

**A phenomenological inquiry capturing students' experience
accessing higher education through recognition of prior
experiential learning**

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Research Student Declaration Form

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Abstract

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is the provision of access to a programme of study and can include course credit or module exemption where there is evidence of prior formal, informal and/or experiential learning. RPL affords students recognition and places a value on their prior learning including life and work experiences. Broadly speaking RPL is formal recognition of non-formal and informal learning acquired through relevant life and work experience. RPL widens student access and participation in higher education. In Ireland recognition for prior learning and experience is offered by the majority of third level institutions providing fair and impartial opportunities to advance education. The aim of this study was to describe and interpret the lived experiences of students who gained entry to higher education through recognition of their prior non-formal and formal learning. The study took the form of a qualitative phenomenological interpretivist approach designed to explore and interpret the meanings students attached to their educational experience. Participants were purposefully selected students who accessed higher education through recognition of prior learning. Data was collected using semi-structured in-depth interviews and analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). The findings that emerged from this inquiry show students who advanced their education through RPL experienced various academic and personal challenges triggering divergent emotions from instances of anxiety and self-doubt to self-realisation. The study highlighted a lack of awareness and understanding among students of the RPL process and emphasised the need to better educate and inform students about the uses of RPL. Further research into the feasibility of early intervention, introducing the concept of RPL into the curriculum at second level is suggested.

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List of Abbreviations

ACE	Adult Continuing Education
AONTAS	The National Adult Learning Organisation
APEL	Accreditation for Experiential Learning
ARPEL	Accreditation and Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning
APL	Accreditation for Prior Learning
ATP	Access, Transfer and Progression
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
EAR HEI	European Recognition Manual for Higher Education Institutions
ENIC	European Network of Information Centres in the European Region
EQPRP	European Qualification Passport for Refugees
ETB	Education Training Board
FET	Further Education & Training
HEA	Higher Education Authority
IPA	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
LRC	Lisbon Recognition Convention
NARIC	National Academic Recognition Information Centres in the European Union
NCEA	The National Council for Education Awards

NFETL	National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
PLAR	Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
RARPA	Recognising and Recording Progress and Achievement in Non-Accredited Learning
RPEL	Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
RVA	Recognition of Validation and Accreditation
SOLAS	Irish state organisation with responsibility for funding, planning and coordinating Further Education and Training
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
VPL	Validation of Prior Learning
WBL	Worked Based Learning

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The aim of the study was to explore the experience of students accessing higher education through the RPL process. The methodological approach is phenomenological underpinned by an interpretivist stance. This chapter aims to introduce the study, briefly outlining the background and context of the study and clarifying why the research topic was chosen. Within this chapter the rationale and research aim will be outlined. Finally, I will present a brief synopsis of the dissertation chapters to provide an overview of what is to be covered.

1.2 Background and Context

Validation of non-formal and informal learning is referred to as the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). It encompasses all forms of prior learning and is provided in the context of specified destination awards from Level 1 to 10 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) based on learning outcomes. RPL broadens access to formal education and can be used for the award of credit, to gain exemptions within a programme of study and support access to the labour market (Murphy, 2019). RPL is critical to the development of an accessible, education and training system. RPL is a key foundation for lifelong learning policies encouraging people of all ages to participate in learning pathways while attributing value to their relevant learning (NFETL, 2015; UNESCO, 2018). RPL provides opportunities to many students who can benefit from their prior life experiences in particular the older mature adult learner. These learners can bring with them a host of competencies achieved outside the classroom through work and life experiences accumulated through their lifetime. Generally speaking, the typical RPL candidate is a

mature student with work experience and have family and non-work-related responsibilities (Snyman & van den Berg, 2017). RPL is one of the current challenges experienced in the lifelong learning field. The main challenge is recognising the value of RPL, ensuring prior learning and experience are given appropriate value. RPL provides accessible and meaningful pathways to lifelong learning for those with a variety of skills. Increased capacity, and use of RPL will ensure more meaningful and assessable pathways are open to the adult learner community (AONTAS, 2021). The difficulty with RPL is assessing the learning. This arises as the learning is not undergone in a traditional formal learning environment related to education and training. The process of valuing and assessing the learning is problematic for both the learner and the formal education provider. From a learner perspective there is difficulty with academic terminology and mapping to learning outcome (Hamer, 2011; Pokorny et. al., 2017; Sandberg & Anderson, 2011). For the education provider the difficulty is capturing the prior learning which can be a fragile and delicate process. The implications of incorrectly framing the learning to fixed criteria can be detrimental to the student. (Sandberg & Anderson, 2011). Additionally, the education providers can have difficulty where assessors are untrained and lack proper skills (Pokorny, 2012). The current government has plans to increase lifelong learning participation and RPL plays a pivotal role in supporting lifelong learning and accessibility to education (SOLAS, 2017). A particular focus is access equality for students from varying educational, economic and employment backgrounds (Department of Education and Science, 2000). One of the key targets set out by the Action Plan for Education (September 2016) includes an ambition to increase Ireland's lifelong learning participation rate to 10% by 2020 and to 15% by 2025. (SOLAS, 2017). RPL may be instrumental in achieving this target.

The HE landscape in Ireland has experienced significant change in the past 35 years with considerable progress in education and upskilling (HEA, 2018). One of the key

objectives of the Higher Education Performance Framework 2018-2020 is to increase in number and proportions entrants through non-traditional routes with RPL being one of those access routes (HEA, 2018). RPL is unique in its existence and necessitates new learning opportunities across diverse contexts. Cooper & Harris (2013), advocate for RPL to be seen as a specialised pedagogical practice providing the essential tools for access to education. Across Europe and worldwide RPL is a widely supported concept nevertheless the existing literature would suggest a marginal take-up and adaptation of RPL (Pokorny, 2012; Cooper & Harris, 2013; McCready, 2017; Hlongwane, 2019; Werquin, 2021; Stephens, 2022). From an Irish perspective RPL is emerging as an instrument supporting inclusivity policies widening access to higher education and pathways to learners from diverse and multi-cultural backgrounds (AONTAS, 2021). In 2014 the RPL Practitioners Network Ireland was established to inform policy, establish a community of practice for RPL practitioners, raise awareness and promote good practice among practitioners and institutions. Since its inception the RPL network has been developing opportunities for the ongoing sharing of practices (AONTAS, 2021). Goggin et al., (2015), O'Leary et al., (2015) and Goggin et al., in conjunction with the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching (2015) are key contributions to Irish literature on RPL. Since 2015 they have been exploring policies with a view to developing a national policy and strategy, which will provide a framework for RPL to operate within while maintaining standards in both practice and quality. AONTAS are very active in their promotion of RPL specifically for its suitability to the adult learner and providing educational opportunities for adults in further and community education (FET). FET is also a pathway for the adult learner to progress to higher education. According to SOLAS (2020) there is significant potential to look at dual provision models which begin in FET and can culminate to HE.

RPL is also linked to Work Based Learning (WBL) with higher education institutes embracing apprenticeship programmes connecting academia to the workplace. Doherty

& Stephens (2019) contribute to the field of work-based learning recognising the challenges for higher education in relation to the dynamics of the employability and skills agenda (Stephens, 2022). Within the HE environment Stephens (2022), suggests the need to develop formal links between working knowledge and academic knowledge where adopting RPL principles will play a central role in this mapping process. According to Doherty & Stephens (2019) there is an expectation for a surge in demand for WBL. They also note that HE institutes need to rethink their teaching and learning models to accommodate workplace training and talent development. McCreedy (2017) identifies RPL as having the potential to bring employers and higher education institutes together to develop a new form of learning and new learning opportunities. RPL has a pivotal role within the WBL field however more focus is required to the development of more advanced and standardised learning models. These models would focus on connecting and integrating work experience and classroom learning throughout HE institutions.

RPL has many valuable functions within the HE landscape, however there are many who suggest it is not being used to its full potential (Andersson et al., 2004; Pokorny, 2012; Cooper and Harris, 2013; Werquin, 2021; Stephens, 2022). The biggest drawback with RPL is its differential usage and processes nationally with no single standard approach. There needs to be a balance with RPL in terms of simplifying its approach to increase its use. While RPL can be seen as being supportive of inclusivity policies there is also the risk of becoming unnecessarily exclusionary because of its complexity (Anderson et al., 2004; Hammer 2011; Hammer 2012; Cooper et al., 2017; Andersson, 2021). The student's voice is largely missing from the research on RPL. With this in mind, I was interested in understanding more about RPL specifically from the perspective of the students and how they experienced the process. I wanted to get more insight into how they experienced the complexities of RPL and indeed insight into why they chose RPL as a pathway to HE.

1.2 Rationale for the Study

The driving force behind this study was my passion for lifelong learning. I have always been driven to learn and this stems from my non-traditional education background. I left school at the age of 15 without a leaving certificate. I didn't want to leave school as I had a passion for learning however at the time furthering education and certainly a college education was not an opportunity open to me. It did not take me long to return to education, embracing the leaving certificate in my twenties. During this time, I was working in an office gaining valuable experience in book-keeping and accountancy. Because of this work-based learning and experience I progressed through the professional accountancy exams and qualified as an Accountant. While not called RPL at the time in my mind and when I reflect over this part of my life, I see it now that this was in fact a form of RPL. In many ways perhaps being stifled from learning at a younger age has given me my love for lifelong learning. Over the past 15 years I have transformed from the student to the teacher and from the teacher back to the student. In my capacity as a student and as a teacher I am still driven to learn more. Through my long and extensive work and learning experiences I understand the concept that RPL cannot be reduced to 'one size fits all' (Cooper & Harris, 2013 p.15). I have an extensive educational and working background embracing formal, non-formal and informal learning and I understand the complexities and dynamics of RPL. I choose this topic for both personal and professional reasons. Coming from a nontraditional education background and as a mature student myself this cohort of student attracted my attention. I had in the past acquired module exemption and I wanted to understand and investigate the experience as lived through by other students. It was important to me that this study contributed to the existing field of literature and would be of benefit to the college in reviewing their existing policies and procedures. The purpose of the study is not to find fault. It is merely to gain insight from the student's perspective.

RPL supports inclusivity and offers pathways to education that were not available to me. According to AONTAS, (2021) the term 'recognition of prior learning' entered the public domain in 1973. I have returned to education several times over the past 30 years, and I had no awareness of RPL or what it meant. O'Leary et. al., (2015) found the approach to presenting information on RPL is varied and inconsistent and there is poor visibility and awareness of RPL. I have only become aware of the existence of RPL in the last year and become embroiled in its complexities. For this reason, I have adopted a phenomenological approach to examine in rich detail the nuances of the students lived experience to broaden my understanding of how the implementation of RPL can become far reaching in the future.

Some researchers note RPL as a form of 'academic currency' or 'money for credit', Marr and Bravenboer, (2017) indicated two forms of currency – 'financial investment from government' and 'academic credit' in the form of credit awarded for prior education qualification. Sandberg and Andersson (2011) argue that RPL in this context seems to promote a rather technical and instrumental view of knowledge – as if knowledge could be used as 'money' to trade and exchange for a 'grade'. Sandberg, (2014) equally notes "it might be argued that RPL becomes similar to 'money' in this context it is used in the education market to buy course credits p. 683." There are many advantages of RPL in particular the benefits of reduced study time which ultimately reduces financial costs for students however there are still barriers for participants to overcome. McCready, (2017) noted the existence and nature of barriers to wider APEL take-up is under-represented in the literature and calls for further research of these barriers. The rationale for my study is to explore the experiences of students who gained access to HE in Ireland through Recognition of Prior Learning. The HE landscape has undergone rapid changes as noted in the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030. The strategy calls for innovation and development of more flexible opportunities for larger and more diverse student cohorts.

The report also calls for “clear pathways for progression and transfer, as well as non-traditional entry routes” with significant emphasis on the development of a national framework for RPL (NFETL 2015 p.9).

1.3 Research Aims and Objectives

The aim of the study was to develop an understanding of the RPL process and experience for students in Higher Education (HE). Within this broad aim, the motivational aspects of electing to use RPL are explored. The study seeks to understand the challenges faced by the participants during the RPL application process and aims to explore and capture the essence of the student experience of RPL. Beyond this the study seeks to explore the impact of the participants experiences on their sense of identity, exploring their educational journey pre and post their RPL experience.

The study investigates and examines the student’s experience through the initial RPL application process analysing and comparing participant experiences. Within the study I examined and compared students learning experiences while investigating the factors influencing their decision to use RPL as an access route. I considered it was worthwhile to examine the commonalities and differences in the experiences in addition to exploring the successes of this cohort of student. Going forward this new understanding of the student experience can both inform how to better design RPL procedures and inform policy and practice to raise awareness of RPL among the general student population.

1.4 Research Question

The main overarching research question is:

What is the nature of the lived experiences of students accessing Higher Education in Ireland through the RPL Process?

To further guide the inquiry four additional sub questions were developed:

- What motivated students to apply for recognition of prior learning?
- How did they experience the RPL process?
- What impact, if any, did the outcome of the process have on their self-identify?
- What impact, if any, did achieving exemptions have on their subsequent academic experience?

1.5 Dissertation Outline

The dissertation is made up of five chapters. Chapter Two encompasses the literature review which starts by defining RPL and setting out the broad context of RPL. It critically evaluates a range of policy documents and research studies. It also explores the various concepts of RPL, and reviews policy related to RPL, lifelong learning and adult learners. Chapter Three describes the methodology adopted and research design employed to best suit the research question/s. This study took the form of an interpretivist phenomenological approach allowing me to build rich local understandings of the life-world experiences of students (Medina & Taylor, 2013) developing insights into the shared experience (or phenomena). I immersed myself into the research using semi-structured interviews. This allowed me to develop in-depth conversations with the participants to better understand how they view the world (Thomas, 2009). Chapter Three will expand on the research methods used and provide an outline of the process of participant selection, data analysis and concerns around quality and rigour. Ethical considerations are outlined in addition to the limitations of the study. Chapter Four presents the findings and a discussion of the results of the study. This chapter explores the emergent themes from the data. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was adopted, and this chapter is subdivided

thematically. The major themes presented in this chapter were developed during the data analysis phase of the research. The final chapter, Chapter Five of the dissertation provides the conclusion outlining the implications of the finding for policy and practice and recommendations based on the findings identifying areas for further research. The appendix section follows Chapter Five and contains several documents relevant to this research.

1.6 Conclusion

This chapter has introduced the research project and given an overview of the dissertation. The chapter opened with the background to the study outlining the importance of RPL within the HE sector. In addition to the background the rationale for the study was presented outlining the reasons for exploring this topic. The aims and objectives of the study were outlined, and I briefly alluded to the literature review section and methodology choices. This chapter has been laid out to guide and inform the reader of the structure of the dissertation.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to provide a critical evaluation of the literature related to Recognition of Prior Learning in the field of Higher Education (HE). The study primarily focuses on the student's experience of accessing HE through RPL. The literature within Ireland has primarily been in the area of RPL practice and policy in the context of a HE setting. Much of the available literature comes from further afield, with prominent authors in Sweden, South Africa, Canada, and the UK. Firstly, I will reflect on the working definitions of RPL. Following this, I will consider RPL policy relative to developments from a European and National perspective to examine what is being done by policy makers. I will then review RPL in the context of the higher education landscape and existing RPL practice. RPL is predominantly focused on the adult learner, to that end I will briefly review some literature related to adult learner identity. The final section comprises a debate regarding theoretical frameworks. The aim of this chapter is to give an overview of the different components framing the research question.

2.2 Definition of RPL

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) is the practice of acknowledgement for knowledge gained from prior formal learning and from knowledge gained through non-formal and informal learning through work and life experiences. RPL is a process providing opportunities to learners who may not have had a structured formal education. It is aimed at mature students who have acquired experience and learning from their participation in employment, community activities and from home responsibilities. According to Goggin et al., (2015) RPL plays a major role within the lifelong learning framework. Over a lifetime

individuals can have numerous diverse roles amassing knowledge, competencies, and skills. As individuals transfer from one role to the next, they are building valuable life skills and life experiences, continuing to build on their existing knowledge. (Goggins et al., 2015).

There are many acronyms used for RPL in practice across the globe but little agreement on collective terminology (Moss, 2017). In recent decades, RPL has developed in policy and practice globally and indeed it is a developing research field (Anderson, 2021). Anderson (2021) notes the use of different names to describe RPL. In general, the term RPL is about recognition of prior learning, the various other names and acronyms introduce different but related elements. RPL is nuanced but its core principle is recognition for learning. This learning can come from many avenues such as the workplace, life experience or various forms of education. Recognition is given in the form of credit hence the use of the word 'accreditation' in many of the various acronyms. Recognition is also given for learning through experience, learning through doing hence the use of the word 'experiential' as this relates to learning gained from the experience of doing. RPL involves a complex 'assessment' and 'validation' phase assessing and validating the learning to ensure it meets the criteria for achieving learning outcomes. Many descriptions for RPL incorporate the use of the words assessment and validation. The many descriptions and acronyms being used nationally, within Europe and internationally are accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL), prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR), validation of prior learning (VPL) (Anderson, 2020). Harris (2018) offers additional names, assessment of prior learning (APL) and prior learning assessment (PLA). Hawley (2010) notes the use of Accreditation and Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning (ARPEL) and Recognising and Recording Progress and Achievement in Non-Accredited Learning (RARPA). UNESCO ((2018) refer to RPL as recognition, validation, and accreditation (RVA). Harris et. al. (2014) in a footnote to the introductory chapter of the Handbook to RPL offers the following descriptions which vary between countries and organisation:

RPL is the term used in Australia, South Africa and Scotland; in the European Union the term Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning (VNFIL) is used; the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) refers to practices as Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning Outcomes (RNFIL); Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) is the preferred term in Canada; Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) is used in the UK, and Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) in the United States p.13

Even within Ireland different acronyms are used with National College of Ireland referring to RPL as Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning (RPEL) while Goggin et. al., (2015) simply refer to it as Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). This is the acronym I have adopted throughout this study as it represents and captures the essence of recognition. RPL to me is about recognition, having that prior learning recognised and acknowledged. It does not matter where the prior learning arises from, it is about identifying and recognising the learning that is important. While all the various acronyms incorporate experience, assessment, validation etc. at the heart of RPL is recognition.

There is no one, consistent and universally agreed definition of RPL across Irish higher education providers (NFETL, 2015). According to Murphy, 2019 in Ireland, validation of non-formal and informal learning is referred to as the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). For the purpose of this study, I have use this definition. RPL encompasses all forms of prior learning and is provided in the context of specified destination awards from Level 1 to 10 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) based on learning outcomes. RPL provides access to formal education and can be used for the award of credit or gain exemptions within a programme of study. RPL also supports access to the labour market (Murphy I, 2019, p. 2). RPL has many uses, it can be used by students to gain admission to a course of study where they can demonstrate they meet the requirements for entry. It

can also be used for advanced entry allowing the student entry to a course of study from year 2 onwards. Where students can demonstrate they have achieved the learning outcomes for certain modules within a programme they can use RPL to gain exemption from those modules. AONTAS (2021) describes RPL as “a process used to evaluate skills and knowledge acquired outside the classroom for the purpose of recognising competence against a given set of standards, competencies, or learning outcomes p. 5.”

Prior Learning embraces formal, non-formal and informal learning or a combination of all of these. Formal Learning is where a learner has completed a course or module in further or higher education or a certified course. This form of learning is measurable through certification on the National Framework of Qualifications. Non-formal or informal learning however poses more of a challenge. It is synonymous with learning achieved through employment, community and voluntary activities and private study to which no certification has been achieved. To some degree non-formal learning can be measured more readily as the learning while gained through various methods is more structured. It is structured through courses, online courses, continuing professional development, workplace learning etc. The challenge here is the breadth of learning as this form of learning is very wide ranging. In-formal learning is unstructured and more difficult to measure. Heinonen and Tuomainen, (2020) point out “the recognition process for non-formal and informal learning are more challenging because the learning is more diverse in nature” (p. 404). Similarly, Copper and Harris, (2013) note the diversity with RPL observing that RPL cannot be reducible to “one size fits all p. 15”.

2.3 Lifelong Learning

Lifelong learning policy has been developing since 1995 both at a European and international level (NFETL, 2015). In 2000 the White Paper on Adult Education – Learning

for life recognised the diversity in the field of learning and advocated for a Lifelong Learning policy providing opportunities for learning over a lifespan. The White Paper set out a blueprint for future development of Adult Education in Ireland. It defines Adult Education as "systematic learning undertaken by adults who return to learning having concluded initial education or training p. 12" (Department of Education and Science (2000)). A key underpinning theme from the White Paper was focused on the adult learners' re-engagement with education having exited the system earlier in their life. The White Paper called for a consultation process focused on Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) and Work Based Learning (WBL) with the aim of developing a more streamlined procedure. Policy in Ireland has moved on greatly since 2000 with RPL featuring in the National Access Plan 2002 to 2028 and Ireland's National skills strategy for 2025. The current Government has plans to increase lifelong learning participation as evidenced in the SOLAS Lifelong Learning report issued in 2017. This report highlights one of the key targets of the Action Plan for Education (September 2016) is an ambition to increase Ireland's lifelong learning participation rate to 10% by 2020 and to 15% by 2025 (SOLAS 2017). According to AONTAS (2021) RPL is one of the current challenges experienced in the lifelong learning field. The main challenge with RPL is the actual recognition and validation of prior learning and experience and ensuring they are given appropriate value. Assigning appropriate value provides accessible and meaningful pathways to lifelong learning for those with a variety of skills. Increased capacity, and use of RPL will ensure more meaningful and assessable pathways are open to the adult learner community (AONTAS, 2021). Miguel et al. (2016) points to RPL allowing for 'personalised lifelong learning' allowing participants to have an active role conducting their own education. Sandberg and Andersson (2011) note that interest in RPL is predominately better in the context of adult learning such as adult education, vocational (working life) learning and higher education with a central focus on the transfer of knowledge and competencies. In recent years focus has shifted to

extending Higher Education to more underrepresented groups. RPL can provide opportunities to many learners who can benefit from their prior life experiences in particular the mature adult learners. This cohort of student can bring with them many life and prior learning experiences whether formal or informal. Experiential learning (learning from experience) comprises unexpected knowledge and skills acquired through life including learning demands from the workplace (Garnett & Cavaye, 2015).

2.4 RPL Policy

The past few years has seen an increase in the link between education policies and social well-being and inclusivity. The focus on RPL has shifted from a focus on social justice aspects to a focus on the benefits to society in particular economic development promoting lifelong learning. The inclusion of non-formal and informal learning constructs extends the learning beyond education to learning through work, family, social and other forms of learning (Andersson et al., 2013). Harris et al., (2014) refers to RPL as providing a 'window of opportunity' for individuals to have an active role in their own learning. It offers "a process-oriented approach recognising what individuals have learned in their lives and, putting value on this learning linking it through personalised lifelong learning p. 65." This in turn connects RPL and lifelong learning policies. RPL policy in Ireland is informed by international reports and developments in Europe in addition to a national context incorporating legislative change and development, expert group reports on future skill needs and QQI. The higher education landscape and national strategy for higher education also play a significant role in RPL policy.

2.4.1 European Developments

From a European context RPL is high on the policy agenda with the establishment of two European Frameworks. The European qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF – LLL) and the Bologna Framework (1999) for European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Both of these frameworks include RPL as a principal theme providing additional learning pathways and opportunities (Goggins et al., (2015). Harris et al., (2014) indicates the Bologna declaration was “created to harmonise qualification and promote socio-integrative economic mobility using the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) p. 75.”

RPL is critical to recognition of foreign qualifications and integration of foreign students to our higher education institutes. According to Anderson (2021) “RPL is often related to processes of the transfer and mobility of knowledge p. 15”. The regulatory framework for international academic recognition in Europe is The Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC). This is the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education drafted by the Council of Europe in co-operation with UNESCO. The LRC has been ratified by more than 50 states. The LRC was developed as the reality of higher education student and staff mobility was evolving (European Commission, 2020). In 2012, a European Recognition Manual (EAR) was published followed two years later by the EAR manual for Higher Education Institutions (EAR HEI) published by ENIC-NARIC (ENIC: European Network of Information Centres in the European Region, NARIC: National Academic Recognition Information Centres in the European Union). The manual advocates for a flexible recognition methodology and offers a practical translation of the principles of the LRC. (European Commission, 2020). According to the ENIC-NARIC the aim of the manual is “to create more clarity regarding recognition practices in all European countries and to contribute to a joint recognition area of higher education.” (Www.enic-Naric.net. (n.d.).

In recent years Europe and Ireland has seen an influx of refugees fleeing conflict. Many of these refugees were forced to flee their home country with incomplete education or have completed education with undocumented qualification. A high volume of these refugees are highly skilled bringing with them experience and professional skills. According to Anderson (2021) RPL is a key factor in the integration of highly skilled refugees. Domvo (2022) argues, while these frameworks have affected the higher education landscape standardising policies and government structures RPL is not appropriate for refugees arguing that RPL is in fact a barrier for refugees. Guo (2013) promotes the use of RPL to assist the entry of migrants into the workforce quoting supporting mobility and globalization of workers as quoted by Goggins et al. (2015). In 2017 the European Qualification Passport for Refugees (EQPRP) was implemented by the Council of Europe, an initiative to assist refugees to rebuild their lives by having their qualifications assessed and to continue their studies with their host country. Domvo (2022) notes the EQPRP allow refugees who are unable to provide proof of the qualifications to demonstrate their skills and standards however recommendations are not being implemented by all European countries. Domvo (2022) found RPL to be a significant barrier for refugees trying to access higher education because of a lack of unified policies and processes. He calls for the development of coordinated solutions across Europe. While Domvo (2022) is supportive of the use of the European Qualifications Passport he is also critical of its value at local level with it only be adopted by a few countries. Domvo (2022) calls for the development of strong policies and processes to ensure the equitability of RPL. Similarly, Anderson (2021) is cognisant of the need for carefully designed RPL process to avoid exclusion rather than recognition.

2.4.3 National Policy Context

From an Irish Government policy perspective RPL is “critical to the development of an accessible, education and training system and is a key foundation for lifelong learning policies”. (NFETL, 2015, p. 1). There is no dedicated infrastructure for RPL in Ireland however in 2012 the national education agency, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) was established. QQI is responsible for establishing policies and criteria for access, transfer, and progression (ATP) for providers. Goggins et al. (2015) noted in their conference paper that QQI were revisiting RPL policy and were in consultation with the various stakeholders to achieve a more cohesive approach to delivering RPL nationally. However, according to AONTAS (2021) Ireland is still without a national policy on RPL from which education providers can draw on. RPL was first advocated for by the National Council for Education awards (NCEA) as a mechanism to recognise prior work-based learning. In July 2000 the Department of Education and Science issued a white paper on Adult Education: Learning for life. One of the core recommendations of this white paper was the establishment of educational policies embracing the life cycle, recognising the multiplicity of sites, both formal and informal, in which learning can take place. (Department of Education and Science, 2000). On the 20th December 2012 the European Council issued recommendations to all countries within the European Qualifications Framework to have RPL procedures on the validation of non-formal and informal learning in place by 2018 (Council of the European Union, 2012).

In the wake of the global recession and extraordinary levels of unemployment the Irish Government introduced legislative changes to increase employment opportunities in addition to the introduction of Labour Market Activation (LMA) policies such as the ‘Pathways to Work’ incentive introduced in 2015 (Goggin et al 2015). Following the economic downturn and high unemployment levels many learners returned to education to

upskill and retrain through government initiatives such as Springboard which launched in May 2011 providing free part-time places in higher education. RPL plays a key role in the upskilling objectives of the National Skills Strategy. (Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, 2011). The aftermath of the Covid pandemic in 2019 saw unemployment levels once again increase. Many individuals who had been temporarily laid off returned to the workforce but for some, their jobs were permanently lost. The introduction of the updated policy 'Pathways to Work 2021-2025' is a strategy to help people return to the workforce (Department of Social Protection, 2021). Upskilling and taking up further education and training opportunities is one of the key strategies in the government Public Policy Framework for Economic and Labour Market Recovery. (Department of Social Protection 2021). RPL is a key avenue for evaluating skills and knowledge for learners returning to education or upskilling post COVID-19. Murphy (2019) notes the need for an overarching national policy/strategy which would enable greater implementation and visibility of RPL across the range of contexts to include enhanced integration of data across regional and national sectors.

2.4.4 Higher Education Landscape

RPL is perceived to be an access route for the non-traditional student. Indeed, one of the key objectives of the Higher Education Performance Framework 2018-2020 is “to increase in number and proportions entrants through non-traditional routes with RPL being one of those access routes” (HEA, 2018, p. 29). A primary objective of current government policy is to widen access and participation in HE, this is reiterated in the most recently published National Access Plan. The National Access Plan is a strategic action plan for equity of access, participation, and success in higher education for 2022 to 2028. One of the goals of this plan is the improvement of the use of recognition of prior learning. (HEA,

2022). Notwithstanding this RPL practice and policies are still lagging behind and are very slowly developing, for various reasons, including lack of resources and of practitioners according to The European Agenda for Adult Learning Report (AONTAS, 2021). Indeed, these issues are not confined to Ireland, they are prevalent across Europe. According to the EHEA despite the overarching legal framework established by the LRC, as well as the structures and ongoing policy and expert dialogues, there is still obstacles to overcome and further action is required. RPL could be instrumental in providing an access route for students from varying educational, economic or employment backgrounds indeed bringing with them a wealth of knowledge.

According to Cooper and Harris (2013), RPL could be a strategy for widening access and participation and they refer to RPL as “a specialised pedagogical practice that provides tools for navigating access to new learning opportunities across diverse contexts” (p. 15). Miguel et al. (2016) also argue, there is a gap between those who have skills and those who don’t simply because of the absence of basic formal qualifications. They see RPL as a potential tool to close this gap. RPL could be a way to counteract this exclusion and widen participation to this cohort of student. Miguel et al. (2016) found that “participants acknowledged the recognition of prior learning as a general mandate to reduce barriers and provide learning possibilities to a wider audience p. 190.” McCready (2017) indicates that APEL has the benefit of improving social inclusion and widening participation despite coming under criticism on several fronts. RPL aims to afford recognition to socially useful knowledge gained in sites outside of the university and widen access to higher education. (Pokorny et al., 2017). RPL has the potential to uncover further participatory opportunities and sources of mutuality that offer recognition, again allowing for widening participation. (Sandberg & Kubiak, 2013). RPL is a significant theme in the Bologna Framework for the European Education Area (EHEA) noting RPL to be an essential component of ensuring

student progression in higher education institutes. (European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2015). As noted by Goggins et al. (2015) in the context of HE in Ireland there are three categories of educational institutes. There are Universities, Institutes of Technology, and other providers (private colleges), with access to HE continuing to be a strategic theme within HEA policy. Despite this strategy there is still no separate or dedicated infrastructure for RPL in Ireland (AONTAS, 2021). Notwithstanding this there are national policies at institutional level as noted by Ilona Murphy (2019) “although Ireland does not have a single national policy on RPL, there are national policies for different actors and sectors that address specific issues related to workforce development, and aspects of diversity and social inclusion p. 2.” Noteworthy also is the role of The National Qualifications Framework (NQF) in Ireland in the context of RPL and their aims to be a unifying device, to create ladders, linkages and pathways that affords seamless mobility to lifelong learners. (AONTAS, 2021). NFETL (2015) found there was “no clear or consistent standard approach adopted by all institutions which presents a difficulty for the potential learner p.25”.

2.4.5 Training

The 2000 White Paper on Adult Education – Learning for Life reported the requirement to increase in numbers suitably qualified assessors for APL and WBL. The paper highlighted the need for a national training programme to develop a body of suitably trained and qualified assessors. This is evident across several papers with another theme arising from the literature review relating to the matter of staff training and how the progress of RPL has been impacted by a general lack of understanding, knowledge, and expertise in the area for staff new to the field (NFETL 2015). Claridge and Felce, (2017) found the development of university staff to be an essential element of the RPL application process to enhance their understanding of the learner’s needs. They also noted staff

development to be a vital element in the Accreditation Project. In April 2021 University College Cork approved the Certificate in Continuing Professional Development in RPL. The course is a Level 7 course and the only one of its kind in Ireland designed specifically for adult educators and community education staff (ANTOS, 2021). This was a significant development in RPL removing one of the barriers highlighted where there was a lack of understanding, knowledge and experience which could have resulted in misinterpretation or misunderstanding during the assessment and validation process. Pokorny (2012) maintains that “assessors and facilitators need to be trained to value the unfamiliar learning that has come from sources never imagined, represented in unfamiliar ways p. 129.”

2.5 RPL Practice

Udeagha et al. (2022) maintained RPL students should be treated in a person-centred way. They should be provided equal opportunities with non-judgemental tutors and flexible educational approaches which can make a difference to these students’ lived experiences. What this points to is the need for further questions to be asked concerning additional resources that could be provided to enhance the student’s orientation, academic language, and technological capabilities which in turn would benefit students.

Interestingly, very similar results were found by Snyman et al. (2017) they note like Udeagha (2022), that a more comprehensive support and mentoring policy should be adopted. In a learner centred approach knowledge of the learner is crucial. Knowing what their needs and experiences are and what barriers to RPL assessment they may experience are essential. Being aware of the different types of knowledge the adult learners bring, such as cultural, practical knowledge, wisdom, formal learning and situated knowledge is fundamental. A holistic approach towards knowledge can benefit an RPL approach. That being said Udeagha (2022) also noted that while a more focused intervention was required

a limitation of their study was not identifying the type of support interventions that would be most suitable. Similarly, Claridge and Felce, (2017) note the importance of targeted support for students with assistance being provided completing applications. This support would ensure all RPL has been identified, translating the knowledge of students to facilitate the transfer of credits.

2.5.1 Uses of RPL

Despite a lack of Irish policy, the Irish Government has been instrumental in validation for formal and informal learning with the emergence of several exciting innovations in RPL practice. This has been outlined by Ilona Murphy in the Country: Ireland European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2018 update in conjunction with European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) (Murphy, 2019). The introduction of the Springboard initiative in 2011 has supported the upskilling and retraining of many learners. According to Murphy (2019) providers of Springboard anticipate an increased proactive use of RPL with many institutions offering RPL as an access pathway. In 2014 The University of Wolverhampton was one of the first universities in the UK to set up to recognise and accredit prior learning for serving personnel and veterans of the British Armed Forces (Claridge & Felce, 2017). The HE sector in Ireland has endeavoured to widen the uses of RPL with a similar programme developed with IT Carlow in conjunction with the Irish Defence Forces. These programmes are at level 6 and 7 of the national framework in leadership, management and defence studies. In addition to this there have been further innovations within the HE sector with the development of additional programmes such as a retail degree programme, a cloud technologies master's programme in addition to programmes within early learning and childcare and nursing programmes nationally. The SOLAS apprenticeship programs offer

retraining and upskilling for older mature learners and learners pursuing career changes. Knowledge, work experience and learning from these apprenticeship programmes can be used in the future to further academic and professional qualification through RPL accreditation and validation. Indeed, many learners gain access to the apprenticeship programmes in the first instance using RPL for module and/or time exemptions in recognition of formal qualifications or trade related work experience (Murphy, 2019). In 2016 the first-degree apprenticeship programmes were established running in partnership with HE Institutes and employer organisations. According to Doherty and Stephens (2019) policy makes in Ireland are keen to promote these programmes and to further develop the WBL field through the use of higher education apprenticeships.

In the professional field several professional bodies use RPL for exemptions from certain modules within their professional education programmes for prior experiential learning. Students seeking access to the Institute of Certified Public Accountants in Ireland and similar accounting bodies can apply for access to professional qualification gaining recognition and exemptions in recognition of their prior academic qualification at higher level institutions. Similarly, Engineers Ireland, The Royal Institute of Architects of Ireland and The Institute of Professional Auctioneers and Valuers all embrace RPL. Garnett and Cavaye (2015) commend Middlesex University in the UK on their pioneering work in the field of WBL using RPL for admissions and/or credit having their worked based knowledge recognised. This recognition acknowledges work-based learning's relevance and equivalency to learning obtained in the higher education classroom. This can also be seen with initiatives such as Retail Ireland Skillnet (RIS). RIS offer learners who do not meet the academic or certified entry requirements access based on their prior experiential learning. Learners who have worked in retail for many years without formal qualifications can apply through RPL for formal recognition and validation of their prior experiential work-based

learning. Goggins et al., (2015) note the critical role RPL takes in linking the workplace and the formal learning system.

2.6 RPL & the Adult Learner

The HEA defines mature learners as students aged 23 or over on the 1st January in the year of entry to HE (HEA, 2021). For the purpose of this section, I will refer to the mature learner as the adult learner. RPL is of particular use in the context of the adult learner (Sandberg & Anderson, 2011). RPL forms an integral part of widening access to higher education for the mature adult learner. According to AONTAS (2021) adult learners have different needs to their traditional cohorts. Kenner and Weinerman (2011) also note the different learning styles and needs of the adult learner. They also note the life experiences and wisdom adult learners bring with them. Andragogy is an adult learning theory developed by Malcolm Shepherd Knowles in 1973 focusing on how adult learning differs from children. Kenner and Weinerman, (2011. p.88) set out Knowles four principles characterising adult learnings which are a) they are self-directed, b) they have an extensive depth of experience, c) they are ready to learn and d) they are motivated. Adults returning to education face many barriers. Bellare et al. (2023) found many obstacles related to cost and time as a barrier to adults returning to education. RPL can play a significant role in reducing study time and cost for the adult learner. Another significant benefit of RPL to the adult learner is the interplay between recognition and confidence. Through RPL learners get recognition and validation of their prior experiential learning thus enabling confidence building and enhanced confidence in academic ability (Sandberg and Kubiak 2013; Pokorny et al. 2017; Snyman and van den Berg 2022). Thus, RPL and adult learners are interconnected in many ways with RPL widening access and reducing barriers for this cohort of student accessing HE.

2.7 Theoretical Frameworks

Alongside the requirements of this phenomenology inquiry, this study used a theoretical framework to help guide the research design and data analysis. RPL research has been developing in different disciplines over the past twenty years with some significant contributors, with differing theoretical underpinnings, Hamer, (2011) & (2012); Sandberg & Kubiak, (2013) adopted Honneth's, (1995) theory of recognition. Hamer (2011) maintains that Honneth's theory of recognition offers a useful conceptual framework for understanding the dynamics and effects of RPL assessment. What is evident in the literature is the 'identity' struggle that can occur with RPL and how recognition can influence the learner identity. Hamer (2011) concludes that certain patterns of recognition support the development of self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem. Sandberg and Kubiak (2013) also maintain that understanding of recognition in RPL draws attention to the conditions under which RPL has the potential to build self-esteem and enabling self-realisation. Sandberg and Kubiak (2013) found that family was a significant source of recognition.

Sandberg & Andersson, (2011); Sandberg, (2012) & (2014); draw on Habermas' communicative theory in their research. Sandberg and Andersson (2011), maintain the lifeworld is defined as a horizon of experiences. RPL is a process involving several actors all of whom require mutual understanding and communicative rationality. (Sandberg & Andersson (2011). Sandberg (2012) found the theory of communicative action to be the ideal tool to enhance the assessment process by focusing on mutual understanding between the teacher and the student. Pokorny (2012) adopted Lave and Wenger's situated learning theory where learning is a social process whereby knowledge is co-constructed. There can be conflict between learner identity and professional (work) identity, they are two very distinct identities. Pokorny (2012) found that tutors can enable the learner to

retain a sense of identity as a “knowing” person in the context of both their work and their studies. Furthermore Pokorny (2012) indicates that “students found the process confusing, alienating and disempowering p. 125.” Broadly speaking tutor approaches to APEL has a significant influence on students’ experience and their sense of worth and ability.

While the study draws on theories related to recognition, experiential, communicative and situated learning, it is framed by Honneth’s theory of recognition. (Hamer, (2011); Hamer, (2012); Sandberg & Kubiak, (2013). Honneth built upon Hegel’s intersubjective theory of the self, drawing on Mead’s psychology, he believed “the possibility of an undistorted relation to oneself proves to be dependent on three forms of recognition: love, rights, and esteem” (Honneth, 1995, p. 21). I have used this theoretical framework to draw meaning from the impact to the ‘identity’ struggle which can occur with RPL and how recognition can influence the learner identity. Honneth’s theory functions within three spheres, Figure 1, illustrates a visual presentation of the theory.

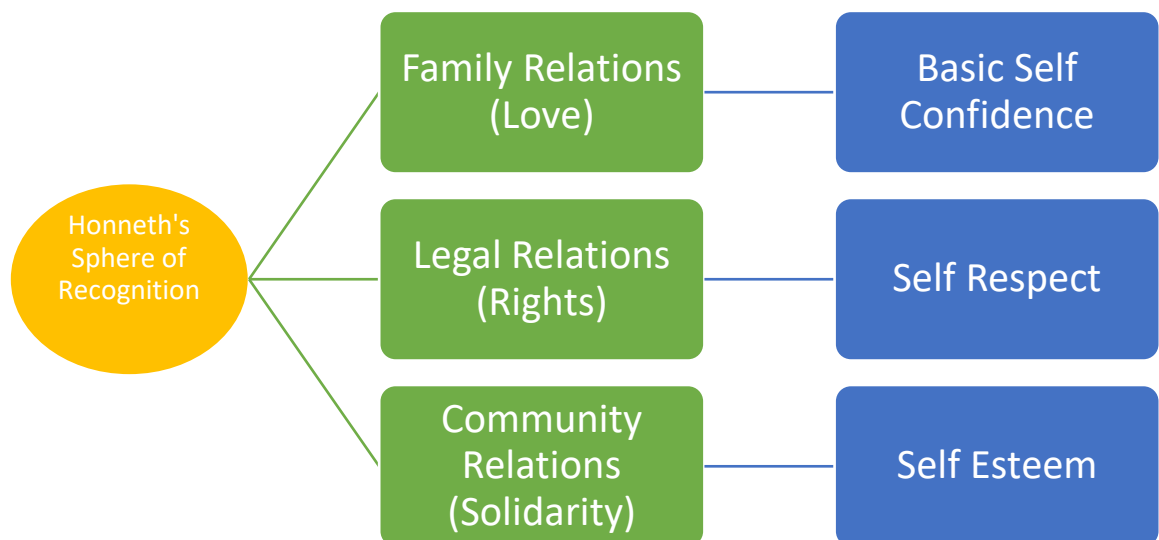


Figure 1: Illustration of Honneth's Theory of Recognition

Hamer (2011) focused her study on the significance of the candidate-assessor relationship and argues that recognition is a relational process. Similarly, Sandberg & Kubiak (2013), note the importance of mutual understandings suggesting that “RPL practice needs to move from a one-way judgement in which the assessors’, managers’ and tutors’ normative views dominate to something more relational and negotiated p. 362.” They indicate that ‘RPL can help facilitate the development of a more positive relationship to learners engaged in RPL processes, enhancing their learning and development p. 351’.

When relationships break down communication breaks down which can impact the RPL process and have a negative impact as noted by Sandberg (2014), “when cooperation and communication were effective, assignments were completed cooperatively based on mutual understandings however in some instances cooperation and communication did not work between tutors and participants which resulted in a negative experience for participants p. 691.” According to Sandberg and Kubiak (2013) recognition is necessary for self-realisation. They perceived that individuals learn by participating and engaging with experienced colleagues. In the context of RPL a student arrives as an outsider to a new community, identity formation is a part of and an outcome of this process. They found that individuals did not just struggle with their identities in the assessment phase but within other various social worlds and within various interactions with those involved in the process. They also noted that while the three forms of recognition (Personal, Legal & Societal) within the aspects of Honneth’s theory appear overly linear nonetheless they found family was a significant source of recognition. Of equal significance was educational process and conferring of qualification which in turn followed on to societal recognition in the form of social esteem raised through RPL’s role in increased salary. Hammer (2011) suggest the three forms of Honneth’s theory being love, rights and social esteem to be supportive of the development of self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem. Miguel et al. (2016) adopted a mixed methods approach in their study. The qualitative element of

the study was analysed noting participants felt personally, socially, and professionally valued. This revealed satisfaction from obtaining higher educational qualification and greater confidence in social placement than they had before. However, this conflicts with Udeagha et al. (2022), their phenomenological study found students had a fear of failure and self-doubt. The two studies were completed in different countries against very different cultural backgrounds which could explain the conflicting outcomes. However, Udeagha et al. (2022) noted students from other culture groups may have different experiences. While both these studies did not use a specific theoretical framework there are similarities in relation to self-recognition, self-confidence, and self-awareness.

2.6 Conclusion

Despite the increase in recognition of RPL there has been very little research conducted specifically related to the students' lived experiences of the RPL process in an Irish HE context. McCready (2017) reports an under representation in the literature concentrating on the barriers to a wider take-up of RPL and argues "the field remains largely fragmented, as a body of research p.100." Udeagha et al. (2022) points to a focus in the literature in a specific area namely "a literature search for studies that measured the success of RPL students in nursing programmes revealed mostly research on RPL accreditation p. 2."

In an Irish HE context there is a distinct lack of literature relating to RPL with particular focus on capturing the essence of the student experience of RPL. This literature review initially presented RPL in the context of European and national policy, followed by a review of scholarly contributions on the topic of RPL. It is evident from the literature that there are several 'gaps' which call for further inquiry focusing on capturing the students' voice.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This study aims to understand the experiences of students accessing or obtaining module credit to gain entrance to HE in Ireland using RPL as a pathway to admission. This chapter sets out the paradigmatic positioning underpinning this research. It also sets out the research methodology used to explore the lived experiences of students gaining access to HE through the RPL process. This chapter will describe and explain the research methodology and the rationale behind its use. I will expand on the research methods used and provide an outline of the process of participant selection and data analysis examining issues of quality and rigour. Finally, I will explore ethical considerations, the limitations of the study and will end with a brief conclusion.

3.2 Paradigmatic positioning

Paradigms are the embodiment of what we think about the world (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), they are philosophical assumptions which are in essence, a world view or general perception of what is thought about the world. Thomas, (2009) refers to a paradigm as the 'technical' term for how we view and research the world. Within the social sciences paradigms are approaches to knowledge, how we gain and use knowledge. According to Punch & Oancea, (2014), Positivism and Interpretivism are the main paradigms with Positivism associated with quantitative research methods and Interpretivism associated with qualitative methods. An interpretivist paradigmatic approach will underpin this study. Applied to education research, this paradigm enables researchers to build rich local understandings of the life-world experiences of teachers and students and of cultures of classrooms, schools, and the communities they serve (Medina &

Taylor, 2013). Thomas (2009) identified the interpretivist researcher to be one that “looks closely at what people are doing by using our own selves, our own knowledge of the world as people p. 75.” Immersing ourselves into the research and having in-depth conversations with the participants will give us a better understanding of how they view the world. According to Scotland (2012) researchers determine their own design for their research with these designs being contingent on their own assumptions and worldviews. Different paradigms inherently contain differing ontological and epistemological views; therefore, they have differing assumptions of reality and knowledge which underpin their research approach. The interpretivist researcher is interested in people and will be immersed in the research (Thomas, 2009). According to Cohen et al., (2011) the interpretivist researcher is interested in and concerned about the individual. The interpretivist paradigmatic approach allows me as the researcher to have in depth detailed conversations with the participants. This also permits observation of their behavioural characteristics, mannerisms and features allowing better understandings of what represents reality for them and how they view the world. I have adopted an interpretivist approach for this study because I am interested in students who have experienced the RPL process and how they have experienced the phenomena. I wanted to delve into their experience, understand what they think, how they understood the process and from this interpret their views and behaviours.

3.2.1 Ontology

Ontology is the study of being, existence, a belief, what is the form and nature of reality and what can be known about it. My stance in this study is relativism holding a view that reality is subjective and differs from person to person (Scotland, 2012). The purpose of the study is to explore and capture the voice of a specific cohort of students using a semi

structured interview. The students are mature students. The research is focused on their experience of obtaining module credits and/or exemptions or obtaining access to HE for their prior experiential learning from formal or non-formal learning. The study attempts to investigate the diverse ways in which the students see and experience the RPL process. From an ontological perspective this research is the study of people and the diversity or similarity of their experiences of RPL. The research question is focused on the nature of the lived experience of the student. To be ontologically consistent I have adopted a phenomenological methodological approach to this study which has idiographic and hermeneutic underpinnings.

3.2.2 Epistemology

While ontology is concerned with the nature of reality or *being*, epistemology is concerned with the knowledge of *knowing*. It is concerned with the nature and form of knowledge, how is knowledge created? How do we know what we know? What it means to know? The Epistemological stance in this study is subjectivism and is characterized by a concern for the individual. "To retain the integrity of the phenomena being investigated, efforts are made to get inside the person and to understand from within." (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 17). Thomas (2009) purposes the researcher to use their own interests and understanding as an aid in interpreting the behaviours and views of others. While I have not accessed, HE through the RPL route I have gained exemptions from professional examinations for prior certified (formal) learning. I have also gained course credit accessing a HE program of study at year 2 because of my period learning. My own experience would have been somewhat different from the participants experiences nonetheless my prior experiences have given me at least a partial understanding of elements of the process. The nature of subjectivism is that experience will differ from person to person and their

experiences, and their interpretation of their experiences will be influenced by their personal feelings and opinions. My role as the researcher is to interpret their interpretations. van Manen (1997) suggests that questions of knowledge should be referred to the lifeworld “where knowledge speaks through our lived experience p. 46.” Moustakas (1994) purports that “phenomena are the building blocks of human science and the basis for all knowledge p. 41;” in other words, experience expands knowledge.

The very nature of RPL is recognition for prior learning and experience which raises two questions; 1) how have the students obtained the knowledge? and 2) how do they know what they know? We all learn in different ways and knowledge varies from one person to the next. According to Thomas (2009) knowledge is interpreted in different ways and there are different ways of coming to knowledge. Moustakas (1994) articulates that phenomenology should be employed in the discoveries of knowledge. The researcher should immerse oneself in the concentrated study of experience in their quest to acquire knowledge while at the same time adopting the reflective powers of the self.

3.3 Research Rationale - Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a qualitative research approach that seeks to depict the essence of a phenomenon perceived through the eyes of those who have experienced it (Neubauer et al., 2019). According to van Manen (2014) phenomenology is a unique methodology focused on the notion of “lived experience”. This study required an approach that would investigate the experience as it was lived while at the same time giving a voice to the students participating in the study. Neubauer et al. (2019) purposes phenomenological study necessitates understanding the experience of others to gather insights regarding the specific phenomenon. The aim of this study is to gather new understandings of the process of accessing HE through the RPL process while describing

and interpreting the experience through the voice of the participants. Phenomenology is best suited to investigating and describing student experiences, unearthing similarities in them rather than just narrating their stories. This study focuses on people's lived experiences thus phenomenology is well suited to the research questions. A Phenomenological approach allows me to pursue knowledge from the lived experiences of others, obtaining the insider perspective of the experience (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015).

There are several different branches of Phenomenology rooted in different schools of philosophy (Neubauer et al., 2019). The different philosophical approaches include transcendental or descriptive phenomenology founded by Husserl (1858-1938), existential phenomenology which was articulated by Merleau Ponty (1908-1961) and hermeneutic or interpretive phenomenology founded by Heidegger (1889-1976) (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015, p. 252). Husserl's school of thought was reflective transcendental phenomenology, the careful examination of experience to unearth meanings in knowledge, in effect the essence, the lifeblood of knowledge. Husserl argued that we should 'go back to the things themselves'. (Moustakas, (1994); Willis, (2001); van Manen, (2014); Eatough & Smith, (2017); Smith et.al, (2021). This reference to 'the things' relates to the experiential content of consciousness, how they emerge in an individual's awareness and how the human mind can misrepresent or distort reality positioning it into established groupings. Husserl's approach involves 'bracketing' insisting the researcher bracket themselves from their bias and beliefs in order to describe the phenomenon.

Heidegger although influenced by Husserl shifted to a more interpretive approach to phenomenology. Eddles-Hirsch (2015) suggests that Husserl focused on understanding individual experience using epoche/bracketing whereas Heidegger considered it impossible to set aside principles and opinions. They believed the researcher was required to immerse themselves into the phenomenon to gain knowledge of the experience. Neubauer et al., (2019), identifies Hermeneutic phenomenology as "studies of individual" narratives to

understand what those individuals experience in their daily lives, in their lifeworlds. A Hermeneutic approach allowed me to use my own past experiences and knowledge to direct the investigation whereas Husserl's transcendental phenomenology approach would require 'bracketing' which I felt would stifle the inquiry.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is underpinned by phenomenology and hermeneutics (Eatough & Smith, 2017). Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre are four of the major phenomenological philosophers. Hermeneutics is the theory of interpretation and a major theoretical underpinning of IPA. According to Smith et al., (2021) Schleiermacher, Heidegger and Gadamer were three most important hermeneutic theorists. Eatough and Smith (2017) are of the view that the emphasis for Heidegger and Gadamer was in the interpretation with interpretation being the "foundational mode of being and that to live a life is to interpret p. 5." Schleiermacher concentrated on how interpretation tells us something about an individual and their intentions however Gadamer was more focused on how text may be understood in a particular historical framework. (Eatough & Smith, 2017). The interpretative process encompasses both the researcher and the participant. The researcher is not simply looking at the experience in isolation. Using IPA, the researcher aims to engage the participant in reflection, targeted at contemplating on the significance of the experience itself and how the participant made sense of that transition in their life (Smith et al., 2021). IPA is idiographic, it is concerned with individuality, concentrating on stories from each individual participant delving deep into the individual experiences. The purpose of this idiographic approach is to fully understand the individuals' thoughts, beliefs, and behaviours (Noon, 2018). To be idiographic the researcher focuses on each participant separately and individually investigating their experience in isolation, analysing the individual experience in depth before moving onto the next participant. The emphasis here is on finding patterns of meanings, delving deeper and exploring the historical and social contingencies of lifeworlds

(Eatough & Smith, 2017).

Tuffour (2017) concludes that IPA presents adaptable and versatile approaches to understanding individual's experiences but cautions the researcher, advising they should be mindful of the participants experience ensuring they give a voice to their experience with subsequent adequate interpretation of their narratives. It is imperative in this study that a voice is given to each of the participants and their experiences are adequately interpreted. The choice to use IPA in this study stems from its theoretical background in phenomenology underpinned by hermeneutics and idiography. This study is concerned with understanding the participants experience at each individual participant case level, identifying themes which will always be experiential. There is a duality to what me as the researcher wanted to achieve from this study. Firstly, I was interested in exploring how the participants found meanings in their experience and secondly through interpretative engagement with the participants how I as the researcher made meanings and sense of the phenomena. Smith et al., (2021) refers to this duality as IPA operating a double hermeneutic, with the researcher seeking what it is like from the participants view but also standing alongside the participants looking at the experience from different angle, asking questions and pondering over what they have said. While IPA has predominately been used as a methodology within the psychological and medical fields it is progressing into the human, social and health sciences (Wagstaff et al., 2014; Charlick et al., 2016; Tuffour 2017; Crawford 2019; Noon, 2018). Jeong and Othman 2016; Noon 2017; Noon 2018; Crawford 2019; Groman & Paquette 2023; O'Neill & Kenny 2023 have successfully used IPA within the educational research field.

3.4 Identifying and Engaging Participants

Participants were selected purposively rather than randomly because of their

ability to offer insight into the specific field of RPL. There was no age or demographic criteria however it was expected the participants would be mature students possibly returning to education using RPL as an access route. The two main criteria were 1) participants must have accessed their course through RPL and 2) the course must be a course in a higher-level institution. Initially the research was to focus on the institution in which I teach. Brightly coloured information posters (Appendix i) were placed in several locations on each floor of the college building however I encountered difficulties finding participants and decided to widen the net. I reached out to the Recognition of Prior Learning network, targeting the gatekeepers of RPL within their institutions (Smith et al., 2021). The posters were circulated nationwide throughout higher-level institutions through the Recognition of Prior Learning network. Finding participants proved very difficult and I had to reach out to colleagues and associates to find suitable participants. The main purpose of the study was to investigate and explore the nature of the lived experiences of students accessing HE in Ireland therefore it was imperative I was granted access to participants who could give me access to their perspective of the RPL process. (Smith et al., 2021).

IPA requires detailed case by case analysis giving a full appreciation for each participant's case (Pietkiewicz & Smith 2014). To be able to give a comprehensive and in-depth analysis the researcher is obligated to give the appropriate time to each participant. Keeping the sample size small ensures adequate time is spent analysing the data rather than using a large sample pool resulting in more general findings. Noon (2018) purposes the researcher should generate a reasonably standardised sample allowing them to secure the experiential details from a specific group of individuals who have experienced the phenomenon. This study concentrates on the lived experiences of three participants focusing on their specific experience of RPL and their reflection and interpretation of those experiences.

Once the participants had engaged with me and confirmed their willingness to participate, I engaged in an email exchange with them and provided them with the research information sheet (Appendix ii) and consent forms (Appendix iii). I requested they read the research information sheet provided and return their signed consent forms. Informed consent was given by the participants, and I engaged with them again via email exchange to arrange a suitable time for the interview.

There were three participants in the study each given the pseudonyms Jane, Mark & Ann. All are older mature learners aged 40+ are employed and have families. Jane chose to travel and experience life before embarking on her education journey. Throughout her travels Jane expanded her experience in the field of childcare. When Jane settled down and while her children were still young, she set up a small preschool from her home. Some years later she described a sudden awakening and realisation that life was passing her by and asked herself the question “what am I going to do with the rest of my life?” Following some research Jane identified where her interest and talents lay and used RPL to apply for a postgraduate degree in childcare. Fulfilling her need to transition into teaching and learning she completed a train the trainer course and returned to HE and completed a Masters degree in teaching and training. Mark left school at the age of 15 with no leaving certificate after been told by his teacher that school wasn’t for him. He tried the apprenticeship route and other odd jobs and ultimately took up employment in service where he spent the better part of two decades. He had tried to return to education as he matured however was rejected as he had not completed a leaving certificate. Following a change of career and a move into the healthcare sector with the assistance of RPL he was able to access HE. He has returned to HE and used RPL three times and believes strongly in lifelong learning. He is currently completing his third HE course and continues to do regular online courses expanding his knowledge and engagement with lifelong learning. Ann describes herself as having been in education for most of her life, she is also a strong

advocate for lifelong learning. She completed her leaving certificate and initially completed a marketing diploma. She worked for a large company for 10 years working her way up the levels of management. While working she engaged in a lot of training in Ireland the UK and America. This learning was both formal and informal but not at third level and much of it was industry related. She then moved into the field of early years completing level 5 & 6 programmes and like Jane she completed the train the trainer course. Ann has also completed leadership and inclusion programmes. By the time Ann embarked on her HE journey she had extensive work and educational experience and was driven to completion of her programme of study within 2 years. With RPL Ann obtained module credit and was able to access her programme of study from year 3.

3.5 Data Collection Method

The essence of phenomenology is detailed narratives from participants discussing their experiences of the phenomena. The correct choice of data collection method was imperative for this type of study. According to Peoples (2020) while a structured interview would give structure it can be too rigid and does not allow for deviation from the specific list of questions. Peoples (2020) also notes the unstructured interview allows for plenty of deviation but carries the potential risk of failing to address all the elements relevant to the research topic. Smith et al. (2021) maintains the semi structured interview to be the preferred means of data collection for IPA. For this reason, semi structured interviews were identified as being the most appropriate method of data collection for this phenomenological study. The semi structured interview offers the best of both worlds allowing structure to the interview with several main questions and additional questions or key words for prompting conversation while giving the flexibility to deviate from the set questions. This approach allows participants to discuss other areas that may be relevant to

the RPL research.

Smith et al. (2021) described a qualitative research interview as a 'conversation with a purpose'. To this end the in-depth interview facilitates an interaction between the researcher and the participant enabling participants to tell their own stories in their own words. In this case the role of the researcher is to be an active listener allowing the participants to do the talking while the researcher gently probes for more depth and detail. Typically, in the phenomenological investigation the long interview is the method through which data is collected on the topic and question. The phenomenological interview involves an informal, interactive process and utilizes open-ended comments and questions. (Moustakas, 1994, p.129). van Manen (1997) points to two specific purposes of interviews "1) used as a means of exploring and gathering experiential materials for a more in depth understanding of the human phenomenon and 2) used as a vehicle to develop a conversational relationship p. 66."

The Microsoft Teams platform was used for the semi structured interviews. One interview was required for each participant lasting approximately 45 minutes. In preparation for the interview, I developed an interview guide (Appendix vi). The questions were open-ended using additional questions as prompts to guide the conversation. I wanted to use the interview for active participation between me and the participant in the knowledge generation process (Hoffding & Martiny, 2015). A pilot semi structured interview was conducted initially followed by the main research participant interviews. Following the pilot interview, I re-evaluated my interview guide and made changes permitting me to be more focused aiding me to navigate through the main interviews. While some participants spoke freely, and in-depth other participants required more prompting to allow them to become fully immersed in the interview. The interview guide evolved as I progressed through the participant interviews. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim on Microsoft Teams. The raw transcriptions were provided to the

participants following the interview and participants were advised that there may be some follow up questions. This would only be required in the event further clarification was needed on certain aspect of the interview once I had assessed and analysed the raw transcribed data.

3.6 Data Analysis

Phenomenological research can be problematic when it comes to data analysis. There is a large volume of transcript pages and notes to be deciphered and the data does not always fall into neatly aligned clusters and themes. Phenomenological research uses the analysis of significant statements, the generation of meaning units, and the development of what Moustakas (1994) called essence description. There are a broad range of options within the phenomenological domain in terms of data analysis. The options I considered were Husserl's transcendental/descriptive phenomenology or Heidegger's hermeneutic/interpretive phenomenology. Edmund Husserl is the founding principle in phenomenological inquiry (Neubauer et. al., 2019; Gill, 2020; Smith et. al., 2021). Martin Heidegger, a student of Husserl diverged from Husserl and developed 'hermeneutic' or 'interpretive' methodologies. (Neubauer et. al., 2019; Gill, 2020; Smith et.al., 2021). Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur are also advocates of hermeneutics specifically the "hermeneutics of meaning-recollection" (Finlay, 2009, p. 11). In more recent years Max van Manen has emerged straddling both descriptive and interpretive phenomenology seeking to transform lived experience into a textual expression of essence (Gill, 2020). The data analysis stage of a research project involves the transformation of the data into meaning, to come to terms with this meaning we must look at it in terms of structures of meanings or themes. van Manen (1997) refers to "Theme Analysis as the process of recovering the theme or themes that are embodied and dramatized in the evolving meanings and imagery of the work p. 78."

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis is a research method dedicated to the examination of how people make sense of their life experience (Smith et. al., 2021). Fade (2004) articulates IPA to be phenomenological as it delves into personal experience seeking insider knowledge, looking for the persons own perspective with the view that understanding requires interpretation. IPA differs from generic thematic analysis in that it is underpinned by phenomenological, hermeneutics and idiographic theories. IPA is concerned with understanding experiences at an individual case level and emerging themes are always experiential (Smith et. al., 2021). Peoples (2021) cautions the novice researcher to keep it simple and choose from the two main philosophers Husserl or Heidegger. Similarly, Larkin et al. (2006) suggests the notice researcher be cautious alluding to the fact that it may be safer to embark on another qualitative method. While IPA may be somewhat daunting to the notice inexperienced researcher, I decided to embrace this method adopting the Smith et al., (2021) seven step heuristic framework, Figure 2.

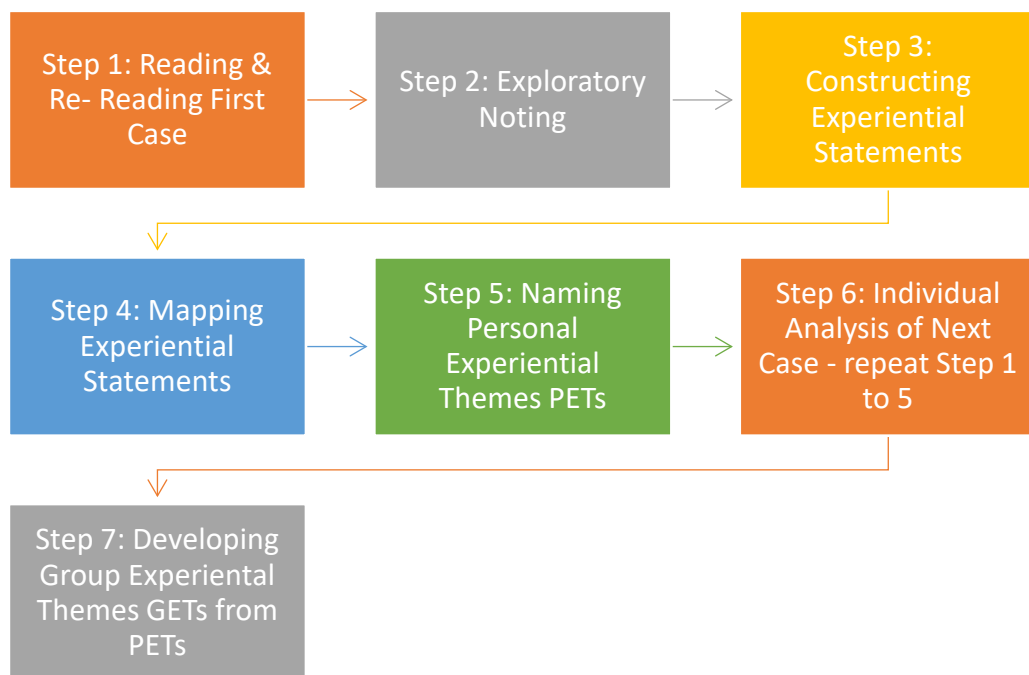


Figure 2: Smith et. al., (2021) Seven Step Heuristic Framework for Analysis

This framework provides for analysis which draws on many of the processes, principles, and strategies typically employed by IPA researchers. According to Smith et al. (2021) the primary concern of IPA is the lived experience of the participants and the meaning the participants make from that experience. There is a double hermeneutic stance here as the researcher makes sense of how the participant makes sense of their own experiences. Following the IPA's idiographic commitment and to ensure I became fully immersed in the process I started with the first interview transcript numbering each line of the transcript and splitting it into two columns. The left column contained the transcribed data, and the right column was left blank intentionally for note taking. An example of a small section of the raw data from participant 1 (Jane) is presented in Appendix v (Figure 5), the file has been redacted to avoid identifying the participant.

I then commenced reading the transcript while watching the recording at the same time. I then re-read the transcript moving onto step two of the heuristic framework, the exploratory noting phase. This involved re-reading the transcript with an open mind noting anything of interest. This stage also involved making annotations in the right column indicating my initial thoughts, observations, and/or reflections relating to participant's narratives (Noon, 2018). An example of the exploratory noting for Jane is presented in Appendix v (Figure 6).

Once I had concluded the exploratory note step, I proceeded to step three. This involved constructing experiential statements (emerging themes) while, moving away from the transcript itself and concentrating on the exploratory notes. "The statements are experiential because they relate directly to the participant's experiences" (Smith et. al., 2021 p.86). A small example of experiential statements from participant three (Ann) are presented in Appendix v (Figure 7).

The next step was developing the experiential statements. This was step four which involved searching for connections across the experiential statements, mapping and

clustering statements that were related and could be grouped together. A small example from the experiential statements mapping/clustering process for Ann is presented in Appendix v (Figure 8).

The next stage of the process was step five personalising the experiential statements, naming the Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) and consolidating and organising them into a table. This process involved giving a title to describe the characteristics of the experiential statements and grouping them into a table. To illustrate this a small section from the PETs table for Mark can be seen in Appendix v (Figure 9).

I then moved onto step six, this involved continuing the analysis of other cases. I started on the transcript for participant two (Mark) and repeated the above process from step one to step five. Once I had concluded this I moved on and repeated the process again on the transcript for participant three (Ann). I was moving within the hermeneutic circle studying the parts as in the 'individual cases' and then the whole as in 'all the cases' being influenced by my annotations on the transcripts as a whole and my interpretation in relation to the whole and the whole being interpreted in relation to the part (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). The final Step adopted a similar approach to that used when developing the PETs in Step 5. I observed patterns of similarity and differences across the PETs which allowed me to create Group Experiential Themes. I called these the "Major Themes". I developed a table incorporating the main Group Experiential Themes, followed by the group level sub-themes underpinned by the relevant experiential statements and quotes from participants. The emerging Group Experiential Themes are discussed in more detail in the next chapter. To illustrate this a section from the detailed Group Experiential Statements table "Major Themes" can be seen in Appendix v (Figure 9).

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethics is concerned with the conduct of the researcher, how the researcher thinks about their research project and their respect for others (Thomas, 2009). The researcher has a duty of care towards the research participants with particular focus on informed consent, confidentiality, and data protection. I Adhered to the ethical guidelines and principles of the college and adopted the British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2018) guidelines. The study was conducted with Integrity in a transparent and respectful manner. The first principle of ethics is to ensure the participants are truly informed. Informed consent is the provision of as much information as possible to participants permitting them to make an informed decision (Bryman, 2016). To give informed consent the participants must understand what they are agreeing to (Thomas, 2009). To allow them to make informed choices the participants were provided with a Research Information Sheet (Appendix ii) to ensure they were informed and could give "informed consent". Included with the research information sheet was a Research Consent Form (Appendix iii). Consent was obtained from all participants and all participants were advised of their choice to withdraw from the study at any point. In addition to informed and ongoing consent confidentiality was a significant concern. The researcher has a duty of care to ensure no harm can be caused where an individual is identified or identifiable (Byrman, 2006). Care was taken to ensure there was no information within the transcripts and data analysis that could potentially identify a participant. To safeguard anonymity pseudonyms were use for each of the interview participants. During the interviews some of the participants identified higher level institutions they attended, actual institution names were not used to avoid the threat of the participant being identifiable. Any information that could potentially identify a participant was redacted from the sample interview transcripts included within the appendices. While the research topic was not a highly sensitive area phenomenology

requires in depth discussions, interpretations, and reflections of the experience for the participants, IPA is the study and exploration of extremely personal experiences (Noon, 2008). Interview participants can at times feel awkward reliving their experience. I was mindful of this when constructing my interview questions and used prompts to keep the conversation moving to avoid awkward silences and to ensure the participant felt comfortable. Ethical implications have been considered throughout this study engaging sustained reflection and review (Smith et. al., 2021), involving reflective deliberation (Punch & Oancea, 2014) to establish ethical rigour.

3.8 Quality and Rigor

Validity and quality were at the forefront of my mind throughout this study from planning through to implementation. Bell (2010) stipulates the importance of critically examining the data and assessing to what extent it is likely to be reliable and valid. Ensuring quality and rigour is of utmost importance in any form of research project regardless of the method used. Phenomenology is within the qualitative research family however for phenomenological researchers it is challenging to defend the research in terms of references that do not belong to the methodology of phenomenology (van Manen 2014). Smith et al. (2021) observes the importance of validity in qualitative research and the need for it to be assessed in its own terms and not against quantitative research.

Bryman, A (2016) identifies two primary criteria for assessing the validity and reliability of a qualitative study as proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Guba and Lincoln (1994) these are Trustworthiness and Authenticity. Trustworthiness is made of four criteria which were reflected on throughout the study, these are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

I reflected on the quality of the study throughout my journey from the initial

planning and design stages to the choice of methodology following on to the writing, analysis and findings stages. At all times I reflected on how I could enhance the quality and make this IPA study a strong study that stood out. This study is a phenomenological study adopting IPA which is an interpretivist approach. Sundler et al. (2018) refers to transferability in terms of how useful and relevant the findings are. Perceptions gathered from the lived experiences of the participants in this study may be like those found in similar studies. The Group Experiential Themes established in this study may provide insights to others conducting a similar phenomenological study. Dependability was another factor that was considered throughout the study, according to Morrow (2005) dependability allows for the replication of the study in that the process is detailed to the extent it can be repeated. The data analysis chapter provides a detailed explanation of the process adopted in this study. In addition to dependability, confirmability was another factor which I considered, in the reporting of findings I used direct references to the transcripts.

Initially a pilot interview was conducted to allow me to test out the Microsoft Teams platform and to refine research questions developing prompts to be used in the main participant interviews. I allowed 45 to 60 minutes for each interview to ensure adequate time was given to gather in-depth descriptions from each of the participants. Focus was placed on the participants attempts of making sense of their experiences. I adhered to a strict seven step conceptual framework for IPA to ensure the analysed data could be traced throughout the whole process. The framework was developed by Smith et al. (2021) and can be seen in Figure 2 "The Heuristic Framework." This framework functioned as an audit trail to maintain trustworthiness, transparency, dependability, and confirmability and to enhance the overall quality of the study. Throughout this research I engaged in critical discussions and reviews with my supervisor to maintain the credibility of my research.

3.9 Limitations

The aim of the study was to understand and appreciate the lived experience of students who had gained access to HE through an application to have their prior formal learning and experience recognised. While I believe the aim of the study was achieved, the methodological approach used within the study makes replicability and generalisation difficult (Brynam, 2016). This can be a deterrent for enacting future policy change. This study was completed as a Master of Arts in Education Practice, the scope of the project was therefore limited. Time and participants selection were factors limiting the scope of the study. Ideally for an IPA study at master's level Smith et al. (2021) would recommend five participants. This study was conducted with three participants to ensure I had sufficient time for the detailed level of data analysis IPA requires. As a novice researcher in RPL and indeed in IPA, I was intensely aware of my own limitation in this field of research. To alleviate this, I did extensive reading and research on RPL in addition to phenomenology and IPA. Technique improves by repetition; initially I conducted a pilot interview to allow me to test and refine the interview questions. My initial interview guide was replaced with a more detailed interview guide with prompts to promote conversation and I noticed as I completed each interview my technique improved.

It would have been useful to have data on the numbers of students accessing higher education using RPL however this information was not readily available and was another minor limitation of my research. While I can say two out of three of the participants came from one particular discipline; early childcare, it would have been more meaningful to have some background in relation to the number of students applying for RPL and the relevant disciplines.

3.11 Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to present the methodological approach for this study. The study was grounded in the phenomenological convention. In the tradition of phenomenology specifically IPA this study focused on the lived experiences of students who had gained access and or module credit to HE through the RPL process. The study concentrated on the meanings they derived from their experience and my interpretations of those experiences. The method chosen was a semi structured interview using the Microsoft Teams platform. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, the transcriptions were used for the basis of analysis using IPA. Ethical considerations were adhered to throughout the study. The next chapter will set out findings of the study including a discussion of those findings.

Chapter 4: Findings & Discussion

4.1 Introduction

This chapter sets out the results of the study. The aim of the study was to develop an understanding of how the RPL process was experienced by students. Within the broad research questions, the study sought to explore and capture the essence of the participants experience of RPL. Furthermore, the study intended to identify any challenges the participants faced and how they rose above those challenges. In answering the research question's themes and sub-themes were generated from the interview transcripts. This chapter will start with a brief overview of the major themes emerging from the study and then follow with a more detailed discussion for each theme.

4.2 Overview of Major Themes

Four Group Experiential Themes emerged from the detailed analysis phase; they have been named "Major Themes". A summary of the major themes & sub-themes is detailed below in Figure 3.

Summary Table of Group Experiential Themes (GETs)	
GET - A	MOTIVATION TO EMBRACE RPL
<i>Sub Themes</i>	<i>Career Progression drives return to higher education RPL as a pathway to higher education The RPL Shift</i>
GET - B	EXTRACTING LEARNING FOR LIFE
<i>Sub Themes</i>	<i>The Synergy between RPL and lifelong learning Experience, the building blocks to knowledge Knowledge from "real" experience</i>
GET - C	ITS NOT ALL PLAIN SAILING
<i>Sub Theme</i>	<i>Academic Challenges Acceptance for who I am</i>
GET - D	RECOGNITION AND VALIDATION
<i>Sub Theme</i>	<i>The path to self realisation Validation conveys confidence</i>

Figure 3 Summary of Major Themes

Theme A: Motivation to Embrace RPL: This first theme captures the mix of motivating factors driving the participants to return to higher education and use RPL. Within this theme there are 3 sub-themes; Career Progression drives return to higher education; RPL as a pathway to higher education and The RPL Shift. The first sub-theme discusses how participants were motivated to return to education because of career choices. Sub-theme two relates to how students used RPL, and the final sub-theme discusses the diverse use of RPL.

Theme B: Extracting Learning from Life: This theme engages with the synergy between RPL and lifelong learning. Focusing on the relationship between experience and RPL. Within this theme there are 3 sub-themes; The synergy between RPL and lifelong learning; Experience, the building blocks to knowledge and Knowledge from “real” experience. Sub-theme one discusses the relationship between RPL and lifelong learning. Sub-theme two relates to building knowledge over time. The final sub-theme concerns real experience.

Theme C: It’s not all Plain Sailing: This theme focuses on the benefits and challenges of RPL. Within this theme there are 2 sub-themes: Academic Challenges and Acceptance for who I am. The first sub-theme focused on the various challenges encountered by participant throughout the RPL process. The second sub-theme discusses the interaction with co-students on their course and a period of settling in and being accepted.

Theme D: Recognition and Validation: This theme draws on the theory of recognition focusing on the impact of RPL on self-identity. There are 2 sub-themes within the theme; The path to self-realisation; Validation conveys confidence. The first sub-

theme is related to the changes to student identify through the process. The second sub-theme focuses on the role of RPL in self-confidence.

4.2.1 Theme A: Motivation to Embrace RPL

This theme describes the driving factors behind the participants choice to use RPL and is discussed under three sub-themes.

Sub theme: Career progression drives return to higher education

A re-current feature of the participants reasoning behind returning to education and embracing RPL was motivated by career progression. Miguel et al. (2016) found the expectations of the participants in their study of the prior learning program were primarily professional. RPL is beneficial in heightening visibility of informal and non-formal learning with the potential for reducing course time and cost (Fejes & Andersson, 2009). This was certainly a motivating factor for Ann and what attracted her to RPL. Gaining module credit and the opportunity to complete the course in 2 years rather than 3 years was a critical factor for Ann in proceeding with third level. Some of the participants received encouragement and support from others (mentors, work colleagues) which influenced their decision to return to HE. This was articulated in a number of ways. Two of the participants made direct statements regarding the role a person of authority had on their decision. For example, Jane said:

“My mentor/tutor suggested why don't I go to XXXXX as they had a lovely BA honours programme in childcare, do the first year. See how you get on and this could take you to a higher qualification and then I could move on to fulfil whatever ambitions I had in the future.” (p. 2)

For Jane her return to higher education coincided with the timing being right and influence and encouragement from her tutor/mentor. Jane left school following the leaving certificate. She travelled and had a family before deciding to return to education, when asked why do you think you chose the RPL route? Jane answered:

“Because I'd never done a degree in the past, like I said, when I finished school, I travelled, I worked, but then I decided to have a family and then sort of, you know, when midway through having your family, you realise, well, actually I'd like to have a qualification ... it sort of hit me like 'oh' well this is like the obvious choice and this is the route to go.” (p. 5)

Similarly, for Mark he was taken under the wing of his senior manager, here Mark points to his appreciation for her help.

“While I was there, I had someone in there who took an interest in moving me along within the organisation which was great, and she basically pointed me in a couple of directions so the first proper third level course that I ever did was with XXXXX.” (p. 4)

Both Mark and Ann's choice to return to education was driven by career change. They are both conscious of a connection between education and career progression. For Mark he experienced a trauma and was forced to change career and then education became important again later as his career changed. It was apparent to him that education was the pathway to career progression.

“I always like learning, I like reading things and things like this, but it wasn't, a big

thing, but then I got hurt ... So, I ended up having to find something else to do (p. 3).

I went to work for XXXXX It became a bigger issue to go back and make sure I was solidly, solidly capable of dealing with anything that was going to come up.” (p. 22)

Ann on the other hand made her own choice to change career and recognised the importance of education. There is a sense of appreciation in Ann’s words, an appreciation for what education can do for her as she links this to doors opening for her from a professional perspective.

“So, third level only really came about when I entered early learning.” (p. 3). The further education sector is so important, like it is, it’s the gateway to professionalism, for many people, you know and for those better jobs.” (p. 26). “It has definitely opened up the opportunities for me.” (p. 18)

Sub theme: RPL as a pathway to higher education,

One of the key benefits of RPL is a pathway to higher education supporting widening access and contributing to student retention for mature learners (Pokorny et al., 2017). Much of the literature documents the link between RPL and widening access and its contribution to social justice providing learning opportunities for those previously excluded. (Andersson & Fejes, 2014; Fejes & Andersson, 2019; Hamer, 2011; Hamer, 2012; Sandberg, 2012; Andersson et al., 2013; Cooper et al., 2013; Garnett & Cavaye, 2015; Udeagha et al., 2022). Jane and Mark both used RPL to access HE as mature students while Ann also a mature student was awarded module credit and was able to advance to year 3 of the degree program.

Jane shows appreciation for RPL:

"So RPL actually meant a lot to me and helped me, I think get into the university programme.' (p. 8)

As previously noted, Mark left school at the age of 15 with no leaving certificate, this caused a barrier for him returning to higher education, although he did several short courses in the interim. There is a sense of Mark feeling unworthy of college:

"Third level sort of alluded me, every time I went for a third level course in the first say five or six years of my career, I never got accepted, simply because I didn't have a leaving certificate. I had no real educational background ... Third level was, I wouldn't say elite, but it was, it wasn't for everyone at the time, so it was Trinity and there was UCD which was still building itself up, so it wasn't, it wasn't an opportunity for me." (p. 3)

RPL provided an opportunity for Mark to access HE where previously he had been rejected.

"So, when I applied for that again, the same issues came up, I didn't have a leaving cert but they started to see from an educational point of view, from an experience point of view, I had an awful lot of these things, so that was the first time I ever had to fill out an RPL form.' (p. 4)

After completing his diploma Mark continued to embrace learning and undertook many short courses and online courses. Stephens (2022) found the primary value

of RPL for individuals with work-based experience was to gain access to higher education and qualification. Mark returned to HE again in later years using RPL again as an access route and vented somewhat about having to repeat the process.

"The diploma course was relevant ... but they wanted all the other stuff everything that I've done within the area that I was actually going to study on ... I've done courses in all of those over the years, so I have to add those in, and they weren't part of the original diploma and that's the thing, you're better to throw everything onto these.' (p. 11) "They do ask about experience and stuff like this, again, I don't know for, I suppose, the first couple of times, yeah it was fine, having it recognised all that stuff that I've done before to help me get onto the course." (p. 13)

In contrast to Jane & Marks use of RPL for access, Ann used RPL for course credit. Ann was adamant she was getting course credit for two years and would not sign up to the course unless she got the course credit.

"It was important to me that I did get into third year ... you know, cause my understanding is that the normal RPL process is that you're going into second year so that was one of my main motivators (p. 5) So I had an awful lot of experience that I just felt that I didn't really want to do three years so I wouldn't have done that, I wouldn't have done three years of a degree." (p. 12)

Ann didn't want to have to re-learn what she already knew. She had covered the content in her level 5 & 6 in addition to her leadership and train the trainer courses and wanted recognition for it. This was noted by AONTAS (2021) when they emphasised 'prior' in terms of learning already achieved. For Ann she had already achieved this learning so

why should she have to repeat it.

There is a sense of entitlement with Ann, but a just sense of entitlement.

"I didn't want to do it over four years, that was one big thing that I didn't want to do." (p. 3) I had lots of experience and training at level six, ... I had already done three years in early years ... I had done the Linc course, so you know I really didn't want to be repeating stuff I'd already learnt." (p. 5)"

Ann is an extremely strong character, and I sensed her ability to fight for what she felt she was entitled to. In contrast to Ann, there is a sense of, I wouldn't exactly say weakness but perhaps softness to Mark and an acceptance that access was only open to him.

"No, it was purely access, it was purely to get onto the course ... I wish I could have skipped a year, but they never let me skip a year on anything." (p. 15)

Ann was motivated by her need to reduce the degree to two years and was driven to ensure her RPL application achieved this. Her experience in the education and training field would have influenced her application greatly. In contrast to Mark's experience, I sensed his frustrations at RPL only giving him access rather than course and module credits and/or exemptions.

Sub Theme: The RPL Shift

Mark has used RPL three times with different institutions, encountering different experiences each time. Both Jane and Mark have in their own way taken ownership or

what they refer to as 'my RPL' as if it is a possession. According to Cooper et al. (2013) RPL will vary depending on the program design and the institution. Mark articulates that the application process got easier with the passage of time. The first time he used RPL he described feeling embarrassed, there is a sense that he wanted validation from the college. It bothered him that when he was accepted, he got no official acknowledge or validation for his prior learning. The negative experience for Mark was a lack of feedback from the college so he could get a better understanding of how RPL gave him access. The negative impact of lack of assessor feedback is also noted by Sandberg (2012). Mark expressed his disappointment at not getting feedback:

"It was a double-edged sword, so when I had to fill out the forms the first time, I felt a little bit embarrassed ... they wanted me to justify why I should be on the course. There wasn't a formal, oh well, well done, you're on the course. Your prior learning went well, you know." (p. 13) "It doesn't intimidate me as much as it probably did the first time, and I think it can be a very positive experience if you get the right organisation dealing with it in the right way ... (p. 23)

Mark refers to old and new learning and how they converge, using his previous RPL application and CV he added to the next RPL application:

"Again, I took the old prior learning that I did in XXXXX you know and dropped it on like added on some extra bits." (p. 16)

Jane compares her RPL to that of others and establishes a connection to how they ultimately converge:

“My RPL is almost the same as theirs, but this was in a formal setting, so it's almost like formally recognised, you know where mine was, yeah, unconventional, but almost equal.” (p. 26) “It got recognised getting into the programme, but it was like forgotten about and then it got recognised again, like I said later on it sort of keeps rearing its head, it's there and it was very useful ... I've two sets now of RPL, I had the original sets, and then my new RPL. (p. 25) “Their RPL was different from mine... but its formal experience because it's in an NHS ... by the time I got to the degree cycle my RPL is almost the same as theirs ... so, everyone I think had their own you know set of RPL.” (p. 26)

4.2.2 Theme B: Extracting learning for life

Theme A drew on the motivation for returning to education and using RPL. Theme B moves into the area of knowledge gathering and building over time, through work, social activities, formal and informal learning. Miguel et al. (2016) suggests learning is extended across the life span of an individual and that individuals have a constant need to extract learning. Theme B is split into three sub-themes: The synergy between RPL and lifelong learning; Knowledge from “Real” experience; Experience, the building blocks to knowledge.

Sub theme: The synergy between RPL and lifelong learning

This sub-theme focuses on how education compliments experience. There is a synergy between RPL, life experience and lifelong learning. RPL plays a significant role in the agenda for lifelong learning. According to Sandberg and Anderson (2011) learning is an ongoing process spanning a lifetime with lifelong and life wide learning playing a pivotal role for RPL. Similarly, Andersson et al. (2013) note RPL is closely connected to lifelong learning. Equally AONTAS (2021) and Goggin et al. (2015) concur that RPL encourages

lifelong learning providing meaningful pathways for those with diverse experience. According to Miguel et al. (2016) throughout our lifecycle individuals will continue to need to build on their knowledge and skills to be adaptable to a rapidly changing social and economic world. They also suggest that encouraging individual to become qualified will attract and re-engage adults in formal learning. Prior experiential learning, RPL and informal learning all converge. The participants in this study, all had life and work experience behind them before embracing higher education. They had all embraced learning in different ways and experienced very diverse educational journeys. Each in their own way experienced a need for validation of that life learning and experiential learning. For Jane it was a sense of wanting more, a reinforcement of her experience with certification, she is observing where academia stands in the pecking order and its fundamental role in her achieving her ambitions.

“I looked into what certification I could get ... I had a basic qualification ... but I always knew that I wanted to go on and do something further.” (p.2) “And obviously an academic qualification, obviously that tops off the whole thing it’s just you know, but yeah, all of the learning everything and it was, yeah very worthwhile.” (p. 9)

Ann reinforces Jane’s sentiment and the importance of validation. She also has a sense that something is missing and alludes to the unbalanced scale of her experience. Pokorny et al. (2017) found a similar need in her participants to have their experience formalised into a qualification at higher education level. Ann expressed this in her interview:

“And because I had a lot of everything but not adding up to much, I applied to do the degree.’ (p. 3). “But it does open other avenues, you know, but unfortunately you

need that piece of paper because you need to be able to back up your knowledge.”

(p. 18) "I was able to get a degree which meant I was able to go on and do my masters ... opened opportunities for me." (p. 18)

An interesting divergence from Jane & Ann’s stance on education, filling the gap or balancing the scale is the impact of prior educational experiences on Marks drive for qualification. Because Mark left school at the age of 15 and had no leaving certificate despite having a wealth of experience, I sense he feels the need to be better educated than others. He is demanding this of himself arising from a lack of belief in his own abilities.

“Personally, I’ve always had this chip on my shoulder about education. I’ve always felt that I needed to learn more or do more or put more effort in because I left school at such an early age, you know that type of thing.” (p, 18)

Mark, Jane and Ann all have a real sense of enjoyment of education, they returned to education many times and are advocates for lifelong learning. Mark perceives education to be a staircase, each new leaning experience is the next step on the stairs but there are more steps to mount. Stephens (2022) found the RPL process for some students revealed a hidden passion for learning with some progressing to additional higher-level programmes. In many ways Mark reminds me of myself, he has a similar drive for lifelong learning and his quest for the next leaning experience:

"Every piece of education that you've done formal, informal, wherever and listing it out, it's like I said, it's lifelong learning all the way through." (p. 22). I try and do a course every year, every two years ... try and learn something new on an ongoing basis ... (p. 19) I'm going to go back and do something else later on." (p. 28)

Jane reiterates Marks sentiments as she continues to expand her toolbox as she aptly put it herself.

"I love doing courses in different areas because to me it's always experience that I'm gonna use it somehow, it's a toolbox to draw upon you're always able to draw on that prior learning and it will help you then boost you into what you do want to do.'

(p. 14)

Ann alludes to the seamlessness in the continuity of her educational journey but culminating to the realisation that she just never got around to embracing third level until her RPL application:

"I suppose I'm in education most of my life, really when you think about it, I just never, never progressed to third level. I worked as a ... I did a lot of training with them both formal and informal, ... so none of it was third level because a lot of it was industry related." (p. 2)

What is evident here is the convergence of views and experiences of all three participants across this theme. This theme focuses on the apparent duality with RPL and experience, a vibrant cross motivational relationship co-exists between them. Mark appreciates the converging of work experience and learning,

"Taking out exactly what type of projects you ran, how big they were, you know, having some sort of idea of what to put into the PRL application now I took my CV, dropped my CV into it and I expanded on the CV more and more, you know the work that I had." (p. 8)

Sub Theme: Experience, the building blocks to knowledge

Knowledge comes in all shapes and sizes, work experience, formal learning, informal learning, it all builds over time. Within the RPL process you are recording those skills and building your knowledge as you continue to re-embrace education and learning. Because Mark had used RPL numerous times he emphasised the importance of not just building skills but recording and updating those skills. Mark is methodical and a proficient keeper of records which were vital to his RPL experience:

"I did a range of courses ... not for the third level ... then I went to work for another organisation more project management, more courses, ... my skill set was built up ... and I kept a record of everything, which was really good for me." (p. 4) "So I was building up that knowledge all the way along, and I kept a record of all of these." (p. 5)

Mark sees the relevance of all learning and experiences. He records all his learning, even courses that may not be relevant to his current studies. These may be relevant to future studies where he may embrace RPL again to continue to build on his knowledge.

"The online courses that you do today need to be taken into account ... for me now I'm trying to learn German and Arabic at the same time which is killing me but even that is going onto your RPL, should be on your RPL." (p. 29)

Ann had also returned to education several times; there is a sense that this building up of knowledge over time prepared her, in a way for the RPL process:

"And so, I suppose I had up to date knowledge from the learning outcomes from Linc,

which were very clear so, I was only after doing that and I had done quite well in it, so that gave me confidence So, I had a lot of experience and training.” (p. 5)

Like Mark and Ann, Jane has built on her skills overtime adding to her chest of knowledge. Unlike Mark, Jane did not keep records of her prior learning and experience. What’s interesting is when she was completing her RPL application this reflective process was a learning experience for her also assisting her to remember learning she had forgotten. Snyman and van den Berg, (2022) in their study referred to a participant who through the RPL process came to realise they had actually accomplished a lot over their years of work and their knowledge could make a difference. Similarly in this study Jane while going through the RPL assess came to realise her accomplishments. She got acknowledgement for what she though was insignificant. She refers to her prior learning as her umbrella of skills:

““I don't have that much experience, but they wanted me to go right back and go well, you've been working with children in whatever capacity for the last 15 to 20 years. That's going to count for something and it kind of made me see the whole RPL in a whole different kind of light, that a lot of it is taken into account from your experience, not just say your academic achievement, which is great” (p. 6) You really have to sit down and think about each job, ... you really start delving in and then you start remembering, ... when you actually have to write it down, it's kind of coming back ... that you've more stuff that you actually forgot about.” (p. 12) Even though I changed kind of direction it's all there that's adding to my overall kind of umbrella of skills ... had like a toolbox to call upon,” (p. 25)

You can see a convergence of skill building overtime and how the participants value

the paths they have choose.

Sub Theme: Knowledge from 'real' experience

Knowledge is gathered throughout life from on the job real life experience to in the classroom real learning experiences. At each stage we are gathering knowledge. The lived experience is a combination of reflection, learning and knowledge which is a process of real life (Fejes & Andersson, 2009). The concept of real-life knowledge is integrated with leaning by doing, the difficulty of course is how this translates to learning outcomes within RPL. As noted above knowledge comes from many aspects of life and therefore there are different forms of knowledge. Cooper et al. (2013) advocate for RPL to be "reconceptualised as a specialised pedagogy p. 3." I had a sense that the breath of experiential knowledge gained by the participants through doing shaped who they were. Ann advocated for more 'real' life experience or aptly put by her "learning by doing"

"I mean, I see so many young teachers coming in from college and they are at a loss, they have no clue and are actually damaging children with their lack of experience."
(p. 20)

Ann has a strong opinion of where life experience fits into the knowledge cycle with RPL being a key element of that:

"Models could be developed across all sectors to meet the shortcomings you know of the life experience, because you don't need to do a full four-year degree if you have all that life experience." (p. 21) "So I suppose it's just getting the quality of those practice placements right I think its evolving and I think eventually we'll have a

much better model, but I mean, I think RPL will be a big part of that.” (p. 24)

4.2.4 Theme C: It’s not all plain sailing

As noted earlier in the discussion there are many benefits to RPL from widening access to reducing course time and costs. In contrast to the benefits there are equally as many challenges with RPL. This theme is split into 2 sub-themes; Academic challenges; Acceptance for who I am.

Sub Theme: Academic challenges

What is prevalent in the literature is the difficulty students have encountered with academic language. (Sandberg & Anderson, 2011; Pokorny et al. 2017; Udeagha et. al., 2022). This was a recurrent theme within this study, predominantly from Ann although Jane also articulated difficulties with Academic language. This is not just a problem for RPL it is indeed a problem for the adult learner which is apparent in adult learner literature. (Kenner & Weirnerman, 2011; Chapman, 2017). There is a perception of language being a hindrance for her:

“It was quite complicated and quite complex because you're asked to describe things that you're not academically trained to do I did find the questions on the RPEL part quite complicated (p. 4) “But a person who doesn’t work in academia, or who may have been away from teaching and learning for many years has no clue what it means, you don't even know what RPEL means That your experience is recognised, you know, it doesn't always do what it says on the tin.” (p. 10) “There is an awful lot of information to be captured It's still quite abstract ... you know because it's a mapping process and that's an academic process, you're asking somebody who's not academic to lay down.” (p. 15)

You can sense Ann's frustrations with the divergence in assessment language and the unnecessary impediment of the process. Sandberg and Andersson, (2011) note the difficulty presented to students with academic terminology and articulate the need for "language proficiency to be dealt with if RPL is to be fair and valid p. 775." Ann expressed her feeling at several stages during the interview:

"You know it has to be student centred, you know, I think it would be to simplify the learning outcomes, and to put them into layman's language, because laymen, normal men and women do not understand academic language, especially as expressed in learning outcomes." (p. 30) "You're asking somebody who has never been to college to figure out how to map their experience against this learning outcome ... (p. 31)

In addition to the difficulty with academic language participants reported difficulties expressing their learning. This was predominately articulated by Ann however I felt that was due to her in depth knowledge of RPL and learning outcomes. Mark and Jane did express difficulties with expressing their informal learning and experience but were not as knowledgeable about the mapping process as Ann was. Pokorny (2012) found a duality in terms of identifying skills, first with the student there was need for retention of evidence of learning and second, a need for training for assessors in unfamiliar learning. Jane expressed a difficulty articulating her experience:

"I think way back then, even though you do QQI, you don't really have the language, you know, that's kind of more academic and professional language so, you do struggle and you don't want to make any, you don't want to make it sound that what you did was worthless, you want to make it sound that it was actually very fulfilling

and worthwhile.” The name babysitting, which people don't take seriously, so there was a little bit of that, difficulty sort of like having to express that” (p. 7)

Similarly, Mark experienced a sense of uncertainty, he also echoed Ann’s opinion of the processing being complicated:

“Having a simpler approach to doing that RPL stuff and also understanding what it means, because there were courses that I didn't put on that I should have put on.” (p. 7) “It did say, formal and informal but it didn't give you any idea of what type of content exactly ... and here's where the learning outcomes were for there, so having that sort of breakdown on that would be ideal.” (p. 9)

Like Mark and Jane, Ann experienced difficulties expressing her experiential learning and found the complexities of the mapping process problematic. According to Heinonen and Tuomainen (2021) recognition of non-formal and informal learning is challenging, and difficulties arise due to its diverse nature. Ann voices her difficulties with the mapping process:

“ I was able to access the modules online ... I went into the learning outcomes for each module and looked at those and tried to match my experience with those learning outcomes, now I wasn't very skilled, but I did the best that I could.” (p. 4) “I suppose my prior academic learning was quite clear because that was simply matching the learning outcome the experiential learning, I felt is harder to map, you know because you're relying on the person at the other end to understand your sector.” (p. 6) “I can talk all day about my experience, but you need the person who's reading it to understand what that translates to.” (p. 6)

Sandberg (2012) found similar problems in his study where there was a breakdown in mutual understanding between the assessor and the student. Here we can sense Ann's frustration.

"You know, because many people have different levels of experience ... what's quantifiable." (p. 7) "There's a lot of variables ... like the quality of the experience and the years, ... The module content should be meeting similar learning goals and outcomes, ... There are so many variables in the experiential piece that you know your experience could be working with young children in the school or you may not have any experience working with babies or you know, it would be more difficult to map out the experiential learning." (p. 10)

Like Sandberg's (2012) study, Ann accepts what she does not understand and just moves on, in a sense she just went with the flow:

"I didn't really know what I was doing, so I was kind of winging it a bit, but I obviously winged it enough because I got through." (p. 4)

Another problematic area can be unskilled or inexperienced assessors. They may be unfamiliar with certain terminology related to specific experience or inadequately trained. Hamer (2012) found the process to be alien for those who had not engaged in formal educational pathways and notes the difficulty where the assessor is unrecognised or non-credible. This resonates with Ann, she struggled with the mapping process, and there was a sense of dissatisfaction where the assessor had no sectorial experience:

"I'd be an industry expert, and I do find it difficult and challenging to see how somebody who doesn't work in a sector can map the experiential learning piece." (p. 6)

Once participants had commenced their studies following the RPL process, there were some who experienced their own struggles with academic life post their RPL application. Initially Jane struggled with academic life, she refers to her need to re-programme:

"I'd never entered into university degrees, so I didn't really know all the prerequisites and the requirements in order to fulfil in order, you know to, you know, to qualify for the course." (p. 3) "They know what the whole university etiquette and all that kind of stuff involved, where I was just kind of like, oh my God, what do they want now and what do I need to give them." (p. 5) "It was a whole new way of thinking and understanding It was really like a brain twirl, so the first couple of months was very challenging." (p. 15)

There is a sense that Jane was not up to the task but then realisation that she was equal:

"They were a lot more clued in than I was, so it's almost like you're playing catch up, but once you're caught up, you're like, ok, we're all the same." (p. 18)

Similarly, Mark struggled, once again his educational background came back to haunt him:

"Getting back into academia and stuff, for me it was hard because I hadn't done

formal exams, freaked me out every single time.” (p. 7) The first couple of weeks when I was on the diploma course ... I felt a little bit different, I felt I needed to be quiet, needed to listen, you know, not say too much coming off stupid.” (p. 20)

Ann's experience differed from Mark and Jane. Ann had been awarded module credit and had progressed to third year. Ann's experience was marred by her late entry, she missed out on orientation due to commencing in year 3. Bruton and Buckley (2021) found a lack of correct orientation impacted adult learners thus influencing their transition to HE and their identity formation. Ann articulates how a lack of orientation was a challenge for her:

“I was kind of I suppose a bit embarrassed or uncomfortable with that ... I had no kind of induction ... I didn't really know what I was doing until the October break, nearly halfway through you know it took a lot of weeks to settle in like no transition into it, so that was challenging for the first couple of months” (p. 11)

Sub Theme: Acceptance for who I am

An interesting finding was the differing levels of interaction with other students on their course and how in particular Ann struggled with this due to her getting course credit. Whereas Mark and Jane had used RPL for access and were less impacted by other student views. There was a sense that Jane felt she was not on a par with her fellow students but then there is acceptance:

"You know when you're answering questions and you're talking about your background,

you just like oh my gosh, like people really know their stuff ... everyone was well seasoned, even though I had the least experience, I was accepted, but I definitely felt that in the first year ... (p. 8) I felt that they came with so much more experience, I had this experience, but they had so much more experience ... so yeah, it does knock you a little bit, but it doesn't mean that my value is any less, but it does take you a while to kind of reconcile that while you're doing it." (p. 17)

In stark contrast to this Ann met with some initial hostility amongst her fellow students, and there is a sense of alienation and perhaps imposter syndrome. Miguel et. al., (2016) noted in their findings some participants experienced the perception of negative public opinion, they felt looked down upon from those having more qualifications. Chapmap (2017), notes the difficulty for mature students of transitioning to HE and the need for a sense of belonging. Anns initial experience was not one of belonging, she articulates the hostility she felt:

"I felt like I was in the playground, the school playground, do you know that sort of thing even though you're dealing with other adults ..., but it was disconcerting in the beginning.' (p. 12) I felt like I was coming into a gang that was already formed ... some of these students were together from first year ... they'd already bonded, so that was difficult, I would just sit by myself." (p. 17)

There is a sense of jealousy where other students coveted what Ann had:

"When I did enter the class, you know, there was a lot of consternation ... I wasn't immediately welcomed because they were quite suspicious that I got straight into third year ... there was such scorn do you know what I mean, how did you get into third year

(p. 10) It can be the individuals as opposed to the system, you know, that sort of way where they kind of say the cheek of you having this and I haven't got that you know I want those shoes." (p. 13)

Despite the unusual start Ann did settle in, there is a sense of acceptance and gratitude for the friendships that were developed:

"I really enjoyed it, made some really good friends ... really positive experience overall."

(p, 14) ... I did make some lovely friends then you know." (p. 18)

4.2.3 Theme D: Recognition and Validation

In this final theme the discussion moves to recognition and validation. The impact of recognition on the participants and how through the validation process their self-confidence evolved. All the participants expressed feelings of varying emotions. This theme explores the impact of RPL on their self-identity drawing on Honneth's recognition theory. Two sub-themes were developed: The path to self-realisation; Validation conveys confidence: The first sub-theme focuses on the transformation from self-doubt to self-realisation and the second theme relates to the impact of RPL on participant self-confidence.

Sub Theme: The path to self-realisation

Each participant was impacted by RPL in their own way and referred to changes within their own identities. Jane articulates the emergence of a new form of herself and her enhanced sense of worth realising her own value. Equally Mark's sense of worth and value comes across through his interview. The participants are all mature students which

of itself brings additional identity crises. Chapman (2017) found the learner identity with her participants was considered positive and could be embraced by students. She also noted that this specific cohort of student (adult learners) have many factors which influence their identity, and a balance needs to be reached in terms of their identity as a student. The participants in the study are all adult learners are in employment and have families. In many ways there are three different identities intertwining, family identity, work identity and student identity and can at time pose an identity struggle. Brunton and Buckley (2021) note participants form learner identities which are added to their existing identities. They found the identity struggle to have implications specifically on adult learners and their transition into HE. They noted interventions such as socialisation and orientation were helpful for adult learners to overcome this identify struggle. This approach would have alleviated Ann's initial negative experience when she commenced HE. Initially she struggled to settle in, had she been afforded some form of orientation this challenge could have been avoided. Rozvadka 2020 also note the struggle between these three identities for the adult learner. Merrill (2015) found the university provided a safe space for one participant to work out and reconstruct their identities while another participant experienced restored self-confidence. Honneth (1995) suggests that with each new form of recognition there is an increase in one's positive relation to self. These positive relations to the self or patterns of recognition can be characterised across the spheres with 3 modes in terms of self-confidence (love), self-respect (rights) and self-esteem (solidarity). (Hamer (2011; 2012). The development of each element of the sphere, self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem are inherent to identity formation. Developing each of these modes is reliant on recognition of others (Hamer, 2011). Securing mutual recognition is essential to identity formation and individual self-realisation (Honneth, 2004). According to Hamer, (2011) recognition and social change impact identity establishing an individual's value. Janes packages away her former self and

becomes the new Jane:

"So that had a huge impact on my own identity because I was like, ok, I'm defining myself, so therefore I have a clear path." (p. 9) "When you undertake that kind of think it, it redefines you ... You have to almost validate yourself, and then sort of almost reidentify yourself because you are not just a babysitter anymore, you're now a babysitter but you're actually undertaking a qualification to validate why you started babysitting in the first place'(Jane, p. 9)

Jane articulates her sense of worth, her sense of surprise at the breadth of experience measured. To some degree I sense she considered herself privileged to have this recognition.

"I don't have that much experience, but they wanted me to go right back and go well, you've been working with children in whatever capacity for the last 15 to 20 years. That's going to count for something and it kind of made me see the whole RPL in a whole different kind of light, that a lot of it is taken into account from your experience, not just say your academic achievement, which is great." (p. 6) "Felt amazing, cause like I said, it's validating your work that you actually do with the children, it is recognised and validated and that feels really good." (p. 10)

Jane accepts her value over time, it is not an initial acceptance. She struggled with her feelings and there is a sense of doubt in her ability:

"I felt no matter even if I had the experience, it didn't mean, for them it didn't mean anything. They had a real-life experience of managing a service, supervising a

service, maybe co-owning a service, ... I was like yeah, I babysat for a few years, and I travelled and then I opened up a place ... so it made me feel a little bit overwhelmed initially.” (p. 17)

During the interview I was bothered by what Jane had said, I said to her “you’re kind of putting yourself down” to which she responded “No, I only felt like that then I’m not now”. Reflectively Jane was putting herself down, but she now has a sense of worth:

“But it doesn't mean that my value is any less, but it does take you a while to kind of reconcile that while you're doing the course, so I might seem like I'm putting myself down, but I'm just as rich and equal to them.” (p. 17)

Reflected in Jane & Mark experiences is the building of their self-esteem over time. Sandberg and Kubiak (2013) identify though the use of Honneth’s idea of mutual recognition and understanding how RPL has the potential to build self-esteem thereby enabling self-realisation. There is a sense of self-realisation as Janes ego shines through:

“I think at the time that I felt I put myself down because I was like, whoa, I arrived thinking I was a big tiger, but actually they were dinosaurs, you know, in that they were like way bigger than me ... so I might seem like I'm putting myself down, but I'm just as rich and equal to them.”(p. 17)

There is a convergence of a sense of worth for Jane and Mark during the RPL application as they completed the various sections of the form and realisation hits them that they have a wealth of knowledge. Mark articulates his sense of worth:

"Going back to education and listing out all of this type of stuff and trying to understand your worth, your, you know what you've achieved has been a big thing personally." (p. 18) "But then going back to the RPL, when you list out your stuff, your achievements, you know, your courses, everything else like this, that makes a big difference from a self-esteem point of view and a personal point of view." (p. 28)

Like Jane, Mark's ego allows him to get over his previous inhibitions about his non-traditional background and see himself equal to others:

"Personally, I will, I've always had this chip on my shoulder about education... (p. 18)

"It made me realise that I don't have to be the most educated or formally educated person in the room ... (p. 22) ... but you know I sat in a room with 20 doctors one time, all at consultant level and you know you feel you have been able to have that level of confidence and being able to sit in the room with someone where a group like that and hold your own is a really key thing for me." (p. 23)

Jane conveys a similar mutuality with Marks experience:

"It kind of all lined up and all the experience made it worthwhile ... it felt amazing, cause like I said, it's validating your work (p. 10). So, I think the jobs that I did was like, worthwhile and meaningful" (p. 11) There were all specialised things and that really broke it down and gave you the sense that you actually had a lot of ... this is a valued person." (p. 12)

An important feature of Marks description of his educational background was the sense in which it was not ordinary, he was different, this was articulated in his self-

justification for not having gone to college:

"It makes you feel shit, you know that it's like, you know, it does, it makes you feel bad, oh you didn't go to Trinity, or you didn't go here or you didn't go there, no, I didn't, I worked for a living.' (p. 21)

Ann perceives the experience of RPL to be akin to childbirth daunting, stressful but you get over it, a sense of being lost, unsure of oneself:

"I was a bit daunted by the whole process, but like I said, I obviously did enough ... I was eligible to join third year of the programme, which I was delighted with, yeah." (p. 4) "It was stressful enough now, but I suppose if the outcomes are positive, you forget the stress, it's like childbirth, isn't it, you know, and I suppose I really didn't know what I was doing so I wouldn't have had a lot of confidence going through the process." (p. 8)

In contrast to a sense of insecurity for Ann, there is an arrogance about her also, while Jane and Mark evolve to a stance of equality with fellow students Ann has a sense of being above her fellow students:

"I was much more ahead in the sector as far as my knowledge was concerned, I got to, I got to understand that going to the classes that, you know, my thinking was very different, I did have a higher level of knowledge." (p. 14)

There is a sense of self-realisation for Ann and Jane where the learning process emphasises the knowledge they already had, Ann states:

"You're kind of reading stuff and you're 10 pages in and you go, but I know all this, I actually live all this every day." (Ann, p. 35)

Jane concurs with Ann she also had her light bulb moment:

"I'm dealing with policy and child protection and da, da, da, nobody mentioned that to me when I was childminding and I was doing this and the other but suddenly you get to the end of your degree or should I say degree cycle, then you're like oh wait a sec, suddenly I'm now drawing on all that experience from when I was in Canada, they had policy certificates and then I was like wait a sec, I actually know that." (p. 24)

Despite earlier misgivings and the need to "do more, be better" Mark appreciates the value of his real work experience and sees himself in a different light, it doesn't matter anymore as for him his years of work count for more:

"From a self-esteem point of view and a personal point of view, it does give you that sense of yeah, you might have had the opportunity to go to college and do it that way, but I've had to work for the past 10 years, on courses, on projects, on everything else to do well." (p. 28)

Across this theme the participants become more aware of their worth coming to appreciate the knowledge and skills they had and realising the benefit of RPL. Sandberg and Kubiak (2013) suggest the shaping of their identification with the self which in turn enhanced self-esteem leading to a positive impact on their work practice.

Sub Theme: Validation conveys confidence

A recurring aspect across some of the participants experiences was a heightened level of self-confidence. Jane and Mark both articulated increased self-confidences. This was also apparent across the literature. Miguel et al. (2016) found RPL had empowering potential for participants and noted increased confidence. Pokorny et al. (2017) noted a transformative effect on participants resulting in increased confidence at work. Snyman and van den Berg (2022) found the PRL process improved students' confidence and the ability to succeed. There is a sense of incredulity and pride in Jane's words:

"It definitely was a confidence boost that makes me feel like okay I am able, I have enough to offer to get me into this I went from level 5 straight to level 7 and 8, it felt amazing, I love telling people that I'm so like I'm so brainy, I'm so academic, no, it does feel good." (p. 8) "So actually having that validated and that experience is becoming, a different, like mini qualification on its own, which really meant a lot." (p. 10)

Similarly, Mark speaks to a higher level of confidence:

'It's helped me a great deal, it makes me more confident in talking to people and dealing with things.' (p. 10)

4.3 Conclusion

This chapter represents the findings of this study. The data obtained during the interviews with participants was analysed and integrated into four themes which were developed to address the research questions. These themes focused on four main areas

and were then divided into sub themes. The main thematic features were as follows: 1. The motivational reasons for embracing RPL. 2. The link between RPL and lifelong learning. 3. The challenges encountered by participants and 4. The impact of recognition and validation on the participant identities. The following chapter concludes the dissertation.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

5.1 Introduction

The purpose of this dissertation was to explore the experiences of students accessing HE through RPL. This final chapter provides a conclusion to the study. The conclusion seeks to reflect upon and draw from the findings of chapter four and how they contribute to answering the research questions. Moreover, this chapter will consider the challenges experienced by the participants while going through the RPL process. This chapter will review the implications of the findings, followed by recommendations culminating with proposals for future research. This research has attempted to fill a gap in the literature specifically in relation to capturing the essence of the student experience of the RPL process.

5.2 Answering the Research Question

The purpose of the study was to explore the participants experiences of accessing HE through RPL. Following an initial review of the literature several questions emerged as set out in Chapter Two. Each question is set out below with a summary of how the findings addressed each question.

Overarching Research Question: What is the nature of the lived experiences of students accessing Higher Education in Ireland through the RPL Process?

Adopting the correct methodological approach was an essential element in answering the overarching research question. Phenomenology was specifically chosen as a

means of capturing the essence of the students lived experience. The four major themes identified in the finding sections focus on the key elements of the lived experiences of the three participants in the study. In addition to the main overarching question there were four sub-questions. A summary of how the findings addressed each of the sub-questions is set out below.

Sub question 1: What motivated students to apply for recognition of prior learning?

In addressing this first question, it was found that the main motivating factor behind the use of RPL was a pathway to access to HE driven by career change and/or progression. This finding was similar to Miguel et al. (2016) where participants expectations were primarily professional. To progress in their careers, the participants were required to return to education. In this study all the participants were mature students from nontraditional backgrounds. Two participants used RPL for access to HE while the third participant availed of RPL for course credit. Mark's story demonstrated how his prior education has caused a barrier for him each time he tried to return to education. RPL removed this barrier giving Mark a pathway to higher education. The benefits of RPL from a social inclusion and social justice view are widely acknowledged across the literature (Andersson & Fejes, 2004; Honneth, 2004; Hamer 2012; Cooper et al., 2013; Miguel et al., 2016; Udeagha et al., 2022).

Sub question 2: How did they experience the RPL process?

The participants experienced RPL in many ways, while there were similarities in their experiences each were quite unique. Mark had engaged with the RPL process on three separate occasions, with each application he encountered a new experience. It was

found that Mark's prior experience of education had led to feelings of self-doubt when entering HE. His story demonstrated the impact that prior educational history had on his self-belief. The first time, he used RPL he experienced feelings of anxiety in relation to acceptance onto the course. When he did get accepted, he would have liked to have feedback in relation to how his prior learning and experienced was accepted. This was also a finding by Sandberg (2012). Mark also voiced frustration at the repetitive nature of RPL, each time he applied he had to complete the same documents which was time consuming, and he felt unnecessary.

For the participants in this study there was a struggle with academic language and a difficulty mapping experience to learning outcomes. This was also very prevalent in the literature (Sandberg & Anderson, 2011; Pokorny et al. 2017; Udeagha et. al., 2022). The RPL process is unique, it is about documenting and assessing prior learning regardless of where it has taken place (Fejes & Andersson, 2009). For prior formal learning participants noted this can be mapped by matching learning outcome from the course to the proposed programme of study. The main difficulty is with the informal and experiential learning element, these challenges arise because of the diverse nature of this form of learning. (Heinonen & Tuomainen 2021). RPL needs to be more learner centred and adaptable to the learners' educational abilities. There are a number of studies equally citing the need for a more learner centred approach. (Pokorny, 2012; Snyman & van den Berg, 2017; Heinonen & Tuomainen, 2021; Udeagha et al., 2022)

Sub question 3: What impact, if any, did the outcome of the process have on their self-identify?

Drawing on Honneth's theory of recognition was useful in making sense of the findings where the participants identity was impacted by the RPL process. It was found

that prior experience of education had led to some participants experiencing mixed emotions from self-doubt to frustration. As the participants navigated the process, they became more self-aware having a deeper understanding of their worth, building self-esteem and enabling self-realisation (Sandberg & Kubiak, 2013). The participants became more aware of the value of their skills and knowledge over time. Some of the participants acknowledged they had formed new identities or had re-defined themselves through enhanced self-confidence. This was also found by Snyman and van den Berg (2022) in their study where they noted improved confidence and ability to succeed.

Sub question 4: What impact, if any, did achieving exemptions have on their subsequent academic experience?

With regards to this question, there is some overlap in the findings stated above in relation to difficulty with academic language experienced by the participants. Another challenge identified for participants was acceptance from other students and acclimating to academic life. Ann experienced initial hostility from students because of the credit she was awarded and found it difficult to settle in due to a lack of induction. Jane needed time to adjust to academic standards and equally settled in over time. Mark has become a seasoned academic returning to HE several times and continues to embrace lifelong learning.

An interesting finding outside of the research questions was a lack of awareness of RPL and its benefits. Before applying for RPL Mark and Jane had never heard of RPL. In fact, they didn't know what it was and had no awareness of its existence. Jane became aware of RPL when her mentor/tutor suggest it as a pathway to access for her degree course. Mark

became aware of it when he applied to the college, and they requested he complete the RPL application form. McCready (2017) noted in his study a lack of awareness of the potential and opportunities that RPL can provide. Hlongwane (2019) found one of the challenges in attracting students through RPL was the lack of visibility of information promoting RPL.

This study found there is a need for a standardised national policy and framework for the assessment of RPL. This standardisation would widen the pathway to participation. The current overly complex procedures can in fact be an exclusionary factor excluding those students who may not fully understand the process. Many students have not been afforded the opportunity to use RPL simply due to a lack of awareness of the existence of RPL nor a proper understanding of its uses. Students availing of RPL tend to be mature learners outside of the school leaving cohort. Due to the nature and diversity of the form of learning and experiences that this cohort of student have, there is a difficulty with identifying the learning and mapping it to specific learning outcomes. There is a requirement for a more centralised system for recording RPL which can be accessible by all institutions to facilitate continuous and lifelong learning. RPL needs to be student centred providing equal opportunities with policies in plain English terminology rather than academic terminology to ensure they are fully inclusive.

5.3 Recommendations

To improve the RPL experience for students the first stage is to have more accessible and public facing information on RPL. (O'Leary et. al., 2015; McCready, 2017). To widen participation in RPL and increase its accessibility, visibility is a key component. Students need to be aware of RPL and its uses and it needs to be available in a format that can be

understood. Another key component of the process is the language, as evidenced in the finding's sections of this study. The information available is not satisfactory and the process is more suited to those from an academic background, in essence it is a barrier to access to RPL. The process needs to be more simplified, with a student-centred focus.

While RPL was available to each of the participants they all experienced it in different ways because of individual institutions practices. The individual institutions do maintain policies and procedures for RPL however there is no consistent standard approach. This concurs with the findings from Goggin et. al., (2015). To improve the RPL experience the development of a standardised institution nationwide policy is essential. In addition, the use of a central data base for maintaining RPL records would transform the current system to a more student-centred system. Learning is for life and RPL has many uses. RPL can be availed of by students' multiple times in their lifetime. The introduction of a centralised RPL data base would alleviate the burden of repeating the process, however, further research would be required in this area.

To improve the RPL assessment process it is recommended assessors have dual expertise to ensure there is balance. An experienced industry experts in the specific field of study also equipped with academic experience conducting the assessments would elevate the assessment process. It is vital that those carrying out the assessment are familiar with how the experience is in fact "experienced" so they can accurately assess and map the experience to learning outcomes. For example, in this study two of the participants were in early childcare, ideally the assessor assessing their RPL would have a background in early years but also experience in academia. The application process was fraught with confusion as it was not clear what counted as RPL, perhaps having a more sectorial expert-led process to guide the students through the process at the early stage would be more advantageous.

A further recommendation is the Introduction of the concept of RPL at second

level, educating students about RPL and how it could benefit students in the future.

Incorporating RPL into the second level curriculum in tandem with guidance counselling to better inform students of future benefits would be very advantageous. Many young people commence part-time employment from the age of 16, there are valuable life skills they will learn with no mechanism for maintaining records of this experience. A centralised RPL data base introduced at second level would ensure continuity of records for students through their lifetime.

5.4 Further Research

This was a qualitative phenomenological study designed to capture the essence of the participants experience of RPL. It was a small-scale study examining the experience of a small number of mature students which does not represent the full cohort of student whose experiences could be different to those of a younger age. I would recommend further phenomenological studies to be conducted across a range of student ages to get a more representative understanding of the essence of the student's experience.

I would also advocate for the recommendation for a feasibility study to be carried out to investigate the viability of the introduction of an RPL central data collection policy to be introduced at second level.

A more longitudinal study following the participants journey over a longer period allowing for the collection of data at different time points during the RPL processing may have allowed for a more meaningful and more in-depth study. The longitudinal study would have allowed for data collection prior to the application process, data collection going through the application and assessment process and data collection when the process was completed, capturing participants reflections on their experience. Further

research is warranted focusing on following the participant's journey.

This dissertation contributes to current educational practice. To further enhance this contribution, I propose a review of existing RPL policies within NCI. Upon completion of this dissertation, I intend on engaging with the key stakeholders within NIC with the aim of conducting additional research into RPL policies. This research would involve a review of existing RPL policies.

5.5 Conclusion

This study has supplemented the existing body of literature on RPL within HE in an Irish context. Phenomenology was chosen as the most appropriate methodological approach to achieve the research aim. The experiences the participants shared were analysed and synthesised thematically within an interpretative phenomenological analysis framework using semi structured interviews. RPL in the HE field is very much an under researched area within the literature from an Irish perspective. There are several main actors within the Irish RPL research field continuously reviewing policy and RPL progress in HE in Ireland. The current Irish research does not include an in-depth exploration capturing the essence of the student experience of RPL. This study will add to the existing body of research focusing on the needs of this cohort of student. This research is necessary if we are to better design policies and practices to increase accessibility and improve the student experience.

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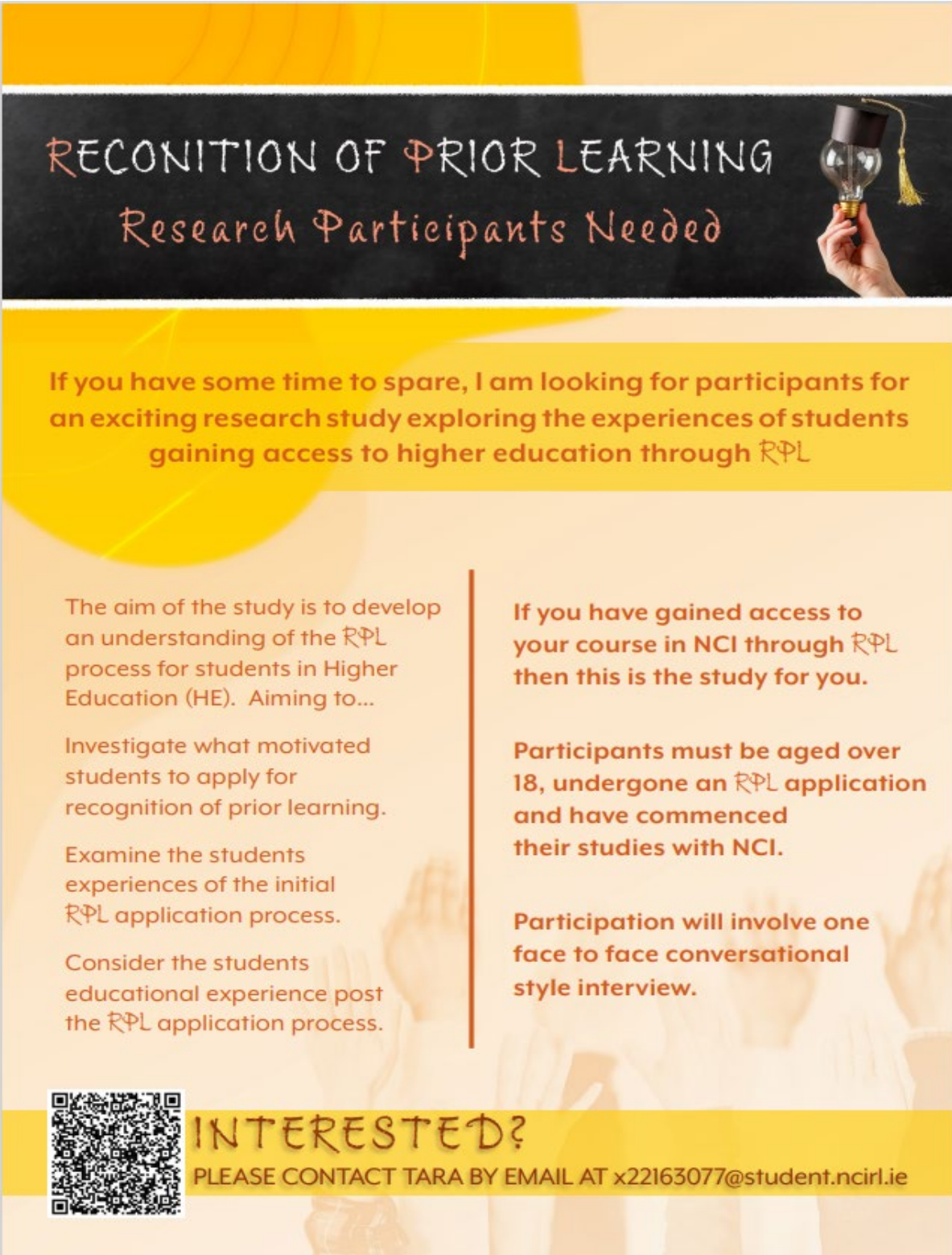
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Appendices

Appendix i: Poster calling for Participation



RECONITION OF PRIOR LEARNING
Research Participants Needed

If you have some time to spare, I am looking for participants for an exciting research study exploring the experiences of students gaining access to higher education through RPL

The aim of the study is to develop an understanding of the RPL process for students in Higher Education (HE). Aiming to...

- Investigate what motivated students to apply for recognition of prior learning.
- Examine the students experiences of the initial RPL application process.
- Consider the students educational experience post the RPL application process.

If you have gained access to your course in NCI through RPL then this is the study for you.

Participants must be aged over 18, undergone an RPL application and have commenced their studies with NCI.

Participation will involve one face to face conversational style interview.

INTERESTED?
PLEASE CONTACT TARA BY EMAIL AT x22163077@student.ncirl.ie

Appendix ii: Project Information Sheet for Participants

Research Information Sheet

My name is Tara Cheevers, I am a lecturer to National College of Ireland, and I am conducting research in the field of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in part fulfilment of my MA in Education Practice in National College of Ireland. My supervisor is Yvonne Emmett (National College of Ireland), yvonne.emmett@ncirl.ie.

The aim of the study is to develop an understanding of the RPL process for students in Higher Education (HE) and to explore the experiences of students accessing HE via the RPL process and their experience of HE thereafter in the context of an Irish Higher Education setting.

The main questions this research aims to answer are:

What is the nature of the lived experiences of students accessing Higher Education in Ireland through the RPL Process?

- What motivated students to apply for recognition of prior learning?
- How did they experience the RPL process?
- What impact, if any, did the outcome of the process have on their self-identify?
- What impact, if any, did achieving exemptions have on their subsequent academic experience?

You have been invited to take part in this research because you are a student that has gained access to Higher Education (HE) through the RPL Process. I am interested in hearing your view about your experience of the RPL process. The research will explore student experience from the initial application process through to participation in your current HE studies. The study will be a phenomenological exploration of your lived experiences of the process.

Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you are under no obligation to take part in this inquiry. Furthermore, if you wish to withdraw from the study at any point during the research, please feel free to do so. You can also be assured that all information you share with me will be treated with the utmost confidentiality and your comments/contributions will be portrayed within the final research document anonymously.

As part of this research, there will be two interviews. The initial interview will be an informal conversational interview with some opened ended questions. The interviews will be recorded and transcribed, these transcribed notes will be shared with you along with my interpretations for your reflection and feedback. This will be a collaborative process. A second semi structured interview will be conducted to follow up on the initial interview and answer some more specific questions.

All participant details will save to and stored to the NCI secure cloud storage with access only permitted by the researcher. All interview recordings will be transcribed by the research and will have individual names anonymised using labels for example Participant 1, Participant 2 etc. the actual names of the participates will not be used. All data from initial contact to the end of the process will be held in NCI secured cloud storage. Once I have completed the research and

defended same in my MA, I give you my personal assurance that I will destroy all recordings, notes and transcripts.

The benefit of participation of the research is the potential future enhancement of the RPL process. There is a strong possibility that involvement in this study by you will be contributing to the enhancement of the RPL policy and framework to improve the experiences for future participants.

National College of Ireland granted permission for this research in January 2023.

Please feel free to contact me at tara.cheevers@ncirl.ie or on + 353 87 6016012, at any time if you have any questions regarding this enquiry. My supervisor is Yvonne Emmett (National College of Ireland), yvonne.emmett@ncirl.ie.

Many thanks



Tara Cheevers

Appendix iii: Participant Consent Form

Research Consent Form

Research Study Title

The working title of the study that you are invited to participate in is: Recognition of Prior Learning Student Experiences: Barriers and Impact on Learning – a Phenomenological Study. It is being undertaken at the Centre for Education and Lifelong Learning at National College of Ireland by Tara Cheevers.

Purpose of the research

The aim of the study is to develop an understanding of the RPL process for students in Higher Education (HE) and to explore the experiences of students accessing HE via the RPL process and their experience of HE thereafter in the context of an Irish Higher Education setting.

Confirmation of requirements

You will be asked to participate in two interviews. The initial interview will be an informal conversational interview with some opened ended questions. The interviews will be recorded and transcribed, these transcribed notes will be shared with you along with my interpretations for your reflection and feedback. This will be a collaborative process. A second semi structured interview will be conducted to follow up on the initial interview and answer some more specific questions. The researcher will request that interview session are recorded.

Please complete the following section by ticking the boxes for each question.

I have read the Information Sheet attached.	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have understood the information provided.	<input type="checkbox"/>
I had the opportunity to ask questions about this study.	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have received satisfactory answers to all my questions.	<input type="checkbox"/>
I agree to have the interview sessions recorded.	<input type="checkbox"/>
I agree to have anonymised quotations from the interview session being used in the study report.	<input type="checkbox"/>

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right and opportunity to withdraw consent to participate in the study at any point.

Protecting confidentiality of data

All participant details will save to and stored to the NCI secure cloud storage with access only permitted by the researcher. All interview recordings will be transcribed by the research and will have individual names anonymised using labels for example Participant 1, Participant 2 etc. the actual names of the participates will not be used. All data from initial contact to the end of the process will be held in NCI secured cloud storage. Once I have completed the research and defended same in my MA, I give you my personal assurance that I will destroy all recordings, notes and transcripts.

Please read and sign the section below

I have read and understood the information provided in this form. I had the opportunity to ask questions about this study. All my questions have been answered by the researcher and I have a copy of this consent form. I consent to take part in this research project.

Participant's Signature: _____

Name in Block Capitals: _____

Date: _____

Please feel free to contact me at tara.cheevers@ncirl.ie or on + 353 87 6016012, at any time if you have any questions regarding this enquiry. My supervisor is Yvonne Emmett (National College of Ireland), yvonne.emmett@ncirl.ie.

Interview Guide

Interview Questions:

Can you tell me a little bit about your educational journey before coming to higher education?

Prompts:

- (1) Before you commenced the HE course, what was your education background?*
- (2) Did you do your leaving certificate?*
- (3) Did you go to college straight from school?*
- (4) Did you do any other courses.*
- (5) Did you have any work experience in your field of interest?*

Can you tell me about how you came to make an application for recognition of prior learning?

Prompts:

- (1) Where did you hear about RPL?*
- (2) Had you heard anything about RPL before?*
- (3) What information was available to you regarding RPL?*
- (4) Who gave you the information?*
- (5) Did you understand what RPL was?*
- (6) What do you think about the information you got?*
- (7) Why do you think you choose RPL.*

Can you tell me about your experience of going through the RPL process?

Prompts:

- (1) Please tell me what RPL means to you.*
- (2) What was the process involved in making the application?*
- (3) What were the stages of the process?*
- (4) Was the process straight forward?*
- (5) What kind of assessment process did you go through?*
- (6) Did you have any difficulty expressing or explaining your prior learning or experience?*
- (7) How did you feel going through the process? Why?*
- (8) Did you have any positive or negative experiences?*
- (9) Do you think it would have been easier to use a different access route? Why?*
- (10) Would you like the process to change in any way?*
- (11) How did you decide to use RPL?*
- (12) Why do you think RPL was a good access route for you?*
- (13) Would you use RPL as an access route again?*
- (14) How did it make you feel to be able to skip a module, year, level?*
- (15) How did the process impact your self-identity?*

Can you tell me about how it felt to have your previous formal learning/ informal learning or experience recognised?

Prompts:

- (1) How would you describe the experience?*
- (2) How did it make you feel (the recognition)?*
- (3) Reflecting now how would you interpret those feelings.*
- (4) What was it like to have, not just the learning, but the experience recognised?*
- (5) What was distinctive/exceptional about it?*
- (6) What mattered about it?*
- (7) What does RPL add to your life?*
- (8) How does RPL fit with your life now?*
- (9) Did this experience have any impact on your self-identity? How? Can you explain?*
- (10) Is recognition of prior learning something that you would recommend for other students? Why?*

Can you tell me a little bit about your academic experiences since obtaining access through RPL?

Prompts:

- (1) How did getting modular credit/exemptions impact you?*
- (2) How did feel going from a lower-level program to a more academic advanced program?*
- (3) Did you feel the missed module impacted your learning in any way? Why?*
- (4) Can you tell me about the other students in your group, how did they access the course? Did they use RPL?*
- (5) Did you feel any different from other students because you used RPL?*
- (6) Have you engaged in any subsequent higher-level education?*
- (7) Did the RPL process have any impact on your future academic career?*
- (8) How has your academic experience impacted your student identity?*
- (9) Would you have been engaged with the course if RPL was not an option?*

Can you tell me about your experiences collaborating with fellow students or, getting involved in discussion groups and conversations?

Prompts:

- (1) Did your choice of access route impact you in any way?*
- (2) How did you feel working with fellow students who did not get module credit or exemptions?*
- (3) How did you feel when they talked about their previous degrees, educational experience etc?*
- (4) Did you compare yourself to them in any way?*
- (5) How? Why?*

Appendix v: Heuristic Framework

The following documents have been compiled to illustrate each of the steps taken with in the Heuristic Framework adopted by Smith et al., (2021) for the data analysis phase.

Step 1: Read and Re-Read Raw Data

Step 1 within the framework involved taking the raw data and reading it while watching the recording underlining significant parts of the text. I then re-read the transcript and then moved onto step two of the heuristic framework, the exploratory noting phase, re-reading the transcript with an open mind noting anything of interest and making annotations in the right column indicating my initial thoughts, observations, and/or reflections relating to participant's narratives (Noon, 2018). An example can be seen below.

149	Interviewer 8:55
150	OK. And can you tell me a bit about your experience of <u>actually going</u> through that RPL process?
151	
152	Participant 8:57
153	Yeah, it was. It was quite like I said, it was comfortable, but the same time was unnerving because they were asking for a
154	whole lot of information. And that obviously makes you doubt yourself, like, am I up to the task. It's not like I had a
155	previous degree where a lot of people I think had previous degrees and then recertifying themselves in new degrees. So,
156	they'd been through that process. They know what the whole university etiquette and all that kind of stuff involved,
157	where I was just kind of like, oh, my God, what do they want now and what do I need to give them then? It was a
158	telephone interview, and I was wondering, why are they looking for so much information off me and it was kind of like a
159	little bit sort of like I said, you know that <u>self doubt</u> , the confidence thing. Am I up to the task and up to the challenge will I
160	be successful, all <u>those kind of things</u> filling out a lot of you know forms, asking questions, trying to be as detailed and as
161	professional as possible you know.
162	
163	Interviewer 9:48
164	Yeah. And what does our RPL mean to you?
165	
166	Participant 9:54
167	So exactly what that it, is recognising all my not just learning as in academic learning, it's recognising the experience I
168	have. So, when somebody says to me how long have you been working with children and I say oh, well I only <u>opened up a</u>
169	<u>play school</u> 12 years ago. They're like. No, no, that's not what I mean. How long have you been working with children? I'm
170	like okay. Well, I mean I've been working with children since I was 17. They're like, that's your prior experience. You're
171	learning. So, it goes right back. And that's what I kind of maybe had a little bit of, sort of uncertainty when applying for
172	<u>Salween</u> .
173	The RPL I thought it was just my medium was like I've only had my <u>playschool</u> barely a year now I'm looking for a degree. I
174	don't have that much experience, but they wanted me to then go right back and go well, you've been working with
175	children in whatever capacity for the last 15 to 20 years. That's going to count for something towards going and it kind of
176	made me see the whole RPL in a whole different kind of light that a lot of it is <u>taken into account</u> from your experience,
177	not just say your academic achievement, which is great.

Figure 4 Sample raw data transcript

Step 2: Exploratory Note Taking

I then re-read the transcript and then moved onto step two of the heuristic framework, the exploratory noting phase, re-reading the transcript with an open mind noting anything of interest and making annotations in the right column indicating my initial thoughts, observations, and/or reflections relating to participant's narratives (Noon, 2018). An example can be seen below.

198		
199	7:45	
200	Yeah.	
201	Okay and why do you think you chose the RPL route?	
202		
203	7:54	
204	Because I've never done a degree in the past. Like I said,	<p><i>Desire to get qualifications, never done a degree before.</i></p> <p><i>Travelled, had family, gained life experience.</i></p> <p><i>What is she passionate about but doesn't really want to do.</i></p> <p><i>Lack of supports & career guidance reason for not going to college previously.</i></p> <p><i>She woke up a bit late but has no regrets.</i></p> <p><i>Regrets not doing it earlier in her life but feels maybe it just wasn't the right time.</i></p> <p><i>Process was comfortable but nervous.</i></p> <p><i>Feelings of doubt in her abilities.</i></p> <p><i>Unawareness of university etiquette and a sense of being overwhelmed.</i></p> <p><i>Issues of self doubt & a lack of confidence in her abilities.</i></p>
205	when I finished school, I travelled, I worked, but then I	
206	decided to have a family and then sort of, you know, when	
207	midway you having your family, you realise. Well, actually I'd	
208	like to have a qualification. I'd like to actually be able to do	
209	something like what I did was open my play school and for	
210	that you need qualifications. So then I started really honing in	
211	on what is it that I really am passionate about and like to do	
212	when maybe in the past, I really didn't give it all that much	
213	thought. Maybe I didn't have enough support around to	
214	actually help all the guidance career.	
215	For guidance to actually help channel what my talents were	
216	and where they my strength lay. So finally a kind of like came	
217	about on its own babysitting and you know childminding and	
218	travelling and all that kind of stuff and then opening the place	
219	school and was like it hit me sort of like ohh well this is like	
220	the obvious choice and this is the route to go. So that's why I	
221	kind of woke up a bit late, but I don't regret it at all doing it	
222	and I almost sometimes wish that I'd woken up 20th prior and	
223	gone yet, but maybe I wasn't the right time or.	
224		
225	8:55	
226	OK. And can you tell me a bit about your experience of	
227	actually going through that RPL process?	
228		
229	8:57	
230	The.	
231	Yeah, it was. It was quite like I said, it was comfortable, but	
232	the same time was unnerving because they asking a whole lot	
233	of information. And that obviously makes you doubt yourself,	
234	like, am I up to the task I had? It's not like I had a previous	
235	degree where a lot of people think previous degrees and then	
236	recertifying themselves in new degrees. So they'd been	
237	through their process. They know what the whole university	
238	etiquette and all that kind of stuff involved, where I was just	
239	kind of like, Oh my God, what do they want now and what do	
240	I need to give them then? It was a telephone interview and	
241	wondering, why are they looking for so much information?	
242	It's off me and it was kind of like a little bit sort of like I said,	
243	you know that self doubt, the confidence thing. Am I up to	
244	the task and up to the challenge will I be successful all those	
245	kind of things filling out a lot of you know forms asking	
246	questions, trying to be as detailed and as professional as	
247	possible you know.	

75

Figure 5 Samples Exploratory Noting

Step 3: Constructing Experiential Statements

This phase involved constructing experiential statements (emerging themes) while, moving away from the transcript itself and concentrating on the exploratory notes. An example can be seen below.

Awareness of importance of education and life long learning p2	Recognition of complex application process p5	Influence of distance from academia on application of RPL p10
Recognition of industry related learning not mapped to learning outcomes p2	Motivation for new learning driven by career change p3	Awareness of importance of qualifications to match experience p3 p18
Articulation of unsatisfactory initial experience of third level application p3	Apprehension amongst other students p13	Motivation & driving factors to use RPL p3 p4
Recognition and articulation of expectation from RPL process p4 p5	Recognition of role of institution in RPL process p4	Articulation of difficulties with RPL process p4
Recognition of difficulty with academic nature of process p4	Different despite similarity, mapping areas of knowledge to learning outcomes p4	Expression of changing emotions during application process p4 p8
Knowledge level is marked by the passage of time p5	Being older and more mature increases ability to drive application p5	Recognition of influence of prior learning to confidence in RPL application p5
Powerful complementarity where prior learning and experience enabled learning p5	RPL application play a major role in proceeding with degree p5	Expression of entitlement to credit for prior learning and experience and absurdity of taking modules to learn what is already know p5
Difficulty in expressing experience p6	Mapping experiential learning was problematic p6	Importance of industry sector experts assessing RPL p6
Awareness of diverse stages of experience p7	Outlook on policies changes and clarity for RPL p7	Reiteration of sectorial experience key to RPL
	RPL beneficial for transfer options with acknowledgement of prior academic learning p8	Articulation of difficulty for some people understanding RPL process p9
Merging of learning outcome and experience p9	Types and depth of experience difficult to articulate p9	Knowledge and experience merging with the passage of time p2
Recurrent reference to mapping experiential learning p10	Awareness of perception of co students towards Ann's RPL p10	Sectorial knowledge imperative to RPL assessment p10
Recognition of struggle for non academic students understanding RPL process p10	Being back in the playground p12	Acceptance of others views p13 p14
Assessors lack of sector knowledge problematic p10	Pushing the boundaries on RPL to get maximum credit, Belief that more recognition should be given p12	Recognition of impact of accessing course later than other students p11

Figure 6 Sample Experiential Statements

Step 4: Clustering/Mapping Experiential Statements

Taking the experiential statement and searching for connections, mapping, and clustering them so that statements that were related in some way could be grouped together. An example can be seen below.

Awareness of importance of education and life long learning p2	Recognition of complex application process p5	RPL needs to be more visible, education students about its uses p 27
Knowledge level is marked by the passage of time p5	Being older and more mature increases ability to drive application p5	Expanding RPL resourcefully p28
Awareness of importance of qualifications to match experience p3 p18	Motivation & driving factors to use RPL p3 p4	RPL beneficial for transfer options with acknowledgement of prior academic learning p8
RPL application play a major role in proceeding with degree p5	Recognition and articulation of expectation from RPL process p4 p5	Articulation of extension of use of RPL, expanding RPL resourcefully p28
Knowledge and experience merging with the passage of time p2	Recognition of role of institution in RPL process p4	RPL for life p25
Recognition that decision to proceed with degree was linked to RPL and credits p12	Pushing the boundaries on RPL to get maximum credit, Belief that more recognition should be given p12	Outlook on policies changes and clarity for RPL p7
Recognition that there is a balance between experience and knowledge, the role of RPL in combining experience with learning p24	RPL experience evolving with the passage of time p14	Articulation of entitlement to module credit for extensive prior learning and realisation of absurdity of teacher being the learner p12
Bridging the gap between knowledge & experience p21	Sometimes less can be more p15	Expression of entitlement to credit for prior learning and experience and absurdity of taking modules to learn what is already know p5
Articulation of essential nature of real life experience p20	RPL as a means to motivate and enable learning p29	Strong position in terms of what expectations of RPL were p12
Application of learning by doing p26	Articulation of difficulties with RPL process p4	Expression of changing emotions during application process p4 p8
Realisation that you already know it because you actually experienced it p35	Articulation of unsatisfactory initial experience of third level application p3	Recognition of influence of prior learning to confidence in RPL application p5
Awareness of link between real life experience and academia p20	Articulation of difficulty for some people understanding RPL process p9	Awareness of impact of RPL process on oneself p16

Figure 7 Sample Clustered Experiential Statements

Step 5: Naming Personal Experiential Themes (PETs)

I then moved on and named the Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) and consolidating and organising them into a table. Each PET is represented in **BOLD UPPER CASE** to show the PET is at the highest level, below that are three sub-themes which are represented in **lower case bold**, under each of the sub-themes are the experiential statements constructed at step four, these are highlighted in grey and refer to the relevant page of the transcript, quotes from the transcript are then shown in italics. An example can be seen below.

C. RPL AND SELF IDENTITY
Application tainted by emotions
Recognition/articulation of impact of return to education on identity p5
<i>'When I went back to education, I suppose I got a little bit nervous'</i>
Changing emotions, self doubt, self conscious p6 p10 p13 p14
<i>'So the combination of filling out forms and the transcripts and I suppose the anxiety of getting on the course was a big deal at the time'</i>
<i>'if you didn't have someone around who could help you with it, you were screwed you know'</i>
<i>'I felt a little bit embarrassed, I'm going to be really honest about it, um because it looked as if, you know, you weren't, you know, I thought I was up to doing the course, but they didn't think I was, and they wanted me to justify why I needed to, why I should be on the course'</i>
<i>'I'm not sure how things like that affect me anymore, I'm at an age where it doesn't, it's like water off a ducks back'</i>
Realisation that self identity wasn't marked by educational status p22
<i>'It made me realise that I don't have to be the most educated or formally educated person in the room ... this concept of being the cleverest person in the room doesn't do it for me'</i>
Awareness of being different p21
<i>'It makes you feel shit, you know that, it's like, you know, it does, it make you feel bad, oh you didn't go to Trinity or you didn't go here or you didn't to there, no, we didn't, I worked for a living'</i>
RPL made a real contribution to confidence
Awareness of impact of returning to education on oneself p7 p20 p23
<i>'Getting back into academia and stuff, for me it was hard because I hadn't done formal exams, freaked me out every single time'</i>
<i>'Personally I will, I've always had this chip on my shoulder about education, I've always felt that I needed to learn more or do more, or put more effort in because I left school at such an early age'</i>
Awareness of how age changes views p17
<i>'Learning after getting onto these courses and the academic experience has been really good, but not necessarily for attending the college and having the college experience cause I'm too old to be doing that'</i>
Recognition/Articulation of own competencies p10 p19 p22
<i>'It's helped me a great deal, it makes me more confident in talking to people and dealing with things'</i>
<i>I sat in a room with 20 doctors once, all at consultant level and you know you feel you have been able to have that level of confidence and being able to sit in the room with someone where the group is like that and hold your own is a really key thing for me'</i>

Figure 8 Sample Personal Experiential Themes

Step 6: Individual Analysis of Next Case and Next Case

Repeating Step 1 to Step 5 for case 2 and then again for case 3.

Step 7: Individual Analysis of Next Case and Next Case

Adopting the same approach as I did with the PETs table; I developed a table for Group Experiential Themes (GET). The GET is represented in **UPPER CASE BOLD** with each group-level sub-theme represented in **lower case bold**. Supporting these are the relevant experiential statements from the participants along with participant quotes. The experiential statements are highlighted in grey and the quotes from the transcripts are in *italics* with the participant's name (pseudonyms) and page number to identify and trace them back to the relevant transcript. Four GETs "Major Themes" emerged from the detailed analysis phase a summary of the GETs & sub-themes an example can be seen in below.

Table of Group Experiential Themes (GETs)
MOTIVATION TO EMBRACE RPL
Career Progression drives return to higher education
Influence and encouragement of others critical to decision to return to education and apply for RPL.
<i>'My mentor/tutor suggested why don't I go to XXXXX as they had a lovely BA honours programme in childcare.'</i> (Jane, p. 2)
<i>'While I was there, I had someone in there who took an interest in moving me along within the organisation which was great and she basically pointed me in a couple of directions so the first proper third level course that I ever did was with XXXXX.'</i> (Mark, p. 4)
Awareness of connection between education and career progression.
<i>'So third level only really came about when I entered early learning.'</i> (Ann, p. 3)
<i>It has definitely opened up the opportunities for me.'</i> (Ann, p. 18)
<i>'The further education sector is so important, like it is, it is the gateway to professionalism, for many people, you know and for those better jobs.'</i> (Ann, p. 26)
<i>'I went to work for It became a bigger issue to go back and make sure it was solidly, solidly capable of dealing with anything that was going to come up.'</i> (Mark, p. 22)
<i>Cause I knew it was going back to college, but it was always good for the CV, keep these things up and running which was great.'</i> (Mark, p. 5)
<i>'So she recommended, that and said that I would be a good fit, having a degree, especially XXXXX, it would look good, looks good on the CV.'</i> (Jane, p.3)
A new career path, not by choice
<i>'I always like learning, I like reading things and things like this, but it wasn't, it wasn't a big think, but then I got hurt So I ended up having to find something else to do.'</i> (Mark, p. 3)
Motivation & driving factors to use RPL.
<i>'I didn't want to do it over four years, that was one big thing that I didn't want to do.'</i> (Ann, p. 3)
<i>'I had lots of experience and training at level 6, so I kind of felt that I'd done my 2 years, you know because I had already done 3 years in early years because I had done a level 5 and 6 and I had done the Link course so you know I really didn't want to be repeating stuff I'd already learnt.'</i> (Ann, p. 5)
RPL as a pathway to higher education
Realisation that qualification was obvious with RPL as the route.
<i>Because I'd never done a degree in the past, like I said, when I finished school, I travelled, I worked, but then I decided to have a family and then sort of, you know, when midway through having your family, you realise, well, actually I'd like to have a qualification.... it sort of hit me like 'oh' well this is like the obvious choice and this is the route to go.'</i> (Jane, p. 5)
<i>'Its been brilliant, and for people who are coming from like I suppose who are coming from I hate calling it disadvantaged areas cause, like that's where I came form So you know, it's about making sure that people are given the opportunities to do something like that.'</i> (Mark, p. 28)
<i>'So RPL actually meant a lot to me and helped me, I think get into the university programme.'</i> (Jane, p. 8)

<p>Acknowledgement of link between RPL and barriers to access.</p> <p><i>'People who don't have the opportunity to do third level in the way that people would like to do it, that springboard thing has been the best, I've told people about springboard.'</i> (Mark, p. 27)</p> <p><i>Third level sort of alluded me every time I went for a third level course I never got accepted simply because I didn't have a living cert, had no real educational background third level was I wouldn't say elite, but it was, its wasn't for everyone at the time It wasn't an opportunity for me.'</i> (Mark, p. 3)</p> <p><i>'So when I applied for that again, the same issues came up, I didn't have a leaving cert From an experience point of view, I had an awful lot of these things, so that was the first time I ever had to fill out an RPL form.'</i> (Mark, p. 4)</p>
<p>PRL critical to the HE application process and access.</p> <p><i>'So RPL actually meant a lot to me and helped me, I think, get into the university programme.'</i> (Jane, p. 8)</p> <p><i>'No, it was purely access, it was purely to get onto the course I wish I could have skipped a year, but they never let me skip a year on anything.'</i> (Mark, p. 15)</p>
<p>Recognition/articulation that RPL evolves over time</p> <p><i>The diploma course was relevant but they wanted other all the other stuff everything that I've done within the area that I was actually going to study on more I've done courses in all of those over the years, so I have to add those in and they weren't part of the original diploma and that's the thing, its you do need to, you're better to throw everything onto these.'</i> (Mark, p. 11)</p> <p><i>They do ask about experience and stuff like this, again, I don't know for, I suppose, the first couple of times, yeah it was fine, having it recognised all that stuff that I've done before to help me got on to the course.'</i> (Mark, p. 13)</p>
<p>Recognition that decision to proceed with degree was linked to RPL and credits.</p> <p><i>'It was important to me that I did get into third year as opposed to second year, you know, cause my understanding is that the normal RPL process is that you're going into second year so that was one of my main motivators for really pushing for the third year.'</i> (Ann, p. 5)</p> <p><i>'So I had an awful lot of experience that I just felt that I didn't really want to do three years so I wouldn't have done that, I wouldn't have done three years of a degree.'</i> (Ann, p. 12)</p>
<p>The RPL Shift</p>
<p>Recognition/articulation of different forms and multiple uses of RPL</p> <p><i>My RPL is almost the same as theirs, but this was in a formal setting, so it's almost like formally recognised, you know where mine was, yeah, unconventional, but almost equal.'</i> (Jane, p. 26)</p> <p><i>Again, I took the old prior learning that I did in xxx you know and dropped it on like added on some extra bits.'</i> (Mark, p. 16)</p> <p><i>'It got recognised getting into the programme, but it was like forgotten about and then it got recognised again, like I said later on it sort of keeps rearing its head, it's there and it was very useful I've two sets now of RPL, I had the original sets, and then my new RPL, So I have a lot now to push my momentum to keep going, so it's, I find it very valuable, definitely.'</i> (Jane, p. 25)</p> <p><i>So RPL then sort of came into play in the last two years ... like I said, it's all bunched up and it's all the momentum then to push you and to, Oh, I'm going to do the masters.'</i> (Jane, p. 24)</p>
<p>Comparison and convergence of RPL</p> <p><i>'Their RPL was different from mine... but its formal experience because it's in an NHS setting that would have been their RPL, so I didn't compare my RPL to their, but like I say, by the time you go to the degree cycle my RPL is almost the same as theirs so everyone I think had their own you know set of RPL but we never really delved into it.'</i> (Jane, p. 26)</p>
<p>Evolving nature of RPL and the RPL shift.</p> <p><i>And so the RPL was my leaving cert then going to do the QQI level 5, it definitely had impact because I'm still striving to fulfil some of those ambitions that I've set myself when I did that first lot of RPL I have all of that, so I don't talk about the experience part of the RPL, I talk now about the fact that I finished school and I have the next RPL So instead of the experience part to get into university its now shifted to the QQI RPL.'</i> (Jane, p. 18)</p>

Figure 9 Samples Group Experiential Themes