European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2018 update

COUNTRY REPORT: IRELAND

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1 Introduction

In Ireland, 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 provides access to formal education and can be used for the award of credit, to gain exemptions within a programme and support access to the labour market.

Since the publication of the 2012 Council Recommendation of validation of non-formal and informal learning, significant progress has been made in terms of the implementation of RPL in Ireland. Whilst this provides for sectoral policy and approaches to implementation, systems for RPL continue to evolve.


Since the 2016 country update for Ireland, the Department of Education and Skills (DES) ‘Action Plan for Education 2016-2019’ outlined its commitment to the development of a national policy for RPL. In addition, the DES continue to actively monitor national progress of RPL though performance framework and reporting systems with relevant national agencies.

Although Ireland does not have a single national policy on RPL, there are national polices for different actors and sectors that address specific issues related to workforce development, and aspects of diversity and social inclusion. As part of the policy response, a range of RPL arrangements related to low-skilled, low-qualified and other groups of learners are in place. There are also single national quality assurance policies and guidelines for RPL for the education and training sector with regard to programmes and assessment, for access, transfer and progression.

At practice level, a number of exciting and innovative RPL activities have emerged across the further education and training and higher education sectors since the previous update. Whilst a number of these initiatives are currently in pilot phase, they provide a coherent and rich resource to capture and optimise learning for future developmental work. This builds on a growing body of research literature on RPL in Ireland.

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) funded a research report on RPL approaches and practices in publicly funded further education and training within the Education and Training Board (ETB) sector (Goggin et al. 2017). The research was commissioned to provide a benchmark for approaches and practices within the ETB sector in response to a call from practitioners for a focused research study similar to that undertaken by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning on RPL in higher education in 2015 (NFETL, 2015). The outcomes of this collective research provides a basis to inform both policy and strategic development for RPL across the education sector – though it is acknowledged that the research within the ETB sector took place over a period of immense and demanding organisational change.
At European level, Ireland participated in the European festival for validation in June 2018. Delegates included the Cork Institute of Technology, Youthreach, the RPL Practitioner Network, Donegal ETB, Waterford Institute of Technology, the Connacht Ulster Alliance, Kerry ETB, the National Adult Literacy Agency, and Aontas. Representatives were invited to present RPL practice in their own institutions, organisations and services. In addition, Ireland is participating in the Erasmus KA3 policy experimentation project VISKA (Visible Skills of Adults, 2017-2020) focusing on informing policy through RPL field trials for people with low skills/low qualifications, migrants and refugees.

Overall, Ireland has made clear progress towards each of the principles outlined in the 2012 Council Recommendation on validation. This can be summarised as follows:

- Arrangements for RPL that lead either to full or partial qualifications, and/or give access to education and training programmes are in place across the sub-sectors of education (with the exception of the general education sector).
- Within the labour market there is growing evidence of individual institutions raising awareness and offering tailor-made possibilities for employees to undergo RPL. This includes work undertaken by Donegal ETB, Cork Institute of Technology and Skillnet Ireland (see section 2.3).
- RPL arrangements can be found in the third sector, though to a lesser extent than the education sector. Although engagement in RPL may be limited due to challenges simultaneously experienced within the sector (see section 2.4), there is some evidence of organisations collaborating and networking with counterparts in the education sector and labour market on RPL.
- RPL arrangements include, as appropriate, the four stages of validation. This includes identification, documentation, assessment and certification. Depending on the purpose of the RPL practice, the use and combination of these stages vary accordingly.
- RPL arrangements are linked to the NFQ and are in line with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). In 2019 Ireland will commence updating the referencing report of the NFQ to the EQF in line with the 2017 Recommendation.
- Information on the benefits of, and opportunities for RPL, as well as on the relevant procedures is the responsibility of individual organisations who typically provide information on their own practices and services.
- There is a clear view that information, advice and guidance is needed in preparation for an application for RPL but also throughout the entire process and different stages of RPL. The National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) continues to support guidance practitioners and provides resources to support the use of RPL with adults.
- Disadvantaged groups, including individuals who are unemployed and those at risk of unemployment can benefit from RPL through a range of inclusive measures. This includes the Springboard+, JobPath and Momentum initiatives (see section 2.1.2). Practitioners can and do draw on key elements of existing RPL arrangements.

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1 See: http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=1223&eventsId=1314&furtherEvents=yes
initiatives and their corresponding tools in order to make RPL opportunities
relevant and specific to the needs of the individual.

- Wide and varied practices (or certain elements within them) that fall under the
definition of skills audits as outlined in the 2012 Council Recommendation on
validation are in place. Within the further education and training sector, diagnostic
tests are frequently utilised for specific programmes to identify skill gaps and
inform 'next steps' in terms of further education, training and/or employment.Individualised plans are used to support integration into the labour market with a
diagnosis of employability skills and competences.

- Quality assurance of RPL is provided for through the establishment by providers
of relevant policies and procedures in response to QQI policies designed to
develop, promote and protect the integrity of the NFQ and the programmes and
awards associated with it. In addition all public higher education providers and
ETBs are engaged with QQI on the basis of quality assurance policies in order to
meet the requirements of the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and
Training) Act 2012. In this respect, significant work has been undertaken with
regard to the provision of RPL underpinned by specific provider owned policies
relating to RPL.

- Some provision has been made for the professional development of staff involved
in RPL; however this remains the responsibility of the individual education
providers as employers. In the higher education sector, the National Forum for the
Enhancement of Teaching and Learning (NFETL) has also developed a National
Professional Development Framework for staff (see section 7.3). Individual higher
education institutions also provide training opportunities for staff who have
responsibility for RPL. Across the further education and training sector, ETBs
traditionally collaborate through ETBI and the Further Education Support Service
(FESS)3 for training opportunities for practitioners. A national CPD Strategy has
been agreed for ETBs. Some ETBs have procured Level 9 training individually for
RPL practitioners within their service. In response to the ETBs participating in the
TOBAR project, training was provided which has led to the establishment of a
dynamic community of practice for RPL (see section 2.2.2).

- Standards used in validation are the same as those used for qualifications
obtained through formal education programmes in line with the quality assurance

- RPL is characterised by the involvement of a wide range of stakeholders who are
involved in the development and implementation of the elements and principles
for RPL. The RPL Practitioner Network continues to be an important and
energising focal point for practitioners across multiple sectors to collectively
support the development of system wide capacity for RPL through sharing of
practices, local policies and toolkits. Specific ‘steering groups’ and advisory
groups’ for particular projects also reflect strategic partner involvement required to
enable progress including RPL for diverse cohorts.

- Use of the Europass framework and Youthpass is promoted in order to facilitate
the documentation of learning outcomes.

Drawing on current RPL literature and based on the views of those contributing to the
production of this country update for Ireland, the following strengths and challenges
of RPL can be summarised as follows:

3 https://www.fess.ie/
Overall strengths of the approach to RPL:

- Innovative RPL practice (consistent with current national policies)\(^4\) continues to grow organically, with continued deep seated commitment to excellent practice.

- Whilst certain initiatives are at pilot phase, they are embedding practices into local and regional systems in advance of overarching single national policies. This learning provides a coherent and rich resource to inform future developmental work.

- QQI provides an enabling policy framework for education and training providers which supports the implementation of RPL, whilst respecting provider autonomy and protecting the integrity of the framework.

- Establishment of the RPL Practitioner Network continues to enable collaboration and sharing of practice on RPL across multiple sectors.

- The ETBI/ETB Consortia and outcomes of the TOBAR project have provided good practice guidelines for the sector. As a result clarity, priorities and drivers for RPL are becoming increasingly clear within ETB contexts in implementing new policy frameworks, performance frameworks and compacts.

- The advancement of data management systems, including the Programme Learner Support System (PLSS) allows for the systematic gathering of learner data across further education services. As the systems continue to evolve, data collection refinements are being prepared that will document RPL participation and outcomes over time.

Overall challenges of the approach to RPL:

- An overarching national policy/strategy would enable greater implementation and visibility of RPL across the range of contexts.

- A common definition or understanding of RPL continues to be challenging.

- The need for improved levels of data integration across sectors, regionally and nationally.

- Perceived lack of resources (time, money and expertise) to build capacity for RPL across all sectors.

- Broader engagement among, between and across different sectors of education, the labour market and third sectors to reach individuals for whom RPL offers important opportunities continues to be challenging.

- Integration of guidance into RPL processes procedures is needed to support individuals through and beyond an RPL activity.

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\(^4\) For example, Further Education and Training Strategy; Higher Education Strategy, National Skills Strategy 2025
2 National perspective

2.1 Overarching approach to validation

2.1.1 Legal framework

The Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012 sets out the statutory basis for Quality and Qualifications Ireland’s (QQI) engagement with RPL. Within the Act, QQI has direct policy responsibility for access, transfer and progression (ATP) of learners, where access, transfer and progression refer to:

1. Access by learners to programmes of education and training, including recognition for knowledge, skill or competence previously acquired,
2. Transfer of learners from one programme to another having received recognition for knowledge, skill or competence previously acquired, and
3. Progression of learners from a programme to another programme of a higher level.

Under the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012, providers must comply with QQI policies on credit accumulation, credit transfer and identification and formal assessment of the knowledge, skill and competence previously acquired by learners (Section 56 (1), (2), (3)). The 2012 Act states that learners may apply to QQI for awards where they meet standards that QQI has established, and that QQI may request providers’ assistance to assess the achievements of learners who apply in this way.

In June 2017 the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Amendment) Bill proposed several amendments to the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act, 2012. This Bill was passed in 2018 and specifies that providers will be involved more centrally in the application process of the RPL.

In 2015, QQI published a policy restatement of Policy and Criteria for Access, Transfer and Progression for Providers of Further and Higher Education and Training (Quality and Qualifications Ireland, 2015), and the Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning in Further and Higher Education and Training, which were first published in 2005 (National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, 2005). This provides the quality assurance framework for RPL.

2.1.2 Validation and upskilling pathways

The Further Education and Training Strategy: 2014-2019 (DES, 2014) refers to how the RPL can be useful to jobseekers and older workers with little or no qualifications. It acknowledges the important role of RPL in enhancing employability and mobility. In addition, the Action Plan for Education 2016-2019 (DES, 2016a), commits to the development of an ‘Upskilling Pathways Plan – New Opportunities for Adults’ which aims to help adults acquire a minimum level of literacy, numeracy and digital skills.

At national level, there are a number of formal practices aimed at bringing low-skilled adults and other groups at risk of social and labour market exclusion back to education and training. As outlined below, many of these practices incorporate elements of RPL that can be used to help an individual through a process of identifying and

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5 Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012, p11
documenting their skills; undertaking training opportunities to boost their skills; and gaining recognition for their prior learning.

In 2012, the Government launched its first Pathways to Work programme from 2012 to 2015 (DJEI), setting out a set of reforms to help unemployed jobseekers return to work. It was designed to complement the Action Plan for Jobs (DJEI, 2012), also launched in 2012 as part of a twin-pronged approach to tackling the jobs crisis that emerged after 2008. Action Plan for Jobs 2018 (DBEI, 2018) is the seventh in an annual series, setting out the Government’s commitment to increasing the number of people able to participate in employment; and ensuring that existing and future skills needs are met. Pathways to Work 2016-2020 (DBEI, 2016) has a continued focus on unemployed people; in particular those who are long-term unemployed and young unemployed people. The aim is to provide priority access for unemployed people to relevant labour market opportunities to enhance their job prospects through education and training programmes and work experience.

Under Pathways to Work, the Momentum programme provides free education and training opportunities for long-term unemployed jobseekers. As reported in Action Plan for Jobs 2017 (DBEI, 2017), two rounds of the Momentum programme have provided up to 13,000 free training places to allow the long-term unemployed to gain skills and experience in occupational sectors where vacancies existed. The sectors where projects were funded include construction, ICT, transport, distribution and logistics, tourism, financial services and manufacturing (technology).

As described in more detail below, the Department of Employment and Social Affairs fund a wide range of initiatives aimed at supporting young and other unemployed people to gain new skills through training and/or education. This includes the Springboard+ initiative offering free part-time courses in higher education and the Skillnet initiative dedicated to the promotion and facilitation of training and upskilling (see section 2.2.1). These initiatives are compatible with the process of validation of non-formal and informal learning outlined in the 2012 Council Recommendation in that a skills audits or analysis of competences underpins referrals to either employment or placements. In addition, the PES JobPath initiative is an approach to employment activation which caters mainly for people who are long-term unemployed (over 12 months) to assist them to secure and sustain full-time paid employment or self-employment. Participants on JobPath receive intensive individual support to help them address barriers to employment and to assist them in finding jobs whereby a variety of methodologies are used to support individuals document their skills and competences. Participants spend a year on JobPath and if they are placed into a job they may continue to receive support for the first year of employment. During their time on JobPath individuals may also be referred for further education and training opportunities.

As noted above, at European level, Ireland is participating in an ERASMUS+ policy experimentation project (key action 3) called VISKA (Visible Skills of Adults, 2017-2020). The aim of the project is to explore lessons for policy arising from field trials exploring the use of RPL for people with low levels of qualifications, including those who are low-skilled, including migrants and refugees. A key consideration in this respect is the role of front-line staff (including guidance counsellors, information officers, core tutors etc.) involved in RPL, their training needs and the quality

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7 http://www.welfare.ie/en/Pages/Courses-for-the-Unemployed.aspx
8 https://www.welfare.ie/en/Pages/Courses-for-the-Unemployed.aspx
9 https://www.welfare.ie/en/Pages/JobPath.aspx
10 www.viskaproject.eu
assurance of RPL processes. The project is led by Skills Norway, in partnership with Iceland, Belgium and Ireland. A National Advisory Group has been established to support VISKA in Ireland. The aim is to learn lessons for policy from the research in order to inform the development of realistic practices, policies and expertise in RPL and to help meet the objectives set out in a number of related National and European policy documents. These include the Action Plan for Education 2016-2019 (DES, 2016a), the Further Education and Training Strategy: 2014-2019 (DES, 2014), the National Skills Strategy 2025 (DES, 2016b) in addition to implementing the European Council Recommendation on Upskilling Pathways (2016) and Validation of non-formal and informal learning (2012).

2.2 Validation in education and training

2.2.1 RPL in the Higher education sector

Equity of access through education and training is one of six national objectives of the 2018-2020 Higher Education System Performance Framework (HEA, 2018). Part of this objective is to increase the number of entrants from non-traditional routes into higher education through RPL. This objective builds on commitments outlined in the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (DES, 2011) and Action Plan for Education 2016 – 2019 (DES, 2016) to build flexible pathways into higher education through national arrangements for RPL.

In response, the higher education sector continues to take forward a range of initiatives involving the use of RPL aimed at widening participation and promoting lifelong learning. One example includes the Springboard+ initiative. Springboard+ provides free higher education courses generally of up-to-one year in duration to unemployed people, those previously self-employed and those returning to work from Levels 6 to 9 on the NFQ. For employed participants on courses at NFQ Level 7 to 9, the government funds 90% of the course fee. A 10% contribution is required from the participant. Courses which are at NFQ Level 6 are free to all participants.

Since its introduction in 2011, Springboard+ has supported over 47,000 unemployed people to reskill to gain employment, change career or start a business. A further 8,000 places were announced for the 2018-19 academic year on 245 courses, including in new areas such as robotics and artificial intelligence - representing an increase of almost 25% on the previous academic year. Employment outcomes from Springboard+ continue on an upward trajectory (DES, 2016b). For the 2014-2015 Springboard+ cohort, 60% of participants reported being in employment/self-employed within three to six months of completing their course. Data from the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection shows that, as of July 2016, 80% of those who have participated on a Springboard+ course since 2011 are no longer on the Live Register (DES, 2016b).

Providers delivering Springboard+ are expected to proactively use RPL processes for entry and achievement of a Springboard course, whereby details of each provider’s policy in this area is also required as part of course proposals (HEA, 2018).

Across the higher education sector, institutions continue to develop and informally apply their individual processes for RPL – providing information on RPL procedures for prospective candidates. One such example includes the use of RPL by the Waterford Institute of Technology as illustrated below. The Qualifax national learners’

database provides a list of certain institutions across Ireland who have developed similar policy procedures across Ireland.¹²

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### Box 1 Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) and RPL

WIT operates a system of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) to enable and encourage people to enter or re-enter formal education leading to qualifications. RPL is the term used to describe the system for giving formal recognition to a range of relevant learning that may have been gained prior to entry onto a particular course. RPL can be used by applicants to help:

- Gain admission to a course of study by helping candidates to demonstrate that they have met the entry requirements;
- Gaining exemption(s) from a module or modules within a programme of study where students can formally demonstrate that they have already met the learning outcomes for the module(s) concerned.

Prior learning may be the outcome of formal, non-formal or informal learning or a combination of all of these. Formal learning is gained through completing courses/modules in further/higher education or certified courses. Non-formal or informal learning may be attained through work, voluntary activities or private study but for which no certification may have been obtained.

Any RPL application must focus on learning attained and not simply, for example, on time spent in a particular job. RPL is not simply a general statement of previous learning – it requires applicants to map their prior learning to learning outcomes of the relevant WIT module and/or programme.

All RPL decisions are validated by the academic Department expert in the relevant area, in conjunction with the Head of Department and other subject specialists if required.

**RPL for exemptions:** Students may be able to gain exemptions from certain modules on a programme where they can formally demonstrate that they have already met all of the learning outcomes of a complete module(s).

**RPL for admissions:** Applicants who don’t already meet the academic entry requirements for a WIT course may be able to use RPL to support their application and gain a place on a course.

**Source and further information:** Extracted from Waterford Institute of Technology website: https://www.wit.ie/schools/education/rpl-for-admissions-or-exemption#tab=panel-3

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### 2.2.2 RPL in the Further education and training sector

The policy context for RPL in the further education and training sector is the Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy: 2014-2019 (DES, 2014). The FET Strategy acknowledges the role of RPL in enhancing employability and mobility and calls for systematic implementation of RPL through its commitment to a national strategy for RPL. In the context of a sector that has been through considerable reorganisation following the inception of the 16 ETBs in 2013,¹³ there have been a number of pioneering developments in relation to RPL since the previous Inventory update.

The 2016 country update reported on some of the advances ETBs were making in relation to RPL. One notable example was the work undertaken by Donegal ETB with the Defence Forces to move from the recognition of prior learning to accrediting prior learning for soldiers. Since the Defence Force initial project, Donegal ETB have implemented a service wide RPL policy and practice. In addition, the Defence Forces have extended the opportunities for soldiers through a pilot project with 10 of the 16 ETBs (who have Defence Force Barracks under their geographic scope). This pilot

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¹³ [Education and Training Boards Act (2013)](https://www.wit.ie/schools/education/rpl-for-admissions-or-exemption#tab=panel-3)
The Defence Force is a lifelong learning organisation. Its use of RPL represents 'a whole system approach' to meeting the needs of defence personnel.

An initial pilot study was carried out between Donegal ETB and Defence Force in Finner Camp with the aim of validating the knowledge, skills and competencies acquired by Soldiers outside of the formal learning environment. Initial identification of the learners in the pilot was through the Skills for Work programme. Individuals ranged in age from 34-59 years.

In partnerships with Donegal ETB, tutors worked with the Soldiers to help identify the skills, knowledge and competences of each individual and then match them to national standards. Through the process of RPL, Soldiers have achieved significant parts of major awards in a range of disciplines (e.g. Information and Communications Technology) across NFQ Levels 3-6. For many Soldiers who left formal education over 30 years ago, RPL has reignited an interest to engage in further formal education and training opportunities and has raised their self-esteem. In the longer term, RPL has the potential to support Soldiers in their transition from military to civilian working life.

Based on the successful outcomes of the initial pilot study, the Defence Forces decided to extend the opportunities for Soldiers on a pilot basis across 10 Defence Force locations in partnership with 10 ETBs. The second phase of the pilot (referred to as the 'TOBAR' project) aimed to engage up to 100 personnel (10 from each Defence Force Location) in each cycle. Cohorts in certain locations have exceeded the initial number of places available - demonstrating growing interest in opportunities for RPL. This represents an exciting development for the ETBs and all soldiers concerned.

The TOBAR project is ongoing and provides a key opportunity to consider the development of systems and procedures in line with quality assurance and Defence Force requirements.

Across the Defence Forces, RPL represents an important part of the accreditation process – providing an opportunity to formally recognise the knowledge, skills and competence acquired outside the formal learning environment.

As noted above, a key aim of the TOBAR project was to provide opportunities to Defence personal to gain recognition for the knowledge, skills and competences achieved outside formal education. For the ETBs, the project continues to provide a unique opportunity to explore a common approach to RPL across the ETB network. For practitioners involved in the TOBAR project, it continues to provide a space for them to develop and broaden their understanding of RPL and its potential value to a wide range of learners.

Based on resources developed by Cork Institute of Technology (CIT) together with tools from Donegal ETB and feedback from ETB practitioners, an evolving Handbook for RPL for those participating in the TOBAR project has been produced. The aim of the Handbook is to assist staff assessing material for learning already acquired through prior certified learning, professional experience, work-related experience and personal experiences. The booklet was designed in a way to assist and support staff involved in the RPL activities, rooted in quality assured processes and is available for use across the ETB network.

Although still ongoing, feedback from the sector suggests the following outcomes of the TOBAR project have been achieved, at least in part:

- An emerging understanding of common definition of RPL across the ETBs;
- Collected data on the profile of RPL users in this cohort;
- Stimulated important debates about the implementation of RPL from many different perspectives. This includes the use of RPL for different purposes in the

### Box 2 RPL in the Defence Forces

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**Source:** Irish Defence Forces Headquarters.
context of a diverse range of learners, its impact on the identity of practitioners, and services, and on the uses and challenges of writing learning outcomes;

- Generated additional expertise related to RPL within and across the ETBs that did not exist two years ago, based on all four stages of RPL processes;
- Produced sound evidence, based on existing RPL practice that can inform the future development of a national policy/strategy and/or good practice guidelines for RPL for this sector;
- Created templates for reporting structures and quality assurance related to RPL appropriate to each ETBs strategic context;
- Provided an opportunity for the ETBs to take ownership of RPL from a practice led perspective.

Interviewees contributing to the production of this country report have consistently praised the role of the ETB practitioners in the pilot project. It has been noted that their efforts to develop capacity and expertise for RPL through participation in the project is commendable - and that overall, their input has been instrumental in the success of the pilot.

Since the 2016 update, other ETBs have also advanced their work on RPL. A notable example is Kerry ETB who has developed a model to assess work based acquired competencies within the tourism sector. This is described in more detail below.

**Box 3 Kerry ETB National Tour Guiding: RPL**

Kerry ETB offers people working in the tourism industry an opportunity to have their prior learning formally recognised. It is available to professionals with a minimum of five years’ experience, providing guiding and tour management services for visitors to Ireland. These are the prerequisites to access the programme and are confirmed in a pre-screening interview with all prospective candidates.

Once accepted on the programme, industry mentors help each tour guide to assemble their own work-based portfolio, which is used to evaluate their skills and knowledge against a set of standards of the QQI Award in National Tour Guiding at Level 6. Mentors work closely alongside the RPL applicant to help them produce the necessary evidence of experience. This could be video evidence of the candidate conducting a tour, itineraries, and/or presentation of their skills etc. The candidate is given three months to prepare their portfolio and is then invited to attend a final interview to confirm they have met the standard for the QQI National Tour Guiding Award (L6).

Prospective applicants might be referred to Kerry ETB via Fáilte Ireland (National Tourism Development Authority) or have learnt about the RPL National Tour Guiding on Fetchcourses.ie. This is likely to result in an increased interest in the RPL programme for National Tour Guide. Given that candidates are required to have at least five years’ experience, the number of applications coming though is expected to be manageable. To date, Kerry ETB have certified five candidates for National Tour Guiding and have a further nine candidates at different stages of the process.

Kerry ETB welcome future applications and the opportunity to support eligible candidates through the RPL process as and when they apply. More generally, across the Kerry ETB, there is also growing demand for the use of RPL in other sectors. For example, there has been recent interest in using RPL for access to the national apprenticeship for Commis Chef. Furthermore, once the 2018/19 literacy and ESOL courses commence, the ETB intends to explore the introduction of RPL with its Adult Literacy Organisers and tutors.

Kerry ETB has worked hard to build expertise and capacity for RPL over recent years and continues to share lessons learnt and good practice with the ETB network. They have spent time to try and test processes and procedures over recent years – working towards continuous

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14 This is a further education and training course online hub providing up-to-date information on over 4,000 FET course. [https://www.fetchcourses.ie/courses/about](https://www.fetchcourses.ie/courses/about)

improvement. Close cooperation with Fáilte Ireland and QQI and open discussion with peers continues to support the success of RPL for national tour guiding.

**Source and further information:** Kerry ETB: [http://kerryetbtrainingcentre.ie/course/rpl-tour-guiding/](http://kerryetbtrainingcentre.ie/course/rpl-tour-guiding/)

Within the Agriculture and Food sector, Teagasc colleges\(^{16}\) deliver a range of Level 5 and Level 6 courses in agriculture, horticulture, equine and forestry. The colleges also collaborate with a number of third level institutions in the delivery of Higher Level courses in agriculture and horticulture. Since 2010, RPL has been used to determine exemption for transfer into higher level awards. The Teagasc Education Vision (Teagasc, 2018) emphasises the need for education and training providers to find ways of assessing and validating relevant prior learning achievements (formal, non-formal and informal) regardless of where the learning has taken place. The report endorses the importance of effective and consistent RPL implementation as emphasised by Goggin et al. (2017).

### 2.2.3 RPL and apprenticeships

Since the 2016 update, there is continued use of RPL in the Apprenticeship programme supported by SOLAS (The Further Education and Training Authority):

Registered apprentices can submit an application for phase and/or time exemptions in recognition of formal qualifications or trade related work experience.

RPL opportunities for redundant apprentices is still available; however, the number of applicants has declined as the Irish economy recovers. Redundant apprentices can submit an application to have trade related work experience or formal training recognised as part of their apprenticeship thus enabling them to complete the apprenticeship.

Time-served apprentices can be offered the opportunity to validate their competence leading to the Record of Attainment or the QQI Advanced Certificate – Craft.

SOLAS also report an increase in the use of RPL in certain sectors:

- **Construction sector:** As the construction industry continues to recover, there has been an increase in the number of individuals who did not complete their craft apprenticeship (e.g. approximately 10 years ago) and are now returning to continue their apprenticeship. SOLAS facilitates those in the industry to validate their competence through RPL, thus shorten their apprenticeship journey.

- **Energy sector:** Changes in regulations and the introduction of a licencing system in the energy sector has identified a cohort of uncertified workers who cannot continue to work in the industry until they validate their competence. Those wishing to obtain the Irish craft qualification can apply for RPL in recognition of related qualifications (sometimes foreign) or work experience.

- **Private security sector:** The potential introduction of a licensing system in the private security sector is also likely to unveil a cohort of uncertified alarm installers who will not be able to continue to work in the sector and thus expected to lead to an increase in the demand for RPL.

Following the 2013 national review of apprenticeship training (reporting in 2014), and as reinforced in the Action Plan to extend Apprenticeship and Traineeship in Ireland

\(^{16}\) [https://www.teagasc.ie/education/teagasc-colleges/](https://www.teagasc.ie/education/teagasc-colleges/)
2016-2020 (DES, 2016c), work has continued to expand the national apprenticeship system into new industry sectors, leading to awards from Levels 5 to 10 on the NFQ. There are now 36 apprenticeship programmes available in Ireland (an increase from 27 in 2016).

As reported in the 2016 country update, new apprenticeship models were developed in Insurance Practice (NFQ Level 8) and Industrial Electrical Engineering (NFQ Level 7). Since then, new apprenticeships have been introduced in a range of sectors with others currently in development. This includes apprenticeships in financial services; accounting; advanced manufacturing and in new craft and services areas such as recruitment, sales, equine and horticulture. As also reported in 2016, the model of the new apprenticeships is a more flexible model and comprises a minimum of two years in duration, a wider range of delivery models, and NFQ Level Awards ranging from NFQ Levels 5 to 9. Through existing arrangements for recognition, SOLAS envisage an increase in the demand for RPL from those already working in these areas who now wish to obtain the new qualification.

### 2.2.4 RPL for young people

Although RPL is not formally embedded in the general compulsory education sector, there is growing recognition of the potential value of RPL for young people. Notably, Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures (DES, 2016d) is the first overarching national policy framework for children and young people (aged 0-24 years), developed and led by the Department for Children and Youth Affairs. The need to support and improve recognition of the role of non-formal and informal learning, and the contribution of youth work is recognised as a key aim in the national policy. Indeed, the National Youth Strategy 2015-2020 (DYCA, 2015) commits to the development of a national system for recognition of non-formal and informal learning.

In an Irish context, opportunities to gain recognition for skills gained through non-formal and informal learning in youth work are wide ranging. Many youth organisations and programmes promote and value the use of RPL and support the need for continued resources in this respect.

For some young people, the emphasis is on the use of formative RPL for personal growth and development – whereas for other young people, the focus may be on summative RPL which enables the young person to acquire a formal qualification as recognition of his /her skills and competences. For individuals who struggle to recognise their own value, programmes such as Youthreach can mentor individuals through the process and help them recognise their non-formal and informal learning experience.

### 2.2.5 Stages of validation

Whilst providers develop their own approaches to the implementation of RPL, the stages of validation typically used are consistent with the 2012 Council Recommendation on validation of non-formal and informal learning and Cedefop’s 2015 European Guidelines for validation (Cedefop, 2015). As outlined in the Expert Group on Future Skill Needs (EGFSN, 2011), stages of validation typically include:

- Identification and documentation: Identifying what someone knows or can do, and recording it (personal stage, possibly with supervision);
- Assessment: Establishing what someone knows or can do;
Validation: Establishing that what someone knows or can do satisfies certain requirements (points of reference, standards);

Certification: Stating that what someone knows or can do satisfies certain requirements, and awarding a document testifying to this (necessitates the involvement of an accredited authority to certify performance and possibly its level).

2.2.6 RPL and open educational resources

There is no specific strategy in relation to validation of learning undertaken by means of open educational resources (OER) in Ireland. Though not technically OER, a number of valuable digital learning tools exist.

Box 4 My Experience RPL Toolkit (www.myexperience.ie)

Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT), Institute of Technology Sligo (ITS) and Letterkenny Institute of Technology (LyIT) together form the Connacht-Ulster Alliance (CU Alliance). In 2016, the CU Alliance launched the My Experience RPL (Recognised Prior Learning) Assessment Toolkit. The toolkit includes: a RPL online portfolio assessment tool built on Moodle; an information website for RPL candidates; an online course on RPL Skills for higher education staff; and a Level 9, postgraduate teaching development module aimed at RPL assessors and mentors (available on the MA in Teaching & Learning at GMIT). Since launching the online assessment tool over 200 RPL applicants have built an ePortfolio RPL application for assessment.

The information website provides step-by-step guidance on how to use the RPL Assessment Portfolio Tool to support users building an online portfolio to help gain access or advanced entry into a higher education programme in the Institutes of Technology in the Connacht-Ulster region including Galway-Mayo IT, LyIT and IT Sligo. The steps include:

- Research a course and the desired location of study.
- RPL applicants then contact the admissions office at the selected college and complete a direct application form.
- The head of department discusses access options with the RPL candidate.
- A RPL mentor is assigned to the RPL candidate.
- The RPL applicant completes an online RPL assessment portfolio.
- Once the portfolio is complete, it will be assessed for recognised prior learning by a RPL assessor in GMIT, IT Sligo or LyIT and candidates may also be called for an interview.

Source and further information: My experience.ie: www.myexperience.ie

As reported in previous updates, the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA)’s distance learning tool - www.writeon.ie - is an interactive website, developed with the support of the European Social Fund. It is a QQI validated programme, operating under quality assurance procedures established by NALA in line with national requirements set down by QQI. The tool enables individuals to improve their basic (literacy, numeracy, IT and interpersonal) skills online.
Box 5 Writeon.ie

The www.writeon.ie site is a web-based learning resource. It was developed in 2008 to provide free online learning and to facilitate literacy development. Its purpose is to enable learners to improve their reading, writing, numbers, ICT, personal development skills and to develop new digital literacies and pursue accreditation if desired.

With demand for accreditation at Levels 2 and 3 on the NFQ, there are 12 accredited awards at Level 2, and 14 at Level 3, mapped to the NFQ providing accreditation opportunities for individuals who have the knowledge, skills and competences but with no way of validating these and achieving qualifications.

In terms of how it works, learners initially log on to writeon.ie with a unique password and select an area of study. Learners then complete an initial assessment for each award area they wish to work on. Where initial assessment demonstrates learners have met all standards in a particular award, they may proceed directly to an on-line summative assessment for those awards. These are identified as RPL learners. The website contains a skills checker which may be used to ascertain the initial level of the learner.

Writeon.ie is used by practitioners and providers as a blended learning resource where learners are supported by centre-based tutors and can use RPL to gain accreditation. Training is provided to registered centres and providers to support blended learning approaches, including that of RPL.

To date, there are 69,000 learning accounts created on writeon.ie. 35,700 minor awards at Levels 2 and 3 have been achieved by over 5,900 learners. This is a significant increase since the 2014 update that reported a total of 2,573 learners achieved awards using the site.

A total of 180 learning centres have registered to use the website for learning and accreditation - including Education Training Boards, labour activation programmes, Community Training Centres, Community education centres, Traveller Education Centres, the National Learning Network, Enable Ireland, Rehab and probation services.

Source and further information: NALA: http://www.writeon.ie/nala/student/login_new.jsf

Other examples include the e-Pathways project aimed to support personalised and professional training pathways for VET teachers. ICT based CPD tools and materials mainly in the format of e-Portfolios are used to enable teachers to document their formal and non-formal skills. Similarly, as part of the Limerick Clare ETB Edge project, an e-portfolio and open badge system has been developed to capture and recognise informal and non-formal learning. The e-portfolio was designed through Moodle as a guidance and employability tool and it supports learners in recognising workplace skills such as time-keeping, interpersonal skills, team work and leadership.

2.3 Validation and the labour market

The Government’s Action Plan for Jobs 2018 (DBEI, 2018) outlines a target to achieve employment growth of 2.3% in 2018 which equates to approximately 50,000 jobs. It builds on measures to address the challenge of long-term unemployment, to help people access the labour market and support their career development. As part of this, the Pathways to Work 2016-2020 (DBEI, 2016) continues to enhance peoples’ prospects for employment and support economic growth. Other initiatives include the aforementioned JobsPlus scheme, the Momentum programme and the Springboard+, and Explore initiatives.

The sectoral activities of Skillnet Ireland in the private sector, continues to have a prominent role in up-skilling the labour market and in sustaining Ireland’s national

17 http://fit.ie/fit-labs/teachers-resources-projects/epathways/
18 http://www.welfare.ie/en/Pages/Courses-for-the-Unemployed.aspx
competitiveness and economic recovery. Through the work of the new Skillnet Ireland agency (launched in May 2018) and the Skillnet network, there is growing evidence of employers working with providers to raise the skills level of employees in their sectors, increasingly including through the use of RPL. One notable example is provided in the case of Retail Ireland Skillnet below.

### Box 6 Retail Ireland Skillnet and RPL

Retail Ireland Skillnet (RIS) have been offering RPL to employers and employees in the Irish retail sector since 2009.

RIS is a national provider of work-based learning for the Irish retail sector, working with a large cross section of retailers including: department stores, pharmacies, book sellers, supermarkets, symbol stores and shoe retailers.

RIS was approached by a number of retail organisations who have well established in-company training programmes which were not accredited. RIS reviewed the training materials used by these organisations and where possible mapped it onto the modules RIS were already providing. In many instances, the employer had to include additional learning to meet the relevant module learning outcomes.

RIS offer RPL in the following eight areas:

- Retail Customer Service
- Communications
- Work Experience
- Retail Selling
- Retail Effective Working Relationships
- Retail Payment Procedures
- Retail Security
- Safety & Health at Work

In order to gain accreditation, learners had to complete a RPL portfolio that provided evidence to address the relevant learning outcomes. Learners had to undergo a RPL interview. In addition, a section was completed by the learner’s workplace supervisor who recorded performance in the workplace against the relevant module learning outcomes.

Since 2009 almost 1,000 QQI certificates have been issued to retail employees achieved through RPL. Many of these employees built on this achievement by enrolling on part-time education programmes.

For further information visit: https://www.retailirelandskillnet.com/

As presented in previous updates, partnerships between education providers and industry continue to develop successfully in response to changing market needs. One example includes the evolving partnerships between the Institutes of Technology and industry. For example, the Cork Institute of Technology (CIT) Extended Campus continues to respond to the needs of employer organisations in terms of engagement, customised course solutions and addressing the organisation and individual labour force needs. RPL and work-based learning are elements which are increasingly important and relevant in the discussions which are taking place between this institute and industry. In addition to examples provided in the 2016 country update, more recent developments from the CIT Extended Campus include:

- Atlantic Flight Training Academy: Demand within the aviation sector for pilots within the next 10 years is expected to increase significantly. In response, the Air Flight Training Academy working with CIT designed an honours degree course to aid pilots in developing their careers and supporting promotion opportunities. A mapping of the pilots’ non-formal and informal learning is the basis for advanced
entry to the programme at year 3. The mapping of the prior learning and a reflective submission equates to 120 ETCS credits.

- **Boston Scientific**: Boston Scientific is a medical solutions multinational corporation with three manufacturing sites in Ireland. Boston Scientific worked with CIT to develop a customised special purpose award for those in a supervisory, team lead or management role with qualifications in a non-cognate discipline. A co-requisite of participating in the course is that the individual must have a managerial or supervisory role and an RPL process was undertaken to support entry to the course. The course has a blended approach integrating credit-earning work-based learning alongside traditional learning elements.

As reported in the 2016 update, professional bodies continue to use RPL in response to changes in regulatory requirements and the changing needs of the labour force. This includes:

- Experiential Learning in Engineers Ireland,
- RPL in Certified Public Accountants Ireland,
- RPL and The Royal Institute of Architects of Ireland,
- RPL and Institute of Professional Auctioneers and Valuers,
- RPL and Society of Chartered Surveyors Ireland.

### 2.3.1 Skills audits

With regards to skills audit for people who are unemployed or at risk of employment, whilst there is no nationally agreed definition of a ‘skills audit’ in Ireland, a number of national practices (or certain elements within them) that fall under the definition of skills audits outlined in the 2012 Council Recommendation on validation exist. These include:

- The MOMENTUM programme which is part of the Government’s Action Plan for Jobs, offers training to long-term unemployed people and young unemployed people;

- The Skills for Work Programme is a national programme aimed at providing training opportunities to help employees deal with the basic skills demands of the workplace. This programme is being aligned directly with opportunities for RPL within some ETBs, including the use of Europass and portfolio tools to document learning outcomes achieved;

- Writeon.ie uses an online ‘skills checker’ to assess a learner’s strengths and gaps in skills and knowledge;

- The Construction Skills Certification Scheme (CSCS) and the Quarrying Skills Certification Scheme (QSCS) provides for the training, assessment, certification (licensing) and registration of non-craft operatives within the construction and quarrying sectors.

In sector-led initiatives such as the Construction Skills Certification Scheme and the Quarry Skills Certification Scheme in Ireland; the skills audit is based on a skills framework that uses occupational/professional standards. The outcome is intended to equip an individual with the relevant documentation (e.g. Skills Card) to demonstrate their knowledge, skills and competences and include opportunities for skills acquired through formal, non-formal and informal learning to be certified. They

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19 [http://www.welfare.ie/en/Pages/Courses-for-the-Unemployed.aspx](http://www.welfare.ie/en/Pages/Courses-for-the-Unemployed.aspx)

20 [http://skillsforwork.ie/?page_id=37](http://skillsforwork.ie/?page_id=37)
are trusted and valued by employers and are supported by sector bodies, social partners and employers.

2.4 Validation and the third sector

The third sector is active in the field of education across all sectors. Though its involvement in RPL remains difficult to evaluate, there are some examples of not for profit organisations providing RPL opportunities to a range of different target groups as outlined in the case of EQUAL Ireland.

Box 7 EQUAL IRELAND

EQUAL Ireland provides adult learners with second chance educational opportunities at tertiary level. As part of a collaborative partnership with Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT) together they have developed a mentored RPL process, which provides learners with ‘one to one’ RPL support. This is currently provided free to the applicant by EQUAL Ireland. Its purpose is to assist the applicant in the collection and presentation, for academic assessment by AIT, of evidence of their relevant prior learning (formal and non-formal learning, life experiences and work-based learning).

Successful assessment means that the valid and relevant life-experience of the RPL applicant can be harnessed to provide an opportunity to engage with higher education and acquire useful qualifications while reducing their associated costs in terms of both time and money.

As a concrete example, a person seeking entry to the final year of a QQI Level 7 degree programme would typically be required to produce a cognate QQI Level 6 Higher Certificate, which would typically require two years study. By engaging with EQUAL Ireland’s RPL process, the qualifying period for a person with relevant prior learning can be reduced significantly. Whilst one in three of the most recent intake for the BA in Business, Enterprise and Community Development had the requisite academic qualifications for entry the balance successfully engaged with the RPL process to gain advanced entry to this programme. The proportion of applicants availing of RPL has been increasing with each intake.

Many successful RPL applicants hold the view that had it not been for the availability of RPL they would not have gained entry to tertiary level education nor have obtained a degree level qualification.

At an EU Level

Transnationally EQUAL Ireland is contributing to the further development and application of RPL processes by leading the Muinín Project, part funded by ERASMUS Plus, which brings together the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (Greece), TUCEP, Perugia (Italy), University of “Vasile Alecsandri ” Bacau (Romania) and the World Universities Services of the Mediterranean, Girona, (Spain). This project will see the development of an accredited programme aimed at standardising and professionalising the role of the community-based or workplace-based RPL Mentor Facilitator in terms of the supports provided to RPL applicants and the general awareness of RPL as a potential vehicle for late entry to tertiary level education.

The EQUAL Ireland RPL process has the potential to significantly accelerate the acquisition of qualifications to the benefit of the individuals involved, the communities in which they live, the tertiary level providers themselves and the economy in general.

Source and further information: EQUAL Ireland: http://equalireland.ie/

In recent years, there have been many important developments relating to the regulation and funding of voluntary and community sector organisations in Ireland. This has challenged their engagement and scope to offer opportunities for non-formal adult learning and RPL across local community settings in Ireland.

The establishment of the Charities Regulator in 2014 means that all charities in Ireland are now required to register with the Regulator. It is reported that many voluntary and community organisations have faced significant governance, managerial and
operational challenges in efforts to comply with the regulatory requirements. The
award of funding for voluntary and community organisations through ‘commissioning’
services is also reported to exacerbate these challenges further. In addition, cuts in
government spending on the voluntary and community sector in past years has meant
that many voluntary and community organisations have reduced their spending,
reduced staffing numbers and in some cases closed down services (ICTU, 2012).
In parallel, QQI’s quality-assurance guidelines for all providers of further and higher
education and training (QQI, 2015) requires all providers to review their current quality
assurance procedures in order to re-engage on the basis of the statutory requirements
of the 2012 Act. However, it is argued that the cumulative effect of regulatory, funding
and the quality assurance compliance environment, challenges opportunities for
engagement by some in the community and voluntary sector.
In the context of RPL, voluntary and community-based organisations have a key role
to play in engaging socially excluded adults and those hardest-to-reach. Many
organisations offer opportunities for non-formal and informal learning and there is
some evidence of organisations collaborating and networking with counterparts in the
education sector and labour market on the provision of RPL. However, challenges
faced by the sector raises a deep concern that educationally disadvantaged learners
may be further disenfranchised. The continued provision of quality assured
opportunities through community education to recognise learning gained outside
formal education, including through RPL, provides a platform from where individuals
can develop personally and potentially progress to further learning and employment
opportunities. The importance of ensuring that voluntary and community
organisations can continue to engage comprehensively with qualifications and the
quality assurance systems to offer relevant QQI minor and other awards is re-
emphasised by AONTAS (O’Reilly (2018).

3 Links to national qualification systems
The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), launched in 2003, is defined as the
single nationally and internationally accepted entity through which all learning
achievements may be measured and related to each other in a coherent way, and
which defines the relationship between all education and training awards. It emerged
in the context of European policy on lifelong learning and the vision of inclusion of all
learning. It is constructed as a system of ten levels and is used to describe the Irish
qualifications system. The Framework includes four different award classes and many
award-types. There are level indicators for each level and these are based on
nationally agreed statements concerning expected knowledge, skills and
competence to be achieved. These reflect what an individual is expected to know,
understand and be able to do following successful completion of a process of learning.

The definition of levels of learning and articulation of the type of learning expected at
each level is considered to be useful for RPL purposes. Almost all awards made
through the state funded sector, and many in the private sector, have been placed on
the NFQ. The NFQ is based on learning outcomes and was referenced to the EQF in
June 2009, which means that an award placed on the NFQ has a corresponding
referencing point on the EQF. As Ireland prepares for re-referencing the NFQ to the
EQF, amendments to legislation will provide for inclusion of awards of other awarding
bodies which will increase opportunities for recognition of non-formal learning.

The tangible outcomes that can be achieved through RPL include gaining entry to a
programme, gaining exemptions within a programme, gaining credit towards an award
and attaining an award. The NFETL (2015) report that the compacts in the higher
education sector show that the main intended role of RPL relates to entry. The
research also shows that RPL is used within institutions to facilitate learners with prior learning. Most institutions consider claims for RPL in relation to advanced entry to a course and in relation to module exemptions, while a limited number consider claims for full awards based on evidence of prior learning. A commitment to further strengthening the use of RPL for entry to higher education was reinforced in the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019 (HEA, 2015). The plan commits to building coherent pathways from further education, and to foster other entry routes into higher education. This includes entry to higher education (from Levels 6-10) through RPL which will be monitored through the performance compacts.

As part of the RPL in Irish FET study (Goggin et al. 2017), respondents were asked if RPL was more appropriate at Levels 1 to 3 or 4 to 6 of the framework of qualifications. It was reported that at ‘the higher Levels (4 to 6), qualifications are often seen as directly linked to entry into the workplace so there appears to be more caution about having RPL at these levels than at the lower levels of the framework’. The authors also note the reasons for engaging at Levels 1 to 3 is generally from a motivational participatory perspective in education and/or to develop adult literacy skills. As stated by one of the participants involved in the study, ‘it is unclear how RPL aligns with the introductory levels if there is a literacy skills gap.’ This is an important consideration in the case of RPL for migrant/refugee learners or for learners who lack self-esteem. Participating in an initiative that allows an individual the time and space to reengage in learning is one thing, but to engage in a process of RPL is an entirely different matter. As reported by Goggin et al. (2017), ‘where RPL is applied in an informal way within the ETBs it is generally for entry to a course. In rare instances RPL is used to enable advanced entry to a programme beyond year one. Exemptions from an element or elements of a course based on prior learning are not commonly facilitated’.

It is worth acknowledging that the RPL in Irish FET report was published prior to the implementation of the various RPL pilots within which the majority of certification has been obtained at Levels 4, 5 and 6, having been anticipated at Level 3 and 4. While not formally evaluated or documented, one of the questions under consideration with practitioners concerns the relative comparable impact of RPL over open access with a focus on progression to the next appropriate level which is a common practice within the sector. Although a number of RPL practices are in place, it will take time for practice to evolve and to determine impact on access, transfer and progression derived from RPL, but discussions within communities of practice currently reflect on such concerns.

Where certificates are awarded, it is not evident by looking at the certificates generally issued to know whether they have been obtained through RPL.

In terms of credit, as reported in previous updates, it remains the case that there is no single national credit system in Ireland as such, but rather a twin-tracked approach is in use. As acknowledged by the OECD in 2008, one approach was pursued in further education and training, and another for higher education and training – namely through the use of ECTS in higher education (ECTS in HE are taken as 60 credits per typical year).

The ATP policy restatement issued by QQI in 2015 clarifies procedures for providers prior to the implementation of a national approach to credit. These procedures relate to the specification of arrangements for the recognition of prior learning by providers of education and training programmes leading to awards. These are as follows:

- All providers are required to develop a statement of arrangements available in respect of each of their programmes for the recognition of prior learning, for entry, for credit towards an award and for access to a full award. These statements should define the purposes for which recognition of prior learning processes can be used, i.e., to enable entry to the programme; to provide exemption from
programme requirements or credit towards an award; or to establish eligibility for a full award. Where RPL is used to enable entry to a programme, the statement of arrangements should indicate to learners the competences needed to succeed on the programme.

- In relation to providers whose programmes are validated by the QQI or who have been delegated authority by QQI to make awards, the statement of arrangements must be consistent with the policies and procedures for QQI Awards.

As noted above, the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) (Amendment) Bill 2018 involves providers more centrally in the application process for RPL bringing RPL services closer to the citizen.

In summary, it remains the case that all Irish award levels in the NFQ are referenced to the EQF and to the framework of levels for the European Higher Education Area. As such, validation resulting in the award of credits or exemptions may be referenced technically to relevant EQF levels and is therefore compliant with the Council Recommendation principles related to links to the NFQ and synergies between validation and credit systems. As noted above, as Ireland prepares for re-referencing the NFQ to the EQF, amendments to legislation will provide for inclusion of awards of other awarding bodies which will increase opportunities for recognition of non-formal learning.

4 Standards

In terms of standards, the standards used for RPL are the same as those used for the provision of formal learning and therefore compliant with the Council Recommendation principle on standards. The design of the NFQ in Ireland means that each level is based on generic, non-disciplinary nationally agreed standards of knowledge, skill and competence. As described below there are also both specific awards standards and standards for fields of learning based on learning outcomes, informing programme design and assessment. RPL can be used against both award and programme learning outcomes, depending on sectoral approaches.

5 Organisations and institutions involved in validation arrangements and its coordination

There are a number of institutions and stakeholders involved in the development and implementation of RPL in Ireland. Overarching responsibility rests with the Department of Education and Skills who co-ordinate work across all sectors of education and training and skills policy, but also connect with other government departments such as e.g. Children and Youth Affairs, Employment Affairs and Social Protection, the Department of Agriculture and Food, Department of Tourism, Transport and Sport. In turn relevant government departments have oversight of and liaise with agencies with responsibility for the range of professional regulatory bodies.

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) is the state agency responsible for maintaining the ten-level NFQ and is responsible for reviewing the effectiveness of quality assurance in further and higher education providers in Ireland. The 2012 Act includes specific reference to RPL and states that:

- Learners may apply to QQI for awards where they meet standards that QQI has established (Section 50(3));

■ QQI may request the assistance of providers to assess learners' prior learning for the purposes of making awards (Section 50(7));
■ QQI shall establish and publish policies and criteria for access transfer and progression (Section 56(1)) for learners, in accordance with which policies and criteria, providers must establish procedures to be implemented by the provider concerned (Section 56 (2));
■ These (Section 56 (2)) shall include policies on credit and recognition of prior learning (Section 56(3)).

The National University of Ireland (NUI), Technological Higher Education Association (THEA), and the Irish Universities Association (IUA) in higher education, ETBI within FET and Aontas for the Community Sector, also have important roles to play in the co-ordination of policy development / approaches at sectoral level.

The Further Education and Training Authority, SOLAS, is responsible for funding, planning and coordinating training and further education programmes. Together with the 16 education and training boards (ETBs), it has an important role to play in supporting RPL both strategically and at regional level. The National Skills Council and network of nine Regional Skills Fora have a key contributory role to play in fostering greater engagement between the education and training sectors, with employers and in matching skills provision with economic and development.

As discussed above, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) Systems Performance Framework proposes an increase in participation in higher education from the FE sector through non-traditional routes, and also for other learners as facilitated by RPL, which is monitored through individual institutional compacts and reports. In addition, the Systems Performance Framework 2018-2020 encourages a process of strategic dialogue between individual higher education institutions and enterprise, whereby opportunities to develop customised courses incorporating RPL and work-based learning to meet employee needs is a key consideration.

SOLAS have agreed performance compacts with ETBs meeting systems performance objectives including provision for the skills needs of the economy and for active inclusion; under each measure, initiatives allow for RPL activities. With changes in the economy, the emphasis on work-based provision and engagement has increased, including through new initiatives such as Explore, delivered in partnership with Regional Skills Fora.

In terms of coordination between organisations and institutions involved in RPL, whilst there is widespread support for a coordinated and coherent approach to RPL, there is currently no single coordination point from the perspective of RPL. At national political level, the Department of Education and Skills has established a Steering Group to advise on the measures required to implement the Upskilling Pathways Recommendation. This group, while focused on the needs of citizens with low levels of qualifications and specific skills needs, provides for coordination among key stakeholders relevant to the target group.

Similarly, a requirement of the VISKA project is the establishment of a National Advisory Group, which because of the requirement to address professional development for practitioners, includes representatives of higher education institutions and provides a model also for co-ordination at political level.

The RPL Practitioner Network continues to be an important and energising focal point for practitioners across multiple sectors. The Network is a voluntary association of practitioners and includes representatives from the public and private sectors, further and higher sectors of education, the labour market and third sector. Representatives
come together and support the development of system wide capacity through sharing of practices, local policies and toolkits. The main aims of the Network are to:

- Provide a coherent practitioner voice to shape and inform policy development;
- Support the development of a community of practice, providing opportunities to share learning, face to face, online and through practical sharing of toolkits and resources;
- Promote good practice, informed by national and international practitioner and policy perspectives.

The Network itself is dynamic and enthusiastic, and is supporting excellent practice. Routinely approximately 80-100 Network members attend meetings up to four times a year. Members are keen to have a voice and active role in supporting developments at national level but also to establish strong practice for RPL in their own services.

Overall, QQI has an important contribution to make at policy level and is in a unique position in that it is linked to a number of different organisations in the field and is committed to both collaborative and consultative processes in its work.

Recent developments emerging from the education and training sector include a range of projects undertaken sectorally and individually by the ETBs and other sectors, in addition to the continuing evolution of the RPL Practitioner Network. These developments indicate sure signs of greater national practice in the implementation of RPL in a broad range of contexts. Practices emanating from these developments together with lessons learnt provide a strong evidence base to inform the development of a more systematic national approach to RPL and its related infrastructure. Rather than a national approach to RPL being imposed through a ‘top-down’ approach – the development of a national approach to RPL can be informed by such practices across diverse sectors.

Within the FET sector, Goggin et al. (2017) reports a willingness from ETB practitioners for a coordinated approach to the development and implementation of RPL, consistent with the preferred approach of that sector. The suggestion is for a ‘formal group to be established within each ETB with representatives including but not restricted to representatives of the post leaving certificate (PLC) colleges, training function and adult education who would all support the development of RPL within the geographic region covered by the ETB’. Since then, through the work of ETBI, sectoral procedures were agreed as reference material for piloting relating to RPL.

In terms of links between public sector RPL arrangements and competence measures taking place in enterprises, CIT has established the ‘Learning Clinic’ where staff meet with employers to discuss upskilling or reskilling requirements of employees. The ‘Atlantic Flight Training Academy’ as noted under section 2.3 is of relevance in this context. These represent examples of where RPL that has taken place in enterprises have currency in the public sector and the other way around.

Since the 2016 Inventory there seems to be growing evidence of RPL being used by different agencies and different government departments. Examples of initiatives are reported throughout. This includes the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, Teagasc – the Agriculture and Food Development Authority and the Department of Education and Skills (DES). Whilst the DES Action Plan for Education 2016-2019 (DES, 2016a) indicates a commitment to develop a national policy for RPL – a coordinated approach is required.

In summary, efforts are in progress to optimise, support and promote the involvement of stakeholders in RPL in order to be fully compliant with the 2012 Council Recommendation.
6 Information, advice and guidance

6.1 Awareness-raising

There is no national communication strategy on RPL, or co-ordination of information services derived from same. At local levels, the provision of information and advice on RPL are communicated primarily through individual education and training providers. The Adult Education Guidance Service is located regionally and advises impartially, including on RPL. Similarly, the PES provide as appropriate, a range of different measures related to skills identification (including skills audit type measures) to a range of clients and may direct individuals towards further services and training opportunities accordingly.

Although awareness in certain sectors is growing, overall awareness of RPL is limited. Within the FET sector, the RPL in FET study (2017) reported at the time of research, that existing knowledge of RPL at an ETB level was limited by the experience and professional pathway of those interviewed for the study. However, annual dialogue meetings conducted by QQI with the 16 ETBs at the close of 2017 indicated that almost all were in the process of developing RPL policies and procedures.

Promoting the value and raising awareness of RPL is increasingly featured in key policy documents. The Further Education and Training Strategy acknowledges the role of RPL in enhancing employability and mobility and in driving the systematic implementation of RPL in the FET sector. Furthermore, the National Skills Strategy 2025 (DES, 2016) sets out a range of measures to improve Ireland’s lifelong learning participation rates and promotes the dissemination of good practice in RPL. Within the FET Strategy, AONTAS (the National Adult Learning Organisation) has been identified as a key support partner across four of the five strategic goals through work in areas including community education, learner voice, literacy and numeracy, RPL and promoting awareness of the value and benefits of further education and training. Since the 2016 update, AONTAS has established the National Further Education and Training Learner Forum (NFETLF) – consisting of a series of events starting in 2016 that bring together learners from across the country to ask their views on further education and training courses. During these events learners expressed growing interest in RPL and the overall need for an effective system for RPL based on their experiences thus far. Based on suggestions raised by learners participating in the events, AONTAS has produced a set of RPL related recommendations. These are presented in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recommendation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>■ Provide assessments before a course begins to assess each learner’s level and ensure they are placed in an appropriate class groupings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>■ Improve RPL through new testing procedures. Portfolio assessments should be used as an RPL option</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

22 https://www.qqi.ie/Articles/Pages/recognition-of-Prior-Learning-RPL.aspx

23 FET strategy includes five strategic goals (skills for the economy; active inclusion; quality provision; integrated planning and funding; standing of FET)


25 N/A (internal report to SOLAS)
Drawing on the examples of good RPL practice in Europe, ETBs should broaden RPL processes\textsuperscript{26}.

Provide an opportunity for learners to showcase learning through portfolios and/or project-based assessments and have these materials accepted as forms of RPL\textsuperscript{27}.

Broaden RPL processes, particularly in areas of language recognition, by allowing learners further opportunities to showcase pre-existing knowledge and skills\textsuperscript{28}.

In terms of next steps, AONTAS report back on all findings from the Forum to learners through a Learner Newsletter and through the AONTAS annual National FET Learner Forum Learner Report. The research findings are shared with all relevant stakeholders (e.g. DES, SOLAS, QQI, DEASP, ETBI, RPL Practitioner Network etc.). In the meantime, QQI continues to support the work of the NFETLF to ensure learner voice work on RPL is incorporated into current debates on RPL.

Efforts to raise awareness of the scope of RPL in both policy and practice terms is needed to promote the value and potential benefits of RPL. There is however reticence among some providers about promotion of a service that is not yet developed, consolidated, funded, or fully operational. Some providers feel that they are developing incrementally and will be able to resource more effectively over time, building staff capacity and infrastructure. At that point they will be happier to advertise more actively and overtly.

6.2 Information, advice and guidance

The National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) is an agency of the Department of Education and Skills with responsibility to support and develop guidance practice in all areas of education. The NCGE informs the policy of the Department of Education and Skills in relation to guidance and provides support and information to guidance practitioners in the general education, adult education and further education and training sectors. NCGE is the DES designated representative at EU level guidance committees and meetings, and NCGE is a member of the SIAC Committee for the implementation of the FET Strategy 2014-2019.

The NCGE role includes the delivery of CPD and professional training for Guidance practitioners in the Irish Post Primary and FET systems. This could support the provision of information and training to Guidance practitioners on the process of RPL. Currently, NCGE is engaged in considerations regarding the development of the FET Guidance Strategy in cooperation with DES, SOLAS, ETBI and ETBs, representative organisations of guidance professionals and relevant stakeholders. As part of these considerations, NCGE will consider and inform the role of Guidance in relation to RPL systems in FET recognising the need to strengthen clarity and links between career guidance and RPL.

Under the Adult Education Guidance Initiative (AEGI), individual Adult Education Guidance Services (AEGS) provide impartial personal, educational and vocational guidance which supports learners to make informed decisions about course choice, progression plans and, where appropriate, in relation to RPL. The AEGS model of guidance can take on the form of a range of different activities and services and can

\textsuperscript{26} National Adult Learner Forum Learner Report, 2017 https://www.aontas.com/46530-AONTAS%20Learner%20Publication%202017.pdf

\textsuperscript{27} Unpublished report (to follow up with AONTAS)

\textsuperscript{28} National Adult Learner Forum Learner Event: April 2017
play a vital role in supporting individuals in understanding the RPL process. AEGS guidance can be offered through group and/or one-to-one support as appropriate. Good practice suggests that guidance support is necessary in preparation for an application for RPL but also may be required throughout the entire process and different stages of RPL.

In January 2018 the Irish Minister for Education and Skills announced a review of career guidance29 in post-primary schools, further education and training centres and higher education institutions and recommended changes to improve the existing tools and information currently in place across the education and training system in Ireland. This follows a commitment by the DES in the National Skills Strategy 2025 (DES, 2016b) and the Action Plan for Education 2016-2019 (DES 2016a) to commence an independent review of existing career guidance. The purpose of the review is to ensure that Ireland provides a high quality, relevant career guidance support service to all students from post – primary level up to further and higher education. The outcomes of this Review is intended to inform the further developments of the FET Guidance Strategy.

7 Validation practitioners

7.1 Profile of validation practitioners

In Ireland, the profile of validation practitioners can be subdivided into the role of management, learner support and assessor, but there is no common job description, role or title, with expert practitioners being named differently in different contexts. The breadth of role lends itself to a variety of staff including administrative, guidance and academic.

In the higher education sector, the NFETL (2015) study identified staff with responsibility for supporting RPL - individuals identified were often heads of department, module assessors, programme coordinators, or other staff from the particular academic department or unit involved. In the majority of cases, the research found that this support role is ad hoc and additional to the staff member’s other duties. The NFETL (2015) research also reported that the organisation and management of the RPL processes within institutions themselves varies considerably; some institutions have dedicated staff to assume a central role in supporting students and staff in documenting, assessing and reporting on the outcomes of RPL applicants – this very much comes down to the responsibility and autonomy of each institution.

In the further education sector, validation practitioners are generally subject matter experts. In the private sector, employers involved in skills audits are typically involved in the development of training programmes. The scale of engagement of professional bodies is not known.

As reported in previous updates, dedicated RPL professionals and offices are now in place in a number of Institutes of Technology and universities.

7.2 Qualification requirements

It remains the case that there are no mandatory qualification requirements for validation practitioners, though within the further education sector there is now a

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requirement for new graduate teachers to have the capacity to undertake student needs and skills analysis, including RPL.

Practitioners have expressed interest in qualifications in the field of RPL and some HEIs provide programmes leading to such awards.

The VISKA Project National Advisory Group includes representatives of the network for providers of teacher education programmes for further education and training specifically with a view to informing training programmes for FET practitioners. Equally, some services have put measures in place to provide for upskilling for their staff in RPL leading to the achievement of minor awards at Level 9.

7.3 Provision of training and support to validation practitioners

The professional development of staff engaged in RPL was highlighted as an issue in the NFETL report on RPL in Irish Higher Education (2015) and more recently in the RPL in Irish FET (Goggin et al., 2017). The issue of ‘RPL for staff development’ highlights the benefit of practitioners undergoing a process of RPL for their own professional development and advancement and was well documented in the NFETL report (2015). In response, the NFETL have developed a National Professional Development Framework for all staff who teach in higher education with a focus on promoting the use of RPL and the methods and terminology associated with it.

Box 8 National Professional Development Framework for All Staff Who Teach in Higher Education and link to RPL

The National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning has developed a Professional Development Framework for all higher education (HE) professionals. The framework supports individuals to:

- Reflect on current knowledge and experience;
- Recognise the importance of self-evaluation informed by data and evidence;
- Identify and develop a personal strategy for effective use of relevant evidence;
- Develop their own capacity to shape and plan their future learning;

The framework covers a broad definition of those who work in HE and is therefore relevant to a wide range of individuals. As illustrated in the figure below, the professional development framework is modelled on the four stages of validation as outlined in the 2012 Council Recommendation on validation of non-formal and informal learning and the 2015 European Guidelines for validation. Recognising that HE professionals using the professional development framework are considering their entire professional journey, the framework is underpinned by both a reflective and an evidence-based approach.
The framework and its typology of professional development has been developed in a way to link the language used in the context of validation (recognition of prior learning in an Irish context) to the HE sector. This process involved mapping RPL terminology used in Ireland to the typology of the professional development framework. In this respect, the framework covers all types of professional development using terms common to RPL. Increasingly the language used in the context of RPL is becoming more familiar across the higher education sector.

The framework was piloted across the HE sector, involving approximately 230 HE professionals. Practitioners have been supported in developing their understanding of RPL by using the framework to claim RPL for their own professional development. Having been through the process of RPL, this has enabled them to further their understanding of the language and processes around RPL. These two dimensions of the framework have the potential to support HE institutions develop a shared language for RPL and common approach to its implementation in the future. Furthermore, the Higher Education Authority as part of their performance indicators for 2018 – 20 have included implementation of this framework into the requirements of all HE institutions.

Source and further information: https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/resource-hub/professional-development/the-national-professional-development-framework-pdf-for-all-staff-who-teach-in-higher-education/

The NFETL report (2015) also recommended that institutions, through their teaching and learning departments or staff development units, should develop more regular staff training and development in RPL practice, assessment, support for non-traditional learners, flexible curriculum development in terms of learning outcomes, and assessment method selection. Since then, there is growing evidence of formal training being provided to practitioners - although the provision of training to support RPL remains at the discretion of each institution.

As with many higher education institutions, the Cork Institute of Technology provide a range of training opportunities for staff who have responsibility for the development and management of any aspect of RPL. Specifically, Cork Institute of Technology offer a ten credit masters degree module (EQF Level 7) on RPL: Policy, Practice, Pedagogy. The module is suitable for all education practitioners and provides insights into the motivations for, and implementation of RPL within education and training.

The Connacht-Ulster Alliance (see section 2.2.6), continue to support the development of staff involved in RPL – notably through an online course on RPL Skills for higher education staff at https://www.cpdlearnonline.ie/ and a Level 9, 10 ECTS teaching development module aimed at RPL assessors and mentors.
In addition, the RPL Practitioner Network through the availability of case studies, discussion boards, guest speakers and resources on-line, [www.rpl-ireland.ie](http://www.rpl-ireland.ie), provide for further organic learning for all staff involved in RPL.

The National Forum has also developed a series of open access professional development programmes leading to a National Forum digital badge[^30]. These badges support staff mobility across the sector and provide easy access routes for CPD activity. The use of digital badges in Higher Education[^31] was piloted by the National University of Ireland (NUI) Galway (funded by the national Teaching and Learning Enhancement Fund), and NUIG is currently leading a national initiative investigating the use of digital badges. ‘Open Badges’ are an online way of recognising skills and achievements.

Within the further education sector, the Further Education Support Service[^32] provides training opportunities for practitioners engaged in RPL. This reflects the case for high-quality CPD for staff interacting with learners to facilitate the delivery of quality RPL as emphasised by Goggin et al. (2017). As noted in section 2.2.2, the outcomes of the progressive work undertaken across the ETB network over the past two years has generated additional expertise related to RPL within and across the ETBs. The TOBAR project as a sectoral project, will be evaluated following the first cycle and examined from a range of policy perspectives.

### 8 Quality assurance

There is no single national quality assurance system in place for RPL, but rather a quality assurance framework. It remains the case that high-level QA systems for RPL are incorporated into the NFQ and therefore in line with the Council Recommendation principle on quality assurance.

As noted above, the QQI published an Access, Transfer and Progression Policy Restatement in 2015, following consultation, and further republished the National Qualification Authority of Ireland (NQAI) Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning in Further and Higher Education in Ireland, (NQAI, 2005), so that these continue to be the basis on which RPL practice is developed. These principles and guidelines emphasised the importance of provider owned quality assurance, stating that RPL should be treated like any other element of educational provision and assessment, in that existing quality assurance procedures should apply to it.

As also noted above, new quality assurance and programme validation policies are also being implemented. These also reference RPL explicitly. A green paper on assessment is under consultation, which further provides for discussion on RPL practices in the context of quality assurance arrangements.

However, given that the further education and training sector, notably the ETBs have gone through a considerable period of transition, Goggin et al. (2017) reported that many ETBs are still operating in a state of transition and are in the process of developing their broader policies and procedures which include consideration of RPL. It is felt that a more defined quality assurance guide in relation to certification of non-formal and informal learning is needed. This has been addressed in part through the

work of the TOBAR project, other pilots and through on-going work on programme
validation, and new apprenticeship.

In parallel, the ETBI National Assessment Working Group published an Assessment
Reference Framework Materials on the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in
January 2018. The Assessment Reference Framework offers ETBs optional
guidelines on how to adopt RPL strategies on this basis of the Framework.

9 Inputs, outputs and outcomes

9.1 Funding

Funding for higher education is allocated to the Higher Education Authority and
funding for further education and training is funded to the ETBs through SOLAS.
Funding for the Community Sector and others is more diverse, but substantially
comes through SOLAS. The funding source for both FET and HE is the Department
of Education and Skills. As part of the 2018 National Training Fund, EUR 415 million
is being invested in programmes to support unemployed people in their journey back
to work and assist those in employment to acquire new skills. As outlined above, many
of these programmes incorporate RPL processes. It remains the case that there is no
single national framework with explicit ring-fenced funds for RPL in Ireland - either for
applicants for RPL or to incentivise providers to implement policies and build capacity.
Dedicated funding of RPL in the past has been provided through a limited number of
nationally and EU-funded projects from institutional resources. In the case where
institutions have implemented and sustained RPL it has been at their own cost from
core grant funding.

The discourse around RPL remains one of cost and not investment, and funding
models to institutions and education and training providers is based largely on full
time participation in programmes not on assessment and granting of exemptions,
advanced entry, partial or full awards in the interests of learner efficiency or mobility.
There are concerns with regard to funding models for RPL generally which an
overarching national policy / strategy might address.

9.2 Distribution of costs

As reported in 2016, there is little publicly available information on financing models
used for RPL and there is no evidence to suggest that tax incentives are available
which help firms to get involved in validation schemes.

Generally speaking, there is no national common basic fee for RPL – the fee (if
applicable) depends on the institution, sector and level where and against which the
application for RPL is made. Some institutions across the different sectors of
education and training charge fees to individuals who undertake an RPL. This mainly
includes fees associated with assessment and/or portfolio building. For some levels,
e.g. the initial levels of the NFQ, a fee would not be charged.

As reported in the previous Inventory update, costs will depend for example on the
assessment methods used such as portfolio assessment as opposed to an exam. It
is however recognised that the fees for RPL do not necessarily reflect the total cost
for RPL. As reported in the EGFSN report, the amount of time necessary for mentoring
and assessing RPL participants may vary from 10 to 40 hours. This broad variation in
duration and the costs associated with it was reported by a number of interviewees
contributing to the production of this country report. It is relevant therefore to
acknowledge that the cost of RPL (both in terms of time and financial resources) potentially limits the scope of its implementation. Capacity to respond to demands for RPL was highlighted as a concern by Goggin et al. (2017). This drain on resources prevents organisations promoting the use and value of RPL. Suggestions to combat the cost implications of RPL were proposed by respondents participating in the RPL in Irish FET study (Goggin et al. (2017), this includes ‘having a panel of tutors and assessors from various organisations working together to provide a quality assured, unbiased and honest system of preparation and assessment’.

### 9.3 Evidence of benefits to individuals

Generally, speaking, there is no systematic collection of data to evidence the benefits to individuals of RPL. The evidence is not systematically collected at national or local levels, though individual institutions may have arrangements in place to collect data on benefits of RPL for individual learners. The NFETL (2015) reflects on the overall purpose and motivation for RPL, emphasising the need to develop a common understanding of the benefits of RPL as system efficiency, an economical gain and also in facilitating diversity. More broadly, the report acknowledges that RPL can play a significant role in the context of lifelong and life wide learning where an individual can expect to have many roles over a lifetime, accumulating knowledge, skills and competences through involvement in the workplace, through professional training or as a result of participation in a formal learning setting.

Since the 2016 Inventory update, a number of organisations have collected testimonials from candidates on their experiences of the RPL process and how it benefitted them including advice which they would give other potential RPL candidates who were considering engaging in the process. Some examples are provided in the box below.

**Box 9 The benefits of RPL: learner quotations**

**Cork Institute of Technology**

*This year, I decided to apply for a place in Masters in Journalism and New Media in CIT and I was fortunate enough to be selected on the basis of the Recognition of Prior Learning process. Without that, undoubtedly, it would not have been possible for me to pursue the course and I am delighted to have been able to avail of the programme. Clearly, there are thousands of people out there who are capable of bettering themselves through Third Level education but might not have had either the opportunity or desire to do so back in the days.....*

Source and further information: http://www.cit.ie/rpl

**AONTAS**

*‘If you could be recognised for your prior skills to progress on or into another job that would be important.’*

Source and further information: Learner Forum

**Myexperience.ie**

*‘The RPL process basically involves documenting your past work experience, training and qualifications and providing evidence of those. I would strongly encourage anyone who would like to obtain a higher qualification to complete the RPL process’*

Source and further information: https://www.myexperience.ie/success-stories/

**EQUAL Ireland:**

*‘Their B.A. in Community Development, Business and Enterprise has taken me on a journey that I could never have conceived as being possible. This journey has totally changed the way I think. ’*
Completing the RPL application process allowed me to reflect upon and to document my achievements to date. Returning to lectures and achieving project deadlines gave me a renewed confidence in my academic abilities.’


These quotations highlight the importance of the accreditation of non-formal learning for adult education learners and reinforces the view that accreditation acts as a strong source of motivation as reported by AONTAS on the benefits of RPL for adult learners (2011). These quotes provide an indication of the benefits of RPL at different levels, including the economic, educational, social and personal benefits of RPL for individuals.

9.4 Beneficiaries and users of validation processes

9.4.1 Validation trends

There is no national data on the number of individuals who have entered, gone through and succeed in the different stages of validation in the last two years. It remains the case that data on the practice of RPL by providers and on learner use of RPL for entry, module exemptions or achievement of full, major, supplemental or special purpose awards is at best, uneven.

Whilst the RPL in FET report uncovered practice of RPL for entry in the majority of ETBs, it was found that data on the number of applications received for RPL, which relates to RPL for access, (with the exception of one provider) is not retained or noted by individual providers, centres or ETBs. More recently, the advancement of data management systems, including the Programme Learner Support System (PLSS) allows for the systematic gathering of learner data across further education services, including longitudinally. As the systems continue to evolve, data collection refinements are being prepared that will document RPL participation and outcomes which over time will inform policy relating to RPL at systems level.

Within the higher education sector, variations in understanding of what constitutes RPL continues to prevent the accurate comparison of activity across institutions. What is needed is for data collection mechanisms to capture activity based on the common definition to be established within each higher education institution and fed into a national repository of data. This recommendation would include the development of a robust and comprehensive system to capture RPL activity in terms of levels of demand, application, and granting of recognition for prior formal, informal and non-formal learning.

9.4.2 Validation users

There is no data on the distribution of validation users according to age, gender, qualification level, target group, citizenship status, however the PLSS has the capacity over time to include such information for the FET publicly funded sector.

9.4.3 Validation and disadvantaged groups

Different RPL practices can be of use to meet the needs of a range of different sub-groups and age ranges. Practices can include both summative and formative approaches to RPL which enable an individual to understand and/or acquire recognition of their individual skills and competences. However as reported by Goggin
et al. (2017), the diversity of the learners and learning within the FET sector in Ireland provides both context and challenge for RPL delivery. Research commissioned by SOLAS into barriers to participation in further education and training (Mooney and O’Rourke, 2017) reminds us that the further education and training sector has undergone significant change in recent years and there are serious challenges encountered by learners from vulnerable groups seeking to engage with learning. These groups include people under 25, long-term unemployed people, people with disabilities, and members of migrant communities. The authors also report that RPL is a huge challenge for older prospective learners, long term unemployed people, early school leavers and migrants. Although learners may have the skills required for eligibility they may not have the certificate to prove it, and recognition of prior qualifications from outside the EU remains a key challenge for eligible migrants. Although the process of RPL can feel overwhelming and time consuming for certain groups of learners, examples of good practice initiatives exist as in the case of the Ballymun Job Centre described below.

**Box 10 Ballymun Job Centre**

Established in 1986, the Ballymun Job Centre (BJC) is a voluntary organisation with charitable status. Located in a disadvantaged area of Dublin, it provides services and programmes in response to the needs of the local community. It is committed to:

- Increasing individual’s capacity to realise their labour market potential;
- Raising the skills, educational levels and the labour market aspirations of individuals;
- Providing individuals with greater labour market choice;
- Providing the opportunity to improve employability, increase employment earnings and reduce future vulnerability to welfare dependence and poverty.

The BJC provides a support services to a range of individuals, e.g. job seekers, low-skilled, early school leavers and other vulnerable groups. Services include one-to-one career guidance, access to training and education and job placement opportunities.

The BJC has been involved in European projects since 2003. As part of the Leonardo da Vinci funded INFORM project (2006-2008), an online competency skills audit tool was developed to support individuals who may not have a strong education/employment background but may have acquired a wide range of skills and competences through everyday life. The focus is on identifying cognitive, soft and transferable skills. The aim of the tool is to place a value on these skills and help individuals recognise the transferability of their skills into the labour market.

The INFORM tool is based on the concept of ‘time on task’ (e.g. time a person spends undertaking a certain task) linked to a set of competences. This is used to undertake a task analysis to identify component parts of a task specific to each individual e.g. cognitive skills, inductive reasoning, problem solving and the individual’s preference for tasks of a more practical or investigative nature. In practice, the user accesses the tool (supported by animated visuals and a voice-over for those experiencing literacy barriers) and provides information related to certain tasks linked to a set of competences. A profile is then created, providing an indication of the skills and competences the individual has acquired from undertaking everyday tasks for example shopping, looking after children, participating in their community.

The competency skills audit tool is an integral feature of the guidance process and in this respect can be considered as an effective pre-curser/screening tool for RPL. Guidance practitioners meet with an individual to determine the level of support they need to help them identify the skills and abilities they have. This part of the process serves as a motivator to help the individual understand their learning has value. Training is provided to practitioners using the tool so they develop their understanding of the different competences and how to prepare and provide feedback to users. This feedback is the basis for developing a career plan.

Having completed the online tool, practitioners confirm if any of the knowledge, skills and competences could be assessed. Though the process of RPL can be time-consuming and challenging for certain users, it is possible. For many BJC clients, participating in a training course
can be considered a more attractive option than RPL. As gaining employment remains the main priority for most individuals – efforts tend to focus on seeking employment. With a strong aptitude for career advancement, the outcomes of the skills audit is of great value in this respect. It provides individuals who may not have had access to such opportunities in the past to reflect on the value of skills they possess and how they could be used to support their transition to education, training or employment in the future.

Source and further information: Ballymun Job Centre: http://bmunjob.ie/

As the example from the Ballymun Job Centre and initiatives discussed under the sections on upskilling pathways and skills audits, RPL opportunities are increasingly reaching the low-qualified, low-skilled jobseekers, unemployed people and those at risk of unemployment. In addition, there are some examples of not for profit organisations providing RPL opportunities to a range of different target groups (see section 2.4). The implementation of targeted initiatives (by a range of providers, including voluntary and community organisations) has the potential to reach disadvantage groups, including migrants/refugees, people with disabilities and others.

9.4.4 Validation for migrants / refugees

At national level there are no RPL practices specifically targeted at migrants / refugees. It remains the case that current RPL arrangements apply universally in the national context whereby citizens from other EU countries are granted the same rights to undergo validation processes as Irish nationals.

A number of voluntary organisations funded by the Department of Justice and Equality offer programmes for migrants/refugees – some of which help individuals gain recognition for their skills and prior formal qualifications (through NARIC). The New Communities Partnership\(^{33}\) is a non-governmental organisation and is providing outreach support to migrants/refugees in this respect. In addition, the EPIC programme\(^{34}\) run by Business in the Community Ireland and also funded by the Department of Justice and Equality work with migrants to help them identify and document their skills.

On the matter of return migration, a committee has been established by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to identify and address barriers experienced by returning emigrants to Ireland. As part of this the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade commissioned Indecon Research Economists to identify the challenges facing Irish emigrants returning to live in Ireland and to consider potential measures to reduce the barriers for returning emigrants (Indecon, 2018). The lack of recognition of overseas qualifications and experience was reported as one of the biggest challenges, preventing some people from returning to Ireland and leading others to re-emigrate. As noted elsewhere, there is some work to do to develop favourable return conditions to country nationals and in developing a system or approach that enables individuals to be considered for RPL in cases where they had been unable to fully complete previous qualifications/awards that they had started in Ireland or overseas.

An area of interest to SOLAS is the recognition of qualifications and experience obtained overseas in key sectoral areas. The absence of a licencing system in Ireland for tradespeople makes it difficult for foreign nationals to obtain a licence to work as

\(^{33}\) https://www.newcommunities.ie/programmes/

\(^{34}\) https://www.bitc.ie/newsroom/news/epic-programme-starting-pre-employment-training/
a craftsperson. SOLAS currently offer the option for foreign nationals to complete the Irish apprenticeship. For highly skilled/experienced returning emigrants, becoming an apprentice again in order to gain certified work is not ideal. As suggested by Goggin et.al. (2017) a system that allows those who qualify outside Ireland to align their qualifications within the Irish system would facilitate those who have immigrated to Ireland and support international transferability of learning.

As previously noted, Ireland’s participation in Erasmus KA3 project VISKA (Visible Skills of Adults, 2017-2020), is expected to provide insights in methods and processes for RPL to support migrants and refugees in an Irish context.

10 Validation methods

In both further education and higher education, the main rule is that whoever is custodian of standards, they will have established and set out the methods used for validation purposes. It is recognised that validation methods used will depend both on the institution but also on the discipline – where some sectors e.g., pharmaceuticals, require more tangible evidence than a portfolio. As also indicated in previous Inventory updates, generally speaking, a portfolio/extended CV and interview are the main methods used in the validation process. Above all else, there is a strong view that validation methods should be fit for purpose – taking into account the different needs of the target groups and the different purposes of the RPL process. The EGFSN also recognises that assessment for the purposes of certification often involves a combination of assessment methods and that appropriate guidance supports are critical for the individual engaged in the RPL process.

The table below illustrates the most commonly used methods at different stages of the validation process.

Table 11.1 Methods used in stages of validation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Validation stage</th>
<th>Identification</th>
<th>Documentation</th>
<th>Assessment</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Debate</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Declarative methods</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Portfolio method</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<td>Presentation</td>
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<td>✓ 37</td>
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<tr>
<td>Simulation and evidence extracted from work</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<td>Tests and examinations</td>
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| Other (e.g. e-learning methods) – please specify | | | - Writeon.ie provides for identification, documentation, assessment and certification  
- My Experience RPL Toolkit includes an RPL online portfolio assessment tool |

36 www.viskaproject.eu.
37 Kerry ETB use presentation in the assessment of skills related to Tour Guiding.
11 The position of validation in society: visibility and trust

In Ireland, RPL incorporates prior formal, informal and non-formal learning which is validated within the context of a specified destination award from Level 1 to 10 on the NFQ. RPL practices exist in all sub-sectors of education and training (with the exception of the general education sector), across the labour market and in the third sector – though to a lesser degree.

The visibility of RPL in national learning strategies and structures is increasing and a commitment to developing a national policy for RPL was outlined by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) in its ‘Action Plan for Education 2016-2019’. In addition, the progressive and exciting nature of the work currently being undertaken at European level and across the FET and HE sectors is producing important policy and practice outcomes. Whilst a number of these initiatives are currently in pilot phase, they provide a coherent and rich resource to capture and optimise learning for future developmental work in relation to RPL.

Within higher education, the view is that the traditional acquisition of knowledge through the university process is more favoured due to familiarity and comfort with the process. In this respect, qualifications emerging from HEIs are trusted – regardless of how they have been acquired as they are aligned with the NFQ which encompasses quality assurance systems and processes.

Within the FET sector, Goggin et al. (2017) found from their research that there is caution surrounding the recognition and validation of informal and non-formal learning at Levels 4 to 6 of the framework due to the possibility of accessing the workforce as a result of the qualification. The issue is related to a broader concern to consolidate and support trust in qualifications as proxy for readiness to engage and participate in the workforce. However both HE and FET provide RPL for people who are in employment, with support of employers in order to recognise and validate skills and competences. Some concerns have been raised about the extent to which RPL is appropriate for different groups of learners – particularly for vulnerable groups or individuals who lack literacy skills. Moreover, the perceived burden of going through a process of RPL is considered to be much higher than simply undertaking education/training provision. The challenge for many practitioners is less one of whether RPL is appropriate but rather the deployment of resources and the evidence base for positive outcomes for those availing of RPL as part of an offering in the context of basic skills needs.

It has been argued that a cultural change is needed to recognise learning that takes place outside formal education. Despite advances in the development of RPL, concerns have been raised that education is still regarded in institutional and qualification terms. The argument is that this leads to an element of discrimination against vulnerable and marginalised individuals who do not have access to formal learning or who have experienced failure in formal learning in the past.

In an effort to promote trust in the outcomes of RPL there is growing evidence of the use of RPL as a tool for the professional development of staff working in further and higher education. Initiatives are aimed at supporting practitioners through a process of RPL for their own professional development and advancement. The key objective is to promote and strengthen peer to peer learning and sharing amongst practitioners engaged in RPL. Building awareness of this form of professional development for RPL makes its value explicit. Moreover, the RPL Practitioner Network continues to be an important and energising focal point for practitioners across Ireland. Along with other pilot projects, sectoral and national initiatives, the network continues to support the
development of an open-space community of practice for RPL providing for the development of a coherent practitioner voice to contribute to shaping and informing local, regional and national policy as appropriate.
12: References

12.1 References


12.2 Sources

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- GMIT (Galway Mayo Institute of Thechi). Teaching and Learning.
- CIT Extended Campus, Cork Institute of Technology.
- EQUAL Ireland.
- Defence Forces Registrar, Training and Education Branch, Irish Defence Forces Headquarters.
- National Centre for Guidance in Education.
- Apprenticeship Services, SOLAS.
- MU Dept. Applied Social Science.
- Ballymun Job Centre.
- Quality and Qualifications Ireland.