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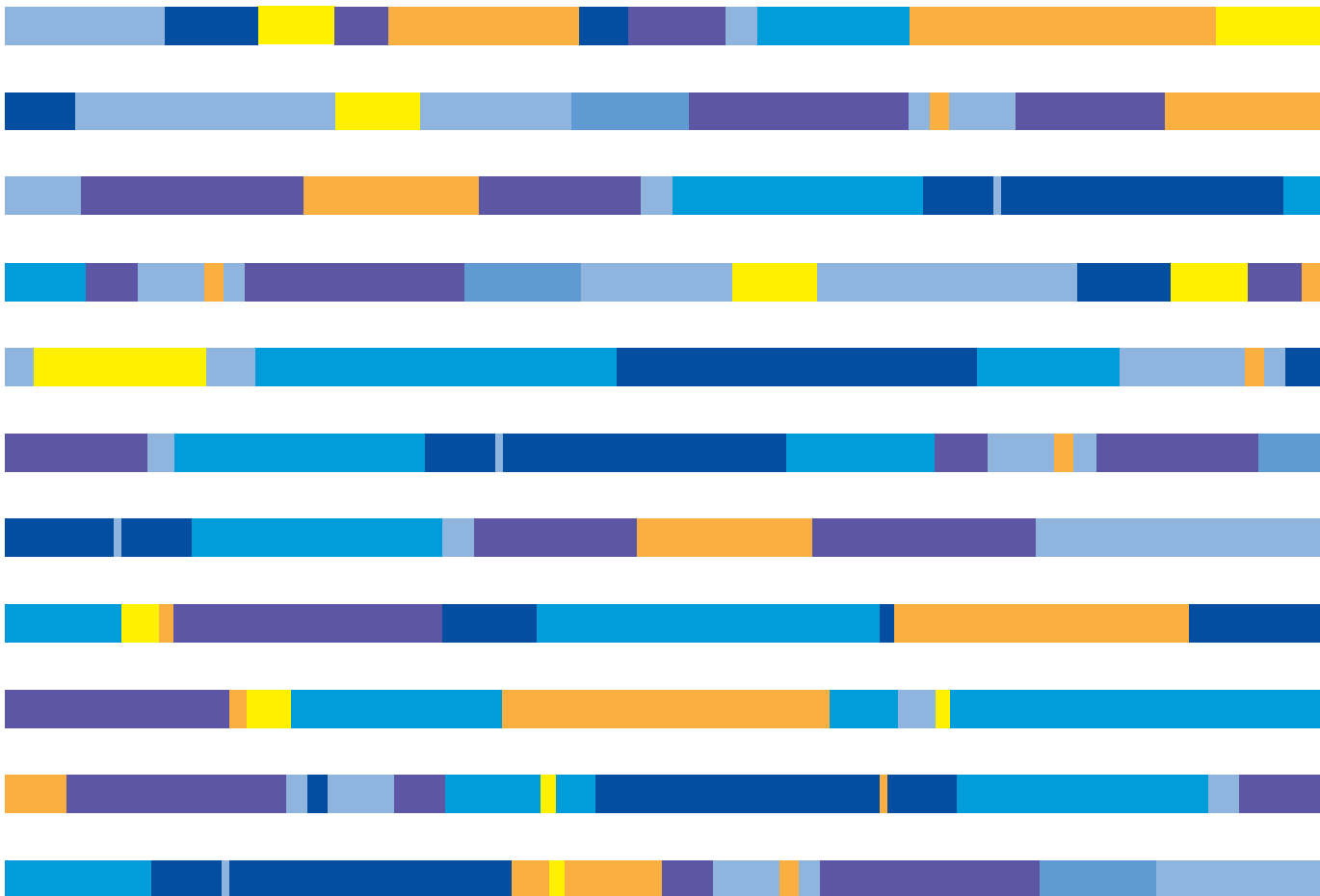
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European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2023 update

COUNTRY REPORT:
IRELAND

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1 Abstract

Since 2018, there have been significant developments and investment in RPL in both the further education and training (FET) and higher education (HE) sectors, and to some extent in community (adult) education.

At the moment, RPL provision across the country is uneven, with examples of good practice in relation to specific communities, (economic) sectors or qualifications. This bottom-up, demand-driven model means that RPL is being developed to meet the needs of learners, employers, and regional contexts. Providing dedicated funding for pilots and projects has worked well to date, because it has enabled providers and practitioners to test approaches and then to identify and share good practice through the national networks and communities that have been set up for this purpose.

Frameworks, guidance, information and training in both FET and HE are supporting greater awareness and capability amongst providers and practitioners. In time, as these become more embedded, RPL will be made available to greater numbers of individuals and will be implemented in a more consistent manner.

2 Introduction

In Ireland, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) encompasses all forms of prior learning (including certificated learning) and can be used to access or obtain awards from Level 1 to 10 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). Although the focus of this report is on validation of prior non-formal and informal learning, it can be difficult to separate this type of learning from prior certified learning when discussing and documenting progress in this area.

There is a statutory basis for RPL set out in legislation, starting with the 1999 Qualifications Act. In addition, direction, oversight and knowledge-sharing are provided at national level. Through this, a system of cooperation and collaborative partnerships has evolved over decades which acknowledges and respects the autonomy of institutions, the breadth of their missions and diversity of obligations.

The Department of Education and Skills (DES) “Action Plan for Education 2016-2019” (DES, 2016a) outlined its commitment to the development of a national RPL policy. This national policy has not yet been introduced, but the commitment remains and has been strengthened with its inclusion in the 2020 [Programme for Government, Our Shared Future](#) (Department of the Taoiseach, 2020).

RPL practice is mainly developed from a sectoral, and within that regional and / or institutional perspective. The HEA and SOLAS agree performance compacts with institutions and learning providers, which are informed by national and European priorities, UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and global responsibilities. In line with these compacts, and guided by frameworks and guidelines developed by sectoral bodies, individual learning providers have continued to develop their own policies for RPL. In addition, the [Human Capital Initiative](#) (HCI), a competitive funding call in the HE sector, has supported a number of RPL projects at institutional and sectoral level including a single national project, RPL in higher education. In FET, the [Innovation through Collaboration Fund](#), among others, has provided more modest investment for RPL in FET.

The projects funded through these schemes have enabled the consolidation of previous pilots and the introduction of new initiatives, against a backdrop of existing RPL provision across all sectors. This include access processes which identify and

document prior learning but do not lead to assessment or certification, rather to 'levelling' and informed choice or admission, where certification is not part of an Institution's policy.

Ireland's bottom-up, test-and-learn approach has helped to increase the visibility of RPL, and improved the capacity of providers and practitioners to put it into practice. They have been able to trial approaches and then to share good practice and lessons learned through the national networks and communities that have been set up for this purpose. This is a strength of the Irish approach: stakeholders and providers in the different sectors of learning are working together to find ways to use RPL to the benefit of their communities and the economy.

A weakness in the existing status quo is the lack of national, consistent data on RPL, which makes it hard to determine the scale of activity and take-up. In addition, the extent to which learners are aware of and utilise the opportunities available to them, remains unclear. Recently-commissioned research should help to improve this in the future.

A reliance on project-based funding to develop and upscale RPL in the HE and FET sectors is also another potential weakness. It may not be possible to sustain some of the activities which have been established through projects in recent years. In addition, the ongoing transition in the guidance sector creates a risk that learners will not have access to the information and guidance they need to identify RPL opportunities and/or successfully undertake a RPL process.

Whilst RPL in Ireland continues to be implemented in line with national priorities, interpreted at the level of each individual learning provider, local practices are becoming more consistent thanks to the introduction of frameworks, guidance, information and training in both the FET and HE sectors. This infrastructure which is developing at sectoral level is helping to support greater awareness and capability amongst providers and practitioners. In time, as these become more embedded, RPL will be made available to greater numbers of individuals and will be implemented in a more standardised manner.

3 National perspective

3.1 Overarching approach to validation

Overall policy context, funding and infrastructure

Starting with the 1999 Qualifications Act, and consolidated within the Determinations of the NFQ and supporting guidelines and structures, RPL has been referenced in national legislation, policies and strategies (including the National Skills Strategy, National Strategy for Higher Education, and National FET Strategy) for some years. More detail of this historical context can be found in the 2018 country report. This statutory basis set out at national level gives an overall shape for sectoral engagement in RPL and its implementation by providers.

The Qualifications Act was further strengthened in 2012 and again in 2019, when the responsibility of institutions and providers to have arrangements in place for the identification and assessment of knowledge, skills or competence of individuals was underlined. The amendments made clear that the responsibility for RPL lies with institutions and providers, and removed the option given in 2012 for direct approaches to QQI for an award, acknowledging that the expertise for assessment lies within institutions.

In 2020, this was taken further with the inclusion of RPL in the [Programme for Government, Our Shared Future](#), which makes a commitment to, “develop and implement a standardised system of accreditation of prior learning taking account of previous education, skills, work experience and engagement in society”. (Department of the Taoiseach, 2020). This is a significant development for Ireland and together with the allocation of dedicated funding for RPL projects in the FET and HE sectors enabling providers to develop their practices and provision further, has facilitated important progress since 2018. In May 2023, the OECD Skills Strategy Ireland Assessment and Recommendations Report was published. It was recommended that Ireland should ‘*Strengthening the capacity of Education and Training Providers to offer recognition of prior learning including by establishing national guidelines outlining the procedures and processes of RPL’ in order to foster greater participation in Lifelong Learning.*

There has been significant investment in RPL through, among others, the [Innovation through Collaboration Fund](#) and [Skills to Advance](#) for Further Education and Training (FET), and the [Human Capital Initiative](#) for Higher Education (HE). These programmes fund projects which enable the ambitions set out in national policies to be developed through bottom-up, test-and-learn innovations and improvements, although the investment is more substantial for HE than for FET.

RPL is seen as a way to better connect with enterprise and employers. Ireland currently has a high rate of employment and RPL is recognised as one approach to help address the labour supply problem (Recognition of Prior Learning, 2022). It has also been shown as a way to support the adaptation to climate change. For instance, HE institutions have introduced opportunities for farmers to have their knowledge of sustainability recognised in a qualification.

The development of a more unified tertiary sector is being encouraged, with increased links between FET and HE. This includes programmes which are based on a combination of learning within the two sectors, e.g. one/two year(s) in FET followed by two/three years in HE (Government of Ireland, 2023). As the tertiary sector becomes more unified, this may help to improve the pathways for learners by increasing the transferability of learning outcomes (including those gained through RPL) from one sector to another.

As outlined in the 2018 country report, the National Skills Strategy 2025 (NSS) aims to increase the number of people across Ireland engaging in lifelong learning, and to focus on active inclusion, supporting participation in education and training and the labour market. Action 4.3 in the NSS is to increase recognition of workplace learning and to develop capacity for RPL. (Department of Education and Skills, 2016b)

Increasing participation in lifelong learning is an important objective in Ireland. Future Jobs Ireland (2019) also sets out an ambition to significantly increase levels of lifelong learning, including by developing mechanisms for formal recognition of employees’ skills through RPL.

The [Irish Register of Qualifications](#) (IRQ), launched by QQI in 2019, includes all quality-assured, recognised qualifications included in the National Framework for Qualifications (NFQ). It also provides information on the associated course, provider and awarding body. QQI works with awarding bodies to ensure the database is up-to-date. (QQI, 2021a)

QQI has now committed to scoping a national approach to RPL. It will also evaluate provider adherence to a national approach to access, transfer and progression and the appropriate recognition of prior learning, thus helping to ensure that learners can achieve their potential within the FET and HE systems. This will involve the development of a revised policy, criteria and guidelines for RPL over the coming period.

Individual Learning Accounts

The FET strategy (Government of Ireland; SOLAS, n.d., a) refers to the importance of, “exploring the potential for individual learner accounts (including tracking credentials and credits achieved within FET over time)”, but aside from this intention, at the moment no specific developments on Individual Learning Accounts were identified during the research for this report.

Stages of Validation

QQI's statutory core quality assurance guidelines refer to European policy and guidelines. However, universities are statutory awarding bodies and so relate to these guidelines differently. As outlined in the 2018 report, 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).

Skills Audits

Intreo is the Irish Public Employment Service, which provides one-to-one services to individuals to create a pathway to employment. These identify the ultimate employment goal of the jobseeker, review education levels, past employment (if any) and identify gaps or barriers to progression. The process includes looking forward to see what education attainment requirements are necessary to successfully achieve the end goal.

Employment Personal Advisers (EPA) and Job Coaches (JC) discuss and agree a series of actions for the individual to undertake. If their assessment concludes that the individual may have undertaken sufficient modules of education together with work experience, the customer may be advised and supported to make a formal application to an education and training provider for RPL assessment. If the individual is unsuccessful the EPA will review the feedback from the assessment, and where there is a skills gap, refer them to a suitable education or training programme. The Department of Social Protection collaborates with education and training providers to ensure customers receive the appropriate skill development and educational attainment.

Participants in the [JobPath](#) programme for the unemployed must agree to a personal progression plan (PPP) to help them in their search for work. This starts with a skills-audit type activity, where the jobseeker works with an allocated personal adviser who assesses their work-related skills and experience, and employment goals. On this basis, the PPP should include a series of steps to help the jobseeker to find work, which might include work experience, training and other support. JobPath is delivered by two companies: [Seetec](#) and [Turas Nua](#).

Ballymun Job Centre has been involved in a number of EU-funded projects which have led to the development of audio/visual, web-based career guidance tools. Their individualised service enables clients to gain awareness of their career interests, aptitudes, preferred work environment and career identity. The different tools were introduced to respond to the needs of Job Centre clients who lacked self-knowledge of their own interests, abilities and characteristics (Ballymun Job Centre, 2023). Further information on Ballymun Job Centre and in particular their INFORM tool can be found in the 2018 country report.

Accenture worked with An Cosán (a community education provider) to develop a “Skills to Succeed Academy”. As part of this Academy, young people can complete a Skills Summary. This tool, developed together with the National Youth Council of Ireland, enables young people to, “understand and document their transferable skills gained from non-formal learning” (Accenture, 2019).

Post-primary students in their transition year (between the Junior and Leaving Certificate) can undertake a Level 5 module in work experience. This module includes an element of skills audit, although the focus is on teaching the learner to undertake a self-assessment, rather than actually conducting a skills audit. Participants in programmes leading to Level 5 awards in FET will typically also complete similar programme modules.

In FET, adults from certain target groups (primarily second-chance learners) can seek guidance from their local Adult Education and Guidance Information Service (AEGIS). The guidance counsellor at the AEGIS will support the individual to undertake a process of reflection during a one-to-one meeting, which should help them to identify how to make progress towards their learning goals. During this discussion, the counsellor will undertake a ‘levelling’ assessment, i.e. identifying the level the person’s learning equates to in relation to the NFQ. They will also signpost the individual to locally available options which can help them to achieve their learning goals.

The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) was a partner in the Erasmus+ funded [Check In, Take Off \(CITO\) project](#) between 2019 and 2022, alongside Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) and South East Technological University (SETU), along with the Ministry for Education and Employment in Malta and Fonix in Norway. The partners developed a pilot [SkillsChecker](#) tool, aligned with the EQF, which learners could use to carry out an initial self-assessment of their literacy, numeracy and digital skills. They also created a [communications and outreach toolkit](#) to engage and support people to use the tool.

The CITO SkillsChecker tool is designed to be relevant, motivating and confidence-building. The tool helps users identify their existing skills and needs and provides them with options in terms of both learning pathways and RPL (CITO, 2022). Field trials of the tool and toolkit in Ireland, Malta and Norway were successful with 62.5% of participants reporting an increase interest in taking up a learning opportunity in the future and 88.8% of participants reporting that they would recommend the CITO SkillsChecker to a friend.

The SkillsChecker tool and communications and outreach toolkit are open source so that other organisations can [adapt them for their own use](#). NALA created a tailored [SkillsCheck](#) tool in late 2022 for Irish learners and to date, it has been accessed by over 300 users.

Data collection and quality assurance

There remains work to be done to improve data collection on RPL in Ireland to ensure national, consistent data can be collected. In HE, the newly-defined technical definition of RPL provides a guide for institutions on what to count (and not count) as RPL in order to support the development of coherent and consistent datasets within and between HEIs. In FET, the Programme and Learner Support System (PLSS) now has an option to select RPL as a course type. Education and Training Boards (ETBs) can use this to collect data, by setting up a specific module or course on the PLSS specifically for their RPL applicants.

3.2 Validation in education and training

3.2.1 Further Education and Training (FET)

The national policies and legislation outlined above and in the 2018 country report apply to FET providers. FET in Ireland includes vocational education, adult education, and community education, providing a diversity of opportunities for individuals across EQF 1-5 / NFQ 1-6 and in nonformal and informal education. The national QQI Principles and Operational Guidelines for RPL, together with the core statutory quality assurance guidelines, require that provider policies and procedures for learner admission, progression and recognition enable the fair recognition of prior learning, including non-formal and informal learning. Providers must have procedures/policies for the formal assessment of the knowledge, skill and competence previously acquired by learners. It is also a requirement that the learning environment offered by providers should respect and attend to the diversity of learners and their needs, and enable flexible learning pathways.

The new FET Strategy, [Future FET: Transforming Learning](#), acknowledges the importance of exploring and developing different ways of validating learning outcomes, including strong support for RPL. It goes on to recommend that the RPL models that have been piloted by ETBs should be mainstreamed as, “this route into education and awards can be a real attribute and selling point for FET in the future.” (Government of Ireland; SOLAS, n.d., a)

In line with these national requirements and recommendations, RPL is developed from the bottom up by the regional ETBs, with practices and innovations emerging in relation to specific qualifications, professions, or collaborations. For instance, RPL is offered to staff in the defence forces as part of routine services in several ETBs, in collaboration with their local defence force barracks. This has resulted from an initial pilot led by Donegal ETB, which was then expanded in the project run between 2018 and 2019 across 10 ETBs, described in Box 1, below.

Box 1 TOBAR: RPL in the Defence Forces

The TOBAR national project built on two previous pilots by Donegal ETB. In the national project, ten ETBs each worked with up to 10 soldiers and participants prepared RPL portfolios for FET awards in subjects such as communications, word processing, and team-working.

A total of 91 learners achieved 21 major and 386 minor awards through the project. The majority (133) of the minor awards were Level 5 qualifications, but there were also a substantial number of Level 3 awards (121), as well as Level 4 (67) and Level 6 (65). Of the minor awards made at Level 4 and above, 190 of these were given a distinction (72%), 61 merit (23%), and 14 at pass level (5%).

The four phases of validation were used to structure the TOBAR RPL process. Learners were made aware of the opportunity through an information event, then the identification phase was undertaken using tools such as Donegal ETB’s Skills Checker.

In this national project, a new RPL mentor / facilitator role was introduced. The mentor supports learners to select and present evidence in line with the qualification’s learning outcomes, and provides ongoing feedback together with the assessor.

All participating ETBs assessed the learners on the basis of a portfolio, sometimes supplemented by the use of skills demonstrations and assignments. Assessments were carried out by subject matter experts.

For most ETBs, funding for the TOBAR project was taken from the Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) framework. In terms of quality assurance, an External Authenticator (EA) visited each site to examine the work and prepare a report. (This role is in keeping with the

process for all assessments in ETBs, although it is more usual to review just a selection of the work).

Learners reported a high level of satisfaction with their achievements through the RPL process: most (46 learners, or 94%) said that it had been an enjoyable experience, and 78% of learners rated the project 'very good' or 'excellent' in terms of gaining skills to manage learning. The evaluation also reports that the project had a positive impact in terms of progression to further education, training and employment.

Practitioners also gave positive feedback on their involvement in the project, which they described as fulfilling, empowering and enjoyable. They also reported that they had learned from the experience: some mentors had to learn to adopt a more facilitative approach, while assessors learned how to conduct assessments of RPL applications. The evaluation also refers to a positive impact on the attitude of younger soldiers, who gained a better appreciation of the value of their time in the defence forces as a source of learning.

The recommendations in the evaluation set out how learning from the TOBAR project can be used to mainstream the RPL process against the backdrop of the FET Strategy (Government of Ireland; SOLAS, n.d., a). The evaluators recommend, among other things, that ETBI and the ETBs will need to engage with a range of stakeholders, that a dedicated RPL service should be introduced at ETB level, and that RPL opportunities should not just be promoted to individual learners, but also through partnerships with enterprise, voluntary and community groups. They suggest that ETBs should be set a range of actions and targets relating to RPL in their annual service planning, and that ETBI should create a programme of work to make this happen, as well as a communications strategy for RPL.

Source: de Paor, C (2021)

The TOBAR evaluation report and its launch were an important milestone and provided a framework for consideration of next steps across the FET sector. A further important impetus was the [Innovation through Collaboration Fund](#), launched by SOLAS in 2019 and closed in 2021. The Fund distributed EUR 950 000 for ETBs to work in partnership and find new approaches to enterprise engagement. RPL projects were encouraged and a number were selected through this competitive funding call, as outlined in Section 3.3 (SOLAS, n.d., a). One of the projects supported through the Fund, led by Kildare and Wicklow ETB, focussed on developing ICT resources to support the implementation of RPL in the hospitality sector. See Section 3.3 for further detail. Another, led by Donegal ETB, working together with Limerick & Clare ETB and Atlantic Technological University (ATU), used the grant to increase the expertise of existing ETB staff to deliver RPL for employees in the healthcare sector.

Box 2 RPL to meet labour market needs

The aim of this pilot project, entitled Validating Competencies of Care Sector Employees (VCCSE) was to develop an alternative route to achieving qualifications through RPL. The pilot enabled the two ETBs to embed the RPL process in their own practices, and to share the outcomes of the project with the wider FET sector.

Year one of the project focussed on developing and testing RPL tools in the care sector. Research at the time suggested that care workers were low-skilled / low-qualified. It was also a growth area for employment, and legislation has since been introduced requiring workers in the sector to hold a qualification at Level 5 on the NQF. Most applicants were mature learners, initially recruited by the ETB from nursing homes and later self-referring after the initiative had been shared widely via word-of-mouth.

In the second year of the project, the two ETBs moved on to implementing the RPL process they had developed in other economic sectors. Notably, workers from the banking sector were identified as being at-risk after the closure of Ulster Bank. Although they had banking sector certificates, these are not recognised on the NFQ, which meant that when applying for jobs, applicants' qualifications were not recognised. Through RPL, 17 banking professionals gained NFQ Level 6 major awards in subjects

such as administration, management and business. Some of these went on to study at higher level at ATU, with advanced entry into the second year in recognition of their prior learning, saving them a year of tuition fees.

With the project now completed, Donegal ETB's focus in 2023 is on the early childhood care and education sector, where the current NFQ Levels 5 and 6 awards will be 'deactivated' and replaced by a new professional qualification, the Advanced Certificate in Early Learning and Care. Dublin and Dún Laoghaire led the development of this qualification, which included designing an RPL Toolkit to support ETB centres in the transition period between the old and new qualifications, so that learners who had achieved relevant awards associated with the 'old' qualification could have their learning recognised towards completion of the new qualification. In addition, since many experienced childcare workers are not able to take time out of the workplace to complete this programme, Donegal ETB is supporting them to acquire the relevant awards through RPL. This is important, because in the future a Level 6 award will be required for workers to obtain a pay increment.

ETBs which have implemented these pilot projects are now in the process of adopting the approaches and practices developed across their provision. Once they have done so, they will share their learning with the wider FET sector, with a view to mainstreaming the practices they have developed.

Donegal, and Limerick and Clare ETBs have already systematically embedded RPL, although the focus tends to be on part-time learners. In addition, Limerick and Clare ETB is currently piloting routine screening as part of the induction for a full-time business programme offered in Ennis College of Further Education, to explore its use for full-time learners. Where RPL is possible for candidates to this course, time is allocated for the learners to complete the RPL activities (e.g. portfolio development) during the timetabled teaching hours.

Limerick and Clare ETB has also provided three cycles of continuing professional development (CPD) in RPL for staff. This has been both for its own staff and participants from six other ETBs (further detail is given in Section 8.2, below).

It is important to acknowledge that not all however, face the same opportunities and challenges in operationalising RPL or approach it in the same way, which means the provision of RPL in FET is uneven. One challenge is the complexity of ETBs as organisations, whilst another is differences between the regions, such as their priorities and varying degrees of appetite for RPL. Nevertheless, most ETBs provide some RPL, with the focus largely on exemptions and acknowledgement of prior certified learning.

Alongside the support provided by the RPL Practitioner Network (see below), the ETBI plays an important role in facilitating continued sectoral development. On the basis of the VCCSE project, a [toolkit](#) has been created which includes a set of resources and templates to be used in the delivery of RPL: publicity material, guidance for participants, and assessment rubrics, among others. This toolkit was launched in June 2022 and is now available from the [ETBI digital library](#) (RPL Practitioner Network, 2022; ETBI, 2023). ETBI has now commissioned a set of operational guidelines for RPL, to be developed on the basis of this toolkit.

The incremental collaborative work of VISKA, TOBAR, VCCSE and the resulting toolkit, together with plans for further collaborations within the sector under the aegis of ETBI, will give greater visibility and formality to what has so far been a purposeful, if largely informally networked approach. Approaches within TOBAR and VISKA were based on the different infrastructure and requirements of each ETB, and a formal acknowledgement of the need to experiment with different approaches according to context, precisely to enable different models to emerge.

Community education

Community education providers offer adult learning in community settings such as non-governmental and voluntary organisations. They deliver a wide range of both non-accredited and accredited part-time courses for adults, most of which fall between levels 1 and 5 of the NFQ. Examples include computing, professional skills and leisure-time courses.¹

Community education frequently works in collaboration with the ETB sector, particularly administratively. Prior to 1990s, when funding for the sector was cut, community education providers would have advocated and practiced RPL more than in the formal sectors, though it may not have been referred to specifically in this way: the process of supporting individuals to reflect on their existing competences and strengths is an integral part of adult education practice, although it may not lead to certification. There is some ideological conflict amongst providers in the sector towards a greater focus qualifications, rather than the core aims of community education which relate to socialisation.

As such, RPL has rarely been used on a formal basis in the community education sector. However, this is likely to change in the coming years. In 2019, AONTAS, Ireland's National Adult Learning Organisation, ran two introductory workshops on RPL with representatives of the sector and participants showed a strong interest in RPL and how it could be used in community education. In response, AONTAS worked with University College Cork to develop a bespoke certified course in RPL for community educators and are building a network of practitioners amongst course participants (Staunton, 2021). See Section 7 for more detail of the training course. The practitioner network is coordinated by Aontas and meets once per quarter, creating a continuum for practitioners who have completed the training to connect and share their experiences.

As part of its Bachelor of Arts in Community Development, MTU offers a module on 'portfolio methods for RPL'. Through this module, students learn about the foundations of RPL, its relevance within the community education sector, how to assist in identifying prior learning and produce evidence to support an RPL application. Finally, the module covers how to create a learning portfolio and to give formal recognition to prior learning. Learners can document their own knowledge, skills and competencies, but also learn how to apply the portfolio approach in their practice within the community (MTU, 2023a). A total of 446 individuals have engaged with the RPL module since it was introduced in 2000.

Training opportunities such as the two described above help to increase confidence amongst practitioners in the sector, and this empowers them to offer RPL on a formal basis. Examples tend to be where there is a cohort of learners who could benefit from an alternative route to acquiring a qualification, such as the early years and childcare award mentioned previously.

Between March 2017 and February 2020, Ireland participated alongside Iceland and Belgium in an ERASMUS+ funded project called VISKA (Visible Skills of Adults, 2017-2020, www.viskaproject.eu), led by Skills Norway. The project conducted field trials of the EU Skills Profiling Tool in order to explore lessons for policy on the use of RPL for people with low levels of qualifications, or who are low- skilled, including migrants and refugees. In Ireland, 32 learners completed the EU Skills Profiling Tool, and this trial helped the partners involved, including AONTAS and the former National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE), to identify future considerations for the

¹ There are notable exceptions, such as An Cosán or Longford Women's Link which span several NFQ levels, pedagogical approaches and liaise with FET, HE and several awarding bodies. These would also provide additional services that help overcome barriers to successful participation in learning.

development of possible approaches for the identification phase of validation in community education settings.

In 2020, the WriteOn.ie online RPL tool, described in our 2018 country report, was replaced with a new website, as outlined in Box 5.

Box 5 Learn with NALA: adapting and improving RPL systems

The WriteOn.ie online learning tool provided by the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) was replaced with a new eLearning website called “Learn with NALA” (www.learnwithnala.ie) in 2020. The new website continues to offer RPL for learners wishing to achieve a Level 2 or 3 award to recognise their existing knowledge and competences in literacy, numeracy, ICT and personal skills. Learners can earn up to 23 standalone minor awards from Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) and if they wish, combine these to achieve one of four QQI major awards.

This automated RPL process is made up of questions relating to the learning outcomes for each award. Users are presented with randomised questions – if they answer all correctly, they proceed to a summative assessment. Where they give an incorrect answer, they are directed to the content they need to complete in order to achieve the relevant learning outcome. They do not have to repeat learning they already know. Users achieve RPL for each question they get correct.

The Learn with NALA user journey has been developed to take account of evaluation findings (Broderick, 2022), analysis of user data, and feedback from learners, as follows:

- Firstly, registration for WriteOn.ie was kept simple to reduce barriers for learners and asked for very little personal data. However, this created administrative work for NALA in order to identify and distribute certificates to learners who completed awards using the system. Because of this, over the 11 years WriteOn.ie was available, thousands of learners did not receive certificates they were entitled to. Registration for Learn with NALA therefore requires a minimum level of data to ensure all learners can be awarded a certificate.
- Users of WriteOn.ie would undertake an initial assessment for their subject and if they passed this, move straight to a summative assessment to earn an award. This initial assessment has been re-named, to recognise the fact that second-chance learners might find the terminology off-putting. Now, the assessment is titled, “what do I already know?” and is optional rather than mandatory. With WriteOn.ie, there was a drop-off after users had set up their account, at the point of this initial assessment. This has now decreased on the Learn with NALA platform, which is likely to be due in part to these changes.
- WriteOn.ie users who passed the initial assessment would not have access to the learning materials for the award in question. In response to feedback from site users, Learn with NALA now gives access to those materials, even for learners who have passed straight away.
- Finally, whilst the learning content remains the same, some updates have been made with the introduction of Learn with NALA, such as more up-to-date images.

Once users have completed an award, Learn with NALA provides information on options for further learning. Learners are made aware of the NFQ Level of the awards they achieve, and are signposted to the [FET Course Hub](#) where they can find awards listed by level and therefore search for progression opportunities.

All [Learn with NALA](#) materials are available free-of-charge, online. NALA continues to be the largest provider of certification and RPL at level 2 in Ireland. For example, in 2022, NALA supported 1,046 learners to achieve 2,250 national awards with QQI in literacy, numeracy and digital literacy. 1,650 were achieved at level 2 and 600 were achieved at level 3 on the NFQ. In over 90% of cases, learners achieved RPL. Learn with NALA was also used by over 200 providers in Ireland a blended learning context.

3.2.2 Apprenticeships

As outlined in the 2018 country report, RPL can also be used towards apprenticeship qualifications. At the time of writing, the apprenticeship division of SOLAS is consolidating its approach to the provision of RPL for apprentices in order to meet skills shortages.

A notable example of this in recent years is the new National Hairdressing Apprenticeship, introduced and developed by Limerick and Clare ETB, which is now the coordinating provider. The apprenticeship was developed to respond to a skills shortage in the hairdressing sector, and is the first nationally-recognised qualification for hairdressers in Ireland. During the recruitment and registration phase of the apprenticeship, the ETB carries out an assessment of candidates' prior learning to identify any gaps which are then addressed through suitable support in order to facilitate non-standard entry. In addition, learners with sufficient prior learning can gain advanced entry to the second year of the apprenticeship through RPL and as outlined in the example below, have the opportunity to gain a full academic award based on non-formal and informal learning (National Hairdressing Apprenticeship, 2023).

Box 3 National Hairdressing Apprenticeship

The National Hairdressing Award is the first apprenticeship that can be achieved in full through experiential learning. It was introduced in response to demand from experienced hairdressers who did not have their own formal qualifications.

After the National Hairdressing Apprenticeship was introduced, a number of experienced hairdressers who had been mentoring / supervising apprentices requested an opportunity to obtain the same qualification in recognition of their own skills and competences. In response, Limerick and Clare ETB worked with the industry-led Consortium Steering Group to develop a process of RPL and the first eight graduates received their certificates in 2022. This is the first time that RPL has been used to certificate a full major Level 6 Award in an apprenticeship as part of a single application.

One salon owner explained how important this certificate was to her. *"This award completes all I strived for during my career as a hairdresser. I am humbled and delighted to have achieved this recognised qualification."*

Following the success in Limerick and Clare, two more collaborating providers have taken on the hairdressing RPL. In addition to Ennis College, which was the original provider, Waterford College and Mallow College have cohorts starting in September 2023. Limerick and Clare ETB provided briefings for the colleges and will provide resources and support for implementation.

In the long-term, it is planned to roll out the RPL process for the National Hairdressing Apprenticeship across the country, and to introduce similar apprenticeships and RPL processes into different sectors, such as beauty therapy and barbering.

Source: Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board (2022).

3.2.3 Higher Education (HE) sector

Recognition of Prior Learning is embedded in the [National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030](#), which emphasises the importance of flexibility and innovation in HE. The strategy, published in 2011, included a commitment to continue to develop clear routes of progression and transfer, as well as more accessible, flexible entry routes to and through higher education. It sets out an ambition to develop a national framework for RPL in HE, to overcome inconsistencies between institutions.

Access to HE is managed through a central applications process, including for FET applicants, on the basis of national qualifications. Institutions are autonomous and determine their own admissions. RPL is used as a means to facilitate access for applicants from non-traditional backgrounds – for example professional qualifications and work experience might be accepted in lieu of the usual requirements. In addition, some institutions provide additional 'points' for extra-curricular activities such as sports, community, or voluntary activities, but these are not nationally mapped and there is little transparency around the arrangements. When this topic was discussed

by the RPL practitioner network, participants were unable to agree on whether it represented an RPL process or not.

In late 2019, the Human Capital Initiative (HCI) was launched, a funding programme aiming to increase the capacity of HE to meet the skills needs of the future. Projects funded through this programme are enabling HEIs in Ireland to implement the commitments outlined in the national strategy for HE.

Box 4 The Human Capital Initiative: realising the potential of RPL

The Human Capital Initiative (HCI), funded through the National Training Fund, is a competitive funding call divided into three pillars. The third of these, “Innovation and Agility”, allocates EUR 197 million over five years to twenty-four projects developing innovative and responsive models of programme delivery. Many of these incorporate elements of RPL, including for example:

- **Rethinking Engineering Education in Ireland (Reedl):** Applicants to the REEdI degree, offered by Munster Technological University (MTU) are assessed on both Leaving Certificate points and points awarded to a portfolio where they showcase an example of their ability to solve a basic problem. This portfolio can include projects developed through the leaving certificate, or alternatives such as Young Scientist of the Year, Junior Entrepreneur of the Year, and projects from industry or work experience for mature students.
- **highered4.ie Career and Learning Pathways:** Higher Education 4.0, run by ATU, provides RPL and careers/study advisory services via the online platform mycareerpath.ie (see Box 6). Learners seeking to upskill, retrain or return to education can use the platform to identify the learning pathways available to them, based on their prior learning.
- **Accredited Talent Development — Convene:** Technological University Dublin and University College Dublin are exploring new ways that academia and enterprise can work together to meet priority and emerging skills needs. This includes working with employers to develop alternative accredited programmes and pathways to the traditional full-time degree model, including the use of RPL (Convene, 2023).

More recently, the commitment to develop a national framework for RPL was reiterated in the fourth [National Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education \(2022-2028\)](#). This plan sets out six goals, one of which is Flexibility. This goal encompasses a range of objectives to recognise students’ individuality and enable participation in HE in line with individual needs and circumstances, including improving the use of RPL. (Government of Ireland, DFHERIS, Higher Education Authority, 2022)

Box 5 National RPL in Higher Education Project

An overarching HCI-funded project called, **the National RPL in Higher Education Project** brings together all fourteen publicly-funded HEIs in Ireland (the Technological Universities, the IUA Universities, and the Institutes of Technology). The aim of the project is to streamline and strengthen RPL in HE and thereby to enable larger numbers of learners, particularly those in the workforce, to benefit from higher education. The overall vision is, “that RPL will be an integral part of the higher education system, widely understood, celebrated and utilised as a flexible pathway to further learning, certification and professional development.” (Recognition of Prior Learning, n.d., a)

This five-year (2020-2025), EUR 6.9 million project, provides funding for a 0.5 full time equivalent staff member (‘Project Lead’) in each of the partner HEIs involved, as well as a small project team co-ordinating implementation from a national perspective, based at the Technological Higher Education Association of Ireland (THEA). Progress to date suggests that the project is already helping to highlight existing RPL practice which was taking place across the sector and to increase engagement with RPL.

Through the project, a pilot framework for RPL in higher education has been developed. The purpose of the framework is to support a consistent approach to RPL and to develop common terminology and

definitions. A number of institutions have already published new policies which align with the framework, and it is anticipated that the vast majority will have new policies in place during the lifetime of the project. At the same time, all partner HEIs have developed their own 'RPL Action Plan' using an agreed template. The plans span five key areas– (i) institutional culture, (ii) enterprise partnerships, (iii) procedures (iv) policy and (v) targeted initiatives, Plans are signed off by each institution's Registrar/Vice-President for Academic Affairs (or equivalent), ensuring that the mainstreaming of RPL has support at senior level.

The first round of action plans covered the period from March to September 2022, a project initiation phase in the majority of institutions. Through a process of self-evaluation, all of the HEIs confirmed that they had achieved most of the objectives set out in their action plans. Their 'top achievements' included internal and external promotion of RPL (11 HEIs); growing internal engagement with RPL (8 HEIs) and having a policy consistent with the pilot framework (8 HEIs). Perhaps unsurprisingly given the stage of the work, areas where there had been less progress included building capacity amongst staff to support and assess RPL applications (25% reported 'no progress'), and creating a system to measure effectiveness and satisfaction (19% recorded 'no progress'). The second round of action plans runs from January 2023 to September 2024. Analysis of the plans indicates significant progress in the area of staff development (12 HEIs have activities underway, with two HEIs planning activity). (RPL in HE Project, 2022)

The framework document and technical definition were approved in 2022. The focus for 2023 is to achieve the potential of RPL to meet the needs of enterprise, ramp up staff development activity and progress the implementation of the technical definition in a pilot site. (RPL in HE Project, n.d.)

Twelve Institutes of Technology in the HE sector have merged in recent years to create five Technological Universities. For TU Dublin, the merger was a prompt to review and update its RPL policy.

Box 4 Technological University Dublin and RPL

Technological University Dublin (TU Dublin) has been created through a merger of three HE institutions: Dublin Institute of Technology, Institute of Technology, Blanchardstown, and Institute of Technology, Tallaght. The merger has led to a review of the way RPL is used and applied to ensure consistency across the newly-formed institution, and a revised RPL policy has been drafted to align with TU Dublin's strategic objectives of widening participation and increasing flexibility for learners.

Currently, RPL, comprising prior formal, informal and non-formal learning, is accepted for admission to most programmes offered at TU Dublin. This is particularly important for part-time programmes which tend to attract learners who are already working, and notably for graduates who have completed an ordinary degree (Level 7 on the NFQ) who are applying for a course where the entry requirement is a Level 8 honours degree. Work experience and experiential learning can be used to bridge this gap. For disciplines where the Level 8 degree was introduced when the Ordinary degree (Level 7) had been the standard undergraduate qualification for a long time, such as construction or architectural technology, this entry route has been especially important.

RPL can also be used as evidence towards a module exemption (for a full module only - partial exemptions are not allowed). Previously, limits on the number of modules which could be obtained through RPL could be set by programme, but TU Dublin's new RPL policy states that no limit should be applied, although derogations to this policy may be sought, for example where the requirements of Professional, Regulatory or Statutory Bodies that approve programmes may exclude the possibility of module exemptions.

RPL can also be used for advanced entry, but this is usually through prior certified learning rather than experiential learning.

More details on TU Dublin's RPL policy can be found at: <https://www.tudublin.ie/study/part-time/how-to-apply/recognition-of-prior-learning/>

In the **independent HE sector**, colleges offer RPL for access, advanced entry and/or module award, although this can depend on whether the programmes are validated by QQI or by a professional body. The latter may not recognise RPL or may accept it

for entry to courses but not for exemptions. However, this may change in future as awareness of and trust in RPL increase.

Griffith College in Dublin is an independent HE provider with around 7 000 students. The college improved its approach to RPL on the recommendation of QQI in 2011, which suggested their existing practice was overly cautious with regard to experiential learning. The college developed an accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) matrix setting out the Level 8 learning outcomes, which applicants can use to show how they meet those outcomes in their work. APEL applications are usually assessed based on the completed matrix and an interview, by staff in the relevant faculty. Once this assessment has been completed, a central APEL committee reviews and approves the result.

3.3 Validation and the labour market

JobPath (see above) is a national initiative overseen by Intreo, the Irish public employment service (PES). Together with a personal adviser, jobseekers identify their work-related skills and experience, as well as their employment skills. The personal progression plan (PPP) is a skills audit-type procedure and does not lead to a qualification, therefore it encompasses only the first stage of validation: identification.

In the FET sector, the Innovation through Collaboration Fund and subsequent funding rounds have encouraged applications from projects providing up-skilling and re-skilling support for employees, particularly people working in low-skilled jobs or in sectors vulnerable to displacement. ETBs were required to work in partnership to deliver these projects – with at least one other ETB and another organisation. Some examples from the 2019 Innovation through Collaboration round are listed below (SOLAS, n.d., a):

- Donegal ETB's VCCSE project (see Box 1) used RPL to support employees in the care sector to engage with FET. RPL was used to validate skills gained through workplace learning and to enable learners to access appropriate progression pathways. The project also included accredited training and development for staff and the development of RPL guiding principles, documentation and assessment tools.
- Galway and Roscommon ETB developed digital resources to support accredited, on-the-job training and RPL in the aquaculture industry. Partners included ETBs, HEIs, the Irish seafood development agency, and the Marine Institute.
- Kildare and Wicklow ETB, working with Dublin and Dún Laoghaire ETB and Fast Track into IT (FIT), used flexible methods, including RPL, to deliver modules and awards in advanced manufacturing.
- Kildare and Wicklow ETB developed an independent RPL framework incorporating digital badges for the hospitality sector which is not aligned to the NFQ. Alongside two other ETBs (Dublin and Dún Laoghaire, Kilkenny and Carlow), the project also involved City & Guilds, the Irish Hotels Federation, the Restaurants Association of Ireland, and Fáilte Ireland (Irish Tourism Trade Support). More detail on this project can be found in the separate case study on micro-credentials.

The Skills to Advance fund has also been used to support RPL. For instance, Limerick and Clare ETB offers an industry-driven Maintenance Skills Technology Level 6 Award. Five employees completed the Level 6 Work Experience module via RPL, with support from the ETB's RPL mentors. Some went on from this to do further modules in the classroom and to complete a Level 6 Award, showing the value of RPL as a

means of bringing people with work experience into education and training to gain recognition and a taste for further learning.

As these initiatives aimed to support employees to gain qualifications and badges through RPL, it is assumed that they covered all four stages of validation.

ETBs also offer 'national' programmes, developed in collaboration with specific sectors in a partnership model, and sometimes collaboratively also with a local Higher Education institution or with a defined pathway for progression. These programmes are validated to be offered nationally, and increasingly include specific RPL arrangements which have been agreed with the employer/occupation sector and those partners managing progression opportunities in education and training, or allow for this development in the future. For some disciplines these arrangements are becoming more relevant now than previously and are under greater scrutiny and reflection in the light of growing local RPL knowledge.

In the HE sector, the HCI supports a number of projects to support collaboration between HEIs and employers / enterprise, including the [Accredited Talent Development — Convene project](#) mentioned above. A second project, [iEd Hub](#), brings together two universities, enterprise stakeholders and leading industries in the health and life sciences sector in the region of Cork. Part of this project is about raising awareness of RPL and its relevance to both new programme development and whether it can be used for elements of existing programmes.

The National RPL in Higher Education Project also supports RPL for enterprise and currently 10 pilot projects are taking place at different institutions. This includes the new Sustainable Farming Academy at the University College Cork (UCC) Adult Continuing Education unit (ACE). The university has committed to delivering its existing Diploma in Environment, Sustainability and Climate to 20 participants from the food company Tirlán each year. The duration of the diploma has been reduced to one year for Tirlán employees, in recognition that they will already have achieved the learning outcomes for three modules, amounting to 30 credits (50% of the entire programme) through training they have completed with the company (University College Cork, 2022a).

The Sustainable Farming Academy builds on a pilot project with dairy farmers from the Carbery Multinational Group, outlined in the box below.

Box 5: Working with employers to offer RPL at cohort level

ACE developed an RPL approach for an initial cohort of 18 farmers to achieve a full Level 7 diploma in environmental science and social policy. The farmers already had substantial expertise in farming sustainability, which they had gained through the Carbery Greener Dairy Farms Project (CGDF). The approach which was developed by ACE is interesting because the 'burden of proof' for the RPL process was taken by the learning provider, rather than the individual learner. ACE mapped the learning and experience gained through the CGDF against the learning outcomes of the diploma. Where the learning outcomes matched, the learners were granted an exemption. In total, exemptions were granted for five modules, equal to 40 out of 60 credits, meaning that the farmers only had to undertake three of the course modules.

The overall process can be summarised in five steps:

- 1. Initial mapping** of the module learning outcomes on the diploma against the learning achieved through CGDF.
- 2. Traffic light system** to visually represent the work completed by the farmers against the learning outcomes of each module.

3. **Weighting the learning outcomes** to establish their relative importance to the overall module, enabling an assessment of the percentage of learning outcomes achieved for each one by the farmers. In line with the 40% pass standard used for traditional learners, it was agreed that if the farmers had achieved at least 40% of the learning outcomes via the CGDF, this would be sufficient to achieve the module.
4. **Learning outcome portfolio** outlining how the learning outcome was achieved by the farmers and any supporting documentation that could be used as additional evidence.
5. **Assessment and validation** of the evidence provided by the Carbery Management Team in the learning outcome portfolio.

This cohort approach means learners do not need to complete an individual portfolio to evidence their learning and therefore reduces the time commitment involved in undertaking RPL, whilst the RPL itself reduces the time commitment for completing the outstanding modules. The farmers were charged a fee for their tailored completion of the diploma derived from a cost-based analysis of the RPL project.

Since the completion of the pilot project, UCC has adjusted the diploma in environmental science and social policy so that the modules which CGDF participants are required to complete are all offered in the first year of this two-year diploma, thereby reducing the timeframe in which the farmers can achieve the diploma.

Source: Staunton, C et al (2018).

There are several opportunities for RPL to be used to recognise skills and competences relating to sustainability in Ireland. Dundalk Institute of Technology (DkIT) uses RPL as part of the admissions process for a new part-time degree programme in agricultural sustainability. The programme is targeted at individuals who have obtained 'green certs' (agricultural, horticultural, forestry and equine certificates) and who have significant experience, but do not have a qualification above NFQ Level 6 (Teagasc, 2021). The Agriculture and Food Development Authority, Teagasc, uses RPL extensively across its programmes and helps to recruit farmers for a programme with the Michael Smurfit School of Business in UCD, where experience of managing farm resources is an entry requirement. (Teagasc, 2017). And the HCI-funded IKC3 Knowledge Centre for Carbon, Climate and Community Action offers a range of flexible learning pathways to support the transition to carbon neutral, which includes a pillar for RPL. (IKC3, n.d.).

Individual HEIs may also have existing relationships with employers and offer RPL as a way of meeting their needs. For example, at TU Dublin, a number of programmes have been developed for specific cohorts of learners with professional skills and experience. Design, Print and Packaging Skillnet has been working with TU Dublin to increase recruitment to its [Master of Arts in Professional Design Practice](#) programme for design, print and practice, by enabling learners to acquire credits based on their experiential learning. Other TU Dublin programmes where a similar cohort approach has been taken relate to some of the craft apprenticeships; an example is enabling qualified electricians to gain advanced entry to Level 6 or Level 7 programmes.

The Universities of Galway and Limerick, ATU Sligo, MTU, and SETU Carlow all have well developed practices in this regard. MTU has an established 'Extended Campus' model which provides clinics for employees in canteens, enabling direct one-to-one conversations for individuals who may wish to talk to someone but who would not otherwise approach either a HR professional, line manager or an institution, but who will if the opportunity is straightforward and accessible. Similar strategies are now being adopted elsewhere in the FET sector.

Also at MTU, 375 individuals have gained formal recognition for their non-formal and informal learning at the Atlantic Flight Training Academy since its inception in 2018. They can earn 120 ECTS credits this way (a total of 45,000 for the cohort to date),

which then enables them to undertake an online honours degree in two years (instead of four).

MTU's programme in Leadership Development, developed in collaboration with Boston Scientific, has expanded since its inception in 2017 to other locations and organisations. Through the programme employees had the opportunity to build on existing learning in order to complete the special purpose award at NFQ Level 8. They used their prior learning to gain entry to the programme if they did not meet the standard entry requirements. A total of 100 staff in the BSCi plant in Cork, 20 in BSCi Malaysia and 75 participants spread across three other companies have completed the micro-credential. These opportunities are funded and supported by the employers. There was also one iteration of the programme delivered through Springboard+ for 15 individuals spread across multiple employer organisations.

3.4 Validation and the third sector

In 2016 the University of Galway (at the time known as NUI Galway) took part in an Erasmus+ funded project called E-VOC, alongside the Spanish Platform of Volunteering, the National Coordinating Body of Italian Volunteer Support Centres, and EDOS Foundation. The project led to the development of an online training course on the use of validation to recognise competences gained in the voluntary sector. The course, which encompasses 120 hours of e-learning, covers the following four topics:

- Introduction to the validation of competences in the voluntary sector;
- The European Qualifications Framework, ECVET and ECTS, and the main European validation tools;
- Development and implementation of systems for the validation of learning outcomes acquired through voluntary work within the ECVET and the ECTS;
- Follow-up, evaluation and improvement of the implemented systems for the validation of learning outcomes acquired in voluntary work.

The online training course is free-of-charge and can be taken in three languages: English, Spanish and Italian. (E-VOC, n.d.)

In 2018, as a follow-up to the E-VOC project, MTU took part in an Erasmus+ funded project call e-vavol which was led by Plataforma Del Voluntariado De Espana and included CSV Lazio, CPV and Meath Partnership. The project led to the development of a platform for those seeking validation of learning from volunteering which included an online course consisting of three units of learning. Learning from volunteering, validation in the formal education system and validation of non-formal and informal learning were covered in the three units. A certificate of completion for the course was available through the website (e-vavol, nd).

MTU is now one of seven organisations from six EU countries taking forward the e-vavol Erasmus+ funded programme to develop European Quality Standards in Validation of Learning from Volunteering (eQval). The first draft of the quality standards was due to be published in May 2023.²

4 Links to credentials and qualifications

The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)

As indicated in 2018, the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) was launched in 2003. It is defined as, "the single nationally and internationally accepted

² See press release: <https://www.psitest.ro/img/Press%20release%20meeting%20in%20Madrid.pdf>

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” (National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, 2003).

The framework has 10 levels which are used to map General Education, FET and HE awards in the Irish education and training system. It can be used to support RPL processes because the framework describes, “what learners need to know, understand and be able to do to achieve a qualification” (QQI, 2021b). The NFQ lists qualifications by level and also identifies pathways from one NFQ level to another (QQI, 2021b).

In 2020, a review of the NFQ against the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) was carried out, known as the EQF Referencing Report. The review states that by, “promoting a learning outcomes approach, the NFQ has brought a more systematic approach to the design, development, delivery, awarding and recognition of qualifications in Ireland. The Irish system of education and training qualifications is more transparent and easier to understand because of the NFQ.” It also notes that the NFQ has been designed to facilitate, among other things, processes for RPL. (Europass, 2020).

Until this year, it has only been possible to include qualifications issued by the following national awarding bodies in the NFQ: QQI, and the Irish universities, technological universities, and Institutes of Technology. Updated legislation in 2019 provided for a new scheme to include awards of other provider types. A new category of ‘listed awarding bodies’ (LABs) that are interested in voluntary, regulated access to the NFQ, has been created to support this process. These include for example professional, sectoral and international bodies. One of the benefits of becoming a LAB is that it provides a mechanism for these awards to be articulated in terms of the architecture of the NFQ which will enable learners to more easily avail of RPL. (QQI, 2021c; QQI, 2022). It is expected that the Listed Awarding Body scheme will be launched in 2024.

Statutory basis for RPL

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.

As outlined in the 2018 country report, the Access, Transfer and Progression (ATP) policy restatement issued by QQI in 2015 clarified procedures for providers with regard to RPL. All providers are required to develop a statement for each of their programmes outlining whether RPL is available for, and what the arrangements are, with regard to entry to the programme; exemptions 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. In line with this, new programme design in FET builds in RPL from the outset.

The new joint sectoral protocol between QQI and designated awarding bodies (universities, technological universities, and the institutes of technology) has been

agreed and will be formally implemented when relevant legislation is commenced, which is expected in early 2024. The protocol requires designated awarding bodies to ensure that arrangements for accessing a programme (including arrangements for RPL where possible), transferring from it, exiting from it, and progressing to other programmes are documented in programme materials from the start, and that they are clearly communicated to the learner (Quality and Qualifications Ireland, 2022).

In essence, both the legislation and QQI policy enable institutions and providers to determine their capacity for RPL within their policy. However, they must have a policy, which must be published on their website, accessible to learners and potential applicants. In some instances, options are explained within programme details, e.g. whether RPL can be used for access, exemptions, and / or credits or (full) awards.

RPL outcomes

The 2018 country report confirms that RPL can be used to gain entry to a programme, exemptions within a programme, credit towards an award and a full award. The pilots and projects that have taken place in FET in recent years, such as the hairdressing apprenticeship and the TOBAR project mentioned above, have tended to focus on awarding minor awards and full qualifications to enable people with relevant (work and other) experience to have this formally recognised. Exemptions on prior certified learning where awards are discontinued/deactivated, supported by additional evidence, has greatly increased. In Higher Education, it is up to each HEI to decide which of the above-listed outcomes it will make available to learners, although the focus tends to be on access and the award or exemption of credits. And in both HE and VET, there are some exceptions, for instance due to professional or regulatory requirements. (Recognition of Prior Learning, n.d., a).

Where certificates are awarded, it is not usually evident from the certificate that they have been obtained through RPL. However, in HE, learners may not be given a grade for modules or qualifications achieved through RPL: providers have the autonomy to decide how and what grades are applied. For example at TU Dublin, module exemptions granted through recognition of prior experiential learning are given a pass rather than given a grade. Discussions are currently ongoing regarding whether this should be changed in the future.

In terms of credit, as reported in previous updates, it remains the case that there is no single national credit system in Ireland, but rather a twin-tracked approach: one for FET, and another for HE (the European Credit Transfer System, ECTS). Awarding bodies operate their credit systems, including accumulation and transfer of credits, in line with the 2006 Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of Credit (National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, 2006). Academic credit also applies to non-major awards offered in HE, including for micro-credentials which are on the NFQ.

Progression between levels and types of qualification

Credentials obtained through validation can be combined where relevant to an overarching standard to obtain a qualification on the NFQ. Typically, such credentials will be on the NFQ as minor, special purpose, professional or other award classes.

The development of micro-credentials and digital badges, and separately the work with Listed Awarding Bodies raise new opportunities for the integration of validation between different levels, types and stakeholders in education. The new FET strategy recommends that the sector must adopt more, “modular, flexible, technology-driven and year-round approaches which facilitate sustained learning pathways where credits and qualifications can be built up over time.” It also recommends that the FET

sector must work with the HE system to investigate ways of “cross-credentialing”, i.e. recognising credits across systems over multiple years (Government of Ireland; SOLAS, n.d., a).

However, transfer from one sector to another can be complicated. The NFQ is based around the principle of progression with an enabling architecture so that someone with an award at one level can progress to a programme at the next, and every programme should be adapted to facilitate successful transitions, particularly for those accessing programmes by non-standard routes. The range of award types in principle, facilitate someone who has an award on the NFQ, however it has been achieved, moving forward without repeating what has been previously learned. However, Institutional procedures for the management of recognition in different systems vary, as do credit systems and programme structures. Within some contexts, for example, transfer across at the same level, some procedures will not allow for previously recognised learning to be recognised for an award of credit a second time, while an exemption may be permitted.

5 Standards

As outlined in the 2018 country report, 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. These are educational standards, described as learning outcomes and weighted as notional learner hours of effort. As they are the same standards as those used for formal education, the resulting qualifications have the same ‘market value’.

The NFQ sets out the standards of knowledge, skill and competence required to achieve awards at each of its levels. QQI issues guidelines to providers to help them interpret and implement the NFQ standards and descriptors when developing their programmes. (QQI, 2021b). The instruments for the Framework initially included levels and level indicators, award types and descriptors. More recently, QQI has embarked on a broader discussion on these, including a Green Paper on Qualifications (QQI, 2020).

The joint sectoral protocol between QQI and designated awarding bodies outlines norms and practices for the latter to follow in order for their awards to be included within the NFQ. They are required to use the NFQ level indicators as the principal reference point in determining awards standards. When designing new, or redesigning existing programmes, designated awarding bodies must ensure that they specify the following: learning outcomes, NFQ level, applicable award type, award class, volume in terms of ECTS, and appropriate and coherent titling (QQI, 2022).

6 Institutions involved in validation arrangements and its coordination

The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS), a new government department formed in 2020, is allocated responsibility for developing a national approach to RPL in HE in the fourth [National Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education \(2022-2028\)](#). Previously, responsibility for FET and HE was held by the Department of Education.

In the same Plan, QQI is responsible for scoping and publishing a national approach to RPL in tertiary education. QQI will address RPL across all ten levels of the NFQ, with the ultimate goal of refreshing RPL policy, criteria and guidelines. QQI is obliged

to consult in the development of policy and engages with professional bodies and competent authorities for whom RPL is also of interest.

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 regional development. Engagement with the National Skills and Labour Market Research Unit, IBEC and with specific sectoral and national supporting bodies, including Skillnet Ireland, is also important and deepening in the context of validation.

The Technological Higher Education Association (THEA) and the IUA co-sponsor the HCI-funded National RPL in Higher Education Project, which brings together representatives of all publicly-funded universities and institutes of technology. Their collaboration on a national framework and a technical definition for the sector are supporting a coherent and consistent approach to RPL within and between institutions. HECA is the representative body for the independent higher education sector which is also active in RPL, including in Springboard+ programmes, and connects RPL policy and practice across broader institutional concerns.

SOLAS is responsible for funding, planning and coordinating training and further education programmes. It has an important role to play in supporting RPL both strategically and at regional level.

Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) represents the sixteen ETBs at national level. As mentioned above, based on the toolkit developed through the VCCSE pilot project, it has commissioned a set of operational guidelines for providers within the sector to refer to when developing and delivering RPL, and is in the process of setting up a community of practice for RPL within FET.

AONTAS is the national adult learning organisation. It sits on the steering group of the RPL practitioner Network, ensuring that this sector of learning is involved in national discussions relating to RPL. AONTAS worked with University College Cork to develop the CPD certificate for adult educators in RPL and now coordinates the community of practice in this sector.

National policy on guidance is currently under review. As a consequence, the guidance sector is undergoing a transition. Guidance is provided by the local AEGIS, or by counsellors or mentors based at individual learning providers. From September 2022 full responsibility with regard to FET Guidance was transferred to ETBI. A dedicated FET Guidance, Recruitment and Information Officer was recruited to support the ETB FET sector in all aspects with regard to FET Guidance, including supports in the area of RPL. A Steering Group was subsequently established comprising key stakeholder members including the Department of Education, DFHERIS, and SOLAS. In December 2022 responsibility for Euroguidance was also transferred to ETBI. At ETB level, guidance counsellors continue to support current and prospective learners on their educational pathway, as outlined below.

The European Migration Network Ireland, the Irish Refugee Council and others working with refugees and migrants seeking validation for the diversity of skills are emerging voices informing policy consideration.

The RPL Practitioner Network (www.rpl-ireland.ie), is a voluntary, national network co-founded by representatives of THEA, the IUA, QQI, the former NCGE and the Further Education Support Service. In 2022, the members agreed a revised terms of reference for the network (RPL Practitioner Network, 2022). A new Steering Group

has been appointed, more reflective of the 2012 Recommendation constituencies, including representatives of civil society, the voluntary sector, professional bodies and of people who are unemployed as well as a diversity of practitioners. People who attend meetings come from industry, HR, community and third sector, public and private, further and higher education and training and work at different levels and roles. The network has been an enabling structure in developing and connecting thought leadership and effective practices. During the Covid-19 lockdowns, the network remained active via online webinars, which enabled more practitioners to get involved. It is seen as providing, “important focus and stimuli for the development of validation nationally” (Wafer, 2020).

Additionally, arising from increased sectoral practices, there are emergent sectoral RPL networks, focus and thematic conversation groups.

7 Outreach, awareness raising, provision of information, advice and guidance

7.1 Outreach and awareness-raising

There has not yet been a general public awareness-raising campaign for RPL. Instead, outreach and awareness-raising are carried out in different ways by the various players involved in coordinating and delivering RPL. This tailored approach to promotion helps to ensure that the resulting demand can be met with appropriate expertise and capacity on the part of providers.

The RPL Practitioners’ Network has a website and social media accounts (<https://rpl-ireland>; Twitter: @rpl_network; LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/rpl-practitioner-network-ireland/>) where it shares information about RPL developments and runs regular events bringing together practitioners and stakeholders to network, share good practice, raise awareness and contribute to policy. Similarly, the Recognition of Prior learning website (www.priorlearning.ie) and social media accounts (Twitter: @rpl_Irl; LinkedIn: @recognitionofpriorlearning) set up through the RPL in HE Project share information on RPL in HEIs for learners, as well as resources and tools for HE staff and employers. New content is created and disseminated on an ongoing basis, including videos capturing ‘real life’ RPL as well as learner, staff and enterprise testimonials. ETBI has a digital library with a sub-section dedicated to RPL (ETBI, 2023), and has developed a podcast series which includes some on RPL (ETBI, 2022).

At regional and local levels, the provision of information on RPL is shared primarily by ETBs and individual HEIs. In the FET sector, Limerick and Clare ETB for instance will promote and advertise RPL in 2023, including developing a web page for RPL on the www.CollegeOfFET.ie website. Others such as Kerry ETB actively promote RPL as part of access and recruitment. The (pilot) projects which have been implemented in relation to specific professions or sectors (e.g. defence forces, care, hospitality, hairdressing) are also helping to raise awareness of the opportunities RPL can offer. Awards ceremonies for instance are an opportunity to raise the profile of RPL as a means of obtaining a qualification, whilst many referrals are received after the opportunity has been shared by word-of-mouth.

At Donegal ETB, the RPL coordinator reaches out to employers to find out if RPL could be of use to their employees. During the Covid-19 pandemic, this work was undertaken by phone, but now it is through attendance at conferences and employment fairs, or by visiting the workplace and speaking directly to employees. The ETB guidance service is also seen as an important source of referrals.

In HE, some providers engage with employers to raise their awareness of the opportunities created by RPL: five institutions in the National RPL in HE Project have indicated that they are actively raising awareness amongst employers. Cork Institute of Technology, for instance (now part of MTU), has held over 40 learning clinics within employer organisations to inform employers and employees about RPL, reaching out to 1,300 employers and 2,500 individuals within industry. Their extended campus model works through strategic partnerships, and other HEIs have similar models to engage with Industry.

Overall awareness of RPL amongst learners and practitioners is growing. As practice becomes more widespread, further awareness-raising actions will be taken to encourage greater take-up.

7.2 Information, advice and guidance

The guidance sector is currently undergoing a transition. The National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE), which previously held responsibility for supporting and developing guidance practice in all areas of education, has now been closed. Responsibility for guidance policy and practice now sits with the DoE. In March 2022, the National Policy Group on Lifelong Guidance was established, with a view to developing a long-term strategic framework. The group brings together the DoE, DFHERIS, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), the Department of Social Protection (DSP) and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (DETE). Its consultation on a lifelong guidance framework closed in late February 2023.

Other agencies and service providers have developed career support services, which are often online, and expanded these further during the pandemic. For example, Accenture worked with An Cosán (a community education provider) to develop a “Skills to Succeed Academy”. The Check In, Take Off (CITO) [SkillsChecker tool \(www.skillschecker.ie\)](http://www.skillschecker.ie) is another example. Both are described in more detail in Section 3.1.

Online tools like the Skills Summary can be useful for many. But NCGE and Aontas (amongst others) have observed that the digital divide means people who are unable to connect to online provision risk being left behind without access to face-to-face services.

The Adult Education Guidance Initiative (AEGI), through its regional and local Adult Education Guidance and Information Services (AEGIS) based in ETBs, continues to provide impartial, professional education and career guidance to adults interested in education and training in the FET and adult education sectors, and ‘in centre’ guidance to learners. FET guidance counsellors (both in AEGIS and in FET colleges) have been utilising elements of RPL for entry into FET, progression through FET and progression from FET on an ad hoc basis for many years. At the moment, there is no formal structured framework for this, and one interviewee suggested that such a framework would be beneficial to the guidance practitioners, both as recognition of their work and to benefit both the individual and the providers: guidance practitioners are often at the frontline of the learner’s journey and equipping them to work within an RPL framework would be beneficial. The same interviewee suggested a review of FET Guidance with regard to RPL is needed.

There are 37 local AEGIS, based at and managed by the ETBs. These services were established and funded to target learners, in particular those who face barriers to participation in education and training. There are regional differences in their services and target groups, informed by local and community contexts. For instance, the ETB

adult guidance service at Cork ETB emphasises their focus on second chance learners: current adult learners who do not have access to guidance, and / or unemployed adults who do not have qualifications higher than Level 6 on the NQF (Cork ETB, n.d.).

ETB AEGIS information officers provide free-of-charge impartial and up-to-date information regarding education and training options to any member of the general public. This is important for RPL as it may be a source of important signposting for adults affected by under-employment and/or facing skills gaps, including migrant workers.

AEGIS information and guidance can be given both one-to-one and in groups. After the information and guidance has been given, and where appropriate, 'levelling' (identifying the corresponding NQF level for the individual's prior learning), has been completed, the individual would need to enquire with the learning provider for the qualification they are interested in, which would then determine if or how RPL can be used.

AEGIS must ensure that local education and training providers and networks are aware of their services. They work alongside various agencies and may receive referrals from, or provide referrals to these. For instance, where the local ETB may have employed a coordinator for RPL, he or she will have responsibility for promoting RPL opportunities, and to build referral relationships with the local ETB AEGIS to receive referrals from the service (and vice versa).

Once FET learners have applied for their chosen course, the programme coordinator assesses their skills, knowledge and competencies to determine whether they are sufficient for the individual to successfully complete the course. For RPL to gain an award, Donegal ETB for instance requires learners to complete an application form which is available on its website. Here, the RPL coordinator is available for learners who wish to discuss the process. RPL mentors then guide the learner in the preparation of their portfolio, including advising on whether the evidence is sufficient to meet the award standards. (Donegal ETB, n.d.).

In HE, each individual institution is responsible for providing information and guidance to learners. This is set out both in the Joint-Sectoral Protocol between Designated Awarding Bodies and QQI, and the pilot framework for RPL in HE. The latter sets out a principle that, "appropriate user-friendly information and advice [must be] readily available to all involved in the RPL process" and that information on RPL must be visible and accessible to learners (Recognition of Prior Learning, n.d.). Of the 14 HEIs involved in the overarching RPL in HE projects, 12 now have dedicated webpages for RPL and the remaining two are expected to be published later in 2023.

The TU Dublin website, for example, advises learners to enquire about the precise availability of RPL with the Department or School offering the programme(s) they are interested in (TU Dublin, n.d.). Cork Institute of Technology, now part of MTU, provides a [handbook on RPL](#) on its website, which includes for instance how to apply, fees, how to put a portfolio together, and examples of learning outcomes. (CIT Extended campus, n.d.). Other examples of HEI RPL web pages include:

- University of Limerick: <https://www.ul.ie/priorlearning>
- Dundalk Institute of Technology: [https://www.dkit.ie/admissions/how-to-apply/recognition-of-prior-learning-\(rpl\)](https://www.dkit.ie/admissions/how-to-apply/recognition-of-prior-learning-(rpl))
- University College Dublin: <https://www.ucd.ie/rpl/>

The RPL website www.priorlearning.ie also provides information about RPL for learners, HEIs and employers and links directly to more specific information on RPL on the websites of each of the fourteen partner HEIs. The Qualifax national learners' database provides a list of higher education providers which offer RPL, with links to relevant web pages for further information (Qualifax, 2023).

The pilot framework for RPL in HE encourages providers to promote and raise awareness of RPL by sharing learners' journeys as case studies or testimonials. Examples of these can be found on the Recognition of Prior Learning page of MTU's website, www.cit.ie/rpl and on the www.priorlearning.ie website, YouTube channel and [Twitter](#) account. QQI also requires all providers offering programmes leading to awards on the NFQ to publish policies on their website, including for RPL.

Box 6: RPL at Atlantic Technological University (ATU)

As outlined above, Atlantic Technological University (ATU) has been running the HCI project Higher Education 4.0. Learners can undertake a process of RPL using their mycareerpath.ie and myexperience.ie online tools, enabling past experiences from work, life, community or education, to be recognised towards entry, advanced entry, credit or exemptions from modules.

The process is broken down into six steps:

1. Users identify a course they would like to study.
2. They contact the local campus RPL coordinator for advice.
3. The user then registers with mycareerpath.ie to book a consultation.
4. They must complete an online ATU campus direct application form (using www.myexperience.ie).
5. They create an RPL assessment e-portfolio.
6. Their portfolio is assessed and they are called for interview.

Alongside the online tools, ATU has a team of mentors to support people wishing to access HE, either as a first-time learner or for people returning to HE to upskill.

8 Validation practitioners

8.1 Profile of validation practitioners

The 2018 country report identifies three main roles in the delivery of RPL: management, learner support and assessor. However, it remains the case that there is no common job description, role or title for any of these. The TOBAR evaluation, for instance, reports that the TOBAR project showed the importance of the mentor role, however this is a role that does not currently have a well-established professional identity (de Paor, 2021).

The breadth of the roles involved in RPL means that they can be undertaken by a range of staff, including administrative, guidance and academic professionals.

- In the HE sector, the pilot framework for RPL in HE reaffirms the principle that, “the assessment of prior learning is an academic activity that is performed primarily by academic staff.”³
- In FET, validation assessors are subject matter experts.

³ https://www.priorlearning.ie/sites/default/files/2022-12/Pilot_Framework_RPL%20in%20HE.pdf

- Donegal and Limerick and Clare ETBs employ RPL mentors to support applicants. At Donegal ETB, these are tutors and are therefore familiar with learning outcomes, whilst at Limerick and Clare, they are both tutors and guidance practitioners. Limerick and Clare ETB requires that mentors and assessors complete some form of RPL professional development, in line with its RPL Assessment Procedure (Limerick and Clare ETB, 2022).
- In relation to the labour market, employment services (or organisations contracted to these) deliver skills audits.
- As reported in previous updates, dedicated RPL professionals and offices are now in place in a number of Technological Universities, Institutes of Technology and universities (although the majority are funded through time-limited projects). In ETBs, the appointment of a dedicated person to support RPL is a relatively new practice, with two full-time appointments so far, at Donegal and Limerick Clare ETBs. The coordinators oversee RPL including aspects such as raising awareness, identifying RPL needs, and ensuring links with guidance providers. In both instances, having a dedicated RPL Coordinator has helped to increase activity in RPL, as illustrated by the initiatives described in this report. At Donegal ETB, setting up a dedicated RPL office with a coordinator and administrator has made it easier to expand the offer of RPL, because they can oversee delivery and take some of the burden away from existing tutors and assessors. At the moment, there is no dedicated lead for RPL in Community Education.

8.2 Provision of training and support to validation practitioners

The following training opportunities are now available to educators in the different sectors:

Higher Education

The pilot framework for RPL in HE states that providers should give assessors and other staff involved in the RPL process appropriate training and support. The framework also commits to the development of a range of, “practical, accessible tools and resources, available in multiple user-friendly formats”, including guides for applicants and staff; staff training and professional development; materials for enterprise such as case studies and brochures; policy guidance and adaptable templates; and a technical definition for data collection, analytics, and reporting. These are being made available via the above-mentioned website www.priorlearning.ie.

MTU continues to offer a 10-credit Level 9 module for staff in higher and further education and training. The module can be taken as part of the MA in Teaching and Learning or as a standalone module. ATU also has a module on RPL in its Level 9 award in Teaching and Learning.

The National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education funded the development a digital badge in RPL for staff working in the tertiary sector (HE and FET) in 2020 by MTU and Mary Immaculate College (MIC). The badge can be taken either as a self-study course or a facilitator-led programme, and encompasses a range of learning outcomes, including how to explain the concept of RPL, to reflect on its potential impact for institution, staff and students, and to analyse the relationship between learning and programme outcomes, and RPL (Open Courses, n.d.). It is also possible to undertake additional facilitator training if participants would like to be able to run the course themselves in their own institution

(Recognition of Prior Learning, 2023). At the time of writing, just over 80 staff from the HE, FET and other sectors had participated in the badge since it was introduced.

The National RPL in HE Project has revised the RPL Digital Badge and ran it in April 2023, with over 200 HE and FET staff registered to participate. Through the project, it is anticipated that this initial training will be developed further into an accredited programme, giving people the choice between a short, six-week training course or a more in-depth longer programme. There are also plans to develop an online version, enabling staff to complete the training at their own pace.

Further Education and Training

The Further Education Support Service has included training on RPL in its CPD calendar for 2023. The online training covers the two roles of RPL mentor and RPL assessors.⁴

The RPL toolkit developed by Donegal and Limerick and Clare ETB is designed for ETB personnel to use so that they can provide RPL mentoring. Alongside this, Letterkenny Institute of Technology (now ATU) has developed a Level 9 special purpose award in RPL for FET practitioners. (RPL Practitioner Network, 2022; Donegal ETB, 2022).

QA staff in Limerick and Clare ETB developed a six-week, 2.5 hours per week CPD course for practitioners within their own organisation and also for staff from other ETBs. Limerick and Clare participants receive a digital badge on completion of the course and submission of a summative assessment, whilst staff from other ETBs receive a record of attendance. So far a total of 49 members of staff from seven ETBs (including Limerick and Clare) have participated in the programme. A practical follow-on workshop is also offered to participants, to encourage further discussion and provide support: the workshop will cover topics such as the application of RPL principles, creating briefs and rubrics, and promoting RPL within their provision.

Limerick and Clare ETB also offers additional briefings for ETB managers, and information and guidance counsellors. These are based on the European Guidelines on Validation, and cover:

- Understanding RPL (for managers/for counsellors)
- Embedding RPL in practice (which takes place six months later)
- RPL for managers (one-day workshop)
- RPL for counsellors (one-day workshop)

Limerick and Clare also provided a short training session for external authenticators for ETBI, which has now been recorded and is available from the ETBI website.

Adult (Community) Education

As mentioned in Section 3.2.4, a Certificate in Continuing Professional Development in RPL has been developed for staff working in the adult (community) education sector. Coordinated by Adult Continuing Education (ACE) at University College Cork, and delivered by a range of guest lecturers, the certificate is a Special Purpose Award worth 10 ECT Credits at Level 7 of the NFQ. It has been designed specifically to support adult and community educators to develop their expertise in using RPL when working with marginalised and vulnerable groups, as well as employees with low levels of qualifications. The course adopts a collaborative learning approach and in doing so, is helping to establish a Community of Practice for RPL in this sector (Staunton, 2021). As part of the course, participants are required to share experiences and practices in groups of three. Weekly engagement with this 'peer triad' is a course

⁴ For more information see: <https://www.fess.ie/professional-development#RPL>

requirement with associated credits. Further details of the course can be found on the University College Cork website (University College Cork, 2022b). In total, 48 adult and community educators have completed the course since 2021 (22 in 2021, 16 in 2022, and 10 in 2023).

As outlined in Section 3.4, MTU also offers a module on developing RPL portfolios as part of its undergraduate degree in community development.

Other

Skillnet Ireland supports the Recognition of Prior Learning. Skillnet Ireland networks offer a limited numbers of programmes which enable learners that have relevant experience to apply for support via Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). Examples of such programmes are below:

- Masters in Professional Practice – Design Skillnet
- Certificate in Design for Sustainability and Circular Economies – Design Skillnet
- Higher Diploma in Fintech – Technology Ireland ICT Skillnet
- Postgraduate Certificate in Infection Prevention and Control – Leading Healthcare Providers Skillnet

8.3 Qualifications and experience

It remains the case that there are no mandatory qualification requirements for validation practitioners, apart from a requirement for new graduate FET teachers to be able to undertake student needs and skills analysis, including RPL.

9 Inputs, outputs and outcomes

9.1 Funding and costs

As outlined in 2018, funding for HE is allocated to the HEA; FET is funded via the ETBs through SOLAS; whilst funding for the community sector and others is more diverse, but substantially comes through SOLAS.

Within the HEA's national systems performance framework, each HEI is required to agree a compact which sets out performance targets. Compacts are required to indicate how the HEIs will contribute to regional, national and system objectives, and how they will provide for increased participation, equality of access and lifelong learning. Within this, each compact must make specific reference to, "arrangements for clear access pathways for access transfer and progression". These performance targets have funding implications for the HEIs. (Goggin, 2022)

In 2022, DFHERIS announced a significant change in the approach to funding for FET. In line with recommendations from an independent expert panel, an outcome-based funding model is being introduced, to increase flexibility in ETB spending, and promote more, "learner-driven" education. (Government of Ireland, 2022).

In the majority of instances, RPL in FET comes from core funding. ETB performance agreement compacts provide for ETBs to outline RPL commitments and targets as part of routine funding agreements, and ETBs finance the delivery of RPL as a means to meet their obligation to promote social cohesion and engage employers. The Innovation through Collaboration Fund has provided additional financial support in this sector. Subsequent funding calls which prioritise collaboration include [Skills to Advance](#) which also funds some RPL activity, and the Adult Literacy for Life

Collaboration and Innovation which could also attract RPL project proposals. EU funding is another source for project-specific developments of RPL.

As indicated previously, the HCI has provided substantial funding for the development of RPL in the HE sector. Nevertheless, one interviewee identified the reliance on project-based funding for RPL in HE as a concern, and suggested that it may not be possible to sustain some of the activities which have been established through projects in recent years.

It is difficult to ascertain the costs of RPL. The evaluation of the TOBAR pilot project gives some indications of the costs of RPL for this cohort of learners (soldiers). In one case, RPL was provided without incurring any additional cost, whereas another ETB recorded expenditure of EUR 10,000 on the project, which led to 23 minor awards. This covered the costs for 96 hours of mentoring, and 109.5 hours of assessment. The evaluators noted that, “coordinators believed that further efficiencies in RPL could be achieved as it became embedded in routine practice with streamlined structures and procedures in place” (de Paor, 2021). Moreover, as a pilot project, some of the costs incurred through TOBAR may have been start-up and developmental work.

Donegal ETB currently estimates the costs of RPL at EUR 200 per minor award, regardless of NFQ level. Limerick and Clare ETB are able to show the difference in time commitment for individuals (and providers): RPL applicants take six to nine months to achieve a major award at Level 6, compared to the traditional three-year apprenticeship model.

When it comes to individual RPL processes, there is no specific financial support for applicants, but at the moment it also appears that RPL itself does not involve a fee for learners in the majority of cases, both in FET and HE.

9.2 Beneficiaries and users of validation processes

9.2.1 Validation trends

Data is not collected at national level on the level of take-up of validation. It remains the case that data on the practice of RPL by providers and on learner use is at best, uneven. The challenges around data collection are linked both to differences in understanding of definitions/interpretations of RPL and to the data infrastructure, which varies across different systems. At TU Dublin for example, it is possible to identify modules that have been granted on the basis of exemptions, but there is no distinction between those granted on the basis of prior certificated or experiential learning. An additional challenge lies in managing practices in ways that respect the different needs of the different sectors, including professional bodies. Furthermore, learners themselves may not understand the language/terminology around RPL and therefore may not provide the relevant information when asked.

However, recent developments should help to improve this in the future. QQI has recently commissioned research to explore access, transfer and progression realities. In HE, a 2022 survey of the HEIs involved in the overarching RPL in HE project found a lack of coherent and consistent data collection and reporting mechanisms. Through this project, a technical definition of RPL has been developed to provide HEIs with a common understanding of which learners, under which circumstances, should be recorded in an institution’s RPL dataset (Recognition of Prior Learning, n.d., b).

Data on trends is not available, but it can be assumed that the ongoing increase in provider implementation of validation will be matched by a corresponding increase in take-up. In HE, RPL tends to be mainly used to support access to programmes, credit towards an award, exemptions from programme modules, and advanced entry. In the

FET sector it has been used more to grant awards of all types (major, minor, special purpose and supplemental) but also for access or advanced entry to learning opportunities. Through the research for this report, project- and institution-level data was obtained as follows:

- TOBAR project (2018-2019): A total of 91 learners achieved 21 major and 386 minor awards through the project (de Paor, 2021).
- VCCSE: Over 200 people in Donegal and Limerick and Clare ETBs working in the healthcare, financial and community sectors had their experience recognised, validated and certified during this two-year project which started in 2020, leading to around 600 awards.
- Cork Institute of Technology (now part of MTU) has processed 7,348 successful RPL applications, spanning 797 modules in 231 programmes. Thirty-seven individuals have gained full academic major awards (up to Masters degrees) via RPL and 112 individuals have gained advanced entry to programmes through RPL between 1999 and 2023. (Goggin, 2019)
- About 300 users have accessed NALA's [SkillsCheck](#) tool.
- WriteOn: during the 11 years it was in operation, 71,269 learner accounts were set up on the WriteOn site (although some learners had more than one account) and 31,739 learners completed at least one course. In that time, 11,593 learners achieved 42,190 QQI awards (34,343 at level 2 and 7,847 at level 3). Over 90% of learners achieved RPL in completing their awards.
- Learn with NALA: during its first three years in operation, 8,211 learners have created accounts and 4,365 level 2 and 3 QQI awards have been achieved by 2,068 learners. Over 90% of learners achieved RPL in completing their awards.
- Since November 2021, 278 learners have undergone RPL with Limerick and Clare ETB, across 92 modules or full awards in the subjects of: business, early childcare and education, hairdressing, healthcare, inclusive education and training, regional tour guiding and sports and recreation.

9.2.2 Validation users

There is no national data on the distribution of validation users according to age, gender, qualification level, target group or citizenship status.

Donegal ETB reports that so far, users of RPL have tended to be adults who are working, volunteering, or currently unemployed. The ETB has supported employees from a range of sectors: finance, healthcare, childcare, agriculture, construction, and the community and voluntary sector (Donegal ETB, n.d.).

9.2.3 Validation and disadvantaged groups

While RPL is used to support disadvantaged and underrepresented groups, it is open to any individual. As this report has shown, it is also used by employees and professionals with varying levels of qualifications, and has the potential to create flexible pathways in learning, able to respond to changing skills demand.

With regard to disadvantaged groups, in FET RPL was previously seen primarily as providing opportunities for learners to gain formal recognition of developed skills to support them in gaining employment through certification: people changing career or returning to education who had previous experience or qualifications which would enable faster progression through a programme. However, the change in the Irish economic context and associated skills shortages mean that it is currently used more

to anticipate unemployment and economic restructuring by supporting at-risk workers to upskill or reskill (sometimes referred to as 'up-qualifying' or 'catch-up-qualifying'); to help meet the skills needs of employers; and to facilitate greater access and inclusion within the FET sector. Similarly in HE, the focus is on opening access to higher learning and ensuring that HE meets the needs of employers and enterprise.

Beneficiaries tend to be adult (second-chance) learners, often those with skills gained through work experience but not the qualifications to match. In FET, projects undertaken to date are concentrated in particular sectors (e.g. the defence forces, hospitality, hairdressing, healthcare, retail, food processing, tourism and the financial sector) and in HE there have also been notable developments in relation to particular skills areas or employment sectors (some examples are sustainable farming, health technology, bio pharmaceuticals). As outlined above, skills audit-type initiatives tend to be used for the unemployed, as is the case for Jobpath and at the Ballymun Job Centre, or second-chance learners.

Although any adult learner can use the Learn with NALA website, the main target groups are adults with unmet literacy or numeracy skills. NALA's current outreach work is focussed on vulnerable groups where unmet literacy is often common, such as migrants, people experiencing homelessness, members of the Travelling Community, learners in prisons, or users of addiction services.

The Springboard programme, now called 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. Providers delivering Springboard+ are expected to proactively use RPL processes for both entry and achievement of a course. In June 2020, it was announced that 11,074 places would be funded over three years under Springboard+ 2020, a significant increase compared to 2019. (Government of Ireland, 2020)

Extensive supports were put in place at all levels of the education and training services to address the needs of displaced people from Ukraine. This included an education helpline, language programmes, a national student and researcher helpdesk (NSR) in Maynooth University to support applications to HE, and a Rough Guide to Ukrainian Qualifications in the context of the Irish NFQ. The Guide took account of general, vocational, higher and professional educational qualifications and summarised the economic context from which displaced people may have come. This provided guidance for employers, education and training provision at all levels and sectors and for frontline guidance and support services, including the NSR and REALT (a school's service supporting integration within general education) managed by the ETBs. In some instances professional bodies (e.g. the [Irish Dental Association](#)) introduced support processes to assist in the alignment of practices across cultures, having mapped learning outcomes and awards.

It is only in recent months that RPL has started to become a live issue for Ukrainian refugees, as their time in Ireland extends. Initial work has begun in the provision of RPL for people from Ukraine having aligned qualifications, built language skills, and now seeking deeper integration professionally. Limerick and Clare ETB, for example, currently has three candidates currently RPL to recognise work experience from before they came to Ireland, for a level 5 early childhood care and education major award (which is required to work in the sector).

10 Validation methods

10.1 Methodologies and methods

As indicated in previous Inventory updates, generally speaking, a portfolio/extended CV and interview are the main methods used in the validation process. For example, at Donegal ETB, the RPL coordinator reviews the learning outcomes for the award in question and develops an assessment brief. This is made up of assignments or tasks for a learner to undertake in order to produce evidence that they have achieved these learning outcomes. These assignments outline the learning outcomes in simplified language: questions which help the learner to map their experience against a learning outcome. The experience they detail must be current – from within the past five years – and must be sufficient, ideally from workplace learning where the individual will have been supervised, rather than independent experience such as caring in the home. Their evidence can be submitted in various forms, including written work, dialogue such as an interview with their RPL mentor, photographs or short video demonstrations of their skills. In addition to this, learners provide a CV and a reference from their employer (where appropriate). Their submission is then assessed by a subject-matter expert. Learners are given six weeks per award to complete their portfolio and the ETB estimates that it takes 12-14 hours to prepare.

Limerick and Clare ETB adopted a unique approach to RPL for the major award in hairdressing, which has 11 programme learning outcomes and 67 individual module learning outcomes in total, developed in line with the Occupational Skills Profile (OSP) and Professional Award Type Descriptor (PATD). To avoid duplication and over-assessment, the programme team looked at the 11 programme learning outcomes (rather than the module outcomes) as a means of evidencing the requirements of the major award, while being careful to maintain the standard as expected for a formal learning programme. Achievement of the 11 programme outcomes via RPL explicitly implies achievement of the 67 individual module learning outcomes of the programme and thus the level 6 Advanced Certificate in Hairdressing major award.

In HE, the draft RPL framework has been informed by the European Council Recommendation and other publications at both national and European levels. The draft framework outlines five typical stages for a process of RPL, which are consistent with the European Guidelines: Information, Identification, Documentation, Assessment and Certification. It recommends that RPL processes should, “have sufficient flexibility to allow for adaptation to particular disciplines and types of prior learning”, and encourages providers to develop and use a range of assessment mechanisms such as portfolios, interviews, essays and examinations. (Recognition of Prior Learning, n.d., a).

In practice, RPL is operated by HEIs in a variety of ways, including through both individual and cohort processes. Where RPL is undertaken for cohorts of learners, this tends to be developed through an existing partnership between the HEI and the employer. (RPL in HE Project, n.d.).

As an example, at TU Dublin, RPL processes and assessment methods are not prescribed in the university’s policy. The relevant programme staff decide what methods to use, depending on the purpose of the RPL application. All RPL applicants are required to provide evidence of their learning, which for prior experiential learning might be through, “a self-assessment exercise, preparation of a file or ‘portfolio’ of appropriate evidence of learning, an interview, and perhaps a demonstration or assessment task.” (TU Dublin, n.d.) Once the applicant has submitted the evidence to show that they have met the learning outcomes for the module or the entry criteria for a programme, then a member of academic staff may meet with the student or

request further evidence, and in some cases the student may be required to complete an assessment.

10.2 Use of ICT in validation

As outlined above, a new technical (data) definition of RPL has been agreed by the 14 partner institutions in the RPL in HE Project in order to support consistent data collection within and across institutions. The definition outlines what should, and should not, be counted as RPL and is intended to support institutions to develop comparable and robust datasets. A project has just started in ATU, which will see that institution pilot the implementation of the technical definition. This entails creating new fields in their operating system (Banner) and adjusting their business processes to collect data which aligns to the definition. This data will then be used to populate the new RPL fields in Banner. An important aspect of this work is the development of practical tools and resources which other institutions can in turn use if replicating the pilot. Of the 14 project partners, 10 operate Banner, which means these tools will directly relate to their own contexts and the new fields would be available to them on request. Exploratory discussions are underway with the four HEIs which use the ITS and SITS operating systems, to assess whether these could be amended in a way similar to Banner. The implementation of the technical definition across all partner HEIs is a longer-term piece of work. It will still be at an early stage when the project finishes.

[HairApp](#) is a customised Moodle site for hairdressing learners, which is used for RPL for the major award and for advanced entry. RPL toolkits including handbooks, resources, applicant guides, forms and templates are housed here. Also, the theory test for advanced entry is completed within HairApp and for the major award, HairApp is where the learners' digital portfolios are built and assessed.

As mentioned above, Ballymun Job Centre has been involved in a number of EU-funded projects which have led to the development of audio/visual, web-based career guidance tools. These were introduced to respond to the needs of Job Centre clients who lacked self-knowledge of their own interests, abilities and characteristics (Ballymun Job Centre, 2023). Further information on Ballymun Job Centre and in particular their INFORM tool can be found in the 2018 country report.

Learn with NALA is an online system where learners can obtain literacy, numeracy, ICT and personal skills qualifications at NFQ Levels 2 and 3 with the option of RPL. See Box 5 for further details. NALA is currently working on creating an automated email system which will generate a pre-populated message for learners who have completed some learning outcomes on the system, outlining their next options.

Whereas learners can achieve an award through Learn with NALA, the tailored [SkillsCheck](#) tool developed by NALA, mentioned in Section 3.1, enables learners to conduct a self-assessment. The tool sets out scenarios based on the learning outcomes for literacy, numeracy and ICT qualifications at Levels 1 – 4 on the NFQ, and based on the user's responses to those scenarios, sets out recommendations for their future learning (e.g. "brush up on your computer skills") and provides access to a database of learning opportunities.

Another online tool is the Skills Summary tool, available from Accenture's Skills to Succeed Academy (see Section 3.1).

11 Quality assurance

11.1 Quality assurance processes

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)).

In 2015, following consultation with stakeholders, 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). These remain unchanged since the publication of the 2018 country report and continue to inform the quality assurance framework for RPL, in tandem with NFQ determinations and the range of statutory quality assurance guidelines which directly state that provider policies and procedures for learner admission, progression and recognition should be flexible and give fair recognition for prior learning, and in the context of a broad culture of quality assurance at institutional and provider level.

QQI carries out both monitoring and external institutional reviews as part of the oversight of the effectiveness of quality assurance processes: a system of annual dialogue meetings, cyclical reviews and reporting processes assure the integrity of the system as a whole. Individual reports, including self-evaluation reports will vary in references to RPL depending on the focus of the institution or provider. Programmes leading to QQI awards which are not offered by institutions with delegated awarding powers must be validated by QQI, and this process includes opportunities for peer consideration of proposed practices in RPL as appropriate. (Quality and Qualifications Ireland, 2021f).

With regard to HE specifically, the pilot framework for RPL in HE, in keeping with the policies and guidelines set out by QQI, states that RPL processes should be fully embedded in the quality assurance procedures of each HEI and should be aligned with the NFQ (Recognition of Prior Learning, n.d.).

In FET an assessed portfolio will be verified internally (by the RPL coordinator if there is one). It is then reviewed by an external authenticator, after which the ETB's results approval board (made up of senior managers and a representative of the ETB's QA team) makes a final decision. Separating the RPL mentor and assessor roles is also seen as an important layer of quality assurance and required governance. This, with an Internal Verifier and External Authentication, is in keeping with the main QA procedures of ETBs.

Learn with NALA operates internal QA policies and procedures which are agreed with QQI and reviewed on a continuous basis.

11.2 Monitoring and evaluation

As indicated above, statistical data collection is currently carried out at provider level. The new technical definition of RPL which has been drafted for HE will be used to ensure consistency in data collection, analytics and reporting for this sector (Recognition of Prior Learning, n.d., b), but providers have the autonomy to decide the extent to which this will be used and in what way. In FET, the PLSS is used to

collect data at the point of registration, including whether a learner has previously gained qualifications or credits through formal RPL.

Individual projects may be evaluated to identify good practice and lessons learned. For instance, an evaluation of the TOBAR pilot outlined lessons learned from this project, which are described in Box 2.

An evaluation of Writeon.ie was published in 2022 (Broderick, 2022) and the new Learn with NALA website was developed taking into account findings from this evaluation, as well as analysis of user data, and feedback from learners, as outlined in Box 5.

An evaluation of JobPath published in 2019 found that the scheme was effective in supporting long-term unemployed people to secure work and increase their earnings. It found a 26%+ improvement in employment outcomes in 2018, alongside a higher rate of earnings for people who took part in the programme by 17%, compared to people who secured employment without the support of JobPath (Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, 2019). In contrast, in late 2021, the Committee of Public Accounts published a report indicating that the JobPath scheme did not deliver value for money and that in most cases, the advice given to jobseekers did not lead to sustainable employment. Between July 2015 and October 2020, 283 826 people took part in JobPath, at a total cost for the service of EUR 247.9 million. Although the cost per participant, at EUR 873, was lower than the average price of Local Employment Services, only 22 000 people taking part obtained employment for more than one year. The Committee recommended that any future public employment service should be managed by either the Department of Social Protection or community-based organisations. (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2021).

12 The position of validation in society; visibility and trust

RPL has been in policy and strategy publications for the past two decades, but its inclusion in the Programme for Government in 2020, as well as references within strategies for the FET and HE sectors, have added further emphasis since the 2018 country report. It is seen as an important means of improving accessibility and flexibility within education, increasing social inclusion, and of meeting the needs of employers and individuals in the context of high levels of employment and associated skills shortages.

Legislation places the responsibility for provision of RPL close to demand. In addition to existing practice in the different sectors of education, pilot projects have helped to show the potential of RPL to bring positive impacts for individual learners. Feedback from individuals confirms that the attainment of an award through RPL is transformative, regardless of level and sector. In the FET sector in particular, as more people across different communities and industry sectors undertake RPL, awareness (and with it referrals and take-up) is increasing through word-of-mouth.

RPL leads to the same qualifications as those earned through formal education, and the quality assurance frameworks which are in place for these qualifications mean that they can be trusted by learners, employers and other stakeholders. ETBs, HEIs and other learning providers implement RPL in line with regional context and need, but through opportunities to share and learn from each other, such as CPD courses and Communities of Practice, learners should be able to expect a more consistent approach across different providers in future. In addition, the ongoing development of overarching guidelines, frameworks and training are increasing awareness and confidence amongst practitioners.

Webinars, discussion fora and events such as those provided by the RPL Practitioner Network are also important in sharing effective practices and challenging development. One interviewee suggested that in the context of an increasingly unified tertiary sector, this cross-sectoral collaboration is important to ensure greater harmonisation of RPL approaches across FET and HE, to help build a trusted process in facilitating learner pathways.

One benefit of RPL mentioned by an ETB RPL coordinator is that it enables them to offer programmes which they cannot provide through taught provision. RPL is becoming embedded in certain services, and the trust in the process that has been developed through pilots means that, as long as learners can prove they meet the relevant learning outcomes through prior experience, the qualification can be awarded through RPL.

Staff working on the TOBAR project reported a limited understanding of RPL amongst some learners, whilst learners also reported that uncertainty about what RPL involved was a challenge (de Paor, 2021). In the coming years, as the FET and HE sectors continue to build increased capacity to deliver RPL, greater information and outreach will help to encourage higher take-up. This means both informing individuals of the opportunities available to them, and ensuring they have access to impartial guidance to enable them to undertake an RPL process.

The progress which has been made in recent years, and the growing numbers of people who have benefited from RPL, will help this. It has been shown as a method of recognising learning with valuable outcomes for individuals, from maintaining their current job to finding a new role, or embarking on an educational path they might previously have thought impossible. These learners have shown that RPL is not an easy alternative to taught provision, and the learning they have acquired through experience is just as valid as that in a classroom. Whilst providers might previously have feared a 'deluge' of RPL requests, the test-and-learn approach which has been taken has proved that this is unlikely, as RPL is targeted at learners with experience and focussed on sectors where employers and employees can benefit.

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

This report is part of the 2023 update of the [European Inventory on the validation of non-formal and informal learning](#). The inventory provides a comprehensive overview of validation practices across Europe, covering 32 systems in EU-27 Member States and EFTA countries.

The European inventory is the product of a long-standing cooperation of the European Commission, Cedefop and ETF on the field. The inventory was endorsed by the [Council recommendation of 2012](#) on validation and works together with the [European guidelines](#) as a tool to support countries in developing and implementing validation arrangements.

A rich source of information, the inventory informs dialogue and learning between countries and stakeholders developing and implementing validation in Europe. Our key objective is to support Member States so that more learners and workers can acquire and make visible new skills, which will support their career and further learning and improve their quality of life.

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