CUA: My Experience Project (Recognition of Prior Learning)
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Our project is called the My Experience project. It's a CUA project. The CUA is the Connaught Ulster Alliance. And that is made up of GMIT, IT Sligo and Letterkenny IT. And we initiated this project back in 2012. We have been working towards a number of initiatives, one being the development of an RPL assessment tool for RPL applicants. RPL is Recognition of Prior Learning. And we have also been working on a number of resources, educational resources, to help academic staff or support staff in the RPL space to understand how to assess applicants and how to manage and support them effectively.

Why ePortfolio?

Well, the ePortfolio is really there for the assessment of the prior learning. So when we looked to create this in the first place and we were thinking of ePortfolios and we were looking at the off-the-shelf ePortfolios such as Mahara and PebblePad, we thought, well is this what we want, you know, thinking in terms of a sort of typical ePortfolio. But we actually concluded that really what we wanted to do was the assessment of prior learning and that we should focus on that. We keep it very focused and deliberately focused so that the assessors of RPL can actually do the assessment.

How do students interact with the ePortfolio?

So I suppose going back to the website, that's the gateway for the applicants – so at myexperience.ie. So they would register and they would indicate what programme they are interested in studying, whether it's in IT Sligo or GMIT or Letterkenny, and when they go into that environment, it's very structured. And it looks at those core elements that any RPL applicant would need to provide in order to demonstrate evidence of learning. So there would be a whole section on work experience, the education aspect, looking at evidence, looking at your motivation for doing the course. So you would have a combination of certified learning and a lot of experiential learning that RPL applicants would be demonstrating.

What has been the key benefit of the ePortfolio?

It's a collaboration between three institutes working together, developing a common policy and a common practice, in an area which has really seen idiosyncratic practice, and that people have had different ways of approaching RPL. And the fact that it's electronic and it's online has given us, it is a sort of repository, but it's electronic evidence that's there. So that we can look at that all the time. It's not lying around on paper copies on people's desks and whatever, and we are collecting it all in one place and making that assessment there. Since we started piloting the tool – the assessment tool – over 18 months ago we started the process. What's happened is a change kind of culture is emerging in the Institutes. So previous to that, RPL applicants were dealt with as a paper-based process and it was normally never to be seen. It was stored in a filing cabinet, and it wasn't, the information was not shared or the experiences were not shared across the Institute. So we have helped kind of break down all of that, and we have helped, I suppose, as I said, change the culture and change the mindset around developing this tool kit, is a nice crutch and a nice support mechanism for the staff. And it's also a lovely user experience for the applicants. So together, the two groups are working through the same systems, and it's making the process much more seamless.

How is the ePortfolio assessed?

In any department or in any discipline area, there would be module leaders or the heads of department, or there could be somebody assigned to RPL assessments within that department. What we have found is that, everybody needs to be skilled and aware of RPL cases that are presented to the Institute. So I suppose that was our thinking behind developing the online course, which sits alongside the ePortfolio assessment tool. And the online course is for higher education staff, and I suppose it helps take away that fear factor, that a lot of academics or support staff have in relation to RPL. And there's about six or seven parts in the course that goes through from national practice to international practices in place or how to go about assessing learning outcomes and looking at the evidence that's coming through from experiential learning for applicants, looking at the currency of an actual, of the learning that's taken place.

What advice would you give to someone implementing an ePortfolio?

One thing that we got right was to keep it simple. And I think that the ePortfolio that we have, the application tool that we have is intuitive. I think that the applicants find it easy enough to use, even with a short tutorial recording that they can look at, and little prompts that they can look at. So I suppose two things – one that we focus specifically on looking at the recognition of prior learning and two, keeping that whole process very simple and straightforward for the applicant. They are important lessons.