learning as this type of learning usually takes place in an unstructured way and in many different and untypical learning contexts. This type of learning usually contrasts to that of the mainstream and structured higher education teaching and learning environment.

Evidence Verifying the Learning Achievement

Assessment of submitted learning should be conducted against the learning outcomes of the relevant programme modules or subjects. Policy and procedures should clarify the role and responsibility of learners in demonstrating their learning achievement against required learning outcomes. The responsibility of the learner extends to providing evidence demonstrating the learning achievement. This evidence must be verified by a third party as the true work or achievement of the learner. Evidence can take many different forms and should be appropriate to the learning achievement.

Review of Policy and Procedures

Policies and procedures for the recognition of prior learning should be monitored and reviewed periodically as part of the general review of quality assurance procedures to determine effectiveness.

Grading and Classification of RPL

Providers are encouraged to grade prior experiential learning for modules, subjects, or units of learning that form part of the award stage and classification calculation in order to avoid disadvantaging the learner. In the interests of fairness and consistency, if the module is one which contributes to the award classification, it must be graded in order to classify the award, otherwise, an unclassified award should be made. Modules that do not contribute to the award classification do not need to be graded.

RPL Assessment Guidelines

Assessment methods should accommodate the literacy levels, cultural background, and educational background and experiences of learners. Assessment methods should provide for a range of ways for learners to demonstrate that they have met the required outcomes. RPL assessment processes should be comparable to other assessment processes for assessing learning or competency outcomes in a subject, module, unit, course or qualification. All RPL assessment methods should be explicitly subject to the quality assurance processes used to ensure the standard and integrity of mainstream assessment processes within institutions, and be validated and monitored in the same way that other assessment processes are validated and monitored. RPL assessment should also be structured to minimise costs to the individual and all decisions on assessments should be accountable, transparent, and subject to appeal and review.

An effective assessment strategy engenders confidence in the academic rigour applied to the assessment process and its outcomes. Assessment strategies should be plainly but clearly written and communicated to learners and to all those involved with teaching and assessing at the start of programme. A clear assessment strategy can complement a statement of intended learning outcomes, as well as aiding its interpretation by learners.

Learners should be provided with advice about the institution's assessment processes and about the sort of evidence the institution will consider when assessing any RPL application. Learners should also be provided with sufficient information to enable them to prepare their evidence to the standard required for the RPL assessment process. The processes used to assess RPL applications may take several (not mutually exclusive) forms, for example:

- Learner participation in the same or similar assessment which the learner would be required to complete as part of the full programme;
- Assessment based on a portfolio of evidence;
- Direct observation of demonstration of skill or competence;
- Reflective papers, journals, or portfolios that relate past learning to the learning or competency outcomes of the current module;
- Provision of examples of the learner's work drawn from the workplace, social, community or other setting in which the learner applies their learning, skill, or competence;
- Testimonials of learning, skill, or competence; and
- Combinations of any of the above.

RPL assessment processes and procedures may consist of the following stages:

- Establishing the purpose of the assessment;
- Identifying the evidence required;
- Using appropriate evidence-gathering methods;
- Interpreting the evidence and making a judgement;
- Recording the outcome;
- Reporting the assessment to stakeholders.

When assessing prior certified learning the assessor will consider the following:

- **Level of prior award in the NFQ:** The prior learning must be at the same level or higher in the NFQ in comparison to the programme the learner is currently undertaking or proposing to undertake. An applicant, for example, seeking an exemption on a Level 7 module must have completed an equivalent Level 7 module or higher;
- **Learning outcomes:** The learning outcomes of the module(s) previously certified must be similar to the learning outcome of the module(s) the learner seeks exemption in;
- **Timeframe of Learning Outcomes:** Depending on the discipline, the currency of the learning outcomes may be relevant in the assessment process. Learning outcomes related to, for example, a language may remain current but those related to a specific technology skill set may not;
- **Avoiding Double Credit for Awards at the same level:** If, a graduate holding a higher education or training award presents for a further major award at the same level within the same generic area of study the institution should ensure that a minimum threshold of new learning is presented.

When assessing prior experiential learning, the assessor will consider the following:

- The likely ability of the applicant to meet the learning outcomes;
- The ability of the applicant to meet the standard of learning on the NFQ;
- The ability of the applicant to demonstrate that they are capable of applying the learning in a new context.

Assessment of Learning Portfolios

The learning portfolio is a document which can be used to represent learning that has taken place. It is a collection or 'a file of evidence' which demonstrates how the learner has met the learning outcomes of a module or entry requirements for a programme through their prior learning. When it is presented for assessment it is examination material. Portfolios can be based on formal, informal, non-formal, experiential, or work-based learning. When assessing learning portfolios, the assessor should:

- Grade each learning outcome;
- Ensure the applicant's evidence of learning reflects each learning outcome;
- Identify any specific areas or gaps in the information provided, and request additional information;
- Communicate the outcome of the assessment through the appropriate channels within the institution.

If the assessor believes that additional information, other than what is contained in the learning portfolio, regarding the learning of the applicant could be ascertained by interview then a suitable time and date should be arranged for the applicant and the assessor.

Dealing with Exemptions

In general, it is recommended that recognition should be given on the basis of complete modules as defined within approved course schedules and not for elements of a module. Exemption procedures must be consistent with the necessity for learners to demonstrate the learning outcomes required to qualify for an award. Exemption allows those learning outcomes to be achieved and/or demonstrated in alternative ways and recognises that they may have been achieved prior to enrolment in the programme.

In principle, exemptions are permitted at any stage of a programme, subject to the relevant programme and constituent module assessment strategies. Where the result of a module is required for calculation of an award classification, the provider should, where feasible, establish a fair, consistent, and transparent process for grading the learner's achievements in respect of the learning outcomes of the exempted module. Where this is not possible, the award can be recommended only without classification. The learner should be fully informed of the consequences of accepting exemptions on this basis.



RPL: Learner Guidelines

This section refers to learner guidelines for the preparation of a learning portfolio which may be used for the recognition of prior experiential learning to gain exemption from a module. The guidelines and the template for the presentation of evidence of achievement of learning outcomes provided here are indicative and arise from a sharing of systems in place among the project partner institutions. Rather than being prescriptive, these guidelines are intended to be a useful starting point for institutions when developing their own systems.

Section One: RPL Application Form

An application form must be completed by all RPL candidates. The form contains details of the RPL application, including the relevant module title and code of the module or modules for which an exemption is sought. This application should be fully completed prior to submitting a learning portfolio.

Section Two: The Learning Portfolio

The learning portfolio should include the following three components:

1. An extended Curriculum Vitae (CV);
2. Matching of learning against learning outcomes;
3. Documentary evidence of prior learning

1. The Curriculum Vitae (CV)

A CV will usually include the following sections:

- **Employment Details:** Details of candidate's existing employment (if applicable) and previous employments considered relevant to the application for RPL should be provided.
- **Training/Education and Professional Membership:** Accredited and non-accredited courses and programmes that are relevant to the application should be included. Details of professional memberships should also be included. Voluntary activities together with any other relevant information should also be supplied.

This information is being sought to provide the Assessor with an overview of the range of experiences being drawn from when compiling the learning portfolio. The CV, therefore, provides a useful backdrop of evidence and learning experiences.


2. Learning Outcomes

The learning portfolio requires a description and evidence of how each of the learning outcomes of the module in question is met through the candidate's prior learning.

What are Learning Outcomes?

Every module has a number of learning outcomes that describe the key learning that a learner is expected to achieve having successfully completed a module or programme of study.

A learning outcome is a statement of what a learner should know or be able to do as a result of a learning experience. Learning outcomes describe the key learning expected to be achieved on completion of a module. Learning outcomes are usually expressed in terms of knowledge, skill, and competence.



An RPL applicant, seeking recognition of prior experiential learning, must be able to demonstrate how each of the learning outcomes has been achieved through prior experiential learning. One must also be able to provide evidence of the learning that has been achieved. Experiential learning refers to learning that has taken place through paid employment, in a voluntary role, or through life experience. It can also include training courses that may have been undertaken as part of employment or voluntary activities but have not been accredited formally.

3. General Guidelines for Meeting the Learning Outcomes

In this section, it is necessary to demonstrate how each learning outcome has been met through experiential learning.

- A sample format or template for presenting non-formal and informal learning experiences should be provided;
- It is necessary for the learner to give an account of prior learning against specific learning outcomes;
- The learner must provide evidence of the learning achieved in support of the application. (See criteria for evidence documents below);
- In addressing each of the learning outcomes, it is necessary to focus on the learning that has been achieved from a particular experience or experiences. It is important to be specific about the learning that has been achieved, showing the knowledge, skill, and competence that have been gained from experience. Recognition can be given only for evidence of learning and not for the experience itself;
- A separate description must be completed for each learning outcome; therefore, a copy of the template for each learning outcome is required;
- The template has a space for the Module Title and Learning Outcome, both of which must be entered in the application form. The remainder of the template is for compiling responses and outlining the learning relevant to the learning outcome being addressed;
- Responses should be set out in a clear and logical manner, identifying relevant evidence in the responses being submitted in support of the claims.

How Should the Learning Outcomes be Addressed?

- Full details of the relevant module including the learning outcomes must be made available;
- Each learning outcome should be addressed separately, thereby helping to match individual learning to the requirements of the learning outcome;
- Each learning outcome should be carefully read to identify what is being asked. Some learning outcomes may have several parts so it is important that all parts should be addressed adequately;
- Each response is personal and, therefore, will vary from applicant to applicant, in terms of content and length. As every candidate will have different circumstances and experience to draw from, there is no single right answer, style, or degree of application;
- To give a structure to the learning experience, however, the following suggested format may be useful when organising responses to the learning outcomes:

Module Title: [Enter the title of the module from which an exemption is being sought]

Learning Outcome: [Address each learning outcome separately]

Introduction and Context

It is useful to start with an introduction that puts the prior learning into context. If, for example, the learning experience is based on activity carried out at work then the context in which the activity takes place and the individual role played in the process should be described. At this stage, it is necessary to briefly outline how the learning outcome has been met, before describing the activity or work related experience.

The Learning Experience

The context above will have given the Assessor a brief overview of how the learning outcome has been met. In this section, it is necessary to describe the learning experience in terms of what was involved, who was involved, where, when and how. This is now detailing the specific learning that is evident in the experience which has just been outlined.

The account of prior learning should include concrete examples of how prior learning was achieved. It is important to be specific about the type of learning that was achieved in terms of knowledge, skill and competence, and in what manner these have been applied in a working/voluntary environment. An account of the knowledge gained from and applied to a working environment should be provided. Skills that have been developed and applied in the workplace, together with competencies that have been developed and applied in a range of work-based functions should also be included.

Some of the learning outcomes to be addressed are specifically knowledge related. It is necessary, therefore, to demonstrate evidence of knowledge in the relevant subject or discipline, and how this knowledge was acquired. It is also necessary to illustrate how this knowledge was applied and in which circumstances, for example, in a work environment, and with what results.

Reflection/Analysis

The candidate must conclude with a reflection on the learning achieved from the above activity or experience in the context of the learning outcome in question. This section should be used to make a clear link between one's 'own learning' and the learning outcome which the learning is being assessed against.

The Assessor will base his or her decision on the evidence of the learner having achieved the learning outcomes and not for the experience itself. In this section it is important for the candidate to articulate how the experience described above has met the learning outcomes of the module from which an exemption is being sought.

- In all cases, it is necessary for the candidate to support what he or she claims to have learned, by providing evidence of the learning that has been achieved. (Examples of evidence and evidence criteria are outlined below).
- It is possible that some learning experiences may address more than one learning outcome. In this case cross referral of learning experiences is acceptable, but the learning experience should relate to the specific learning outcome being addressed.



4. Evidence of Learning

Each claim of learning submitted in support of an RPL application should be accompanied by appropriate evidence documents providing proof of learning achieved or verifying the learning experience.

Evidence of learning is one of the basic principles of RPL and, therefore, it is important that claims of learning should be verified by producing evidence to support the application for recognition.

Examples of Evidence

The following are examples of evidence that may be used to support a learner's RPL claim:

- Testimonials from employers regarding specific tasks undertaken in the workplace;
- A job analysis of role(s) verified by an employer;
- Projects, reports, publications undertaken by the learner;
- Log book or diaries of in-house training activities undertaken;
- Emails, memos, documents verifying tasks, activities undertaken;
- CV outlining career, voluntary work, and learning activities;
- Photographs and audio/video tapes of work, projects, presentations or assignments;
- Copies of certificates;
- References;
- Any additional material that verifies claims of relevant learning gained.

Evidence Criteria

In all cases, the evidence documents submitted in support of the application for RPL must be:

- *Authentic*: Evidence presented must be truly the work of the applicant;
- *Sufficient*: Evidence presented must show necessary breadth and depth of knowledge, skill and competence required for the learning outcome(s) or entry to a stage of a programme;
- *Current*: Evidence and examples presented should be up to date and relevant to the current best practice in the discipline;
- *Relevant*: Evidence submitted must be appropriate and relevant to the learning outcomes;
- *Consistent*: Candidates must demonstrate that they have performed the tasks, used the knowledge and skills (associated with the learning outcomes) at the level required in a variety of situations over a period of time.

Organising and Submitting a Learning Portfolio

A learning portfolio should provide the basis of an RPL claim and must be subject to assessment by course specialists who will in turn make a recommendation and decision. The learner must ensure that the learning portfolio contains all the necessary information and evidence to support the application. The candidate should organise the portfolio to help the assessor to easily identify relevant information and documentation submitted with the application. The text of the submission should clearly advertise when evidence documents are used to support the application.

RPL: Frequently Asked Questions

The more information a learner can have in advance of making an RPL application the higher the probability of a successful application. There are many sources of information for learners and potential learners and the *Education in Employment* project has determined that the provision of information through employers and employer networks should be very useful. The following general information on RPL is provided as an indicative set that could provide a useful starting point for institutions when providing information in either hard or soft copy.

What is RPL?

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) is the generic term used to describe the system for recognising and awarding or transferring credit to learners on the basis of learning that has occurred prior to admission to a particular programme. In order to have their learning recognised, the applicant will be required to provide evidence of that learning.

The term RPL includes:

- (i) **Recognition of Prior Certified Learning:** This refers to formal learning for which certification has been awarded, through an educational institution or other recognised education/training provider. The learner will be able to provide a transcript of results, details of the syllabus studied, and information on the examination and assessment processes as evidence of this type of learning.
- (ii) **Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning:** This refers to informal or non-formal uncertified learning gained through work, voluntary activities, or other life experiences. In this case, the learner will be required to provide a portfolio or collection of evidence to indicate this learning. An interview or other assessment technique may also be required.

What can RPL be used for?

RPL can have a number of purposes:

- To gain entry to a programme at undergraduate or postgraduate level where a learner does not meet the standard entry requirements;
- For advanced entry to a programme at a stage beyond the first stage;
- To gain exemption from some modules or element of a programme;
- In certain circumstances to present an accumulation of evidence of prior learning in order to gain a full award on the framework.

The RPL process enables learners who have already achieved learning outcomes for a subject/module to apply for an exemption from having to take that subject/module again. In this way RPL allows learners to build on previous learning regardless of where it was attained and not to have to repeat that learning.

Who is RPL aimed at?

Generally, the RPL process is aimed at mature learners who will have significant experiential learning in addition to their formal education. Learners who have completed all or part of a formal third-level programme in the past may use the RPL process to apply for exemptions from another third-level programme.



How does the RPL process work?

In advance of making the application, the learner generally should be clear about the programme that they wish to enter or gain exemptions in. Regardless of the outcome sought, the RPL process will require the learner to make a formal application to have their prior learning recognised, to provide evidence of appropriate past learning, and to submit that evidence to an assessment process. The learning that they present for recognition should be relevant to the education/training programme. To apply for an exemption from a particular module, the learner usually has to be able to demonstrate, either through certified or experiential learning, that they have already achieved the learning outcomes of that module.

What is a learning outcome?

A learning outcome is a statement of the knowledge skill and competence that a learner will have achieved following satisfactory completion of a specific module. Most third-level education institutions describe the modules in terms of the learning outcomes at the appropriate standard or level.

What is the 'level' of an award?

In the context of the NFQ the level of an award or qualification refers to its place on the framework. Third level encompasses awards at Level 6 (Higher Certificate) to Level 8 (Honours Degree). Postgraduate or fourth level covers Postgraduate Certificates and Masters Degrees at Level 9 and Doctoral awards at Level 10.

What are ECTS credits?

The European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) refers to a system of describing student achievement in higher education programmes across Europe. The system represents one credit as being roughly equivalent to twenty learning hours, or hours of student effort. If, for example, a module that is worth five credits, that should demand at least one hundred hours learning effort on the part of the learner.

When does prior certificated learning go out of date?

It depends, some learning such as algebra or Greek stay in date for a long time. Other learning such as software design goes out of date very quickly. Applications for RPL are usually judged for their 'recency' or 'currency' of learning as well as other qualities.

Can certificates obtained in another country be used for RPL?

Yes, certificates obtained in other countries may be used for RPL. Certificates obtained in other countries are generally measured against databases of known awards. Other countries may not use similar descriptions of awards as the NQAI; therefore, certificates obtained in other countries may seem more valuable or less valuable than a similar Irish award.

Will all Institutes of Technology and Universities Process an RPL Claim?

At present, not all third-level institutions in Ireland have defined policies or practice in relation to RPL. This is now changing. The Cork Institute of Technology-led *Education in Employment* SIF project, funded by the HEA, has enabled the sharing of practice and policy among the project partners. The Project partners comprise Athlone Institute of Technology, Dublin Institute of Technology, Dundalk Institute of Technology, Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology, Institute of Technology Sligo, Letterkenny Institute of Technology, NUI Galway, and University College Cork.

What are the stages involved in making an RPL claim?

This will differ between individual institutions but generally the stages are:

- Submitting an RPL application form;
- Consulting with relevant academic staff/mentor. (In some institutions there is a dedicated support mentor to assist in the process);
- Where appropriate consulting with one's employer and availing of in-house support and mentoring;
- Developing a detailed portfolio of evidence in support of the RPL claim;
- Where appropriate, undergoing an interview.

What is a Portfolio?

The learning portfolio submitted in support of an RPL claim may take a variety of formats but it must contain all of the relevant evidence confirming that appropriate learning has taken place. If the claim is based on formal or certified learning this may be a syllabus, sample examination papers, and a transcript of results. If the claim is based on experiential learning the portfolio will contain descriptive and reflective elements explaining how the evidence presented meets the learning outcomes of the module from which exemption is sought. The portfolio should be prepared with guidance from the relevant institution to ensure that it meets the assessment needs. A portfolio of evidence may include: an extended version of a curriculum vitae, a detailed analysis of one's job and responsibilities in the workplace, projects, reports, publications, diaries of training activities undertaken, photographs, audio files, video files or objects that demonstrate achievements in the specific learning fields of interest, testimonials, and other documents verifying achievements.

Who will assess the portfolio of evidence?

Institutions will have differing processes but in general the portfolio will be assessed by academic staff of the institution and will be subject to the academic quality system that applies including external examination and examination board consideration.

Is an exemption gained through RPL different from taking the module and doing the exam?

In each case, it is necessary to demonstrate that the learning outcomes of the module have been achieved. The outcomes may be recorded differently on the transcript of results, depending on the route to recognition.

Can credits be gained through the RPL process without reference to a particular programme or module?

In Ireland, most Higher Education providers who offer an RPL service do so only in the context of a specific programme or award offered. In other words, the learning is recognised in respect of a particular programme or module at a particular level and not as general credit.

Is there any limit to the amount of RPL that can be awarded?

The specifics will differ between third-level institutions. In many cases there is a limit to the amount of prior certified learning that can be used in the award stage of a programme.

What does RPL cost?

This will vary from institution to institution and sometimes from module to module. It will also depend on whether the RPL claim is based on prior certified learning, which will usually be less expensive to process, or on prior experiential learning. In some cases employers may have entered into a partnership arrangement with the third-level provider and may support the RPL claim financially.

What are the benefits of RPL?

RPL can facilitate entry to a course, allowing learners, who would not meet the standard entry requirements, to gain access to learning.

The benefits of gaining an exemption from elements of a programme:

- Learners have more time to devote to other elements of the programme;
- There may be a financial benefit if the RPL route is less expensive than the conventional route;
- Learners are not required to repeat learning that has already been demonstrated.

Are there risks associated with the RPL route?

Depending on the length of time involved in RPL application, and the preparation and submission of a learning portfolio, learners may find that if their submission is unsuccessful significant class time may have been missed. If an application for an exemption at an award stage is granted, this may have implications for the overall classification of the award.

Where can more Information be obtained?

Learners should contact their local third-level education provider and ask to speak to an RPL advisor who should be able to advise and assist each applicant at an individual level. Employers, human resource managers, or training and development managers may also be able to provide more information.



National Framework of Qualifications

The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) was established in 2001 with the principal aims of establishing and maintaining a National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) and promoting and facilitating access, transfer and progression. The outline framework of qualifications is usually seen in the form of the 'fan' diagram shown below in Figure 1.

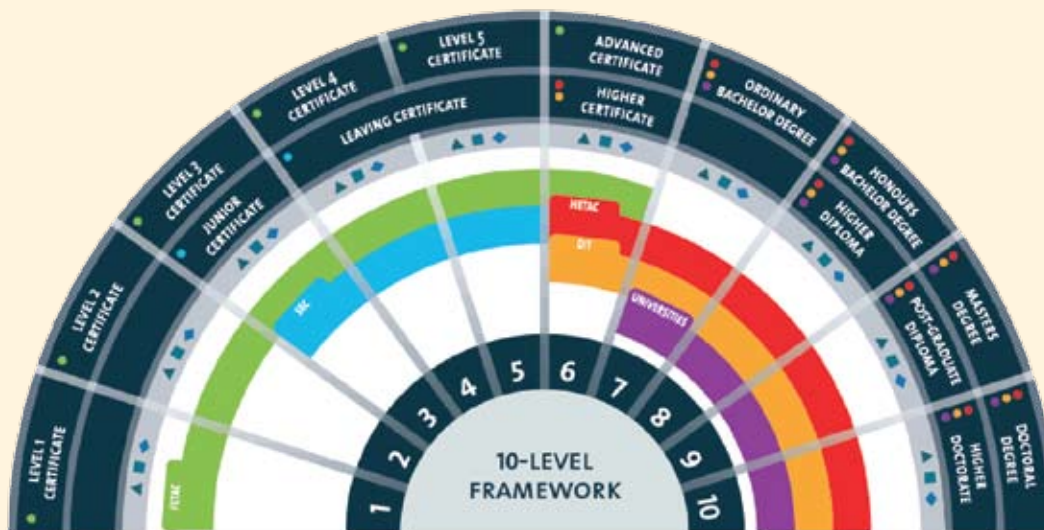


Figure 1 National Framework of Qualifications

www.nqai.ie

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MIGRANTS AND HIGHER EDUCATION IN IRELAND

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Thanks to the access and admissions officers in each of the participating third-level colleges who were interviewed for this research project.

Thanks to the individual stakeholders who were interviewed for this report.

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Foreword



During the last decade, Ireland experienced a steady inflow of non-Irish workers to meet the demands of an expanding labour market. The new arrivals are a diverse group whose needs are not widely understood. If they are to achieve the desired levels of integration, it is clear that they should be afforded the same access to education, employment and enterprise as Irish citizens.

This group of potential learners face additional barriers in their efforts to access higher learning. This sub-strand of the *Education in Employment* (EIE) project had the objective of assembling and collating information on migrant workers and their experiences in accessing or attempting to access higher education in Ireland.

Led by Cork Institute of Technology, the working group established to address this issue comprised members from University College Cork, Institute of Technology Sligo, Dublin Institute of Technology, Athlone Institute of Technology, Letterkenny Institute of Technology, Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology, and Dundalk Institute of Technology.

This report brings together the work conducted through an extensive series of focus group studies and interviews. It is intended that the findings and conclusions presented here will inform national policy as well as facilitating higher education institutions to more effectively address the needs of this diverse group of learners, and to raise the levels of staff awareness and sensitivity to the issues involved in so doing.

This report focuses on the educational needs of migrants in the workforce, as one of the four themes addressed by the CIT-led *Education in Employment* project which is funded through the Higher Education Authority's Strategic Innovation Fund. While net inward migration and an expanding labour market were current at the time of project initiation the changed economic circumstances and negative growth projections at the present time brings the issue of integration, education and upskilling of the 'new Irish' into even sharper focus.

I would like on my own behalf and on behalf of the overall EIE project steering group to thank the authors and all of the working group members as well as the participants in the focus groups and interviewees for their contributions to this study. A collaborative project such as this represents a significant challenge for all involved and I wish to acknowledge the important role of the chair of the working group in ensuring that the work of the group was always effective and focused.

A stylized signature of Michael Delaney, consisting of a series of small, connected dots or characters.

Michael Delaney,
Head of Development,
Cork Institute of Technology.



Executive Summary

In the mid-1990s, Ireland changed from its long established tradition of a country with net emigration to a country with net immigration. Over the last five years (2003 – 2008), migrant workers and their families have formed the largest single group of new residents in Ireland. More than 420,000 people now living in Ireland were born outside the country. The majority of migrants have come to Ireland for economic reasons.

Contemporary Ireland became highly dependent on migrants and the many benefits they brought, particularly since the considerable growth in the Irish economy from the early 1990s. That expansion was greatly helped by the contribution of migrant labour. This research supports the findings of many studies which show that, without migrant labour, certain sections of the Irish economy would not have functioned successfully over the past number of years (NESC 2006; Forfás, 2005). In addition to providing labour and intellectual assets, migrants contribute to Irish society through direct and indirect taxation and to the social and cultural diversity of the country.

The economic and social benefits of immigration can be properly realised only if a greater degree of successful integration of migrants can be achieved. Education and employment play an important role in the integration and social inclusion of migrants. Research evidence suggests that higher education increases local and national economic development and leads to increased workforce quality. Increasing the proportion of third-level college graduates in the local population will have significant economic benefits for local economies. Access to third-level education and employment for migrants provides many benefits, including better levels of income, improved social standing, and a means for making social connections and learning about Irish society. Education and employment are, therefore, central to integration and social inclusion. The integration of all migrants is fundamental to Ireland's success in becoming a country of immigration rather than emigration.

In 2006, the Government introduced a Strategic Innovation Fund, through which €510m was allocated for spending, between 2006 and 2013, in higher education institutions for projects to enhance collaboration in the sector; to improve teaching and learning; to support institutional reform; to promote access and lifelong learning; and to support the development of fourth-level education. Through the Strategic Innovation Fund, the development of new strategic alliances creates new synergies and potential for higher education systems. Through its range of initiatives, the Strategic Innovation Fund is providing new impetus to the development of system-wide quality. The Strategic Innovation Fund is driving reform of structures and systems within and across institutions to cater for growing student numbers at all levels; for greater teaching and learning quality; to ensuring graduates are equipped for a lifetime of innovation and change in the workplace; and to enhance research and innovation capacity.

The *Education in Employment* project is one of the initiatives funded under the first cycle of the Strategic Innovation Fund. The *Education in Employment* consortium is led by Cork Institute of Technology, which coordinates the work contributed by the other members of the consortium: Athlone Institute of Technology, Dublin Institute of Technology, Dundalk Institute of Technology, Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology, Letterkenny Institute of Technology, Institute of Technology, Sligo, University College Cork, and National University of Ireland Galway. *Education in Employment* focuses on the learning needs of those already *in* the workforce, and includes lifelong learning as a central aim by placing significant emphasis on continual professional development and upskilling in the workforce.

This report is based on the activities of one of the four linked sub-strands in the Education in Employment project. For this report, staff from the collaborating third-level colleges conducted research into barriers of access to higher education that are faced by migrants who are in employment and by migrants who are attempting to gain employment in Ireland. The findings included in this report are based on interviews with:

- (i) One hundred and sixty migrants from twenty-one different countries of origin,
- (ii) Access Officers and Admissions Officers in third-level colleges who are partners in the Education in Employment project,
- (iii) Employers, employer bodies, and other key stakeholders.

The focus group interviews and one-to-one in-depth interviews with staff and key stakeholders were conducted between February and October 2008. Quotations from the transcribed interviews are included in the report to illustrate the findings and to give voice to the participants.

One of the main aims of this report is to identify barriers faced by migrants when attempting to access third-level education in Ireland. The research findings discuss four main barriers to third-level education, which emerged from the study. These barriers were similar in all regions of Ireland where focus group interviews were conducted.

The first barrier identified was the lack of clear, consistent, and relevant information for potential third-level migrant students on entry requirements and educational rights and entitlements.

Second, low levels of English language competence were identified by all three sets of interviewees as a major barrier to third-level education. All interviewees identified English language proficiency as essential for accessing third-level education and for social inclusion and integration to Irish society.

Third, the lack of recognition of international qualifications and of prior learning were key issues faced by migrants in their attempts to access third-level education. Potential students received varying responses from third-level colleges in relation to capturing their prior learning and having their international qualifications properly recognised.

Fourth, inconsistent and confusing information regarding fees and fee structures, together with very high fees charged to non-European Union citizens were identified as significant barriers. The residency status of non-European Union migrants and lack of clarity regarding who has the right to education in Ireland proved to be confusing and problematic.

The findings of this report are based on the perceptions of those interviewed in geographical regions of collaborating third-level colleges, but are sufficiently robust to be generalised throughout Ireland. A further aim of the report is to open a debate with policy makers to enable them to address the barriers which have been identified. Denying access to education and employment allows for the marginalisation and isolation of migrants and has serious implications for both migrant and receiving societies. Third-level education is a powerful and life-changing instrument in the process of social integration.

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1.0 Background

Since 1995, Ireland has moved from traditionally being a country of net emigration to a country of net immigration. Immigration has only recently become a significant issue in Ireland. Large numbers of immigrants, however, have arrived in Ireland over the past decade and, as a consequence, the population of Ireland is more ethnically diverse than at any previous time (Watt and McGaughey, 2006). In some ways, this reflects wider European patterns, but in Ireland this experience has been significant at a level beyond the experiences of many of its European counterparts. Immigration to Ireland continued its strong growth in 2006, when long-term migration of foreign nationals was approximately 89,000. This represents an increase of more than one third over 2005, which until then held the highest immigration on record. Preliminary figures for 2007 show, however, a stagnation at this high level (OECD, 2008). Coakley and Mac Éinrí (2007) suggest that the onset of mass immigration constitutes the single most significant axis of socio-cultural change that has occurred since the advent of mass industrialisation and urbanisation in the middle of the twentieth century. Historical migratory movements have shown that, regardless of the intentions of individuals, a significant proportion of migrants will remain in the receiving country, settling, and forming a community.

In Ireland, as in other 'new migration countries' in the European Union, this challenge is complicated since the integration of immigrant groups is occurring in a society that was previously a region of emigration. Such societies typically lack the legal and policy infrastructures, funding, service provision, and migrant activism found in more mature immigration societies. Furthermore, Coakley and Mac Éinrí (2007) suggest that, because immigration is such a recent and dramatic phenomenon, it could also be argued that Ireland lacks the cultural and experiential background needed to best address the challenges posed by the presence of a multiethnic and multicultural society in this country.

Immigration refers to a process by which people move into a country for the purpose of settlement. An immigrant is an all-encompassing term usually taken to mean someone who leaves their native land and goes to another country as a permanent resident (as distinct from a holidaymaker). Barrett *et al.* (2006) identify immigrants to Ireland as "people who describe their nationality as being other than Irish, were not born in Ireland, and have lived here for under ten years" (2006: 3). The term encompasses economic migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees. The term migrant, however, is usually understood to cover all cases where the decision to migrate is taken freely by the individual concerned for reasons of 'personal convenience' and without intervention of a compelling factor. This term therefore applies to persons and family members moving to another country or region to better their material or social conditions and to improve prospects for themselves or their family (Forfás, 2007).


An economic migrant is an individual who leaves their country of origin in order to improve their quality of life, usually by seeking employment in another country. The term labour migrant can also be applied to an individual who moves countries for the purpose of employment. An asylum seeker is described by the UN as someone who has made a claim that he or she is seeking refuge for safety reasons and is awaiting the determination of his or her status as an applicant for residency. The term contains no presumption either way; it simply describes

the fact that someone has lodged the claim. Some asylum seekers will be judged refugees and others will not. An individual can be considered a refugee if they are a person who is outside his or her country of nationality or habitual residence; have a well-founded fear of persecution because of his or her race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or hold a particular political opinion; and is unable or unwilling to avail of the protection of that country, or to return there, for fear of persecution (Forfás, 2007).

Ireland's population currently stands at approximately 4.24 million people. This figure consists of 420,000 people born outside Ireland. It has been estimated that by 2030 this number may exceed one million (CSO, 2006). Between 1996 and 2006, Ireland's population increased at an annual average rate of 1.6%. One of the main reasons for the increase in the immigrant population has been the enlargement of the European Union. One-third of immigrants coming to Ireland were non-EU15 during the period 1992-1995. Since 2000, however, immigrants from outside the EU15 have accounted for more than half of all non-Irish immigrants arriving in Ireland (Ruhs, 2005). In relative terms, Ireland attracted the highest number of immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe after the ten Accession States joined the EU in May 2004. To date, Ireland is unique in its approach in relation to immigration policy as the government chose not to impose restrictions on the free movement of labour from the ten EU accession states. This means that a population of 456 million Europeans have the right to arrive, study, work, and live in Ireland without restriction. In light of the significant inflows following the 2004 EU enlargement, the Irish government subsequently decided not to give free access to nationals of Romania and Bulgaria following accession of these countries in January 2007. Immigration now poses new challenges which must be addressed by policymakers and society.

For the first time in a decade, Ireland is experiencing an economic downturn that will have a direct impact on many of those who have opted to come and live in Ireland. The general assumption is that many of them will return home or move elsewhere for employment. This may be true for a section of casual workers, but with CSO data showing that almost 42% of the non-Irish population is married, a significant number of them are probably settled and raising families here. Lucy Gaffney, Chair of the National Action Plan Against Racism, (2008) reported that — for those involved in the immigration, multiculturalism and integration sector — the initial challenge of accommodating new arrivals to the country has evolved into ensuring that the diversity which has been achieved is maintained and developed for the long-term benefit of Ireland's economy and society. Gaffney added that the challenge also was to ensure that the situation which has emerged in many other European countries in recent years can be avoided, whereby the frustrations of the local population in less prosperous times are vented against immigrant communities.

This report specifically focuses on issues relating to third-level education and employment for non-Irish nationals who are currently employed in Ireland. This does not include international students who are normally resident outside Ireland but come to Ireland on student visas to study on a fee-paying basis. The results of the research conducted for this report should aid third-level institutional policy makers in the provision of higher education for migrants, as well as adding to the limited knowledge in the field of migrant education. As noted by Dunbar *et al.* (2008: 10) "gauging precise levels of educational attainment among migrants is difficult due to a lacuna in this area of study". Dunbar *et al.* summarised the findings and recommendations of previous research in this area, and concluded that there are many issues in need of resolution regarding adult education and the



recognition of prior learning (RPL) for migrants in Ireland. Similarly, a report on education for immigrants in Ireland concluded that “there is no government body in charge of overseeing access to education among migrants in Ireland, and that problems in this area will be detrimental to the future development of Irish society and the economy” (Warner, 2006: 66). Following the appointment of the Minister of State for Integration in June 2007, however, an Integration Unit was set up in the Department of Education and Science. The Unit’s brief is to co-ordinate the response to the education needs of newcomers and to liaise with other sections in the Department and with external agencies and stakeholders.

1.1 Strategic Innovation Fund Aims and Objectives

The Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF) is awarded by the Department of Education and Science and is administered by the Higher Education Authority (HEA). SIF is a competitively driven resource stream which aims to implement organisational transformation. The fund is multi-annual, amounting to €510 million over the period 2006-2013. SIF aims to support innovation, and to foster collaboration between institutions competing for funding to:

- Incentivise and reward internal restructuring and reform efforts;
- Promote teaching and learning reforms, including enhanced teaching methods, programme restructuring at third and fourth level, modularisation and e-learning;
- Support quality improvement initiatives aimed at excellence;
- Promote access, transfer, and progression, and incentivise stronger inter-institutional collaboration in the development and delivery of programmes;
- Provide for improved performance management systems and meet staff-training and support requirements associated with the reform of structures and the implementation of new processes;
- Implement improved management information systems.

Through the collaborative nature of the projects, new strategic alliances have been developed and supported, providing new impetus for enhanced quality and effectiveness. The OECD Review of Higher Education in Ireland made a compelling case for reform of third- and fourth-level education in Ireland. While the sector is acknowledged as an engine for economic development, higher education institutions need to rise to the challenges of increasing their relevance, for example, through promoting access and participation by those already in the workforce. The Strategic Innovation Fund is an important element in the investment and reform of higher education institutions that should enable them to meet challenges presented by changing social and economic realities while building on their existing strengths. In this way, the projects funded through the Strategic Innovation Fund will help the partner institutions towards realising their potential while also improving the learning experience for a diverse range of learners at all levels.

In developing a project proposal for the Strategic Innovation Fund Cycle 1 deadline, Cork Institute of Technology (CIT) endeavoured that the submission should build clearly on existing leadership and strengths and align with CIT’s strategic plan and those of partner institutions. The resulting ‘Education in Employment’ project focuses on the learning needs of those already in the workforce, through four distinct but linked strands. The initiative is a Cork Institute of Technology-led consortium comprising Athlone Institute of Technology, Dublin Institute of

Technology, Dundalk Institute of Technology, Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology, Letterkenny Institute of Technology, Institute of Technology, Sligo, National University of Ireland Galway, and University College Cork. The Ethnic Minorities group, one of the four strands of the Education in Employment project, has a duration of 18 months. The main aims and objectives of the ethnic minorities working group include:

- To conduct focus groups with migrants in relation to their access to third-level education and employment in Ireland within geographical proximity of each partner college,
- To conduct focus groups in each of the partner institutions with migrants who are already in the third-level education system in Ireland and are in employment;
- To conduct interviews with Admissions Officers and Access Officers in all of the partner institutions in relation to policies and procedures for migrants accessing third-level education;
- To produce a report containing the findings of the new empirical research;
- To present a seminar for staff in partner institutions on meeting the education needs of migrants in the workforce;
- To develop a set of frequently asked questions arising from the empirical research and provide answers to those questions to provide 'signposting' for migrant groups;
- To translate the frequently asked questions into six languages and ensure its widespread availability in both hard copy and electronically.


This report fulfils one of the main aims of the working group, and the other stated objectives above have also been achieved.

1.2 Methodology

This report is divided into six distinct chapters. The first chapter serves as a general introduction and provides a background for the report, including a brief outline of the aims and objectives of the Strategic Innovation Fund.

Chapter 2 introduces the concept of integration, explores definitions of integration, and highlights approaches used to integrate immigrants in a number of European cities. The chapter also provides summary findings from the extant literature on migrant education, and access to third-level education for migrants in Ireland. The recognition of foreign qualifications and the RPL are also explored. Finally, the chapter provides an overview of migrant employment in Ireland.

Chapter 3 presents the main findings of the research from focus group interviews conducted with migrants, which were carried out by working group members in their local regions. The rationale for choosing focus groups is discussed briefly and the research findings are arranged thematically. Direct quotations from the migrants who participated in the focus groups are included. The focus group interview guide is in Appendix B.



Chapter 4 presents the empirical data from one-to-one interviews with access and admissions officers which were carried out by each working group member in each partner institution. The findings from these interviews are arranged according to the main themes which emerged, and direct quotations are included. The interview guide is in Appendix C.

Chapter 5 presents the results of one-to-one interviews, conducted with selected stakeholders, regarding barriers to third-level education and employment faced by migrants in Ireland. The interview guide is in Appendix D.

Chapter 6 outlines some of the challenges facing third-level education providers and employers in relation to migrants. Based on the research findings, the chapter also presents some recommendations regarding access to education for migrants in third-level institutions and industrial organisations. Finally, a conclusion to the report is presented.



2.0 Integration

There are many different views and ongoing debates on what constitutes 'integration'. Research literature on the subject recognises integration as a process, which is multi-dimensional, extends over several generations, and is bi-directional in that it equally affects the majority population. The term integration is widely used in a policy context at National and European level, and is understood to be a "two-way process that places duties and obligations on cultural and ethnic minorities and the State to create a more inclusive society" (National Action Plan Against Racism 2005-2008). The Interdepartmental Working Group on the Integration of Refugees in Ireland suggested that "Integration means the ability to participate to the extent that a person needs and wishes in all of the major components of society, without having to relinquish his or her own cultural identity" (1999: 9). More recently, a report by The National Economic and Social Council (2006) defined integration as the adjustments that result from interactions between immigrants and mainstream Irish society. Integration, therefore, can be seen as a process of mutual accommodation, but is also considered as an essential factor in realising the full benefits of immigration (Ejorh, 2006). For many people, however, the idea of integration can be fraught. It may be interpreted to mean cultural assimilation or absorption into a society. This concept has connotations of loss of identity and of incorporation into the dominant host group. It is a limited approach, with notions of 'common' or 'shared' values or identities left unquestioned. In many instances, such approaches have been shown to fuel racial tension (Hegarty, 2008).

The integration process is shaped by many factors such as the skills, abilities, religion, and other characteristics of the migrant population and the economic, social, cultural, and political characteristics of society. A report conducted by an interdepartmental working group on the integration of refugees in Ireland (1999) suggested that the emphasis of integration policy should be on supporting initiatives which enable the preservation of the ethnic, cultural, and religious identity of the individual, which remove the barriers affecting access to mainstream services, and which raise awareness among all cultural groups. Later research conducted by the Enterprise Strategy Group (2004) also recommended that Ireland should aim to be seen as an attractive place to live and work, with a welcoming attitude to immigrants and a vibrant, diverse cultural life. The Enterprise Strategy Group further suggested that there is need for a planned and coherent immigration policy that is carefully managed and regulated and consistent with the skills requirements of the economy.

Research by Harrison *et al.* for EUMC (2005) found that, if integration is to be achieved, four dimensions must be addressed:

- **Culturation** (= socialisation) transmission to and the acquisition of knowledge, cultural standards and competences necessary for successfully interacting in a given society;
- **Structural participation** (= placement) refers to an individual's acquisition and occupation of relevant positions in society, e.g., in education and economic systems, in the labour market, in occupational hierarchies, and as a citizen;
- **Interaction** refers to the formation of networks and social relations, e.g., the establishment of friendships, of love or marriage relations across group boundaries;
- **Identification** whereby persons see themselves as an element of a collective body. Identification has cognitive and emotional sides and results in a "we-feeling" towards a group or collective.

A recent Oireachtas report states that conditions for many immigrants are clearly less than ideal, not only in terms of their material well-being but also of their integration into Irish society. The Oireachtas Joint Committee suggested that what is required is a “fundamental shift in attitudes, structures and services. It is not simply a matter of making public services more user-friendly for migrants but of the nature of the relationship between the migrants and Irish society in general and the nature of governance” (Oireachtas Joint Committee, 2007: 5).

According to Lucy Gaffney, Chair of the National Plan Against Racism, Ireland must face up to the challenges of integration in today’s slower economic conditions. She suggested that “education is the strongest weapon in the Government’s arsenal to prevent racism and promote integration. More people – whether of Irish or non-Irish birth – will become vulnerable as the economy shrinks and competition for jobs grows. Education alone can play a crucial part in preventing intolerance, jealousy and hatred in a harsher economic and social climate” (www.diversityireland.ie).

Research conducted by Cork City Partnership during 2007 and 2008, to inform the Cork City Integration Strategy, found that there is a need for more information on how the education system operates in Ireland and, in particular, a need to focus on cultural and ethnic diversity in the curriculum. The research also highlighted a demand for enhanced English language classes to be provided at weekends or evenings at a low cost to help immigrants to integrate.

One of the key findings of existing international research on the social impact of immigration on host countries is that issues of integration cannot be tackled quickly. The consequences of immigration are felt over several generations and, therefore, policies encouraging integration must extend over the long term. The integration process itself is determined by a myriad of factors, notably language, culture, and religion, as well as the economic characteristics of the migrant community.

The newly constituted Office of the Minister for Integration, established in June 2007, currently has a budget allocation of €9 million. The most recent official statement on integration policy, *Migration Nation*, was issued in May 2008 and set out the key principles to inform and underpin State policy regarding integration:

- A partnership approach between the Government and non-government organisations, as well as civil society bodies, to deepen and enhance opportunities for integration;
- A strong link between integration policy and wider state social inclusion measures, strategies, and initiatives;
- A clear public policy focus that avoids the creation of parallel societies, communities, and urban ghettos, i.e., a mainstream approach to service delivery to migrants;
- A commitment to effective local delivery mechanisms that align services to migrants with those for indigenous communities (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, 2008).

Migration Nation put the case that the Irish government and Irish people must help migrants from very different cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and religion backgrounds to successfully integrate to Irish society to become the new Irish citizens of the twenty-first century.

2.1 Summary of Approaches to Integration in Selected European Cities

The Oireachtas Joint Committee on European Affairs has examined best practices in a number of European countries that are experienced in integrating immigrants. The Joint Committee noted that a feature common to the countries examined is the prominence given to language teaching, and the necessity for well-structured consultation processes to promote a continuous dialogue between immigrant organisations and national, regional, and local authorities. They also found that despite contextual, historical, and regulatory differences, local authorities are supporting:

- Forums for dialogue, consultation, and decision-making, involving new communities to achieve integration;
- Allocating responsibility for integration, both internally in their own administrative areas of responsibility and among other organisations providing services in the city;
- Involving all stakeholders in integration work, through the provision of support for individual organisation and collaborative projects;
- Preparing integration and equality plans with stakeholders, allocating budgets for their implementation, and monitoring and reviewing outcomes publicly (Oireachtas Joint Committee, 2007).

A recent report focusing on local integration strategies in fourteen European cities confirms that municipal policy is not only embedded in specific national demographic and historical contexts, but is also strongly influenced by philosophical concepts of integration, national legislation, policies and plans, and by specific city and local development plans, policies, and legal contexts. The report, however, highlights that there is no consciously planned systematic and goal-oriented national integration strategy in the European Union. After examining 'interesting' approaches among the fourteen cities, the report concluded by stressing that these varied approaches were, however, not 'best practice' (European Training and Research Centre for Human Rights and Democracy, 2006). Brief outlines of some of the features of these activities in a selected number of these cities are presented in the following summaries.

Amsterdam

Amsterdam has a city 'Diversity Department', that is responsible for the planning and supervision of its equality policy, supporting Departments to achieve intercultural mainstreaming, and achieving the 20% employment quota for people from ethnic minorities. Other institutions are charged with special integration measures and with special consultative bodies which function as a link between the city government and the foreign population.

Birmingham

In Birmingham, there is an Equality Division, and a Race Relations Unit, the biggest institution of its kind in Britain, employing its own equality officers. Consultation is achieved through the Birmingham Race Action Partnership, which draws together representatives from social services, departments of the city administration, and migrant associations. The city administration has reached a target of 20% employment rate for migrants, but continues with positive action focused on promotions and specific underrepresented groups.



Bologna

The city of Bologna has established a centre dedicated to migration issues, which draws together consultancy and information services. They also provide a service for cultural mediation with all other services and departments in the city area.

Frankfurt

In Frankfurt, the city parliament established an Office for Multicultural Affairs with a remit to promote the constructive coexistence of groups with different national, social, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. The body undertakes counselling, mediation, and conflict management tasks for service providers and in local neighbourhoods.

Madrid

In Madrid, the city council launched a strategic plan to elaborate a 'city for everybody', appointing mutual responsibilities for both migrants and natives that is coordinated by the city's General-Directorate for Immigration, Cooperation for Development, and Community Service.

Paris

In Paris, a town councillor was given responsibility for migrant inclusion and integration policy and was allocated €7 million per year for three areas of activity: anti-discrimination; citizenship and access to rights; and valuing cultures of origin. The distribution of multilingual documents and information sheets and a council for foreign citizens are two interesting activities, indicating a move away from the assimilation model that has been prevalent in France.

Nuremburg

In 2004, the city of Nuremburg unanimously adopted Integration Guidelines, committing the city to municipal integration policies consisting of four elements: linguistic integration, social integration, professional integration, social counselling, and support. Language support is considered an essential but not a sufficient tool for integration policies.

Stockholm

In Stockholm the city integration service, employing 60 people, is responsible for planning and communication of new integration measures, consulting and intercultural training for civil servants, and the evaluation of integration programmes. An executive committee monitors the city's Plan for Equality, Integration and Diversity. The city has also introduced a legal instrument that requires all public contracts, concluded by any contractors with the city for the delivery of goods and services, shall have an anti-discrimination clause. Stockholm also grants 'integration awards' for exemplary achievements of integration measures, organises celebrations for new citizens, and ensures that cultural institutions such as libraries adapt their agenda to the ethnic heterogeneity of the city.

Stuttgart

In Stuttgart, the Department of Integration supports the city's 'Pact for Integration' involves all stakeholders aiming to achieve eight milestones addressing: education, economic growth, equal rights and opportunities, political and social participation, pluralism and cultural diversity, a spirit of mutual respect and solidarity, participatory communication, and international cooperation.

In summary, it is clear that the challenge of integration is not to be underestimated. Integration is a dynamic two-way process of mutual accommodation by all immigrants and residents of European Union member states. Inward migration and the growing multicultural nature of societies pose a challenge for everybody involved.


2.2 Migrant Education in Ireland

Ireland's first White Paper on Adult Education was published in 2000. The Paper set out the Government's policies and priorities for the future development of the adult education sector. The Paper recommended that adult education should be underpinned by principles promoting:

- (a) equality of access, participation, and outcome for participants in adult education, with proactive strategies to counteract barriers arising from differences of socio-economic status, gender, ethnicity and disability. A key priority in promoting an inclusive society is to target investment towards those most at risk;
- (b) interculturalism – the need to frame education policy and practice in the context of serving a diverse population as opposed to a uniform one, and the development of curricula, materials, training and modes of assessment and delivery methods which accept such diversity as the norm.

The White Paper notes that, with regard to Adult Education, the challenges of interculturalism include:

- The recognition that many immigrants, particularly refugees and asylum seekers, can have specific urgent requirements, including the need for basic information or for language training;
- The issue of many refugees and asylum seekers not having the requisite job market skills or having difficulty in achieving recognition for their qualifications;
- The need to develop mechanisms to support different groups in ways which are empathic to and which respect their own heritage and cultural diversity;
- The need to provide specific tailored programmes and basic literacy and language education for all immigrants as an elementary part of education provision;
- The acknowledgement that the indigenous population also needs educational support as it adapts to an intercultural context;
- Recognition of awards and qualifications achieved in other countries;
- The need to provide mechanisms whereby all minority and marginalised groups have the possibility to influence policy and to shape interventions concerning them (Department of Education and Science, 2000).



The White Paper acknowledges that Ireland is rapidly evolving as a multi-racial society. Recognising the importance of this issue for the future direction of Irish society — aiming to maximise the gains of multiculturalism, and pre-empting the threat of racism in Ireland — interculturalism will be the third underpinning principle of Government policy on Adult Education. Accordingly, all programmes supported or publicly funded will be required to demonstrate their openness and contribution to Ireland's development as an intercultural society (Department of Education and Science, 2000).

In 2002, the National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism (NCCRI), an independent expert body set up by the government to focus on issues of racism and interculturalism, conducted research on education in Ireland for the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia. Their research noted that there is very limited official education data, due to the limited disaggregation of information on ethnic grounds. The study also observed that data, in relation to black and minority ethnic groups and education in Ireland, is very limited from a number of perspectives, including the system of categorisation, the accessibility of existing data, and the lack of data (beyond data merely relating to enrolment numbers). Similarly, later research conducted by Hughes and Quinn (2004), analysing existing data on migrants in relation to the impact of immigration on Europe's societies, confirmed the limited nature of information on countries of origin, where such data were summarily aggregated under narrow headings, such as: EU, UK, US, and 'rest of the world'. The report, nevertheless, presents an education profile of migrants in the labour force during the 1990s, including a section on highly qualified immigrants. On the issue of racism, the Irish Human Rights Commission believes that racism is a "very serious concern in contemporary Irish society" (Irish Human Rights Commission, 2003: 13). The Commission believes that there are worrying signs that racism is on the increase in Ireland, particularly among groups such as refugees, asylum seekers, and migrant workers.

Recent research conducted by Dunbar *et al.* (2008) illustrates that migrants arrive in Ireland with a wide spectrum of curricular and service needs — ranging across literacy, language learning, further education, vocational training, third-level education, and qualifications recognition. Barrett *et al.* (2006) established that immigrants in Ireland have notably higher levels of education than the domestic population. Their research suggests that while this might have been the result of Ireland being an attractive destination for highly educated people, it might also have been the result of an information effect, whereby better educated people were the first to know about improving economic conditions in Ireland. Recent immigrants to Ireland are more highly educated than their Irish counterparts, with over 54% of immigrants having a third-level qualification, in comparison to 27% of the native population (Barrett *et al.*, 2006). This contrasts with the experience, for example, in the United States where immigrants are generally less skilled than the native population. Despite these high standards of educational attainment among new arrivals to Ireland, evidence exists which suggests that highly qualified immigrants are not being employed at a level reflecting their educational status (Forfás, 2005). Barrett *et al.* (2006), however, caution that, while Ireland has benefited from a high-skilled inflow in recent times, there is no guarantee that the inflow will continue to be high skilled. Their research concludes by recommending that Ireland should aim to promote the inflow of high-skilled people.

There is a variety of reasons why economic migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers arriving in Ireland might wish to gain access to further education and training. There are some factors, however, which limit their access to

higher education. These factors have been explored as part of the empirical research conducted for this report and will be presented and analysed in Chapters 3, 4, and 5.

This report specifically addresses migrants:


- (i) who are in employment or looking for employment in Ireland; and
- (ii) who are studying at third-level colleges or wish to enrol in third-level education.

2.3 Access to Third-level Education for Migrants in Ireland

As a modern democracy, Ireland aspires to having an equitable education system that provides opportunities to learners throughout their lives to reach their full potential as individuals and as members of a society and of an economy. Achieving equity of access to higher education is central to realising this goal, and the higher education sector occupies a key position of leadership in addressing this task. The education needs of minority ethnic groups and of people within ethnic groups can vary considerably. Where poverty, racism, and failure to accommodate ethnicity or other forms of diversity are combined, social exclusion in the education system tends to be exacerbated. A report by the National Action Plan Against Racism Steering Group (2003) suggested that this is particularly evident in respect of women from minority ethnic groups.

In Ireland, to date, there have been mixed results in efforts to eliminate social exclusion and inequity, particularly in the education system. Participation in education has grown significantly over the past forty years but has not been shared equally by all members of society. People with a disability, socio-economically disadvantaged students, members of the Traveller community, ethnic minorities, and mature students remain under-represented in higher education (HEA, 2004). In 2005, Integrating Ireland published research into access to further education and recognition of professional qualifications. The report concluded that lack of access to education for skilled migrants was a major obstacle to integration and social inclusion, and that there was an element of institutional racism at play. Research into barriers to access to further and higher education for non-EU nationals conducted by Pobal (2006) found that incidents of discrimination and racism occur in education institutions at all levels and that strategies to combat this are inadequate. Additionally, the Pobal research found that, as well as individual racism, there is a need to acknowledge and combat institutional racism in the education sector in Ireland. An earlier study found that 73% of international students cited at least one such instance of discrimination (Irish Council for International Students, 1998).

According to the HEA (2008), Ireland has reached a point in its national education development where the achievement of further growth in higher education will require continuing progress in relation to widening access. This means that the achievement of national objectives for upskilling the population will require further progress in extending higher education opportunities to groups that have traditionally been under-represented in higher education. The upskilling objectives are widely shared across all developed countries, thus all countries struggle with the challenges of inequality in education. Despite the enormous potential of education for counteracting inequality and poverty, education systems tend towards a reproduction of existing inequalities in the wider society. The inequalities that exist in education are most apparent in higher education.



At present, over 55% of the Leaving Certificate age cohort go on to higher education, up from 44% a decade ago, but the Government has set a target that would see participation rates over 70% by 2020. In July 2008, the National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education launched a new access plan to higher education in Ireland setting a national target of 72% entry to higher education by 2020. The plan was developed by the National Access Office of the HEA, in partnership with the Department of Education and Science and in close liaison with higher education institutions and other stakeholders in the education sector. It outlines the current challenge in terms of low rates of participation in higher education by certain socio-economic groups, and sets clear targets to be met over the next five years to address this problem. Based on the principle that no group should have participation rates in higher education that are less than three-quarters of the national average, the plan sets a target that all socio-economic groups will have entry rates of at least 54% by 2020 (HEA, 2008).

In 2001, the Department of Education and Science set up a task force to examine issues of access to third-level education. The terms of reference for this task force included target groups of students with disabilities, students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and mature second-chance students. There was no specific mention of ethnic minorities. The HEA commissioned five major surveys of access to higher education institutions at regular intervals between 1980 and 2003. None of these surveys treat ethnic minorities as separate groups, instead, the surveys categorise by socio-economic background (Thornhill, 2004).

Studies conducted with migrants indicate the problem of a lack of easily available information on the requirements for access to education (Keogh and Whyte, 2003; Integrating Ireland, 2005). Migrants interviewed by Keogh and Whyte (2003) were not always aware of the implications of their legal status on entitlements to access higher education, fee levels, grant and social welfare entitlements. They said that they had gathered information in an ad hoc way, as the need arose, and that sometimes they accessed the information belatedly. Interestingly, the above research by Keogh and Whyte and by Integrating Ireland highlighted that where potential students thought they had the correct information this was very often not the case. Additionally, guidance counsellors interviewed for Keogh and Whyte's study also complained of a lack of information about the higher education entitlements of migrants. Later research conducted by Warner (2006) confirms these previous studies and notes that information provision on access entitlements and financial assistance for third-level education, however, has proven difficult for migrants, and in some cases incorrect information was provided. A particular barrier to access for many migrants in Ireland related to the fees charged to non-EU nationals in universities and institutes of technology. Fee policies vary among institutions of higher education, but there is an inherent tension between the obligation of institutions to subsidise education for Irish students with fees from non-EU students and the requirement to promote equity of access (Warner, 2006). O'Byrne (2004) noted that, for migrant students (for example refugees) who may be eligible for financial assistance, the current system is "an administrative quagmire" which is wasteful, full of duplication, and demeaning to the student. O'Byrne notes that these problems are experienced by all students trying to access grants for further and higher education, but may impact in particular upon those students who have problems with language, with access to information, and who are unfamiliar with the Irish education system. O'Byrne calls for one central agency to process student funding, which should be adequate to fully support students, and flexible enough to accommodate different student needs as they progress through the system.


In 2005, the National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education published a document on funding for third-level education. The National Access Office suggested that there is a need to reform the financial support systems for students, and that students should no longer have to navigate a maze of different funds, but should be provided with adequate information. The financial support system should be adequate to their needs and should cover all kinds of study, including part-time courses. With regard to the needs of migrants in this area, however, the only relevant reference in the report acknowledges that “we still have a significant way to go in opening doors for socio-economically disadvantaged students, including the Traveller community and the emerging new groups of refugees, migrant workers and their children.”

More recent research by the National Access Office (2008) noted that the general funding environment presents challenges because the overall level of investments in higher education is modest by international standards. This underfunding impacts on the effectiveness of financial support for students endeavouring to overcome financial barriers to education. The National Access Office also observed that, in relation to institutional funding promoting access, many institutions find that the demand for access-related services is growing faster than their resources allow.

Dunbar *et al.* (2008) identified that one of the primary barriers to education for migrants is the effect their residency status has on their educational entitlement. Asylum seekers are prohibited from applying for full-time third-level courses unless they can pay their own fees. Asylum seekers, however, would have to pay international fees which are generally three times greater than those for EU citizens. Migrants who have been granted leave to remain on the basis of parenting an Irish-born child are not subject to the same rights as a person who was granted refugee status. A migrant who is the parent of an Irish-born child has no right to subsidised education.

Recent research conducted by Coakley and Mac Éinrí (2007) with African immigrants in Ireland reported that the cost of education at third level to be prohibitive. The African interviewees reported that they “encountered difficulties at every level” (2007: 55). Some of the barriers to education which they encountered included accessing either introductory education or English language training because adequate information about entry levels and requirements were not accessible to them. The immigrants who succeeded in negotiating their way around the applications processes also encountered difficulties when seeking to demonstrate the worth of qualifications and learning they already held.

Under Irish law, education establishments may not discriminate against students on grounds of race. The Equal Status Act 2000 prohibits discrimination in admission to all education establishments on nine grounds, including race. The Universities Act 1997 obliges universities to promote equality of opportunity among students and employees, and the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 mandates Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) and Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) to monitor institutes of technology and further education establishments for quality assurance purposes in access, transfer, and progression. This monitoring includes a section on equality.



In 2003, Ireland enacted the European Convention on Human Rights Act, giving effect to this Convention in Irish law. The Convention confers rights on all persons within the jurisdiction and not just citizens. The 2003 Act obliges every organ of the state to carry out its functions in a manner compatible with the state's obligations under this Convention, which means that whenever a public authority is exercising power, the question arises on whether there are Convention rights at issue and, if so, whether deviation from them is permissible, necessary, and proportionate. Protocol 1 Article 2 of this Convention states that "no person shall be denied the right to education".

Ireland is also a signatory to the Council of Europe / UNESCO Convention on the recognition of qualifications concerning higher education in the European region (The Lisbon Convention, 1997). This Convention states that holders of qualifications issued in one country shall have adequate access to an assessment of these qualifications in another country, and that recognition of qualifications in this way shall lead to access to further or higher education. No discrimination in this respect may be made on the grounds of race, colour, or national or ethnic origin. It further states that all countries shall develop procedures to assess whether refugees and displaced persons fulfil the relevant requirements for access to higher education, even in cases in which qualifications cannot be proven through documentary evidence.

Research conducted by Coghlan *et al.* (2005) suggested that some societal 'dangers' may result if migrants are not granted access to higher education. The research warned of dangers to social cohesion in Ireland if a large body of migrants felt discriminated against and if they were unable to integrate. Coghlan *et al.* concluded that this warning on the possible creation of a migrant educational underclass should be taken very seriously, in view of the importance placed by all of the studies on the need for migrant residents in Ireland to freely access education so that they might integrate fully into Irish society.



2.4 Recognition of International Qualifications

Recognition of international qualifications held by migrant workers is very important to preserve the efficiency and flexibility of the Irish labour market. In order for migrants to be able to access the labour market effectively, Irish employers must be able to recognise and compare the migrants' qualifications, whether academic, professional or vocational. Recently, the Minister for Integration, Conor Lenihan, TD, said: "It is critical for migrants coming to Ireland that their existing education and qualifications are recognised so that they can fully participate and integrate into Irish society" (www.nqai.ie/news_2008).

The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) is an agency of the Department of Education and Science and of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and was set up in February 2001. The recognition of qualifications gained outside Ireland is one of the responsibilities of this authority. It now provides a one-stop-shop for the recognition of international qualifications (www.qualificationsrecognition.ie). The NQAI define recognition as a "formal acknowledgement by a competent authority of the value of a foreign education qualification with a view to access to education and/or employment activities". The Authority has also related the Irish National Framework of Qualifications to systems of qualifications in other countries and this helps in making comparisons. This has been done in consultation with HETAC, FETAC, and other stakeholders, and in the context of developing EU norms and standards. In 2006, it was estimated that the NQAI processed nearly 2,000 applications for advice on comparing international qualifications with Irish ones.

Attempts are currently being made to align and reference the National Framework with other national frameworks, such as that in Britain. Generally, however, for people with qualifications gained outside the EU or the European Economic Area (EEA), recognition has to be on an individual basis only. As outlined in the National Policy Approach to the Recognition of International Awards in Ireland (2005), the NQAI will first provide an individual applicant with information on any existing agreements and arrangements. If the candidate is seeking professional recognition within a regulated profession, they will be directed to the relevant designated authority of the profession in question. For those seeking recognition of academic qualifications or professional recognition for a non-regulated profession, the NQAI will issue an application form, which the applicant can submit to the NQAI with a required set of documents describing their qualifications. The NQAI then consults with a relevant awarding body that assesses the international award. Awarding bodies will use databases and publications of awards and their comparability, such as the United Kingdom National Recognition Information Centre (UK NARIC) system, to reach decisions, based on an examination of programmes undertaken leading to awards already granted to the applicants. As the NQAI (2005) document makes clear:

In general, it is the awarding bodies which have the power to recognise awards as being comparable to named awards that they set the standards for. Where more than one awarding body in Ireland makes the same or a similar award, as may well be the case with the operation of common award-types in the National Framework of Qualifications, it is a matter for each awarding body to recognise an award as being comparable to a named award that it sets the standard for and makes. Potentially, this could give rise to a situation where there is differing recognition within Ireland of a particular international award.

In Ireland, there are two types of classifications in relation to professions; both require a qualification relevant for the area of expertise. First, there is a regulated profession; the title of the profession is controlled through registration with a professional body. Second, there is a non-regulated profession, which means that accreditation by a professional body is not compulsory. For the non-regulated professions, while an endorsement of a professional body is not necessary, once it is verified that a person holds the relevant qualification, however, additional authorisation by one of the industry regulatory bodies is required.

There are currently fifteen separate EU directives governing the area of free movement of qualified EU national professionals between member states. These directives apply only to EU nationals whose qualifications were gained wholly or partly in the EU or to third-country qualifications already recognised and practised in an EU member state for at least three years. There are no provisions within the current EU directives for third-country nationals who have not acquired qualifications and experience within the EU. Research conducted by Coghlan *et al.* (2005) found that there is a widespread feeling among highly skilled immigrants who need to register with a professional body in Ireland that these bodies lack flexibility and do not have a proactive approach to assisting non-EU nationals to register as easily and as quickly as possible. Some migrants who took part in research conducted by Coghlan *et al.* believed that there was “a need for professional bodies to embrace diversity and be more inclusive in their attitudes” (2005: 24). A report by Ní Mhurchú (2007) on the role of professional bodies suggested that there are two systems in Ireland, one for the ‘native’ people and one for those who are considered ‘foreigners’. Her report called for a national policy to be developed in consultation with employers, professional bodies, migrants, migrant organisations and the Irish government in relation to recognising foreign qualifications. Ní Mhurchú also believes that the existing consultation mechanisms between government departments, employers and professional bodies are inadequate for the purposes of coordinating their various approaches when dealing with the issue of overseas qualifications and work experience. Ní Mhurchú concluded that the system which is currently in place lacks transparency and consistency, both with regard to recognition of qualifications and with regard to procedures for registration and accreditation (2007: 34).

Recent research by Dunbar *et al.* (2008) reported that one of the principal barriers of access to education for skilled migrants is the dearth of recognition of foreign qualifications in Ireland. Their research also suggests that “the record of the professional bodies in relation to foreign qualifications is below acceptable standards and some of the professional bodies act as barriers towards recognition” (2008: 33). The Irish Business Employers Confederation also suggested in relation to the recognition of foreign qualifications, that the current structures and set of rules are very complicated, with different agencies involved, jargon, and with processes that are not customer focused (IBEC, in Ní Mhurchú, 2007).

While there have been attempts to provide greater clarity for the recognition of foreign qualifications through the NQAI, Ní Mhurchú (2007) found that employers and migrant bodies have not been sufficiently informed about this initiative. Ní Mhurchú commented that very few employers were aware of the existence of NQAI, even though it was set up as early as 2001 as a national contact point for academic recognition and vocational education and training queries. Ní Mhurchú concluded that professional bodies have been ignored in discussions about national and international strategies for academic and experiential recognition, with the result that “there has been little opportunity for cross-collaboration between professional bodies to facilitate the sharing of decent and fair practices (2007: 25).


Coghlan *et al.* (2005) highlight the lack of relevant documentation as an additional difficulty for migrants in having their qualifications recognised. Refugees, in particular, can sometimes encounter a problem of securing documentation to prove their qualifications. Where degree certificates can be produced, institutions often ask for full transcriptions which are certified by the home university to be supplied, detailing all the courses taken in each year of study. Dunbar *et al.* confirm the Coghlan *et al.* observations, and add that difficulties in supplying this additional documentation “is another key issue which so far has not been sufficiently emphasised” (2008: 36). An additional difficulty also reported by Coghlan *et al.* relates to the translation of degrees and diploma certificates, and obtaining an understanding of the level of these courses. This lack of understanding often means that migrants have to begin their third-level education again at the first year of their new course.

The Coghlan *et al.* (2005) study emphasises the need for all third-level colleges to come up with a clear, transparent, fair, and consistent method of assessing prior learning and qualifications. A number of potential students interviewed for their research illustrate what they saw as the ‘patronising’ and ‘uninformed’ attitude of universities and colleges to their prior learning and qualifications. The research also illustrated inconsistency of approaches to recognition of qualifications by third-level colleges, and the degree to which decisions in this area seemed to be left to the discretion of individual third-level institutional departments. The research concluded that potential students were receiving different responses on the recognition of their qualifications from the different third-level colleges.

2.5 Recognition of Prior Learning

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is the generic term for systems such as Accreditation of Prior Learning or Accreditation of Advanced Academic Standing, which are used within higher education to describe the awarding of credits to students on the basis of demonstrated learning that has occurred prior to admission. The RPL particularly addresses the needs of disadvantaged groups, part-time students, and mature students and can have a positive impact on the retention of students. In addition, RPL grants opportunities to providers of education and awarding bodies to upskill individuals and to meet workforce needs at local and national levels. The philosophy underlying the RPL is to enable and encourage people to enter or re-enter formal education, leading to qualifications, or recognising credit for what they already know from the course curriculum. The onus is on the student to demonstrate the prior learning, by preparing and submitting adequate evidence under the guidance and advice of the academic institution. This practice, however, can prove problematic for migrants as training practices in some countries do not traditionally lead to formal certification, despite the high levels of competencies they have achieved in trades-related work.

Migrants interviewed by Coghlan *et al.* (2005) believed very strongly that, to remove the barriers to RPL and barriers to access to higher education, it was not a question of changing a few rules or tweaking the existing system but rather a question of changing the mindset behind the system.



Three purposes of the RPL are set out in the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland's Policies, *Actions and Procedures for Access, Transfer and Progression* (2003):

- Entry to a programme leading to an award;
- Credit towards an award or exemption from some programme requirements;
- Eligibility for a full award.

The RPL in Ireland is closely associated with the promotion of lifelong learning and the full implementation of the National Framework of Qualifications. For some decades, the RPL has been used in Ireland to facilitate broader access to education and training programmes, particularly by mature learners in further and in higher education and training, to meet workplace requirements and the personal needs/interests of learners. The number of learners who avail of the RPL has been and continues to be relatively small in comparison to the number who access education and training qualifications by formal routes. There is, however, a range of practice and experience in the RPL in many fields of education and training.

In 2005, the NQAI published *Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning* in Further and Higher Education and Training. These guidelines reaffirm that, as well as formal learning, the RPL encompasses non-formal learning (e.g. workplace training, voluntary sector or community-based learning, etc.) that takes place alongside mainstream education and training, and informal learning that takes place through life and work experience. The NQAI calls on the independent awarding bodies such as the universities to consider the guidelines in the context of the development of their own procedures. FETAC and HETAC have indicated that they will follow the guidelines.

A recent OECD report (2007) on RPL suggests that, in Ireland, there is a need to examine more closely the role that RPL can play in achieving broad policy goals concerning education and training (e.g., widening access and participation in education) in relation to the workplace (e.g., upskilling in the workplace). The report found that there is a need for a more coherent, clear, and focused national approach to developing and implementing the RPL.




2.6 Migrant Employment in Ireland

Labour migration studies outline a number of motivations for one's choice of a destination country, including the economic status of the country of origin or of the destination country, and contextual effects such as the existence of a home-country subculture, family relations, or religious similarities (Van Tubergen *et al.*, 2004). Research by Niehoff and Maciocha (2008) concluded that "at present, little empirical evidence exists on the factors that influence cultural adaptation and job motivation of the immigrants into Ireland" (2008: 25). Ireland's economic prosperity and high labour demand, however, were two of the main reasons for the significant increase in the number of non-Irish nationals now living in Ireland. Cudden (2008) noted that, in Ireland, labour migration is considered to have had very positive economic effects and, according to one estimate, migrant workers have added two percentage points to Ireland's gross national product. Ireland has historically enjoyed a strong international reputation for the calibre of its education system and the generally high standards of education within the workforce. The rapid pace of technological development and the increasing sophistication of business processes and systems now demand higher levels of academic achievement and greater links between the education sector and enterprise than ever before.

In 2006, Barrett *et al.* presented research findings that profiled the labour market characteristics of immigrants in Ireland. At that period, the unemployment rate for immigrants was 6.8% while the rate for natives was only 4.2%, indicating a relatively substantial divergence. This confirmed the finding of Frijters *et al.* (2003) who observed that higher unemployment among immigrants is not unusual. As migrants continue to join the Irish workforce, the National Action Plan Against Racism (NPAR 2006) identified an increase in agreement from 51% in 2003 to 55% to 2006 with the attitude that "non-Irish nationals are taking jobs from the Irish". The findings from a report by Mayo Intercultural Action (2006) also revealed that there was growing resentment against foreign workers, particularly when Irish students found it more difficult to find summer jobs. It was also reported that there was an upsurge of anti-foreigner sentiment from some people who were in long-term unemployment. Foreign workers were seen to be taking seasonal work from them and were seen to be favoured because of their more positive work ethic. Similarly, more recent research (Eurobarometer, 2007) found that 48% of respondents believed that the presence of people from outside Ireland increases unemployment in Ireland.

Research conducted by the Migrant Rights Centre Ireland (2006) noted that a large number of migrant workers reported incidents of excessive overtime, lack of holiday pay, and unfair dismissals. The research also found that workplace exploitation is more likely to happen in certain situations, particularly in the more unregulated and often isolated sectors, such as, the private home or in the agri-food sector (for example mushroom farms). The Equality Authority Annual Report (2006) highlighted that the race issue remained the largest category of cases raised under the Employment Equality Acts, reflecting some particularly difficult experiences of migrant workers. Employees are legally protected against discrimination on the basis of race, skin colour, religion, nationality, and ethnic or national origin (Employment Equality Acts 1998-2004). Discrimination arises if a person is treated less favourably than another person would be treated, has been treated or is treated in a comparable situation. From the perspective of immigrants, research conducted by the Equality Authority (2008) found that the higher



likelihood of discrimination among non-Irish nationals persists in the work and service domains (housing, shops, pubs, restaurants, financial services, and transport), but is particularly pronounced in relation to job search, where immigrants are two and a half times more likely to report discrimination than Irish job seekers.

Mac Éinrí (2008) reports that surveys conducted with migrants in Ireland suggest relatively high levels of prejudice and discrimination in the workplace as well as in social settings. He suggests that there is evidence of various kinds of glass ceilings in the workplace, compounded by a type of differential racism which seems to privilege some migrants over others. Research findings by Conroy and Brennan (2003) highlighted that many migrant workers do not receive a written statement on the terms and conditions of their employment and these terms and conditions may change without their agreement. The highest rates of unemployment among migrants are to be found among those who have been granted refugee status or given leave to remain. More than half of west African people with full residency status or full leave to remain are unemployed (Mac Éinrí, 2008: 9-10).

Forfás (2005) suggests that the primary source of continuing skilled labour supply is, and will continue to be, achieved through skills development of the resident population. To supplement the skills resources of residents, it will, however, also be in the national interest to seek out and compete for highly skilled individuals from other countries and attract them to work in Ireland, whatever their nationality or original place of residence. For this reason, efficient and effective migration procedures are essential to ensure that Irish companies can compete successfully for the finite pool of highly skilled and mobile labour available internationally. More recent research by Forfás (2007) suggests that, because migrant labour has a high educational profile, a situation may develop where highly skilled migrants might be able to access skilled occupations while the low skilled resident population find it difficult to access employment. The Forfás report recommends that the ideal solution would be to continue to attract high skilled migrants and to upskill the resident population, rather than attracting low skilled migrants that would further undermine our skills profile and competitive position.


Up to recently, Ruhs (2005) noted that high vacancy rates were prevalent across most occupational and employment categories, in both skilled and low-skilled jobs. Employers, therefore, began to look abroad to recruit workers to alleviate labour shortages. Non-Irish nationals took up almost half of the newly created jobs between 2002 and 2006 while the unemployment rate remained low (CSO, 2007a). By the end of 2007, 16% of the workforce consisted of migrant workers, and they were working in almost every industry. More than a third of those employed in the hotel/catering sector were migrant workers, with the construction and manufacturing sectors employing the highest number of migrants (CSO, 2008). Research conducted by the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (2003) found that in some Irish hospitals one third of the workforce was made up of non-European Economic Area workers, with almost one half of the non-consultant doctors coming from outside the European Economic Area. At the end of 2006, over half of the migrant workers in Ireland were nationals of the new EU accession states, with Poland accounting for two-thirds of these employees followed by Lithuania, Latvia, and Slovakia. According to the work permit statistics, the highest number of non-European Economic Area migrants came from countries such as the Ukraine, Romania, the Philippines, China, India, Malaysia, Brazil, South Africa, and the United States of America. Fifteen per cent of non-Irish national workers came from Britain, whereas the older EU countries outside of Britain and Ireland

provide around 9% of the migrant workforce (CSO, 2007b). The recent global recession, however, has already impacted on Ireland with many signals of a serious downturn, particularly in the construction sector which employs a large number of migrant workers. According to the *FÁS Quarterly Labour Market Commentary: Second Quarter 2008*, construction employment fell by 3.5% from its peak of 284,600 in quarter one of 2007 to 274,400 in quarter one 2008. The rise in the Live Register has been composed of increases in both Irish and migrant workers. Of particular note has been the increase in the number of EU12 nationals signing on since the beginning of 2007. Prior to 2007, the increase in the number of EU12 migrants signing onto the Live Register was fairly modest, reaching just 3,000 by the end of 2006. Since then, the number of EU12 nationals signing on has increased to over 15,000 (figure published on 20 June 2008). This provides evidence that not all those who are being made redundant in the construction sector are returning to their home countries.

Migrant workers are entitled to the same working rights as Irish nationals. These rights and entitlements are set out in legislative instruments and special agreements that have a statutory basis. Conditions of employment relating to working time, rest periods, leave entitlements, and minimum pay rates are regulated by these instruments and agreements. Employees are protected against discrimination on the basis of race, skin colour, religion, nationality and ethnic or national origin (see Employment Equality Acts, 1998-2004). Despite this legislation, Barrett and McCarthy (2006) reported that, on average, a migrant employee earns 18% less than an Irish employee. Similarly, research conducted by FÁS suggests that EU accession-state nationals earn substantially less than Irish employees. Acknowledging these variations in earnings, the Migrant Rights Centre Ireland commented that there seems to be a danger of creating a segregated labour market for migrant workers (MRCI, 2007). Migrants are a diverse group and they can face a range of issues in employment and non-employment areas that make them vulnerable to poverty and social exclusion. Work-based exploitation, lack of access to social protection, and the existence of racism and discrimination all constitute significant factors that push vulnerable migrants into poverty and contribute to their exclusion within society.

The 2006 census and other studies highlighted that many migrant workers are employed beneath their skill level. Barrett *et al.* (2006) examined the impact that this under-utilisation of migrant labour has on overall levels of national income. Their findings suggested that, if all migrants resident in Ireland were employed at a level fitting their educational level, it would add between 3.5 and 3.7% to GNP. Similarly, research conducted by the National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism (2005) concluded that migrants are prepared to take up positions beneath their educational level in the short-term to secure their entry to the Irish labour market. Restricting migrants' access to jobs, however, that is not commensurate with their educational attainment in the long term is "a wasted opportunity for the Irish labour market which cannot utilise the skills needed and already existing in the economy". A further related difficulty has been highlighted by Ní Mhurchú (2007) who observed that migrants who have been refused access to the occupations they have trained for in their home countries, and who lower their expectations, still have difficulty finding employment as employers avoid hiring them because they are seen to be 'overqualified'.

While the importance of migrant workers is increasingly recognised, it has been established that migrants continue to be disadvantaged when accessing employment (Ecotec, 2005). Denayer (2008) noted that factors such as legal status, qualifications, work experience, lack of language skills, poor knowledge about working



practices in the host country, prejudice and discrimination by employers, distinct cultural practices, lack of political power and of social capital, as well as a whole set of practical problems – spatial barriers and child care – function as significant barriers to employment, and consequently to the integration of newcomers and settled immigrants. Denayer further suggests that spatial barriers to employment refer to limited access to transport and greater geographical distance from employment opportunities. This can lead to migrants living in segregated neighbourhoods in which they become more isolated from employment opportunities.

Niehoff and Maciocha (2008) believe that, for migrant workers, their most immediate concern relates to their adaptation to the host culture. The challenges of cultural adaptation create considerable stress for migrants. Studies have also found significant health consequences from adaptation stress, including depression and mental illness (Hener *et al.*, 1997; Hafner *et al.*, 1977). Adaptation is also related to the migrants' perceived trustworthiness among the local population. Niehoff and Maciocha suggest that, as immigration continues, human and progressive management practices would call for human resource professionals to help facilitate migrants' adaptation to the host culture to reduce potential stress and accompanying health and attitudinal problems. It is believed that such development begins with a clear understanding of the motivations and expectations of the migrant populations. Similarly, in relation to diversity in the workforce, the report by the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (2007) suggested that diversity is not simply a matter of differing nationalities and ethnic groups working together. Other factors, such as the changing age profile, educational attainment levels, and work patterns, as well as greater female participation, will impinge on the cultural ethos of organisations in the future. Cultural diversity will create a demand for 'new' skills in the Irish context, at management level, throughout the workforce, and within the spheres of education and training. The Expert Group suggests that training to respond to diversity in the workplace, and to conflict resolution potentially arising from that diversity, are important skills-agenda issues for the future.

Since 2000, asylum seekers have not been allowed work or cook for themselves, and have been required to live in 'direct provision' accommodation centres, with bed and food supplied along with an allowance of €19.10 per week for adults or €9.60 for children. Ireland is the only one of the 27 EU member states which has refused to incorporate the Reception Directive which allows for asylum seekers to work under some circumstances. This system directly creates poverty and social exclusion as well as isolation and widespread depression and mental illness. Denial of the right to work and to earn a living, coupled with their weekly allowance which is considerably lower than other welfare payments to Irish citizens, increases the social and economic gap between asylum seekers and virtually all others. The explicit exclusion of asylum seekers from integration policies is likely to build up social problems for the future. Many people who receive refugee status or who receive leave to remain in Ireland have been de-skilled and have become socially isolated, wasting a potential resource of new skills, ideas, and energies that could be available to the Irish economy and society (EAPN: 2007).

Denayer (2008) believes that the existence of barriers to economic participation is "perhaps the most serious problem that immigrants face in Irish society" (2008: 20). Denayer suggests that having a job means economic and social integration, the development of self-esteem and social contacts, opportunities for personal advancement and development, and the ability to be independent or to raise a family. In the case of migrants without work, this often means being without welfare benefits which means that people inevitably suffer

hardships such as poverty, exclusion, domestic violence, isolation and mental and other health problems. Brunkhorst (2005) suggests that the removal of barriers to employment is essential, but in itself it is not enough to accomplish integration. Instead, according to the Scottish Advisory Board for Naturalisation and Integration (2007), it is necessary to develop a consistent integral approach, driven by immigrants, immigrant groups, as well as local and national policy makers.

There were a number of significant changes in legislation in 2007, beginning with the new Employment Permit Act which came into force in January 2007. Among the key changes were: the introduction of a so-called “Green Card” for highly-skilled employees, mostly in occupations with an annual salary above €60,000; and in a restricted number of occupations, in sectors with skills shortages, in a salary range between €30,000 and €60,000. Applicants do not need to pass a labour market test and are entitled to bring their family with them. The card is issued for two years, after which holders can apply for permanent residence. Almost 3,000 Green Cards were issued in 2007 (OECD, 2008). In April 2007, the Third Level Graduate Scheme was implemented providing that non-EEA students who graduated on or after 1 January 2007 with a degree from an Irish third-level educational institution may be permitted to remain in Ireland for six months. The scheme allows them to find employment and apply for a work permit or Green Card permit. During this six-month period they may work full time.

Despite the changes in legislation, however, research by Niessen *et al.* (2007) has revealed that most Irish believe ethnic discrimination is fairly widespread and that it worsened between 2001 and 2006. Research by Mac Éinrí (2007) noted that some empathy with migrants may well exist, but, there is a lack of policy, legislation, infrastructure, support organisations and experience of those European countries long used to dealing with immigration. Mac Éinrí concluded that the challenge now is both to respond in the short term to the needs and rights of these new members of Irish society, and to address in the medium to long term the task of building a new society in which place of origin and ethno-national identity are no longer the sole defining vectors of identity.



3.0 Background to Focus Groups

This chapter summarises the results of the focus group interviews which were conducted with migrants by the working group members as part of the Education in Employment project. Focus group interviews were conducted by working group members in their respective geographical regions. One hundred and sixty migrants (82 males and 78 females) from twenty-one different countries participated in this research. Participants ranged from less than 20 years to over 40 years, with the majority of participants in the 20-35 age category. The length of time participants lived in Ireland ranged from less than half a year to over nine years, with the majority of participants living in Ireland between one and two years.

Working group members conducted three focus group interviews in their respective local communities and selected participants based on the largest community of migrants in that region. A fourth focus group was conducted within their own respective third-level college. Each focus group consisted of six to ten participants. Each working group member acted as facilitator for the focus group interviews they conducted, and had administrative support from their respective college to tape-record and take notes during their interviewing of the focus groups. Some working group members also invited a translator to attend, particularly, if they knew in advance that the level of English of the participants was poor. In order to more fully explore cultural differences and similarities in each focus group – and for translation purposes – the majority of groups consisted of people from the same country of origin. In some cases, however, groups had participants from different nationalities. Each focus group had participants which could be divided into three categories: (i) those who previously had third-level qualifications from their home countries; (ii) those who never attended a third-level college; and (iii) those who are currently attending third-level colleges in Ireland. All focus groups had participants who were employed and unemployed and had various residency statuses. Focus group participants were selected through immigrant support centres, word of mouth, migrant networking groups, voluntary organisations and personal contacts.

As many participants in the focus groups which were conducted in the general community (i.e., outside the colleges) had not engaged with third-level education in Ireland, it was decided that a further focus group study would be held within each of the partner colleges to gather the perceptions of those who have engaged with third-level education. For inclusion in a college focus group, each participant needed to be a migrant (i) currently *in* employment and (ii) currently enrolled in a third-level education course. The college-based focus groups comprised students of diverse nationalities and enrolled in a variety of disciplines in the colleges. These participants were selected through word of mouth, referrals from lecturers, and personal contacts.

As focus groups were restricted to the geographical vicinity of partner institutions, the findings do not represent all regions of Ireland. The findings are intended to provide a snap shot of a number of barriers to accessing third-level education by migrants living and working in various regions of Ireland. Focus groups were conducted in cities, large and small towns and rural areas generally within a forty-mile radius of a partner college. Interestingly, the findings illustrate that overall there are no regional differences and the difficulties which were experienced were similar in cities, towns, and rural areas.

Table 3.1 Country of Origin of Participants

Country of Origin	Number of Participants
Poland	37
Nigeria	36
Lithuania	20
Iran	11
Brazil	9
China	8
Russia	7
Latvia	7
Ghana	5
Turkey	3
Syria	3
Zimbabwe	2
Venezuela	2
Lebanon	2
Congo	2
Moldova	1
Algeria	1
Ukraine	1
Czech Republic	1
Romania	1
Paraguay	1

Country of Origin of Participants

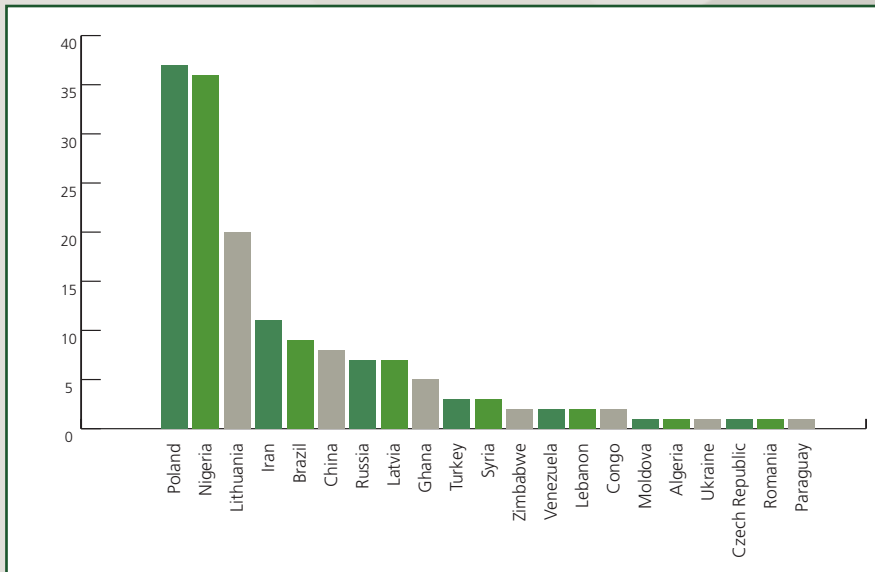


Table 3.2 Gender of Participants

Gender	Number of Participants
Male	82
Female	78

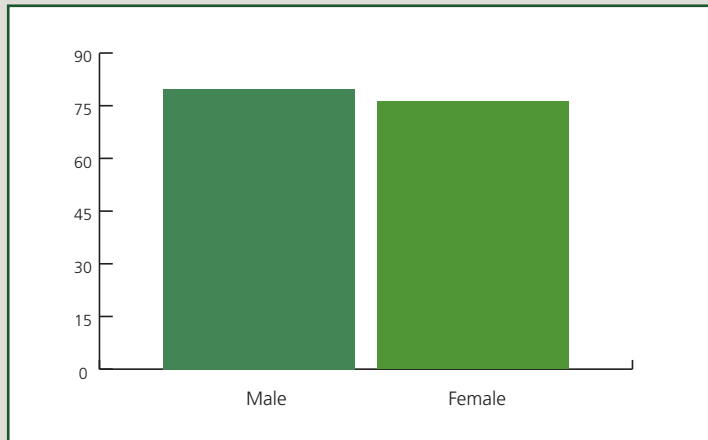


Table 3.3 Ages of Participants

Age	Number of Participants
<20 years	3
20-24 years	45
25-30 years	53
31-35 years	36
36-40 years	16
>40 years	7

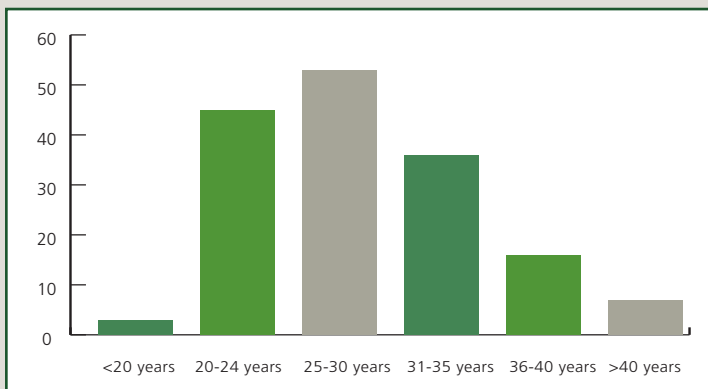
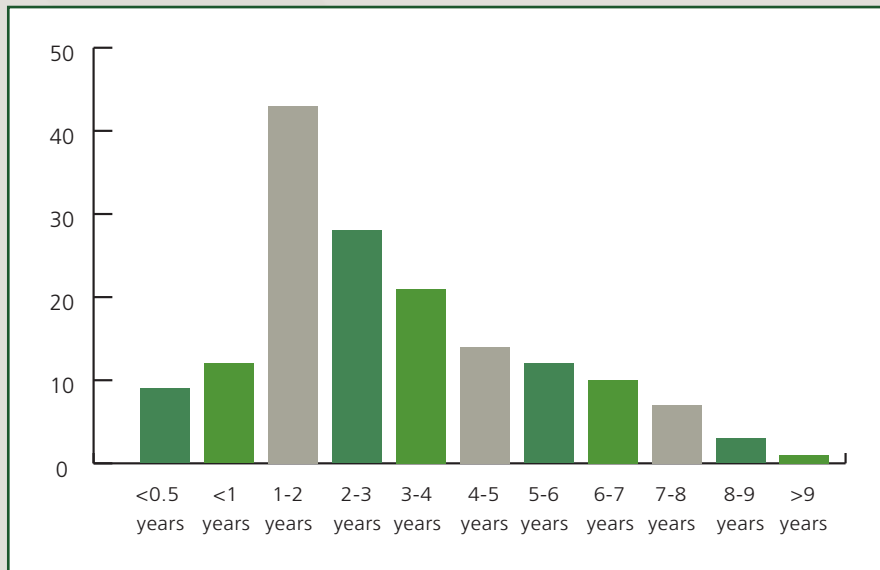


Table 3.4 Length of Time in Ireland

Length of Time in Ireland	Number of Participants
<0.5 years	9
<1 year	12
1-2 years	43
2-3 years	28
3-4 years	21
4-5 years	14
5-6 years	12
6-7 years	10
7-8 years	7
8-9 years	3
>9 years	1





3.1 Focus Group Interview Guide

A focus group interview guide was developed by members of the working group to ensure that information addressing selected topics was obtained from a broad number of people. The questions which formed the focus group guide are listed in Appendix B. The focus group interview guide included selected topics or subject areas about which the interviewer was free to explore, probe deeper, and ask related questions that would optimally elucidate and illuminate that particular subject. The most fundamental use of the focus group interview guide was to serve as a basic checklist during the interviews, to make sure that all relevant topics were covered by the different groups and interviewees. A further advantage of the focus group interview guide was that it helped to ensure that the interviewer carefully decided how best to use the limited time available in the interview situation. The guide helped to make interviewing different people more systematic and comprehensive by confining the issues to be discussed in the limited time available for each group of interviewees.

3.2 The Appropriateness of Focus Group Methodology for the Current Project

A focus group study is a qualitative research method. As such, it uses guided group-discussions to generate rich understanding of participants' experiences and views, drawing on three of the fundamental strengths that are shared by all qualitative methods:

- (i) exploration and discovery;
- (ii) context and depth; and
- (iii) interpretation (Morgan, 1998).

The focus group is essentially a form of group interview but is also crucially distinctive for the explicit use of group interaction as research data. This interaction also facilitates the active involvement of the interviewer in the research. Though a distinct research methodology, it incorporates elements of a range of qualitative techniques, including the interview, group discussion, participant observation, and active researcher involvement (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003). Morgan (1998) argues that the use of focus groups is a "particularly desirable research method" in situations where the researcher is investigating complex behaviour and motivations because "focus group conversations can be a gold mine of information about the ways that people behave and the motivations that underlie these behaviours" (1998: 58).

Other advantages of focus groups include:

- Increasing the sample size compared to one-to-one interviews, thereby helping to offset the labour intensive nature of qualitative research;
- Facilitating the collection of information in a flexible, low cost, and interconnected way that produces speedy results and that have high face validity;
- The conversation, questions, and debate between participants helps to reveal, in their own words, their perceptions, underlying assumptions, attitudes and priorities and this helps to clarify why people hold particular views (Seale, 2004).

The focus group methodology was chosen as it was deemed to provide the greatest potential to investigate the research questions in a holistic, in-depth, and meaningful way. Another important consideration was that this methodology allowed for a substantial increase in the research sample size and because it provided immediate results. While the research exercise was highly labour intensive and time consuming, the focus group methodology allowed for a sufficient but manageable number and range of participants, and for the timely gathering, recording, and analysis of data.


The focus group interview findings are presented under eleven main thematic areas that emerged from the discussions:

- Impressions of Ireland
- Racism and Discrimination
- Integration
- Cultural Differences and Cultural Barriers
- English Language Difficulties
- Cost of Education
- Lack of Information Regarding Access to Education
- Recognition of Qualifications and Prior Learning
- Residency Status
- Right to Education
- Future Plans and Aspirations.

3.3 Impressions of Ireland

Participants were asked to give a very brief overview of their general impressions of Ireland and Irish society, in order to ascertain their perceptions since their arrival in Ireland. This was a broad question but it was included to establish an overall sense of their general experiences. Research participants, overall, had a very positive impression of Ireland and described the Irish generally as friendly and polite. One participant knew a little about Irish culture before arrival:

*For me Ireland always painted a romantic picture, from reading stories about the Celts
(Slovakian participant, Galway/Mayo).*



Most participants believed Ireland is a good place to live:

Life is easier. The social life, including the lives of our children, is better here (Polish participant, Galway/Mayo).

When I came here, I started a job; I did not speak English, but, the Irish people helped me with everything. The Irish provide a kind of community for Polish people and other nationalities to work together (Polish participant, Sligo).

When I came to Cork first I found the Irish people very friendly. This was a new experience for me, especially at the beginning. Their friendliness exceeded all of my expectations (Polish participant, Cork).

We are made feel very, very welcome here. I have met some very good Irish men and women and I like all the people in Carrick-on-Shannon where I live (Iranian participant, Leitrim).

I remember when I arrived in Sligo first I thought the people are very friendly. People on the street say 'Hi' to you. This would never happen in Poland. When somebody says 'Hi' to you, you just feel better (Polish participant, Sligo).

There is a calm and quiet atmosphere here in Ireland and it is very laid back (Polish participant, Co. Cork).

The Kurdish Iranian participants in Sligo stressed that they were very grateful to the Irish people for making them feel so welcome, and also to the Irish government for accepting them as refugees, for taking them from a 'very bad situation', where they lived 'under a tent'. They were also keen to make clear that they hoped to get a good job here as they were unhappy accepting social welfare – or 'social money' as they termed it. One participant stated that he felt 'shame' as he had not been able to work and find employment. Other Latvian participants in West Cork described how they had been overwhelmed by the support they had received from the local Irish people in the aftermath of a tragic accident occurring within their own community. Some of the Polish participants in Cork stated that the Irish people were 'most helpful'. All of the Middle Eastern participants believed that Ireland is a welcoming place and again compared this more favourably to their experiences elsewhere in Europe, though some Dublin-based participants suggested that Irish people were becoming gradually less tolerant, particularly towards traditional Muslims.

All of the focus group participants thought the pay in Ireland is very good and their experience was that even lower paid jobs here provide enough for the achievement of a good standard and quality of life, though they did recognise that Ireland was an expensive place to live. The following quotation summarises such sentiments:

Even lower paid jobs provide enough money for a good standard of living in Ireland compared to similar jobs in Venezuela, where a lower paid job will allow you to pay only your rent and to eat (Venezuelan participant, Dublin).

One participant, however, noted the difficulty in getting a pay rise. A Chinese participant in Dublin believed that Irish people tend to get preferential treatment in workplace promotions. Ghanaian participants interviewed in Letterkenny were generally happy in Ireland, though some stated that they found it very difficult to find work here. Some of the Nigerian participants based in Letterkenny, however, commented that the Irish did not mix socially with them, even with their children in schools. Middle Eastern participants believed that Irish society is more tolerant of Islam than other European countries, such as Britain.


Interestingly, in Cork, a number of the Polish participants, who lived in Ireland for a number of years, believed that attitudes towards migrants have changed dramatically in the last few years. One participant stated that when he first arrived Irish people were extremely friendly – people would say ‘Hello’ to him on the street and local Irish people would visit his house, socialise with him and, generally, ‘we were made to feel very welcome’. He believes, however, that this changed when 10 further countries were admitted to the EU. A second participant also believed that Irish people, particularly the younger generation, tended to be very jealous of migrants. Another Lithuanian participant, based in Cork, agreed that Irish people were less welcoming now, but she believed that this was understandable given the growing competition for work. One of their key concerns about Ireland was the poor standards in the health services. All of the participants agreed that, if they needed an operation, they would prefer to fly home if possible rather than depend on the Irish health service. In the education context, some of the Athlone-based Nigerian students stated that they found their lecturers to be very approachable and compared this favourably against their experiences in their native country. Likewise, students in Cork believed that they received excellent support in college, from both lecturers and tutors, and this service was something which they believed is very important and influential in their educational success.

Many of the focus group participants agreed that Ireland was experiencing rapid change with regard to immigration and that, in another ten years, the experiences of migrants should be qualitatively different, as Irish people would become more accustomed to – and younger people used to growing up in – a multicultural society. Others commented that starting a new life can be difficult, but as one expressed it:

If you’re a migrant, at the back of your mind, you know these challenges will be there (African participant, Sligo).

The main impression of Ireland for all participants was that it was:

A land of opportunities (African participant, Sligo).



Overall, focus group interviewees in the different parts of Ireland expressed positive experiences upon their arrival in Ireland. Many of the interviewees, however, articulated what appeared to be an increasing apprehension about migrants among Irish people, coinciding with the slowdown in Ireland's economic growth in recent years. Some Irish people now view migrants to be 'taking Irish jobs', with the result that the previous more benign attitude towards migrants is becoming less positive. Some interviewees also suggested that, while Irish people tend to be friendly towards them when they first meet them, the friendliness seems to remain 'rather superficial' as many of the Irish tend not to socialise or mix with them over the longer term.

3.4 Racism and Discrimination

The study participants were asked if they experienced any racism or discrimination since their arrival in Ireland. Issues relating to racism and discrimination emerged most prominently in focus group discussions with African migrants. A number of interviewees articulated incidents of racism and bullying in the workplace and in children's schools. Nigerian focus group participants based in Athlone believed that racism among children was a result of ignorance and the only way it might be eradicated would be through social integration. Most of these participants believed that social integration could be achieved in Ireland only by actively adopting positive discrimination employment policies for black minorities across all professions, including the teaching professions. These Nigerian interviewees believed that, otherwise, it would take 'many generations' for true integration to occur spontaneously, in the absence of active supported efforts. On racial discrimination in the workplace, one interviewee commented that she was given degrading jobs and believed her skin colour was the reason for this:

I was always asked to empty the bin simply because I'm black (Nigerian participant, Athlone).

Participants commented that racism was not only confined to the workplace, as it was also evident in social situations:

I am living in a small town and I stand out because I am black. Irish people do not think they are racist, but they are. We are treated differently. If I go to a counter in a shop and want to ask a question I am left standing there and people do not want to talk to me, and I have seen that happening to other black people also. There is also a sense of community in a small town and people are not used to interacting with strangers (Nigerian participant, Sligo).

Being coloured is a big, big challenge here in Castlebar. When I came here first in 1998, Castlebar was a tiny little place. I remember walking in the main street and people were looking at us. I'm not that black but I am not white either, so we are seen as strangers. In Castlebar, when you talk of racism, it is different; it is not like being in France where they tell you straight away you are coloured, or Muslim or Jewish, and that causes more rage. Here, racism is hidden, it is deeper, you don't see it, you don't understand it, but, when people find out where we come from we are ignored and that is insulting. People do this in an ignorant or narrow-minded way (North African participant, Mayo).

Most people I know have experienced some form of discrimination or racism but it is mostly in secondary schools and not at third level (Nigerian student participant, Athlone).


I have noticed that black people living here experience a lot more racism than we do (Polish participant, Cork).

A Dublin-based Nigerian interviewee believed that both country of origin and skin colour had an influence on access to employment. The Nigerian research participants based in Dublin also believed that they experience racism and exploitation in the workplace, though it was noted that experience of racism among Irish employers varied, depending on the sector worked in. This group agreed they are treated with respect more often by people who have attained a high level of education. One person gave an example that a Nigerian national would more likely experience racism while working in a warehouse or supermarket. It was also noted by participants that racism was more likely experienced from fellow employees than from management. Some participants spoke of positive experiences with managers when discussing issues of discrimination. One interviewee commented, however, that equality was not often implemented in the workplace. The interviewed Nigerian nationals based in Cork had a mixed view of Irish people's attitudes towards them. They had all experienced some form of racism and believed it was difficult to progress as a black person living in Cork, particularly through any employment opportunities. They noted specifically that the elderly and people who had travelled were less racist towards them. Additionally, the Nigerian participants based in Cork expressed that they had experienced racism and discrimination from non-Irish nationalities based in Ireland as well as from the native Irish:

When we shop in supermarkets and if there is a Polish person working at the checkout, they will not put the change into our hands like they do with other customers, they will throw it on the counter and not look at us (Nigerian participant, Cork).

In relation to the experiences of Middle Eastern participants, five interviewees believed that being Islamic was an influential factor in the way they were treated in the workplace; again reporting that discrimination was more often exercised by fellow employees rather than from management. Although they believed that Irish society was trying to challenge racism in the workplace, they concurred that this was a difficult task.

Some of the participants in Cork who came from EU Accession States also experienced discrimination, though they believed that 'racism' was too strong a term to describe it. They believed that the people who were most discriminatory towards them were Irish people younger than 35 years. One Lithuanian participant based in Cork concurred with this, believing that the more educated people and older people were generally quite welcoming, but that Irish in the 25-35 years age-group were more likely to be discriminatory and 'jealous'. The EU Accession State participants also commented that black people experience more racism. In relation to work opportunities, one eastern European woman who had worked for both Irish and American companies reported that, while she was not given opportunities to progress within the Irish company, she is now an assistant manager with the American company. Some migrants perceived a problem regarding career progression for 'foreign nationals',



even where their qualifications surpass those of their Irish colleagues, with some participants arguing that “Irish employers are biased”. It was also stated by Polish participants in Cork that employers are less helpful towards foreign nationals. Another Polish participant commented:

I have experienced lots of racist comments but it is mostly because I work in a bar and when people get drunk they are more difficult to deal with and I have to deal with people under the influence of alcohol a lot. I am living in a country town with lots of other Polish people living here also and local people have commented that there are too many Poles living in this town (Polish participant, Co. Cork).

The above findings illustrate the variety of experiences towards the issue of racism and discrimination. From the current research, it is clear that participants from African countries tend to suffer more discrimination than participants from other countries might. Despite difficulties related to discrimination, however, many participants from all backgrounds indicated that they would like to make Ireland their permanent home.



3.5 Integration

Regarding integrating with Irish society, the interviewees presented mixed responses. Many believed that Irish people were friendly, but it was difficult to make more meaningful and lasting friendships. In Cork, the EU Accession State migrants stated that they “had no Irish friends their own age”. Similarly, the students based in Athlone found their Irish counterparts, and in particular female students, to be “cliquish”, and as one participant stated:

They say hello to you, but never invite you round to their house or to go out with them (Nigerian student participant, Athlone).

Another commented:

When you come here everyone is so welcoming. After about two weeks you realise that they are welcoming only to tourists and that you have to make an effort to really fit in (Student participant, Galway/Mayo).


I have a job here and my son is going to school here but I would like to be more fully integrated into Irish society (Iranian participant, Sligo).

The lack of a support network of friends is difficult for us, for example, if you want to apply for a course it is a massive challenge if you are doing it alone, whereas if your friends have already done so it seems easy. A further difficulty for us in becoming integrated is the difficulty we face in meeting Irish people (Moldovan participant, Co. Galway).

Some of the participants who have been living in Ireland for a number of years believed that, when they return for a holiday to their country or origin, they realise that they are integrating to Irish society:

When I go back to Poland I see that everything is changing there, so we are getting more involved now here in Ireland and less involved with the Polish community. I still have a lot of friends in Poland but I have lots of friends here also and I can have fun and enjoyment with them because now I have a home in Ireland. I love it because this is my home and I should love it (Polish participant, Sligo).

All the Cork-based student interviewees believe they are treated the same in class by their lecturers and tutors, and they perceived themselves to be well integrated into the third-level education system. In terms of workplace integration, the Dublin-based Nigerian migrants believed that integration was more difficult to achieve. Likewise, the Middle Eastern migrants in Dublin stated that their overall experience of working in Ireland was good, but they knew that some of their compatriots were in lower paid jobs and found it harder to integrate.



They believed it was difficult to integrate into the workplace “until you build up trust”. One participant believed that integration is particularly difficult when one is not interested in going to the pub, as he believed that social life in Ireland is centred on pub life. He summarised that while he gained financially from moving to Ireland, his quality of life has suffered:

I have more money but have less enjoyable free time. On one hand you gain, but on the other you lose (Lithuanian participant, Cork).

In summary, participants in all of the focus groups confirmed that there are challenges for workplace and social integration, both in urban and rural Ireland. There was a general consensus that integration is difficult to achieve, but, many participants believe that there is a lack of emphasis placed on integration strategies. Participants also suggested that there are not enough opportunities available to them to integrate with local people. A number of interviewees commented that having meetings, such as these focus groups, would provide opportunities for improved understanding and integration, and that, overall, there is a need for developing opportunities and shared activities to help migrants to more easily integrate with local communities.

3.6 Cultural Differences and Cultural Barriers

Participants were asked if they had experienced any cultural barriers in their attempt to integrate with Irish society. While some participants identified specific cultural barriers, the following quotation summarises the feelings of a number of participants:

I live in Sligo now and I have lived in England and in America for a long time, so I know what it is like to live in another country. It is never your country; it can be painful sometimes. Even if the country is good you still miss your home country in your heart (Iranian participant, Sligo).

General sentiments regarding cultural differences and cultural barriers included:

I came here to experience a different culture, but, there are a lot of drugs in third-level colleges in Ireland so I do not want to send my children to third level in Ireland. I came to Ireland to gain some new cultural experiences and also I had an ambition, I did not want to stay at home in a factory folding clothes all day long (Chinese participant, Dublin).

I have a driving licence since 1978 but it is not accepted here. I have asked why it is not accepted and I did not get any explanation (Iranian participant, Sligo).

There are a lot of different cultures here, but, people do not talk about them too much. Very few people have the courage to bring out their own cultures. There are not many opportunities to show people our culture. The only time I saw an opportunity to show our own culture was when our company organised a welcoming food day. There were a few Chinese people, a few Indian, a few Africans and the rest were Irish, and we all brought in our own traditional native foods. Now, even with more foreigners, we do not share our culture. There should be more opportunities for cultural expression, but, we have fewer opportunities to do that (Nigerian participant, Co. Mayo).

Coming to Ireland was a big culture shock because of the land, the language, the people, the music; everything was different (Polish participant, Sligo).

I find it difficult to progress in life here in Ireland as a black person. People judge me on the colour of my skin and this is a cultural barrier for me in my progression in the workplace (Nigerian participant, Cork).

Some Nigerian participants, in particular, indicated that there were some obvious cultural differences between African and Irish behaviour, which can cause initial difficulties in understanding communication styles, especially with official or workplace authorities in Ireland. Cultural practices in Nigeria, for example, dictate that one should address all superiors formally and without eye contact:

I have noticed here in Ireland it is possible to look directly in the eyes of a person when talking to them in formal situations. In Nigeria we do not do that, and that is one of the biggest cultural differences I have found. Also in college, I have noticed that students address their lecturers by their first names. In Nigeria, it is much more formal (Nigerian participant, Cork).

All focus groups reported that non-EU participants faced more acute cultural barriers than the EU migrants faced. Students in Athlone, predominantly African, also noted that there were some cultural differences in interpersonal communication, making it difficult to understand the lecturer in the classroom:

There are some obvious cultural differences between Nigeria and Ireland. Nigerians for example tend to represent a culture that keeps a distance from those in high power positions and this causes initial difficulties for us in the classroom situation. A positive cultural difference is that third-level lecturers in Ireland are very approachable (Nigerian participant, Athlone).

Some participants suggested that intercultural education at schools and colleges should aim to promote respect for different cultures and should highlight the benefits of cultural diversity. The interviewees believed that the promotion of different cultures should begin with young children in primary schools. Interviewees also suggested that there should be an emphasis on showing respect for differences and for cultural diversity at all levels of education and in workplaces. They further suggested that there should be a focus on the positive contribution migrants can make to the economic, social and cultural life of Ireland.

3.7 English Language Difficulties

There was consensus among all research participants that difficulties with English language were the single greatest factor in terms of access to education and employment in Ireland. Mixed results emerged from the focus groups in relation to English language proficiency of the participants. As one participant observed:

It is difficult to go to another country where everything is different. If you are going to study in another language, this is a very big consideration (Lithuanian participant, Cork).

When I came to Ireland first, I do not think that my spoken or written English language skills were good. It would have been helpful if there were special classes for me to improve. It was difficult for the beginning of my time here, but, now I am studying in third level and I find the printed handouts and the notes that lecturers give out are very helpful and now I do not have a problem (Polish participant, Cork).

There are ten of us here tonight, eight from China and two from Venezuela and we are all studying English here in Dublin. This is necessary for us to further our education and careers (Chinese participant, Dublin).

The above quotations confirm that most participants would welcome the chance to improve their English language skills, particularly in relation to discipline-specific areas they wished to study. Interviewees reported a wide variance in their proficiency in spoken and written English — and difficulties with attaining higher proficiency. Some of the Nigerian participants in Athlone reported a lack of confidence in their ability to express themselves in English. The following comment is representative of the sentiments of the majority of participants:

The first barrier is the English language and the lack of confidence we have for expressing ourselves in English. General English classes are not enough to give us confidence to pursue a third-level course; we need more specific classes in whatever area we decide to study (Polish participant, Athlone).

There is a fear of not succeeding because of language difficulties (Polish participant, Cork).

Some of the older research participants in Athlone stated that they found it very difficult to learn English, even though they did speak a number of eastern European languages. Some stated that they felt “ignorant” or that they were perceived as such by Irish people because of their inability to speak English fluently. Many found that they had few opportunities for conversing in English as their workplaces and homes tended to be populated by people who spoke the same language as themselves.

Many participants with a good level of proficiency in English identified the need for more specialised English language provision. A common finding from most of the focus groups was that general English classes are not sufficient to provide them with the capacity and confidence to pursue third-level education through English. One Lithuanian participant had attended beginners' level classes in Cork but did not think that they were adequately delivered. Two other Cork-based Lithuanian participants had learned English by reading newspapers and watching television and had an excellent level of spoken English. Some of the Athlone-based Nigerian participants proposed the provision of technical English classes or other English classes dealing with particular areas, for example, English for accounting students, or English for science students. Students in Cork also expressed the view that specialist classes, such as English for business, would be beneficial. In relation to accessing third-level education, the younger participants in Athlone expressed fears that they would "not be able to understand lecturers" and would not be able to write essays. The eastern European participants in the Athlone focus group believed that general English classes do not provide sufficient preparation for third level and that a "higher level" or specialised English classes would be required. Another participant added:

At the moment I am studying for a PhD in physics and additional specialised tutorials which deal with scientific terms would be very helpful. I do not have a problem with writing English but the translation of some terms is very difficult for me (Polish participant, Cork).

The Nigerian focus group in Cork found difficulty not only in writing and speaking English but also the requirement in education for speed-reading. They also found regional differences in accents difficult to comprehend and, in particular, the Cork accent. The problem of accent was expressed in most of the focus groups.

Many focus group participants believed that employers should organise English language classes for migrants to help them improve their language skills and to integrate better into the workplace. Some suggested, however, that employers might be unwilling to do so since their employees would then gain a better understanding of their rights and entitlements. The Polish interviewees in Cork argued that migrants should be more self-motivated to learn English and believed that they must engage more with English speakers to help themselves to improve their language skills, rather than socialising and speaking solely with their compatriots. These Polish participants who were willing to speak English believed that they had gained confidence and improved their competency while living and working in Ireland, an achievement which allowed them greater opportunities. Some participants argued that the high fees charged for English language courses caused problems for them and that this factor caused considerable delay in language acquisition.

Overall, it was apparent from all of the focus groups that the language barrier caused difficulties for the majority of participants, in education, work, and social settings. There was a willingness among all participants to learn English, but cost of classes and cost of childcare emerged as barriers to their participation in such classes. Many participants also spoke of the need to move beyond Basic English classes and to introduce discipline-specific English classes for them to integrate more fully with their specialised field of work and study.



3.8 Cost of Education

A common finding emerging from all focus groups was that participants are very eager to partake in third-level education. The cost of education, however, was identified as a major barrier to access by all participants in all regions. The issue of finance was of greater significance to the non-EU migrants or migrants with non-resident status, due to the differential fees demanded by education institutions depending on status and country of origin:

I saw a course advertised for a local third-level college, but, when I asked about enrolling on this course I found out that I would have to pay three times the amount per year as people from Ireland and other European Union states. There is just no way, no way at all that I could afford to do the course. I already have a degree from my home university and I am working here as a security man to make a living for my wife and daughter. Very often, my daughter asks me why I work as a security person but I cannot tell her that I cannot afford to do a course and get a better qualification and then I would not have to do security work (Nigerian participant, Cork).

As illustrated by the above quotation, many other participants commented that international fees are often three times greater than those for EU citizens. This issue was, in particular, noted by all African participants. In Dublin, the African participants argued that the high cost of foreign-national/non-European fees prevented most people in their community from accessing third-level education in Ireland. All of the Dublin-based Nigerian participants knew of people who achieved high points in their Leaving Certificate but who could not access third-level education because of high fees. This issue was also noted by the Dublin-based Chinese and Venezuelan participants. The African participants in Cork also specified fees as the key barrier to education and believed that if these were lower, more people would access education. One participant had applied to go to college but was forced to withdraw because the application fee was prohibitively expensive:

I am a qualified nurse but I am working here as an assistant in a nursing home, so I decided I would like to get a qualification in business in order to have a better chance of changing from my current job. When I realised how much I would have to pay to attend college in the evening, I realised all of my wages would go on paying the fees, and I would not have enough money for food and rent (Nigerian participant, Cork).

With regard to EU-status participants, fees emerged as an important issue but were less significant in comparison to the non-EU participants. Some interviewees stated that the cost was only marginally higher than in their countries of origin and as the average salary was considerably higher in Ireland, the cost of education here was in real terms less than in their countries of origin. The Polish participants in Athlone, however, noted that as citizens of the European Union they were paying the same fees as Irish citizens and they welcomed the opportunity to avail of this fee structure. It was also suggested in all of the focus groups that it was necessary to save money so that loans which were acquired to move to Ireland could be repaid. Another budgetary consideration for the participants was that they frequently send money to their families in their countries of origin. Overall, the barrier created by prohibitively expensive education enrolment fees was a recurring concern for the focus group interviewees:

I would love to go to a third-level college to do a master's degree as I already have a primary degree from my home country, but, it is just too expensive. I am working as a waitress here and I am enjoying the work, but I do not want to do this work for the rest of my life. I would like to stay in Ireland as the standard of living is good, but when I pay my rent and send some money home to my family there is not a hope of paying college fees (Polish participant, Cork).

Of course the price of courses is a difficulty for all of us, and also because we are working in jobs like bars and hotels we work in the evening times and this is generally when the courses take place (Polish participant, Co. Cork).

I had difficulties getting a maintenance grant and am overwhelmed with all of the paperwork involved (Polish participant, Letterkenny).

A further cost identified by participants accessing education is that of childcare. All of the participants, regardless of nationality or residency status, referred to the high cost of childcare in Ireland. This difficulty is compounded by not having the support of extended family members:

If I want to enrol in a third-level course here in Ireland it is very, very difficult for me as I have three small children and my husband has to work extra hours to make sure that we are looked after. I cannot afford to pay for childcare and I do not have any other family here. In my home country there would be a family structure which I could avail of to look after my children with no cost for the hours I attend classes (Nigerian participant, Cork).

The main barrier for me is childcare costs. I have three children to mind and even if I did get a job to help pay for my education the money would go on minding the children (Nigerian participant, Sligo).

Ireland is a very expensive country. Everything is very expensive here especially as we are depending on the Government to give us social welfare money (Iranian participant, Co. Leitrim).

In summary, it is clear that the cost of education is a major barrier for migrants who are interested in pursuing third-level education and the costs are particularly prohibitive for those who have to pay non-EU fees. Despite the cost barrier, however, many participants are willing to work in low paid jobs in order to save money for their education. Participants also suggested that they would like to have more information on the fee structures for third-level institutions and some advice on where to locate this information. Some participants also reported that there is a demand for more low-cost English language courses.



3.9 Lack of Information Regarding Access to Education

The majority of focus group participants articulated that they had very little guidance or other information on access to third-level education in Ireland. A major theme arising from the research was the frustration voiced by participants in relation to this lack of available information on access to education. There was a general lack of awareness among interviewees about services available to ‘foreign-nationals’ resident in Ireland wishing to apply to third-level education institutions — as one participant put it:

Nobody has ever explained whether we are permitted to go to college, and to be honest we have not checked out this option (Brazilian participant, Galway/Mayo).

The information available for getting into college is not clear, especially in relation to funding. It is not clear where we are to get information from. It appears that there are a lot of agencies doing the same job and that is confusing (Nigerian participant, Letterkenny).

We do not have enough information on how people from our community can enter third-level colleges (Chinese participant, Dublin).

The information we need about third-level education is probably out there somewhere even if it is not in Polish but the difficulty is we do not know how or where to get this information (Polish participant, Co. Cork).

When we find out how to get the information from different public services the information provided can be inconsistent (Ghanaian participant, Letterkenny).

Many of us get information from our friends about going to college and about getting our qualifications from Poland recognised. It would be great if the procedures for foreign people would be advertised in places where we could easily get the information. My friend told me that she applied to have her qualifications from Poland recognised here in Ireland but she told me it takes about 12 to 14 weeks for this. I never heard of this before (Polish participant, Cork).

Most of us know third-level colleges from a distance and would like to go to college but do not see it as an option. We do not know if third-level courses are available to us. I would like to go to college but I think the entrance exam would be most difficult. The first year in college would be difficult but we would pick up the language just as we did in the workplace (Lithuanian participant, Galway/Mayo).

Interviewees noted a general dearth of information for potential students on both eligibility requirements and services available. They found the application process extremely confusing. Some stated that they found it difficult to ascertain how “the system” works in Ireland. Many participants believed the system to be overly “difficult, patchy, cumbersome, awkward and burdensome”, particularly for non-CAO and foreign-national applicants. While services might be available for information provision, the general consensus was that migrants were not made aware of them:

We would all like to have more information on third-level courses. Some of us are doing FETAC courses at the moment but nobody has given us any information on what is possible for us when we finish these courses (Iranian participant, Co. Leitrim).

Many of the participants mentioned the Internet as an information source, but not all interviewees had access to the Internet. Interviewees also suggested that they would like a “human face” to interact with to find immediate answers to questions:

I know it is possible to get information about courses through the Internet but it would be good if we had somewhere we could go to meet, somebody to explain to us what courses are available for us (Nigerian participant, Cork).

An Athlone-based participant from an EU Accession State observed that, although third-level college websites do list available courses, these websites do not have dedicated sections to addresses queries relevant in particular to migrants, such as pages explaining to recognition of foreign qualifications, the fees category they are subject to, and details regarding their application process. Similarly, interviewees from some of the other focus groups recommended that college websites should be redesigned with a dedicated section concerning the application procedures and requirements for international and non-CAO applicant students.

Some Nigerians based in Letterkenny believed that advisors dealing with these issues were unhelpful and very quick to say that they would not qualify for grants. Likewise, other participants argued that every third-level college should have a dedicated information office set up to deal specifically with applications from migrants. One participant suggested that each college should provide an open information-day to deal with all queries on requirements and entitlements.

Overall, the participants in all focus groups across all regions perceived that lack of information regarding accessing third-level courses to be a major barrier for their advancement in education and in the workplace. A large number of participants requested that specific information on how to access third-level courses in Ireland should be provided in a user-friendly way and this information should be available locally for them and without over-reliance on the Internet. Participants suggested that information leaflets could be made available through their local libraries, money-transfer outlets, social welfare offices, accommodation houses, citizen information centres, Bus Éireann offices, local ethnic shops, restaurants and bars, regional drop-in centres for foreign nationals, and billboards.



3.10 Recognition of Qualifications and Prior Learning

Formal recognition of international qualifications and formal recognition of prior learning are complex and related issues, but are considered of utmost importance for migrants wishing to attend third-level institutions. One of the key themes identified by all participants in all regions, regardless of nationality, was the difficulty in getting qualifications which they had been awarded in their home countries recognised by employers and they feared that they would have a similar difficulty when approaching third-level institutions in Ireland. Participants observed:

Employers do not care what degrees we have from our home countries; they just want somebody to fill in and do whatever job becomes vacant. I have a master's degree from Poland and I am working in a chip shop here. Most of the Polish people I know that are here are working in bars, or as cleaners in hotels, or in Polish shops, and all of them would have degrees (Polish participant, Co. Cork).

I have a degree from my home country, Nigeria, and it is equivalent to at least a level 8 or even a 9 in Ireland, but, when I went to ask about this I was told that I would have to take a FETAC level 5 course (Nigerian participant, Mayo).

Participants in all regions knew of people whose qualifications were not recognised in Ireland. An Iranian participant in Sligo, for example, knew of someone whose nursing qualifications had not been recognised. A Romanian participant also spoke of her own experience:

I have both primary and postgraduate qualifications from my home town university in Romania, but, people here treat these qualifications with suspicion. There is a perception that all Romanian people are here in Ireland to beg on the street and steal money and my qualifications are not taken seriously. I have now started a night course in CIT in order to gain an Irish qualification which I hope will help me in my future career (Romanian participant, Cork).

The medical qualifications that we receive from our own country are very difficult to have recognised here. I know lots of people here who have been trying for many years to have their qualifications recognised. We need more access to information and help for getting our hard earned qualifications recognised here in Ireland (Nigerian participant, Cork).


Our existing qualifications from Ghana are not recognised here in Ireland, whereas in Britain all we would have to do is a short course for the qualifications to be recognised. This is the case in nursing, for example (Ghanaian participant, Letterkenny).

In Nigeria I was a lecturer in a department that trains medical scientists and I worked in that department for eight years. I don't just have a primary degree, I have a master's degree. I have been trying to register with the Academy of Medical Laboratory Scientists here in Ireland and they told me it would take about six months. I rang them after a few months to find out what was happening and they said that they assessed my qualifications and said I could work here in Ireland, that was fantastic and it made me very jubilant. After more time, however, they told me that they were wrong and my master's degree is not the correct standard, because it is pure micro-science, or something like that. I have been a scientist all of my life and I have worked in a hospital as well as in a university in Nigeria and I cannot become recognised here. I also applied to the Institute of Medical Science in Britain with the same credentials that I used for the Academy of Medical Laboratory Scientists in Ireland and they accepted it, they accepted everything, but I want to stay in Ireland. I am hoping that in the next two months they will meet again to decide about me (Nigerian participant, Co. Mayo).

One of the Polish participants now based in Athlone stated that, even in Poland, she had difficulty getting her qualifications recognised as she acquired them during the era of the Soviet Union and these qualifications are now considered somewhat alien or imprecise. Some participants stated that this was a serious concern as they would like to “continue their education but not repeat it”, and they believe that if their qualifications were not recognised then they “would be going back to first year again”. Polish migrants in Cork also experienced difficulty in having their qualifications recognised and believed that professional qualifications should have the same status everywhere. Some of the Athlone-based migrants from other EU Accession States also believe that their qualifications were treated with “suspicion” and “cynicism”. Participants living in Co. Cork observed that there was little awareness among migrants about the opportunity for recognition of qualifications through the NQAI and that the procedure “should be advertised and non-Irish nationals should be informed about it”. The following quotation summarises these sentiments:

One of my friends, who came to Ireland before me recently, found out about getting our previous qualifications recognised. She was surfing the web and found the NQAI website. She has now sent off all of her documents to them and she is telling all of us to do the same. Nobody ever told us about this when we arrived here. We live 25 miles from the nearest city where we would have to travel to for third-level courses, and we would be prepared to travel together in the evening to do advanced study but we do not want to have to start again in first year (Polish participant, Co. Cork).

Participants in the Polish and Lithuanian groups based in Cork city and county again emphasised that the majority of employers do not care about recognising the qualifications of employees and perceive the level of education of migrants to be inferior. One of the Lithuanian participants, however, had a positive experience with his company as they had organised the recognition procedure for him. Another Lithuanian was recruited by an Irish person in the Ukraine on the basis of having a degree in mechanical engineering. On a positive note, however, others argued that employers are now slowly starting to change and are becoming “more adaptive”. Nevertheless, participants in most of the focus groups suggested that employers should be more aware of the recognition of the NQAI system.



In addition to the lack of recognition of non-Irish qualifications, many participants also observed that there is a lack of coherent information on RPL for access to employment and education. These two reasons were especially cited by the African participants in Athlone for not enrolling in third-level education. Many expressed the need for one centralised office within Ireland offering a co-ordinated and transparent service for the evaluation of all foreign national qualifications for both educational and work purposes. While such a service exists in the NQAI, many participants were heretofore unaware of the agency. Five of the nine members in the Athlone-based Nigerian group had qualifications that were not recognised in Ireland. Most of the participants throughout all focus groups expressed frustration with the system and the process for qualification recognition for work purposes or for enrolment in higher education. Two Nigerian participants had difficulty getting their prior professional training favourably recognised by Irish professional bodies, the Law Society and the Medical Council. Some participants had problems with a lack of documentation to prove their qualifications or level of education. Some participants indicated an additional problem relating to the translation of degree and diploma certificates, leading to a misinterpretation of qualifications for accessing academic ability through the NQAI. Focus group participants, who are in employment throughout Ireland, believed that they were 'overqualified' for their current occupations, which were mainly in the services sector. They believed that their low level of employment was due to problems arising from the lack of due recognition for their qualifications and their work experience. This causes great frustration to participants in all regions. One Polish participant summarised:

A lot of highly qualified people from our country who came here are doing menial work because the employers do not know how to assess our qualifications. Some even have PhDs (Polish participant, Galway/Mayo).

In Poland, our courses are broader so we tend to know about a lot of areas, but we are not given credit for our previous learning. In Ireland the courses tend to be narrower, with more of a specialised focus; but because we have a broader education we are not given credit for that (Polish participant, Co. Cork).

The majority of African focus group participants believe that their original qualifications were as good as "obliterated" in the eyes of prospective employers, and, that the only way to progress their careers was to "go back to college and start all over again or to go back again for one or two years" and to be examined again for qualifications which they had already achieved in their home country. A Nigerian participant based in Cork felt as though he had to "abandon his qualifications completely", and others in the group agreed that the time they had spent studying in Nigeria was "meaningless". Many participants stated that multinational companies were more progressive in the recognition of qualifications from outside the EU, whereas Irish employers tended to ignore prior learning and qualifications completely. One Polish participant articulated his frustration as follows:

People who came from our country with bachelor degrees and master degrees very often end up working in hotel kitchens. Employers don't know how to equate our qualifications to the Irish system. Employers worry that our qualifications are substandard, so in a lot of cases they don't take our qualifications into consideration at all. Irish people with easily recognisable qualifications generally get the jobs; Irish employers consider those with just Leaving Certificate to be more qualified than our graduates (Polish participant, Galway/Mayo).

In summary, the above research findings confirm that the majority of migrants are employed in occupations for which they are over-qualified. The focus group findings from all regions indicate that migrants are unsure or unaware of how to have their previous qualifications and prior learning formally assessed. There was a very real sense of frustration evident among migrants who attempted to have their previous qualifications equated with Irish qualifications, due both to delays in the system and the low level of credit they were awarded. These migrants suggested that their many years of study and work in their country of origin was “meaningless” in Ireland.





3.11 Residency Status

Focus group members discussed the impact that residency status has on migrants wishing to engage with employment or with third-level education. Asylum seekers, for example, are prohibited from applying for full-time third-level courses unless they can pay their own fees. This difficulty, however, is compounded since asylum seekers have to pay international fees, which are generally three times greater than fees for European Union citizens. Residency status emerged as an issue particularly among non-EU participants in the focus groups:

Current immigrant regulations can act as a deterrent in applying for education courses as it might put residency visa status on the radar screen (Nigerian participant, Athlone).

Illegal residency status is a potential deterrent in applying for third-level courses for many migrant workers, as we might have to return to our home country if we are identified (Nigerian participant, Athlone).

Some participants were concerned not only about their own education, but believed that a 'good' education is of primary importance for the future of their children:

I would like a new start here in Ireland in education and employment. It is probably more important for our children to have a good education and for all of us to have a good life here. Most of us are here because we are seeking asylum from our homelands. We hope our extended family will be able to join us. We would hope to stay here in Ireland in the future (Ghanaian participant, Letterkenny).

I believe that Irish society has a strong focus on education and that Ireland can offer my children a path to education. I know this is a view that is also shared among my Nigerian friends here (Nigerian participant, Dublin).

In some focus groups, especially where participants were refugees or asylum seekers, the issue of residency was highlighted as being problematic for integration. The separation of family members from each other usually leads to considerable hardship and this may be a contributory cause of serious obstacles to the integration of refugees in any new society. Participants suggested that refugees and asylum seekers should have ready access to support services and support staff when exploring services and assistance they are entitled to. Participants also suggested that providing support services to such groups are important and, in particular, at the earliest possible opportunity after their arrival in Ireland.

3.12 Right to Education

The majority of focus group participants believed that regardless of their status they should have a right to an education. On analysing the data, it was apparent that many participants, particularly non-EU natives, were unsure of their entitlements to education. This contrasted with, for example, the Polish participants all of whom strongly believe that they have a right to education in Ireland:

We all have a right to education here in Ireland. We are working and paying our taxes and if we want to progress in our careers we have a right to access third-level courses. It is our responsibility to be motivated to attend college and I think the educational opportunities here are comparable to Poland (Polish participant, Cork).


Myself and my friends are interested in returning to third-level education, so part-time education would be perfect for us. We all have a right to be educated here, the same as everybody else (Polish participant, Letterkenny).

Upskilling and completing courses is important. It is important to do something with yourself in relation to further education. If we do not do some courses while we are here we will regret it. Everybody has a right to education. I have started a third-level course and I find the teachers very helpful and I definitely see my future in Ireland (Polish participant, Cork).

Similarly, many of the Lithuanian participants believed that they had a right to education in Ireland because they are Europeans and have EU-status:

Everyone has a right to education if they want to be educated. If people are educated they work better. It is in the government's interest to make education more attractive for immigrants, then there will be a more competent workforce. We are all Europeans, after all (Lithuanian participant, Cork).

The Nigerian participants based in Letterkenny were acutely aware of their rights to education in Ireland, however, the group were a little suspicious about being interviewed as they thought the information they offered “might go against them” if they wished to apply for third-level education. Most of this group were in receipt of social welfare payments, so they stressed that the cost of third-level courses is a major barrier to education access for them. The majority of these interviewees came to Ireland with their families and expressed the desire to continue their own third-level education here, but also emphasised the right to education for their children.



Some interviewees stated that the Government should incentivise further enrolment in education, arguing that better education makes the workplace more productive, thus their education should be a good investment for society overall. Some related their right to education based on their status as European citizens. Others said the onus is on the individual if they want to be educated. Some participants added that they were confused about their entitlements to education and suggested:

It would be good if each college provided an open day to deal with all the queries on requirements and entitlements. In addition, every third-level college should have a dedicated information office set up to deal specifically with applications for resident migrants (Nigerian participant, Athlone).

I along with most of the people here would like the opportunity to study at third level in Ireland. We are aware of our rights regarding third-level education in relation to refugee status. In some cases when we have approached third-level institutions they did not know what the procedures were and they were not always helpful (Nigerian participant, Dublin).

I am doing a third-level course now, but I had to pay for it myself. I was told that I am not an Irish citizen even though I am here five years and I have got legal residence. There is confusion regarding our rights and entitlements to education. We do not get a local authority third-level grant, or the millennium fund, or the partnership grant. As this is a serious block to our education, we are advocating our entitlement to grants (Nigerian participant, Mayo).

We do not have enough information about how members of our community could enter third-level education in Ireland. We need to get more information about our rights to education. I cannot study at third level here in Ireland because I do not have an Irish visa (Chinese participant, Dublin).

I came to Ireland to improve the quality of life for myself and my family. I want to invest in the education of my children here, but I find it difficult to understand how the system works in relation to education. I need more information on fees and entitlements; we all have a right to be educated here (Turkish participant, Dublin).

As illustrated by the above quotations, the interviewees perceived that there is not enough information available to migrants regarding their entitlements to access third-level education. This has led to misinformation and confusion for many people coming to Ireland, particularly those who have been granted refugee or asylum status.

3.13 Future Plans and Aspirations

Finally, participants were asked to elaborate on their future plans and hopes, and if they believed their futures would be likely to be in Ireland or elsewhere. There were mixed responses from participants across all regions on whether they planned to stay in Ireland or return to their countries of origin. Many of those who arrived as asylum seekers and had since achieved citizenship rights here said they intended to stay in Ireland. Given the nature of their circumstances – having originally fled their home country in fear of persecution – many of this cohort do not have the opportunity to return to their country of origin and all participants who fit into the ‘refugee’ or related categories believed that the long-term future for them and their families is in Ireland:

My children are here and my children are Irish, so my future is here (African participant, Sligo).

My family has a better opportunity here in Ireland, in the English-speaking world, and they would not have this opportunity in Nigeria. I am looking forward to being able to find work here in my field (African participant, Sligo).

I am happy to be here and happy for my family to get the opportunity for a new start. Our future is in Ireland (Ghanaian participant, Letterkenny).


I have a strong desire to remain permanently in Ireland (Nigerian participant, Athlone).

We feel very welcome here. There are some very good Irish men and women, and my future is in Ireland. I want to stay here (Iranian participant, Sligo).

Other respondents were less certain that their long-term future would be in Ireland. In this regard, the issue of economic uncertainty in Ireland came to the fore, thus many participants believe that they might have to leave the country in the near future to find employment elsewhere. This was especially evident in relation to the eastern European participants. Many were concerned that work opportunities in Ireland were becoming scarce and there was an increasing level of insecurity for these economic migrants:

My opinion is that people who are moving to Ireland now are having great difficulty in finding employment, particularly if they have a poor level of English. When I first arrived it was no problem to find a job but now it is very different. There are many immigrants looking for work and the problem is that the economy is going down. People are losing jobs and there is more opportunity now for local people than for migrants (Lithuanian participant, Cork).

There is big competition among migrants now for jobs, so staying in Ireland is getting tougher (Lithuanian participant, Cork).



I am not sure if my future is in Ireland. It depends on what the country can offer us in education and employment. My future here in Ireland depends on upskilling and education. I have started a course here and the fees are very expensive but it is important for me to finish the course. I have gained confidence and improved my English skills since I started my course and this provides opportunities for my future; but I am unsure about it being in Ireland (Polish participant, Cork).

My future plans are fluid and I also know many of my Polish friends are the same. We are not sure about our future, or for what length of time we will stay in Ireland. I know that some of my friends wish to stay in Ireland for four more years, and more of us wish to stay for up to eight more years, but it really depends on our work and other personal circumstances (Polish participant, Athlone).

Similarly, many of the Latvian participants commented that work opportunities were becoming limited:

My plan is to stay here and live with my family, to work, and earn more money. This would be very good for me and for my family. But I don't know if this is possible. I love it here, but I have to work. If I lose my job, it will be not so easy for me to find another. So that makes me feel very unsure about my future in Ireland (Latvian participant, Cork).

With regard to the importance of educational achievement in enhancing their future careers, there were again mixed responses. Some believed that education would not necessarily enhance their work opportunities in Ireland, particularly those working in the construction sectors. They argued that if there is no work in building and construction, then the level of education qualifications one has makes little difference in securing employment.

Those who were already attending college reported uniformly that education and upskilling would play a vital role in their future success and career plans, as almost all intended to remain in education to graduate and postgraduate level:

My quality of life in Ireland should improve when I get an Irish third-level qualification. I am studying here to get a qualification and I am motivated by the challenge of getting the degree. I hope to have better career prospects because of doing the course here, and an Irish qualification should help me to advance in my career further (Romanian participant, Cork).

I would like to increase my level of education and to have a better job. I would like to be better qualified as this will provide more opportunities for me to progress in my career. Training is important also and I cannot understand why the Irish Government is paying to bring nurses into Ireland from abroad instead of putting the money into training the people who are here (Nigerian participant, Cork).

I hope to get top qualifications and then go on to work and settle here in Ireland, if at all possible (Congolese participant, Letterkenny).

You can change your life through education and work at any time. I am a young woman, I am only 22, and I am given the chance to go to college here and I am also a supervisor in my work. I would not have been given this chance in Poland at all. My experience is that there are much better opportunities to study and work here than in Poland (Polish participant, Sligo).

I came here with my wife, we decided to come and try out living in Ireland for two years first, then five years. I have spent much of my life in Europe but I decided to come to Ireland for more training. My wife also wanted to study here and she thinks there are good opportunities here. We are here now for over two years. I will support my wife with her study as I am fairly ambitious for the two of us (African participant, Mayo).


I would like to do something better with myself and this is important to me. I would regret if I did not make an effort to do something better, but it depends on further education (Polish participant, Co. Cork).

Overall, the findings from the focus group study illustrate that migrants who were already enrolled in third-level courses were very enthusiastic, ambitious, and determined to complete their courses in order to progress further in their careers. This cohort was largely motivated, optimistic, and determined to overcome whatever barriers or obstacles they would encounter.

3.14 Summary Observations

The interviewed migrants highlighted many barriers they have to overcome to integrate into Irish society, including a range of obstacles to engaging with higher education and employment. Across all regions in Ireland, the majority of interviewees articulated that their most serious challenges included:

- English language difficulties
- The lack of recognition of their previous qualifications and prior learning by education and employer bodies
- Difficulties accessing relevant information concerning third-level education
- The burden of third-level fees



A large number of participants believed that education is a key step in their integration process. Access to higher education for migrants, however, was hampered for a variety of reasons, with English language difficulties identified as the main barrier by participants in all regions, as English was accepted as a fundamental key to participation in Irish society generally, as well as in education and employment. English language tuition, therefore, was seen as vital if migrants from non-English-speaking countries, employers, and society are to fully benefit from immigration.

The focus groups also highlighted that, while many migrants already hold third-level qualifications, they are employed at levels which do not reflect their educational status. Participants believed that this disparity resulted in many cases from poor English language proficiency and the lack of recognition of previous qualifications and prior learning. Migrants believed that the lack of recognition by Irish third-level colleges and employers unduly denied them opportunities to contribute more effectively to the Irish economy. Many migrants were unaware of the process of having their previous qualifications mapped to the national framework of qualifications. This indicated a widespread lack of awareness of relevant information on third-level education provision. There is an urgent need for the NQAI, for third-level institutions, and employers to work together to address this lack of awareness and to actively promote information provision to migrants across all regions.

In addition to English language difficulties and a lack of relevant information, many focus group members, particularly those from non-EU countries, believed that the high level of fees charged by third-level education colleges constituted a major barrier to access. Interviewees also stated that there is a need for clear and standardised fee policies in all higher-level education colleges. Focus group interviewees suggested that information on fee structures and grant entitlements should be included as part of college information packages for migrants.

Evidence shows that investment in education and training yields positive results for individuals, employers, and for the economy, therefore policymakers need to co-ordinate their work to focus on methods of improving migrants' access to third-level education and training. Currently, many migrants are employed in areas of work that do not match their knowledge and training. Access to promotion and progression routes in education and employment is often denied to migrants as they are often perceived as temporary workers where they are used for their labour and not their skills.

Finally, forecasts for the economy for the latter part of 2008 and beyond have been steadily revised downwards, and the impact of the economic downturn will have significant impact on migrants, who have been employed in large numbers in the hospitality and construction sectors over the past number of years. As many migrant workers are employed at lower skill levels, they are particularly vulnerable, reinforcing the need for them to have access to additional training and education in order to upskill themselves for wider opportunities in employment.

4.0 Introduction

An analysis of the focus group findings in this report should provide third-level colleges with a better understanding of the concerns, hopes, views, and general context of migrants in Ireland. One of the themes explored confirms a dearth of information available to migrants concerning access and admission to third-level colleges in all the regions in Ireland. In order to gain further in-depth understanding of the current policies and procedures for migrant students in partner colleges, the admissions officer and access officer in each college were interviewed.

Interviewees were asked if they could estimate the participation rate of migrant students in their institutions. In some institutions, statistics are available on participation rates according to nationality. No data were gathered in relation to student immigration status (e.g. refugee, person granted humanitarian leave to remain, etc.). One participant estimated a population of migrant students constituted about 3% of the total student population and other interviewees concurred with this estimation.

An interview guide was drawn up by members of the working group to enable all interviews to cover the same topics. These interviews were conducted face-to-face by the working group member in each college, and the average length of each interview was one hour. All interviewees were guaranteed anonymity and each interviewee was assured that it was the content of the information that was important rather than the identity of the person being interviewed. The data from these interviews were summarised under the following headings:

4.1 Information and Advice Provision for Potential Migrant Students

There was a consensus among all interviewees representing third-level colleges that most migrants presenting themselves as potential students would be directed to the admissions office when they had pre-admission enquiries. Generally, however, there was little specific information targeted at migrants and admission policies tended to be rather ad hoc. Where two different types of admissions office existed – general and international – some education providers would redirect enquiries to the relevant office on the basis of the EU or non-EU residency status of the potential student. For migrants who are unsure of their citizenship status, they are directed to the Fees office in the relevant third-level college, where, on presentation of their documentation, staff would advise them on their entitlements. The admissions offices in all universities and institutes of technology generally advise students about fees and grants, which are areas of core concern to migrant students. The admissions office typically receives most enquiries dealing with student applications, however, depending on the nature of the enquiry, applicants are occasionally redirected to, for example, the access officer (particularly in relation to finance issues) or to a head of department or course co-ordinator. The following quotations are representative of views from the interviewed admissions officers:

It would depend on how good the person who answers the phone is to pass on the query.

If somebody phones up we would not necessarily know where they are from, but, in the main we would refer them to our website. They would probably be familiar with our website anyway as that is normally their first point of contact. There is one significant gap in our service and I have been advocating for some time that we should have a fully fledged international office to deal with all of these queries. They should be advising and assessing all foreign students. We are doing the best we can here in the admissions office but we do not have the time to devote to advising foreign students.

We find that for those potential foreign students who come in to talk to us we would look at the course they are applying for and give them advice on their documentation and all that type of information. We would tell them which channels they would have to go through and we would arrange for them to talk to the head of a department or to an academic staff member to see that they understand what they are applying for and the various aspects of the programme of study.

One of the interviewed admissions officers suggested:

I would like more standardisation of issues like admission requirements and procedures and so on for migrants. The more standardisation we have between all third-level colleges the better. I would definitely welcome better networking of all admission officers within the third-level education sector.

Some of the access officers interviewed noted that on occasions their office would be the first point of contact for migrant students. Their comments were similar to those of their admission officer colleagues. One access officer stated:

There is not one person identified for dealing with pre-entry queries for foreign students and even for someone looking at our website it is not clear who they should go to. Should they go to admissions, or the department the course is being offered in, or the course co-ordinator, or myself? From time to time I would get emails through the website address but it really depends on whose lap the query falls on, therefore, they may be getting different information from different sources. Unfortunately, as a college we have not been very proactive in relation to migrants. We have not done the ground work with migrants in relation to pre-entry, and then I find at the post-entry stage they are coming in here looking for information on fees, etc.

All of the interviewed admissions officers believe that the website of their third-level colleges provided the major sources of information for potential students, though word-of-mouth information was also a significant factor. Many believed that most potential migrant students could access this information quite easily. The majority of admissions officers interviewed believe that third-level colleges should be making "more of an effort" to target migrant students. They also noted that, because of the large volume of work which admissions offices deal with, they do not have additional time and resources to specifically address the needs of migrant students. All interviewees, however, stressed that they were very sympathetic to the plight of migrants and believed that third-level colleges have a duty of care for all citizens, regardless of their country or origin.

4.2 Suitability of Student Applicants for Courses

Interviewees were asked who in their college would assess and advise potential students in relation to their suitability for enrolment on courses. The answers received indicated that many prospective students would have been advised by guidance counsellors in second-level schools and schools of further education. Those over the age of 23 would be advised by the office dealing with mature students, where the same advice was available to all students, in most instances, with no specific advice tailored for migrant students endeavouring to choose a course. One admissions officer stated:

It depends on whom the individual students make their initial contact. Students often contact the student guidance office. If students come through the Mature Student Access Courses they will receive advice regarding their suitability for courses from course co-ordinators and other academic staff.

The majority of interviewees believed that most migrants would receive information on courses through the Internet. One access officer stated that she would get very few queries on suitability for courses, as such queries would usually be directed to the career's office, particularly the career counsellor. Sometimes students might ask representatives at adult education exhibitions or they might contact individual schools within the college directly. One admissions officer stated that students were generally well informed about what is offered by the college, though others countered that lack of information was a big concern, particularly for mature students as no guidance service is available to them at the pre-entry stage:

If migrant students come in here to college, we can direct them to the various services like the careers and counselling service. I am not sure who they approach for advice before they come in here. There are no facilities here in relation to career advice for any part-time students; there are no career guidance services here at night.

Another admissions officer observed that:

Prospective students are usually well informed of what the college offers them. The main advice migrant students usually want is in relation to fees and grants. The access office is rarely asked for advice on suitability of applicants for courses; this is generally done in the careers office.

As noted above by the interviewed admissions and access officers, the advice given to migrant students in relation to their suitability for courses largely depends on their first point of contact with the college. All interviewees believed that additional guidance and career advice should be available specifically to address the needs of migrant students who attend college on a part-time basis.



4.3 Who Should Advise Potential Students?

Some participants believed that there should be a dedicated institutional officer for migrants to give advice and information on courses, grants and fees. One recommendation was for public relations officers who would be available in the community to speak with different groups:

There should be a dedicated person as a first point of contact for migrants to help them with issues around courses including financial issues. This person could be a public relations person who is available to meet with groups in the subject area and answer their questions. Some colleges hire current or past students to talk to their own native groups. There is probably a need for more than one person to be involved. Many non-Irish potential students may need encouragement to get them involved in third-level education.

Another interviewee recommended that a separate section on the website for migrants would be valuable as this was very often the first point of contact. Website links to other useful sites, such as the Citizen's Information site at www.citizensinformation.ie, or the National Access Office section of the HEA website, as well as the www.studentfinance.ie website should be included. One access officer pointed out the lack of information clarity, particularly in the absence of designated personnel:

An issue for all students, and for all mature students in particular, is a lack of advice because there is no career guidance service available to them. The careers and counselling staff should be the people advising all students.

This access officer also believed it unlikely that dedicated staff would be made available to advise migrant students in the future as, she observed, this is currently a very underdeveloped area. She believed, however, that there was potential through the Strategic Innovation Fund for all universities and institutes of technology to collectively develop resources for disseminating information, particularly since policy was the same across the national sector and therefore "it would be well worth our time coming together and establishing something like that". Another admissions officer also spoke of the importance of having specialist advisors for migrant students, giving an example of one of the practices his college has implemented:

We have had training for staff from the Irish Council for Overseas Students. They are a non-governmental organisation but act as advocates for foreign students. We brought them here to the college to train staff who are involved and interacting with migrants. These sessions were for the administration staff, but we have training sessions organised for academic staff this autumn. We are going to do a training session on different cultures and how to deal with students from various cultures, specifically this time for academic staff.

Interviewees also believed that clarity on policy and practice is essential for those dealing with migrants, particularly since so many different departments are involved in the process – the Departments of Education and Science, Social and Family Affairs, Justice, Equality and Law Reform, and others. One interviewee working in the education sector admitted that it was difficult for her to understand the various official categories of

migrants and their respective entitlements for access to education; she added that it was much more difficult for those for whom English is not their first language:

Making all the information clear regarding fees, for example what they can avail of and not avail of etc. is important. If we are bringing in non-EU students and expecting them to pay thousands of euros then the level of service they would expect should be provided.

In one institute of technology, both the access and admissions officers argued that the key issue, in relation to not properly targeting students and thus missing out on revenue, was the absence of an international office which should have responsibility for assessing and advising foreign students. Another interviewee argued that “we should be out there encouraging people to come in”.

The majority of interviewees believed that there should be specialised staff in each of the third-level colleges who would be the first point of contact in providing advice to potential migrant students.


4.4 General Policies in Relation to Migrant Students

All interviewees were asked if their colleges had any policies specifically relating to migrant students. All interviewees confirmed that there are no specific policies for migrant students in any of the participating colleges:

There is not a specific policy for migrants; our policies would cover all students, but not particularly migrants. There are some policies and supports for all minority groups that attend college. These minorities would include Travellers, handicapped and special-needs students as well as migrants. It would not be appropriate, therefore, to create a policy to cover only migrants when all the other minorities would have their own requirements.

The admissions office refers to the set criteria, as laid out in our prospectus and college handbook. There are no specific policies for migrants, but non-EU students always have questions around fees and grants. Non-EU students usually need some assistance around fees. So, when a prospective student applies for a course, the admissions office deals with the issue of fees first.

When a student enrolls here, they are first and foremost a student of this college rather than a mature student or refugee or any particular category, and that is what we as an access team focus on. We aim for full integration of all students and this has to be an institute-wide policy. At the moment we are looking at developing specialist training programmes, which will be run through the access office, for staff endeavouring to make teaching more inclusive in the classroom. We are also looking at setting up a mentoring programme so that existing mature students could mentor new-entrant mature students, for example, a second-year daytime student could mentor a first-year student in a type of buddy system. We are trying to make sure that when a student starts college that they would not feel isolated, and that they would be more aware of what is going on in college.



All administration staff interviewees concurred that access policy for migrants tends to be defined on the basis of whether one is dealing with an EU or a non-EU applicant/student. One of the interviewees suggested that general policies relating to issues of finance and fees can be readily accessed but there is a dearth of policies relating specifically to migrant groups:

Another concern I have relates to financial maintenance for foreign students after they have enrolled. They need to be made aware of various grants which they may be entitled to depending on their residency status and income. We also offer some financial help to students under a number of headings, for example, there is a hardship fund whereby if a student is suffering from severe hardship through no fault of their own and they do not have any financial aid then we would help them. We cannot obviously support them for the long haul but whatever supports are available should be documented in some form of policy documents.

Another of the access officers interviewed also believed that there should be clearer policies for migrant students:

Financial barriers are a major obstacle for foreign students but, as well as financial barriers, there is a lack of clarity on whether they can enrol on a course or not, and then once they are enrolled, there is confusion regarding what they are entitled to. For example, if they could avail of various student funds, but all of this information is not documented in any clear fashion. A booklet would be helpful for this. I know the finance office has a little booklet regarding student fees and information, but any additional documented information would also be helpful.

Another interviewee believed that his college had not been very proactive in relation to migrants, even if they have become a relatively recent addition to the college's target groups. He believed that there had been little groundwork done with migrants at the pre-entry stage, requiring these students to seek information on fees at the post-entry stage. Three of the access officers believed that it is now an opportune time to formulate policies to address the requirements of migrant students:

Given that each of the institutes of technology will soon be required to design an access policy and an access plan, an opportunity would be presented for acting more strategically in relation to migrants, particularly given the increase in demand from this cohort.

The national access office has directed that we develop an access strategy and plan which has to be tied into our strategic plan. It has to be an institute-wide access plan and policy.

What we need in all colleges is a strategist to formulate policies for migrant students. I am too busy fire-fighting and I do not have time to think strategically. What is best policy for the ordinary Irish student is not necessarily going to work for all others, so if we can just turn our thinking around a little and make it a strategic priority and push hard for inclusion of migrants we could make a difference.

One of the access officers also spoke of psychological stress among migrant students because of the lack of clear policies:


I meet a large number of migrant students who are very stressed over their finances. A bit of clarity and information would go a long way. Finding out relevant information is very difficult even for staff working in an educational institute, not to mind for those trying to get this information when English is not their native language. There are so many places that hold the fuller regulations, such as the Department of Social and Family Affairs, the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, and the Department of Education and Science — and these are only the main ones; it is very confusing. Making all the information clear regarding fees is important.

The majority of administrative staff interviewees spoke of policies which related solely to fees and fee structures, and admitted that these policies are complicated. Overall, the interviewees affirmed that the participating third-level colleges do not hold any collated body of policies or guidelines specifically for migrant students explaining admission entitlements and regulations on fees, which could act as a common guide to all migrant students and to administration staff dealing with admissions and fees.

4.5 Fees and Financial Considerations for Migrants

The migrants interviewed in the focus groups highlighted the issue of fees as a major barrier to their participation in third-level education. Some of the focus group participants were also unsure of the costs of courses and suggested that they would like more clarity around fees and fee structures. All the access and admissions officers interviewed agreed that the fee structures for the various categories of migrant students are confusing.

All interviewees noted that fees and grants are a major area of concern particularly for non-EU students. The admissions office will usually be the first person to deal with the issue of fees when a potential student applies for a course. In order to qualify for free fees, applicants must have been living in Ireland for at least three of the previous four years. They also need what is termed a 'Stamp 4' or 'Stamp no. 4' form (permitting residency in Ireland until a specified date) from the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform. The onus is on the



applicant to provide proof of residency in order to qualify for a 'Stamp 4'. Household bills or P21 are deemed acceptable for proof of residency. The Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform lays down the guidelines regarding residency and the local VEC decides on who qualifies for third-level grants. One of the interviewed access officers stated that the different categories of fees is very complicated, not only for potential students, but also for staff members:

Dealing with increasing numbers of non-Irish students is all new to me, and it depends then on which category they are in. Are they refugees or asylum seekers and then what fees do they pay? Do they pay EU-fees, non-EU fees? It is extremely complicated, and I am only familiar with Stamp 4. I know with Stamp 4 they only have to pay registration. The refugees can have free fees and can apply for a maintenance grant, and that is clear-cut. Stamp-4 people cannot apply for a maintenance grant, but they must be registered students in the college, and then when they are registered they can avail of all the student services in the college. I find that it is very much word of mouth. If I meet with somebody then they tell their friends and then it is all the same category of people come. Students that come in have to pay €825 and that is a lot of money for them to have to pay over. The finance department or head of department or myself try to make it possible for these students to come to college; the finance department will allow them to pay in instalments. The only problem is that they pay the first instalment, then they are up on the system as being registered students and then we are chasing the second and third instalment and that is a big difficulty.

A similar viewpoint was expressed by another admissions officer:

We try not to put any more obstacles in the way of any of our students, including migrant students. We review the status of every person that applies to the college. If a student enrolls and we allow them to pay by instalments, and if there is an outstanding amount against them we would give them a review of their financial status every month. We try to be well-disposed and flexible towards all students and we would do as much as we could in terms of making life easy for them.

The high cost of fees and non-qualification for free fees was noted by all interviewees as a major barrier to education access for non-Irish potential students, and particularly for those coming from outside the European Union. One of the interviewed access officers stated:

The most obvious barrier for migrant students is the ability to pay fees. The access office and the mature access office, for example, will support any students admitted into this college on either the school-leaver access route or those who entered through the mature student access course route. The access offices, however, have no role in determining what fees the student pays. If a student is deemed not to qualify for free fees by the international office, then the access offices cannot apply for a fee waiver.

Another access officer suggested that:

We should all be working together both the institutes of technology sector and the universities sector to solve the fee problem, particularly for non-EU students. The fee situation for non-European students is absolutely crazy. They are coming here on the basis of being a refugee or an asylum seeker and they are not going to have €10,000 a year so that very first step in accessing education prevents a lot of them from ever setting a foot in the front door. The way forward has to be a joint discourse because there is nothing any individual institution can do about grants or fees.

In some institutions, a Student Assistance Fund is made available to eligible students through the access office and many migrant students require financial aid because they do not qualify for a VEC grant and do not have time to engage in part-time work. In one of the participating institutions, there is a course which is particularly popular with migrant students as it has a six-month work placement along with social welfare benefits paid throughout the duration of the course, suiting students with acute financial concerns.

One access officer recommended the introduction of a scholarship system which would specifically target students who are not entitled to EU fees, but do have residency status in Ireland. She believed this group are the most seriously disadvantaged by the current system:

One of the groups that find it hardest to access education includes those who have been living in asylum-seeker centres and clearly do not have money. I would like to see the introduction of a scholarship fund and free fees for students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds whose country of origin is outside of Ireland. I would like to recommend a scholarship fund for twenty really good students every year who have residency status but do not qualify for EU fees.

The charging of fees for part-time students was identified by many interviewees as a key barrier to many potential student enrolments. Contrasting with the case of full-time courses, which are free to EU citizens, fee charges are imposed on part-time students, regardless of nationality or ethnicity, since full fees are demanded for part-time courses:

There has been no change in policy in relation to charging full fees for part-time courses and that is a huge issue. I got a document recently from the HEA asking about barriers to distance education and the barrier is fees, fees, fees. All the time, it's fees. The definition of a full-time student does not relate to the number of hours required. The definition is based on the contact hours being between 9.00 a.m. and 5.00 p.m.

All the interviewed admissions officers and access officers perceived that the issue of fees and financial support is a major barrier to migrant students wishing to access third-level courses. The interviewees believed that fees present real concerns to potential students, and unambiguous information on fees needs to be made transparent for staff as well as for potential students. The interviewees also suggested that broader policies in relation to fee entitlements for migrants should be more widely available and in a more user-friendly manner.



4.6 Recognition of Previous Qualifications

In the focus group interview findings, the majority of migrant students highlighted the lack of recognition of their previous qualifications and prior learning as barriers to accessing third-level courses. To gain a more in-depth insight to the practices and policies relating to the recognition of previous qualifications, all interviewees were asked to explain the current situation in their own institutions.

The majority of the interviewed admissions staff confirmed that, in their respective college, the same policies and procedures are applicable to all students regardless of nationality:

There is not a specific policy for migrants; our policies cover all students. All foreign students must observe the minimum requirements to have their previous qualifications recognised. All foreign students need to have the prerequisites for course entry, and they must have the legal requirements to enter the country, with visas, etc. This applies to students applying from within the EU, like Polish students, and those applying from outside the EU. Regarding the RPL, we do not have a separate policy for migrant students; all students have to go through the regular RPL route which is well established in the college and students are aware of this.

We have specific policies for the recognition of previous qualifications and prior learning but these policies are concerned with the rules and regulations for access to the programmes. As a general rule, our attitude is that we want to facilitate people, and our approach is if people want to study here, irrespective of what their ethnic origin is, we favour doing everything we can to admit them. We know that means more for the migrant student than it does for the standard Irish applicant, so we would be well disposed towards migrant students applying through these routes. However, there is a set of rules that have to be complied with: the first rule is the academic entry requirement and that must be met first. The second issue on enrolling through these routes concerns the various categories of migrant students, for example EEA and non-EEA residents, as residency is a big issue for people who come from outside the EEA.

In relation to those applying through the CAO as a school-leaver, qualifications attained at the end of the second-level system in some countries were not recognised as equivalent to the Irish Leaving Certificate. Many of the interviewed admissions officers highlighted the plight of students in relation to some professional bodies, which do not recognise qualifications obtained in certain countries. This poses difficulties for colleges in allowing potential students to access some postgraduate courses:

One of the cohorts of students we deal with includes people who have obtained medical and dental qualifications in other jurisdictions, and who want to practise in Ireland. This cohort looks for postgraduate courses. One of the biggest problems we have is that the professional bodies do not necessarily recognise their foreign qualifications. Even though these students are qualified some professional bodies here do not recognise their qualifications. Their registration for postgraduate courses depends on their ability to register with a professional body, and if they cannot register they cannot access the postgraduate course. The main difficulties arise with veterinary, medicine and dentistry. Recently, I was dealing with a couple where both qualified as dentists in Iran and had refugee status here but their qualifications were not recognised by the dentistry council. Our requirements demand that all postgraduate students are recognised with the professional bodies, so that is not a college issue as such, it is an issue for the professional bodies.

Regarding previous qualifications and prior learning, all of the interviewed admissions officers believed that the policies and procedures which are in place in their respective institutions are clear and transparent. The interviewees suggested that individual students who apply to have their previous qualifications and prior learning recognised are all treated equally, regardless of their country of origin. The interviewed admissions officers stressed that it is important to ensure that the minimum entry requirements for all courses are met by all students. The interviewees, however, did suggest that a dedicated contact person should be identified in each college to deal with queries from foreign students in relation to these specific policies and broader questions. One admissions officer summarised the current situation:

The admission of migrant students is a growing area, and more and more questions are coming to the admissions office every day, and to be quite honest we do not have the time nor the expertise to deal with the queries.





4.7 How Are Previous Qualifications Assessed?

The focus group findings confirmed that many migrants were unaware of the procedures for having their previous qualifications assessed. Additionally, there was a perceived lack of information among participants regarding the initial approaches they should make to their local third-level education provider regarding assessing their previous qualifications. All of the admissions officers and access officers interviewed were asked to explain how previous qualifications achieved in an applicant's home country are assessed.

Interviewees explained that qualifications were generally assessed using information available through a number of international qualifications databases. The main such database was UK NARIC (United Kingdom National Recognition Information Centre). UK NARIC is the official body entrusted by Britain's Department for Education and Skills to provide information and advice on the comparability of international qualifications with those in Britain. UK NARIC compares qualifications from over 180 countries. An Australian version of this database is now available, and one institution participating in the current study was in the process of signing up to the Australian service. Interviewees stated that experience has shown that, though a qualification may initially seem valid and relevant, external advice is often required when deciding on relevance. Citing the external standard is also important when relating a negative judgement to a student whose qualification is not deemed appropriate for a successful application to the institution, and it is useful to have the rationale for that decision supported by an external body, staffed by personnel whose sole role is to thoroughly research these qualifications.

All NUI admissions officers, for example, have a working document relating to all European qualifications, based on a synthesis of information from agencies like UK NARIC and their own accumulated evidence. The NUI defines, for each country, what exams and qualifications are valid in Ireland for the recognition of prior learning. There may also be additional matriculation requirements which should be met. If a student, for example, wishes to study French, there is a matriculation requirement for having achieved at least a Higher Level C grade in the Leaving Certificate and therefore a prospective student will have to demonstrate equivalency in this. A student, therefore, may be eligible for one programme but not another. Each student's application must be examined on a case-by-case basis and all NUI admissions officers will liaise in making a decision on an unusual application. In relation to non-EU applications, there are basic standards which have been set, but students may also have to prove additional competencies or higher grades for specific courses. In the past, some students whose qualifications were not initially recognised returned to study a Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) course and successfully gained access in the subsequent year through this route. One participant institution has a policy of not providing foundation level courses, so students are referred to colleges of further education in the area which provide FETAC courses.

One of the interviewed access officers argued that a more uniform approach is required when attempting to assess prior qualifications, and she suggested there was a need for all third-level education providers to standardise their approaches to recognising such qualifications:


The recognition of foreign qualifications is a bit of a hot potato. I have spoken to other access officers around the country to see if we could approach this jointly because the difficulty is that each institution seems to be doing its own thing around how it views these qualifications. There needs to be a joint process so that a baseline would be established and that would have to come both from the universities and institutes of technology. We need a standardised process which would be a one-stop solution application process for having foreign qualifications recognised. A further challenge for us is that sometimes applicants do not have the paperwork from their country of origin and we are going to have to find a way by means of an entrance test or something else to confirm the ability of an individual to take the course based on their own previous experience and previous qualifications. This would be particularly common among asylum seekers as the majority of them do not have any of the paperwork. If a person is dashing out of a country they are not going to be in a position to gather up the required paperwork.

One of the admissions officer from an institute of technology explained the procedures for institutes of technology in relation to equating foreign qualifications with the Irish Leaving Certificate:

We are a member of the Institutes of Technology Central Evaluation Forum (IOTCEF). This is a subgroup of the Council of Registrars. This body assesses foreign qualifications and equates them with the Irish Leaving Cert. A CAO rating is created based on the comparison of these qualifications. I am part of this body and every year we meet and we assess all the foreign applicants and we try match the foreign qualifications with the Irish Leaving Cert and then we come up with a rating and that rating represents the score that a foreign applicant gets. That is all carefully documented and subscribed to by all the institutes of technology. When we are doing the assessment, the students have to have all of their necessary documentations translated, for example, a student from China would have to have their documents translated into English in order for us to be able to do a comparison. The students know this in advance. We have a book explaining all of this and I think there are 120 countries documented in it. In the book, there is a synopsis of the foreign qualifications and an explanation of how to equate them to Irish qualifications. It is clear and obvious to everybody what is involved.

Many colleges also liaise with the NQAI for fact-finding and briefing exercises which help to raise awareness of the issue of recognising foreign qualifications. Some staff had invited members of staff from the NQAI to visit their colleges and inform staff members of the procedures involved in having foreign qualifications recognised. The interviewees suggested that they liaise with the NQAI, particularly in relation to postgraduate applications, as the previously mentioned book which deals with matching foreign qualifications to Leaving Certificate results relates to undergraduate applications only. The following quotations illustrate some of the responses from admissions officers in relation to the assessment of foreign qualifications:

I've had interaction with the NQAI and I've always found them very cooperative. Members of their staff have come here to the college and we talked about a lot of things. I found their information very important and they will be useful to us in the future. They are a national agency which advises people like ourselves and it is well informed in terms of various foreign qualifications.



The college does recognise non-Irish qualifications. The applicant must provide the college with a transcript of results. If these are in a foreign language, they must be translated by a recognised translator. The onus is on the applicant to provide this information. Difficult cases are sent to the NQAI for review and decision.

One of the interviewed admissions officer working in a college with a large intake of Polish students said the college now has leaflets available in Polish which provide relevant information for these students. The college has also advertised in foreign languages, but the admissions officer added, "I'm not too sure how successful it has been". All interviewees again stressed that minimum entry requirements must be met by all foreign students. This applies to students applying from both within and outside the EU.

4.8 Recognition of Prior Learning

A closely related area to the recognition of prior qualifications is the recognition of prior learning (RPL). All interviewees were asked to explain their procedures for recognising prior learning in relation to migrant students. Analysis of the data illustrated that there was some variance in policy around the RPL. One participant institution does not currently have a policy on recognition of prior experiential learning, though this is being developed at the moment:

Existing qualifications for migrants are one thing, but recognising prior learning procedures is something we are all agonising over. This is a very live issue for us at the moment and we hope to have a system in place shortly whereby we will be able to assess people's prior knowledge for the purposes of admission and for the purposes of exemptions and so on. We are part of a project under the Strategic Innovation Fund in relation to RPL, and SIF provides a forum for consultation between the colleges involved. There are definitely other people working on the same type of processes for other institutions but I am not aware of any central co-ordination for the RPL process. We have an officer employed here to create the system and she has it at an advanced stage. The more standardisation we have relating to RPL the better across the institutes of technology network and I would definitely welcome more interaction between all of our institutes.

One college has a central unit which processes non-Irish applications, with a designated officer for the recognition of all prior learning applications. Other colleges also have well-developed policies in the areas of accreditation and RPL:

We have a very good RPL system here in the college and we have a dedicated person who deals with all RPL queries, however, there is not a separate policy which deals with foreign students. The RPL policy is the same for all students regardless of their country of origin. A lot of the staff here would not be familiar with the operations of RPL but they would refer all applicants to the RPL staff member. I don't think many foreigners would have knowledge that RPL is available to them. We are a very large college and we get a lot of queries from both Irish and foreign students in relation to RPL. Very recently, the college has appointed an RPL Officer and now all queries are passed on to that office.

One of the interviewed access officers interviewed suggested that:

Word of mouth regarding RPL is very important. If we could develop a policy booklet in relation to RPL and advertise it through immigrant centres and all the other agencies which deal with this sector it would be good. We need to get the information about RPL out to these particular groups as they do not know where to go for information. It would also be a good idea to have a separate section on our website for migrants as very often the college website is the first point of contact. Information such as RPL and the assessing of foreign qualifications could be included there. A very good website is the Citizens Information one, and lately the National Access Office has launched a new website called studentfinance.ie and in it there is a very small section on migrants. If we could even do a link to these from our own website that would be good because there is no point in putting the same information up again.

All of the interviewees believed that migrants should be encouraged to avail of the RPL and the recognition of previous qualifications. One admissions officer added:

I would be quite in favour of positive discrimination for the RPL to help migrants because we have the scope to do it on most of our courses so why not do it? I would be very well disposed towards that. We do not have a college RPL policy in place yet but I certainly would not be putting any obstacles in their way. Our main objective for admitting any students under the RPL system is that they have the ability to complete the course and for migrant students it would be important to ensure that they have sufficient reading, writing, understanding, and numeracy skills.

Overall, RPL provision and policy was quite uneven among participating colleges. In colleges where RPL has been established for a number of years, interviewees believe that the process works well for most Irish and non-Irish students. One of these interviewees suggested that it is important for migrant students to realise that their prior learning can be recognised in two main categories. The first category deals with the recognition for learning which already has formal certification within the education system. The second category deals with the recognition of learning gained through experiences in the workplace, in voluntary work, or elsewhere. The system allows for learning to be measured and recognised regardless of where it was gained.

4.9 English Language Skills

As identified in the previous chapter, members of the focus groups identified the lack of competence with spoken and textual English as a major barrier to third-level education. All the access and admissions officers interviewed concurred and identified English language skills as a matter of priority for non-Irish students. Confidence and competency in the English language was consistently referred to by all interviewees as crucial for academic success for migrant students. Even where students present with the necessary qualifications and standards, as demonstrated through tests such as IELTS (International English Language Testing System), the demands of academic English was seen to be very challenging for any student for whom English was not his/her mother tongue and was not sufficiently bilingual.

The following quotations summarise the views of the interviewed admissions officers:

One of the biggest problems is the language issue and having the ability to communicate in English. We have structures in place which allow us to deal with foreign qualifications, and if they have illustrated that the student has English up to a certain level then we accept it. That does not always work because, in the last few years, we have had quite a number of Chinese students who were having English language difficulties even though they met our entry requirements.

Lack of competence in the English language is a big problem. Our courses are run through the medium of English, and there is a lot of technical language in the science and engineering courses. A lot of migrants would not have very good English, and it can create problems for people dealing with them. We are trying to find a way to help ethnic minorities with English language skills. Recently, we established contact with an English language college in town and we are trying to set up an arrangement whereby if people come here to college and if they do not have sufficient English they could do a six-month course there to build up their English skills. I know some universities run English courses specifically for their own students, so we could perhaps imitate that.

All interviewees believed that English language skills are difficult to assess and some colleges have put measures in place such as:

We try not to obscure the culture of migrant students but if they do not have the English requirement we will tell them that we need them to take an interview and to write an essay of about 500 words. We give them every opportunity but we also have to be aware that there are students out there who want to get into Ireland for reasons other than education, and they might not be always upfront with us in that regard. We have to be conscious of that, but we also have rules and regulations for residency status; if students meet our requirements in these regards they are very welcome here. We generally give most students the benefit of the doubt and say to them if you want to study we will accommodate you. I would be in favour of making studying here as easy as possible for them.

One of the access officers also spoke of the possibility of introducing an English examination at the pre-entry stage:

I was speaking to colleagues in our registrar's office recently and they were also concerned about the competence of people in reading and writing English. At the moment we do not offer them an opportunity to sit an English exam but that might be something we should look at. One of the students that came to me had good English but he could not understand the accent of one lecturer, and he also said that the lecturer spoke very quickly. If the information was written he could make it out, but he found lectures very difficult. This raises the whole question of staff development for migrants, and dealing with diversity in the classroom, etc. First of all, we need to get migrant students to prove that their English is good enough to study here, and second, the whole lot of issues around staff development needs to be looked at.

Furthermore, interviewees noted that, while a student may have good spoken English, their level of written English may not be of a high enough standard for third level, particularly when they have difficulties with spelling and punctuation. Classes are available in some institutions through language centres, but interviewees pointed out that students have to pay for such classes. FETAC courses were identified as particularly valuable for preparing students in English language training for third-level education. Some colleges demand students to demonstrate competency in written English language skills, though not all colleges do so. In particular, technical language within science and engineering, for example, posed major difficulties for students and this was perceived to be creating major problems for lecturers involved in teaching such courses.

4.10 Support Services for Migrant Students


The interviewed participants, both in the focus groups and in the access/admission offices, identified additional barriers facing migrant students throughout all regions. Admission and access officers were asked if their colleges provided any additional support services to help migrant students to overcome these barriers. They responded, however, that none of the participating institutions had support services designed specifically for migrants. As some interviewees pointed out, there are many services available to the student population as a whole, but none available solely to migrant students. While interviewees across all the participating colleges believed that the same services should be available to all students and that migrant students should be treated in the same manner as every student, they acknowledged that some additional support services could be provided. At the same time, the interviewees pointed out that it would be inappropriate to generalise by assuming that every migrant student would experience the same difficulties, given the diversity within these groups.

One of the interviewed admissions officers suggested:

We are not doing enough for migrant students. We need to get information out to them because some of them are coming into the country and they do not have a clue where to turn to for the information they need. At the beginning, third-level courses will probably not be on their minds, but after a while they begin to look around and they see it as an option. So, there is a need for us to get information out there and to be more supportive towards these groups.

Another access officer suggested providing support through staff training and awareness:

When academic staff are coming here for the first time, they are given a module on dealing with staff with disabilities as part of their induction training. Their induction should also include an access module so that it covers issues like barriers facing migrant students. This should be a matter of course for everybody employed here. At the moment, we have excellent staff who are very accommodating and make extra efforts for migrant students, but this is at an individual rather level rather than an institutional level. Institutionally speaking, we do not have the same approach and we don't seem to be able to capture that personal interaction. As an institution we are poor on policies across the board. I have come across very few policy documents in this office on how we should deal with certain issues, and I know some people raise their eyes to heaven about policy documents, but I believe we can make a policy document a living thing. We are doing an exams policy document for students with disabilities, for example, so there should definitely be more policies and supports for migrant students.



An access officer also commented:

I cannot ever see that in the future we will have a dedicated person to deal with migrants, but this is an area which needs to be supported and developed and will take time. First, if we had all the information gathered ourselves for migrant students, that would be a big support but that would be a huge task. If we could get all the partners in the SIF project to distribute information about their colleges, and a lot of it would be fairly similar, it would be well worth our time coming together to provide something like a co-ordinated and comprehensive information source.



Another access officer pointed out that her college is unlikely to provide additional support for migrants unless the college authorities specifically target and recruit students from this cohort. She argued that support systems should be developed to address the needs of all students, regardless of nationality, residency or citizenship status:

I would prefer us not to specifically target ethnic minorities as a group, as this could unnecessarily treat them as 'different' from students in general. I would much prefer us to have good supports in place for our whole student body — a system which recognises diversity and student needs. Those supports should equally meet the needs of a student from Donegal or a migrant. Recognition of diversity and recognition of different needs on campus as a general policy will also support the migrant student. I have a problem with singling out student sectors, whoever they are and wherever they are from. Additional support should be available to any student who needs it. People have needs which can be temporary or transitory and needs change; sometimes students cope successfully and sometimes they do not. The system should be flexible enough for any supports which are available to be used by all students. I would like to see an integrated support and learning centre.

Overall, there are no additional support services currently in place for migrant students in participating colleges. All interviewees are aware of the lack of support services and they particularly highlighted the lack of information available at the pre-entry stage to college. All of the interviewees expressed enthusiastic support or hope for the idea of providing institutional support services in future, but emphasised that such supports must be resourced and proactively inclusive for migrant applicants/students.

4.11 Staff Training and Development

All interviewed access and admissions officers were asked if their colleges had any staff training and development sessions in relation to the needs of migrant students. All believed that intercultural training is very necessary for staff, and that this must be approached sensitively to avoid any stigmatisation of migrant students or for other groups who feel discriminated against, as one access officer suggested:

Staff training and development in relation to dealing with migrants is badly needed but it needs to be approached properly. We do not want to alienate this group even further or to make other groups feel discriminated against.

Other Interviewees concurred with the above quotation and believed that, although staff training should facilitate a better understanding of cultural issues, it should not promote differential treatment. Another interviewee declared that staff development should include the raising of awareness about issues and difficulties encountered by migrant students.



One of the admissions officers stated:

We have started training staff in relation to the needs of migrant students. It is something we are very conscious of and over the past couple of years we got different staff to meet with various agencies that deal with migrants, for example, engaging with staff from the NQAI and with the Irish Council of Overseas Students, etc. We recently had our first part of staff training on managing ethnic diversity and managing the non-Irish student. Staff need to be aware of these and other issues. Soon we will have a session for the teaching staff or for anybody in the college who wants to attend, and this session will be specifically geared towards dealing with migrant students and the difficulties they encounter in reading and writing in their non-native language. We also have a session planned on ethnic diversity and issues that arise around that in an educational establishment.

All interviewees agreed that if they had additional resources to train and develop staff in their institutions they would be in favour of introducing awareness-raising sessions. They did caution, however, that this training should be professionally provided and should aim to make policies for migrant students more inclusive.

4.12 Targeting Migrant Students

All administrative staff interviewees were asked if their college actively targets migrant students. The interviewees noted that most institutions do not specifically target migrants but many suggested that this was in the context where demand for places currently far exceeds the availability of places. Interviewees generally believed, however, that colleges should target such groups, as reflected in the following quotations from two admissions officers:

This town and surrounding area has a large population of non-Irish who could be targeted to attract them into third-level education. They may need encouragement. Migrant students are a diverse group and there are no groups or clubs set up here in college yet which would help them specifically. The information technology support course and the access course are our two main courses that attract migrants. The information technology support course is a practical 18-month course, which does not demand a huge commitment in terms of time, but it introduces the students to third-level education.

Students from different backgrounds always require different kinds of targeting. The successful way in which our college has targeted non-traditional students (e.g. on the basis of socio-economic status or students with a disability) may prove to be a useful model for targeting migrant students. Additionally, students from other cultures may often require additional supports to retain them in college after the initial targeting.

Another admissions officer illustrated the method used by his college to specifically target migrant students:

I put an advertisement in Polish in the local press recently about an open evening here in the college. We also contacted the Polish community through the local priest, as the Poles are the biggest non-Irish community here. I still think there is more we could do to target migrants in terms of getting information out there and making contact with them.

Two admissions officers spoke of targeting non-EU students, particularly for disciplines which are experiencing falling numbers, for example:

Very recently, senior staff from the Science Faculty here in college went to India on a trade mission and they are now fostering links with colleges in India. India is one of the places that we get very few applicants from, this initiative may increase our population of Indian students.

The college actively seeks to recruit international students. It does this through various media and as part of broader delegations to their countries. We also target students through the Mature Student Access course and we promote this in all of the migrant media. We also provide information sessions for migrant students through community and advocacy groups.


Other interviewees also believed that colleges would probably begin to target migrant students if demand for courses fell in the future. As one admissions officer stated:

We do not target ethnic minority students, but, we are now currently in a situation where our demand far exceeds our availability for places. Generally, there are very few cohorts of students specifically targeted. If, in the future, demand were falling, we would then engage in all types of marketing.

Another admissions officer believed that if colleges were to target migrant students the most effective way to do so would be within migrants' own communities:

If we decided that we were going to target migrants, or if we decided that we wanted to have different quotas, and if migrants became an identified group, then I would do that through the communities that represent them. If we decided we wanted to target the Polish community for example, we would liaise with the local Polish community. Unless we have set a target to increase particular quotas, a targeted marketing strategy would not be developed.

Another interviewee, however, commented that, if colleges decide to target migrant communities, this should be undertaken in a very inclusive manner, as "targeting such students can make them feel exposed". That interviewee suggested that, as most towns and cities now have a large population of migrants, they could be targeted in an inclusive manner and encouraged to enter third-level education. Some colleges already target such groups through adult education exhibitions run by the Vocational Education Committees.



One of the access officers commented that a key difficulty in targeting and recruiting migrant students was that most were engaged in full-time employment and therefore had little time to access higher-level courses. She believed, however, that this is a barrier which is faced not only by migrants but by all employees. She also observed an increasing trend by the third-level education providers towards targeting people in the workplace for further training and education:

There is a lot of energy devoted to targeting people in the workplace in order to pursue higher education. Migrants are a subgroup of this cohort. But, first we need to develop a policy for all people in employment who wish to access higher education before we can develop policies for migrants. The current issue for upskilling the Irish indigenous workforce is a huge task, but it is an area we need to work on. Migrants are a subgroup of the larger employed population, but, we need to develop policies which extend beyond this group.

One admissions officer argued that the conditions of access to education for full-time employees were so complex that they created barriers to education enrolment. The same interviewee added that the necessity for improving systems of recognition of prior learning and experiential learning were key in targeting those in employment who wished to upskill or engage in higher education:

We have people from outside the EU who are employed in pharmaceutical companies or information technology companies, and they would often ask if there is a course at graduate level in which they could enrol, but when they are working full-time in industry it is very difficult, it is almost an impossibility. But these issues are not specific to migrants; Irish people face the same difficulties. How do they upskill while still maintaining status as a fulltime employee? It is a broader issue affecting everyone and not just affecting migrants. Unless there is a system for the recognition of informal learning, potential students are effectively looking at a four-year programme, which on a part-time basis might take eight years. If the recognition of prior experiential learning cannot be factored in, this approach is not going to be feasible. The main policies that I would like to see developed in this college would be the RPL, both formal and informal, and providing people who are in full-time employment with additional opportunities to engage in higher education. These policies would also benefit migrants.

In summary, administrative staff interviewees believed that migrant students are generally treated the same as all other students. Most of the participating institutions do not specifically target migrants, but many interviewees believed that this is a cohort which should benefit from promotional material aimed at addressing their particular needs. One institution has produced specific promotional material for migrants, for example, some recently acquired funding for access was spent on developing booklets in different languages. Some interviewees also believed that the strategic innovation fund should make provision for more targeted and more specific focus on migrants in the near future. One participant believed that word-of-mouth promotion arising from efficient and supportive admission practices along with provision for delivery of courses to migrants was a very important marketing tool. It was also suggested that third-level colleges should form and maintain stronger connections with organisations working in the voluntary and community sectors. These connections should provide positive and useful input to developing policy and promotional materials, particularly since many potential students do not know where to go for information.

4.13 Summary Observations

The views of the access and admissions officers interviewed for this report concurred with the findings from the focus group observations that there is great difficulty in readily ascertaining relevant regulations governing access to third-level education for potential migrant students. The interviewed administrative staff shared the view with migrant interviewees that a co-ordinated and up-to-date single database should be developed and maintained. These interviewees also shared the view that ready access to this information, specific to the needs of migrants, would benefit not only the students but also the staff in each third-level college. One of the most significant problems identified from this set of interviews was the lack of dedicated personnel to specifically deal with queries and questions relating to migrant students. There is clearly a need for a staff member in each college to be available and trained to deal with migrants and their specific issues at the pre-entry stage. As illustrated, the prevailing system operates on an ad hoc basis, and as one interviewee succinctly stated, “it really depends on whose lap the query falls”.

These interviewees, coinciding with the focus group interviewees, also identified English language difficulties, high fees, the lack of recognition of previous qualifications, and the lack of RPL, as the major barriers facing migrants when accessing third-level education. These challenges present opportunities to build on further institutional collaboration, now being developed through the strategic innovation fund, to promote access, transfer, and progression for all students, with a particular focus on the needs of migrants.



5.0 Introduction

This chapter presents findings from interviews conducted with representatives of various stakeholders including:

- Construction Industry Federation
- Fáilte Ireland
- FÁS
- HETAC (Higher Education and Training Awards Council)
- IBEC (Irish Business and Employers Confederation)
- IVEA (Irish Vocational Education Association)
- Irish Hotels Federation
- Hotel Managers (Jurys Doyle Hotels; Radisson Hotels)
- Director of Immigrant Support Centre
- Intercultural Training Consultant.

The research findings provide a snap shot of the main issues under investigation from the perspective of interviewed stakeholders. An interview guide was prepared and used by all interviewers to gain answers to the questions under investigation. As a diverse group of stakeholders was chosen for interview, some questions were specifically directed at employers and employer bodies while others were directly relevant to education authorities, and NGOs (non-governmental organisations). Appendix D contains a full list of questions from which appropriate interview questions were drawn for the different types of interviewees. These interviewees were chosen for a variety of reasons, including: expertise in the areas under investigation; responsibilities for recruiting migrant workers; being representatives of bodies with strategic responsibilities for policies and practices in higher education; or for having professional involvement with migrants.

5.1 Impressions of Migrant Workers as Employees

As illustrated in previous chapters, many migrant workers have high levels of third-level education, but are employed at levels which do not reflect their educational attainments. In an attempt to establish if this occupational gap impacted on their work performance, interviewees were asked about their impressions of migrant workers. All stakeholders commented on the invaluable contribution of migrant workers to the national economy. Migrants working in the tourism and hospitality sector, for example, accounted for an estimated 35% of Ireland's total workforce of a quarter of a million. All interviewees representing the tourism and hospitality industries praised the contribution of migrant workers regarding their work ethic:

Given the growth which the hospitality sector has experienced, that growth could not have been achieved without a skilled workforce and the large contribution of foreign nationals. The growth could not have been sustained without them. From that point of view, they have certainly made a valuable contribution. I have heard very positive accounts from the human resource managers regarding foreign workers in the hotels I have contacted (Fáilte Ireland representative).

The majority of hotels I have heard from have said very positive things, especially with regard to attendance and punctuality. Migrants never phone in sick. In general migrant workers are very pleasant to work with (Irish Hotels Federation representative).

Migrants are excellent workers; they have very low absenteeism rates and they illustrate a willingness to work hard (Hotel representative).

Similarly, both the Construction Industry Federation and the IBEC representatives believed that migrants have a positive contribution to make:

We have had very, very good feedback from our members regarding migrant workers. They are diligent, hard working and are willing to learn, and they are given every opportunity to partake in training courses which would help them adapt to the cultural environment of working in Ireland. Workers from some countries place a great deal of emphasis on procedure. This can sometimes lead to confusion/misunderstanding about Irish flexibility in relation to the process of work (Construction Industry Federation representative).

Migrants have the same basic needs and wants as all other workers and have a positive contribution to make to the workplace. My overall impression of them is favourable, and it is important for them to be positively treated to enable them to fully integrate in their workplaces (IBEC representative).

Respondents also believed that in relation to the promotion of employees within the hospitality industry there were no discriminatory practices. Employers believed that many migrants succeeded well in the Irish labour market and their work performances were rewarded accordingly:


A lot of foreign nationals here are frequently promoted. We look at individuals, not nationalities (Hotel representative).

*We produce a magazine called *Get a Life*, which encourages second-level students to enter the hospitality and tourism sector, and for the past two years the *Employee of the Year* award has gone to foreign nationals (Irish Hotels Federation representative).*

Respondents noted that within their industries there was generally no evidence of discrimination or racism in relation to any of their organisational practices or procedures. Interestingly, however, interviewees reported instances of racism from clients, and found this particularly evident within the hospitality sector:

Racism is a bit of a problem. There is a perception from the public that the sector is saturated with foreign workers (Hotel representative).

Some staff in the industry have been on the receiving end of nasty comments from customers, such as 'Can you get me someone who speaks English?', when the person is perfectly capable of dealing with their queries (Hotel representative).



One of the education-authority interviewees, however, commented that racism may act as a barrier to migrant education and employment:

Racism may be an issue – maybe cultural and religious discrimination in the workplace – although we have no direct experience of such discrimination (Education-authority representative).

The interviewed Director of an Immigrant Support Centre, however, believes that racism is a serious barrier for access to employment, particularly for Africans:

Racism is a big problem for accessing employment, particularly among black people. A lot of black Africans are finding it very, very hard to find employment at the moment. If a black person is competing against an Irish person for a job it is obvious that there are racist issues there. One of the colleges that we deal with here also told me that they find it very difficult to get work placements for black African students. When they come to the end of the course they are left with black African students, as employers tend not to want to give them work placements. So, there is an opportunity for third-level colleges and employers to work more closely to formulate policies in relation to work placements (Director, Immigrant Support Centre).

One of the interviewees who participated in this research was an Intercultural Training Consultant specialising in cross-cultural issues in organisations, cultural training, and cultural coaching. That interviewee believes that the cultural diversity among migrant workers has a very positive contribution to make to Irish organisations and Irish society. She also believes that the talents and valuable contributions of these workers could be further harnessed through fostering mutual respect and co-operation among different cultures in the workplace:

Service providers should engage in preparing migrants for living and working in Ireland by giving them some basic information regarding working in Ireland. This should include culture, business and social ethics, and networking (Intercultural Training Consultant).

She concluded by stating:

Cultural adjustment, information and understanding of the infrastructure, and negative attitudes all act as barriers to the integration of migrants into Ireland, to its education systems and workplaces.

The Construction Industry Federation interviewee and the IBEC interviewee also emphasised the importance of inter-cultural training:

Migrants may not have enough understanding of Irish employment policies and practices and Irish culture in general, when they first arrive. There are opportunities to provide further cross-cultural skills training in the workplace. Migrants need to be confident enough to act as individuals in organisations, and to have the courage to raise a query as an individual, the same way as an Irish employee would do. Some employers provide newspapers for migrants in their native languages in order to help them feel welcome in their places of work (IBEC representative).


The challenges of adapting to a very different cultural working environment are difficult. When a working culture is very different and English language skills are poor, then adapting to the new workplace can be a big barrier. We try to do everything we can to make this cross-cultural transition easy for our very many workers in the construction sector by providing as much information as we can (Construction Industry Federation representative).

In summary, the findings from the interviews conducted with industry stakeholders on their impressions of migrant workers are all very positive. None of the interviewees referred to any prior work experience or the qualifications of their migrant workers, illustrating that employers are primarily interested in filling vacancies rather than investigating what level of qualification levels are held by prospective employees. This research finding concurs with findings from focus group participants who also suggested that employers depend on migrants, particularly in the hospitality industry, to ensure the smooth running of their organisations, but are not interested in taking prior qualifications into account. Perhaps, employers need to look closer at prior learning and prior qualifications when hiring migrant workers in order to ensure that these workers can achieve their full potential. Achieving a better 'fit' between prior learning and current job requirements should also ensure a better rate of retention of migrant workers.

5.2 Access to Education and Training

One of the findings emerging from the focus groups' research was that employers generally did not seem to be interested in employees accessing further education or training. In order to gain a better understanding of this perception, industry stakeholders were asked about their opinions on migrants' access to education. Employers were reluctant to offer support to an employee to attend full-time courses as they perceived this would negatively impact on their work performance:

Our experience would be that, because of labour shortages, it would not make sense for employers to promote full-time education (Fáilte Ireland representative).



Employers, however, recognised the advantages of third-level education and training for all their employees, regardless of nationality, and were supportive of flexible learning options. The interviewed employers believed that arrangements for flexible and work-based learning would be easier to accommodate within the work context:

We believe that what happens regarding education and training should be 70% work-based learning and 30% should be learning-based through college. We would support block release courses, online learning etc (Fáilte Ireland representative).

Our hotel sponsors a lot of foreign workers to attend block release programmes (Irish Hotels Federation representative).

It is very important for migrants to have access to further education and training and at present many migrants are finding it very hard to access middle level jobs. In all countries there are lower level and middle level jobs and it is very hard for migrants in any country to break into the middle level jobs without access to additional education and training (Director, Immigrant Support Centre).

Obviously access to third-level education broadens the horizons of everybody. It is important to improve access for migrants by giving them every opportunity available to access third-level education in Ireland. It is also important for migrants to see the relationship between third-level education and achievement and success (IBEC representative).

Employers also agreed that the many benefits of further education for employees in employment should be contingent on the individual employee's performance:

Certainly if hotel owners or managers see a commitment from their staff they are more than willing to support them with regard to furthering their education (Irish Hotels Federation representative).

Respondents from the hospitality industry spoke of funding opportunities offered by hotel employers for employees who may wish to invest in upskilling staff:

There is a lot of funding for training in the hospitality sector. Some of the bigger hotel chains who have a greater emphasis on training have no problems paying fees for staff to attend courses (Irish Hotels Federation representative).

Employers spoke of recruiting migrant workers with very different levels of skills and education. Employers who recruited migrant workers through EURES (The European Job Mobility Portal) found that this cohort typically does not have previous third-level qualifications, but employers will often provide them with educational opportunities to reach a FETAC Level-4 award. Generally, all respondents spoke positively about the benefits of training and further education for their staff, and added that they do support staff members who are interested in pursuing education.

Certainly, we would support anyone interested in further education. A FETAC Level-4 award will get them into the system and then they would be supported in progressing and building transferable credits (Fáilte Ireland representative).


I believe that third-level colleges should work, together with employers, to put policies in place for upskilling all workers including migrants, particularly, as the economy is in recession. Ireland became too dependent on the construction industry, but now it really needs to move to a knowledge economy and to invest in upskilling workers. There should be a focus on education in conjunction with work in order to upskill workers now that the jobs in construction are gone. Technicians and general operatives should be upskilled and a lot more work needs to be done to ascertain what upskilling is needed. There is need for serious thinking and strategic planning around providing courses for workers. The unemployed should also be targeted as they are now really struggling to get jobs (Director, Immigrant Support Centre).

We are in favour of facilitating and supporting all staff in further training. We would allow them to do exams orally if necessary. Construction workers can go on training courses with ourselves, or some large construction companies also provide their own training. We are very much in favour of any initiatives which promote education and upskilling of workers, at all levels, to make the industry more competitive, and to make sure our workers are better equipped with necessary skills to face the global challenges that the construction industry is currently facing. We encourage workers to talk to their human resource manager in their company first. We would then try to offer advice and support. We deal with thousands of queries, and we are delighted to give any help or advice on upskilling. We have a Level 6 Certificate in Construction Administration and we offer as much information as we can to help all our workers (Construction Industry Federation representative).

The education stakeholders interviewed also stated that they are very aware of the difficulties and barriers faced by migrant students, and are attempting to make third-level education accessible to all students. These interviewees highlighted that they offer induction, integration, and cultural training through the English Speaking Other Language (ESOL) programme which is accredited by the Advisory Council for English language schools, though it was acknowledged that this process is still at a developmental stage:

To date the translation of policies into other languages is incomplete. However, a study of ESOL across post-primary level and further education is due to be published shortly. This report will also have a list of recommendations which should be of benefit to all students (Education-authority representative).

Another education stakeholder interviewee believed that access to higher education and training was important for migrants themselves, for employers, and for the Irish labour market. The following interview extract argues for the importance of developing stronger links between third-level education providers and employers, and this could be achieved by having more work placements included in academic programmes:



It is important for individual learners, employers and the Irish economy to have third-level graduates. Third-level qualifications appear to be highly valued by Irish employers and by Irish society in general, and serve as a necessary prerequisite for working in a competitive environment for all those residing in Ireland regardless of ethnic origin. The National Skills Strategy is focussed on upskilling the Irish workforce with specific stated targets. The funding agencies are also focusing on projects to enhance collaboration between employers/industry and education providers to implement a range of life-long learning initiatives which could be further strengthened by inclusion of more work placements (Education-authority representative).

In an attempt to widen access for migrants, an initiative relating to assessing their English language proficiency has been introduced in some third-level colleges. One of the interviewed education stakeholders noted that overseas students are facilitated with induction programmes and with skills for the assessment of oral and written language and communication, to determine if additional tutorials are required. The level of additional training provided, however, is variable:

The assessment of English language skills is a matter for the education provider and depends on the number of overseas learners present in a university or institute of technology (Education-authority representative).

One participant made a cautionary observation on the apparent widespread presumption of homogeneity of migrant workers, a caution that should be considered when developing education and training in employment programmes for this cohort:

There are clear and distinct differences in all groups relative to age of the learner, their role in the family, etc. While general anecdotal remarks are made regarding all groups, e.g. "Polish are hard workers", "Africans value education", etc, it is difficult to make hard and fast judgements about any particular ethnic group. It is clear that flexible modular programmes are desirable for migrants in accessing education and employment (Education-authority representative).

It is clear from the above findings that stronger links need to be established between employers and third-level education providers to ensure that migrant workers are given opportunities to access third-level education and training while in employment. Work-based training and education is ideally suited to serve this need. Work-based learning offers scope for developing further employer engagement with higher education colleges in the design, development, implementation, and delivery of work-based learning programmes. The primary source of continuing skilled labour supply is, and will continue to be, achieved through the training of, development of, and learning by individuals. In effect, from the perspective of employers, the focus is on workforce development – the upskilling of an organisation's employees at a higher level. Unlike other forms of learning, work-based learning has the great advantage of being directly related to the needs of employers and/or the employment needs of those in work. An opportunity, therefore, exists for developing and formalising work-based learning partnerships between employers and third-level education providers in order to broaden access to education for all employees including migrant employees.

5.3 English Language Competence

On analysis of the focus group findings and the findings from the access and admissions officers, it was clear that the majority of interviewees identified similar barriers to third-level education for potential migrant students. In order to investigate if there are additional barriers, not previously identified, the interviewed stakeholders were asked to identify and elaborate on any barriers they perceived to be detrimental to migrants. Concurring with the findings of the focus groups and of the access and admissions officers, the majority of stakeholders identified poor English language skills as a major barrier.

A number of interviewees reported that migrants' skills in spoken and written English vary widely:

Some migrants have very poor language skills and some have excellent language skills (Hotel representative).

English skills are very, very variable. We need to develop some system which would encourage multi-lingual skills to enable migrants to integrate better to Irish society (IBEC representative).

English skills vary widely. We did have a programme, joint-funded by ourselves and ICTU, to provide English language for migrant workers in the construction industry (Construction Industry Federation representative).


Research undertaken by the interviewed Intercultural Organisational Consultant reported ratings of migrants' level of English as follows:

- 17% - Beginner's Level
- 15% - Basic Level
- 29% - Intermediate Level
- 20% - Advanced Level
- 19% - Proficient

This respondent also stated that levels of written English competence were far lower than spoken language skills. All interviewees underscored that they believe that English language competence was the greatest challenge that migrants face in accessing both employment and third-level education:

Language is the problem rather than skills or commitment (Hotel representative).

The level of English is the biggest problem. Obviously I can't employ people whom I can't conduct an interview with if they have poor language skills (Hotel representative).



English skills are the most important and the biggest barrier for migrants. The standard of English people arrive with seems to have dropped in the last six months. I can't employ foreign workers if they don't have a basic level of English, even from a Health and Safety perspective we have to have translators (Hotel representative).

English language is definitely a major barrier. A lot would depend on the country the migrants come from, and some migrants struggle much more than other migrants, depending on their country of origin. They may competently speak a version of English in their home countries but still may struggle with a different standard of English here, so they may need extra attention in this regard (Director of Immigrant Support Centre).

English language competence is the greatest challenge that migrants face in accessing third-level education (FÁS representative).

Interviewees pointed out, however, that a number of strategic efforts have been made in tackling the English language problem for many migrants. Employers who recruit through EURES, for example, stated that they can ensure that their potential employees will have already attained a good standard of English language competence prior to moving to Ireland. The interviewees representing the hotel sector reported that some hotels offer in-house training which allows for better integration of migrants, as well as organising tours of the region to provide them with a better knowledge of the local geography and dialect. Some employers offer English classes to staff twice a week and organise fun days to develop interaction through English. Other employers encourage staff to speak English as much as possible.

The hotels encourage staff to speak English at all times, even in the staff canteen, to ensure language skills improve (Irish Hotels Federation representative).

We encourage our workers to refrain from speaking their native language and to speak English to improve their language skills (Hotel representative).

English language skills were also identified by employers as a key element for promotional opportunities:

For some migrants, the main barrier for promotion is the language. Frequently we offer foreign workers junior positions until their language is at a level where they can be promoted (Hotel representative).

We encourage our staff to improve their language skills at outside classes, particularly if they wish to be promoted (Hotel representative).

If a construction worker has good English language skills and they have done any other types of upskilling courses, such as leadership courses or project management courses, then it is whoever is best for the job is given the promotion regardless of nationality (Construction Industry Federation representative).

One of the interviewees spoke of how language courses provided by Fáilte Ireland enable migrant workers to improve their English language skills and thereby to access promotional opportunities:

A lot of people start working in the accommodation section of the hotel and as their English improves they move to front of house. A lot of Poles coming here now are doing a lot of Fáilte Ireland courses with the support of their hotels and are progressing to management posts (Irish Hotels Federation representative).

One of the interviewed educational representatives recommended that Applied English support programmes for migrants would be useful to help overcome the language barrier:

In addition to third-level providers offering mainstream programmes, appropriate Applied English support would benefit migrants both when they are students on the programme and again when they go to employers after graduation seeking employment (Education-authority representative).

As identified by the majority of interviewees, lack of English language competence is a major barrier for accessing education and employment. It is clear from the interviews conducted with employer bodies that English language competence is essential to gaining employment, particularly for those in front-line positions. The overall findings from the research interviews confirm that proficiency in English meant migrants were more likely to be employed, were better integrated in their workplaces and society, and generally enjoyed a better quality of life in Ireland. As noted above, the levels of English language competence is quite varied among migrants, while some who possess excellent everyday English might still require specialised or discipline-specific English language training relevant to their employment. Employer organisations and education providers, therefore, need to work in partnership to develop and provide technical or specialised English modules which could be delivered in the workplace.


5.4 Financial Barriers and Lack of Information

Fee structures and lack of funding were identified by the majority of focus group participants and by the access and admissions officers as other major barriers to accessing education by migrants. Similarly, from the interviews conducted with relevant stakeholders, financial impediments were recognised as a key barrier to education:

Money is a major access barrier to education. In recent times, particularly with the downturn in the economy, more and more migrants are struggling to gain employment, which will obviously impact on their ability to pay for courses (Director, Immigrant Support Centre).

One of the education-authority representatives commented on the importance of eligibility of funding for potential students, particularly given financial barriers to accessing training and education:

The VEC administer maintenance grants to the institutes of technology, but the most inhibiting factor for migrants is that many do not qualify for VEC maintenance grants because of non-conformance with residency and citizenship criteria. Non-EU fees coupled with no grant make it almost impossible for many migrants to even consider entering third-level education (Education-authority representative).



This interviewee also pointed out that some initiatives relating to the provision of financial support have recently been introduced and should help to alleviate financial difficulties:

Fortunately, thanks to changes last year in the Back to Education Initiative (BTEI), migrants can now enter ESOL programmes free of charge and the providers don't lose scarce funding in this operational area. Prior to changes in the BTEI, such programmes were run on a self-financing basis (Education-authority representative).

In addition to the financial barriers identified above, some respondents said that a general lack of information on education opportunities for migrants is a key barrier to access:

The simple lack of information is a major barrier. Many of those who have completed Level-5 FÁS courses are not aware that they are in a position to apply to third-level colleges (FÁS representative).

Lack of information about the education sector is a big barrier for migrant workers and this causes unease. When lack of information is combined with a lack of English they are at a disadvantage in comparison to the Irish construction workers. Lack of information can also mean that they are not aware of the opportunities available to them. We direct them to our website for all relevant information and we also have a monthly magazine and a monthly newsletter which go to our 16,000 members (Construction Industry Federation representative).

There is a widespread lack of information on courses for migrants. Generally, we find that migrants get their information through word of mouth more than anywhere else. Libraries are probably the best places to seek information. Many migrants get information from NGO organisations. Migrants come in here a lot looking for information on social welfare entitlements and on accessing courses and employment opportunities. We found that when we telephone various colleges, for information on behalf of migrants, there are no clear policies in place; we are often transferred to different people within the same college and get different answers (Director Immigrant Support Centre).

In summary, the interviewed stakeholders also believe that fees and the widespread lack of information on access to third-level education for migrants are additional barriers which have to be addressed by students. Interviewees also condemned the current prohibitive fees charged to non-EU citizens. Some stakeholders also observed additional difficulties in the complexity of the fees structure, particularly for non-EU students, which are often compounded by a lack of English language proficiency, thereby, making access virtually out of reach for many migrants. Interviewees also spoke of the lack of clear information relating to residency status, which causes problems not only for migrants but also for employer bodies, individual employers, and education providers. Educational stakeholders believed that migrants require additional informational provision and assistance when dealing with fee structures and financial supports, and recommended that this information should be available widely and in easily-understood and jargon-free English, through all higher education colleges.

5.5 Recognition of Qualifications and Prior Learning

There were mixed responses regarding the recognition of non-Irish qualifications and for the RPL. Interviewed respondents from the hospitality sector reported that some applicants arrive with experience and qualifications relevant to the industry in which they work:

A lot of people coming from Poland, India, and Sri Lanka have experience working in the area of hotels and some from Poland would also have achieved qualifications in the area (Hotel representative).

The Irish Hotels Federation representative noted that, in relation to hiring employees in their industry, most hotel owners or managers do not seek third-level qualifications from either Irish or migrant applicants. If employees, however, do hold previously attained qualifications relevant to the industry, employers use the FÁS system of recognition for competence-based qualifications. Some employers also check qualifications with higher-education institutions, and many employers ask job applicants to provide translations of their qualifications.

Many respondents reported that migrants frequently do not have qualifications relating to the industry in which they are currently employed. Interviewees stated that, very often, workers would have third-level qualifications from their home countries, but find difficulty gaining employment relevant to their qualifications. Rather than remain unemployed, migrant workers usually choose to work in, for example, the tourism sector, in which it was relatively easy for them to gain employment until recently:


A lot of our foreign workers generally do not have a qualification in the hospitality sector; they are often very qualified in another area. A lot of our Polish workers are teachers (Hotel representative).

A large number of staff members have qualifications in other areas rather than in the hospitality sector. Many workers coming from Poland, for example, have degrees in the areas of Engineering or Arts. They come to work in this sector as they have difficulty gaining employment in other areas (Irish Hotels Federation representative).

They may hold a higher level qualification in another area, so choosing another career path is a lifestyle change and there is nothing wrong with that (Fáilte Ireland representative).

Coinciding with the focus group findings, stakeholder interviewees confirmed that migrants experience difficulties when attempting to gain academic credits, in particularly for prior learning. Stakeholders generally believed that this lack of recognition was another barrier when attempting to engage in further education and training:

There is, in some instances, a failure to give academic credit to prior learning acquired through previous positions (FÁS representative).



Our experience of dealing with migrants is that they have difficulties in having their prior qualifications recognised, but, even more seriously, they may not be able to enter courses at the appropriate level. They do not seem to be able to join a course halfway through, which means they have to step backwards and start again (Director of Immigrant Support Centre).

A further difficulty migrants face is failure to have their previous qualifications recognised, or when they attempt to have these qualifications recognised they often encounter difficulties which are big barriers for them in accessing education (FÁS representative).

The lack of recognition of foreign qualifications and of RPL were identified by many stakeholders as additional barriers for migrants, from both educational and employment perspectives. One of the education-authority interviewees acknowledged that barriers exist in relation to these two areas and outlined procedures which they recommend to third-level education providers:

Education providers are encouraged to liaise with the National Academic Recognition Information Centre (NARIC) located in the office of the NQAI to establish the recognition of overseas awards. HETAC assists in the NARIC recognition process. Experience to date would indicate that non-Irish qualifications would rarely if ever be recognised as above the Irish qualifications on the national framework (Education-authority representative).

This interviewee also argued that some discrimination may exist in systems designed for the RPL:

Barriers could exist in terms of unconscious bias. For example, in higher education, the learner assessment processes devised by providers may have unconscious bias due to the fact that they are devised for learners that providers are familiar with, for example, Irish nationals. Recognition of qualifications may be a barrier where there is no equivalent quality assurance or qualifications framework structure in the country of origin (Education-authority representative).

Similarly, the intercultural training consultant interviewed believed that some additional problems may arise because of the difficulties associated with matching Irish qualifications with non-Irish qualifications:

We have generally found that the standard of non-Irish qualifications are equivalent in terms of quality, but difficulties may arise because of the different framework of qualifications used in different countries (Intercultural Training Consultant).

The interviewed director of the Immigrant Support Centre, however, believed that further difficulties are encountered when the level of a foreign qualification is perceived to be lower than its Irish equivalent qualification:

Sometimes it is difficult for migrants to get recognition of their prior qualifications, and I know this is an unpopular thing to say and a difficult thing to say, but some of the qualifications from the African countries are below the level of Irish qualifications, though not all of them. From looking at CVs and from people coming for interviews here, I know they are at a different level (Director of Immigrant Support Centre).

Notwithstanding these experiences, the same interviewee has also dealt with many migrants who, despite having many years of experience in their professions, they were unable to get recognition for their prior learning:

There is a particular problem for refugees who do not have their paper certificates with them to get recognition of their prior learning. There should be a system in place in educational institutions and in industry for migrants to prove what they can do rather than what they cannot do. If somebody is given refugee status it means they have been persecuted, so they are unlikely to have their pieces of paper here with them, so they are stuck and must start at the beginning of a course again. There are other issues, for example, in some countries people do not need paper qualifications for certain jobs. We had a situation of a man who came here as a very qualified car mechanic who was 36 years of age and has four children. He had years of experience as a mechanic but did not have a piece of paper to prove this. So he could not get a job here even as an apprentice and he had to go back and start classes again with a group of 18-year-olds. If he had been given a chance to prove what he could do, our country would be well served by people like him. So, it is important to recognise prior learning (Director, Immigrant Support Centre).

The education-authority representatives were very aware of the difficulties of having prior qualifications and prior learning recognised - both in third-level colleges and in employment situations. The interviewees believed that these difficulties are compounded when varying award frameworks are used in different countries, thereby making the comparisons of awards with the Irish framework problematic. At the same time, interviewees pointed out that a major objective of the national framework of qualifications (NFQ) is to recognise all learning achievements. The NFQ aims to do this by supporting the development of alternative pathways to qualifications/awards and by promoting the RPL. The recognition of non-formal and informal learning are closely associated with work-based learning, thereby affording further partnership development between employers and third-level education providers to ensure that migrants are compensated for their prior learning and qualifications both in the workplace and in third-level colleges.



5.6 Policies for Migrant Workers

All interviewees were asked if they were aware of any specific policies in relation to the needs of migrants, in the context of both employment and higher education. The two representatives from the education authorities stated that education providers are responsible for the translation of policies into different languages:

Policies and procedures are primarily directed towards education providers. It is the responsibility of providers to communicate the policies and procedures appropriate to the provision of programmes to learners. I am not aware of any specific policies relating to the needs of migrants, but education providers need to ensure that language barriers are overcome in the context of managing programme provision for overseas learners (Education-authority representative).

Policies are translated into different languages where appropriate. These languages vary by college or learning centre and depend on catchment locally (Education-authority representative).

In relation to the employment of migrant workers, industry representatives were asked if they were aware of any separate policies in this regard. All respondents stated that every member of staff was treated in the same way regardless of nationality or residency status:

There is no separate policy as such. Migrant workers are treated exactly the same as Irish citizens applying for jobs (Irish Hotels Federation representative).

Absolutely not – everybody is treated equally (Hotel representative).

Migrant workers are treated the same as any other employee. The hospitality sector has a reputation for being difficult to work in – relying on tips etc. But I would say that migrant workers are treated the same. Like any other employee, if they are not being looked after, they will leave the employer. By and large they are treated fairly with regard to employment rights. I am not aware of any documented evidence of ill-treatment (Fáilte Ireland representative).

All workers are treated equally, regardless of country of origin. There is an obligation on us through our social policies to treat all workers equally. When migrants arrive to work in Ireland they have to learn about a new set of policies and practices, such as our taxation system, etc., but they are all treated the same as Irish workers. Treating migrants equally should ensure their full integration to Irish society (IBEC representative).

Interviewees were asked if their industries had additional policies relating to training of non-Irish workers. Interviewees stated that training was the same for all, regardless of the employee's nationality:

Most hotels have a certain day of the week when they provide induction for all new staff. If further induction is needed by migrant workers it is provided separately (Irish Hotels Federation representative).

Generally, induction and training in most hotels is not a separate event for Irish and non-Irish workers. We do a full-day induction training course for Irish nationals and non-nationals. We treat all staff the same (Irish Hotels Federation representative).

Training is exactly the same as for Irish staff (Hotel representative).

We have a Big Brother programme, a mentoring system for new staff for the first couple of weeks. The mentor signs off on training covered at the end of each week (Hotel representative).

In relation to intercultural training, some initiatives have also been introduced.


During the induction training period, everyone gets half an hour on-the-job training per day during their work time. At this training, we encourage workers from other countries to share their experiences from their home and from their culture with their co-workers (Hotel representative).

We do some training on cultural orientation for the general population in Ireland, but not specifically for migrants. We should do more orientation training. There is very little cultural training happening. Some of the colleges have orientation courses, but, overall there is very little training being given (Director, Immigrant Support Centre).

Some organisations do training on cross-cultural skills and this training is very important for integration. Another barrier for individual migrants is that they tend to be treated as a homogenous cultural group. People need to look at the attributes of each person and treat them as individuals (IBEC representative).

The FÁS interviewee also spoke of the importance of intercultural training, and believed that the lack of such training can lead to misunderstandings and bias:

It is important to recognise that norms of behaviour constituting customary practice in the country of origin of migrants are deemed socially unacceptable in Ireland. Certain communities, for example, fail to queue or some migrants have a custom of washing their hands in drinking fountains. These customs are not objectionable when considered in the light of their social background, but may be mistakenly considered rude to the unsympathetic observer (FÁS representative).



Some of the larger companies within the hospitality industry were reported by the interviewees to have a policy of translating recruitment application forms into different languages. Some companies also display notices in the workplace in different languages, even if those companies did not have formal policies in place to provide notices in translation.

Regarding dealing with policies on the legal status of employees, the respondent representing the tourism industry stated that employees from all countries are welcomed equally, but potential workers are always required to provide evidence of their work permit, i.e., the Garda National Immigration Bureau (GNIB) Stamp-4 permit:

We welcome any nationality in any constituent part of the workforce. We have an open-door policy. The only requirement is that anyone presenting for training who is not Irish would have to have a GNIB Stamp Four permit. The reason for this is that if we make an investment of three months training we want to ensure that that investment will benefit the Irish economy. We want to ensure they can study and work in Ireland (Fáilte Ireland representative).

The Construction Industry Federation interviewee reported that all workers are treated equally, but, was aware of policies which had been formally translated to other languages for migrants:

Policies and procedures in relation to the Health and Safety of individuals are translated into a language that can be understood by those working in the construction sector as is necessary by Health and Safety legislation. The Construction Industry Federation have induction/safety publications available in several languages. We have a lot of Polish construction workers, for example, so the health and safety policies would be available in Polish on the construction sites. The Polish workers would also receive their induction training in Polish in very many of the large construction companies (Construction Industry Federation representative).

The interviewed employer and employer representatives stressed that all employees are treated equally, regardless of their nationality. Some employers recognise the richness of diversity which migrant workers bring to their organisations and afford them the opportunities to display aspects of their home cultures during induction and on an informal basis. The employer representatives and employers did not believe that migrants were disadvantaged as a result of not having their various policies and procedures translated into different languages.

5.7 Targeting and Recruiting Migrant Workers

In recent years, many industries relied on migrant workers to fill vacancies in their organisations. The hospitality and construction industries, for example, have employed large numbers of migrants throughout the country. When conducting interviews for this research, with employers and related stakeholders, the impact of Ireland's recent economic downturn could not be assessed, therefore, the interview questions focused on participants' experiences of targeting and recruiting migrant workers over the previous number of years. Interviewees were

asked if they specifically engaged in targeting and recruiting migrant workers. The Construction Industry Federation representative stated:

We do not distinguish between any workers. We send all the information out to our contractors and they filter the relevant information for us and make sure it is available to any worker it would be of interest to (Construction Industry Federation representative).

Interviewed representatives from the hotel industry stated that their industry was heavily dependent on the contribution of migrant workers:

Certainly in the accommodation and kitchen areas we would have difficulties filling the posts were it not for foreign employees (Hotel representative).

In particular, hotel-industry stakeholders identified a gap in the availability of trained chefs, and discussed some difficulties in filling these vacancies:

The numbers of Irish people training as chefs has dropped radically and Polish workers coming here wouldn't usually have those skills. Usually there are no problems filling vacancies in all areas of our hotels, except for positions as chefs (Irish Hotels Federation representative).


It is difficult to recruit chefs because of the unsociable hours. It is virtually impossible to recruit chefs currently (Irish Hotels Federation representative).

Many respondents referred to the European Recruitment and Employment Service (EURES) system, on which they rely for targeting migrants with specific skills:

We know from our own human resource development strategy and research that the prime requirements are for commis chefs and front-line people. We don't go to recruitment fairs as such, but we deal with our EURES counterparts who set up three days of interviews and we would recruit two hundred to three hundred candidates, bring them to Ireland, and train them (Fáilte Ireland representative).

Respondents believed that when migrants are specifically targeted for certain occupations, these migrants generally integrate more effectively in the workforce. The recruitment of such migrants not only means that they are better integrated in the labour force, but they are also likely to integrate more successfully in Irish society:

As a state organisation we have tried to improve the recruitment situation by working with FÁS on the EURES system. We believe that by going ourselves to eastern European countries, and identifying, targeting, and recruiting suitable candidates, and bringing them to Ireland for training, we can ensure more effective integration. We also believe that when we recruit migrants that we have specifically targeted these workers to integrate better to the workplace and to society because they have better English and an equivalent FETAC Level-4 qualification (Fáilte Ireland representative).



In recent years some of the hotel chains built up experience in targeting migrants abroad, and many of these hotels now undertake this process directly rather than going through the EURES system. Other employers in the hotel industry tended to rely on local resources for the recruitment of staff. Many hotel owners placed advertisements in local newspapers or recruited through FÁS and local employment agencies. Other hotel owners relied on word-of-mouth recommendations and many migrants were employed on the basis of handing in a CV directly to the hotel for consideration.

One of the interviewed educational stakeholders reported from her interaction with employers that there are general skills and competencies which tend to enhance the recruitment and employability of migrant workers:

Some work experience and communication or interpersonal skills appear to be high on employers' lists with an emphasis placed on work placement for academic programmes. Workplace experience would probably be even more relevant for minority learners in order to provide better opportunities for successful employment following completion of their third-level studies (Education-authority representative).

More generally, stakeholders argued that they would recruit the best candidate, regardless of nationality. Some of the more sought-after recruiting qualities were identified as:

Longevity in previous employment, experience in the area, attitude to work and training (Hotel representative).

Overall, from the interviews conducted with industry stakeholders, it can be seen that the methods of targeting and recruiting migrant workers vary between relying on the more traditional means of recruitment to travelling overseas and specifically targeting potential migrants who have specific skills. Employers commented that migrants are often not employed in their direct areas of expertise but, generally, their organisations have greatly benefited from an inflow of migrants in recent times. These interviewees also noted that the Irish economy too has benefited and could not have grown at the rate it did over the past number of years without employing migrant workers.

5.8 Retention of Migrant Workers

Finally, interviewees were invited to comment on whether they experienced any difficulties in retaining migrant workers. The hospitality and hotel interviewees, in particular, reported that retaining migrant workers was problematic:

Someone with a qualification in another area would tend not to stay more than a year or two before returning home. There's a high turnover of foreign workers (Irish Hotels Federation representative).

Migrant workers tend to stay eighteen months to two years, and then they go home, while some others upgrade their qualifications to progress in the industry (Hotel representative).

It depends on the international economy. As the Polish economy is improving a lot of these workers will go home. I don't think Irish people will be easily attracted to the industry and this is a major concern for hotels (Hotel representative).

The number of foreign workers has already decreased since October 2007. The economies of the source countries have improved and therefore people have realised they can do as well at home. I can see the numbers of foreign workers continuing to decrease in the future (Fáilte Ireland representative).

Similarly, the Construction Industry Federation representative noted:


We have seen a decrease in the number of migrant workers in the construction sector recently. Anecdotally, it is said that they are going to London to work in preparation for the Olympic Games or else going home. We know, however, that we still have very large numbers of migrants employed and they are very skilled workers and they have a huge part to play in our economy (Construction Industry Federation representative).

One respondent commented on the importance of treating employees well for their successful retention:

We provide good conditions here and we treat our workers very well with regard to work-life balance, etc. We have a great atmosphere here. I believe that is why they stay so long with us (Hotel representative).

At this point in time, with the recent economic downturn, it is very difficult to predict if migrant workers will remain in Ireland. The hospitality and hotel representatives interviewed noted that the pattern for migrant workers was to remain in the hospitality and tourism sector for approximately a two-year period before moving to different occupations or moving back home. Recent research by Mac Éinrí (2008) pointed out that, in the case of nearly half a million Irish who left the country in the 1980s, nearly half of those came back in the following decade and a half, while the rest stayed in their new countries. Mac Éinrí suggests that there is no reason to suppose that it will be very different in the case of migrants in Ireland. He concludes that a large number of Poles, Latvians, Lithuanians and other eastern European migrants may indeed return to their home countries, but substantial numbers will remain and become a part of Irish society on an indefinite basis. The findings from the focus groups conducted for this research concur with the research findings of Mac Éinrí, insofar as some participants indicate a desire to return to their home countries while many other migrants desire and hope to make Ireland their permanent home.

Given that the recent economic downturn is predicted to continue for a couple of years at least, it is likely that many migrant workers in particular will be adversely affected in their employment prospects. If unemployment continues to rise, migrants who are no longer in employment will be faced with three possible options: to return to their home countries, to move to another country, or to participate in further education and training to



upskill and progress in the Irish labour market. The latter option suggests that immediate action is required from both education and industry stakeholders, ideally working together, to ensure that access to third-level education is made much more accessible to migrants.

Finally, from the interviews conducted with the relevant stakeholders it is clear that many opportunities exist for all parties to continue to work together in a deliberate manner to overcome various barriers to migrant integration and advancement, as identified by all three sets of interviewees. These stakeholders illustrate that there is much potential and willingness to strengthen the collaborative approach between third-level colleges and industry to form powerful partnerships to improve the opportunities for education and employment for migrants so that they might become more fulfilled in their careers and personal worlds, and more successfully integrate to Irish society. A powerful message from one of the stakeholder interviewees quoted above, but, worth re-emphasising to all people dealing with migrants, is that:

There should be a system in place in educational institutions and in industry for migrants to prove what they can do rather than what they cannot do.



6.0 Challenges for the Provision of Third-level Education to Migrants

These conclusions and recommendations are based on the findings of the research conducted by working group members as part of the *Education in Employment* project. As reported in previous chapters, research was conducted with:

- Members of various migrant communities throughout Ireland;
- Migrant students who are both currently enrolled in third-level education courses and are in employment;
- Access and admissions officers in participating third-level institutions;
- Employer bodies, education-authority representatives, employers, and other key stakeholders.

The findings from the research provide an insight to barriers and difficulties experienced by migrants wishing to access third-level education in Ireland. In addition to education barriers, which are the main focus of this report, barriers to employment and to integration into Irish society were also discussed by focus group participants. Similar barriers were identified by interviewees across all regions in Ireland, with no significant differences cited between rural and urban areas. It was apparent, however, that the varying levels of barriers experienced by different sectors of migrants reflected on their respective continent of origin, which, in turn, impacted on their residency status and fee structures for third-level courses. The residency status of migrants and the nature of their entitlements caused much ongoing confusion, not only for migrants but also for administrative staff dealing with migrant applicants/students in third-level colleges.

Emerging from the research, the main barriers to educational advancement for migrants can be summarised under four broad themes:

- (i) information provision;
- (ii) English language skills;
- (iii) recognition of qualifications and prior learning; and
- (iv) fees and financial considerations.


These thematic areas will be used to illustrate challenges for third-level educators and to present recommendations.

Information Provision

While migrant interviewees acknowledged that some information regarding access to third-level education was available, they all agreed that it was difficult to find what was particularly relevant to their own individual contexts. Providing readily-accessible and relevant available information on the requirements for entry to third-level colleges is a challenge for third-level educators.

English Language Skills

The majority of those interviewed identified the lack of spoken and written English language skills as a major barrier to entering higher education and a fundamental barrier against fuller integration to Irish society.



Additionally, focus group participants noted that the entry level of English for third-level students was not standardised across all regions. Some colleges hold examinations of written and spoken English ability, some rely on international standards, while others do not use any methods of assessing applicant students. A further challenge, therefore, for third-level education providers is to develop a consistency among requirements for spoken and written English among migrant students at the pre-entry stage. After students enrol on courses, another challenge remains for the provision of specialised technical English language tutorials in the various disciplines.

Recognition of International Qualifications and Prior Learning

All focus-group participants, as well as access and admissions officers, identified the under-recognition of international qualifications and of prior learning. The majority of focus group interviewees were unaware of the services provided by the NQAI. Many interviewees reported that the terms for recognising their previous qualifications were quite inconsistent between third-level colleges. These interviewees reported further inconsistencies between individual administration staff within the same college. A challenge for third-level providers, therefore, is to ensure that all potential students are made aware of mechanisms for assessing international qualifications and prior learning.

Closely related to the recognition of foreign qualifications is the RPL, an issue that was identified by all interviewees as another major barrier to accessing higher education. Focus group participants claimed that they are not given credit for their prior learning in Irish third-level colleges. They further suggested that if prior learning is not recognised there is a real danger of developing an occupational gap, with many third-level-educated migrants not given the recognition they earned while in many cases being over-qualified for the level of employment they are offered. Interviewees also believed that, in general, employers do not consider previous learning and previous qualifications when employing migrant workers.

A challenge for third-level educators is to develop clear and standardised policies and procedures in line with best practice for the RPL. For academic and administrative staff, training and development is urgently required in the RPL, particularly in relation to learning acquired abroad. The development of standardised online tools for the RPL and assessment should be developed and widely marketed to all students and to the relevant administration staff dealing with students. A further challenge for third-level education providers in relation to the RPL is to ensure that employer bodies, employers, and employees are all made aware of the existence of such policies; and larger number of migrants should be encouraged to apply to have their prior learning recognised and accredited.

Fees and Financial Considerations

All focus groups confirmed a lack of clarity concerning information on fee structures and on access to funding entitlements for migrant students. Interviewees also recommended an overall review of existing policies towards migrants, so that newer policies would facilitate more effective administration of entitlements for migrants wishing to access third-level education while in employment. A challenge for third-level providers is to re-examine the practice of charging maximum fees for non-EU students and students who wish to enrol on part-time courses.

Overall, it is clear that there are many barriers for migrants when entering third-level education in Ireland. The main barriers, cited by all three sets of interviews, provide serious challenges to third-level education providers, and solutions for overcoming such barriers need to be urgently addressed. Entry to education is of pivotal importance to migrants endeavouring to integrate with Irish society, while, on the other hand, educational disadvantage is recognised as a factor behind much social and economic exclusion.

6.1 Recommendations

It is clear from the research conducted for this study that migrants are still significantly under-represented in all Irish third-level colleges. Based on a review of the interview findings and drawing on the experiences of working group members, a number of recommendations for addressing barriers to third-level education are suggested. The following recommendations for higher education institutions should enable significant progress on overcoming such barriers.

Information Provision

- Provide clear and comprehensive information on programme availability, entitlements, fees and access for learners;
- Ensure that the appropriate information is widely distributed and available in accessible formats;
- Raise awareness among academic and administrative staff in relation to the additional informational needs of migrant students.

English Language Skills

- Provide standardised entry-level guidelines for competence in English across all third-level institutions;
- Ensure that existing language support systems are made available and accessible to students after they have enrolled.


Recognition of International Qualifications and Prior Learning

- Develop clear and accessible policies on the RPL, including certified and experiential learning, across the third-level sector;
- Ensure clear equivalencies for international awards, mapped to NFQ standards;
- Build a shared repository of case studies to inform practice.

Fees and Financial Considerations

- Provide clear and consistent documentation in all colleges regarding fee structures, educational grants, and social welfare entitlements, taking into account the residency status of migrants;
- Provide input to a national debate on fees for part-time students, particularly non-EU and other students who are liable to maximum fees.

There are many considerations for widening access, both in education and employment, to help migrants to integrate more successfully into Irish society. Higher-education providers and employers can collectively take



responsibility for supporting integration by working together to help migrants overcome barriers identified in this research. The Minister for Integration, Conor Lenihan, TD, stated that “Integration is a shared challenge for society as a whole and cannot be successful without each sector playing a constructive and active role” (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, 2008: 19). Minister Lenihan also noted that the unprecedented immigration that Ireland experienced over the past decade and the challenge of integration that it brings are some of the biggest challenges that Ireland faces as a country.

6.2 Conclusions

The role of third-level education, training, and upskilling was identified by all interviewees as essential to combating racism and for developing a more inclusive, integrated, and intercultural society in Ireland. The education needs of migrant groups and individuals vary considerably. Where poverty, racism, failure to accommodate ethnicity, and other forms of discrimination prevail, social exclusion in the third-level education system can be exacerbated. It is clear that the current fee structures in third-level institutions are a contributing factor to exclusion for many migrant applicant students or potential students. Fee structures and access to reduced fees for non-EU nationals, including refugees, should be reviewed and addressed. Equal opportunities in third-level education are essential to prevent under-achievement, which can disadvantage migrants and be passed on to subsequent generations. The continued hampering of access to third-level education was particularly pronounced among asylum seekers, who identified the inadequate level of financial support they receive, coupled with the unrealistic fees they are expected to pay, as insurmountable barriers. This lack of access to third-level education may lead to further isolation and stereotyping of asylum seekers. In addition to financial barriers, particularly for non-EU students, there are other difficulties relating to policies and procedures that are often issued in isolation by the Department of Education and Science, the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, the Department of Social and Family Affairs and the individual third-level colleges. The lack of cohesion between these bodies on issues concerning migrants creates additional and unnecessary barriers for potential migrant students.

Overcoming the language barrier has been identified as critical to successful integration. Without the ability to communicate in English, all other tasks — such as improving skills, accessing public services, and entering gainful employment — become virtually impossible for migrants. Recent measures and initiatives to provide English language training must be continued and additional resources should be provided as necessary.

Employment was another key factor identified as essential to social integration. Employment provides a regular income and economic independence, security, self-esteem or personal status, and opportunities for interaction with people from Irish society. Employment also brings improved lifestyle, an increased sense of belonging to the community, better interaction with people outside their own communities and allows migrants to contribute to Irish society. Employment prospects can be enhanced through additional third-level education and training, enabling migrants to further develop their skills and to reach their full potential. It can be seen from the focus group interviews that many of the practical issues facing migrants are interlinked and are all

contributory steps to successful integration. The prospect of gaining employment, for example, is hindered by poor language competence, which, in turn, affects a person's ability to participate in training and education.

The need to create awareness among employers, particularly small to medium-sized employers, of the benefits of a diverse workforce should also be emphasised. Recruiting from a diverse population brings new perspectives, experience, and language skills into the workforce. These enriching phenomena are particularly important for employers competing in ethnically and culturally diverse markets in Europe and globally. Information should continue to be disseminated to employers to become more familiar with issues concerning migrants, including their skills and their potential as employees. Employers must be encouraged to maintain a positive working environment for a diverse workforce by adopting anti-discrimination codes of practice. Employers should also be encouraged to develop diversity awareness and awareness of various cultures among management and staff in order to encourage positive attitudes and behaviour. Integration in the workplace is a two-way process that places obligations on employers and the individual migrant. From the migrant's perspective, integration requires a willingness to adapt to the Irish workplace without abandoning or being expected to abandon one's own cultural identity. From the employer's perspective, it requires a willingness to employ migrants on the basis of equality and to take action to prevent racism.

In summary, while education and employment are key factors for successful integration of migrants to Irish society, it is clear from the research findings that migrants in employment face many barriers in their attempts to enter higher education. The findings support recent research by the Immigrant Council of Ireland, in 2008, which noted that, as an emigrant nation for centuries, it behoves Ireland to be particularly sensitive to the challenges facing migrants in new societies. The Immigrant Council of Ireland cautioned that Ireland should not make the mistakes that other European countries made in the aftermath of the Second World War, when immigrants were marginalised and ghettoised, as this leads to disharmony and future conflict.

Finally, if conditions are not improved for greater integration of migrant workers and their families into education and employment, social exclusion and segregation would result. If cultural diversity is not recognised and actively supported, racism and xenophobia are reinforced and given a dangerous legitimacy.



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Appendix A

Entitlements to Education

European Economic Area (EEA) Migrants

According to Articles 48-60 of the Treaty of the European Union, 1992, EU citizens have the right to attend any educational institution on the same basis as an Irish citizen. People from EEA countries (and Switzerland) are entitled to access third-level education and local authority or VEC student maintenance grants on the same basis and at the same fees as Irish citizens.

Non-EEA Migrants

There are several categories of non-EEA migrants in Ireland and their entitlements in respect of access to and participation in third-level adult education vary depending on their circumstances.

Refugees

People with refugee status (and their family members) have the same entitlements to education and FÁS training as Irish citizens.

Asylum Seekers

While an application for asylum is being determined, applicants have no right to full-time education (unless under the age of 18). Adult asylum seekers do not have a right to access full-time state-funded education or training in Ireland.

People issued with GNIB Stamp 4

Stamp 4 indicates that a person is entitled to work in Ireland without a work permit. It is issued to people on work visas or work authorisations, and also to spouses of Irish and EU citizens, refugees, people with Irish born child residency, and people with long-term residency status. Holders of Stamp 4 permits are entitled to access education.

Persons Granted Leave to Remain at the Discretion of the Minister for Justice

People in this category are allowed access to third-level education and local authority or VEC higher education. Student maintenance grants are available only to persons with letters stating that they have 'humanitarian leave to remain'.

Persons granted Family Reunification

People in this category have the right to attend any educational institution on the same basis as an EU citizen. They also have access to third-level education and local authority or VEC higher education and student maintenance grants on the same basis as an Irish or EU citizen.

Persons Granted Leave to Remain on the Basis of Marriage to Irish and EU Citizens

These persons are allowed access third-level and local authority or VEC higher education and student maintenance grants on the same basis as an Irish or EU citizen.

Dependants of Work-Permit Holders

Dependants of work-permit holders may access education as long as their residency remains tied to the work permit holder (Stamp 3).

Student Visas for Non-EEA nationals (Stamp 2)

People from non-EEA countries who wish to study in Ireland may be required to apply for a student visa from the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform. They will need to submit (i) a letter of acceptance from the academic institution and evidence of payment of fees; (ii) proof of financial capacity (currently €7,000 in their account per year); and (iii) private medical insurance. Applicants must also demonstrate their academic ability and state that their intention is to return to their country of permanent residence following completion of the course.

Work Visa/Authorisation Holders

International fees are required for immigrant workers entering third-level education and they are ineligible for higher education and student maintenance grants.



Appendix B

Topic Guide for Focus Group Interviews

- What is your nationality?
- What is your age?
- What is your gender?
- What length of time have you been living in Ireland?
- What is your level of education?
- What are your impressions of Irish society?
- Have you experienced any racism or discrimination since your arrival in Ireland?
- Have you integrated into Irish society?
- Have you experienced any cultural barriers in your attempt to integrate into Irish society?
- What level of spoken and written English skills do you possess?
- What do you perceive as the main barriers to third-level education in Ireland for non-Irish nationals?
- Could your quality of life be improved with a third-level qualification?
- If you obtained a third-level qualification before arriving in Ireland was this officially recognised by the relevant statutory authorities?
- Did you experience any difficulties having your previous qualification(s) recognised?
- Has your prior learning been recognised?
- What knowledge do you have of existing services available in relation to education provision?
- Are your qualifications recognised by employers in Ireland?
- Does your future in Ireland depend on upskilling and education?
- Do you think you are entitled to/have a right to education in Ireland?
- Do you think your future is in Ireland?

Interview Guide for Access and Admissions Officers

- Who deals with potential migrant students when they contact the college?
- Who advises migrant students on courses which are most suited to their needs?
- Who or where in your college do you think should be the first point of contact for potential migrant students?
- Where do the majority of migrant students obtain information regarding courses on offer at your college?
- Does the college have policies which specifically relate to migrant students?
- What barriers or obstacles do you perceive migrant students may face?
- Does the college recognise non-Irish qualifications?
- If so, how are these qualifications assessed?
- Have you had any experience of dealing with the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI)?
- What is the policy in relation to the recognition of prior learning for migrant students?
- Are there any additional resources or support services put in place to facilitate migrant students?
- Does the college provide staff training and development sessions in relation to the needs of migrant students?
- Does the college target migrants as potential students?

Appendix D

Interview Guide for Stakeholders

- What are your impressions of migrant workers?
- Do you have specific policies in relation to the needs of migrants?
- Do you have any of your policies or procedures translated into other languages?
- How do migrants get information regarding your business or service?
- How would you rate the level of English language skills of migrants?
- What are the main barriers of access to education and training for migrants?
- What are the main barriers or obstacles to employment for migrants?
- Do you offer any cultural or induction or integration training for migrants?
- Is it important for migrant workers to have a third-level qualification?
- Would you support migrant workers in their pursuit of a third-level qualification?
- Does your organisation recognise non-Irish third-level qualifications?
- Is the standard of non-Irish third-level qualifications equivalent, below, or above, Irish third-level qualifications?
- What general skills and competencies would enhance the employability of migrants?
- What additional support or services could third-level colleges provide to enhance the employability of migrants?
- Do you target and recruit migrant workers?
- Do you find it difficult to retain migrant workers?

Appendix E

National Framework of Qualifications

The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) was established in 2001 with the principal aims of establishing and maintaining a National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) and promoting and facilitating access, transfer and progression. The outline framework of qualifications is usually seen in the form of the 'fan' diagram shown below in Figure 1.



Figure 1 National Framework of Qualifications

Appendix F

Working Group Membership

Chairperson

Dr John Pender

Organisation

Institute of Technology, Sligo

Representative

Mr John Cusack

Athlone Institute of Technology

Mr Chris McDermott

Athlone Institute of Technology

Ms Marcella O'Shea

Athlone Institute of Technology

Dr Margaret Linehan

Cork Institute of Technology

Mr Will Peters

Dublin Institute of Technology

Ms Sinéad McCann

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Mr Fergus Timmons

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Journal of Workplace Learning

Workplace learning courses in Irish third-level colleges

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Journal of Workplace Learning is a double-blind reviewed journal which focuses on research into individual, group and team learning in, from and for the workplace. It also provides for discussion of the nature of interventions intended to enhance learning, and on the roles of those who are responsible directly or indirectly for such interventions, including trainers, consultants, managers and human resource developers. The term "workplace" is broadly defined, and the Journal also encompasses issues related to the wider environment within which learning takes place and within which organisations operate.

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PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

Workplace learning courses in Irish third-level colleges

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this research is to ascertain data in relation to courses that are currently on offer in seven third-level institutions in Ireland which include elements of workplace learning. It is intended that the research findings will contribute to the provision of new workplace learning programmes in Irish third-level colleges.

Design/methodology/approach – A questionnaire was designed for this research and was administered in seven higher education colleges in Ireland. In total, 433 courses were examined in relation to workplace learning.

Findings – The findings illustrate that there is still an over-reliance on the provision of traditional classroom-based courses. The findings further suggest that, for the successful operation of workplace learning programmes, there is scope for developing further employer engagement with higher education colleges in the design, development and delivery of such programmes.

Practical implications – As a result of the data collected for this research, recommendations for implementing workplace learning programmes for both third-level education providers and employers are included here.

Originality/value – The paper provides value by identifying courses in Irish third-level colleges which include elements of workplace learning and suggests that an attitudinal and cultural shift must be engaged with to overcome the traditional reliance on classroom-based programmes in order to successfully develop new workplace learning programmes.

Keywords Workplace learning, Tertiary education, Ireland

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

In Ireland, until recent years, the emphasis in state-funded third-level education was almost entirely towards “for-employment” rather than “in-employment” education and training. In-employment training has, for the most part, been largely disconnected from the formal education qualifications system. The newer emphasis on upskilling of persons already in the labour force poses new and significant challenges. This is particularly true for those at the lower skills level who find it difficult to access education and training opportunities.

Learning for Life (Department of Education and Science, 2000), Ireland’s first White Paper on Adult Education, confirmed that skill shortages continue to threaten Ireland’s economic prospects, a view endorsed by all stakeholders, who also agreed on the priority status of the skill shortage issue. The White Paper, however, reported that “there is less agreement as to how workplace education should be organised and



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financed" (Department of Education and Science, 2000, p. 76). Since the publication of the White Paper, educators, employers, and politicians have given increased attention to the concept of learning as a lifelong activity. Within the context of lifelong learning, learning required by the workplace and which takes place at work and through work has a predominant role in determining the content and direction of learning. As work environments increasingly move to knowledge-based environments, with their increasing dynamic and changing contexts, ongoing upskilling of employees is required. Work-based training and education is ideally suited to serve this need. Rapidly changing contexts now require training and education curricula that are fluid, dynamic, and continually responsive to volatile workplace environments and to societal change. Third-level institutions need to continually engage with the crucible of changing work environments, where newly created contexts continually demand educators to respond quickly to new and ever-changing circumstances.

This paper presents data in relation to the provision of third-level courses which provide elements of workplace learning in seven higher education institutions in various geographical locations throughout Ireland. The findings from this research illustrate that workplace learning is already challenging the current structures of third-level academic institutions, requiring them to be flexible in terms of mode of delivery, in the context of the accreditation of prior experiential learning, and in the accreditation of in-company training or work-based projects. It is also clear from the findings that, for the successful operation of workplace learning programmes, there is scope for developing further employer engagement with higher education institutes in the design, development implementation, and delivery of such programmes. As work contexts are now considered important for curriculum developments, this emphasis highlights the need for a sharing of the responsibility for creating new learning opportunities. This should better assist the student to achieve both the academic knowledge and higher-level skills to meet the needs of employers. From the current findings, a further challenge emerging for third-level institutes emphasises the need to take on a more flexible approach to delivery, utilising a mixed mode or blended approach to learning. The blended learning approach enables the student to have greater control over when and where the learning takes place, and is particularly suited to those learners *in employment*, as it allows the learning to be built around other work and lifestyle commitments.

2. Methodology

A questionnaire was developed and distributed to seven higher education institutions throughout Ireland in order to gather data on courses that offer elements of workplace learning. These institutions were selected because they are collaborative partners in a Strategic Innovation Fund project which was sponsored by the Irish government in 2006. The aims of the Strategic Innovation Fund are:

- to enhance collaboration in the higher education sector;
- to improve teaching and learning;
- to support institutional reform;
- to promote access and lifelong learning; and
- to support the development of fourth-level education.

The particular focus of this sub-strand of the Strategic Innovation Fund is on the learning needs of those already *in* the workforce, and includes lifelong learning as a

central aim by placing significant emphasis on continual professional development and upskilling in the workforce.

The survey aimed to illustrate a snapshot of the higher education landscape by highlighting “what we know” and “what we do not know” about workplace learning, and in doing so identify areas on which to focus attention in the future from an institutional and pedagogical perspective. The questionnaire was aimed at course co-ordinators and was available to be filled in electronically or at a face-to-face meeting with a member of the research team. The criteria for inclusion of courses were that they were targeted at students who are *in employment*, i.e. courses which are not accessed by Central Applications Office (CAO) entry, and usually delivered through part-time provision. The summary data presented here represents 433 courses, which is the total number of courses accounted for by all seven third-level institutions. A very large variety of courses is currently offered to the workplace by the third-level education providers; these include management, marketing, professional cookery, energy management, auctioneering, accountancy, palliative care, interior design, lean manufacturing, retail management, and enterprise development. The questionnaire aimed to ascertain information relevant to workplace learning, including National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) level, recognition of prior learning, and course delivery, in order to assist third-level institutions and employers in identifying available approved modules that will benefit learners. The findings from the research are presented below under the main themes that were investigated.

3. Level of courses on offer

The first question asked what level each course on offer was classified by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) in the National Framework of Qualifications. The need for workplace learning to operate in the dual worlds of work and education means that a common language must be used to describe the outcomes of what is being undertaken. This language is represented in the national framework of qualifications. The National Framework of Qualifications comprises ten levels of qualifications, with each level based on nationally agreed standards, skills and competence. These standards define the learning outcomes to be achieved by learners seeking qualifications at each level. The ten levels include qualifications gained in settings from schools to places of work, the community, training centres and to colleges and universities, from the most basic to the most advanced levels of learning.

From the responses received, most courses (37.60 per cent) are offered at Level 6, whereby the learner receives a certificate on completion of the course. “New economy” theory suggests that advanced countries are witnessing a growth in “knowledge jobs” and there is an emphasis placed on knowledge-rich employment. One of the challenges, therefore, for higher education providers and employers is to promote further learning and to increase participation rates at Levels 7 and 8. The requirement to enhance the skill level of the working population presents a substantial task as Ireland’s participation rate in continuous learning (non-formal learning) is relatively poor. Only 14 per cent of the 25-64 years age group in Ireland engaged in non-formal learning in 2002, contrasting with a 16.5 per cent average in the twenty-five European Union states, and 34.5 per cent in Britain. A Forfás (2007) report suggests that the National Framework of Qualifications is a vital tool for the development of skills in the Irish knowledge economy and that the availability of data based on the National Framework of Qualifications is of the central importance. For employers and employees, the National Framework of Qualifications provides a means of assessing or demonstrating

that particular skill levels have been achieved. Qualification systems clearly add value to training and learning investments at the level of the national economy. Qualification systems promote labour mobility and the more effective matching of candidates and vacancies.

4. Course design

The next question related to the design of courses. The results of the survey show that the education institutions were responsible for designing 221 courses; only ten were designed by industry, and 47 were designed by both the education providers and industry. These findings relating to course design provide a challenge to third-level education providers, particularly because of the limited consultation with industry. It is clear that if academics develop courses in conjunction with employers, academics will necessarily lose much of their traditional role as the sole or primary course designer. The curriculum for the newer model is ultimately located within the workplace, and is individually renegotiated with each learner. Actual teaching is seldom required. It is replaced by two important new roles: that of the assessor and that of manager of the learning process. As assessor, the academic is required to evaluate learning in the workplace and determine its academic merit and worth.

Traditionally, courses have been designed by the education providers; however, current thinking on workplace learning provision is that initiatives should be "learner"- and "employer"-centric rather than being developed from the perspective of education or training providers. This in turn should give both the learner and employer greater ownership of newly developed courses. The design of workplace learning courses requires an appreciation of the complexities of learning and of the circumstances in which it can take place. Considerable design preparation is needed if meaningful and worthwhile courses are to be planned to suit the diversity of students in the workplace. One of the valuable features of courses designed by the industrial and educational partnership is the potential richness of resources and support available to learners. They can draw not only on the resources of the education institution but also those of the workplace. Additionally, when a course is designed in partnership by the educator and the employer, its role becomes one of assisting learners in identifying, developing, and recognising their individual learning in the context of their current jobs and future professional development.

The formation of a partnership between academics and employers should bring a new perspective to course design and development. Participation by employers in course design (covering duration, timing and content) should ensure that their employees would be beneficiaries of the course. One of the methods of achieving success for workplace learning courses is the inclusion of a workplace learning project which would be designed by the employer and the third-level educator. Advocates of workplace learning courses suggest that a main focus of these courses is on the delivery of a major workplace project (whether on an individual or collaborative basis) which addresses real-life issues and has the capacity to have an impact on the organisation.

A further reason for having the employer involved in course design is because of a difficulty faced by many organisations for placing due value on learning. While it is broadly accepted that learning is an essential capability for organisations, it is often among the first areas of activity to face budget cutbacks in times of difficulty. Traditional approaches to business performance measurement have focused chiefly on financial performance. If the employer has co-designed a course tailored to the needs of

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both employees and organisational needs, it is more unlikely that the course will suffer financial cutbacks. Additionally, the partnership approach to course design and development demonstrates that the third-level provider is itself a learning organisation as it is able to transform the curriculum and develop new ways in which individuals and organisations can engage with higher education.

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5. Recognition of prior learning

Another area to be investigated was the recognition of prior learning. Recognition of prior learning (RPL) is the generic term for systems such as Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) or Advanced Academic Standing, which are used within higher education to describe the awarding of credit to students on the basis of demonstrated learning that has occurred prior to admission. RPL is also used to refer to the recognition of (prior) non-formal and informal learning for qualifications. The term "prior" concerns learning that has taken place, but has not been formally assessed or measured, prior to entering a programme or seeking an award. The philosophy underlying the recognition of prior learning is to enable and encourage people to enter or re-enter formal education, leading to qualifications, by awarding or recognising credit for what they already know in the course curriculum. Workman (2008) summarises that academic recognition and academic assessment of *experiential* learning are the essential features of the recognition of prior learning. The measurement activities within the assessment process relate to two key factors – the volume of credit and the level of learning, which reflect academic level equivalence to undergraduate or postgraduate learning. The onus is on the student to demonstrate the prior learning, by preparing and submitting adequate evidence, under the guidance and advice of the academic institution.

The research illustrated there was no recognition of prior learning for 264 of the 433 courses surveyed. This finding suggests that significantly greater emphasis needs to be placed on recognising prior learning by third-level education providers. Recognition and accreditation of prior learning enables non-traditional entry into third-level courses as well as gaining credit for advanced standing. A recent report (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2007) on RPL observed that an awareness of RPL among Irish employers, workers, and the general public is low. Until now, awareness of RPL has been limited to a small number of policy makers, education professionals, and people partaking in RPL.

The recognition of prior learning in Ireland is closely associated with the promotion of lifelong learning and the full implementation of the National Framework of Qualifications. For some decades, the recognition of prior learning has been used in Ireland to facilitate broader access to education and training programmes (particularly by mature learners in further and in higher education and training), to meet workplace requirements and personal needs/interests of learners. The number of learners who avail themselves of the recognition of prior learning has been and continues to be relatively small in comparison to the number who access education and training qualifications by formal routes. There is, however, a range of practice and experience in the recognition of prior learning in many fields of education and training.

The OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2007) on the recognition of non-formal and informal learning notes that in Ireland "while RPL for access, credit/exemptions is generally practised, the concept of making full awards on the basis of RPL is a relatively new one (there is some international practice of this)". The OECD recommends that Ireland should increase the availability of part-time

education, and other flexible forms of education and instruments such as RPL, to facilitate access to education.

Recognition and accreditation of prior learning are important and necessary for workplace learning courses. A process of portfolio development and assessment is needed for students to identify the point at which their formal work-based learning should commence. A major objective of the National Framework of Qualifications is to recognise all learning achievements. The National Framework of Qualifications aims to do this by supporting the development of alternative pathways to qualifications/awards and by promoting the recognition of prior learning.

6. Course delivery location

The next area to be investigated related to the delivery location of the courses. The results show that 364 courses are still delivered on campus, with only *two* out of the 433 courses surveyed delivered in industry/the workplace. This finding poses some serious challenges for Irish third-level education providers, and particularly for the delivery of workplace learning programmes. Most education providers have become conditioned to a classroom model that separates theory from practice, which can risk make learning seem impractical and irrelevant. Workplace learning, however, merges theory with practice and knowledge with experience. It recognises that the workplace offers as many opportunities for learning as the classroom does. While the workplace creates possibilities for learning, it is *how* individuals participate and interact in their workplace that is central to learning by individuals.

Learning in the workplace can occur at different levels and is different to classroom-based learning. Learners may be individuals, groups, whole organisations or inter-organisational networks. The nature of the learning varies as well. Although formal learning and informal workplace learning are different in nature, both are equally important for the development of vocational and professional expertise. Formal learning usually produces explicit knowledge, whereas informal learning largely produces tacit or implicit knowledge.

Third-level academic providers are now facing the challenge of working with course modules that require them to deal with converting work practices into learning practices that meet both education and industry standards. There are also issues regarding the place of theory and critical reflection for courses delivered in the workplace rather than those delivered in the classroom. The third-level providers also need to make the adjustment that courses delivered off-campus enables the learner to be responsible for, manage, and to timetable one's own learning, and to provide courses that require minimal attendance at a third-level institution.

7. Methods of assessment

The next issue to be addressed was that of assessment methods. The research results highlight that very traditional modes of assessment are still utilised by mainstream education providers. Exams and continuous assessments remain the favoured means of evaluation. One of the more interesting findings emerging from the research is that only *two* courses were assessed by means of project work.

Currently, most education institutions organise courses around credit points. These credits represent a discrete component of a course with specific learning outcomes and assessment processes. A challenge for education providers is to move from traditional class-based examination and assessment procedures to more innovative project work that can be completed in the workplace. This means that workplace learning

programmes must be flexible and responsive to the circumstances of the learner and of the work setting but without compromising on quality and standards from the perspective of the third-level institute. The focus should be on what students wish to learn, not just on what is provided for them to learn. The need for workplace learning, however, to operate in the dual worlds of work and education means that a common language must be used to assess the learning and describe the outcomes of what is undertaken. This language is represented in the National Framework of Qualifications. Assessment of work-based learning must meet the quality challenge as specified by the education institution, and should have reliable measures of the volume and level of work-based learning required.

Overall, academic institutions needs to be assured that all courses meet rigorous academic standards, and the employer needs assurance that courses will prepare employees to contribute to the workplace with the highest attainable quality standards. Although the ultimate award of credits rests with the education provider, the employing organisation has to sustain its own interests. By reducing on-campus assessment methods, such as examinations, work-based learning can be responsive to the needs of those *in* employment who have multiple responsibilities in their lives.

8. Recommendations for implementing workplace learning

For many practitioners, workplace learning is already a vital and legitimate mode of learning which offers significant value for the strategic teaching and learning agendas of higher education institutions. Workplace learning also acts as a driver for greater innovation in the broader third-level education system. Extending this legitimacy, however, will necessitate developing strategies that cross the cultural bridge between learning and work, address the issues and challenges throughout the system, and demonstrate how the practices of work-based learning have wider applicability in the higher education sector. Based on a review of the current research, a number of recommendations for implementing work-based learning programmes can be suggested. These recommendations for higher education institutes and industry should enable significant progress on workplace learning agendas in the next number of years.

For higher education institutes:

- Acknowledge and provide a variety of approaches for those *in* employment to avail themselves of workplace learning offered by higher education institutes.
- Ensure that the recognition of prior learning is an integral component of all workplace learning programmes.
- Design user-friendly approaches for the recognition of prior learning and continuous professional development.
- Establish strong industry partnerships as a means to ensure participation and progression into higher education.
- Involve the employer in the design of the programme, particularly in relation to workplace projects and assignments to support the assessment of learning.
- Develop customised programmes to meet the needs of the individual and the organisation.
- Address the diverse range of knowledge and skills possessed by learners at the commencement of workplace learning programmes.

- Ensure workplace projects and assignments fulfil the essential measurement criteria of validity, reliability, and authenticity.
- Provide learners with frequent feedback on their progress and achievements.
- Encourage critical reflection throughout the programme.
- Provide accreditation for work-based learning programmes through the National Framework of Qualifications.

For employers:

- Direct more energy and effort towards motivating employees to see value and to engage in higher-levels skill development.
- Allocate a workplace mentor to help the student identify their individual learning needs, apply knowledge to practice, and act as a resource for the student's development.
- Encourage employees to have a greater sense of responsibility for individual and continuing professional development.
- Develop a clear sense of purpose for workplace projects and assignments and the personal rewards that can come from them.
- Consolidate the workplace as a place of knowledge production.

It is clear there are many considerations for the implementation of workplace learning for both third-level institutions and employers. Work-based learning, however, also presents considerable implications and challenges for learners. In workplace learning programmes, learners have to deal with the complexities of being both a worker and learner, and having increased responsibility in the learning process. While flexibility in both process and content is an important part of the appeal for both the organisation and the learner/employee, flexibility has to be provided and timetabled. Learners, their organisations, and academics demand this. It is important that boundaries are constructed within an educational framework that maintain academic standards while at the same time provide guidelines and practices that make explicit the educational parameters within which workplace learning partnership awards are to be negotiated, organised, and assessed.

9. Conclusions

Overall, it is clear from the results of the research carried out that third-level institutions need to adopt a more proactive approach in developing workplace learning courses and, in particular, engaging in consultation with employers and employees. There are many opportunities for third-level providers to utilise more distance-learning tools and to make the transition from an over-reliance on traditional course delivery mechanisms that are currently in place. There is little doubt that current models of workplace learning and practices are evolving and will change considerably over the next decade. There are varied levels of emphasis and extent of provision of workplace learning courses, which in some instances are driven by the institutional mission, while in others it happens as a by-product. In tackling the workplace learning agenda, institutions have started to create an environment that enables them to respond in a timely manner to identified employer needs. Building and sustaining longer-term closer relationships between the higher education providers and employers will have to

underpin any drive by higher education institutes to expand their role in supporting workforce development.

It is interesting to note that of the courses currently on offer, none of the participating third-level institutes offers a full programme leading to a qualification in workplace learning. For workplace learning programmes to be truly work-based and learner-centred, they typically commence with a structured review and evaluation of current learning. This, in turn, challenges the education institution to move beyond the traditional concept of the recognition of prior learning, to formally recognise learner-defined learning for possible inclusion in a future workplace learning programme.

Rapidly changing workplace environments, increasingly influenced by accelerating developments in information and communications technology, require new models of training and education from higher education institutions. Higher education in general, as well as organisational learning and workplace learning in particular, has to draw on the valuable resource of prior learning in the workplace. Prior learning must be more readily and formally recognised for its solid and valuable contribution to third-level education. The more static curricula of yesterday's education systems cannot serve the demands of today or tomorrow. As change in the workplace is at the cutting edge of new demands for training and education, it is the workplace that has, of necessity, to inform much of the training and education curricula of tomorrow. A paradigm shift is required in third-level education, as new and ever-changing curricula will continually and dynamically be informed by the workplace, to address student requirements in the twenty-first century.

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Journal of Workplace Learning

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Editorial objectives

Journal of Workplace Learning aims to provide an avenue for the presentation and discussion of research related to the workplace as a site for learning. Its scope encompasses formal, informal and incidental learning in the workplace for individuals, groups and teams, as well as work-based learning, and off-the-job learning for the workplace. This focus on learning in, from and for the workplace also brings with it questions about the nature of interventions that might assist the learning process and of the roles of those responsible directly or indirectly for such interventions. Also relevant are such topics as assessment of workplace learning, knowledge management, and growth of the learning individual within the workplace.

Since workplace learning cannot be considered without reference to its context, another aim of the journal is to explore the organisational, policy, political, resource issues and other factors which influence how, when and why that learning takes place. Articles will also therefore present research and discussion on the roles of management and human resource developers in learning and training, and on government and management policies and strategies that impact on workplace learning.

For purposes of the Journal, the term "workplace" is broadly defined, and not limited to enterprises within which there is a clearly defined training function.

Editorial style

- Contributions are welcomed from academics and researchers, as well as from practitioners and consultants in workplace training and learning, those who supervise or manage the training/learning function, and from workplace learners themselves.
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- Articles will only be considered for publication if they have not been published, submitted or accepted for publication elsewhere.

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**WORK-BASED LEARNING: CHALLENGING IRISH THIRD LEVEL
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Work-Based Learning: Challenging Irish Third Level Education Provision

The development of a world-class base of skills has become the key driver of economic growth in the developed world. There is recognition that it is only through enhancing people's skills that future competitive advantage will emerge. Markets, however, are becoming much more open; competition is more international and intense; technology is enabling global trading and new business models; the value chain in enterprise is increasingly disaggregated with activities distributed to their most economic or strategic location. Organisations need to identify the precise areas where they have, or can build, distinctive strengths that will enable them to compete effectively. In the past, Ireland benefited significantly from the international expansion of markets for trade, capital and labour. Today, with the rapid opening up of markets in Eastern Europe and Asia (especially China and India), globalisation presents both opportunities and threats. The primary source of continuing skilled labour supply is, and will continue to be, achieved through the training, development, and learning of individuals. In effect, from an employers' perspective, the focus is on workforce (or professional) development – the upskilling and reskilling of an organisation's employees at a higher level. Work-based learning, unlike other forms of learning, tends to be directly related to the needs of organisations and/or the employment needs of those *in* work.

Changing employment patterns in the organisation of work have impacted on the demand for higher level skills. Employees are expected to be more flexible, have a broader range of skills and be better able to manage their own career and development. Graduate-level skills and qualifications are seen as increasingly important in the changing workplace. Knowledge creation and the deployment of

new knowledge in the workplace have given rise to the workplace itself being recognised as a site of learning and knowledge production. Brennan (2005) suggests that, if higher education is to continue to make a contribution to the knowledge economy, collaborative activities based in and around the workplace should be considered.

Higher education institutions are expected to be responsive to the needs of the economy and of the labour market, while at the same time affording citizens their right to appropriate levels of education to sustain economies in stable societies. The growing interest in the interface between traditional higher education and the world of work at European Union and national levels is evident as an increasing number of research projects, incentives and initiatives now have a labour market focus. Research suggests that over 70 per cent of learning comes from experiences, either planned or unplanned, thus emphasising the need to ‘learn from real work’ (Nixon *et al.*, 2006). Such learning is also seen as a means by which the economy can respond more rapidly to changing skill needs, when compared to ‘campus-based learning’. Until relatively recently, however, the value of experience-based learning in higher education has been recognised only in very specific contexts, for example, in practice placements on professional awards.

The government currently funds full-time education, up to third level, and training primarily aimed at the low-skilled cohort. Until recently the emphasis in state-funded third-level education has been almost entirely towards “for-employment” rather than “in-employment” education and training. In-employment training, has, for the most part, been largely disconnected from the education/qualifications system.

Comparisons of education/training of adults show that Ireland lags behind many countries and, in particular, is considerably behind the Lisbon learning target that 12.5 per cent of adults should be engaged in learning. Currently, the Irish rate is 7.4 per cent. Thus, there is a need for a roughly 50 per cent increase in adult learning to achieve the Lisbon target. Lifelong learning is essential for the development of 'human capital', which in turn is inextricably linked to personal, social and economic development.

Organisations and enterprises which want to develop their knowledge base and to engage with Higher Education Institutions, however, face a confusing array of schemes and an inconsistency of approaches. There is a need for the education sector to proactively facilitate and simplify the engagement process. Educational provision for workplaces must be context-sensitive, flexible, innovative and adaptive. Developments must be informed by an understanding of the needs and opportunities, by region and by sector. The need for workplace innovation and the transformation of the concept of work from the static use of previously acquired skills into a dynamic of continuous learning is accepted as essential for the Ireland of the future.

The focus of this paper is to present new empirical data in relation to third level courses which include elements of work-based learning for learners *in* employment across seven higher educational institutions in Ireland.

Defining Work-based Learning

A wide range of terms is used interchangeably for the concept of work-based learning, including: workplace learning, work-related learning, and vocational learning. This

leads to some confusion and undervalues the potential benefits of work-based learning as a mode of learning at a higher level. Furthermore, since the mid-1990s, there has been a gradual shift in language and techniques used to describe steps taken by employers to help employees perform their jobs more effectively – a point emphasised by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) which records that *learning*, *development*, and *training* are often used in the same context. This has again led to some confusion. The CIPD consequently defined work-based learning as “a self directed, work-based process leading to increased adaptive capacity. Individuals ‘learn to learn’ and possess the capabilities that enable them to do so to help to build and retain competitive advantage” (CIPD, 2005).

Work-based learning is often used in the literature to describe any form of learning *in* the workplace. Work-based, however, can convey the notions both of:

- learning that takes place *in* the workplace, and
- learning that takes place *for* the workplace, or the employer more specifically (Glass *et al.*, 2002).

The term work-based learning is used to describe a diverse range of learning situations which have differing influences on higher education, students, employers and employees (Foster and Stephenson, 1998). Gray (2001) identified four different forms of work-based learning:

1. Work-based learning used to access higher education programmes – wherein the previous/current experience of employees is recognised by higher education institutions as a valid form of learning. In addition to allowing these

problems are very complex, involving state-of-the-art techniques at the frontiers of knowledge;

- *Innovative* – New techniques or approaches are constantly being devised to meet new situations, creating many opportunities for learning, and providing experience of managing change;
- *Both strategic and just in time* – Many people have to think and operate at both levels: strategic in terms of working towards medium- to long-term goals; just in time in terms of learning what is necessary for tomorrow;
- *Autonomously-managed and self-regulated* – Learning often takes place without direct instruction or formal tuition. Learners are expected to take responsibility for ensuring they learn from their work activities;
- *Self-motivated* – Many people are motivated to achieve beyond basic expectations;
- *Team-based* – Tackling problems in the workplace requires effective co-operation between people with different roles and expertise, leading to the development of a range of skills and personal qualities as well as a sharing of expertise;
- *Concerned with enhancing personal performance* – Constant updating and upgrading of expertise is now a normal part of most people's work;
- *Concerned with improving the performance of a business, enterprise or organisation;*

A spectrum of interpretations therefore exists, especially in relation to work-based learning, and this has led to a rather prolonged debate concerning both what work-based learning means and the exact form work-based learning should take to best achieve its learning outcomes. The narrow interpretation of work-based learning relates to learning in the workplace that is driven by employer needs and motivations,

whereas the broad perspective focuses on learning that relates to work and is driven more by individual and societal needs.

Terminology and definitions can get in the way of exploring the subject and dealing with what really matters, notably influencing policy environment, dealing with issues and challenges from a structural perspective, and sharing, promoting and encouraging effective pedagogical practice. An inclusive approach that accepts the variety of interpretations is a prerequisite in order to avoid over-compartmentalising provision and straight-jacketing institutions by trying to shape an absolute definition. Nevertheless, it is critically important to establish a shared understanding of the particular area of focus from both an academic and employer perspective, regardless of the terms used.

From a review of the relevant extant literature, however, one thing is clear: there is no single or simple definition of what work-based learning entails beyond the notion that it is about learning (not teaching) and occurs in the workplace (rather than on campus). It should not be assumed that work-based learning in the higher education context is specifically about training; work-based learning may take many forms and be undertaken for a number of different purposes; and it is not restricted to performance-related learning in a narrow sense. Instead, the emphasis is on identifying and demonstrating learning that has occurred through work-based activity, wherever and however this may have been achieved.

For the purpose of this research, work-based learning is considered a subset of workplace learning. It refers specifically to the achievement of 'planned learning

outcomes' derived from the experience of performing a work role or function. Work-based learning is part of a cluster of concepts including 'lifelong learning', 'employability' and 'flexibility'.

Strategic Innovation Fund

The Strategic Innovation Fund is awarded by the Department of Education and Science and is administered by the Higher Education Authority. The Strategic Innovation Fund is a competitively driven resource stream which aims to implement third-level organisational transformation. The fund is multi-annual, amounting to €510 million over the period 2006-2013 and aims to support innovation and to foster collaboration between higher education institutions.

The 'Education in Employment' project is an example of one such project which is supported by the Strategic Innovation Fund. The initiative is a Cork Institute of Technology-led consortium comprising Athlone Institute of Technology, Dublin Institute of Technology, Dundalk Institute of Technology, Letterkenny Institute of Technology, Sligo Institute of Technology, National University of Ireland Galway, and National University of Ireland Cork. Education in Employment focuses on the learning needs of those already *in* the workforce, and includes lifelong learning as a central aim by placing significant emphasis on continuous professional development and upskilling in the workforce.

The Education in Employment Project consists of four distinct but linked strands. The project is overseen by a Steering Group and each of the four strands has working group members from the partner institutions. The work-based learning group is one

of the four strands of the overall project and is composed of academic staff from Athlone Institute of Technology, Cork Institute of Technology, Dublin Institute of Technology, Letterkenny Institute of Technology, Sligo Institute of Technology and University College Cork.

The main aims and objectives of the work-based learning group are:

- To provide those in the workplace, wishing to attain a third-level qualification, the opportunity to avail of the National Framework of Qualifications, and to do so in a flexible cost-effective manner;
- The establishment of collaborative workplace–education partnerships to identify workforce upskilling needs and to develop education/learning programmes to meet these needs;
- The development of flexible delivery and support for learners in employment using a ‘blended approach’ integrating face-to-face delivery in institutions and in the workplace, e-learning, mentoring and coaching;
- The integration of work-based credit-earning learning into programmes, defined by learning agreements – jointly supervised and assessed by workplace and academic staff.

In summary, the work-based learning group proposes developing these skills in the workplace in conjunction with a third-level education provider.

Methodology

A questionnaire was developed by a sub-group of the work-based learning members in order to gather data on courses currently offered by third-level partner institutions

which include work-based learning. The survey aimed to illustrate a snapshot of the higher education landscape by highlighting ‘what we know’ and ‘what we do not know’ about work-based learning, and in doing so identify areas on which to focus attention in the future from an institutional and pedagogical perspective. The questionnaire was aimed at course co-ordinators and was available to be filled in electronically or at a face-to-face meeting with a member of the working group. Working group members from each partner institution were responsible for data collection in their own college.

The criteria for inclusion of courses were that they were targeted at students who are *in employment*, i.e., courses which are not accessed by CAO (Central Applications Office) entry, and usually delivered through part-time provision. When the data collection phase had been completed, the questionnaires were then forwarded to a working group member for statistical analysis.

The summary data presented in this paper represents four hundred and thirty-three courses, which is the total number of courses accounted for by all partners. A very large variety of courses is currently offered to the workplace by the third-level education providers, these include management, marketing, professional cookery, energy management, auctioneering, accountancy, palliative care, interior design, lean manufacturing, retail management, and enterprise development.

Courses Offered by Partner Institutions which include Work-based Learning

Background Information to Courses

The research aimed to seek some background information in relation to the types of courses currently offered by third-level partner institutions. The first three questions, therefore, dealt with:

- Course Duration
- National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) level of courses
- Course Accreditation

The results of the research illustrated that the duration of courses on offer ranged from one month and upwards. Most courses were offered over one or two years: 115 courses took one year to complete, and 128 courses took two years to complete. These results clearly suggest a reliance on more traditional timetables, whereby the learner attends a higher education institute on a part-time basis for either one or two years to gain their qualification.

The second question investigated the level of each course on offer on the NQAI in the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). The NFQ comprises ten levels of qualifications, with each level based on nationally agreed standards of knowledge skills and competence. These standards define the learning outcomes to be achieved by learners seeking qualifications at each level. The ten levels include qualifications gained in settings from schools to places of work, the community, training centres and to colleges and universities, from the most basic to the most advanced levels of learning.

The results illustrated that only 1.16% of courses are at Level 5. In general, courses ranging from Level 1 to Level 5 are accredited by the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC), while courses from Level 6 to Level 10 are accredited by the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC), the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) and the universities. From the responses received, most courses (37.60%) are offered at Level 6, whereby the learner receives a certificate on completion of the course. One of the challenges, therefore, for higher education providers and employers is to promote further learning and to increase participation rates at Levels 7 and 8. The requirement to enhance the skill level of the working population presents a substantial task as Ireland's participation rate in continuous learning (non-formal learning) is relatively poor. Only 14 per cent of the 25-64 years age-group in Ireland engaged in non-formal learning in 2002, contrasting with a 16.5 per cent average in the twenty-five European Union states, and 34.5 per cent in Britain.

The third question related to the accreditation of courses. The results illustrated that most (289) courses are accredited by the higher education provider. One hundred and twenty-five courses are accredited by outside organisations such as London's City and Guilds, various accountancy bodies, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, the Marketing Institute, etc. Only nineteen courses are accredited by FETAC and this reinforces the distinction between further and higher educational provision. It is clear from the results that courses currently on offer are primarily accredited by the education provider. There is a need, however, to establish if recognition of prior learning and of informal learning in the workplace contribute towards the learner gaining exemptions as part of the accreditation process. Evidence,

however, suggests that most learning developed in the workplace has until recently been unaccredited, but it provides the foundation on which students will build their work-based learning studies.

Recognition of Prior Learning

The next area to be investigated was the recognition of prior learning. Recognition of prior learning (RPL) is the generic term for systems such as Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) or Advanced Academic Standing, which are used within higher education to describe the awarding of credit to students on the basis of demonstrated learning that has occurred prior to admission. RPL is also used to refer to the recognition of (prior) non-formal and informal learning for qualifications. The term 'prior' concerns learning that has taken place, but has not been formally assessed or measured, prior to entering a programme or seeking an award.

The research findings illustrated that there was no recognition of prior learning for 264 of the 433 courses surveyed. This finding suggests that significantly greater emphasis needs to be placed on recognising prior learning by third-level education providers. Recognition and accreditation of prior learning enables non-traditional entry into third-level courses as well as gaining credit for advanced standing and exemptions from some elements of programmes. The number of learners who avail of the recognition of prior learning has been and continues to be relatively small in comparison to the number who access education and training qualifications by formal routes. From the current research, it is clear that a further challenge for third-level educators is to raise awareness of RPL among Irish employers, workers, and the general public. Until now, awareness of RPL has been limited to a small number of

policy makers, education professionals, and people partaking in RPL. The recognition of non-formal and informal learning is closely associated with work-based learning. There are opportunities for third-level providers to increase the availability of RPL in order to facilitate access to education.

Course Delivery Location

A further question addressed the issue of where courses are delivered. The results illustrated that 364 courses are still delivered on campus, with only *two* out of the 433 courses surveyed delivered in industry/workplace.

This finding poses some serious challenges for Irish third-level education providers, and particularly for the delivery of work-based learning programmes. Most education providers have become conditioned to a classroom model that separates theory from practice, which can risk make learning seem impractical and irrelevant. Work-based learning, however, merges theory with practice and knowledge with experience. It recognises that the workplace offers as many opportunities for learning as the classroom does. While the workplace creates possibilities for learning, it is *how* individuals participate and interact in their workplace that is central to learning by individuals.

Learning in the workplace can occur at different levels and is different to classroom-based learning. Learners may be individuals, groups, whole organisations or inter-organisational networks. The nature of the learning varies as well. Although formal learning and informal work-based learning are different in nature, both are equally important for the development of vocational and professional expertise. Formal

learning usually produces explicit knowledge, whereas informal learning largely produces tacit or implicit knowledge.

Third-level academic providers are now facing the challenge of working with course modules that require them to deal with converting work practices into learning practices that meet both education and industry standards. There are also issues regarding the place of theory and critical reflection for courses delivered in the workplace rather than those delivered in the classroom. The third-level providers also need to make the adjustment that courses delivered off campus enables the learner to be responsible for, manage, and to timetable one's own learning, and to provide courses that require minimal attendance at a third-level institution.

Methods of Assessment

The next issue to be addressed was that of assessment methods. The results of the research illustrate that very traditional modes of assessment are still utilised by mainstream education providers. Exams and continuous assessments remain the favoured means of evaluation, with 180 courses still relying on a mixture of these two methods. Sixty of the courses used exam only, with 58 of the courses using continuous assessments. One of the more interesting findings emerging from the research is that only *two* courses were assessed by means of project work.

Currently, most education institutions organise courses around credit points. These credits represent a discrete component of a course with specific learning outcomes and assessment processes. A challenge for education providers is to move from traditional class-based examination and assessment procedures to more innovative

project work which could be completed in the workplace. This means that work-based learning programmes must be flexible and responsive to the circumstances of the learner and of the work setting but without compromising on quality and standards from the perspective of the third-level institute. Work-based learning provides an excellent example of a learner-centred approach to curricula. The focus is on what students wish to learn, not just on what is provided for them to learn. The need for work-based learning, however, to operate in the dual worlds of work and education means that a common language must be used to assess the learning and describe the outcomes of what is undertaken. This language is represented in the NFQ. It is important to recognise that the assessment of work-based learning must meet the quality challenge as specified by the education institution, and should have reliable measures of the volume and level of work-based learning required.

Overall, academic institutions need to be assured that all courses meet rigorous academic standards, and the employer needs assurance that courses will prepare employees to contribute to the workplace with the highest attainable quality standards. Although the ultimate award of credits rests with the education provider, the employing organisation has to sustain its own interests. By reducing on-campus assessment methods, such as examinations, work-based learning can be responsive to the needs of those *in* employment who have multiple responsibilities in their lives.

Use of Web-based Learning Tools

The next question dealt with the use of Web-based learning tools. No responses were received in relation to the use of Web-based learning tools for 201 courses surveyed. This finding suggests that Web-based learning tools are underutilised in the delivery

of work-based learning courses. Eighty-four of the courses surveyed use a learning management system (LMS). A LMS is a set of software tools designed to manage user learning interventions. A LMS also provides the tool for control, monitoring, and evaluation. While free and open-source LMS models are available, most LMSs are commercially developed. Given the relatively low level of LMSs used in the courses surveyed, third-level education providers might usefully consider moving from the traditional classroom-based delivery to 'user-friendly' on-line systems of delivery. In an effort to increase the use of on-line systems, the Strategic Innovation Fund is supporting a project focused on enabling access for the workplace learner through the development of flexible learning capability within the institute of technology sector.

As noted earlier, the traditional classroom style of delivery of courses is still very much used by the institutions surveyed. The use of Web-based learning tools is a growth area for both academic institutions and employers and has many advantages for those learners *in* employment. Web-based tools and their wide availability is an area which should be further explored for delivery of work-based learning courses. The use of Web-based tools provides learners with the chance to maintain a flexible schedule. There is also the opportunity to build a virtual network of others studying the same course, enabling the learner to gain the benefit of group learning without having to attend a college or an off-site training course.

Blended Learning

A further question asked if blended learning is incorporated in the delivery of work-based learning courses. The results illustrated that currently 248 courses do not

include blended learning, this finding again emphasises the reliance on the traditional mode of course delivery.

Blended Learning is an approach to course design that brings together the best of both online and face-to-face learning strategies. It is not intended to replace either of these two approaches, but rather to build from each to create an innovative and more effective learning experience for students. Blended learning is a combination of multiple approaches and can be accomplished by utilising both virtual and physical resources. Typically, technology-based facilities and face-to-face sessions would complement each other throughout this learning process. In the strictest sense, blended learning is when an educator combines two methods of delivery of instruction, normally combining e-learning with other educational resources. E-learning is naturally suited to distance learning and flexible learning but can also be used in conjunction with face-to-face teaching, in which case the term blended learning is commonly used. Generally, blended learning initiatives have attempted to leverage what is best done person-to-person (group presentations; debates; reflexive response/thought) in combination with what is best done online (deeper, reflective discourse; document management, and organisation). The major aims of blended learning are to (i) use information and communication technologies to support more active approaches to student learning; (ii) support learning activities that extend outside face-to-face sessions; (iii) assist students in being better prepared for face-to-face sessions.

In relation to blended learning, the research findings suggest the need for third-level education institutions to take on a more flexible approach to delivery that utilises a

mixed mode or blended approach to learning, integrating e-learning and distance learning alongside more conventional and formal approaches to education. The blended learning approach enables the student to have a greater say over when and where the learning takes place, and allows the learning to be built around other work and lifestyle commitments.

Discussion

There are many challenges that higher education institutes are confronting in the design and delivery of work-based learning programmes, not least the widespread confusion on what constitutes work-based learning, which is also referred to by a variety of terms, such as: workplace learning, work-related learning, and vocational learning. Such confusion, arguably, leads to an undervaluing of the potential benefits of work-based learning as a mode of learning at a higher level. A focus on terminology and definitions could, however, get in the way of exploring and dealing with what really matters, notably influencing the policy environment, dealing with issues and challenges from a structural perspective, and sharing, promoting and encouraging effective pedagogical practice. Irrespective of the terms used, when attempting to implement work-based learning, it is critically important to establish a shared understanding of the particular area of focus from both an academic and employer perspective.

Academic standards continue to be a key challenge for academics involved in work-based learning. While concerns regarding academic standards are not confined to work-based learning practitioners, they are fuelled by a fear that work-based learning is contributing to a more general lowering of standards by making such qualifications

available to all employees. Academics working in work-based learning programmes are confronting the challenge of articulating not only conventional academic standards but also how the learning outcomes in work-based learning programmes are equivalent to those standards. The movement to cross-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary knowledge, the participation in partnerships with organisations, and the reframing of entry requirements that allow non-graduate to access some postgraduate awards mean that the traditional predictability of knowledge learnt and the actual academic standard of that knowledge are no longer certain or easily measurable. This is particularly the case for work-based learning awards. The challenge for academics is to work within an educational framework that recognises and accredits learning that occurs outside the higher education institution. The framework needs to acknowledge that the work-based learning arrangement accommodates notions of academic learning and at the same time legitimises 'working knowledge'. The challenge is not to apply the same criteria as one might for conventional awards.

Symes (2003) observes that another challenge is caused by 'the flirtation' with non-academic organisations that work-based learning necessarily entails, and this is seen by many academics as a threat to higher education institutes, which might risk undoing its standards and academic standing. In this respect, work-based learning has to prove itself far more than the more orthodox forms of third-level learning and to demonstrate that what is happening under its banner is worthy of being within the preserve of the third-level institute. Hence, according to Symes, work-based learning seems to have been subject to more interrogation and surveillance than is usual in the case with standard third-level courses. A further challenge in the provision of work-based learning courses is the degree of control which surrounds it. This is evident by

the “web of documentation” that surrounds it: portfolios, learning agreements, contracts, memoranda of understanding, assessment inventories, reports etc. In some respects, such documentation makes the learning processes involved more transparent, but more susceptible to challenge and renegotiation, much more so than in the case of traditional academic courses.

Boud and Solomon (2003) believe that an immediate challenge for all institutions adopting work-based learning is to select staff who can cope with working with students operating outside their “disciplinary comfort zone”. Work-based learning courses require teaching staff to change their role from being experts on the content of what is being learned to becoming animators and assessors of learning. This might often be in areas of learning and knowledge in which students and their workplace colleagues may be more expert. They may also have to engage in knowledge generated through work that does spring from structures with which they are most familiar.

A further challenge identified by Boud and Solomon (2003) is in relation to research. They observe that at present there is a large gap between work-based learning and collaborative research. They suggest the reason for this is a structural one. This division also often exists at third-level institute level and faculty levels. Work-based learning is, for the most part, located within the area of teaching and learning, while research is located in the area of research and consultancy. Boud and Solomon believe that the prospects for associating research with work-based learning partnerships are more problematic than they might first appear. They suggest that the great potential for research is unlikely to be realised if work-based learning is seen

only within a framework of course delivery and as an adjunct to more conventional work in third-level education institutions. Work-based learning programmes, however, are far more worthy than just as sites of interest in terms of their potential for establishing collaborative research partnerships with organisations. These organisations also provide a location conducive for researching new kinds of teaching and learning practices associated with the concept of 'work as the curriculum'.

Another important consideration in the fostering of work-based research through to work-based learning should be an examination of what calibre of person represents the third-level institute when interacting with organisations. There is a risk when structuring work-based learning that the most skilled research academics might have the least likelihood of interacting with partners. All too frequently, staff negotiating partnerships, coordinating courses, and undertaking assessments of work-based learning are neither research trained nor active researchers.

Recommendations for Implementing Work-based Learning

For many practitioners, work-based learning is already a vital and legitimate mode of learning which offers significant value for the strategic teaching and learning agendas of higher education institutions. Work-based learning also acts as a driver for greater innovation in the broader third-level education system. Extending this legitimacy, however, will necessitate developing strategies which cross the cultural bridge between learning and work, address the issues and challenges throughout the system, and demonstrate how the practices of work-based learning have wider applicability in the higher education sector. Based on a review of the relevant extant literature and drawing on the experiences of working group members in this SIF project, a number

of recommendations for implementing work-based learning programmes can be suggested. These recommendations for higher education institutes and industry should enable significant progress on work-based learning agendas in the next number of years.

For Higher Education Institutes

- Acknowledge and provide a variety of approaches for those *in* employment to avail of work-based learning offered by higher education institutes;
- Provide support for the development of academic staff who are operating at the interface between higher education and the world of work, through internal programmes of staff development;
- Assist academic staff in their transition from being a lecturer of a specific body of knowledge to being a facilitator of learning;
- Ensure that the recognition of prior learning is an integral component of all work-based learning programmes;
- Design user-friendly approaches for the recognition of prior learning and continuous professional development;
- Promote teaching and learning reforms, including enhanced teaching methods and e-learning;
- Identify ways of improving support for the provision of cost-effective work-based learning solutions;
- Establish strong industry partnerships as a means to ensure participation and progression into higher education;
- Involve the employer in the design of the programme, particularly in relation to work-based projects and assignments to support the assessment of learning;

- Develop customised programmes to meet the needs of the individual and the organisation;
- Address the diverse range of knowledge and skills possessed by learners at the commencement of work-based learning programmes;
- Ensure work-based projects and assignments fulfil the essential measurement criteria of validity, reliability, and authenticity;
- Provide learners with frequent feedback on their progress and achievements;
- Encourage critical reflection throughout the programme;
- Provide accreditation for work-based learning programmes through the National Framework of Qualifications;

For Employers

- Direct more energy and effort towards motivating employees to see value and to engage in higher-levels skill development;
- Allocate a workplace mentor to help the student identify their individual learning needs, apply knowledge to practice, and act as a resource for the student's development;
- Encourage employees to have a greater sense of responsibility for individual and continuing professional development;
- Develop a clear sense of purpose for work-based projects and assignments and the personal rewards that can come from them;
- Promote more online learning to overcome the barrier of lost production time, with employees having to spend less time away from the workplace, a benefit for SMEs in particular;
- Accommodate and exploit informal peer networks of support in the workplace;

- Provide an informal culture of support and official recognition of achievement;
- Place greater weight on encouraging high level engagement for work-based learning within organisations, reaching above human resource management professionals to chief executives and managing directors;
- Recognise and encourage the role of trade unions in work-based learning processes (if operating in a unionised environment);
- Consolidate the workplace as a place of knowledge production;

It is clear there are many considerations for the implementation of work-based learning for both third-level institutions and employers. Work-based learning, however, also presents considerable implications and challenges for learners. As identified by Boud and Solomon (2003), work-based learning is a very attractive option. Its relevance is clear and it provides an opportunity to gain qualifications through drawing on recent or current everyday work practices. It enables one to be responsible for, manage, and timetable one's own learning and it is likely to require minimal third-level attendance. Such freedom, however, often presents its own problems. While some learners easily manage the work-based learning experience, many find the increased responsibility a struggle. In work-based learning programmes, learners have to deal with the complexities of being both a worker and learner, and having increased responsibility in the learning process. While flexibility in both process and content is an important part of the appeal for both the organisation and the learner/employee, flexibility has to be provided and timetabled. Learners, their organisations, and academics demand this. It is important that boundaries are constructed within an educational framework that maintain academic standards while at the same time provide guidelines and practices that make explicit the educational

parameters within which work-based learning partnership awards are to be negotiated, organised, and assessed.

Conclusions

From the research conducted, it can be stated that work-based learning in third-level institutions in Ireland is still in its infancy and there are many different directions in which it might develop. Currently, the provision of work-based learning courses varies from institution to institution. The current research findings illustrate that none of the participating third-level institutes offers a full programme leading to a qualification in work-based learning. For work-based learning programmes to be truly work-based and learner-centred, they typically commence with a structured review and evaluation of current learning. This, in turn, challenges the education institution to move beyond the traditional concept of the recognition of prior learning, to formally recognise learner-defined learning for possible inclusion in a future work-based learning programme. Currently, most of the third-level institutes incorporate elements of work-based learning at varying levels, through programmes offered on a part-time basis.

The results of the research also suggest that third-level institutions need to adopt a more proactive approach in developing work-based learning courses and, in particular, engaging in consultation with employers and employees. There are many opportunities for third-level providers to utilise more distance-learning tools and to make the transition from an over-reliance on traditional course delivery mechanisms which are currently in place. There is little doubt that current models of work-based learning and practices are evolving and will change considerably over the next

decade. There are varied levels of emphasis and extent of provision of work-based learning courses, which in some instances are driven by the institutional mission, while in others it happens as a by-product. In tackling the work-based learning agenda, institutions have started to create an environment that enables them to respond in a timely manner to identified employer needs. Building and sustaining longer-term closer relationships between the higher education providers and employers will have to underpin any drive by higher education institutes to expand their role in supporting workforce development.

Overall, the workplace holds the promise of a powerful learning environment. Work-based learning is becoming increasingly important both for organisations – which need professional development to create a dynamic, flexible workforce – and for higher education institutions that recognise the workplace as a legitimate site of learning. Work-based learning deliberately and perceptively merges theory with practice, and acknowledges the intersection of explicit and tacit forms of knowing at both individual and collective levels. It recognises that learning is acquired in the midst of practice and typically occurs while working on the tasks and relationships at hand. Applebaum and Reichart (1998), however, note that “there is no roadmap available to follow that will take a traditional organisation down the path to being a learning organisation. There is no single right way or only one way” (1998: 52). They observe that, in many ways, it is the journey that creates the learning organisation. They conclude that the journey is not a simple one, as it requires challenging many fundamental beliefs and operating principles.

Delanty (2001: 103) also believes that knowledge creation is no longer solely assumed to be the responsibility of the third-level institute and this has led to the establishment of other centres of knowledge production, such as “industrial laboratories, research centres, think-tanks, and consultancies”. Work-based learning within higher education recognises the legitimacy of the workplace as a source of learning and it is increasingly recognised that developing higher level skills is not restricted to the learning gained within the protected confines of the higher education environment. Work-based learning, however, poses real and wide-ranging challenges to higher education structures, procedures, and practices. A key challenge for work-based learning is to develop structures, contacts, and ways of working which effectively draw upon and enhance subject disciplines without being restricted by them. Work-based learning is now challenging most of the conventional assumptions about teaching, learning, knowledge and course curricula. Boud and Solomon (2003: 225) suggest that work-based learning “is a disturbing practice – one that disturbs our understandings about our academic identity and its location”.

Rapidly changing workplace environments, increasingly influenced by accelerating developments in information and communications technology, require new models of training and education from higher education institutions. Higher education in general, as well as organisational learning and workplace learning in particular, has to draw on the valuable resource of prior learning in the workplace. Prior learning must be more readily and formally recognised for its solid and valuable contribution to third-level education. The more static curricula of yesterday’s education systems cannot serve the demands of today or tomorrow. As change in the workplace is at the cutting edge of new demands for training and education, it is the workplace that has,

of necessity, to inform much of the training and education curricula of tomorrow. A paradigm shift is required in third-level education, as new and ever-changing curricula will continually and dynamically be informed by the workplace, to address student requirements in the twenty-first century.

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**RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING IN IRISH THIRD LEVEL
INSTITUTIONS: A FOCUS ON PRACTICE**

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Track: Teaching and Learning

Recognition of Prior Learning in Irish Third Level Institutions: A Focus on Practice

BACKGROUND

The lifelong learning approach recognised by the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development indicates that learning should encompass the whole spectrum of formal, non-formal, and informal learning (OECD, 1998). Lifelong learning is defined as all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competencies (National Competitiveness Council, 2009). Learning occurs in many contexts including work, involvement in social and community activities, or learning through life experience. In order to enable an individual to learn throughout life, equal value should be given to all these forms of learning regardless of source, how it is achieved, or when in life it is achieved. Lifelong learning, therefore, is about making use of personal competencies.

Competencies acquired in non-formal and informal situations rather than solely in formal situations are essential parts of individual learning. Learning that takes place outside the formal systems for education and training, however, is much more difficult to identify and value. As a result of taking all types of learning situations into account, the focus on lifelong learning policy has slowly shifted from the traditional approach of 'learning in the classroom' to incorporate 'other learning environments'. This means giving value to non-formal and informal learning.

One of the distinguishing features of non-formal and informal learning is that the experience of the learner occupies central place in all considerations of teaching and learning. This experience may comprise earlier events in the life of the learner, current life events, or those arising from the learner's participation in the workplace or in activities implemented by teachers and facilitators. It supports a more participative, learner-centred approach, which places an emphasis on direct engagement, rich learning events and the construction of meaning by learners.

According to a Eurostat survey (2007) Ireland performs poorly in terms of the percentage of persons engaging in lifelong learning, with 7.6 percent of respondents aged 25 to 64 receiving formal education in the four weeks prior to their survey. This remains below the Lisbon target of 12.5 percent, the EU-15 average of 12 percent, and considerably behind the leading countries (National Competitiveness Council, 2009). The *National Skills Strategy* sets an ambitious target of up-skilling an additional 500,000 individuals within the workforce by at least one level in the National Framework of Qualifications by 2020. A National Competitiveness Council (2009) report suggests that this target presents a challenge for Government, employers, and employees in terms of how to create a culture and sense of shared responsibility for lifelong learning and decisions on appropriate investment levels and sharing of costs.

The current economic downturn underscores the need for everyone, particularly those with low skill levels and those in vulnerable positions, to upgrade their skills. The aim is to significantly improve access for unemployed persons to job search, training and education, community and employment programmes, and to maximise opportunities for up-skilling and re-skilling so that people will be better placed to avail of new job opportunities where they become available, including in new sectors such as energy efficiency (Government of Ireland, 2008: 54). In order to facilitate the required up-skilling and re-skilling, a particular focus needs to be placed on efforts to increase participation in lifelong learning by providing opportunities for education and training. The National Competitiveness Council (2009) also underlines that investment in human capital is critical if Ireland wants to maintain a healthy and viable economy in the future. The recognition of prior learning affords opportunities to those already in the workforce to engage in lifelong learning in a meaningful sense.

This paper presents findings from research conducted by members of the *Education in Employment* project in relation to RPL policies and practices in selected third-level institutions in Ireland. The *Education in Employment* project is a Strategic Innovation Funded project which is a Cork Institute of Technology-led consortium comprising Athlone Institute of Technology, Dublin Institute of Technology, Dundalk Institute of Technology, Galway–Mayo Institute of Technology; Institute of Technology, Sligo; Letterkenny Institute of Technology; National University of Ireland Galway; and

University College Cork. Through a collaborative approach, members of the *Education in Employment* project have produced useable generic RPL guidelines. These guidelines are based on the many years of ‘on the ground’ practical experiences members of the consortium shared in conjunction with a review of best practice of RPL internationally.

The determining factor in developing the guiding principles was that the recognition of prior learning should meet the needs of learners. In particular, the learning needs of part-time students, mature students, disadvantaged groups, learners in the workforce, and those unemployed should be supported by recognising their prior learning.

From the empirical research conducted with third-level partner institutes in the *Education in Employment* project it is clear that there is not a uniform approach to recognising prior learning. It is also evident that there is no one RPL model that is suitable for all qualifications and all situations. In particular, different sectors give rise to different models. It can be suggested, however, that the RPL model which is implemented must be aligned with the outcomes, goals and objectives of the qualification.

This work should be of interest to policy makers, higher education providers and all who want to engage with RPL in a practical way. In particular, the main aim of the research is that it will provide an impetus to upscale RPL activity that currently exists and to initiate activity where it has not yet begun. Through exploring existing practice and articulating the difficulties and inconsistencies where they exist, this work should contribute in a real and meaningful way to the development of RPL practice.

WHAT IS THE RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING?

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is a process by which learning that has already taken place prior to enrolment on a programme of study is given a value. This learning process may have taken place formally through a further or higher education provider or informally or non-formally through work/life experiences. The

Commission of European Union (2000) suggest that for the purposes of developing a national approach to the recognition of prior learning, prior learning encompasses:

- (i) **Formal learning** which takes place through programmes of study or training that are delivered by education or training providers, and which attract awards
- (ii) **Non-formal learning** that takes place alongside the mainstream systems of education and training. It may be assessed but does not normally lead to formal certification. Examples of non-formal learning include learning and training activities undertaken in the workplace, in the voluntary sector, or in communities
- (iii) **Informal learning** that takes place through life and work experience (experiential learning). It is learning that is quite unintentional and the learner may not recognize at the time of the experience that it contributed to his or her knowledge, skills and competences.

A broad aim of RPL is to enable and encourage people to enter or re-enter formal education, leading to qualifications, by awarding or recognising credit for what is already known of the course curriculum. The purpose of RPL may be formative (supporting an ongoing learning process) as well as summative (aiming at certification). In higher education institutions, two main categories of prior learning for the purpose of RPL are

- (i) Certified learning
- (ii) Experiential learning.

Certified (accredited) learning is learning that has previously been accredited, formally recognised or certified. This is the recognition of formal learning for which certification has been awarded through a recognised educational institution or other higher education/training provider. The process of identification, assessment and formal acknowledgement of prior learning and achievement is commonly known across the higher education sector as 'accreditation'. The term 'accreditation of prior learning' is used to encapsulate the range of activity and approaches used formally to

acknowledge and establish publicly that some reasonably substantial and significant element of learning has taken place. The recognition of this category of learning will normally result in:

- The admission to a programme or course of study;
- The award of advanced academic standing or
- The award of exemption from module(s) of a programme;

Experiential (unaccredited learning) is learning which has not been previously accredited or recognised and is typically uncertified. This is learning which has been gained through life experiences in work, community, or other settings. It is often unintentional learning. The learner may not recognise at the time of the experience that it contributed to the development of their skills and knowledge. This recognition may happen only retrospectively through the RPL process. The process of giving formal recognition to non-formal or informal learning can be described as the accreditation of prior experiential learning. The recognition of this type of learning will normally result in the awarding of credit attached to the learning outcomes for the learning achieved by the learner.

While it is useful to understand the differences between these different types of learning, it is likely that an individual's learning experience will have a combination of formal, non-formal and informal aspects. Engaging in RPL allows people to systematically look at their own experiences, to reflect on them, and perhaps look at them in a different or new way. Through informal or experiential learning people are regularly acquiring and renewing their skills and knowledge, and RPL enables people to consider and reflect on how these have developed and changed.

DEFINING RPL

Recognition of prior learning has been defined in a number of ways, some more expansive than others. All definitions, however, include the key notion that RPL involves the assessment of previously unrecognised skills and of knowledge an individual has acquired outside the formal education and training system. The process of RPL assesses hitherto unrecognised learning against the requirements for a

qualification or for a course leading to a qualification, in respect of both entry requirements and outcomes to be achieved.

By removing the need for duplication of learning, RPL encourages an individual to continue upgrading their skills and knowledge through structured education and training towards formal qualifications and improved employment potentials. UNESCO defines RPL as:

The formal acknowledgement of skills, knowledge, and competencies that are gained through work experience, informal training, and life experience (Vlăsceanu et al., 2004: 55).

The Australian National Training Authority (ANTA, 2003) defines recognition of prior learning as ‘recognition of competencies currently held, regardless of how, when or where the learning occurred’. Evidence may include ‘any combination of formal or informal training and education, work experience, or general life experience’, and may take a variety of forms, including ‘certification, references from past employers, testimonials from clients and work samples’. The assessor must ensure that ‘the evidence is authentic, valid, reliable, current, and sufficient’. ANTA places significant emphasis on the nature and processes of assessment, and is heavily focused on system and institutional administrative needs. Interestingly, ANTA does not specifically identify a functional link between RPL and workplace learning or workplace competencies. ANTA provides an administratively focused view of RPL, emphasising notions of rigour, standards and quality control. The Australian Qualifications Framework Advisory Board (1997: 13) suggests that RPL ‘involves a case-by-case assessment of the individual’s knowledge and skills, which may be derived from a whole range of learning experiences, including workplace learning and general life experience’. The Australian focus of assessment, however, is primarily technical knowledge and skills rather than generic employment attributes.

The Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA) in Britain also places an emphasis on assessment and has defined the recognition of prior learning as:

A method of assessment that considers whether a learner can demonstrate that they can meet the assessment requirements for a unit through knowledge, understanding or skills that they already possess and do not need to develop through a course of learning (Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency, 2009).

The Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency underlines one of its main aims to respond to the needs of individual learners. In support of this, it contends that learners should not be required to 're-learn' something that they already know, understand, or can do.

Wheelahan *et al.* (2002: 4) suggest that RPL involves a process that 'assesses the individual's learning to determine the extent to which that individual has achieved the required learning outcomes, competency outcomes, or standards for entry to, and/or partial or total completion of, a qualification'. Furthermore, they suggest RPL involves an access mechanism when the normal education or qualification prerequisites are not present. They clearly separate the notion of RPL from that of credit transfer, which they define as a mechanism that: "assesses the initial course or subject that the individual is using to claim access to, or the award of credit in, the destination course to determine the extent to which it is equivalent to the required learning outcomes, competency outcomes, or standards in a qualification".

Overall, in line with the definitional frameworks discussed above, Wheelahan *et al.* (2002) and Wheelahan (2004) summarise that the RPL literature focuses mainly on supporting learners through the assessment process. They comment that while the intention of including RPL as part of a broader assessment process was to incorporate it holistically into learning and assessment, the result, however, has been that the overwhelming focus of RPL has been on assessment. Wheelahan *et al.* further argue that the greater focus of RPL on assessment may well limit the extent to which it is used because people may 'be unaware of what they know and the extent to which they know it' or 'not have the language to describe what they know' or 'not be able to move from the discourse of their everyday practice to the discourse required to substantiate their claims' (2002: 13). Another problem identified by Wheelahan *et al.* is that RPL primarily requires learners to translate their industry-based practice into

academic discourse which requires learners to understand and articulate notions such as ‘competency standards, elements of competency, performance criteria, evidence and range of variables, codes, and institutional processes’ when their education and work backgrounds have not provided significant development of this specialised skill (2002: 13–14). They conclude that insufficient attention has been paid to the individual learners and their ability to claim recognition for their prior learning.

In summary, there is no clear agreement among writers, researchers, and major policy-influencing agencies regarding what RPL is, what it does, or what it encompasses. Views vary from quite tightly defined notions of RPL as a means of access to a training programme or a qualification, through to conceptions of RPL as a reflective process that can directly impact on understandings and applications of the learning process, both for learners and educators. Within the project consortium the RPL process is viewed as recognising learning in the context of a destination programme or award on the National Framework of Qualifications. In Ireland the development of the National Framework has been a significant step in facilitating the comparison, mapping and recognition of learning generally.

WHO CAN USE RPL?

RPL should be an accessible and inclusive process, applicable to all learners at all levels. RPL can be used by a wide range of learners to help them either re-enter learning or as a contribution towards a programme including:

- Adults returning to higher education;
- Employed and unemployed people seeking recognition for skills gained through informal learning;
- People wishing to improve their existing qualifications;
- Those wanting to re-train or change careers;
- People who have undertaken non-formal learning or training in the workplace or through community-based learning;
- People who have gained a range of skills and knowledge through volunteering or through activities or projects in their community.

A variety of different approaches to RPL can be developed and used by higher education institutions to meet the needs and goals of learner groups across the

different sectors. All RPL provision, however, whether for personal/career development or for credit should be an effective, quality-assured practice that will enable all users to have confidence in the outcome of the process. RPL should be a gateway, and not a barrier to learning. RPL should promote the positive aspects of an individual's learning experience (as opposed to its deficiency). The learner's needs and reasons for recognition should be paramount.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF *EDUCATION IN EMPLOYMENT* PROJECT TO RPL PRACTICE

At the initial stages of the *Education in Employment* project, it was recognised that the academic partners were at very different stages of RPL readiness and engagement. It was also recognised that RPL practice, capacity, and capability varied significantly between the academic partners. The practice between organisations varies, not only in scale but also in respective levels of requirements for advanced entry or exemptions awarded. Organisations who have focused only on accreditation of prior *certified* learning tend to view the process as merely administrative whereas those who have developed expertise in evaluating and assessing prior informal and non-formal learning tend to see the process as one involving academic staff across all disciplines and at all levels. These different approaches reflect the current status of practice within organisations, including that some institutions are neither ready nor even willing to embrace RPL.

At the commencement of the project, five of the project partners had policy documents on RPL agreed within their academic system. One of the most useful exercises conducted was the sharing of those existing policy documents and the exploration of the content in the context of national and international publications. Following considerable discussions it was agreed that a single RPL policy within institutions was not achievable. The aim, therefore, was to have a single 'top-level' outline policy agreed by all partners and to ensure that the various institutional policies as implemented within the individual institutions would be in broad agreement with the single top-level document.

During the course of the project, members of the consortium presented a set of questions and a workshop discussion on the existing RPL practices within each

partner institution. In this way, the varieties and similarities in practice were explored and the different actors in the processes and their varying roles and responsibilities were discussed. The underlying RPL enablers were sought in order to determine factors that might facilitate development, and an attempt was made to identify the barriers to further development or scaling up of RPL activity. By August 2009 an agreed high level policy document was agreed, and all *Education in Employment* project partners had an RPL policy/practice document in their institutions. The partners also had the advantage of familiarity with the other partners' RPL policies. It was agreed that project outcomes would be disseminated as generic documents, rather than the product of an individual partner.

The *Education in Employment* project recognised that, for meaningful change to be implemented, open dialogue between organisations, employers, education providers, and employment agencies must take place in a positive and supportive climate. The *Education in Employment* project aimed to stimulate such discussion and, through sharing knowledge and experience, to identify good practice. In working together, it was not expected that a uniform approach should necessarily be adopted but rather that appropriate and informed practices should be developed in organisations, resulting in clear guidelines and expectations for learners. The project, therefore, sought to ensure that RPL policies and practices in individual institutions were appropriate to their overall educational strategy and state of readiness for RPL. The main focus of the project, therefore, was to facilitate continued RPL engagement and ensure the development of RPL opportunities through sharing experiences and identifying good practice within the consortium.

RPL PROCESS MAP

Exploration of policy and practice on RPL throughout the *Education in Employment* consortium through questionnaires and in-depth discussion fora allowed a generic process map for different elements of RPL to emerge. This process map does not represent any particular process within a specific institution but is broadly representative of good practice emerging from a discourse on existing RPL arrangements and from an amalgamation of inputs from the contributing academic institutions. This illustration of the Recognition of Prior Learning process is intended

to be a sample guide and is in no way meant to be prescriptive. In this case the map allows an exploration of roles often encountered in the systems and of the issues that arise in practice which were explored through the *Education in Employment* project deliberations.

Figure 1 illustrates a process whereby RPL is sought for exemption from an element of a programme. In this case, the learner is generally required to demonstrate that they have met all of the learning outcomes of the module(s) for which exemption is being sought. The partner institutions reported that these cases are most often encountered for part-time programmes where non-standard learners bring significant learning to a particular programme. Non-standard learning can be certified or experiential, or in some cases a combination of these. The process map attempts to identify various roles and stages and to show the relationships between these. While these roles are shown separately, single individuals can be responsible for a number of these roles in any institution. For instance the administrative and academic guidance roles may be carried out by a single individual in some cases. Separating the roles is meant to draw attention to the different stages of the process and to contribute to the discussions on appropriate resourcing levels.

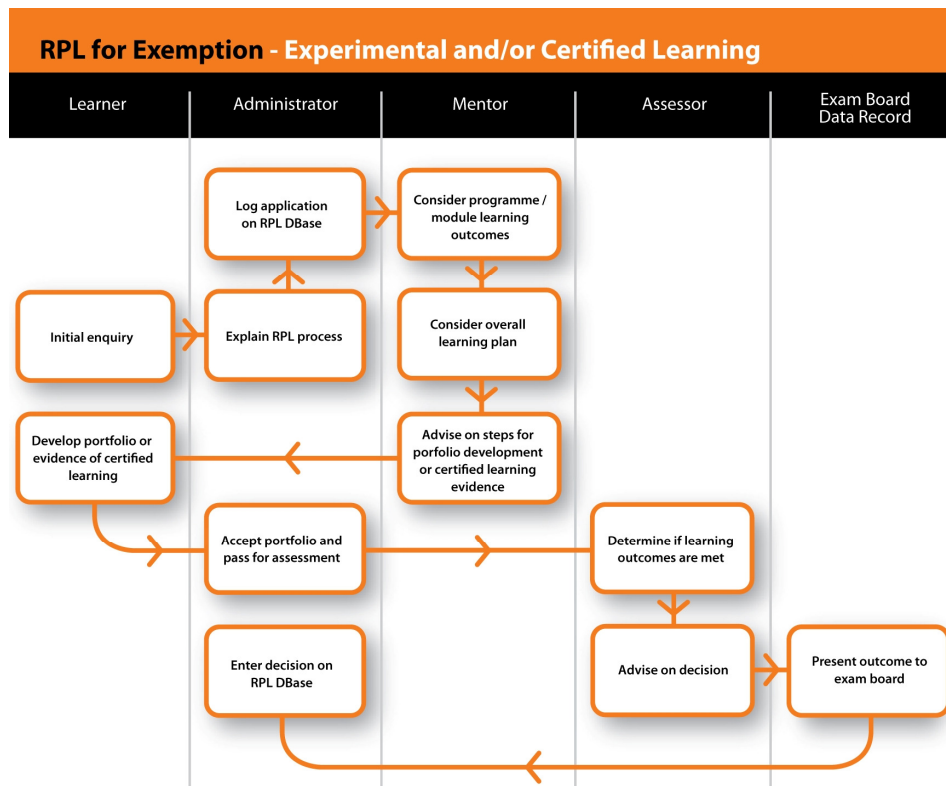


Figure 1: RPL for Exemption – Experiential and/or Certified Learning

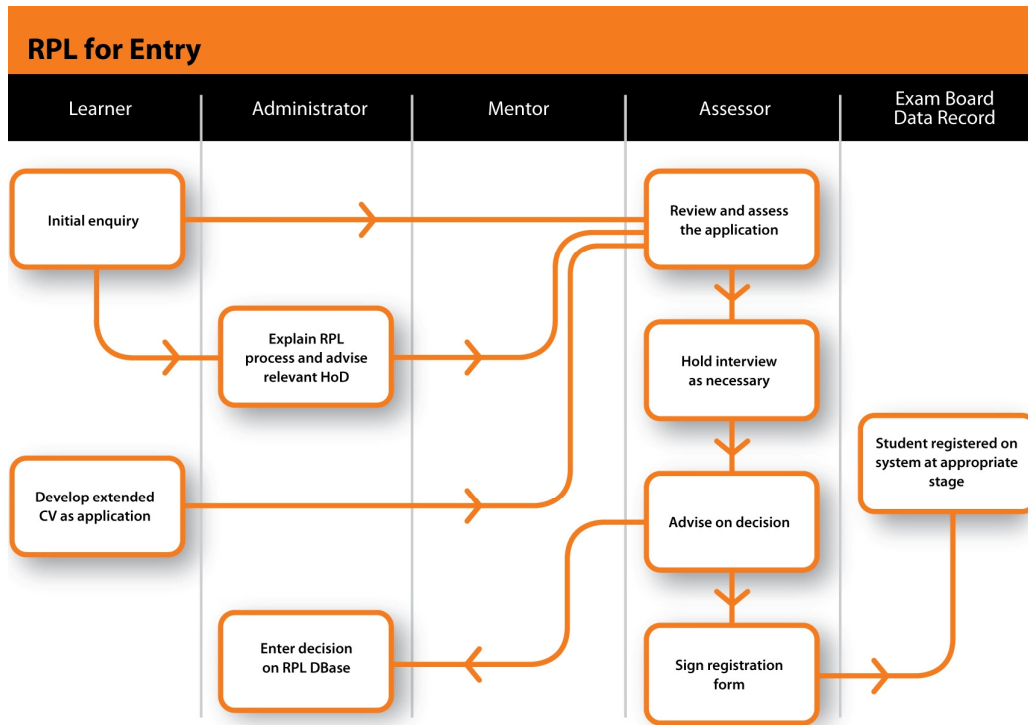


Figure 2: RPL for Entry

Figure 2 shows an RPL process for entry to a programme. In this case, the learner is seeking to enter a programme for which they do not have the required formal prerequisite, for instance, a learner who enters a Master’s programme without the cognate Level 8 honours degree. In these cases, a more holistic approach is generally taken where the responsible academic, with sanction from their Head of Department, makes a general decision about the eligibility of the learner to enter a programme. Typically, this requires the learner to present extended curriculum vitae (CV) and to undergo a semi-formal interview. In this case, a learner’s prior learning can be formally ‘recognised’ for entry but is not usually considered to be ‘credited’. The learner, for example, applying for entry to a Level 9 course would not be granted the Level 8 award in such cases. It is generally understood that this use of RPL for entry is under-reported as in many cases the learner engages directly with the appropriate academic department and may not go through a central RPL advisory body or office, even where such a service exists. In the case of the processes represented above, the

major considerations focus on roles and responsibilities, the timing of the various processes, and the thresholds and limits placed on the use of RPL.

ROLES IN THE RPL PROCESS

Where RPL is to be marketed and scaled up as an entry mechanism and a service to employers, sufficient resources must be provided to ensure that the learner and, where appropriate, the employer receive an appropriate level of service. Most institutions have not decided whether RPL roles should be administered centrally or if these functions should be distributed throughout the administrative and academic resources of the various Faculties/Schools and Departments. There are arguments supporting both approaches. One benefit of having at least some dedicated RPL resource or function centralised would be to facilitate the collation of overall RPL data. Where there is a central RPL administrative resource, the central admissions, registration, and examinations processes of the institution must also play a role. Distributing the RPL functions has the advantage of ensuring a greater spread of awareness, capability, and credibility throughout the staff cohort. From the perspective of academic quality and of quality assurance the academic assessment role must, however, be independent of the advisory role.

The *Education in Employment* consortium agreed that RPL processes should include and clearly indicate academic and administrative responsibilities and accountabilities, and these should be widely publicised both within institutions and to potential learners. The potential for RPL should be offered prior to or when enrolling, and RPL follow-up processes should continue to be available while the learner is enrolled in a programme. Support should be available to learners in either a formal group or an informal setting to learn the skills needed to gain RPL. Processes should be timely and, where possible, decisions made as close as possible to the commencement of a programme. The main roles in the RPL process typically include: the learner; the RPL mentor; and the RPL assessor.

The Learner

The learner is the person who applies to have their prior learning assessed. All RPL processes require the applicant to provide evidence of appropriate past learning,

whether certified and/or experiential learning. Guidance, support and mentoring should be provided for applicants wishing to submit evidence for assessment. Contact point for advice, support, and mentoring should be clearly signposted. The learner should be:

- Fully informed of the application process, including its different stages and of the nature and range of evidence that is considered appropriate to support an RPL claim;
- Supported in developing their understanding of the intended learning outcomes, against which prior learning will be assessed;
- Supported to develop reflective capacity skills in the identification of learning outcomes;
- Informed in relation to fees that are payable for the consideration of claims for the accreditation of prior learning;
- Given clear guidance on when a claim for the accreditation of prior learning may be submitted, the timescale for considering the claim and the outcome;
- Required to provide an original transcript of previous results and relevant syllabus information, if possible, where prior certificated learning is the basis of RPL;

The RPL Mentor

Mentoring helps people to realise their potential and can combine elements of giving advice, counselling and coaching. The RPL mentor should discuss the role of both the learner and mentor at the beginning of the process to ensure a mutual understanding of the relationship. Morton (2003) advises 'there must be clarity as to the purpose of mentoring and what it is intended to achieve. All parties involved in the process must be clear about the intended outcomes'. The role of the RPL mentor is to advise the applicant on RPL planning, evidence gathering, and portfolio building. The RPL mentor should provide the applicant with relevant information and guidelines on the RPL policy and procedures and should provide information on the assessment process.

The RPL mentor should:

- Provide initial guidance on the RPL process;
- Provide guidance on the gathering and presenting of evidence of learning;

- Facilitate opportunities for the applicant's further learning and development;
- Support applicants in the reflective process, identifying learning through experience (skills, knowledge and competence);
- Support applicants in selecting and producing evidence of that learning, and identify areas for further learning;
- Provide unbiased constructive criticism, guidance and feedback;
- Avoid or be prepared to explain academic jargon;
- Encourage applicants to make links between learning and their work practice;
- Help applicants with any practical or conceptual difficulties with the RPL process;
- Encourage applicants to take responsibility for their own learning and help to build their confidence.

Garavan *et al.* (2003) assert that the focus of mentoring must be on helping the learner. They further suggest that while direct advice and instruction from the mentor can be helpful, it is important to ensure that learners think for themselves and that the mentoring process does not, either intentionally or unintentionally, create a dependence where they just blindly follow the mentor's instructions and cannot take action without advice. The development of well-informed workplace mentors can play an important role in reducing the resource requirement within the third-level provider.

The RPL Assessor

The assessor is responsible for the assessment of the individual case. The assessor should be a subject specialist with experience of using a range of assessment techniques. Assessors should only be requested to assess learning outcomes which they are competent to assess. Each case is assessed against the learning outcomes of the destination module or programme. Training is required for the assessment of prior experiential learning as this type of learning normally takes place in an unstructured way and in many different and untypical learning contexts.

When assessing **prior certified learning** the assessor will consider the following:

- **Level of prior award in the NFQs:** The prior learning must be at the same level or higher in the NFQ in comparison to the programme the learner is currently

undertaking or proposing to undertake. An applicant, for example, seeking an exemption from a Level 7 module must have completed an equivalent Level 7 module or higher. In case of international awards clarification can be sought from the NQAI as to the comparable level in the Irish system;

- **Learning outcomes:** The learning outcomes of the module(s) previously certified must be similar to the learning outcome of the module(s) the learner seeks exemption in;
- **Timeframe of Learning Outcomes:** The prior certified learning must have been achieved within a relatively recent timescale, but the currency of the learning can depend on the particular discipline.

BARRIERS TO RPL

Student Record Systems

When asked to identify the main barriers to development and scaling up of RPL activity within individual institutions, members of the consortium from a number of institutions – notably those with the most significant practice built up - identified problems relating to student records and management information systems as barriers to successful RPL. Difficulties or deterrents included: rigidity of the institutional record system, difficulty in clearly and consistently recording students who are granted exemptions, implications for the students' full-time status and delays in the portfolio development and assessment process. The recording of the outcome of the process and how this is translated to the Diploma Supplement was also considered. Members of the consortium recommended that, where experiential learning is awarded a grade and included in a final award, these grades should not be differentiated on the Diploma Supplement.

Time Involved in the Preparation and Assessment of Portfolios

The length of time taken to prepare and assess a portfolio of experiential learning was identified as a concern and often, an RPL barrier at some of the institutions. Where the preparation of the portfolio is contemporaneous with the delivery of the module in question there can be serious concerns over any delay in portfolio preparation. The

major concern is that the learner may fail in their bid for RPL and may have opted not to take the lectures or tuition in that subject, thereby missing their chance to undertake the conventional assessment methods on offer. It was noted that learners initially often underestimate the time and effort required to complete a portfolio and, following mentoring and advice sessions, some of the potential RPL applicants opt to undertake the modules through the conventional route. Particular circumstances, however, can vary significantly and the timing issue is often not a difficulty where a cohort of learners is progressing through the RPL process in a planned and managed way in collaboration with an employer partner.

RPL Costs

RPL costs can be a barrier for the learner and for the provider. One of the issues explored by the RPL consortium is the lack of clarity and transparency around costing RPL. The process to recognise prior certified learning will have a very different resource requirement than that required to advise and guide a learner to the preparation and assessment of a portfolio. The RPL consortium agreed that the RPL process could be important in incentivising learners towards third-level education, therefore, neither the costs nor the process should act as a barrier to the learner.

Academic Language

In some cases the language in which the learning outcomes are couched, even terms such as 'learning outcomes' can deter potential applicants who have not engaged in third-level education previously. Some of the *Education in Employment* partners have already undertaken the process of re-phrasing terminology concerning the learning outcomes of modules which are often the subject of RPL claims. The *Education in Employment* consortium is also providing examples of prior learning evidence at the appropriate level that can be used to meet the specific requirements. In cases where an institution is working with large numbers of learners, this provision of readily understandable exemplars can be very effective in encouraging RPL applicants.

ENABLERS OF RPL

Policy and Process

An approved policy on RPL is one of the main building blocks for successful development of RPL. Currently, the build-up of practice and experience based on an approved RPL policy within any institution acts an incentive for developments. In the case of many of the partner institutions the ongoing development of RPL and the clear upholding of academic standards are facilitated through a sub-group of Academic Council or equivalent.

Institutional Capacity and Capability

An institution's RPL capability requires adequate staff capability in the administrative, mentoring, and assessment functions. Building this capability and, as far as possible, ensuring that the required capacity is quantified and available, will result in enhanced opportunities through RPL. Building assessment capability as it relates to problem- and project-based learning, and work-based and flexible learning will translate well into RPL and vice versa.

Point of Contact

Some institutional partners believed that a clearly identifiable point of contact and a dedicated resource and/or office for RPL was a significant factor in growing and developing RPL activity and ensuring that the learner believed that this resource was readily accessible to them. Under the SIF *Education in Employment* project funding many partners put a dedicated resource in place or supplemented resources that already existed.

Robust Quality Assurance Systems – Well Designed Programmes

A perception can be held by some people in the academic community and in other areas that the recognition of prior learning allows an easy route to an award for a learner, or that the learner does not hold the same level of knowledge, skills, and competence as a learner who went through the traditional learning route. The experience of learners and academics involved in the RPL process, however, is that the route to exemption based on prior experiential learning is difficult and rigorous. The application of transparent and robust quality assurance systems should help to build more widespread confidence in RPL systems.

Compilation of RPL Data

It was clear that information on the RPL process and RPL applications was not collected in a uniform and comparable manner among the institutions represented by project partners. It was agreed that the availability of information on RPL practice within institutions would serve a number of purposes. From an internal organisational perspective, the availability of a precedence database would allow an assessor to view the outcome of previous cases and assist in the consistency of assessment processes. The compilation of information on certified cases could, for instance, allow the granting of exemptions on a cohort basis to holders of particular certified learning pathways. The collection and sharing of information could, as a matter of course, allow recognition of learning from professional bodies and private providers. For example an in-depth consideration of a set of Irish Management Institute (IMI) examinations against the learning outcomes of a stage 1 module in Business Studies might be accepted as a precedent and allow other learners to have such learning recognised without the need for an in-depth consideration. Equally, success in the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) could be accepted against an introductory level computer skills module once the institution had completed one comprehensive mapping exercise. As well as ensuring greater internal consistency this can be seen as a marketing opportunity which could be advertised to potential learners.

Compilation of information on experiential learning cases could assist in developing exemplars for potential learners to illustrate how evidence can be successfully presented against particular learning outcomes. The compiled information should also assist the higher education provider in identifying the discipline and modules which are most commonly the subject of RPL claims and will therefore assist in the identification of the resources and capability required. Collection of data on RPL queries and unsuccessful bids should assist in the development of advisory information to be made available to learners in advance and to avoid such unsuccessful applications in the future.

CHALLENGES OF RPL

There are many challenges that higher education institutes are confronting in RPL provision, not least the widespread confusion over what constitutes RPL, which is also referred to by a variety of terms, such as: **APL** (accreditation of prior learning), **APCL** (accreditation of prior certified learning), **APEL** (accreditation of prior experiential learning), **RNFIL** (recognition of non-formal and informal learning), **PLAR** (prior learning assessment and recognition), and **RAL** (recognition and accreditation of learning). For the purpose of this research, members of the *SIF Education in Employment* project decided to adopt an all-inclusive approach to RPL, accepting the variety of terms outlined above. A focus on terminology and definitions could, however, get in the way of exploring and dealing with what really matters, in particular, deliberately and strategically influencing the overall RPL policy environment, dealing with structural issues and challenges, and sharing, promoting, and encouraging effective RPL practices.

According to Adam (2007), there have been significant developments in the area of international recognition since the inception of the Bologna educational revolution in 1998-99. A formidable array of recognition tools, techniques and processes now exist. Adam suggests that the main challenge is not to create more RPL devices but to ensure the existing ones are properly and extensively employed.

The findings of the current research suggest that academic standards continue to be a key challenge for third-level education providers involved in RPL. Concerns regarding academic standards are fuelled by an unfounded fear that RPL is contributing to a more general lowering of standards by making RPL available to all learners. A challenge for RPL providers, therefore, is to ensure that RPL activity is recognised as part of the quality assurance mechanisms within their institutions. A robust quality assurance system also enhances the comparability of validation processes across institutional, regional, and national borders.

Another challenge for academics championing RPL is to ensure that *all* staff in their institutions recognise that learning also occurs outside the higher education institute. This requires well-defined standards, accessible information on learning outcomes, clear information on how assessments are conducted, jargon-free policies. It is

important, however, to ensure that RPL systems are not made unnecessarily complicated, too time-consuming, too bureaucratic, or too expensive to administer.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTING RPL

The empirical research conducted during this project confirms that many third-level educational institutes now have policies and procedures for recognising prior learning. It is interesting to note that many of the RPL developments have taken place in the past five years, contrasting with the previous years, when Murphy (2004: 8-9) concluded that, “in Ireland the application of the accreditation of prior experiential learning related in the main to existing course provision across a relatively small range of fields of learning”. Murphy further noted that only four institutions had organisation-wide policies in place and these were mainly driven by external forces rather than an active desire on behalf of the institutions to promote RPL. The *Education in Employment* project now fosters RPL developments and has achieved the main Strategic Innovation Fund objectives by:

- ◆ Enhancing collaboration between higher education institutions;
- ◆ Improving teaching and learning;
- ◆ Supporting institutional reform;
- ◆ Promoting access and lifelong learning;
- ◆ Supporting the development of fourth-level education.

As argued throughout this paper, RPL is already a vital and legitimate mode of learning, offering significant value for the teaching and learning agendas of higher education institutions. Based on a review of the existing literature and drawing on the experiences of the *Education in Employment* project members, a number of recommendations for higher education institutions should enable further progress on RPL agendas in the near future. It can be recommended, therefore, that higher education institutions should:

- ◆ Recognise that a learner already has certain insights, experiences, and knowledge;
- ◆ Design user-friendly approaches for the recognition of prior learning and continuous professional development;

- ◆ Encourage collaboration between different institutes in order to meet the needs of the learner more effectively;
- ◆ Recognise that RPL should be underpinned by quality assurance mechanisms;
- ◆ Clearly define the roles and responsibilities of the learner, the RPL mentor, and the RPL assessor;
- ◆ Provide appropriate training and support to staff involved in managing and supporting the RPL process;
- ◆ Provide guidance on portfolio preparation in relation to language to be used, and volume of evidence to be included;
- ◆ Recognise that RPL is an integral component of any work-based learning programme;
- ◆ Promote awareness and knowledge of RPL arrangements widely to potential learners;
- ◆ Monitor and review policies and procedures for the recognition of prior learning;
- ◆ Gather appropriate information on the RPL process within their organisation;
- ◆ Provide effective, timely, and appropriate feedback to learners;
- ◆ Work in partnership with employers, where appropriate, to develop negotiated pathways to learning for cohorts of workers taking account of their prior learning;

There are many considerations for the implementation of RPL for both third-level institutions and learners. RPL is a very attractive option for learners as its relevance is clear and it provides an opportunity to gain qualifications through drawing on recent or current everyday practices. It is important that boundaries are constructed in an educational framework maintaining academic standards while at the same time providing policies, guidelines, and practices that make explicit the educational parameters within which RPL is to be negotiated and assessed.

CONCLUSIONS

The economic and employment climate in Ireland deteriorated significantly in recent years. Ireland thus faces a harsh new fiscal environment. Economists recognise that enhancing people's skills gives future competitive advantage to a workforce. The

current economic downturn makes a strong case for reforming aspects of third-level education in an effort to strengthen economic growth. The formal recognition of prior learning is now accepted as an essential element in educational reform. This change should encourage the building of a culture of up-skilling for jobseekers and for the continuous development of skills among those already in employment. The development of RPL processes should play a more significant part in the development of pathways to learning for those whose job functions are under threat or those who are unemployed. The recognition of prior experiential learning can also be used to foster a culture of lifelong learning and to provide opportunities to meet the newer needs of individuals and employers. As Pouget and Osborne (2004: 46) note, “One of the outcomes of the consultation launched by the *Memorandum of Lifelong Learning across Europe* has been to highlight the importance of ‘valuing after learning’ be it informal, non-formal or informal settings”.

The developments associated with the concept of the learning society, lifelong learning, and the learning organisation are promoting change within higher education in a number of ways. There is increasing pressure on the higher education institute to work more closely with employers for contributing to the processes of economic change and development. Education and industry partnerships are increasingly regarded as essential to the development of lifelong learning, resulting in the blurring of boundaries between these sectors. This reflects a growing emphasis on the importance for higher education institutions to develop partnerships with employers and other organisations. Partnership is an important catalyst for the recognition of prior learning at all levels. RPL can also provide significant assistance to employers because of the added value contribution employees can make to the organisation.

Partners in the *Education in Employment* project have welcomed the opportunity to work with employers in their local regions to encourage further recognition of *all* prior learning which in turn promotes the lifelong learning agenda. Recognising prior learning, however, must not only satisfy academic scrutiny by the third-level institutions but it must demonstrate a ‘fitness for purpose’ at the level of the individual, the employer, and, in some instances, the wider professional community.

Higher education institutions are expected to be increasingly flexible in their modes of delivery when meeting the lifelong learning agenda. Recognising all prior learning satisfies the criteria for flexible learning by being flexible in terms of time, place, and mode of learning. This newer flexibility transforms the role of higher education from merely delivering pre-specified programmes of study into one of proactively facilitating and supporting learning in response to new societal demands. The recognition of prior learning across all disciplines provides many opportunities for such flexibility. Many Irish third-level institutions are now delivering courses in modules, that is, organising academic courses in smaller rather than larger units, thus making it easier to formally accredit prior learning. As well as enabling learners to gain credit in Irish third-level institutions for their learning, modularisation helps individuals to transfer more easily to third-level institutions across Europe.

Further flexibility is offered to learners through the partnership developed between the *Education in Employment* consortium and BlueBrick.ie, a student-focused information portal developed by the IOTI-led flexible learning project. Through a modular approach, BlueBrick.ie will enable learners to register for modules in their area of interest, from modules on offer by third-level institutions, and to accumulate credit towards a graduate or postgraduate award. Bluebrick.ie aims to allow individuals to continue their learning through taking subsequent modules at their own pace, in their choice of institution, and still be able to group those modules together to create a national award. This approach allows maximum flexibility to the individual while steadfastly protecting the autonomy of the institution and rigorously upholding academic standards.

The *Education in Employment* project members, reflecting the National Competitiveness Council (2009), agree that inter-institutional cooperation is critical to the future success of Ireland's higher education system. The National Competitiveness Council further suggest that higher education institutes can provide value for money and enhance efficiency by reducing duplication through rationalising courses and developing critical mass through greater sustained cooperation. The National Competitiveness Council views the establishment of the Strategic Innovation Fund as a positive step in this direction. Inter-institutional cooperation further underlines the need for clear, unambiguous, transparent, comparable, and accessible

policies and procedures. Unnecessary complexity in procedures, even if only in jargon-laden guidelines, acts as a disincentive for learners seeking RPL.

This paper, resulting from inter-institutional cooperation during the past three years, illustrates some of the outcomes which can result through inter-institutional cooperation and, as a result, encourages further collaboration. In addition to inter-institutional cooperation within higher education institutions, an inter-disciplinary approach should, ideally be established to progress the RPL agenda. At the same time, RPL in each discipline within each third-level institute must meet national and international requirements for quality assurance. By placing RPL high on the quality assurance agenda of each institution, such prioritising should help to dispel a common myth — that RPL is an ‘easy option’ or a ‘back door’ to a qualification.

Overall, the research findings of the *SIF Education in Employment* consortium underscore that higher education institutions are in a transition period as they move to place more emphasis on recognising *all* prior learning. As indicated above, the current provision of RPL activity varies from institution to institution. If higher education institutes aim to adopt a more proactive approach to developing RPL practices, fundamental decisions will need to be taken in relation to costs and human resources. The costs associated with RPL, both in time and budgets, appear to be a significant disincentive both for learners and higher education providers and may help to explain why the service is underexposed and underutilised. Members of the *Education in Employment* consortium, however, argue that the benefits to both the learner and the higher education institution outweigh arguments focused on cost savings. Additionally, members of the consortium agree that a dedicated resource in each third-level institution should actively promote the provision of the service. A dedicated RPL resource should play a strong role in the process, not only for providing support, advice and guidance to the learner, but also for promoting RPL to employers.

Finally, there are significant RPL advantages for learners and employers from the information gained through engaging with the process and systems, and not just in the advanced standing it can provide towards a qualification or programme of study. Recognising prior learning will ensure better access to high quality education and

should raise both economic competitiveness and the wellbeing of society. It is critical that Ireland continues to provide and maintain a highly skilled and well-educated workforce to successfully compete in global markets, and to combat the recent sharp rise in unemployment, as higher skill levels boost labour participation rates, productivity, and economic growth. Prior learning must be more proactively recognised for its solid and valuable contribution to third-level education, and thus ultimately enhancing the economic and general well being of individuals and society generally.

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