RPL for Access, Success and Inclusivity in Higher Education

The West Cork Dairy Farmers' RPL Case Study

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Abstract: This chapter presents a case study of engagement between a University and a Multinational Company that highlights the mutual benefits of RPL for employers and learners. The chapter will describe in detail the development and implementation of a Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) cohort method. The University worked with Carbery, a global company owned by the farmers of west Cork, with a goal to create delicious and nutritious products for customers in 50 countries worldwide. Carbery had commenced the Carbery Greener Dairy Farms Project (CGDF) with the purpose of identifying as many practical means by which farmers, who supply dairy ingredients to Carbery, could improve their sustainability and lead to long term reductions in green-house gas emissions as well as improve the financial gains of the farmers in a measurable way. The aim of this case study was to use RPL as a way of validating the experiential learning of the farmers that could provide them with access to a university award while also granting exemptions to them on the basis of demonstrated learning that had occurred through their participation in the CGDF. The award was the Diploma in Environmental Science and Social Policy, a 60 ECTS credits, NFQ Level 7 two-year part-time course offered through Adult Continuing Education (ACE) at University College Cork (UCC). The RPL method developed consisted of five steps which were consistent with standard RPL process in terms of identification, documentation, assessment and certification: *Mapping the Learning Outcomes; The Traffic Light System; Weighting the Learning Outcomes; The Learning Outcome Portfolio; Assessment and Validation of Evidence*. Through the use of qualitative data, this chapter also provides a learner perspective on the process which is largely absent in the literature. The case study is presented as a potential cohort approach to RPL that could have widespread impact for industry engagement.

Keywords: Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), experiential learning, cohort approach, access, University.

1. Introduction

Creating an inclusive learning environment for all is at the heart of University College Cork's mission statement and strategic plan (UCC Mission Statement, 2017–2022; UCC Strategic Plan 2023–28). RPL, the Recognition of Prior Learning, was given a statutory footing in Ireland in 2012 through the Quality and Qualifications (Education and Training) Act and is evidenced in the Access, Transfer and Progression policy (2015). This chapter presents a case study of RPL at UCC in which a cohort of 17

farmers from the Southwest of Ireland gained access to and exemptions to the value of 40 ECTS credits on the 60 ECTS credit Diploma in Environmental Science and Social Policy (NFQ Level 7) through a recognition of prior learning (RPL) process. The chapter describes the RPL method developed whereby the farmers' experiential learning was validated.

The Carbery group is a major international manufacturer of quality nutritional ingredients, flavours and natural cheeses, headquartered in West Cork, Ireland (www.carbery.com). With milk suppliers at the heart of the business, the Carbery Greener Dairy Farms Project (CGDF) was developed by Carbery as Ireland's first model for best practice in sustainable dairy farming. CGDF is an innovative, dairy efficiency programme designed in collaboration with Teagasc (the Agricultural and Food Development Authority in Ireland) to measure, monitor and optimise resource allocation and best sustainable practice on farms. Teagasc is the national body providing integrated research, advisory and training services to the agriculture and food industry and rural community in Ireland (www.teagasc.ie). Therefore, the primary objectives of CGDF were to introduce efficiencies and improve environmental sustainability on all Carbery milk supplier farms. Seventeen farmers from across four co-operatives in Bandon, Lisavaird, Drinagh and Barryroe were taking part in the project. An RPL methodology was created by the current authors whereby the learning and experience achieved by the farmers through their participation on the CGDF was mapped against the specific learning outcomes of the Diploma programme. As such, we considered the work of the farmers as useful learning incomes. The methodology that was created and used for the RPL purpose is described in detail in this chapter. It is considered within the University as an example of best practice in dealing with RPL candidates, especially as a cohort approach to RPL. It has potential to be used with other cohorts which is a contemporary challenge with the reality of large migrating populations. It can also be used to foster and develop partnerships between higher education institutions with industry and enterprise whereby groups of employees could benefit from a cohort approach to RPL.

Essentially, this RPL case study involved the identification of the learning and experiences of the farmers and the demonstration of this learning in a form suitable for assessment. A Learning Portfolio was created which was assessed by subject matter experts including the External Examiner of the Diploma Programme whose role is to assure academic standards and advise on the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. Given the pilot nature of the case study, a previous student from the Diploma course also reviewed the portfolio of evidence. It was felt that the learner voice was important insofar as they could comment on the evidence and compare it to what they had learned in the traditional classroom setting thereby taking a learner centric approach to the assessment as well as to the process. As a result of the method developed, the farmers were granted exemptions on 40 credits (5 modules) of the Diploma by the relevant University Board in December 2017. This was the first time that the University College Cork (UCC) approved a cohort RPL portfolio and as the 40 credits constituted 60% of the programme it was beyond the then UCC policy rec-

ommendation of a 50% limit. The Board agreed that the level of detail provided in the portfolio warranted the exemptions and therefore approved a waiver of the 50% policy limit. Subsequently, the farmers were registered for and completed the remaining 20 credits (three modules) of the programme in a blended learning fashion and one that adopted both an adult education ethos and teaching for understanding approach. This case study has had a powerful and positive outcome for the farmers who all graduated with the full Diploma award in October 2018 alongside the traditional UCC cohort of Diploma students. According to the Carbery Group Management, the project had added value in terms of financial profitability to the farmers as the changes they had made on their farms had a significant impact on the quality of their milk production, which in turn led to increased profits, while at the same time minding and improving the environment. These farmers have already spread the meaning of sustainability which is now easily understood by all suppliers/farmers in West Cork.

The purpose of this chapter is to present, reflect and disseminate the learnings from the case study. The following sections will consider RPL within the broader context of lifelong learning, as well as within the current Irish context. It will then provide a detailed overview of the RPL process that was developed. It was a five-step process. Finally, the Summary and Conclusion provides a broader discussion and reflection on the learnings from this case study and its impact.

2. Lifelong Learning and the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

Miguel, Ornelas, and Maroco (2015) stated that lifelong learning goes beyond formal education and training, to include learning at work, in the family and in the community. The valuing, validation, or recognition of this form of learning is what educational providers are grappling with. When achieved, RPL can be a facilitator of lifelong learning. The Irish Higher Education Authority's (HEA) most recent National Access Plan (2022–28) has put RPL on a central footing in terms of exploring new routes of access for priority groups. While numerous definitions of the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) exist, it is largely understood as a process of evaluation of those skills and knowledge acquired through life experience, allowing them to be formally recognized by a qualification systems (e.g. Quality and Qualifications Ireland, www.qqi.ie). A useful definition provided by Harris and Wihak explains that 'the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is the practice of reviewing, evaluating and acknowledging the knowledge and skills that adults have gained through experiential, self-directed and/or informal learning, as well as through formal education' (Harris & Wihak, 2011, p. 1). As such, it is a central aspect of lifelong learning. In line with the National Strategy for Higher Education (2030) in Ireland all who need to have their prior learning and experience assessed for university education should be afforded that opportunity. And yet RPL can be a complex and cumbersome process for both the institution and the learner (Sheridan, 2015). A national RPL project among third level institutions in Ireland commenced in 2020. Funded under the Irish Government's Human Capital Initiative (HCI) Pillar 3 (Innovation and agility), this ambitious 5-year (2020–2025)

€6.9m project has transformative potential for Ireland's education system to become an international leader in the field. The vision of the project is that RPL will be an integral part of the higher education system, widely understood, celebrated and utilized as a flexible pathway to further learning, certification and professional development (THEA – Technological Higher Education Association – Recognition of Prior Learning). As it comes to an end in 2025, the project has seen considerable momentum in RPL across the fourteen partner Higher Institutions involved with new RPL policies, application portals and data collection capacity in progress. This is largely captured in the project's dedicated webpages (www.priorlearning.ie). While significant progress has been made due to this nationalproject, RPL remains on the periphery as a means of access to and progression through higher education.

According to Miguel, Ornelas and Maroco (2016) recognition of prior learning is seen as a critical strategy for enhancing skill development and motivating people's participation in learning activities (Colardyn & Bjornavold, 2004; Smith & Clayton, 2009). Encouraging people to become qualified or requalified attracts adults to re-engage in formal education systems (Cameron, 2014). In common with similar frameworks elsewhere in the world, the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) in Ireland aims to be a unifying device, to create ladders, linkages and pathways that affords seamless mobility to lifelong learners. An OECD report (2010) states that attaching award standards to prior learning makes invisible learning visible, and thus "makes the stock of human capital more visible and more valuable to society at large … [and enables people] to navigate better both the system of lifelong learning and the labour market" (p. 1). Despite this, the rate of participation of lifelong learners in Ireland is dismally low, and well below the EU average. In fact, at just 8.9% (SOLAS, 2017), Ireland is ranked 20th out of 28 countries (Eurostat, 2017). Ireland's Action Plan for Education has the goal of increasing the lifelong learning participation rate to 15% by 2025 (2016).

There is no independent dedicated infrastructure for RPL in Ireland. Instead, it is practiced and largely understood in the context of education and training. Awarding bodies and institutions use RPL in relation to accessing programmes and qualifications. They evaluate prior certificated learning in the main. Recognizing and validating experiential learning is, simultaneously, one of the current challenges and opportunities experienced in the lifelong learning field. In the principles and operational guidelines for the recognition of prior learning in further and higher education in Ireland (NQAI, 2005), RPL is defined as:

> "the process by which prior learning is given a value. It is a means by which prior learning is formally identified, assessed and acknowledged". (p. 2)

The key terms associated with RPL are a) 'prior', i. e., learning already achieved; and b) 'process' i. e., the distinct stages of identification, assessment and certification. RPL encompasses all forms of prior learning, including learning acquired by following a course of study (i.e., formal learning), learning acquired outside of the formal ed-

ucation system which may not lead to certification (i.e., non-formal learning) and learning acquired through experience.

There are different means of assessment in place for RPL depending on the type of RPL an individual wishes to gain, i. e., it can be dealt with by an admission officer who reviews previous certification and experience, or (in the case of experiential learning) it can involve an assessment of the individual against the learning outcomes associated with the relevant unit, module, programme or qualification (FIN Report, 2011). The current authors argue that by shifting the focus to the learning incomes that learners already possess through their prior experience and fostering diverse learning pathways that are bespoke to the learner's needs, this will unlock the true potential of RPL in creating truly diverse and inclusive Institutions.

The RPL pilot project described here had a dual purpose in that it set out to create a mechanism or pathway that would allow the 17 farmers to be considered as one group (cohort) in order to facilitate access to the Diploma in Environmental Science and Social Policy and award exemptions to them based on the non-certified learning they acquired on the Greener Dairy Farms Project, which was mainly experiential in nature. Research by Goggin, O'Leary, and Sheridan (2017) of RPL across the Irish FET sector alludes to "a sense that RPL processes would be more amenable to a cohort approach as it can be very time consuming to process claims from individuals" (p. 27). It would certainly be a more time and cost-effective strategy to harness the potential of cohort approaches to RPL.

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) in this context describes a process used to evaluate the skills and knowledge acquired by the farmers outside of the classroom (i.e. on the Greener Dairy Farms Project) for the purpose of recognising competence against a given set of standards, in this case the module learning outcomes of the Diploma. Therefore, RPL was considered as a means by which the work that the farmers were doing on their farms could be reasonably identified, assessed and acknowledged. It was a means by which gaps in their learning could be identified and addressed thereby creating a pathway for the farmers to complete the Diploma in a way that best matched their needs and interests. We consider this to be the use of valuable of learning incomes that the farmers already possessed through their participation on the CGDF project.

3. The Diploma in Environmental Science and Social Policy

The Diploma in Environmental Science and Social Policy (NFQ Level 7) offers an interdisciplinary approach to the environment and issues related, either directly or indirectly, to our use of it. The course is designed to give a broad knowledge and experience of the key concepts of environmental science, sustainable development, social policy and economics that shape the world we live in. The course consisted of eight modules completed over two years as follows:

YEAR 1 MODULES
AD1871 – Environments for Living Organisms (5 credits)
AD1872 – The Physical Environment (10 credits)
AD1873 – Environmental Systems and Resources (10 credits)
AD1874 – Development and the Environment (5 credits)
YEAR 2 MODULES
AD2850 – Social Policy and the Environment (5 credits)
AD2851 – Analysing and Managing Environmental Change (10 credits)
AD2852 – Introduction to Environmental Policies (10 credits)
AD2853 – Health and Human Needs (5 credits)

4. The RPL Method

This section describes in detail the method that was developed and which evolved organically during the RPL process. The challenge was to map the skills, knowledge and competencies acquired by the farmers on the CGDF against the modules learning outcomes of the Diploma course described above. There are a number of common stages taken in any RPL Process which can be summarised as follows:

Tab. 1: Common Stages of the RPL Process

Identify/Document	Identify and record what someone knows and can do. This may be achieved with support.
Assess	Establish what someone knows or can do. This is a measurement stage
Validate	Establish what someone knows or can do to satisfy certain requirements (points of reference, standards). A level of performance is set and requires the involvement of a third party.
Certify	Stating that what someone knows or can do satisfies certain requirements, and the award of a document to testify this. (Necessitates the involvement of an accredited authority to certify performance and level.)

(Adapted from Expert Group on Future Skill Needs, 2011, p. 18; Werquin, 2010)

The stages outlined above provide a good framework from which to develop an RPL process. As is normal for any RPL assessment applicants must demonstrate that they understand the theory as well as the practical learning elements of a module or modules of the programme to which they are seeking entry to or in this case to which they are seeking exemptions from. Prior learning must be evidenced in writing or through the medium appropriate to the learning outcomes of the module and accompanied by authentication as necessary. For the current case study, several steps were taken to achieve this as described below.

Step 1: Initial Mapping Process

The first step in this pilot project involved an "Initial Mapping Process" of the Learning Outcomes (LOs) for each module on the Diploma in Environmental Science and

Social Policy against the learning achieved by the farmers on the Greener Dairy Farms Project. A simple EXEL file was created which listed each module of the Diploma and every associated learning outcome in one column.

A visit to the Carbery Plant in Ballineen by the course co-ordinator, as a subject-matter expert, helped the Carbery team to identify more clearly the extent of learning achieved by the farmers for each of the Learning Outcomes. From this very early simple mapping process it was agreed that there was potentially sufficient learning by the farmers that could be suitably demonstrated against many of the learning outcomes on the Diploma programme. But it was also clear that a more in-depth analysis of the LOs was necessary to fully elicit the extent of demonstrable learning that had occurred by the farmers. This led to Step 2 of the process which involved a Traffic Light Colour Coded System.

Step 2: The Traffic Light System

Next a *Traffic Light Colour Coded System* of red, orange and green was applied as a way of visually representing the work completed by the farmers against the learning outcomes of each module on the excel file.

- Red indicated that the learning outcome was *not achieved* by the farmers.
- Orange indicated that the learning outcome was *partly achieved.*
- Green indicated that the learning outcome was deemed to have been *fully achieved* by the farmers.

The overall result was a colour coded excel file. What was evident from this traffic light analysis was that there were plenty of learning outcomes coded with either green or orange colours which indicated that there was quite a good match between the work the farmers had completed on the Greener Dairy Farms Project and the LOs of the Diploma in Environmental Science and Social Policy. Very few learning outcomes were colour coded red, indicating that the learning was not deemed to have been achieved by the farmers.

Upon further analysis of the learning outcomes that were coded as orange and discussion with the Carbery team, it was felt that some of these LOs were closer to being fully achieved than others. Therefore, a more refined analysis was necessary. This led to Step 3 in the process which involved a re-ordering of the learning outcomes and assigning a percentage weighting to them as described next.

Step 3: Weighting the Learning Outcomes

This step involved assigning a percentage weighting to the learning outcomes which took into consideration their relative importance to the overall module. For example, the learning outcomes for each module were re-ordered and each one assigned a percentage weighting by the course co-ordinator. For example, as can be seen in Table 2,

there were six learning outcomes for the module AD1871. These were re-ordered and then the first LO which was "Outline biochemical cycles" was assigned a weighting of 25% compared to the final LO "Define the structure or an energy pyramid" which was assigned a percentage weighting of just 10%. In this way, full completion of all the LOs in any one module would equate to 100% complete. This procedure allowed for a more refined analysis of the LOs.

Tab. 2: Sample Module With Weighted Learning Outcomes

Module	Learning Outcome	Weighting applied by the subject matter expert	Proportion of module deemed to be achieved	% completed
AD1071	Outline biogeochemical cycles.	25	12.5	50%
	Explain how chemical and biological stresses limit the distribution of organisms.	20	20	100%
	Distinguish between autogenic and allogenic changes in environmental conditions.	20	20	100%
	Appreciate the importance of oceans, oceanic processes and functioning to people.	15	0	0
	Compare primary and secondary succession	10	10	100%
	Define the structure of an energy pyramid	10	10	100%
		100	72.5	

The traffic light system was then re-applied to the LOs with the orange colour having three distinct bands associated with it as follows:

- Red – 0% achieved
- Orange – 25%, 50%, or 75% achieved
- Green – 100% achieved

This analysis produced tables which indicated in percentage terms the proportion of the module which was deemed to have been successfully completed by the farmers. For example, as can be seen in Table 2, for the Module AD1871, it was found that 72.5% of the learning outcomes were successfully completed. This naturally led to a discussion on the threshold values needed to state that the farmers had fully satisfied the learning of the modules. While the RPL team initially proceeded cautiously by agreeing a 70% threshold, this was subsequently revised to a much lower 40%. This was based on the reality that for traditional students who complete the Diploma programme within the University, the Marks and Standards stipulate a 40% pass standard for each module. Therefore, why would we create a dual standard whereby the level of expectation for the farmers would far exceed that of the traditional student? It was agreed by the RPL team that the benchmark would be 40%. Interestingly, what emerged is that there was a clear delineation between those modules which are achieved and those which are not. For example, in Year 1, there were three modules in which over 70% of the

learning outcomes are deemed to have been achieved indicating that they are in fact well achieved by the farmers and only one module whereby only 10% of the learning outcomes were deemed to have been achieved suggesting that full completion of this module would be necessary by the farmers.

Overall, because of having mapped the learning outcomes in terms of weightings, key skills and required competencies across the programme, it was found that the farmers met 58% of the learning outcomes in Year 1 modules overall and 49% of learning outcomes in Year 2 modules overall. Or put another way, through their participation on the Greer Dairy Farms Project, the farmers appeared to have completed three of the Year 1 modules and two of the Year 2 modules from the University Diploma course. The next stage of the process involved capturing the evidence to support this analysis. For this purpose, a *Learning Outcome Portfolio* was developed which is described in Step 4.

Step 4: The Learning Outcome Portfolio

A simple one-page template was devised in which the following information would be captured:

- The Module Code;
- Learning Outcome Number and Description;
- Description of how the Learning Outcome was achieved by the farmers; and
- Any supporting documentation, reports, certification etc that would provide additional evidence to support the learning achieved.

Step 5: Assessment and Validation of Evidence

This step involved assessing the evidence provided by the Carbery Management Team in the Learning Outcome Portfolio. Several criteria must be met when assessing this evidence of learning (as per the University Policy: Recognition of Prior Learning | University College Cork).

- *Validity/Relevance*: Does the prior learning presented clearly correlate with the learning outcomes required for the programme/module?
- *Level*: Is the learning at the academic level required for the award? Does it meet the appropriate level descriptors in the NFQ? Is it equivalent to the standard expected of other students?
- *Currency*: How long has it been since the learning was acquired? Is it up to date with current knowledge and practice? Have there been any significant developments since the learning was acquired that might undermine its adequacy?
- *Sufficiency*: Is there enough evidence to demonstrate that the learning outcomes have been achieved?

- *Authenticity*: Is it clear that the prior learning is that of the applicant? Can it be verified?

To achieve these requirements a systematic review of the learning outcome portfolio was conducted independently by several people including various subject matter experts as well as those closest to the prorgamme content, for example, the course coordinator and the External Examiner. Written feedback was provided by each of these individuals regarding their review of the Learning Outcome Portfolio. All individuals were fully satisfied that the evidence presented sufficiently met all of the criteria outlined above.

Tab. 3: Summary of Learning Outcome Analysis for Year 1 Modules

Module	Credits	Number of LO's	LO's achieved	% achieved
Year 1				
AD1871	5	6	4.5	72.5%
AD1872	10	6	0.5	10%
AD1073	10	6	4.5	72.5%
AD1074	5	5	3	75%

In summary, based on the initial mapping process, the traffic light system, the weighting analysis of learning outcomes and the assessment of the Learning Outcome Portfolio, it was agreed by the RPL team that there was sufficient evidence to suggest that the farmers had successfully completed five out of a total 8 modules, or 40 out of 60 credits of the Diploma programme and an exemption request of 40 credits was sought from the University. This was the first time that UCC approved a cohort RPL portfolio and as the 40 credits constituted 60% of the programme it was beyond the then UCC policy recommendation of a 50% limit. However, given the detailed approach to the method and case study overall, the University Board was satisfied to waive the 50% RPL limit. This approval paved the pathway for the farmers to be registered for the full Diploma Award, receive exemptions on five modules in total, complete the three remaining modules and graduate with the full award.

There were five Steps in the RPL Process. RPL initially involves the identification of learning and the recording of this learning in a form suitable for assessment. This was achieved through Steps 1–3 of the current methodology. Initial results from the mapping process in Step 1 indicated that there was sufficient overlap between the initiatives that the famers were engaged in on the CGDF project (i.e. their learning incomes) and the learning outcomes of the modules of the Diploma Programme. The Traffic Light System outlined in Step 2 provided a visual representation of every learning outcome for each module and indicated whether the learning outcome was fully achieved, partially achieved or not at all achieved by the farmers. Anecdotally, this step, in particular, has been described as being particularly useful for those attempting to engage in RPL practice as an initial mapping tool through feedback to this author based on various presentations of the case study nationally. The application

of a percentage weighting to the learning outcomes was described in Step 3. This step provided an objective metric to what may be seen as an otherwise subjective decision. As a result of this analysis, that the authors proposed that the farmers had successfully achieved 58% of the learning outcomes in Year 1 modules and 49% of the learning outcomes in Year 2 modules overall.

The next stage in a standard RPL process is the assessment of the candidate's prior learning. Several approaches can be used to achieve this including a review of documentary evidence, interview, or demonstration (Goggin et al., 2017). For the purposes of the present case study, a *Learning Outcome Portfolio* was created by the authors as described in Step 4 of the methodology. This portfolio contained a detailed description of evidence as to how the farmers had achieved each learning outcome they were deemed to have achieved through the analysis in Steps 1–3. It was an evidenced-based document.

Validation is the next stage of an RPL process and involves the use of particular references points or standards. This stage is captured in Step 5 of our methodology which involved the assessment of the evidence-based portfolio by several individuals including the previous External Examiner of the Diploma programme and a student representative of the course. It was extremely useful to have the views of the student representative in order to ensure fairness and transparency across the process. The portfolio document was also reviewed by representatives of Teagasc, the Environmental Protection Agency and Management of the Carbery Group. All indicated their approval that the evidence supplied was sufficient to merit the learning outcomes being deemed as "completed".

Finally, validation is followed by certification which is the award of a formal qualification following the identification/documentation and assessment of the learning. Certification normally involves a recognised awarding body (CEDEFOP, 2016). In this instance, exemptions were sought on behalf of the farmers for 40 out of the 60 credits of the Diploma in Environmental Science and Social Policy. This request was approved by the relevant University Board. As a result of this approval, the farmers were registered for the remaining 20 credits of the programme. Lectures are delivered both off-site using Panopto and on the main University campus with face-to-face workshops. They completed the required assessments and exams as described by the Book of Modules like the UCC cohort of students and graduated with the full Diploma award.

5. Qualitative Feedback From the Farmers

The experience of the RPL participant in terms of the process is largely absent in the literature. Given the success of the current pilot project, the authors sought to seek the views of the farmers of both the RPL portfolio that was developed on their behalf as well as their experience of completing the 20 credits of the programme. A short survey questionnaire was circulated to all 17 farmers with seven returned. All farmers

provided informed consent to the qualitative data being used for inclusion in any dissemination activities.

Feedback was tremendously positive with participants stating that RPL *"recognises that you can learn and work at the same time, that this learning is important*". Participants indicated that they understood that the RPL process has to be rigorous but the opportunity to study and have their prior knowledge rewarded was magnificent and that this allowed them to study at third level was an amazing benefit to receive. The RPL was a benefit to them clearly but also to the University as the programme now had students (farmers) who would not have considered attending a University and there was huge knowledge to be gained from them in the classroom. As one farmer stated, *"receiving a University qualification was more than they had ever expected."*

While taking the remaining 20 credits of the programme was not easy for them, they stated that the material covered was very applicable, new and interesting. Taking a formal qualification opened them up to new areas outside of their usual work on the farm – tourism impacts, poverty, technologies, geology in terms of geohazards and climate change were specifically mentioned. It also opened their mind to the bigger picture and areas of global concern. They now considered the environment not just locally but nationally and globally. Critical thinking skills were apparent as farmers indicated how important it is to understand the source of information and whether it is reliable information.

The social and psychological capital gained by the farmers was evident from the following quotations: "I am more focused on the impact that I can have." "I can be a better role model for my family." "This course has given me the confidence to consider further study." Most revealing was the fact that the seven farmers who provided feedback stated that they would not have ever considered applying for an RPL route into a course of study, due mainly to the amount of time it would have taken them plus the worry that they did not have the requisite skills to complete a portfolio of evidence. Such fears are genuine concerns for many individuals who may seek to commence an RPL process and cannot be overlooked. It is a fair comment to acknowledge that those who champion RPL candidates are highly committed individuals who usually spend a considerable amount of time in mentoring the candidate. By taking a group cohort approach in this pilot project, it alleviated all such issues as the burden was on the RPL team established rather than on the individual farmer or an individual champion. As such, the future usefulness and strategic impact of cohort approaches for marginalised groups or other difficult to reach learners warrants further investigation.

6. Conclusions

Knowledge structures can be obstacles to RPL. The way one learns through experience is very different to how one learns in a formal setting. Assessing experiential learning can prove to be even more challenging, and even standardised RPL processes can be difficult for RPL candidates to navigate. The current challenge for Institutions of Higher Education is to be able to 'translate' personal learning experiences from an

informal or non-formal nature to accountable formal learning outcomes within their own curricula. This is crucial for inclusion. The case study presented here has highlighted how, even within the constraints of institutional and broader national policies, creativity in approach to the practice of RPL can still be true to quality assurance and rigorous academic objectives. The farmers in this case study were successfully awarded exemptions for 40 credits of a 60 credit NFQ Level 7 Diploma Special Purpose Award through a bespoke RPL process thereby enabling them to complete the full Diploma award in an accelerated fashion. Through their participation in the Carbery Greener Dairy Farms Project (CGDF), these farmers had achieved learning, competencies, experiences and skills that were considered as useful learning incomes and mapped through an RPL process against the Module Learning Outcomes of UCC's Diploma in Environmental Science and Social Policy. The aim of this case study was to pilot a cohort approach to RPL which could be used with other cohorts of learners. As such, this was a test case. This paper has described in detail the process and method that was established.

In conclusion, this project incentivised farmers in West Cork, Ireland to consolidate their experiential learning from the Greener Dairy Farms project into a formal third level qualification by completing the Diploma in Environmental Science and Social Policy at University College Cork. Through the RPL process, UCC has been able to highlight and validate the tremendous work that the farmers had completed in making their farms both more sustainable and profitable in a very tangible way by recognising and validating that work (learning) through module exemptions on the Diploma Programme. This way, key achievements in their farming careers are now certified in an NFQ Level 7 programme. By developing a transparent and strong RPL methodology, the academic standards and rigour of the Diploma course were maintained. It was important to the RPL team from the outset that both the farming cohort and the conventional student cohort in UCC were satisfied with the process and the outcome.

Finally, it is worth noting that the real impact of this case study has been the fact that it provides a positive narrative into the discourse of RPL. The case study has been delivered and disseminated at several conferences and meetings both in Ireland and in the EU. The feel-good factor associated with the stories of the farmers seems to resonate with practitioners and those who wish to further their understanding and practice of RPL. Based on anecdotal feedback to this author, the Traffic Light System has provided a powerful and useful approach to the mapping of competencies and knowledge against formal learning outcomes. In this way, we propose that experience, learning and competencies acquired outside of the formal classroom can be utilised as learning incomes for the purpose of RPL. The case study described here is presented as one useful approach that can be utilised for either individual or cohorts of RPL candidates and in that way can have widespread impact. Based on our experience of this case study, we propose that staff development and training around suitable alternative assessment practices for RPL are warranted.

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