

Recognition of Prior Learning at the University of Malta:

A researcher - practitioner perspective.

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Introduction

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is “the process of confirmation by an authorised body that an individual has acquired learning outcomes measured against a relevant standard” (CEDEFOP, 2019 pp.i).

Through the RPL policy (University of Malta, 2016), the University of Malta (UoM) seeks to facilitate access to its courses for non-traditional learners who have obtained relevant knowledge, skills, and competencies from various contexts. The policy, established in October 2016, has been implemented since then. Within this period of time, practices have been developed and an evaluation of the process will be useful to identify any shortcomings. In this paper I reflect on my practitioner’s experience as an RPL Coordinator within the University of Malta to analyse the strengths of the RPL process. From a researcher’s point of view, I present an evaluative perspective of how this can be developed further.



Value in all Forms of Learning

Fejes and Andersson (2009) conceptualise RPL as being both a necessary tool for “making informal and non-formal learning visible, and for making the education/training shorter and cheaper” (p.42). These two forms of learning are in contrast to formal learning, which usually occurs in formal educational institutions (OECD, 2010). There seems to be a progression from distinguishing between the three types of learning according to whether the learning is based on objectives, is intentional, and if it is certified. The latter criterion has been recently dropped based on efforts to ensure that any form of learning is certified (Werquin, 2008). Thus, informal and non-formal learning are not usually based on learning objectives or happen intentionally, and are mainly the result of one’s experiences (although in several countries, non-formal learning is organised and also has learning objectives). This kind of learning happens through personal interests, voluntary work, paid work, leisure activities, family life, and endless other contexts.

Irrespective of the origins of learning, the RPL process aims to identify, assess, and document this learning (Fejes & Anderson, 2009). It counteracts the position that values formal learning more than other forms of learning (Andersson, Fejes & Sandberg, 2013) and makes higher education more accessible through alternative pathways (Ünvan, 2021). This form of recognition has its roots in efforts to increase social inclusion and social justice for disadvantaged groups who were traditionally denied opportunities for education (Harris, 1999; Cooper & Harris, 2013). It further developed into one of the policies in support of the European agenda for Lifelong Learning in efforts to make Europe a knowledge-based society (Andersson, Fejes & Sandberg, 2013). The benefits of such policies are reaped by the individual, and also by society at large. Although the initial focus on social justice and accessibility to education remains, there has been a shift in focus on economic development and how the RPL process contributes to economic growth and employability.

Who Benefits?

Werquin (2010) expands on the potential benefits of RPL based on an in-depth analysis of the experiences in several countries. The recognition of non-formal and informal learning clearly benefits the individual, but it also has benefits for employers, educational institutions, trade unions, and social partners, as well as governments and economies.

Through RPL, there is wider accessibility for individuals to obtain qualifications in higher education. This facilitation of access is particularly relevant for those who “could have not done so through a conventional route” (Werquin, 2010, p.49). RPL also contributes to equity in access and to integration pathways for disadvantaged groups and those at risk of exclusion such as the unemployed and immigrants - the latter is particularly relevant for Malta. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the local hospitality industry led to several people being made redundant. However, based on a funding scheme for training designed by the Malta Tourism Authority, these individuals could access further training in several institutions, including postgraduate



courses at UoM, through the recognition of their experiences within the industry.

When the process also involves the individual in reflecting on their experiential learning, they learn about themselves as a result, and they can better-navigate their lifelong learning goals and the labour market (Werquin, 2010). Individuals also benefit psychologically, as an RPL system acknowledges the individual's capabilities and offers validation of their worth (OECD, 2010), also increasing their self-esteem and confidence (Werquin, 2010). In making experiential learning visible, RPL also benefits the individual economically, as lesser time spent in formal learning implies less costs since they would need not start from scratch (Werquin, 2008; 2010). Often, RPL

is applied for postgraduate courses, as at this level, knowledge is highly-contextualised and applicable (Cooper and Harris, 2013). A knowledgeable individual who is open and motivated to learn, but whose knowledge is not formally recognised, makes one an ideal candidate for RPL (Werquin, 2008; Cooper and Harris, 2013). Individuals who have been educated and trained in another country can also benefit from RPL, as this offers a way to “have their knowledge, skills and competences recognised when traditional equivalence procedures are not possible” (Werquin, 2010, p.47). Locally, the Faculty of Education reached out to educators trained in other countries, in an effort to recognise their qualifications and experience for entry to the Masters in Teaching and Learning as a pathway to obtain a local teaching warrant. Apart from



benefitting the individuals, this contributes to greater cultural diversity in schools to reflect the reality of Maltese schools, and also increases the availability of professional educators.

This points to the secondary beneficiaries of the RPL process: employers, educational institutions, and economies. Employers can create a better fit between their employees' skills and the skills required for specific jobs. Some countries also report increased productivity when employees' skills are recognised (Werquin, 2010). The recognition process can also help industries increase their effectiveness, competitiveness, and satisfy specific regulatory requirements for having qualified employees. Moreover, trade unions and social partners can promote the benefits they negotiate for employees with qualifications even in the case of these non-traditional learners. Governments and economies benefit at large from being more competitive when human capital develops its potential through a lifelong learning process. Finally, educational institutions can use RPL to increase and diversify the student population by attracting non-traditional learners to higher education (Werquin, 2010).

Recognition of Prior Learning in Practice

Despite these benefits, RPL also involves costs as it requires an individualised process, and it can also be a lengthy process, particularly when the experiential learning cannot be easily mapped or translated. At the University of Malta, an RPL policy was established in 2016 (University of Malta, 2016) and it was piloted

and put in practice subsequently. Gasteiger and Wulz (2020) report that Malta is one of the few countries where universities have policies that recognise informal learning.

Since the establishment of the RPL policy, its implementation has been assigned to the Student Advisory Services. The role of Student Advisors is primarily to provide prospective and current students with information and advice to help them make informed decisions about their careers. Currently they also act as the RPL Coordinators. RPL applicants initially approach a Student Advisor either because they are aware of the RPL services offered, or else, during the process of discussing their career options they subsequently become aware of the possibility of applying to UoM through RPL.

From my practitioner's perspective, the meeting between an applicant and a career guidance practitioner serves several functions. Apart from the obvious information-giving content at these meetings, the career guidance practitioner supports the applicants in various ways. In several instances, applicants need help in finding the right course that matches their prior experiences, and thus, knowledge of UoM courses on offer is essential for the process. Often, adult learners also ask for support in their decision-making process and what factors to consider in their decision, particularly how to juggle work, part-time studies, and other responsibilities. Taking on further studies in adulthood can be daunting, and RPL applicants also seek the career guidance practitioners for reassurance about their decision to pursue further studies. This makes the initial contact a crucial part

of the process as the applicants find the space to discuss and forge the next step in their career path and the encouragement to proceed with the RPL process. In some countries, such career guidance is even considered as the initial step of the recognition process (CEDEFOP, 2019).

After the initial encounter, applicants prepare a portfolio. This usually consists of their curriculum vitae, a letter of motivation presented to UoM contextualising their experiences in relation to the course they intend to follow, certification related to formal education and training experiences, and proof of the experiences claimed (such as letters of reference, and samples of their work). The aim of this portfolio is to demonstrate to the assessors that the applicant's experiences match the learning outcomes of the pre-requisite qualifications of the course they intend to pursue. The portfolio is an essential component of the RPL process, because once the individual's knowledge and skills are identified and documented, it can be verified that the requirements and standards are being met (OECD, 2010).

RPL is often considered as a way to map "one body of knowledge (for example, working knowledge) against another (such as academic knowledge)" (Cooper and Harris, 2013 pg.449). This process of mapping learning outcomes to an applicant's experience is carried out through the RPL Advisor and the RPL Assessors within the respective Faculty, Institute, Centre, or School (FICS). The RPL Advisor, who is conversant with the learning outcomes of the courses on offer, carries out an initial review of the portfolio and advises the applicant if they are required to submit further information. Mapping the individual's experience to specific learning outcomes can be a cumbersome and costly process, as each applicant has to be considered individually and the procedures cannot be standardised. Finn (2019) re-iterates how reflecting on one's experience is an important part of the RPL process, but debates that while

reflection is a fluid process, it needs to be somewhat organised and measurable for the purpose of recognising and validating learning experiences. Some FICS are adopting the solution to ask applicants to fill in a self-assessment template based on learning outcomes as part of their portfolio. Werquin (2008) discusses how once such systems are in place, the process can be facilitated and nonetheless, benefits outweigh the costs. The portfolio makes prior learning visible through "reflection and documentation" (Fejes & Andersson, 2009, p.38). This portfolio is then evaluated by RPL Assessors who recommend whether the applicant's experiences make them eligible to be accepted for their course of choice.

The Way Forward: Reflection, Revision, Resources and Research

In the following section, I will present my reflective experiences as an RPL practitioner and researcher in relation to how the RPL process can be developed. The way forward is based on four elements: the role of reflection in the RPL process,



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revisions to the current policy, ensuring adequate resources, and introducing research within the RPL process itself.

A well-presented portfolio is essential to showcase informal and non-formal learning. Reflecting upon one's experiential learning is considered by several authors in the field as an important element of the RPL process (Harris, 1999). Currently, this component is not sufficiently incorporated in the portfolios generally presented for an evaluation by UoM applicants. The example of good practice adopted by some FICS to create templates for applicants' reflective experiences based on learning outcomes can become one of the requirements of such portfolios. These templates could be used by applicants to present a reflective statement on their informal and non-formal learning. This facilitates the evaluative process as they provide clear criteria, but also implies that academic entities would be required to create templates based on the learning outcomes of the courses on offer. Cooper and Harris (2013) comment on the uptake of RPL in different higher





a clear breakthrough in the relatively rigid world of education and training, but a lot of work needs to be done

academic programmes. In some programmes where knowledge is contextual and applicable, there is more openness to the RPL process, as learning can easily be mapped. The RPL coordinators are meeting with the academic entities to explain the function of RPL, and how it can be adapted in each FICS, with the aim of increasing openness to this process. Academic entities seek reassurance that the aspect of facilitation of access that the RPL policy introduces is not a way to bypass entry requirements. The development of guidelines for applicants' reflections and self-assessments to develop a learning outcomes attitude (OECD, 2010) can be one way to increase the effectiveness of the evaluative process.

Despite being a new policy, one can already identify ways in which the practice of RPL is diverging from the policy. Werquin (2008) contends that recognition of learning is in fact “a clear breakthrough in the relatively rigid world of education and training, but a lot of work needs to be done” (p.48). Part of this work includes revising policies to ensure that the principles of recognition are withheld and strengthened, and that the process is sufficiently simple, practical and flexible, yet coherent. Based on the past four years' experience implementing the RPL policy, it can be considered an ideal time to review and revise the policy both as a quality assurance and a pragmatic exercise.

Another foundation that strengthens the role of RPL in higher education is ensuring the project is serviced with adequate resources. Increasing awareness about the availability of recognising prior learning leads to an increase in the number of applicants over the past few years. Given that this openness increases equity for disadvantaged groups, it is also important to ensure that the institution is able to cater for the requests to process RPL applications, since this lengthy

process requires individual attention and a significant component of career guidance.

Non-traditional learners who have not experienced formal education in several years could benefit from preparation courses prior to being admitted to a course. This can serve to increase retention rates, as applicants are better-prepared as to what to expect and what is expected from them in the higher education environment. Moreover, when applicants are not admitted because they do not satisfy the required criteria, they could also be offered the possibility to take on short courses or specific modules to bridge these gaps.

Research also can be another tool to reinforce the RPL process. Gaining further insights into RPL applicants' experiences can help provide valuable feedback into how the process can be improved to facilitate non-traditional learners' access to higher education. Once applicants are admitted to higher education through RPL, follow-up research can also identify how these adult learners are faring and the obstacles they face to decrease drop-out rates.



Conclusion

Recognition of learning acknowledges the value in other forms of learning apart from formal learning. Such recognition through the development and implementation of RPL policies in higher education requires several resources and structures.

However, when individuals' learning experiences can be adequately mapped to learning outcomes, it enables non-traditional learners, particularly those who have been disadvantaged, to gain access to further education. This benefits individuals primarily, and also educational institutions, employers, social partners, and economies, which can all benefit from the development of human capital. The gains of acknowledging non-formal and informal learning by far outweigh the costs of having untapped potential within individuals whose paths diverged from formal learning routes.



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