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European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2023 update

CASE STUDY:

Micro-credentials (Ireland)

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Acknowledgements

This case study report was produced by Joe Hawley Woodall, as part of the 2023 update to the European Inventory on validation, a project managed by ICF (lead consultants: Manuel Souto-Otero, Michael Richardson, Ilona Murphy, Valentina Musso and Flora Dussine) in association with 3s (lead consultants: Karin Luomi-Messerer, Monika Auzinger, Julia Fellingner, Mariya Dzhengozova and Daniel Unterweger) under the supervision of a Steering Committee formed by the European Commission (Koen Nomden, Aline Juerges and Klara Engels-Perenyi), Cedefop (Ernesto Villalba-Garcia), and the ETF (Maria Rosenstock).

Work was carried out under DG EMPL Implementing Framework Contract EAC-01-2019 – Request for Services VT/2021/059.

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Please cite this publication as:

Hawley Woodall, J. (2024). *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2023 update: Case study: micro-credentials (Ireland)*. European Commission and Cedefop. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/country-reports/european-inventory-validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning-2023-update-micro-credentials-ireland>

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Abstract

Ireland currently has a high level of employment, with a substantial proportion of low-qualified workers in the labour force. Micro-credentials - records of learning outcomes from small volumes of learning which can be offered in formal, non-formal and informal settings- are seen as a flexible, responsive way to meet the skills needs of individuals and employers in the country's rapidly evolving labour market. Furthermore, the structure of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) makes it well-suited to recognise small units of learning.

The case study looks at a number of different awards, courses and validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL) opportunities which could be understood as micro-credentials. The case study identifies whether the micro-credentials can be accessed or obtained through validation, and for those which are not on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), whether the micro-credential itself can be used as evidence towards a VNFIL application to access formal education or to obtain a formal qualification.

1 Introduction

The European Union sees lifelong learning as key to ensuring that everyone has the knowledge, skills and competences they need to thrive. Flexible, learner-centred, accessible and inclusive learning opportunities are needed to ensure that people can access quality and relevant education and training, upskilling and reskilling opportunities throughout their lives.

Micro-credentials are one way for individuals to fill their skills gaps. In 2022, the Council of the European Union (EU) adopted a Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability ([Council of the European Union, 2022](#)). It calls on Member States to use micro-credentials, where appropriate, to strengthen and complement existing learning opportunities, increase participation in lifelong learning and help reach the EU's target of 60% of all adults participating in training every year.

The Recommendation sets out common definitions, EU standards and principles for micro-credentials, and outlines key areas for action in this field. It defines micro-credentials as, *“the record of the learning outcomes that a learner has acquired following a small volume of learning [...] assessed against transparent and clearly defined criteria.”* Micro-credentials are owned by the learner, can be shared and are portable. They may be stand-alone or combined into larger credentials, and they are underpinned by quality assurance following agreed standards in the relevant sector or area of activity.¹

This case study examines the relationship between micro-credentials and validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL) in Ireland. As outlined in the Ireland country report, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is the accepted terminology used in Ireland and will therefore be used in this case study. RPL encompasses all forms of prior learning (including certificated learning). For this reason, it can be hard to separate the different types of prior learning when discussing and documenting progress in this area, however the focus of this case study is on prior

¹ For a discussion on the definition of micro-credentials see: Cedefop (2022). Microcredentials for labour market education and training: first look at mapping microcredentials in European labour-market-related education, training and learning: take-up, characteristics and functions. Luxembourg: Publications Office. Cedefop research paper, No 87. <http://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2801/351271>

non-formal and informal learning and how these can be used to access or attain micro-credentials.

The case study looks at a number of different awards, courses and validation opportunities which fit the EU definition of micro-credentials (there is currently no 'official' definition in Ireland (McCoshan, 2023), but in relation to the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) micro-credentials tend to be understood in Ireland as awards worth less than 30 ECTS²). The case study identifies whether the micro-credentials can be accessed or obtained through validation. For micro-credentials which are not on the NFQ, we discuss whether the micro-credential itself can be used as evidence towards an RPL application to access formal education or to obtain a formal qualification. Where appropriate, we highlight which of the four phases of validation (identification, documentation, assessment, and certification) are used in relation to the micro-credential in question.

2 Rationale

At the time of writing, Ireland has a high rate of employment, with only 4.1% unemployment (for all persons aged 15-74 years) in August 2023 (CSO, 2023). This means that many employers face skills shortages (SLMRU, 2022a). At the same time, a substantial proportion of Irish workers (41% of all adults over the age of 20 in 2022) does not have a qualification above Level 5 on the NFQ, the level of the school leaving certificate (SLMRU, 2022b). Together with the rapidly-changing nature of work, this means that many Irish workers need to upskill, reskill and make their skills more visible, in order to meet the demands of industry.

Micro-credentials present an opportunity for these individuals, many of whom will not be able to commit to taking substantial periods out of the workplace. They can be a more approachable way to return to education for workers who have had a long break from learning and / or negative experiences of formal education. They also meet the needs of employers who are unable or unwilling to release workers for long-term training, or who need to be able to respond to rapidly-changing skills demands.

The national strategy for Further Education and Training (FET) highlights the importance of, "modular, micro and 'bite sized' offerings to meet specific up-skilling needs" ([Government of Ireland; SOLAS, n.d.](#)). It identifies a role for 'micro-credentialing and digital badging' in providing flexible, accessible upskilling opportunities to employees and enterprises, and in promoting lifelong learning. The national strategy for Higher Education (HE) also states that the delivery of HE must be characterised by flexibility and innovation ([Department of Education, 2019](#)).

The structure of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) makes it well-suited to recognise micro-credentials as either minor or special purpose awards (see Section 3.1.1). Indeed, many of these could in themselves be considered 'micro-credentials'. In the first example given in this case study, the focus is therefore on existing awards or qualifications which fit the definition of micro-credentials, although they are not identified with this label.

Likewise, *"the infrastructure for small qualifications has long been established in Irish higher education"* (QQI, 2021c). In this sector, HEIs are shifting towards the

² There are two credit systems in Ireland: one for FET, and another for HE (the European Credit Transfer System, ECTS). Academic credit also applies to non-major awards offered in HE, including for micro-credentials which are on the NFQ. One ECTS credit is valued at between 25 to 30 hours of learning, whilst one FET credit is around 10 hours.

introduction of micro-credentials, or the adaptation of existing provision to this new label and definition, notably through the MicroCreds project (Example 3).

And the transition during the Covid-19 pandemic to online and blended learning provision means that learning providers are now more confident in offering flexible learning opportunities. This applies both to the non-formal and formal sectors, as illustrated by the range of examples presented here.

It is worth noting from the outset the challenges encountered in developing this case study. Micro-credentials are a 'new' form of qualification (although in some cases, there are qualifications which have been in place for some time which fit the definition of a micro-credential, although they may not be labelled as such). A substantial part of the research was therefore spent identifying micro-credential initiatives and where these were found, several were relatively new or still in the pilot phase. The extent to which RPL can be (or could be) used to either access or acquire these qualifications was often still under consideration. Similarly, the extent to which the micro-credentials themselves can be used towards an RPL process is still speculative in most cases. Often, it can simply be assumed that the existing arrangements for RPL would be applied as and when required.

3 Micro-credentials in the formal sector

The first part of this case study looks at different types of micro-credential that can be found in the formal education sector. These are: minor and special purpose awards in FET and adult education (Example 1); Micro-Qualifications in FET (Example 2); the MicroCreds project in HE (Example 3); and digital badges and micro-credentials offered by the Food Industry Training Unit at UCC (Example 5). Although they are offered by formal education providers, only some of the micro-credentials presented are included in the NQF. The case study discusses whether each example can be accessed or obtained through RPL.

3.1.1 Example 1: Minor and Special Purpose Awards on the NQF

The NQF is a 10-level system which maps qualifications according to what learners need to know, understand and be able to do to achieve them. The Framework recognises a number of different award types, which makes it particularly suited to host small, or 'micro' qualifications (QQI, 2021b):

- **Major** awards: these are 'full' qualifications, such as the Leaving Certificate (Level 4/5), Honours Bachelor Degree (Level 8) or Masters Degree (Level 9).
- **Minor** award-types: recognise that a learner has attained part of a major award. Their volume varies, but is always smaller than the major award they relate to.
- **Supplemental** award-types: recognise learning which adds to a previous award, such as updating and refreshing knowledge or skills.
- **Special purpose** award-types are for specific purposes. They are always significantly smaller in volume than a major award, have a distinct identity and a clearly defined purpose, such as legislative, regulatory, economic, social or personal learning requirements.

Minor awards can be viewed as a kind of micro-credential or micro-qualification (see also McCoshan, 2023, p. 36). They can be 'stacked' or combined to achieve a major award, enabling learners to gradually build up their learning towards a full qualification, or to have some recognition of their achievements if they are unable to

complete the award in full. Similarly, some special purpose awards could also be considered a type of micro-credential.

Minor and special purpose awards have been in place for some time, which means that providers and learners are likely to be more familiar with these terms for small units of learning, than with some of the more recently-introduced terminology such as micro-credentials and micro-qualifications. However, both award types fit the definition outlined in the European Recommendation: they record the learning outcomes from a small volume of learning, assessed against clearly defined criteria; they can be stand-alone or combined into larger credentials; and they are underpinned by QQI's quality assurance framework.

The national QQI Principles and Operational Guidelines for RPL require providers to have policies and procedures for learner admission, progression and recognition enabling the fair recognition of prior learning, including non-formal and informal learning. Learners can therefore seek to access or to obtain a minor or special purpose award through RPL.

Two examples of this are described in the 2023 country update for Ireland. The first is the TOBAR project, which developed a national RPL offer for staff working in the defence forces. Through TOBAR, learners who gained minor awards through RPL could use these in combination with further awards, gained either through RPL or by taught programme, to lead to a major award. **All four stages of validation** were used in the TOBAR project. Participating ETBs assessed learners on the basis of a portfolio, sometimes supplemented by the use of skills demonstrations and assignments. Assessments were then carried out by subject matter experts.

The second is the Learn with NALA website (www.learnwithnala.ie), through which learners can achieve a Level 2 or 3 award through RPL to recognise their existing knowledge and competences in literacy, numeracy, ICT and personal skills. Through online assessment, learners can earn standalone minor awards and if they wish, combine these to achieve a QQI major award. Learn with NALA focuses on the **assessment and certification** stages of validation.

One example of the use of RPL to obtain a special purpose award was identified in the research for this case study. Interviewees at Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board (LCETB) supported a cohort of three staff members to achieve the Level 6, 30-credit special purpose award in tour guiding through RPL. This award is made up of two 15-credit modules. They mapped prior learning from a formal HE qualification together with experiential learning from the workplace and volunteering against the learning outcomes for the special purpose award, enabling the learners to acquire this qualification in three months. Successful completion of the full award enabled them to obtain a badge in either National or Regional tour guiding.

3.1.2 Example 2: Skills to Advance FET micro-qualifications

One of the main target groups for validation are vulnerable and at-risk learners, although there is also evidence that these groups do not make use of validation as often as it could be expected. [Skills to Advance](#) is a SOLAS initiative which aims to provide targeted support for vulnerable workforce groups: people who are working in lower-skilled jobs; workers aged over 50; and people who are working in a job role that is experiencing significant change. Bite-size learning may be particularly suited to these particular groups: they may be unable to take time out of the workplace and / or may not have participated in education or training for some time.

Skills to Advance is also intended to support industry, particularly small- and medium-sized enterprises which may have limited capacity to offer skills

development or validation measures to their employees, and companies which face changing skills needs. The scheme offers a range of subsidised upskilling and reskilling opportunities, supporting these employers to increase their productivity and competitiveness.

One of the Skills to Advance routes to a qualification is a pilot micro-qualifications scheme. Around 25 **micro-qualifications** have been introduced at NFQ Levels 5 and 6 in the following skills areas: aqua farming; green skills; digital skills and robotics; and market innovation and product development. Pre-pilot and pilot projects have been completed, leading to a model due for launch in autumn 2023. During this time, over 300 learners have earned micro-qualifications in green and digital skills.

SOLAS believes that micro-qualifications give people a taste of the new skills covered in the programme and enable them to return to learning without making a significant (time or financial) commitment. There are several micro-qualifications in each subject area, each accredited in their own right, and some which can be combined to obtain a special purpose award. For example, the robotics programme is made up of five individual micro-qualifications.

The micro-qualifications are worth a minimum of five FET credits (equal to around 50 hours of learning). Most are based on around 25-30 hours of tutor learning, with the remainder self-directed learning such as work-based assignments and projects. At the moment, most of the micro-qualifications do not incorporate a specific element of validation of non-formal and informal learning, although a learner could request RPL in line with the aforementioned QQI Principles and Operational Guidelines for RPL (which as mentioned previously, covers recognition of prior formal, non-formal and informal learning). However, interviewees suggested that it is likely to be less time-consuming (for both learners and providers) to complete the training than to produce an RPL portfolio.

However, the assignments are project-based so involve practical learning in the workplace which could be prior learning from the individual's work experience. The tutor hours are currently compulsory, but as the initiative is in its infancy, it may be possible to introduce RPL as a means to reduce the tutor hours in the future.

One recently-introduced micro-qualification does specifically allow RPL to be used to acquire part of the award. The Level 5 Certificate in Lean Practice for Sustainable Business, worth 15 FET Credits, is made up of two modules: Lean Principles (5 credits) and Lean Tools (10 credits). Learners can enrol directly onto the second module if they can show that they already have the necessary skills and knowledge in Lean principles. They do this through the Education and Training Board (ETB)'s RPL process, which includes an interview and/or submission of evidence from previous qualifications and/or work experience. This particular example therefore incorporates the **identification, documentation and assessment** phases of validation. It does not include the certification phase, as a certificate can only be acquired for the combined 15 credits of learning.

SOLAS felt that it was important for the Skills to Advance micro-qualifications to be accredited and listed on the NFQ: whilst employers use the micro-qualifications to understand what skills their workers have, employees are looking for recognition of what they have achieved. As a recognised award on the NFQ, the micro-qualification gives them a 'currency' they can use when looking for other jobs or pursuing further learning. However, these awards are not part of QQI's Common Award System (CAS), which means that they cannot be combined ("stacked") with other minor CAS awards to achieve a major award; they can only be combined together to achieve a non-CAS special purpose award.

One strength of the scheme is the highly collaborative approach taken in its development. With SOLAS as project manager, for each skills area there is an oversight group (a high level working group made up of ETBs and key agencies) and operational sub-groups for learning design and promotion. This collaborative approach has helped to ensure that the qualifications developed are responsive to gaps in the market place. Regular discussions with QQI have also helped to ensure that the qualifications can be approved in a timely manner, because they have been developed in line with QQI's principles and requirements.

3.1.3 Example 3: The MicroCreds project

MicroCreds is a five-year, EUR 12.3 million project led by the Irish Universities Association (IUA) in partnership with seven universities. These main partners also collaborate with learners and an Enterprise Advisory Group. Through the project, the partners aim to:

- establish a National Framework for quality assured and accredited micro-credentials in higher education (HE),
- develop a sustainable model for data-informed collaboration between universities and enterprise: MicroCreds Innovate,
- create a Discovery Platform linked to a digital credentialing solution,
- develop and deliver a suite of micro-credentials across partner universities.

The National Framework is currently in development. So far, partners have agreed a number of principles and values, including the parameters of micro-credentials: between 1 and 30 ECTS. Significant progress has also been made in developing a web presence for the project, including a central online hub (microcreds.ie) where learners can access a catalogue of micro-credentials offered by participating institutions.

In addition to introducing common principles and values, the MicroCreds project has also provided seed funding which has enabled modifications that support the delivery of micro-credentials. At University College Cork (UCC) for example, financial support from MicroCreds has been used to adapt the university's computer system in order to allow multiple points of registration.

HEIs have always offered small, flexible learning opportunities, although they may not have been referred to as micro-credentials. Between 2014 and 2023, there were over 2,000 standalone HE programmes of between 0 and 29 credits (QQI, 2023). However, not all micro-credentials offered in HE are available on the NFQ (e.g. Example 4).

One of the benefits of the MicroCreds project is to introduce some consistency across the different small learning opportunities on offer. At UCC for example, there was previously a different approach for digital badges, Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and adult continuing education. The MicroCreds project has enabled UCC to review their existing offer and to provide a central point of (consistent) advice for the development of new learning offers. Adult Continuing Education (ACE) at UCC has for instance 24 courses ranging in size from 5 to 30 credits, which will now be classed as micro-credentials. These are courses which are offered online, in-person or through blended provision, in subjects from social farming to trauma studies. RPL is usually offered as a means of entry to these courses. As outlined in the 2023 country report for Ireland, HEIs already use RPL to support students from non-traditional backgrounds to access their courses, including micro-credential (and other short) courses. UCC has additionally included a

requirement for an RPL alternative to standard entry requirements in its approval process for micro-credentials (e.g. either a Level 8 qualification, or an equivalent professional qualification plus five years of work experience). In this case, it is likely that one or more of the first three stages of validation are implemented: **information, documentation, and assessment.**

However, similar to FET micro-qualifications, interviewees suggested that RPL is rarely practical for the award of micro-credentials in the HE sector. As these courses relate to small volumes of learning, HEIs do not have the capacity to offer an assessment and certification of prior learning: it is more efficient from both the learner's and the HEI's perspective for the individual to attend the course than to achieve it through RPL.

3.1.4 Example 4: UCC Food Industry Training Unit digital badges and micro-credentials

The Food Industry Training Unit (FITU), based at University College Cork, offers professional development opportunities in the food, agri-food and seafood sectors. This includes digital badges and micro-credentials in a range of technical and soft skills.

Digital badges hold information relating to the course, the skills acquired, and the awarding institution. The badges offered by FITU are open, which means they can be displayed in an online/e-portfolio and used to create a unique portfolio of learning. Learners can access the courses leading to a digital badge through recognition of their prior experience.

One example is *Cleaning in Place for the Food and Drink Industry*. This short course is open to any learner, and suitability for the course is determined through RPL. Once a learner has obtained the digital badge, he/she can progress to Part 2 of the course (which cannot be accessed without the badge). Other course topics include *Food Process Engineering Principles*, *Cheese Science and Technology* and *Principles of concentration and drying technologies utilised in dairy industry*. As well as courses which are open to the general public, FITU also offers bespoke training in companies which can lead to digital badges, micro-credentials or other outcomes.

Applicants to FITU's digital badges are required to complete an application form, which is designed around the skillset required to fulfil the job role which the badge relates to. FITU staff build strong relationships with the companies they work with, and work with the companies to build their knowledge in order to design and assess the forms. The applications are assessed by FITU's programme manager; an expert in the topic. If the programme manager determines that the individual does not have the relevant skills or expertise to benefit from the course, he/she might recommend another learning opportunity instead. The process therefore encompasses the **identification, documentation and assessment stages** of validation.

Achievement of the course learning outcomes is assessed through a range of methods, including presentations, peer work or a reflection. This assessment can be based on learning from the course or experiential learning from the workplace: some learners do not complete the digital badge assessment until they have applied their learning at work.

Initially, FITU's digital badges were designed at around 20-25 hours of learning (not including independent learning and reading), including assessment - but this was found to be too large. Now, the digital badges involve between 6 and 15 hours of learning. Although the badges are not currently accredited on the NFQ, FITU is planning to do this via the MicroCreds project (see Example 3). It is envisioned that

the courses which match the correct number of hours and show sufficient academic rigour will be given 1 ECTS credit.

UCC's micro-credentials team is responsible for the quality assurance of new badges and micro-credentials offered across the university and to verify that they meet relevant academic standards. Each new proposal is reviewed by two different boards to ensure that the outcomes are in line with best practice.

FITU's digital badges were introduced in 2018, with an initial cohort of 45 learners. Since then the annual cohort has increased to around 150 learners per year, with a cumulative total of around 500 learners completing the digital badges and / or micro-credentials.

As well as being a standalone record of the learner's skills, FITU's badges also offer an entry point to a progression pathway for learners, because they can be used as an alternative access route to UCC's accredited courses. The badges themselves don't have an NFQ Level but they can be used as evidence of competences when applying for a Level 7 or 8 qualification. For instance, the access requirements for FITU's Level 9 (Masters) courses are usually a Level 8 (undergraduate) qualification in science or a relevant subject. Although the digital badges are not attributed to a Level on the NFQ, for learners without a Level 8 qualification but who do have a Level 7 Diploma in Food Science and Technology, plus work experience in the food sector, the badges can be used as additional evidence towards the entry requirements for entry to the Level 9 course. Another example is learners who do have a Level 9 qualification but do not have the required scientific knowledge to meet the eligibility criteria for the course they are applying for: e.g. if they have a background in business but want to proceed to a Level 9 dairy science postgraduate certificate, completing the digital badge in food chemistry would give them access to the Level 9 course. This course is 25 hours and has learning activities and MCQs associated with it.

FITU identify a number of strengths of the digital badges and micro-credentials they offer. Their learners are looking for a way to show their employer that they have specific practical competences, and through RPL these courses enable them to do so. Using RPL to assess applicants also means that people are matched to a course that meets their needs and abilities. Micro-credentials and badges provide a portable outcome for learners from a course that previously would only have led to a paper certificate: the digital badges are distributed via e-mail and can be downloaded for future use. The badges provide learners with a record of the learning outcomes which they can share with an employer to support career progression and /or job applications.

One weakness is the lack of awareness and understanding of digital badges in many industries. The variation in terminology and definitions used can also be problematic: it is hard to understand the difference between a digital badge, micro-credential, and accredited module, among others. Furthermore, there is substantial variation in the content and quality of learning provided through a digital badge or micro-credential: one might be 20 hours of learning, whereas another could be just five hours.

4 Micro-credentials in the non-formal and informal sectors

The next part of this case study looks at micro-credentials which are not delivered by formal education providers. These are: non-formal learning offered by a range of providers (Example 5); and the Global Hospitality Badge (Example 6). The case study discusses whether each example can be accessed or obtained through RPL,

and whether the outcome can be used in an RPL process to access or obtain a formal qualification.

4.1.1 Example 5: Non-formal learning in the private and third sectors

Non-formal learning, as defined by the European Recommendation on Validation, takes place through planned activities (in terms of learning objectives, learning time) where some form of learning support is present (e.g. student-teacher relationships). The Recommendation refers to in-company training and courses organised by civil society organisations as examples of non-formal learning (Council of the European Union, 2012).

There are many short forms of non-formal learning offered by employers, private training providers, sector bodies and other organisations which could potentially support an RPL application. Again, these are not necessarily referred to as micro-credentials, although they may fit the definition. They include courses hosted by international platforms such as Coursera, FutureLearn and edX, as well as national and sectoral training providers, and individual employers.

Since learning providers in both FET and HE are required to have policies and procedures for RPL, small, non-accredited units of learning could be used as evidence in a learner's RPL application to access formal learning or obtain a formal learning award. However, during interviews conducted for this case study, providers indicated that currently most RPL evidence tends to derive from experiential learning, mostly from the workplace. This may change with time, as the RPL Practitioner Network (www.rpl-ireland.ie) has included representatives of statutory professional bodies as part of its national steering group to support better understanding of RPL in professional contexts, including the recognition of non-formal learning.

4.1.2 Example 6: Kildare and Wicklow ETB: the Global Hospitality Badge

Kildare and Wicklow ETB (KWETB) offers a digital badge initiative to recognise experiential learning for people working in hospitality. The [Global Hospitality Badge](#) is based on a City and Guilds competency framework of over 40 hospitality job roles, which are mapped to an industry-based set of standards.

The scheme was first piloted in the city of Liverpool in England. Standards were created around three skills competencies: common skills, specific skills, and CPD skills. Free-of-charge workbooks are available which set out these standards, enabling the identification of skills the individual already has, and their skills gaps. Hospitality businesses can benchmark their own occupational profiles or job descriptions against these global standards, which are set and agreed by industry.

The Global Hospitality Badge initiative was introduced in Ireland as part of a state-funded Innovation through Collaboration Project funded by SOLAS. The original project, entitled Recognition of Prior Learning for the Irish Hospitality Sector, responded to research that identified barriers to accessing jobs, and challenges in achieving promotion, faced by employees without formal qualifications. Many have no formal education but have developed high value skills within the workplace. KWETB receives the funding and manages the initiative across all ETBs.

The scheme has been delivered through three routes. First is the corporate route offered to employers, enabling them to quality assure their performance management systems by monitoring employees' performance against the Global Hospitality Badge competency standards. When an employee meets the standards

of the job role, the organisation issues a badge through a quality assured process managed by the lead ETB.

The second route was introduced during the Covid-19 lockdowns, when the scheme had to be adjusted and was offered directly to individuals, with about 700 people applying for a badge during this time. There is also a third, educational route (see below). The original format has now resumed and three hotel groups are currently using the Global Hospitality Badge in their performance management systems.

The process to earn a Global Hospitality Badge incorporates **all four stages of validation**.

- When the **individual route** was introduced during the Covid-19 lockdowns, hospitality tutors from local ETBs were trained to assess applications. A call for expressions of interest would be launched, and staff would verify that a learner's initial application met the relevant criteria (e.g. making sure the individual's experience was recent, i.e. from the last six months). The individual would then be assigned two appointments with an advisor: one induction appointment to discuss the evidence they already have and any additional evidence they might need to provide, and a second appointment for the advisor to assess the learner's final evidence portfolio, prior to submission. The submission would then be assessed and validated by an independent assessor verifier, and following approval the individual would receive their digital certification badge.
- Through the **corporate route**, employers are required to meet robust quality assurance requirements that help underpin the Global Hospitality initiative standards into their performance management systems. They issue digital badges on an annual or bi-annual basis, based on line managers' assessments of individuals' competences against the Global Hospitality workbooks. The relevant ETB validates the processes and policies of the employer's programme, and City and Guilds conducts a quality assurance review of a sample of the assessments once a year.
- The **educational route** benchmarks existing work-based learning programmes to the Global Hospitality competency framework to support individuals working towards a qualification to achieve a digital credential. For example, learners who successfully complete the two-year national commis chef apprenticeship programme automatically achieve the Global Hospitality scheme's commis chef credential.

Since the initiative started in 2020, around 360 employees have completed a Global Hospitality badge. They are issued by KWETB, in conjunction with City and Guilds and the World Chefs association Global Certification Framework. The initiative has worked particularly well with large employers, who have seen candidates achieve their Global Certification badge and then change jobs either within their organisation and/or transfer within sister properties (i.e. from one hotel to another), enabling them to progress and often to achieve promotion. Learners' feedback overwhelmingly cited that they had gained confidence from their first formal recognition or award, as well as feeling more valued by the organisation.

The Global Hospitality Framework is not aligned to the NFQ. This was a deliberate decision to allow the badges to recognise skills in the workplace. The badges' portability is created by the fact they are industry-recognised, and recognise individuals' skills, enabling career development, progression and change. However, for those who wish to pursue an educational pathway, non-alignment to the NFQ may be a drawback. This is something that has been under consideration. An initial exploration of the potential to map the digital badges against modules within HE

qualifications also concluded that the focus on competences rather than knowledge meant that there was insufficient overlap between the two.

Nevertheless, as noted, the digital badges have benefits both for individuals (supporting career development by providing evidence of their skill and experience level) and employers (for staff recruitment and retention, talent management and quality assurance). As such, the scope to introduce a similar scheme to other sectors such as retail or construction is currently being explored.

5 Micro-Credentials and RPL: strengths, weaknesses and lessons learned

This case study has examined a number of micro-credential initiatives in Ireland and assessed the extent to which each one can either be accessed or obtained through RPL, or if the micro-credential itself can be used as evidence towards an RPL application. The findings are summarised in Table 5.1 below.

Table 5.1 Overview of micro-credentials and use of RPL

Example	Can be accessed through RPL	Can be obtained through RPL	Can be used in RPL process to access/obtain formal qualifications
1. Minor or special purpose awards on the NFQ	Yes: QQI Principles and Operational Guidelines for RPL require providers to have policies and procedures for learner admission, progression and recognition enabling the fair recognition of prior learning, including non-formal and informal learning.		N/A. These awards are on the NFQ (i.e. they are formal qualifications) and (many) can be combined to achieve full awards.
2. FET Micro-qualifications	Yes: in line with QQI Principles and Operational Guidelines for RPL.	Yes: in line with QQI Principles and Operational Guidelines for RPL. However, interviewees suggested that it is likely to be less time-consuming (for both learners and providers) to complete the training than to produce an RPL portfolio.	N/A. These awards are on the NFQ (i.e. they are formal qualifications). They can be stacked to achieve larger awards.
3. MicroCreds project	HEIs use RPL for access, including for micro-credential (and other short) courses.	RPL is used in HE to support credit towards an award, exemptions from programme modules, and advanced entry. However, interviewees suggested that RPL is rarely practical for the award of micro-credentials in the HE sector.	N/A. Some of these awards on the NFQ, whereas others are not.. It should be possible to use them towards a process of RPL in line with QQI Principles and Operational Guidelines. It may be possible to combine certain MicroCreds to achieve full awards.
4. FITU digital badges and micro-credentials	Yes: suitability for the courses is determined through RPL.	Yes: assessment can be based on learning from the course or experiential learning from the workplace.	Yes: see above with regard to RPL in both FET and HE. Badges can be accepted in place of the qualification requirements for entry to FITU's Level 9 (Masters) courses.

5. Non-formal learning, e.g. offered by employers, private training providers, sector bodies	N/A.		<p>Yes: in line with QQI Principles and Operational Guidelines for RPL.</p> <p>However, providers indicated that most RPL evidence tends to derive from experiential (informal) learning, rather than non-formal learning.</p>
6. Global Hospitality Badge	<p>Yes: a learner's initial application is assessed against the relevant criteria (e.g. making sure the individual's experience is recent, i.e. from the last six months).</p>	<p>Yes: the badges are obtained through an evidence portfolio or a line manager's assessment of the individual's competences.</p>	<p>Yes: see above with regard to RPL in both FET and HE.</p>

The challenges outlined at the start of this case study make it difficult to draw substantial conclusions on the strengths and weaknesses of the micro-credentials presented here in relation to RPL. The case study shows that micro-credentials present opportunities and benefits for individuals, employers and learning providers. They can be a stepping stone (back) into education and training, can facilitate career progression, help to address skills shortages and enable learning providers to respond quickly and flexibly to market demand.

Micro-credentials which provide an electronic record of learning outcomes may be more portable and sustainable than a paper certificate, which can be misplaced and may not detail the learning outcomes achieved. This (electronic) record of the learning outcomes also makes them potentially more useful for RPL: learners may find it harder to remember and / or articulate the learning from a course which was recognised only through a paper certificate, whereas a record of the learning outcomes may help them to map these against the standard(s) used in the RPL process.

Micro-credentials which are aligned to the NFQ may have more 'currency', by indicating that the awards are designed, delivered and assessed to high standards. Over half (51%) of Irish employers responding to a survey said they wanted micro-credentials to be linked to qualifications frameworks (Nic Giolla Mhichíl, et al, 2021). Awards on the NFQ are more likely to be transferable to different employers and learning providers than micro-credentials which have been tailored to the needs of one sector or enterprise.

In line with QQI's Principles and Operational Guidelines for RPL, it should be possible to access or obtain these qualifications through RPL. However, their size means that it may be less time-consuming (for both learners and providers) to complete the training than to produce an RPL portfolio. Nevertheless, where learners face barriers to attending a training course (e.g., distance and costs of travel, caring responsibilities, or working hours), having RPL as an option would create opportunities for people who otherwise could be excluded.

Where micro-credentials are not aligned with the NFQ, providers can decide whether these will be open to RPL. The examples considered for this case study have shown that these small units of learning are well-suited to the recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning. They are designed to meet specific needs within industry or to support career progression, therefore workers can match their skills developed on-the-job with a badge or qualification that recognises these.

These providers can use their own quality assurance processes from design through to delivery, such as setting clear learning outcomes and appropriate and robust assessment processes. Having these in place will help to ensure acceptance and trust in the micro-credentials, and to enable RPL. It will also help to overcome one of the issues identified by interviewees: the diversity of micro-credentials available can be confusing, undermining their value. Given the existing limited awareness and understanding of micro-credentials (Nic Giolla Mhichíl, et al, 2021), this is important to ensure confidence and trust from all stakeholders.

Interviewees stated that **RPL in formal education has tended to focus on experiential learning** to date, rather than non-formal learning. Building a greater understanding of non-formal micro-credentials and how these relate to the learning outcomes for formal qualifications would enable them to be used more commonly in RPL. This would require time and investment, for instance to conduct a 'mapping' of non-formal provision against formal qualifications standards. It would also require further awareness-raising of RPL and its benefits amongst the general public, so that

people understand that they can convert their prior non-formal and informal learning (including micro-credentials) into a recognised formal qualification through RPL.

6 Conclusions

There are many learning opportunities across the different sectors of education in Ireland that could be considered micro-credentials, although they may not be labelled as such. Some examples have been highlighted in this case study to assess the extent to which they incorporate or can be used for RPL.

Two of the examples with a strong RPL element - the Global Hospitality Badge and online badges offered by FITU – are developed to respond to identified employer and / or employee needs. They are not aligned to the NFQ, which may limit their portability, but they are highly regarded in the sectors where they are offered due to the collaborative approach used to develop them together with employers and employer organisations.

Other examples of small units of learning which can be acquired solely, or partly through RPL – Learn with NALA, and both FET and HE minor and special purpose awards on the NFQ – often pre-date the term micro-credential. More recently-introduced micro-credentials and micro-qualifications which are aligned with the NFQ seem to be less suited for award through RPL. If the viability of the courses relies on a certain intake of learners, it may not be cost-effective for providers to offer an RPL route, which requires substantial staff time to guide and assess each individual applicant. An increasing shift towards the provision of micro-credentials does not, therefore, mean there will be an associated increase in the provision of RPL.

Micro-credentials which are more closely linked to the workplace, for instance to support performance management and / or career progression, have a clearer fit with RPL. These tend to be more about recognising and evidencing skills acquired at work, than learning new ones. In this case the reverse is true: it is more cost-effective and efficient to enable workers to capture and record their competences through a badge or micro-credential, than releasing workers to undertake a training course.

Where micro-credentials provide a route back into education, as evidence to support an application for higher-level learning, a mix of both RPL and taught provision seems to work. RPL for entry enables providers to ensure learners are capable of achieving the micro-credential. Combining taught provision with recognition of experiential learning ensures they then have the full skillset and knowledge to move on to the next level.

The shift – accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic – towards more blended learning, means that providers are better equipped and more confident in providing flexible opportunities. As such, micro-credentials in various forms, from badges acquired through RPL to minor awards resulting from a training course, are likely to continue to be popular with learners, employers and providers. RPL should be both part of and complementary to these micro-credentials, as a means to attract learners from all walks of life and to enable them to achieve their aspirations in education, training and employment.

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- Quality and Qualifications Ireland
- SOLAS

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