Scaling up AP(E)L for sectoral professionalisation: an experience from the social care sector in Dublin
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Abstract

This paper outlines the AP(E)L/RPL policy implications of the results of an AP(E)L Pilot Project for the social care sector undertaken as an element of the 2003-2005 Socrates-Grundtvig Research Project: VaLEx Valuing Learning from Experience. The policy context has two dimensions. The first dimension is the current development of principles and operational guidelines by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) which will oblige all awarding bodies and providers of qualifications to respond to requests for recognition /accreditation of prior learning. The second dimension is the urgent need to ‘professionalise’ all workers in the social care sector mainly for quality assurance reasons. This paper outlines the results of the Pilot Project against the backdrop of those policy dimensions. It deals with the experiences of the two providers and their awarding bodies in taking a ‘scaled-up’ rather than an individualistic approach to AP(E)L. It considers the evaluation feedback from participants which could inform policy, feedback from the facilitators/accompaniers and feedback from the assessors. The paper suggests how AP(E)L/RPL policies can be sufficiently pliable to accommodate the range of ‘stake-holders’ who need such policies to work effectively and efficiently for them.

Introduction

The VaLEx Research Project, Valuing Learning from Experience, is an EU Socrates-Grundtvig 2003-2005 project aimed to develop a theory-based model of AP(E)L which would be more holistic and inclusive than the competence-based, Anglo-Saxon, credit exchange model which predominates in higher education. The model took an existential/hermeneutic, future-oriented, capability approach to adults’ learning plans, with a life history of learning as central to the process. The model was heavily influenced by the French AP(E)L model and by emerging literature on indigenous knowledges and biographical methods which emphasise the value of contextualised and socially constructed ways of knowing. (Bailie and O’Hagan 2001; Pouget, Sallic and LeScouiller, 2004; Dominicé 2001).

The VaLEx model was piloted by Glasgow-Caledonian University (lead), the universities of Warwick, South Brittany, Brussels, Turku and Tartu, and the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT). The final report on the pilots, a set of generic AP(E)L materials and a theoretical guide are in the process of completion at the time of writing.

Policy Context

The Dublin Pilot of the VaLEx model of AP(E)L was specifically planned to advance previous scaled-up models designed for the vocational/professional areas of childcare, disability and literacy organisation which had differing theoretical and pedagogical approaches. What was significant about the timing of the Dublin VaLEx pilot was that it coincided with the development of AP(E)L/RPL policies and procedures for all FE
and HE providers and coincided with a growing interested in the epistemology of AP(E)L fostered by the Irish AP(E)L Network. In 2003 the NQAI launched a national framework for all awards in the state, and set out ‘policies, criteria, procedures and determinations’ with the objectives of ‘enhancing access, transfer and progression of learners’, including:

- entry to a programme leading to an award
- credit towards and award or exemption from some programme requirements
- eligibility for a full award.

Underpinning the framework was the ‘concept of lifelong learning that should encompass the whole spectrum of formal, informal and non-formal learning’, and account was later taken of the 2004 EU Common Principles for Recognition of Informal and Non-formal Learning agreed during the Irish Presidency of the EU. The NQAI has a co-ordinating and harmonising role but not a providing role with regard to awards. Its remit includes bringing coherence and consistency to the recognition of prior learning through obliging providers and awarding bodies to make provision for AP(E)L for any individual who applies for access, credit or full award. The approach of all awarding bodies has traditionally been, and continues to be, to apply AP(E)L the individual learner/applicant level and not to offer a collective or sectoral approach. Providers are additionally obliged to outline progression routes for all learners and to make explicit both access and ‘accessibility’ arrangement for mature students and RPL applicants. The 2001 White Paper on adult education, Learning for Life, had predicated that providers would become morally obliged to accompany learners throughout their lifelong learning careers.

Provision for AP(E)L in Irish further and higher education is generally based on the individual applicant/learner and most models relate to existing programmes or occupational standards. However, to actualise the NQAI provision for full awards through RPL, The Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) made its first award of a masters degree to an individual in June 2005. The Irish university sector has traditionally had provision for doctoral awards based on publications and most education providers have traditionally accepted experiential learning as ‘equivalent’ to accredited learning for non-traditional/exceptional case entry to postgraduate programme. However, awards or exemptions at undergraduate level have been less favoured, despite enabling legislation and procedures.

Research method and objectives

The anticipated outcomes of the overall VaLEx Research Project include:

- a pedagogical model of AP(E)L underpinned with educational theory which is transferable across diverse European realities
- an AP(E)L toolkit, evaluated through the pilot, which will include both electronic and paper-based resources
- professional guidelines for teaching, advising and support staff.

One of the main challenges for the VaLEx model was to design a ‘scaled-up’ process which would both meet the accreditation needs of all the individual learner involved and address the reservations of academic staff, particularly around acquisition of sustainable academic writing skills for future learning, and around the credibility of the assessment process. The VaLEx model would also need to be sustainable in terms
of time and resources. Accordingly, the model initially claimed to include the following features:

1. It is an ideal mechanism for practitioners, who are experienced in their field of practice, to have their experiential learning formally recognised and accredited towards a qualification
2. It offers guidance and ‘accompaniment’
3. It leads towards a clearly identified learning plan
4. It focuses both on current competence and on future capabilities
5. It is related specifically to existing course modules
6. It allows for module learning outcomes to be synthesised into appropriate portfolio ‘tasks’
7. It allows applicants to ‘challenge’ module assessment tasks instead of preparing a portfolio of learning evidence
8. It offers a biographical/narrative approach to identification of appropriate informal and non-formal learning
9. It allows for flexible approaches to presentation of learning for assessment
10. It expects to be subject to the same criteria for assessment and the same quality assurance controls as the target modules
11. It is specifically designed to be ‘scaled up’ to groups and sectors, as well as serving the needs of individual applicants
12. It is underpinned by current theory and scholarship on work-based learning (WBL) and on learning-in-practice for professional development
13. It takes account of current research and policy development related to recognition of non-formal and informal learning
14. It has explicit guidelines and procedures with potential for transfer to other professional sectors.

The VaLEex model was piloted with the social care sector because the local Health Board had requested the two main providers of social care qualifications - the DIT and the Open Training College (OTC)/St Michael’s House - to devise a mechanism to professionally accredit unqualified staff already working in the residential care and disability care sectors, building on significant practice experiences and in-house training. A scaled-up approach was therefore essential, with key academic staff in the two colleges to have a direct input into the processes of ‘accompaniment’ and assessment. The model should also be approved by the quality assurance arrangements of both providers. Existing part-time, in-service programme modules were made available to the Pilot as follows:

**DIT BA (Ord.) in Social Care Practice (in-service)**

- **Modules:**
  - (i) Principles of Professional Practice (10 ECTS Credits)
  - (ii) Health and Well-being (5 ECTS Credits)

**OTC/HETAC Bachelor of Arts in Applied Social Studies (Disability)**

- **Modules:**
  - (i) Introduction to Disability (12 ECTS Credits)
  - (ii) Health Safety and Personal Care (12 ECTS Credits)

The support of social care agencies was easily gained and 14 participants with no previous professional qualification in social care were recruited.
Findings from research activity 1: audit of AP(E)L in HE

An audit of AP(E)L usage in higher education, conducted for the first activity of the VaLEEx Dublin project, found that no higher education college has an inclusive approach to AP(E)L provision and only one has a dedicated AP(E)L officer. Colleges which had discontinued AP(E)L cited lack of resources and cumbersome procedures as the reasons. Other identified weaknesses included lack of conceptualisation of levels of learning appropriate to experiential learning, inappropriateness of traditional assessment modes, lack of grading, restriction of types of evidence, lack of uniformity, the need for constant updating and individualisation of procedures, the extensive resources required and the cumbersome paperwork involved. Academic problems identified by colleges included resistance by staff to the concept itself, lack of academic skills for future study, fear of lowering standards, over-caution with documentation, limitation to the range of evidence permitted in a portfolio format, negative impact on future modules, and lack of coherence in how experiential learning is expressed relative to traditional learning. A persistent problem was the confusion between the requirement to satisfy a numbers of learning outcomes and percentage score to reach a pass standard. Further weaknesses included inconsistencies of models applied, pressure on individual applicants in pursuing claims, lack of staff training and lack of efficient resources and templates.

The Pilot of the VaLEEx model needed to address at least some of these concerns.

Findings from the pilot project

The AP(E)L audit referred to above had indicated that lists of discrete module learning outcomes are unsuitable for AP(E)L. Following discussion with the programme directors and module assessors from both the DIT and the OTC it was decided to offer VaLEEx Pilot participants three ways of meeting module assessment requirements. Firstly, they could take the original learning outcomes as they stood and provide evidence from prior learning to prove that learning had already been gained in terms of skills, knowledge and attitudes required by the module. They could request the assistance of the accompanier in this task. Secondly, they could ask to see the assessment assignments for the modules from the past and arrange with course personnel to challenge those assignments without the assistance of the accompanier. Thirdly, they could carry out a set of assignment tasks in their current context of professional practice and meet the learning outcomes in that way.

To make this third option more efficient, module learning outcomes were combined into assessment tasks for completion within the duration of the Pilot. Each module required just one substantial portfolio entry to demonstrate learning in the following categories:

Table 1 Developmental Categories for Portfolio Evidence (Module exemptions)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person</th>
<th>Profession</th>
<th>Profession</th>
<th>Organisation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self</td>
<td>Individual contribution</td>
<td>Professional Contribution</td>
<td>Self as a professional</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Through reflection on life history and professional experience the participants’ personal learnings were identified and used as evidence to support the specified outcomes of the modules. Critical analysis was required to draw conclusions on individual practice. The developmental process began by analysing self, or asking how experiences contributed to the participant’s own worldview, values, personal development and learning. Then it progressed to analysing individual contribution to the situation or experience and moved through the categories to analyse how the profession contributed to the situation. When focused on the profession, the participant needed to revisit yourself as a professional and the final category helped put the experience into a holistic focus of your own and others’ contribution to the organisation’s purpose.

Use of the Biographical Life History Approach

The Dublin VaLEx Pilot team was enthusiastic about using the life histories approach rather than a competence approach. For efficiency of implementation the life history of learning was organised into two sets as follows:

**Life History**
- Personal Life Achievements
- Life and Job Transitions
- Personal Qualities and Values

**Biographical Record**
- Evidence of work, life, educational attainments
- Personal and Professional Development Goals.

This information was to be regarded as:
- A tool to identify learning from experience
- A tool to evaluate personal and professional future goals
- A tool to link experience to module outcomes
- A tool for lifelong learning.

Synthesised Learning Outcomes

Module outcomes were synthesised into one activity as in the following example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original list of module learning outcomes</th>
<th>Synthesised Learning Outcomes as Portfolio Task</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Outline the importance of good health and safety practices in your work</td>
<td>• With reference to legislation, demonstrate your understanding of health and safety in the workplace (based on prior learning)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. State the main provisions of the Health &amp; Safety and Welfare at Work Act 1989</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. State the areas covered by the Health &amp; Safety and Welfare at Work General Application Regulations 1993</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. List the responsibilities of the employer and</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
employee with regard to the 1989 Act

5. State the main provisions of the 1981 Fire Services Act

A sample portfolio task based on the module learning outcomes was constructed as follows:

**Table 3 Portfolio task to meet module learning outcomes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Module Learning Outcomes</th>
<th>Assessment Task</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Principles of Professional Practice</td>
<td>Using Gibbs’ reflective cycle construct a 3,000 word analysis and draw conclusions from the following:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Observe colleagues and clients over a five day episode of care and then identify, assess and discuss how models of service delivery meet clients’ overall needs.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Illustrate your own and others’ professional roles, responsibilities and contributions to the clients’ needs.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Illustrate your own and others’ professional roles, responsibilities and contributions to the moral and ethical values of the organisation in this regard.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An optional *viva voce* was part of the VaLEX model of assessment. Assessors were required to prepare sets of module assessment criteria suitable for AP(E)L mode.

**Academic Capabilities for ‘Accessibility’**

The Dublin VaLEX Pilot was informed by the a keen awareness of the need to enhance the capabilities of AP(E)L applicants to survive in a higher education environment. This need had been identified in Irish higher education research with mature students and in the audit results reported above. Additionally the explicit requirement of the NQAI for access and participation by mature students in higher education is that the principle of ‘accessibility’ should apply. In practice, the receiving institution is obliged to provide the appropriate supports for students who enter their programmes to enable them to succeed. The principle implies that all institutions must provide whatever bridging studies are required either at the point of entry, or at the point of transfer to another programme. In adherence to this principle it was agreed that participants on the VaLEX Pilot Project would be offered appropriate support in developing their skills in academic writing, in library research skills, in information technology and in presentation of assignments for assessment.

Issues which arose in the selection process for the social care agencies included the following:
Could the participants select the modules they considered as most appropriate for them from the suite of programme modules?

What was the role of line managers regarding supervision, accountability and facilitation with time-off to prepare the portfolios?

Was the timetable of AP(E)L workshops negotiable?

What material could be included in the portfolio and how could participants access documents?

Would the VaLEx model be available after the pilot for additional modules and additional applicants?

Concerns raised by agencies about group-based AP(E)L included the following:

a. The time require for participation in the Pilot would have to be made up by other staff
b. Would the effort involved be reflected in the amount of credit awarded?
c. Would there be a time benefit from AP(E)L relative to the tradition course?
d. Would fees be reduced accordingly for module exemptions?
e. If participants registering on in the full programme are obliged to attend for two days in any case, what is the advantage of module exemptions?
f. Would the low literacy skills of some staff hamper their potential to gain exemptions or even gain from involvement?

Feedback and recommendations from participants

A summary is feedback from participants is as follows:

- Give accurate information on exactly what it means for individuals who may not have heard of AP(E)L before
- Stress that all participants may not gain exemptions or credits
- Make clear the roles of staff involved
- Distinguish between subject expert accompaniers and generalist accompaniers
- Distinguish between accompanier and assessor roles
- More employer support is essential
- Time off is essential
- Group sessions are a great resource for peer learning and personal support, with the option of individual progress at own pace.
- Spend less time on the life histories exercises
- Offer more modules by AP(E)L to extend to all the prior learning of participants and let the participants decide how many modules to claim.
- Explore possibility of getting exemptions from several courses and not just one
- Include the possibility of observation of work practice in the assessment mechanisms
- Support outside the structured sessions is essential
- Give formal training in academic writing and referencing at the start
- Give reading lists that participants can use individually to learn how college theory connects to real-world practice
- Provide examples of learning evidence at the start of the process
• Do not withhold materials from participants until the accompanier decides they should have them. Trust the maturity of adults to decide their own rate of academic development, otherwise they will not be self-directed and autonomous learners.
• Use electronic resources as well as direct personal contact to suit the work patterns of the residential care sector.
• Keep the supportive, adult-friendly atmosphere as it is, and keep the valuable social aspect.

Feedback from the participating colleges

The VaLEx Pilot has addressed a number of ‘blockages’ in AP(E)L in higher education, especially with regard to the following:

i. There is now no need to regard lists of module outcomes as discrete in themselves or progressively linear in difficulty
ii. There is no need to think of assessment in terms of meeting 40% of the list of module learning outcomes since 40% refers to the grade achieved and not the % of learning outcomes! Synthesising all learning outcomes into one portfolio task allows for grading of performance if required.
iii. The facility to have a viva voce/presentation to an assessment panel with the support of the accompanier is both significantly new and fair to learners
iv. The model is appropriate for sectors and group-based AP(E)L
v. The accompanier model is effective and efficient, and preferable to tutor models
vi. The connection of the VaLEx model of AP(E)L to a professional learning plan is essential
vii. The connection to work-based learning curriculum design is obvious
viii. Building the capabilities of participants to succeed in higher education is essential
ix. The model is more than a competence audit
x. It dovetails perfectly with national policies for the development of AP(E)L
xi. It can be quality assured
xii. It can be adopted to be applied on a range of courses.

Feedback from Project Team/Tutors/Accompaniers/Assessors

1. An AP(E)L model that focuses on holistic learning across the lifecourse is preferable in principle to a model than focuses only on atomistic competencies related to national standards
2. Synthesising learning outcomes into assessment tasks overcomes the straight-jacket belief that only 40%/50% of learning outcomes need to be met by evidence of learning
3. AP(E)L related to a future learning plan is preferable to AP(E)L for personal development only
4. Group-based AP(E)L is preferable to individual AP(E)L from the perspective of support for the learner.
5. Group-based AP(E)L using the VaLEx model will only work well if there is a commonality in the group, such as a sectoral commonality or a specific job commonality.

6. Developing the capabilities of participants to succeed in their learning plan in higher education is essential, especially in research and academic writing.

7. Facilitators/tutors/accompaniers for the life history element may be ‘generalists’.

8. Facilitators/tutors/accompaniers for the specific module should be content experts.

9. Group support outside the structured sessions is essential.

10. AP(E)L is a pedagogical activity and should not be confused with counselling or therapy.

11. The VaLEx model has the potential to link the scholarship and practice of AP(E)L and WBL in curriculum design in higher education.

12. The VaLEx model respects discipline-based epistemologies and could be easily transferred.

13. On-line materials are essential for efficiency.

14. Staff training is essential.

Conclusions

The VaLEx Dublin Pilot set out to demonstrate that AP(E)L need not be a marginal and resource-hungry activity for colleges and that the reservations of academic staff can be allayed by collaborative design which is supported by acceptable pedagogical theory and academic quality assurance. It also set out to demonstrate the value of working at the interface between professional practice and academia where a more seamless approach to professional development can be achieved by a life history and professional learning plan model which gives more direct control to the learner than the traditional in-service training model. Since the Pilot ended a complementary work-based contract learning model has been developed for a number of modules on one of the degree programmes. It is likely that this mixed mode of learning will influence in-service professional development courses across a range of activities as some of the main academic reservations about AP(E)L have now been addressed in this scaled-up model.

References


National Qualifications Authority of Ireland http://www.nqai.ie


VaLEx http://www.valex-apel.com