



# A CURRENT OVERVIEW OF RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING (RPL) IN IRISH HIGHER EDUCATION

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evidence base for  
teaching and learning  
enhancement in higher  
education*



**NATIONAL FORUM**  
FOR THE ENHANCEMENT OF TEACHING  
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The National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching & Learning in Higher Education is a key consultative forum and an evidence-based change agent for teaching and learning enhancement and innovation for impact. It works in partnership with students, teachers, experts, learner support providers and researchers - and with institutional and system level leadership throughout the sector to provide thought leadership on developing future-orientated aspects of teaching and learning on Ireland's emerging higher education landscape.

As part of Forum's commitment to leading and facilitating enhancement from an evidence-based standpoint, it has funded a series of Focused Research Projects to be conducted over a six month period by higher education researchers in partnership with the National Forum. These projects were designed to facilitate rapid and focused research on specified themes to inform academic practice and guide enhancement activities, including:

- Transitions to higher education
- Student completion and retention in higher education (qualitative studies)
- Open Education Resources and Open Access
- Recognition of Prior Learning
- Research on Higher Education Teaching & Learning in Ireland

Successful projects were awarded funding by the Forum following competitive selection, based on international peer review and were initiated in December 2014. They ranged in scope from national analysis of existing practices and policies to in-depth case-studies located in small clusters of institutions. Ethics approval for the projects was granted through the higher education institutions involved and the National Forum's Research Ethics Committee.

Collectively the projects have now created a baseline understanding in a national context on these topics, as well as a springboard for future enhancement activities and further practice/policy developments. Importantly, the successful completion of these projects attests to the collaborative partnership and engagement between the Forum and higher education institutions in developing a shared common purpose for evidence-based enhancement activities. In addition they also demonstrate the potential for contributing to the research and scholarship of Irish teaching and learning locally and internationally through peer-reviewed publications. The Forum in line with its scholarship strategy will support project teams to achieve this objective.

### **A Current Overview of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in Irish Higher Education.**

This project, a national analysis, explored current practices relating to the recognition of prior learning in Irish higher education. A systematic review of information available publicly through institutions' websites, published policies for RPL as well as analysis of institutions' mission-based Performance Compacts was undertaken. In addition in-depth interviews with practitioners, employer case-studies and student perspectives were used to explore the practices of RPL in operation. The research underlines the need for a national policy and strategy for RPL, which is supported by agreed definitions and good practice guidelines. In addition the on-going implementation of RPL practices should be supported by systematic data collection, professional

development for staff involved in RPL processes, including the inclusion of RPL processes in higher education continuing professional development frameworks.

Thanks are due for the commitment and energy invested by the Project Team of Deirdre Goggin, Dr Irene Sheridan, Phil O Leary and Dr Stephen Cassidy. The National Forum looks forward greatly to its ongoing partnership with the Project Team in sharing the outcomes of this projects for the benefit of the wider higher education sector during the next academic cycle and beyond.

For further information on all of the National Forum Focused Research Projects please see:

<http://www.teachingandlearning.ie/t-l-scholarship/national-forum-research-projects/>.

# A current overview of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in Irish Higher Education

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## Contents

<b>Contents</b> .....	<b>i</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	<b>iv</b>
<b>1 Introduction</b> .....	<b>1</b>
1.1 Overview .....	1
1.2 Context .....	1
<b>2 Literature review</b> .....	<b>3</b>
2.1 Defining Recognition of Prior Learning .....	3
2.2 RPL policy context .....	3
2.2.1 <i>European developments</i> .....	5
2.2.2 <i>Significant international reports</i> .....	6
2.2.3 <i>National context</i> .....	7
2.2.4 <i>Higher education landscape</i> .....	9
2.3 Drivers and benefits of RPL .....	10
2.4 RPL practice .....	11
2.4.1 <i>Quality assurance</i> .....	12
2.4.2 <i>Education in Employment and REAP projects</i> .....	13
2.4.3 <i>Reports of the University Sector Framework Implementation Network</i> .....	14
2.4.4 <i>Employers perspective</i> .....	14
2.4.5 <i>Support and guidance</i> .....	15
2.5 Summary .....	16
<b>3 Methodology</b> .....	<b>18</b>
3.1 The research question and the scope of the research .....	18
3.2 Methodology .....	18
3.2.1 Research methods – Desk review .....	20
3.2.1 Research methods – Empirical research .....	21
3.3 Data Gathering .....	21
3.4 Data processing and analysis .....	22
3.5 Ethical considerations .....	22
<b>4 Research Findings</b> .....	<b>23</b>
4.1 Higher education policy framework .....	23
4.1.1 Review of compacts .....	23
4.1.2 Review of institutional policies .....	24

4.1.3 Quality and Qualifications Authority of Ireland.....	25
4.2 Higher Education Institutions .....	27
4.2.1 Defining Recognition of Prior Learning.....	27
4.2.2 RPL Policies .....	27
4.2.3 Organisation and management of RPL processes .....	28
4.2.3.1 Examples of institutional approaches.....	30
4.2.4 Limits applied to RPL cases .....	32
4.2.5 Recognition of prior learning in various disciplines and levels.....	33
4.2.6 RPL Data.....	33
4.2.7 Assessment .....	34
4.2.8 RPL and Staff Continuing Professional Development (CPD).....	36
4.2.9 Staff Continuing Professional Development.....	37
4.3 Good practice in higher education in Ireland.....	40
4.4 Learner perspectives.....	40
4.5 Employer Perspectives .....	43
4.5.1 Engineers Ireland .....	43
4.5.2 Certified Public Accountants Ireland .....	45
4.5.3 The Royal Institute of Architects of Ireland .....	46
4.5.4 Institute of Professional Auctioneers and Valuers.....	48
4.6 Limitations of the research .....	50
4.7 Conclusions.....	50
<b>5 Conclusions and Recommendations.....</b>	<b>52</b>
5.1 Conclusions.....	52
5.1.1 Organic development of practice.....	52
5.1.2 Development beyond higher education institutions .....	52
5.1.3 Absence of clarity and lack of commonly agreed definition .....	53
5.1.4 Data and measurable indicators.....	53
5.1.5 National and Institutional level governing structures.....	54
5.1.6 National drivers and initiatives for widening participation.....	54
5.1.7 Institutional commitment to RPL.....	55
5.1.8 Staff development on supporting and assessing RPL .....	55
5.1.9 RPL for staff CPD .....	56
5.2 Recommendations .....	57
5.2.1 Common definition and National policy .....	57

5.2.2 Data collection.....	58
5.2.3 Good practice guidelines.....	59
5.2.4 RPL staff training and development.....	60
5.2.5 RPL and the CPD Framework.....	60
5.3 Summary.....	62
<b>6 References.....</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>APPENDICES.....</b>	<b>69</b>
APPENDIX A: CRITERIA USED TO ANALYSE INSTITUTIONAL PUBLIC MEDIA SOURCES ON RPL 70	
APPENDIX B: INSTITUTIONAL Interview Guide.....	71
APPENDIX C: CRITERIA USED TO ANALYSE INSTITUTIONAL PERFORMANCE COMPACTS.....	74
APPENDIX D: PROFESSIONAL BODY Interviews.....	75
APPENDIX E QOI Interview question.....	76
APPENDIX F; STUDENT REPRESENTATIVE VIEWS.....	77

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*We are also grateful to the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning who provided the impetus and funding for this research project as well as the encouragement and access to a vibrant network of researchers throughout.*

*The support of the Higher Education Authority and the partner institutions through the Strategic innovation Fund and in particular the Education in Employment and REAP projects to the development of RPL must also be acknowledged. We anticipate that this report will contribute to the development of coherent and context sensitive pathways to learning for all.*

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## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Overview

This report details an exploration of the current practice relating to the recognition of prior learning in Irish higher education. The research includes a review of the published policies of higher education institutions, their public-facing information as well as an analysis of the details of the mission-based performance compacts outlining goals and objectives for higher education institutions from 2014 to 2016.

In-depth interviews with practitioners in higher education institutions were conducted to explore the implementation of RPL in practice. An exploration of processes relating to identification, evidencing, assessment, and recognition of experiential learning by selected employer professional bodies was undertaken.

The recommendations arising from the research are summarised here:

- A national policy and strategy should be developed and implemented across higher education
- An agreed definition of RPL in higher education in Ireland
- Good practice guidelines should be developed to support practice at institutional and national levels
- Higher education institutions should seek to collect data in a consistent and systematic way
- Clarity of roles and adequate training and development for staff involved in the process
- The inclusion of RPL processes in a higher education continuous professional development framework

These recommendations are designed to support the development of a more consistent and coherent approach and to position Ireland appropriately in relation to meeting the relevant EU recommendations.

### 1.2 Context

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is critical to the development of an accessible, education and training system, and is a key foundation for lifelong learning policies encouraging people of all ages to participate in learning pathways while attributing value to all of their relevant learning. RPL, therefore, has a potential role to play in meeting individual, societal,

and national needs; as an instrument for providing people with access to education, training, and formal qualifications and helping to meet more efficiently, rapidly changing requirements of the workplace within a competitive global economy.

*The new lifelong learning for all approach is a true 'cradle to grave' view. It encompasses all purposeful learning activity undertaken with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence. It gives weight to building foundations for lifelong learning as well as to remedial second chances for adults. And it recognises that not only the settings of formal education but also the less formal settings of the home, the workplace, the community and society at large contribute to learning . . . No learning setting is an island*

(OECD, 1998: 8-9).

The concept of lifelong learning, referred to by the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) above, considers the variety of contexts in which learning can occur. The reality is that learning which takes place in settings other than the traditional environments associated with education and training can be more difficult for the learner themselves to identify and more difficult for formal education processes to value and assess. Incorporating learning which takes place in a variety of contexts and environments into our higher education systems and frameworks also implies accommodating the learner as an individual with a unique accumulation of formal, non-formal and informal learning. Depending on the setting and the context, this can result in the need to develop and support individual, contextualised, learning pathways as opposed to cohort approaches. This more participative, learner-centred approach, places an emphasis on direct engagement, rich learning environments and supporting the construction of meaning by learners as they reflect on and interrogate their own experiences and resulting learning.

While the participation rate in full-time higher education in Ireland exceeds the EU average, the percentage of persons engaging in lifelong learning at approximately 7% remains well below the EU average and considerably behind leading countries. At the same time, strategies to support labour market activation and the upskilling and reskilling of workers who are under-employed and unemployed mean that more learners with varied experiences are returning to higher education. This places a growing importance on processes in higher education which are sensitive to learners' prior learning. In this context, this research investigated and explored current policies and practices in Irish higher education relating to the recognition of prior learning.

## 2 Literature review

In establishing the current landscape and contextualising the research relating to RPL in Irish higher education, this review considered working definitions of RPL, RPL policy, and contextual developments from an international and national perspective, as well as some of the main motivations and drivers with respect to the Irish higher education landscape.

### 2.1 Defining Recognition of Prior Learning

RPL is defined as a process whereby prior learning is given a value (European Commission, 2008; NQAI, 2005; OECD, 2004). RPL can operate to provide recognition for advanced entry and non-standard admissions to educational pathways and is also used to award credit for elements within programmes. Cooper and Harris refer to RPL as *“a specialised pedagogic practice that provides tools for navigating access to new learning opportunities”* (p. 447, Cooper and Harris, 2013).

For the purposes of this research the following definition of RPL extracted from the European Inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning, country report Ireland 2014 is used;

*“RPL incorporates prior formal<sup>1</sup>, informal<sup>2</sup> and non-formal<sup>3</sup> learning and that which is validated within the context of a specified destination award from level one to ten on the national framework of qualifications”* (p. 3, European Commission, Cedefop, ICF International; 2014).

Validation is another term that is used in the literature sometimes interchangeably with the term recognition. As stated in the QQI RPL green paper ‘in the European context RPL is also referred to as the Validation of Prior Learning ‘QQI 2013. While the above definition relates well to RPL as commonly understood in Ireland, much of the international literature focuses on the areas of non-formal and informal learning reflecting the inherent difficulties encountered in recognition or validation of these forms of learning.

### 2.2 RPL policy context

Education policies are increasingly linked to the broader economic and social well-being of a country or region and include a lifelong learning perspective (Harris, 2011). Europe has seen significant restructuring and updating of education policies, structures and systems in recent years, within which RPL is an important element (Harris, 2011). A timeline of substantial

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<sup>1</sup> Formal Learning refers to learning which has already attracted formal certification within an education system

<sup>2</sup> Informal learning refers to learning acquired through day to day activities which may be unplanned and unintentional

<sup>3</sup> Non-formal learning is learning which is acquired through planned activities but does not result in formal certification

relevant reports and communiques has been developed to provide some context for the review (table 1). Lifelong learning as an agenda has been developing since 1995 at a European and International level through the White paper 'towards a learning society' and further enhanced through the establishment of the Bologna process.

<i>International / European</i>	<i>YEAR</i>	<i>Ireland</i>
<i>European principles for RPL (EC) The role of national qualification systems in promoting LLL (OECD)</i>	2004	
<i>Bergen Communiqué</i>	2005	<i>Principles and Operational Guidelines (NQAI) Guidelines Irish HE Quality Network</i>
<i>Helsinki Communiqué</i>	2006	
<i>London Communiqué</i>	2007	<i>EGFSN Tomorrows skills , towards a national skills strategy</i>
<i>The EQF for LLL (EC ) Country note on the Recognition of Non - formal and Informal Learning in Ireland (OECD)</i>	2008	
<i>European Guidelines for VNFIL Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué ET2020</i>	2009	<i>RPL - A focus on Practice (EIE) HETAC assessment and standards guidelines</i>
<i>Country Practices Report (OECD) Guidelines for RNFIL (OECD) Recommendation on the promotion and VNFIL (EC)</i>	2010	
	2011	<i>RPL in University Sector (FIN) National Strategy for Higher Education (DES) Role of RPL (EGFSN) National plan for Equity of Access to HE (HEA)</i>
<i>Guidelines on the RVA of outcomes of NFIL (UNESCO) EU Council Recommendation on VNFIL</i>	2012	<i>Part time and flexible HE in Ireland (HEA) Qualification and Quality Assurance (Education and Training ) Act</i>
	2013	<i>Education at a glance OECD Indicators ; A country profile for Ireland RPL Consultation Document (QQI) Education at a glance (DES)</i>
<i>European Inventory Country report Ireland (CEDEFOP) Education and Training monitor (EC) Employment outlook ; how does Ireland compare (OECD)</i>	2014	<i>HE system performance - first report (HEA) HEA consultation paper towards new NP for equity of access in HE</i>
<i>The Bologna process; setting up the EHEA (EC)</i>	2015	<i>RPL Research (NFT&amp;L) Qualifications recognition ; mutual recognition of professional qualifications in Ireland (DES) Pathways to work ; government policy statement (DSP) Springboard; building our future</i>

Table 1. Timeline of relevant reports and communiques

### 2.2.1 European developments

Recognition of prior formal, non-formal and informal learning is a key policy area across Europe relating directly to the establishment of two European Frameworks and the associated national frameworks. The establishment of the *European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning* (EQF - LLL) and the *Bologna Framework for the European Higher Education Area* (EHEA) both include RPL as a central theme, and have served to highlight RPL as a critical element within learning pathways and learning developments (Bologna, 1999; Council of the European Union, 2009; Crozier *et al.* 2012; European Commission, 2010; 2015). These developments have supported alignment of learning attainment across different countries as well as the development of a learning outcomes approach which has formed a significant basis for the recognition of learning and the assessment of evidence of learning.

RPL is an essential component of one of the four strands in the current ET2020 framework's strategic objectives, namely "*making lifelong learning and mobility a reality,*" (Council of the European Union, 2009).

The *European Higher Education Area in 2012: Bologna Process Implementation Report* reported significant progress in the use of RPL across Europe, stating that 47% of higher education systems allow RPL for access to higher education and 62% allow RPL for credits within programmes. It is worth noting that these figures relate to the recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning (Crosier *et al.*, 2012).

The most recent relevant recommendation from the Council of the European Union, namely, *the Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the Validation of non-formal and informal learning* recommends that all countries should have RPL procedures in place by 2018 (Council of European Union, 2012). This Council recommendation underlines the strong commitment to RPL in Europe. The imposition of this particular timeframe encourages all higher education institutions to have arrangements in place which will support the realities of individuals seeking and attaining RPL for all forms of learning. It follows that higher education has a key responsibility to put appropriate arrangements in place, and will benefit from a coherent sector-wide approach to guide the provision of effective processes in the immediate future. In this context, a national strategy for RPL would provide a comprehensive macro reference point, guiding future arrangements for the higher education sector, further building confidence and capacity for RPL delivery (Department of Education and Skills, 2011).

### 2.2.2 Significant international reports

Cedefop works in partnership with the European Commission to support and promote RPL for European states, using the terminology, 'validation of non-formal and informal learning' to denote RPL. This definition excludes the recognition of prior formal learning.

The most recent 2014 Cedefop report notes that few countries have comprehensive national systems in place and RPL commonly operates as a series of special initiatives or as projects at a local level. Coherence is seen as another significant challenge. It is noted that diverse practices can be difficult to accommodate if they are to be brought into a single system which is to be accepted by the general public (European Commission; Cedefop; ICF International; 2014).

Cedefop reported on Ireland and considered aspects such as national perspectives on validation, advice and guidance for institutions and practitioners, quality assurance, validation methods, information on profiles and training for practitioners (European Commission; Cedefop; ICF International; 2014).

Reporting on issues and challenges, the report focused on:

- gaps in information and communication on RPL,
- dearth of information on the costs of RPL
- little evaluation of practice,
- ambiguity as to the role of practitioners
- and a lack of dedicated funding for resources to deliver RPL

(European Commission; Cedefop; ICF International; 2014).

The OECD's *Recognition of Non-Formal and Informal Learning: Country Practices Report 2010*, made specific reference to the Irish National Skills strategy which notes particular competences such as problem solving, innovation, communication, literacy, and team-work as key competences that may be acquired informally (Werquin, 2010b; Expert Group on Future Skills, 2007). The inclusion of generic or transferrable skills in Government reports highlights the value of informal learning and portrays a strategic awareness of the relevance of this learning to the future employability of the Irish workforce.

In 2012 *UNESCO Guidelines for the Recognition, Validation and Accreditation of the Outcomes of Non-formal and Informal Learning* was published (UNESCO, 2012). Outlining the purpose and principles for RPL, this publication provides information on key areas of action at national level underlining the growing importance of RPL for society and further underlining UNESCO's commitment to lifelong learning for all.

The UNESCO guidelines include the importance of “*equity and inclusiveness in access to learning,*” and “*promoting the equal value of learning outcomes,*” regardless of where they are gained, of placing the candidate at the centre of the process, of the role of quality assurance within RPL and of the shared responsibility of all stakeholders “*from design through to implementation and evaluation,*” of RPL (p. 4, UNESCO, 2012). The six key areas of action outlined in the UNESCO guidelines are insightful and indicate that RPL should be:

- a key component of national lifelong learning strategy
- accessible to all
- integral to education and training systems
- part of a co-ordinated national structure involving all stakeholders
- supported through the capacity building of RPL personnel
- Included in sustainable funding mechanisms

(UNESCO, 2012).

The call by UNESCO to develop a coordinated national structure involving all stakeholders is significant in that the organisation sees merit in taking a cohesive national approach, referring to the provision of local infrastructure within institutions, appropriate administrative processes, quality assurance procedures and “*clearly defined roles and responsibilities*” for all actors within RPL (p 6, UNESCO, 2012).

### 2.2.3 National context

In Ireland, the term RPL as it is commonly used, incorporates prior formal, non-formal, and informal learning which is to be validated in the context of a particular destination award on the NFO. HETAC Assessment and Standards 2009 outline the considerations which have informed the local institutional policy development for RPL in terms of equity, fairness and maintaining quality assurance across programme design, development and assessment for all learners and learning (HETAC, 2009).

While the Qualifications Act 1999 established the legal basis for the development of RPL in Ireland, the then NQAI principles and operational guidelines published in 2005 are the foundation of much of the development of practice (NQAI, 2005). Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) is currently revising RPL policy and has consulted broadly with stakeholders in order to achieve a more cohesive approach to delivering RPL nationally (Quality & Qualifications Authority of Ireland, 2013). This welcome initiative will provide new impetus to support alignment with the European Council 2012 recommendation.

RPL is regularly noted as a key element within Labour Market Activation initiatives by Government (European Commission; Cedefop; ICF International, 2014). In 2011, the Expert Group on Future Skill Needs (EGFSN) was invited to report on RPL and its potential for up-

skilling and reskilling of the labour force by the Department of Education and Skills (Expert Group on Future Skill Needs, 2011). This report signifies RPL as a critical element in Labour Market Activation programmes; for efficient use of resources within education and training; for lifelong learning; for flexible provision and to contribute to government targets on social inclusion and equity of access (Expert Group on Future Skill Needs, 2011).

The 2011 report of the EGFSN recommends a cohesive national approach for RPL to optimise provision (Expert Group on Future Skill Needs, 2011). Significantly, the EGFSN report (2011), notes the work done by providers and by the QQI, however, it stresses the importance of commitment from the Department of Education and Skills to drive change at a national level. Of interest also were comments made in section 5 of that report. 'RPL Infrastructure and practice in Ireland,' which noted that while it is, "*very difficult to estimate the demand for RPL,*" arrangements for its provision and subsequent capture of resulting data should be in place (p. 30, Expert Group on Future Skill Needs, 2011). The report cites evidence arising from the Strategic Innovation Funded Education in Employment project (Sheridan and Linehan, 2009), showing activity varying considerably across higher education institutions, stating it is probable that, "*practice is localised within particular institutions ... and is specific to certain groups of learners,*" (p.30, Expert Group on Future Skill Needs, 2011). Noteworthy also were the comments calling for specific funding for RPL provision, the implications for managing workflow for large numbers of RPL cases, the lack of systematic gathering of data on RPL cases across higher education institutions and uncertainty as to responsibility for providing RPL for specific roles in the workplace. It can be summarised that RPL delivery suffers from a lack of cohesion and consistency and would benefit from the adoption of a national strategy to support and inform local provision.

The "*Green paper on the RPL for consultation*" (Quality & Qualifications Ireland, 2013), provided an important opportunity for stakeholders to have input to the national framework supporting RPL. This document provides a comprehensive picture of the policy and legislative framework (national and European) and invited consultations on six issues from various stakeholders across the education spectrum. The issues addressed were:

- RPL and Access Transfer and Progression
- National strategy on RPL
- Direct application to QQI for awards
- RPL for access to FETAC awards
- Data on RPL
- RPL and credit

(Quality & Qualifications Ireland, 2013)



This consultative approach to capturing the viewpoint of the range of stakeholders involved in RPL allowed for inclusion of all voices, while also providing some signposts for enhanced practice.

#### 2.2.4 Higher education landscape

The higher education landscape is undergoing a period of rapid change reflective of the broader general socio-economic changes in Ireland and Europe over the past ten years (Department of Education and Skills, 2011). Underpinning the changing higher education landscape and signposting the opportunities for development is the National Strategy report published in 2011. The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030, emphasises the key role that Ireland's higher education system has to play in building an innovative knowledge economy. The report calls for the sector to *"innovate and develop if it is to provide flexible opportunities for larger and more diverse student cohorts,"* (p. 10, Department of Education and Skills, 2011). Significantly, the report calls for clear pathways for progression and transfer, as well as non-traditional entry routes.

The National Strategy report has called for a national framework for RPL to be developed and has pointed to the opportunity to leverage input from existing expertise within its higher education institutions to contribute to the development of this RPL National Framework.

Within the HEA's national systems performance framework, the development of institutional performance compacts is a novel undertaking, wherein each higher education institution, through a strategic high level dialogue process, agrees a compact, which is publically available (O'Connor *et al.*, 2013). Significantly, performance against agreed targets has funding implications for institutions. There is a requirement that compacts must include an element detailing provision for 'Increased participation, equality of access and lifelong learning' and make specific reference to arrangements for clear access pathways for access transfer and progression. (O'Connor *et al.*, 2013).

In relation to education quality and awards QQI is a state agency established by the Quality Assurance and Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 2012, with a board appointed by the Minister for Education and Skills. The functions of QQI include responsibility for maintaining the ten-level NFO (National Framework of Qualifications). QQI also provides advice on recognition of foreign qualifications in Ireland and on the recognition of Irish qualifications abroad.

The 2012 Act includes specific reference to RPL and states that:

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

- QQI may request the assistance of providers to assess learners' prior learning for the purposes of making awards (Section 50(7))
- QQI shall establish and publish policies and criteria for access transfer and progression (Section 56(1))
- These shall include policies on credit and recognition of prior learning (Section 56(3))

Recognising this significant role, QQI undertook an extensive consultation process commencing in 2013 through its Green Paper on the Recognition of Prior Learning (Quality and Qualifications Ireland, 2013). The Green Paper summarised the situation in Ireland at that time and focused on the Recommendation of the European Council (2012), while highlighting some of the challenges for RPL within the system.

### 2.3 Drivers and benefits of RPL

The complexity of individual learning and the opportunities it offers for the knowledge society were recognised in Europe in 1995 in the White Paper of the European Commission: Towards the Learning Society (European Commission, 1995). The European Commission published Common European Principles on the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning in order to value competences developed in all possible learning environments (European Commission, 2004).

Under the Bologna Process the main motivation for developing such principles is to strengthen the comparability (and thus compatibility) of approaches at different levels and in different contexts. Since 2004, common European principles have been used as a reference for national developments, underlining their usefulness as a checklist for developing high quality, credible validation approaches.

Recognising that the nature of work and employment is changing rapidly in a global economy, there is a growing importance placed on lifelong formal and informal learning and training as a key component in ensuring and maintaining a highly skilled workforce. The traditional notion of obtaining one set of skills or qualifications that would suffice for a lifetime of permanent employment, generally with one employer, is no longer the dominant model (Nicolescu, 2002; Howkins, 2001). Contemporary employees, therefore, require the capacity to work across a range of contexts in an integrated manner which acknowledges that *"life, content, ideas, and knowledge are not divided into separate, segregated clusters"* (Spady, 2003, p.18).

RPL can play a significant role in this context of lifelong and life wide learning where an individual can expect to have many roles over a lifetime, accumulating knowledge, skills and competences through involvement in the workplace, through professional training or as a

result of participation in a formal learning setting. As society aspires to the knowledge economy, the way we live, work and learn is constantly evolving, with renewed emphasis on activating the learner’s own responsibility (European Commission, 2000; Duvekot *et al.*, 2007; Su, 2011). Sursock and Smidt report on the far reaching changes in attitudes and values that are occurring in higher education institutions across Europe including consideration of the various contexts in which learning can be gained (Sursock and Smidt, 2010).

According to Werquin, RPL can be seen to benefit individuals, employers, the education system, governments and trade unions. Some of these benefits, are summarised in the following table, (Werquin, 2010a).

**Table 2: Benefits of RPL**

Individuals	Education Providers	Employers	Governments
<b>Personal</b>	Reduced time to Certification	Recruitment	Efficient and effective systems
<b>Educational</b>	Recognition of various types of learning	Employee retention and motivation	Agility in addressing skills shortages
<b>Social</b>	Increased access for a variety of learners	Quality assurance	Competitiveness and growth
<b>Economic</b>	Enhanced relevance and currency of courses	Improved links with higher education	Democracy and active citizenship

#### 2.4 RPL practice

Ireland has a long tradition of RPL and operational principles in place, however these are found as dispersed initiatives and practices on the ground (Feutrie, 2007). Van Kleef (2014), maintains RPL provision relies on good communication and cooperation between stakeholders, from both a systems-wide and individual perspective, *“to promote understanding, ensure transparency, and engender trust in one another”* and in the assessment outcome (Van Kleef, 2014). Considering the practice and operational realities of RPL in Ireland this review focuses on:

- Quality Assurance
- Education in Employment and REAP Project Initiatives
- Framework Implementation Network Report
- Support and Guidance
- Employer Perspectives

#### 2.4.1 Quality assurance

Calling for “*More flexible, inclusive and open qualification systems*”, Bjørnåvold believes the development of the European Qualifications Framework combined with the realisation of RPL will enable the European qualification systems to deliver effective lifelong learning (Bjørnåvold, 2007). Given the diverse nature of non-formal and informal learning, accommodating RPL may present challenges for higher education in terms of establishing structures and supports that allow for supportive access, mentoring and subsequently assessment (University Sector Framework Implementation Network, 2011; Van Kleef, 2014).

The Council of the European Union 2012 Directive on non-formal and informal learning, recommending that institutions have arrangements in place for RPL by 2018 will have implications for practice in Ireland (Council of the European Union, 2012). Recently, the European Association for the Education of Adults welcomed the Council of the European Union’s 2012 Directive on non-formal and informal learning and promised to support institutions in the establishment and adoption of good practice guidelines for RPL (European Association for the Education of Adults, 2012).

The provision of macro-tools such as National and European Framework of Qualifications, approaches incorporating programme outcomes and learning outcomes have enabled RPL in practice, yet much work remains to be done in terms of module design and best practice approaches in writing learning outcomes which will take into account the assessment of non-formal and informal learning (Auzinger and Luomi-Messerer, 2014). In November 2014, QQI hosted a peer learning activity in Ireland on behalf of the European Commission, exploring viewpoints on the writing of learning outcomes in order to facilitate the assessment and validation of non-formal and informal learning within the formal learning system (Auzinger and Luomi-Messerer, 2014). The exploration allowed for consideration as to how standards can influence the design and delivery of assessment pieces and validation practices in general. European principles for RPL make explicit the clear link between the introduction of outcomes-based qualifications frameworks and validation procedures (European Commission, 2004).

Key recommendations from this peer learning activity included the writing of learning outcomes in such a way as to be interpreted easily by the learner and to take into account horizontal elements of learning as well as the vertical or more codified learning of the formal learning system. In higher education institutions in Ireland, the last decade has seen the development of formal credit-earning learning opportunities in Teaching and Learning which have supported building scholarship and evolving practice. A number of Postgraduate Diploma and Masters courses are now available for higher education staff and while they do

not all include specific modules on RPL, they include consideration of learning outcomes, evidence of learning attainment and assessment methodologies.

Noteworthy within the Irish context, are the publication of guidelines in 2005 by the Irish Higher Education Quality Network which provide general principles of good practice for higher education and principles of good practice for the conduct of quality assurance or quality improvement reviews (Irish Higher Education Quality Network, 2005). In 2005, NQAI highlighted the need for RPL provision to be embedded within all quality assurance mechanisms of institutions in higher education (National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, 2005). The RPL guidelines relay the importance of maintaining the standards of the formal learning system and follows with guidelines as to documentation and support for the learner along with supporting detail pertaining to the assessment and processing of RPL claims (National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, 2005).

In addition, HETAC through their Assessment and Standards guidelines 2009 detailed the approaches which needed to be adopted by institutions in developing inclusive education systems without compromising quality assurance and assessment principles of equity and fairness (HETAC, 2009). The developing and extant policies and practices of higher education institutions make reference to these HETAC guidelines as there has been no national policy or awarding body guidelines regarding RPL and quality assurance since 2009.

#### *2.4.2 Education in Employment and REAP projects*

Nationally, a number of projects have served to act as drivers of RPL policy and practice developments. Funded by the Higher Education Authority, Strategic Innovation Funded (SIF) projects ran from 2006 – 2014 to foster collaboration and innovation in teaching and learning in Higher Education and to foster access and lifelong learning (Higher Education Authority, 2006). The '*Education in Employment*' project focused on providing access routes to education for those already in employment but who were seeking up-skilling opportunities requiring a flexible responsive approach from higher education. The project team proposed a model of education delivery that was supportive of the circumstances of the learner. The research on RPL practice in Ireland was significant in that it served as a catalyst to inform and support the higher education practitioners involved. The resulting reports and symposia strengthened this collaborative and supportive approach (Sheridan and Linehan, 2009). Findings from this research provide comprehensive guidance on RPL practice and operational realities in Irish higher education, including good practice guides.

A second project, Roadmap for Employer-Academic Partnership (REAP), also funded by SIF worked to develop an overview of the broad range of partnership interactions that can occur between higher education and external enterprises and to explore in detail some of these types of interaction. One of the models of interaction explored was the development

of focused and customised learning solutions in response to specific enterprise needs. This research analysed a number of different responses by Irish higher education providers at varying levels on the framework and developed a suggested practice guide (Sheridan and Murphy, 2012). RPL is a central theme underpinning this type of learning collaboration between learners, higher education and the workplace, facilitating learner advancement and enabling formal recognition of learning. These projects served to further the scholarship and evolution of RPL in Ireland in the timeframe 2006-2013.

#### 2.4.3 Reports of the University Sector Framework Implementation Network

The University-sector Framework Implementation Network (2010), published its first report on *“University Awards and the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ); Issues around the Design of Programmes and the Use and Assessment of Learning Outcomes,”* (National Qualifications Authority of Ireland & Irish Universities Association, 2010). This report set out the foundations for the second report which followed in 2011.

The second report was titled *“Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in the University Sector: Policies, case studies and issues arising”*. This report addresses national principles and practice and the international context, including definitions and detail as to the NFQ and RPL. The report provides a general context, and four case studies describing the use of RPL in Trinity College Dublin, NUI Galway, University of Limerick and the National College of Art & Design (University Sector Framework Implementation Network, 2011).

Commenting that RPL is valued as a critical component within higher education the report considers the mission to broaden participation. Noteworthy, however, are comments finding evidence, *“that the design, planning and implementation of RPL policies are not uniform, straightforward, or unproblematic processes”* (p. 54, University Sector Framework Implementation Network, 2011). Specifically the University Sector Framework Implementation Network (2011) calls for an acknowledgement of the costs of RPL and provision to address these costs to be put in place. The report calls for increasing the availability of information on RPL, to improve the monitoring of RPL cases and the outcomes for candidates afterwards, and stresses the importance of quality assurance within RPL provision. Significantly, the report calls for the availability of appropriate supports within teaching, learning, and student support services for the non-traditional learner to ensure their successful passage through the formal learning system (University Sector Framework Implementation Network, 2011).

#### 2.4.4 Employers perspective

The workplace setting provides significant learning opportunities (Cedefop, 2009; Duvekot *et al.*, 2007). Cameron (2014), reports on the emerging significance of national policies regarding human capital management and the use of RPL to deliver, *“effective solutions to sustainable human resource management,”* (p. 115, Cameron, 2014). Policy makers and

education providers are aware of the need for workforce development in response to changing market forces and emerging technologies (Sheridan, et al., 2014). Rapidly developing fields, such as cloud computing, have seen the industry base itself emerge as subject matter expert and have supported the adoption of partnership approaches to curriculum development, recognising the workplace itself as a valid and valuable centre for learning (Goggin, et al., 2014).

Cedefop reported in 2008 that RPL is of significant importance to employers and that validation processes were established by some multi-national companies to, “*assess and make full use of these learning processes.*” (p. 28, Cedefop, 2009). Cedefop reported that those participating in validation processes had increased motivation, improved generation of new ideas, better retention, and a reduction in the amount of time required to attain a qualification for the learner (Cedefop, 2009).

Employers are significant stakeholders in RPL and are subject to changing regulations and legislation which commonly require minimum levels of qualification by employees (Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, 2011).

The Cedefop 2009 report states that aligning company validation processes so that they are compatible with national frameworks can be advantageous to both the employer and employee strengthening the portability of the knowledge, skills and competences of the workplace (CEDEFOP, 2009).

*“The involvement of companies in validation process is important if the bulk of personal learning, which is probably work based, is to be made visible in a country. It is also important to appreciate that the company process can raise expectations of further learning and certification”* (p. 30, CEDEFOP, 2009).

#### 2.4.5 Support and guidance

Establishing appropriate infrastructure to efficiently support RPL provision is a key requirement (Department of Education and Skills, 2011). Once policy and procedures are in place, there follows the significant task of building an efficient system where the candidate is guided through the process and academic assessors are confident in their own ability and that of their colleagues to assess the diverse range of learning presented through RPL.

There is an expectation on the part of the RPL candidate that appropriate information is well signposted, readily accessible and easy to understand (Kenniscentrum EVC, 2007; Leiste and Jensen, 2011). Sursock and Smidt (2010), note that lifelong learners tend to be highly motivated and will present as autonomous learners along with variability in their enrolment patterns (Sursock and Smidt 2010). This tends to place an onus on institutions to provide

flexible access to information, guidance and support services, ensuring the most efficient and effective approach is adopted.

The sustainable and cost effective use of RPL resources may imply the development and maintenance of a suitable website, from the perspective of the end user, to deliver initial information on RPL policies and procedures (Williams and Chinn, 2009). In addition to generally available information, supporting the individual through the RPL process, or RPL mentoring requires specific competencies (Kenniscentrum EVC, 2007). The EuroguideVAL project highlighted the ability to deliver information in a straightforward way while supporting the identification of competencies, and providing clear feedback after the assessment process (Duvekot and Konrad, 2007). Similarly, having specific nominated staff within each major discipline can positively support RPL delivery in practice (Popova-Gonci, 2009).

The candidate will benefit from support with portfolio preparation, along with identification of learning and appropriate evidence to support the case (Conrad and Wardrop, 2010; Hamer, 2010). The complexity of the reflective process is ably captured by Moon (1999), as follows:

*“Ill-structured, ‘messy’ or real life situations, asking the ‘right’ kinds of questions... tasks that demand the ordering of thoughts, tasks that require evaluation,”* (Moon, 1999).

Support for academic staff engaged in the assessment of RPL is important to develop practice and ensure validity and fairness within the process. The focus moves from the teaching process to the learner themselves and what has been learned. This shift in emphasis implies a considerable cultural change for staff. In order to meet the Council of the European Union 2012 recommendation on the Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning, the learning system must position itself to meet these new responsibilities and to provide resources for its efficient delivery.

## 2.5 Summary

The review of the literature presents consistent themes which follow from the exploration of these national and international contexts and has revealed particular gaps which lend support to the research enquiry process. The review also addresses the research question to identify current policies, frameworks and processes used to support the recognition of learning, formal, informal, accredited and experiential.

The literature clearly suggests that good practice with RPL should be supported by an international and national policy framework within which individual practice will be enabled and supported by clear definitions and comparable data capture, where strategic direction is supported by policy and underpinned by clarity as to roles and responsibilities within its provision.



The significant policy developments at a national and European level have served to put RPL at the centre of the lifelong learning agenda for the foreseeable future. However as noted by Van Kleef (2014), the realities of providing for the many and varied aspects of support which underpin quality RPL provision provide very real challenges for the formal learning system. These challenges are best addressed as part of a coherent sector wide approach which in turn would foster links between practitioners.

The literature around RPL highlights the importance of initial signposting and information for the RPL candidate, the importance of mentoring and support along with support for the assessment of RPL (Kenniscentrum EVC, 2007; Quality and Qualifications Ireland, 2013; University Sector Framework Implementation Network, 2011; UNESCO, 2012). The adoption of a cohesive national framework supporting the variety of local approaches would act to nurture and support its provision in practice.

A common approach in terms of defining RPL nationally as cited by the CEDEFOP Country Report for Ireland (2014), would support RPL provision, provide for evolution of practice and lend coherence with reporting and data collection. The call for collection of data provided by the Expert Group on Future Skill Needs (2011), would act to strengthen the many approaches to RPL.

As stated by Auzinger and Luomi-Messerer (2014), much work remains to be done to enable support networks for academic staff in taking a best practice approach to the design and writing of learning outcomes with the assessment of non-formal and informal learning in mind. Such initiatives will become increasingly important as the formal learning system adapts to accommodate an increasingly diverse cohort.

Common features of good practice in RPL in Higher Education extracted from the literature review:

- National policy framework aligned to relevant international frameworks
- Measures to address the issue of funding
- Clarity of definitions and meaning
- Coherent data capture
- Clear roles and responsibilities at system and institutional level
- Robust quality assurance
- Structure to support sharing of good practice and development of capacity and capability
- Structures to support applicants

These features will be included in the empirical research phase and discussed in more detail in the chapters on findings and conclusions and recommendations.

### 3 Methodology

#### 3.1 The research question and the scope of the research

This research was undertaken in response to a call issued by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, 2014). The call sought research proposals under the title of 'A current overview of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in Irish Higher Education' to respond to the following specific questions.

- *What are the current policies, frameworks and processes that are used to support the recognition of learning, formal, informal, accredited and experiential?*
- *How can these current policies and practices become more coherent and consistent across the higher education sector in Ireland?*
- *In addition to these questions the scope of the research was further expanded to include: an exploration of the current practices relating to RPL in the Continuing Professional Development of staff in higher education institutions in Ireland.*

These questions align well with the 2013 QQI RPL consultation document and the findings of the Cedefop Ireland report of the European Inventory on Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning 2014. Some of the practicalities of the research development were defined at this call for proposal stage, as it was to determine the resources available as well as the overall timeframe of the research.

#### 3.2 Methodology

In order to answer the research questions, the research design has taken a mixed methods approach. Building from the research question as posed, the researchers sought to explore the current policies, frameworks and processes.

Figure 1 presents a schematic of the four sample populations considered within the research footprint, namely student, workplace, higher education, and policy makers.

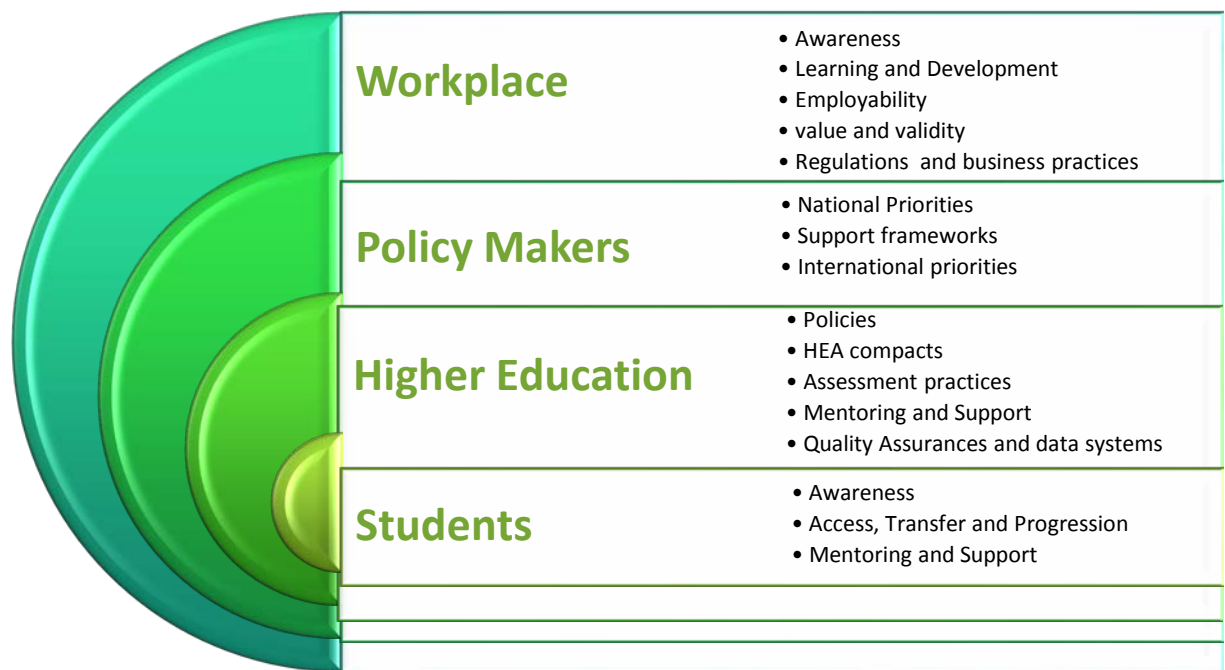


Fig.1 Sample populations of the research

When considering the actors in higher education in Ireland there are a number of perspectives which one can take. In general it can be said that the sector is comprised of the universities, institutes of technology and other higher education providers including smaller private and discipline-specific providers.

Precise quantification of the higher education sector in Ireland is difficult to ascertain due to the range of institution types which make up the sector. The information and data available for the publically-funded higher education sector (which comprises a majority of the registered students) is captured by the HEA regarding programmes and enrolment of part-time, full-time, and remote students. This data presents a particular snap shot of activity, however, it excludes the data for providers who fall outside the remit of the HEA.

The National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning was established to enhance the quality of the learning experience for all students at 3<sup>rd</sup> level. In this role the Forum engages with managers, leaders and teachers in public and private higher education institutions in Ireland, of which there are 38 in all. The participant pool of higher education institutions for the study was drawn from the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning institutional contact list with each institution invited to propose a participant for interview in the study.

	University	IOT	Constituent college of university with Compact <sup>4</sup>	Other	Total number
Total research sample	7	14	3	14	38
Publically available information on RPL	7	14	2	12	35
RPL Policy publically available	5	9		2	16
HEA Compact Available	7	14	3	2	26
Participated in Research	5	11	1	5	22

Table 3 Overview of research participant institutions

### 3.2.1 Research methods – Desk review

The intention of the desk review was to explore the public facing information provided by higher education institutions in relation to RPL and the extent to which RPL is included within institutional strategic compact agreements with the HEA.

Information relating to 35 of the possible 38 institutions was reviewed to ascertain the public facing information available regarding RPL, as outlined in Table 3 above. Currently it is impossible to accurately define the student pool represented by this institutional grouping due to the range of institution types but it can be concluded that these 35 institutions represent the vast majority of registered students in higher education in Ireland.

From the 38 institutions, publically available RPL policies from 16 higher education institutions were reviewed to identify the key elements and aspects of the policies and how they pertain to the student, academic, and support staff and associated systems. These policies represent 71% of the enrolled student population according to statistics available from the HEA (Higher Education Authority, 2014a).

In total, 26 higher education institutions developed strategic compact agreements with the HEA, detailing the strategy they will employ for the period 2014 – 2016. Of this cohort, 13 institutions made specific reference to RPL or its associated processes within their strategic documents. The 13 institutions that have made reference to RPL represent 48% of the HEA

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<sup>4</sup> In the context of institutional compacts, constituent colleges of universities are those who are linked in the governance structures of a university but have established their own institutional compact agreement with the HEA.

defined student population which includes full-time, part-time and remote student registrations (Higher Education Authority, 2014b).

### 3.2.1 *Research methods – Empirical research*

The empirical research phase comprised of a number of studies of the different actors as identified through the literature review.

The cohorts can be defined as:

- higher education institutions (appendix a, appendix b & appendix c)
- students (appendix f)
- policy makers (appendix e)
- employer groups (appendix d)

### 3.3 Data Gathering

Considering the actuality of RPL as it is practiced within the higher education institutions and seeking to build as valid a picture as possible of the lived experience of practitioners, an in-depth interview approach was selected as the most appropriate research method. An outline of the anticipated interview structure was provided in advance to ensure that the institution could make an informed decision in selecting the representative. In total 22 of the possible 38 higher education institutions participated in the research. This included eleven IoTs, five universities, and six other higher education institutions. As defined under the data available pertaining to student enrolments from the HEA, this study represents 53% of IoT, 41% of university, and 6% of other institution student enrolments (Higher Education Authority, 2014b).

In considering the student perspective, the Union of Students in Ireland (USI) as the representative body of the interests of higher education students in Ireland was invited to participate in the study. National and local vice president officers for academic affairs and quality assurance were consulted to provide a student perspective. A vice president officer for academic affairs in a higher education institution was interviewed in depth as part of the research (appendix F).

In seeking to include the view of policy makers and influencers, QQI was consulted as a state agency established under the Quality Assurance and Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 2012 with responsibilities including maintaining the NFQ and the effectiveness of quality assurance (QQI, n.d.) (appendix E).

In researching the employer cohort, due to the diversity and range of employer and professional bodies active in Ireland, the research focused on associations with known interest in the area. Nine professional bodies and employer representative bodies were

contacted initially. This grouping was not intended to be representative of all employers but rather to provide some specific insights in the time that the research allowed. Four of those contacted consented to be included in the study through a case study approach.

### 3.4 Data processing and analysis

Analysis in the current study involved indexing the interview transcripts and reducing the data to meaningful categories based on the frequency of response and established themes in the literature following Braun and Clarke (2006, 2013) thematic analysis. These responses allowed the generation of summary themes and also provided numerous direct quotations which have been included in the report.

### 3.5 Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance for the work was sought and granted by the Cork Institute of Technology Research Ethics Committee this was received and noted by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning Research Ethics Committee.

## 4 Research Findings

### 4.1 Higher education policy framework

Institutional compacts, which are an outcome of a process of strategic dialogue between the HEA and the individual institutions, in addition to providing benchmarks and measurement instruments, provide a valuable insight and institutional perspective on performance, priorities and aspirations for the particular institution.

In the context of this research exercise, the content of these compacts was reviewed (appendix C) in order to determine the importance attached to RPL within the institutional responses.

#### 4.1.1 Review of compacts

The number of institutions in each higher education sector with specific reference to RPL included in the terms of their published compact agreement is indicated in Figure 2 below. In total, 13 of the 26 compacts contained a reference to RPL or associated systems.

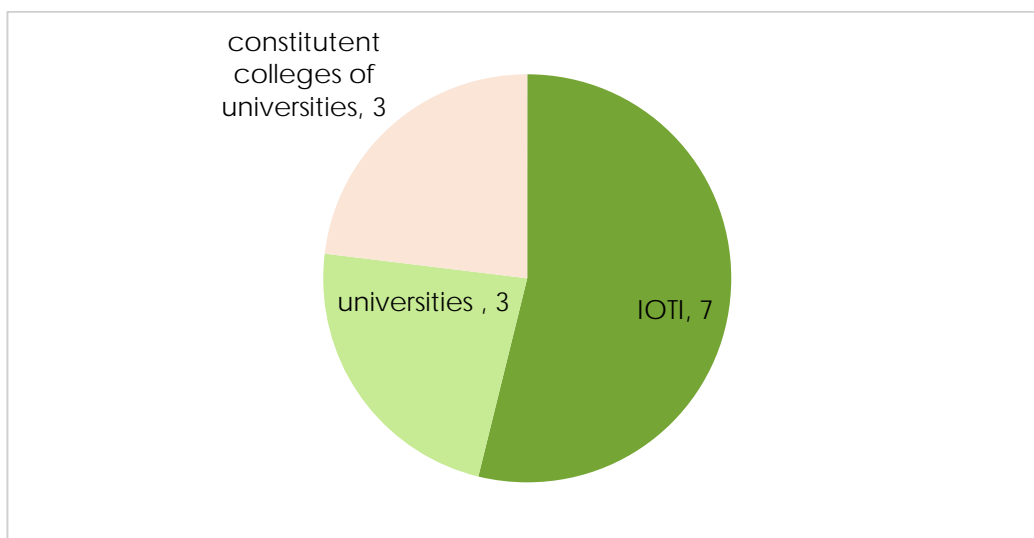


Fig. 2 Inclusion of RPL in Institutional compacts per Institution group

A further analysis included consideration of the contexts in which RPL was mentioned in the compact documents. It has emerged that some commonalities exist, with nine of the institutions including a reference to RPL under their 'participation and lifelong learning' performance indicator, four institutions referring to its importance in the development of 'regional clusters', three institutions in 'institutional consolidation' and one institution in its 'retention and progression rates'. One institution did not include reference to RPL in its main objectives but rather within the section of the compact which considered how the stated

objectives would be verified which they believed through ‘excellent teaching and learning and quality of the student experience’.

The review of the compacts also extracted the intended role of RPL in the context of the institution strategies within the timeframe of the compact agreements. Table 4 below summarises the findings.

	Number of Institutions	University	Institute of Technology	Constituent colleges of universities <sup>5</sup>
<b>Entry (advanced or non-standard)</b>	11	4	6	1
<b>Exemptions</b>	3	1	2	
<b>Full academic award</b>	1		1	
<b>Increase RPL activity</b>	2		1	1
<b>Policy</b>	7	2	5	
<b>Procedures, policy, staff development, information sources</b>	2		1	1

Table 4 Role of RPL as included in Compact Documents

#### 4.1.2 Review of institutional policies

A desk review was also conducted on the outward facing RPL policies and information sources available from Irish higher education institutions to explore the implications for maintaining academic standards and rigour within their processes. Eighteen policies were reviewed which uncovered some common themes:

- Explicit procedures and scope for the incorporation of RPL into programmes, modules, assessment within a higher education institution
- Explicitly stated policy requirements on mechanisms by which RPL fits within the general operations of the institution and how it is to be managed within such a system
- The use of transferable standards including learning and programme outcomes and national framework level descriptors
- Role division, responsibilities of the institution, staff members, and the learner
- Academic rigour through quality assurance procedures which are clear and transparent to all stakeholders
- Integration of RPL within existing structures including student supports
- Linkages with national and local policy and procedures through references to published position papers

<sup>5</sup> In the context of institutional compacts, constituent colleges of universities are those who are linked in the governance structures of a university but have established their own institutional compact agreement with the HEA.



- Limitation and exceptions of the system within the individual institutions or sub-sections of the institutions

In some of the policies and information sources the importance of maintaining the autonomy of the academic units was emphasised. Placing limitations on RPL learning claims due to external bodies or other programme requirements was also identified as important in maintaining the academic standards of programmes.

In keeping with the standards as set out by ENQA (2005), regular policy review was seen as necessary to ensure that the content of policies remained relevant and in alignment with the direction of the institution. This review schedule also assists in ensuring that current thinking and national and international policy developments are incorporated into policy evolution at an institutional level.

One key finding from the review of the external facing policies and information sources is that there is no clear or consistent standard approach adopted by all institutions to RPL, which presents a difficulty for the potential learner. Thus far, the analysis suggests that not all institutions are at an advanced stage in their development of RPL.

#### *4.1.3 Quality and Qualifications Authority of Ireland*

For the purpose of this research an in-depth interview was undertaken with staff with responsibility for RPL within QQI in order to ascertain their perception of the current situation and to better understand their role. QQI undertook an extensive consultation process commencing in 2013 through its Green Paper on the Recognition of Prior Learning (Quality and Qualifications Ireland, 2013). The Green Paper summarised the situation in Ireland at that time and focused on the Recommendation of the European Council (2012), while highlighting some of the challenges for RPL within the education system.

The main themes arising from the interview are addressed below:

#### **RPL and QQI**

In analysing the landscape of RPL in higher education in Ireland QQI identifies a gap between what it can see and what it can do in terms of developing and supporting RPL nationally. QQI can influence the quality assurance of RPL activities, including how RPL is implemented for admission to programmes, and at programme approval stage. The manner in which learning outcomes are assessed through alternative methods is also within its scope where it can issue guidelines to providers. QQI can explore how RPL is implemented within institutions in terms of practice and how it is included in the quality assurance systems of the institution. QQI may also issue tools or guidelines on RPL processes to assist in the development of practice.

In looking at the micro level of the domestic scene in order to determine the needs of learners and the higher education sector, it is necessary to look at data collection or RPL activity levels, which is viewed as fundamental by QQI.

A review of existing data collection raises the question of what is being included by institutions in their activity statistics. The inclusion by some institutions, but not all, of applicants with previously assessed formal material and professional qualifications provides an inconsistent picture. A prerequisite is required for common definitions and statistics in order to compile baseline statistics to measure RPL. Nationally, gathering concise data will require standard reporting formats. Until an agreed data set for the development of metrics is available it will be difficult to measure progress in the area. In addition, identifying the incentives for providers engaging in RPL should be part of the development of a national policy.

Introducing an interdepartmental approach to a national policy so that the views of employers are included would be worthwhile. It is also worth considering the overall purpose and motivation for RPL. On a national level, QQI deemed significant two key outcomes which were presented by Patrick Werquin at the Irish Presidency Conference on 'Quality Assurance in Qualification Frameworks'. The first is that one should 'use the qualification framework lens and not the programme lens'. Secondly, the focus should be to 'have coherent systems and not necessarily coherent practices'. There is also a necessity to develop a common understanding of the benefits of RPL as system efficiency, an economical gain, and also in facilitating diversity.

In the opinion of the QQI interviewees the concept of credit and more specifically the idea of credit being neutral of programmes may prove problematic. It is also necessary to recognise the regulatory push in certain sectors for qualifications.

In recent times, areas such as childcare and adult care have seen the move towards a more regulated care system. These changes need to be responded to by education providers.

Close communication with employers and employer representative bodies will be essential in order to anticipate and respond proactively to these regulatory changes.

The apprenticeship training system is one of the main sectors which experienced substantial difficulty since the economic downturn and it would benefit from an RPL approach. The HEA has recently published their data strategy which outlines dedicated progression pathways available to learners in higher education.

It is unclear how the development of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) will impact on demand for RPL and accreditation. It is not evident that education providers are prepared for the questions which MOOCs will raise in terms of academic rigour, the resulting certification, and how it fits within existing systems.

In summary the following points were raised:

- considerations surrounding the development of a national policy and strategy
- the role of QQI in terms of informing and monitoring practice nationally.
- key considerations which providers should contemplate when developing RPL processes and practice such as quality assurance, admission processes and programme approval stages
- external factors such as regulatory changes or other educational developments which highlight the changing dynamic of participants.

Some additional points raised by QQI are consistent with the conclusions of the literature review around quality assurance, data capture and clarity of definition and meaning

## 4.2 Higher Education Institutions

The research explored current practice in RPL in Irish higher education institutions through a series of in-depth interviews, the interview guide is available in appendix B. In order to contribute to the exploration of coherence and consistency in the current policies and practices, the interviewees were asked to define their institutions' understanding of RPL, to detail the policy in relation to RPL, as well as some specific questions relating to processes and procedures.

### 4.2.1 Defining Recognition of Prior Learning

In addressing the question regarding an institution's definition or understanding of RPL, most of the research participants included reference to non-formal, informal and formal learning within their operating definitions of RPL. Some also considered RPL as fundamental to their access, transfer and progression processes. In some institutions, RPL is considered in the context of internal transfers between programmes or between institutions in institutional transfer agreements such as links programmes or direct entry from further education courses. Other institutions would not necessarily consider these well-defined formal learning transfers as part of their RPL activity. RPL is referenced by some providers as underlying enterprise engagement activities in the context of work based learning and the development of focused customised courses in response to enterprise learning needs. It can be concluded that, while similarities exist and there is broad agreement, there is not a single, coherent, encompassing understanding of RPL in higher education in Ireland.

It could also be concluded that, in general, the understanding of the role of RPL derived from these interviews indicates synergy or alignment with broader areas such as equity of access and lifelong learning,

*'... greatly values the life, formal learning and workplace experiences of learners and will recognise knowledge or experience previously gained in these contexts... RPL may be used as a supplement or alternative to formal learning...'*

### 4.2.2 RPL Policies

All responding institutions have a policy in relation to RPL. While the majority reported that the policy exists at a central level in the institutions, many reported that the autonomy of academic schools and departments takes precedence and that this governs how the procedures for claims are implemented in practice. This is indicative of the variety of

academic governance arrangements within some institutions. It was also reported that these practices vary from academic unit to academic unit within many institutions. When asked to indicate if the policy allowed for RPL in some specific application types within the institution, the responses varied.

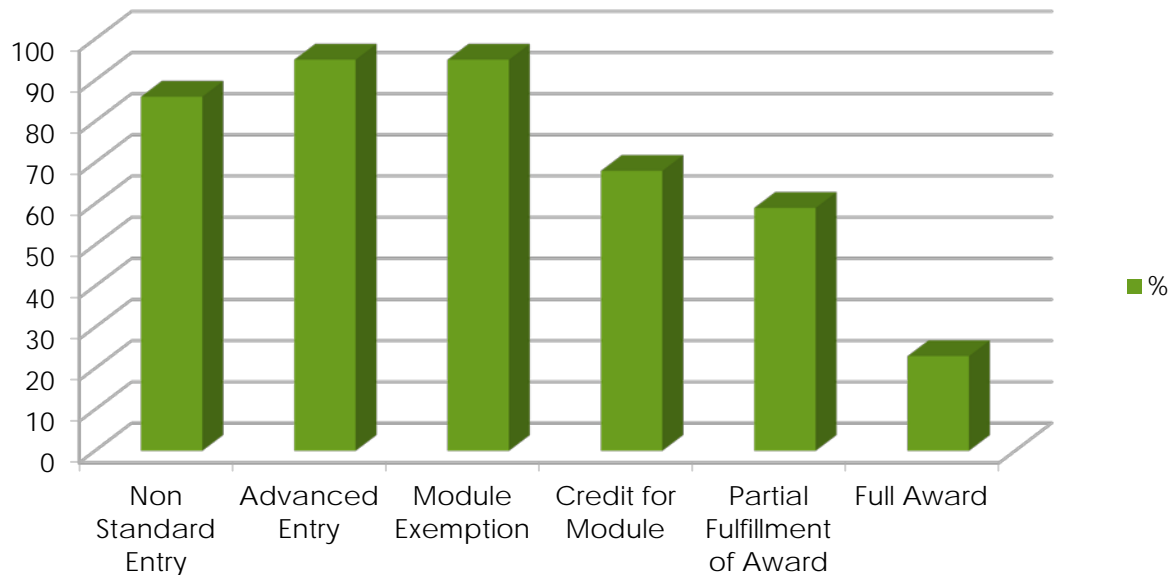


Fig. 3 Application of RPL within Institutions

The responses indicate the broad spectrum of how RPL is used within institutions to facilitate learners with prior learning. As can be seen from Fig. 3 most institutions consider claims for RPL in relation to advanced entry to courses and in the case of module exemptions, while fewer consider claims for full awards based on evidence of prior learning.

#### 4.2.3 Organisation and management of RPL processes

The organisation and management of the RPL processes within institutions varies considerably, with a wide variety of structures described by the respondents. Some institutions have dedicated staff to assume a central role in supporting students and staff in documenting, assessing and reporting on the outcomes of RPL applications.

The responsibility and autonomy of the department, school, college and disciplines is very prominent in the approaches adopted by many institutions stemming from academic governance structures, resulting in a wide variation across and between the responding institutions. The role of the Registrar and the head of school or department were also identified as key in supporting the RPL process and ensuring alignment with institute-wide quality assurance processes by many of the respondents. Depending on the level of the

programme being applied for, the Dean of undergraduate or graduate studies was also included by some respondents in their description of the various structures involved.

In the majority of the institutions the process involves a number of staff in terms of support, assessment, reporting and ensuring the integrity of the process and the programmes are maintained.

*'Responsibility for implementation of the policy is then designated to the individual Schools and Colleges, with oversight from the Admissions and Graduates Studies offices'*

A clear appeals process for RPL claims is in existence in some, but not all, of the institutions that took part in the study, of those who do facilitate appeals on the outcome of the RPL process, it is managed through the central appeals processes in the case of exemptions sought. It was unclear from the responses if there was an alternative process in place for appeals on the outcomes of the advanced or non-standard entry applications processes.

Exploring the organisation structures for the RPL process within the participating institutions, the respondents were asked if there were specific staff members identified to provide information and to support the applicants through the application process. Figure 4, summarises institutions with staff support for the application process of students.

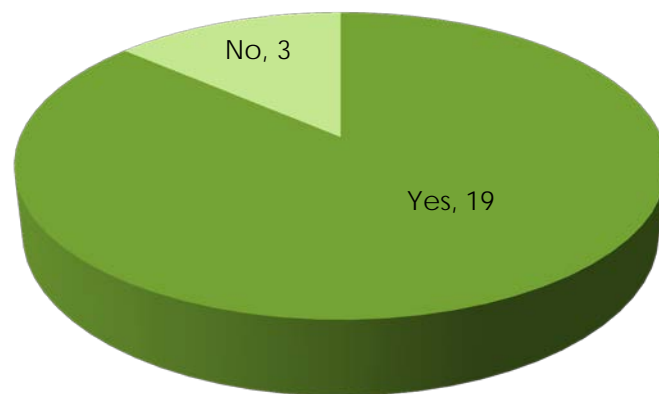


Fig. 4 Staff support application process of students

Where institutions identified staff with responsibility for supporting the application through the process, the individuals identified were often heads of department, module assessors, programme coordinators, or other staff from the particular academic department or unit involved. In the majority of cases this support role is *ad hoc* and additional to the staff

member's other duties. Two of the institutions have a dedicated function allocated to the support of applicants in the process.

#### 4.2.3.1 *Examples of institutional approaches*

The following extracts from the interview transcripts indicate approaches that have been adopted by individual institutions to effectively organising and managing the recognition of prior learning process.

##### **Institution A:**

Using the standard application form

'The application form for the college is used as the central point for gathering the initial indication from learners if they want to be considered for advanced entry or module exemptions. There is a box which they tick on the form, which is then processed and followed up by admission via email requesting a transcript of results, syllabi of the course previously done or other information which should be considered. Admissions on receipt of the documentation set up a separate folder for each applicant on a common drive containing the information which is then forwarded to the relevant department and course director. The course director then evaluates the information, completes a form and returns it to admissions who issue the offer accordingly. '

Note: the process seems to relate more readily to the processing of applications for the recognition of prior formal learning.

##### **Institution B:**

The RPL Team is a subcommittee of, and reports to the Examination Board. Its membership consists of the RPL Coordinator, Head of Assessment and Internal Examiner(s).

The RPL team is responsible for the following:

- Development of RPL policy and procedures. The Programme Director is responsible for their approval.
- Determining if exemption should be granted in the case of recognition of Prior Certified Learning;
- Determining the level of specific credit and the marks to be awarded to a learner in the case of submission for recognition of prior experiential learning;
- Determining whether the learner should be required to present further evidence in support of his/her submission, or that the learner might rewrite the submission or repeat the interview;
- Forwarding to the External Examiner and Examination Board a statement detailing the number of credits which are recommended for award at each level;
- Recording and monitoring RPL decisions. Evaluation of RPL process.
- Ensuring that the integrity of the academic standard of the award is observed.

RPL Coordinator

- Coordinates all aspects of the RPL process.
- Communicates on behalf of the RPL Team with the learner
- Provides guidance to the applicant regarding their eligibility for RPL.

- The RPL coordinator in conjunction with Internal Examiner will devise appropriate alternative assessment.
- The RPL Coordinator will provide assistance and guidance to the applicant in developing their portfolio.

#### Head of Assessments

- Reviews and advises on all RPL Assessment mechanisms
- Ensures RPL assessment mechanisms are consistent with and are integrated with the Programme Assessment Strategy.

#### Internal Examiner

- Is a member of academic staff with subject expertise in the area of the submission;
- Is not involved in providing guidance or support to the RPL applicant;
- Examines the documentation, or other material, which has been presented and interviews the learner.
- Establishes whether academic learning has taken place as a result of the experience and ensures that this is current i.e. not learning which may have since been forgotten;
- Present to the RPL team a statement detailing the results of the RPL process.

#### Role of Education Board and Academic Council

- The RPL team produces an annual report which summarises all ratified RPL recommendations. The Education Board will review the report and all RPL progress in the year. Any amendments to RPL policy and Arrangements are submitted to the Education Board for Approval. The RPL Report is approved by the Education Board and submitted to Academic Council. Any amendments to RPL policy and Arrangements are submitted to Academic Council for approval.

Note: in this case considerable attention has been paid to the various roles in the process and the collation of data

### **Institution C:**

RPL is a central function in this institution and works with the schools and departments on promoting and making visible the opportunity to seek recognition for prior learning. RPL resources are allocated to mentor and support students through the application process and to work with partner companies to build RPL opportunities into skills development. There is a focus on valuing experiential learning and submission of portfolios of evidence is supported throughout. Data is collated on the applications received under each module code in a database which is integrated with the student record systems. Staff development on RPL is supported through regular workshops and a module on a Masters in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education.

Note: In this case central management of the RPL function has the benefit of capitalising on cross and inter-departmental learning on the assessment of RPL and ensuring consistency for all students of the institute.

### **Institution D:**

A regional alliance of institutions has developed an online presence which provides information on RPL and the opportunity for an applicant to register for a module and develop an e-portfolio against a programme which they have identified in one of the partner institutions. The approach aligns with a broader partnership between the regional institutions.

Note: in this case the development of a system to manage enquiries and applications for RPL has enabled the alliance to ensure consistency in approach for students submitting a portfolio.

#### 4.2.4 *Limits applied to RPL cases*

The research explored the application of credit limits to a particular candidate's claim to have their prior learning recognised within the institution. This was further elaborated by exploring whether different limits were set in award and non-award years within a particular programme.

Due to the differences in governance arrangements and variation in procedures, the central general policy on RPL and associated limits to claims, is sometimes superseded by the autonomy of the various academic units. These limits are further reinforced in relation to external factors, such as professional body accreditation procedures. In some cases the external professional body imposes limits on the level of exemption, if any, that is permissible within a particular programme or stage of a programme. Institutions generally reported limits in the amount of RPL credit available in relation to the award year of a programme. These limits varied between institutions from 10% to 50% for claims for the recognition of prior experiential learning in award stage. In a minority of cases there is no limit applied to the claims for prior experiential learning in an award stage.

The classification of the resulting award was the most cited reason for the consideration of limits at an award stage. In terms of prior formal learning at an award stage limits were also reported. In most cases this related to the HETAC ruling which requires 60 credits of new learning at award stage. In some cases, the possibility of allowing claims for recognition of prior formal learning in award stage is considered but with the implication that the resulting award may be unclassified. The following quotes indicate the variation in approach across institutions.

*'... in a non-award stage of a programme, there is no upper limit to the number of modules which may be exempted through recognition of prior certified learning'*

*'... must complete a minimum of two years of a programme'*

*'... exemptions at award level will only be granted under exceptional circumstances and must be approved by the Examination board. Learning demonstrated to gain such exemption will be assessed and graded'*



In summary, institutions vary when setting RPL limits, however, they tend to make distinctions generally between award and non-award stages and between experiential and formal learning.

#### 4.2.5 Recognition of prior learning in various disciplines and levels

The manner in which RPL is applied in the various disciplines and at different levels on the framework in their institutions was explored through the interviews with the higher education participants. These responses again illustrated the differences between what is theoretically possible, in line with the institutional policies, and what is actually permissible determined by the particular academic unit, as a result, in some cases, of external influences. While all respondents reported that RPL is theoretically possible across all disciplines; several reported restrictions that apply in practice, such as:

- Limits applied in response to external professional body requirements
- Limitations in capacity and capability for assessment of evidence of prior learning
- Limitations due to collaboration with another international provider on an award
- Specific exclusion of RPL in relation to elements of programmes (e.g. RPL is not allowed for practical placement elements of some programmes)
- Specific exclusion of RPL entirely from some courses (e.g. Masters course for which no RPL claims will be considered)

When considering the application of RPL at various levels on the NFQ there was a considerable diversity in the responses. In general, it emerged that RPL is rarely facilitated in award stages and, while in some institutions RPL is theoretically possible up to Level 10 on the NFQ, it has seldom, if ever, been used to this extent.

*'It is for the different colleges to design and agree local arrangements for the implementation of this policy in keeping with the university's strategic activities and in the context of subject and professional body requirements'*

#### 4.2.6 RPL Data

Respondents were asked to estimate, on an annual basis, the number of claims processed in their institution based on

- a. prior formal learning
- b. prior informal and non-formal learning
- c. a combination of types of learning

The responses to this question are influenced by the overall consideration of what constitutes RPL within each institution's operating definition. The variety of definitions of RPL gathered in

the interviews may indicate that certain cohorts (such as those transferring internally from one course to another, or those undertaking planned work-based learning modules) can significantly skew the responses.

Where respondents were in a position to estimate the numbers at an institutional level, most reported single digit figures for each category of application, when internal transfers and planned work-based learning cohorts were excluded. Of the 22 institutions who participated in the research, 14 estimated the numbers of applications for recognition of evidence of prior learning processed on an annual basis. For these 14 institutions the estimate of cases for the recognition of prior formal learning is approximately 1,300 in total and the estimate for cases of non-formal and informal learning is approximately 450 in total.

The variation in understanding of what constitutes RPL prevents the accurate comparison of activity across institutions. A more significant barrier to the collation of meaningful responses is the reality that this information is either not collected or not centrally collated in many institutions. This is highlighted in the quote below.

*'...it is difficult to estimate the number of applications. These would come through a number of different avenues'*

#### 4.2.7 Assessment

Respondents were asked questions which sought to explore the capacity, capability and practice in relation to the academic assessment of claims for RPL within their institution. In exploring assessment practice, the research sought to establish whether evidence of prior learning could be awarded a grade at the assessment stage of a higher education academic programme. While over two thirds of institutions award grades for prior learning, this is restricted in award years and also in some disciplines for reasons such as professional body requirements. Figure 5 below summarises.

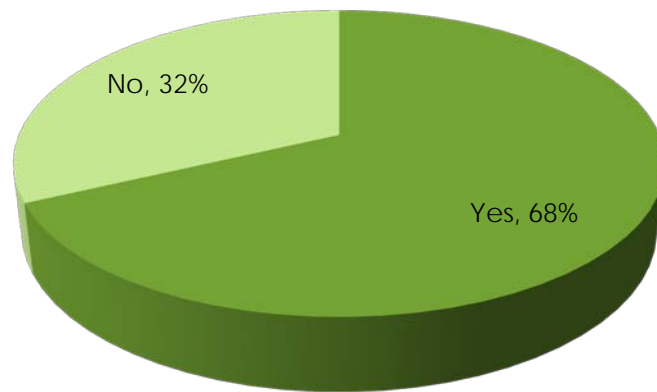


Fig. 5 Grades awarded on the basis of evidence of prior learning

The research also explored whether the concept of non-standard learning and evidence of learning gained in different contexts is considered at the module or programme development stages.

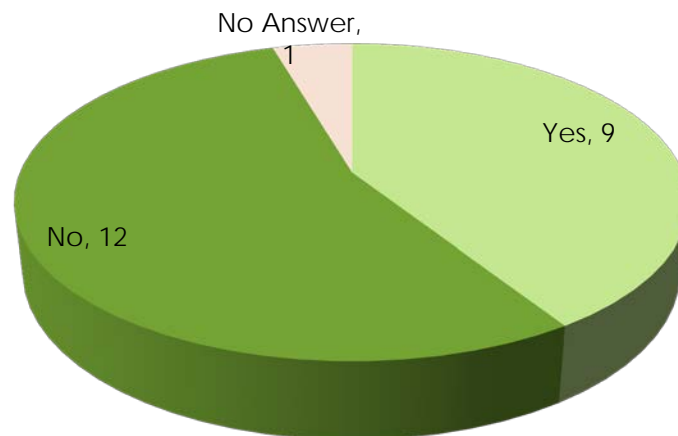


Fig. 6 RPL Considered at Module Design Stages

As Figure 6 illustrates, just over half of respondents acknowledged that it was not an area they actively considered currently. However, there were instances of good practice and proactive approaches to planning for and accommodating applicants with prior learning – particularly where cohorts of learners were anticipated. Of the positive responses most could provide examples of academic units attracting more part-time or mature students wherein non-standard pathways were more likely to be considered at module and assessment design stages.

The drivers for institutions to re-examine module design approaches is considered in the quote below from one of the participants who identifies the changing landscape and profile of students as the impetus to re-think the writing of learning outcomes but also the associated challenges for institutions in implementing such a policy.

*'The culture has been the writing of learning outcomes and building the practice around that but the profile of the learner has changed dramatically. It's not a 'school leaver' any more - the achievement of learning outcomes through non-standard evidence requires a huge leap of faith by an institution and accrediting authority.'*

#### 4.2.8 RPL and Staff Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

The research with regard to continuing professional development focused on two distinct areas. Firstly, the study sought to ascertain the availability of information and training to support academic staff on the implementation of RPL and its assessment and secondly, to determine the extent to which RPL is an avenue available to staff themselves for the purpose of their CPD. In this way, RPL as a field of learning and as a mode of evidencing learning attainment was considered.

Respondents were asked if there were general information or awareness-raising sessions on the RPL process and the student support mechanisms offered to staff in their institutions, Figure 7 summarises the responses.

*'... on average three or four times a semester, general information sessions are given to Institute staff. Additional sessions are organised on request. These requests would normally emanate from Heads of Department or functional areas'*

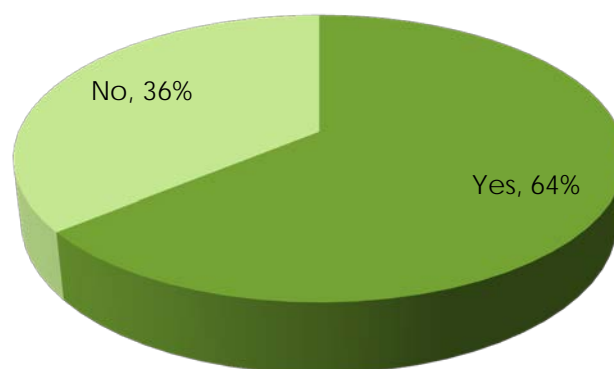


Fig. 7 Staff Information sessions for RPL

In exploring the practice of assessment of applications for prior learning each respondent

was asked to indicate whether their institution offered training or staff development to support the assessment process.

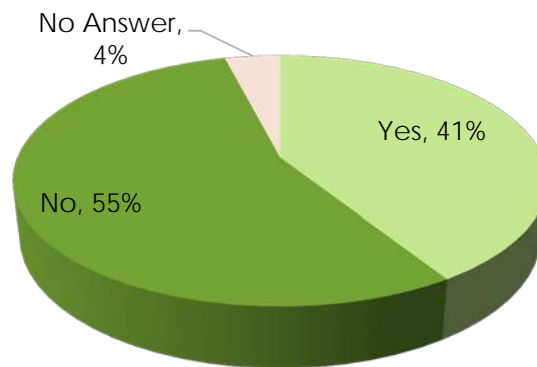


Fig. 8 Staff development offered for RPL assessment

Just over half of the respondents reported, see Figure 8 above, that their institution does not offer specific staff development opportunities to support academic assessors in developing their knowledge, skill and competence in the assessment of RPL claims. However, there were institutions with well-developed processes in place to support work-based learning and other practice-learning activities. These activities could well support the recognition, assessment and certification of evidence of prior learning in the practice domain. While most respondents reported that there were no specific supports in their institutions, a small number did refer to significant progress and innovation in assessment generally which should support development of capability to assess a variety of forms of evidence of learning.

#### 4.2.9 Staff Continuing Professional Development

The participants were asked if the RPL process could be used by their own staff as part of their CPD process within the institution (Figure 9 below). Most respondents replied that the process and principles were the same for staff as for any other applicant which suggests that the responses relate to the role of RPL in facilitating staff to continue their professional development within the context of an accredited destination award. Some indicated that their institutions are in the process of considering and developing professional development models, while for others no structure exists.



Fig. 9 Can Staff use RPL in their professional development?

The question was further refined to explore the situation relating to academic staff in particular as this is the focus of the initial National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning CPD framework.

Again this question resulted in a slight majority of institutions whose academic staff can use RPL in their CPD which is generally part of a recognised accredited destination award in the same way as for the student cohort (Figure 10).

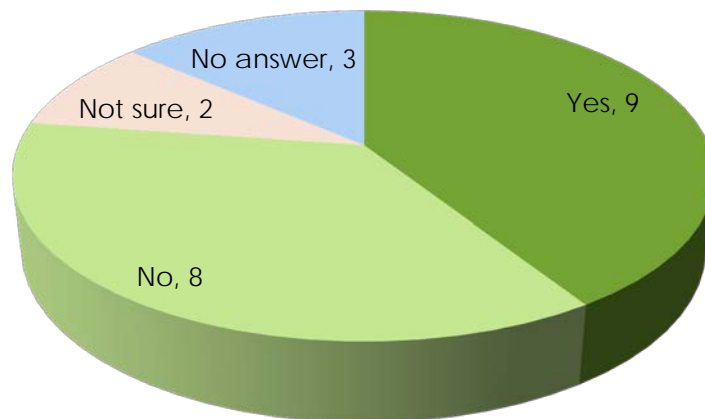


Fig. 10 Can RPL be claimed by academic staff in their professional development?

An interesting point was made with regard to the relevance of RPL for academic staff and is captured in the quote below.

*'As the minimum qualification required to be a lecturer is a PhD, I'm not sure how relevant it is. They have attained the highest qualification they can get in their discipline'*

This illustrates the perception or lack of awareness of CPD requirements or their relevance to academic staff beyond the attainment of an academic award. Another comment received stated that 'CPD activity was not limited to accredited activity'. This comment demonstrates an understanding of the range of CPD types, however, it also suggests that for this respondent RPL is considered only within the context of destination awards whilst the area of CPD is broader than just accredited learning. The co-existence of these views suggests that there is work to be done to raise awareness of teaching and learning CPD in terms of scale and relevance.

In questioning the kinds of evidence that might be used to support these RPL applications some respondents noted, that in line with their general policies and practice, informal, non-formal and formal learning can form part of the evidence. Others indicated that not all of these forms of learning would be accepted while many others did not respond.

The opportunity for staff to collate evidence of their learning and professional development outside of the framework of a destination award was then explored. Respondents were asked if their institutions allowed staff to present evidence of non-formal, informal and formal learning as part of their continuing professional development generally (Figure 11 below).

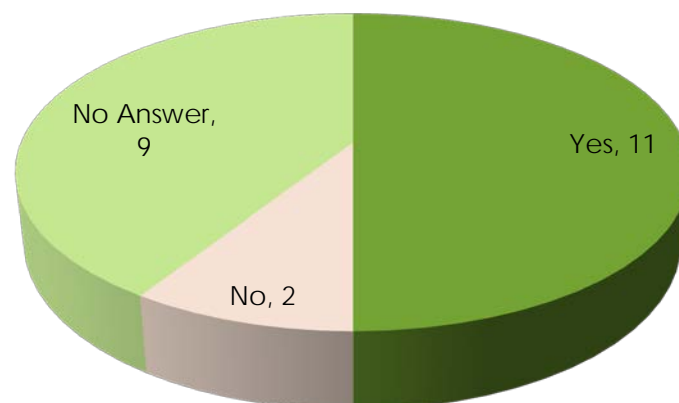


Fig. 11 All forms of learning considered as staff CPD

*'We wouldn't classify research funding attained, journal publications, etc... instead this would be seen to be part of the contribution the staff member is making to the University and not framed as being part of their CPD...'*

In line with the variety of understandings of what constitutes RPL there is similar inconsistency within institutions with regards to what constitutes CPD. As is evident from the quote below, learning which has been acquired relevant to non-accredited staff courses is not seen as being relevant or possible within an RPL system (Figure 11).

*'Generally staff training and development programmes are not accredited and as such RPL would not be relevant...'*

Other institutions reported accredited pathways, for instance Masters programmes in Teaching and Learning which are specifically developed to support formal accredited staff development and learning planning and for which RPL applies in exactly the same way to staff as other learners.

#### 4.3 Good practice in higher education in Ireland

RPL in higher education in Ireland has developed in an organic way and there are some instances of good practice of institutions developing systems or processes that fit within their existing structures and facilitate learners. Some of these practices have been included in the Cedefop Irish Country report on the validation of informal and non formal learning 2014<sup>6</sup> and the FIN RPL in University Sector report<sup>7</sup>. These include but are not limited to the academic programmes in leadership, management and defence studies developed by IT Carlow in collaboration with the Irish Defence Forces at level 6 and 7 of the national framework; a retail degree programme developed by LYIT in collaboration with IBEC and retail Skillnet; A cloud technologies Masters programme developed by CIT in collaboration with EMC and other industry partners a response to industry demand; processes adopted by St Nicholas Montessori School in responding to legislative changes; the utilisation of RPL by schools of nursing within the university sector nationally.

#### 4.4 Learner perspectives

In considering RPL practice from a learner perspective, the research explored the public-facing information available through institution websites (appendix A) of 14 institutes of technology, seven universities, two constituent colleges of universities and 12 other higher education providers in Ireland. The research explored the availability of RPL policy on the websites and whether RPL is mentioned in the online prospectus, as these would be

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<sup>6</sup> [https://cumulus.cedefop.europa.eu/files/vetelib/2014/87062\\_IE.pdf](https://cumulus.cedefop.europa.eu/files/vetelib/2014/87062_IE.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.nfqnetwork.ie/\\_fileupload/FIN%20REPORT%20%28Final%29.pdf](http://www.nfqnetwork.ie/_fileupload/FIN%20REPORT%20%28Final%29.pdf)



important sources of information for current or prospective students and would offer the opportunity to raise awareness among the general student population (Figures 12 & 13).

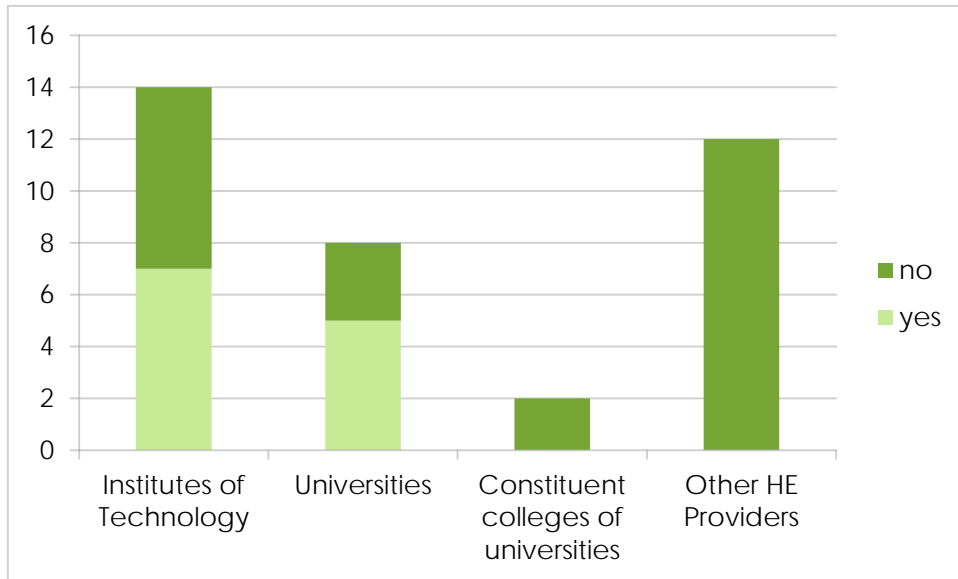


Fig. 12 RPL Policy available on website

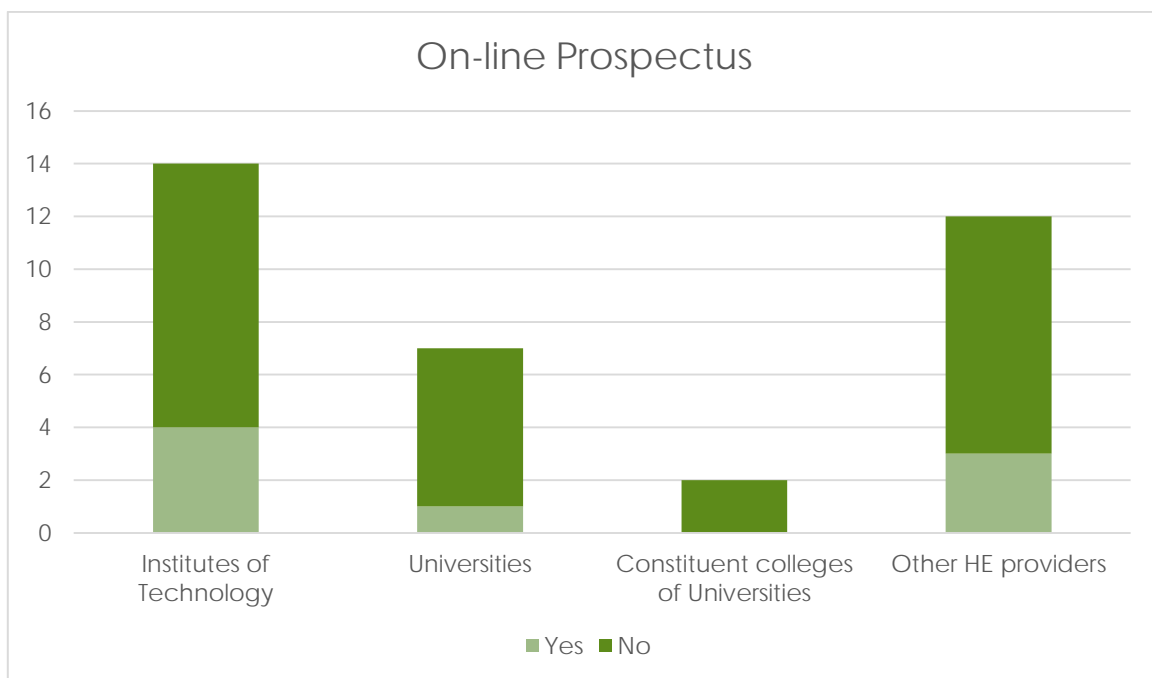


Fig. 13 RPL mentioned in online prospectus

The webpages of the higher education institutions were explored to ascertain if there was direction given to learners in terms of clear signposts for the process of applying to have prior learning recognised or a clearly identified student support function.

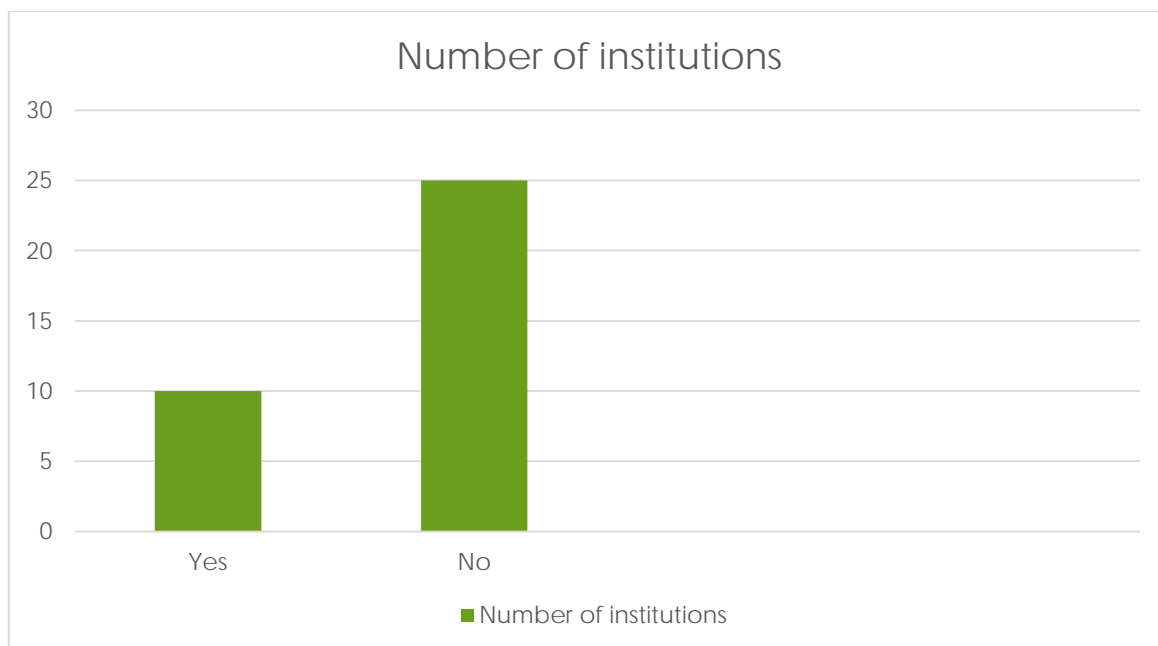


Fig. 14 Signposting or identified student support

These findings indicate the possibility of a low level of awareness among the general student body of the RPL processes(Figure 14). In order to further explore the perspective of the learner, efforts were made to engage with institutional USI education officers through the Union of Students of Ireland. An interview was arranged with an institutional USI Education branch Officer and is summarised below.

#### **USI Institutional Education Branch Officer Perspective on Recognition of Prior Learning**

It might be concluded that very little is known about RPL by the average student with many not aware of RPL or that it exists as an option for them. Equally the process of making and submitting a claim for assessment would be unknown to the majority of students. Another insightful comment relayed the importance of the mindset of initial contact point with the student, whether this person is the head of an academic unit or course coordinator, it was felt that if this person has reservations or questions about RPL, these reservations are transmitted and can be the source of more hesitation or doubt on the part of the student.

In terms of recommendations for supporting learners with RPL, several suggestions were made which considered

- the importance of good visibility or signposting for information on RPL, so candidates can readily find out where to access information on RPL;
- the importance of key academics being well informed about RPL as they act as key focal points for information on RPL terms access; transfer and progression in practice;
- comprehensive training on RPL to be available for all staff to enable its consistent delivery in practice.

Anticipating an increasingly diverse student cohort with a variety of experiences prior to higher education entry and more complex needs it is clear that higher education must be prepared to handle these new realities in terms of having systems and processes in place to deal with these new demands, RPL being a critical component within this.

#### 4.5 Employer Perspectives

In developing a view of the current practice on recognition of prior learning in higher education in Ireland the research also sought to explore some perspectives of employer representative organisations (appendix D). The work focused on exploring structures or processes which support the recognition and valuing of experiential learning in particular, and the intersection of these processes with higher education and the national framework of qualifications where applicable. As the research timeframe was limited, four organisations were identified and the findings from these interviews are presented separately below.

The intention of the resulting vignettes is to demonstrate some approaches adopted by professional bodies in responding to environmental changes such as regulatory requirements or the evolving student profile.

##### 4.5.1 Engineers Ireland

Engineers Ireland is the professional body for engineers and engineering in Ireland and has been representing the engineering profession since 1835. Almost 24,000 members come from every discipline of engineering, and range from engineering students to fellows of the profession. Engineers Ireland responsibilities include:

- Promote knowledge of engineering
- Establish and maintain standards of professional engineering and engineering education
- Provide opportunities for Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for engineers
- Maintain standards of professional ethics and conduct
- Ensure that professional titles are granted to qualified candidates
- Act as the authoritative voice of the engineering profession in Ireland

Engineers Ireland awards professional titles to members according to their qualification, including Fellow (CEng FIEI), Chartered Engineer (CEng MIEI), Associate Engineer (AEng AMIEI), and Engineering Technician (Eng Tech IEI).

#### **Experiential Learning in Engineers Ireland**

In Engineers Ireland RPL is referred to as 'experiential learning'. It is considered within the context of the formation of a professional engineer. This process consists of four steps, namely:

1. Academic qualification
2. A period of initial professional development (IPD) where specific competences are developed in the work environment
3. Assessment by a panel of peers
4. Continuing Professional Development (CPD) (mandatory five days a year requirement)

In the context of stage one of this process if the applicant has not attained the prescribed academic qualification, there is an opportunity for them to demonstrate that they have acquired the standard through their workplace learning. The application is competence-based so applicants develop their portfolio against the defined standards. This approach is also applicable for those who do not have a Level 9 (masters) qualification. The academic qualification for Engineer status changed from an accredited Level 8 qualification to a Level 9 qualification on the 1st of January 2013.

A small number of applicants access this recognition process on an annual basis.

A combination of report submissions and interviews are used to assess applicants. The main motivation for the professional body is that

*'... engineers are doers and problem solvers and the acknowledgement that these skills can be developed outside of an academic setting. Just as academic qualification alone does not make an engineering professional so neither does pure experience...'*

**Damien Owens, Membership Director and Registrar, Engineers Ireland**

In addition to the development of a portfolio there is also a three hour interview to determine if the academic basis of their experience is sufficiently evidenced and understood.

A mentoring process is in place to support members undergoing the experiential learning route. Prior to undertaking this pathway an applicant must seek permission in line with the regulations for the registered professional title of the professional body. It is necessary for the applicant to compile a report (a time frame of one year is allowed) and develop the report with the guidance of a mentor. The assessment panel includes academic representatives and professional representatives.

### **International recognition**

Engineers Ireland as the professional body of Engineering in Ireland is a member of the International Engineering Alliance with other country members including Australia, Canada, USA, UK, New Zealand, and Japan amongst others. The purpose of the alliance is to develop an international register and establish substantial equivalence of qualifications. This facilitates the mobility of engineering graduates. Three levels of graduate attributes and professional competency profiles have been developed: the Washington accord; the Sydney accord; and the Dublin accord. The three accords relate to the time spent in training which roughly equates to the time taken to become an engineer, engineering technologist or engineering technician through a formal academic route. These would equate to an honours degree, ordinary degree and higher certificate qualifications on the NQF.

Key learning

The approach adopted by Engineers Ireland demonstrates

- how work place competencies can be formally linked to and recognised within academic programmes.
- potential transferability of this mechanism to the CPD framework for higher education as proposed by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in higher education in Ireland.

#### 4.5.2 *Certified Public Accountants Ireland*

The Institute of Certified Public Accountants in Ireland (CPA Ireland) is one of the main Irish accountancy bodies with 5,000 members operating in Public Practice, Industry, Financial Services, and the Public Sector in over 40 countries. The Institute has a statutory role in overseeing the professional activities of members and in ensuring the education and training quality standards are maintained.

The role of the Institute includes:

- Regulating CPAs in accordance with the law and the Institute's Code of Ethics in the public interest
- Ensuring that CPAs have current information in all matters relating to their professional work
- Maintaining the highest levels of educational standards for new entrants to the profession
- Representing the interests of members where appropriate

The Institute is active in the profession at national and international level participating in the Consultative Committee of Accountancy Bodies together and was a founding member of the International Federation of Accountants. The Institute is also a member of the *Federation des Experts Comptables Europeens*, the representative body for the main accountancy bodies in 25 European countries.

#### **Recognition of Prior Learning in CPA Ireland**

RPL is used by the professional body in two ways. Firstly, in recognising the prior academic qualifications of graduates of higher education institutions; and secondly in the professional training of members.

In outlining the first approach, the CPA has its own syllabus and assessment strategy as part of the programmes which it offers. When prospective students have qualifications from higher education institutions invariably the syllabus doesn't quite match the syllabus of the CPA. The process involves an assessment of the content of the academic qualification to ascertain the potential for exemptions from elements of the CPA syllabus. No exemptions

based on prior academic qualifications are permitted in the final year of the CPA examinations. The exception to this is other professional body exams which a member may have completed. It can happen that members move from one body to another for a variety of reasons. The existing processes can be complex as the content of syllabi can vary considerably - the mapping exercise is not always on a modular basis but may seek to combine learning from groups of modules. However, the system does support the access, transfer and progression of applicants into the Institute and the Institute does collaborate with higher education providers to support the linking of courses and learning to exemptions in the context of professional qualifications. In fact the respondent reported that higher education providers are tailoring their courses in order to maximise the exemptions that graduates can claim in the CPA professional qualifications.

The second approach adopted by CPA relates to its three year supervised training requirement which is a structured model which comprises six competence areas. The competency requirements are in areas such as financial accounting, taxation, corporate planning, auditing, management, and information systems. In addition to the competence requirements there are also behavioural attributes such as interpersonal skills and sensitivity to business needs which a member needs to demonstrate. Whilst the applicant is training, the learning gained and their behavioural attributes can be recorded against the framework. This is part of the planned training and skill acquisition pathway for the trainee accountant. If the trainee accountant has completed training prior to starting the process with CPA then it is possible for them to include their relevant learning against these six competences and behavioural attributes. They must show evidence of their training context and content so that an informed judgement can be made on its relevance.

The professional body provides relevant information and support to potential and existing members on exemptions and the process of RPL. In order to ensure compatibility and alignment the Institute maintains communication with higher education providers and seeks copies of relevant modules for comparison of content and learning outcomes. The development of online databases of modules by some higher education providers which are accessible to external bodies has made the availability of up to date information much easier.

The Institute does not have a dedicated member of staff for RPL but is available to respond to the questions and queries of potential and current members with regard to the recognition of their prior learning. There is also an information and feature rich website available with a devoted information area about the recognition of prior academic learning, particularly in reference to exemptions.

#### Key learning

- The CPA have developed a very considered system which takes account of both the academic and practice background of individuals who wish to engage with them in professional membership and training development
- Currency of the system is ensure through continuous review and engagement between the CPA and education institutions

#### 4.5.3 *The Royal Institute of Architects of Ireland*

The Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland (RIAI) is the Regulatory and Support body for Architects in Ireland which also provides support services for Architectural Technologists.

The RIAI is designated as the competent authority for architecture in Ireland under EU Directive 2005/36/EC. As the official registration body under the Building Control Act 2007, the RIAI is committed to discharge its obligations for administration of the Register of Architects in Ireland. In addition the RIAI seeks to provide architects with professional training, education and research support. In summary, the RIAI:

- Acts as the Registration Body for Architects in Ireland
- Uses RIAI education policy and the RIAI Matrix of Knowledge, Skills and Competence when accrediting schools of architecture, for prescription by the Minister for the Environment
- Uses RIAI education policy and the Professional Practice Matrix of Knowledge Skills and Competence in Professional Practice Examination to ensure candidates:
  - Fully understand the nature of Professional Architecture Practice
  - Have sufficient knowledge of Irish Law and Contract Procedures
  - Have enough practical experience of all the stages of a building project
  - Have experience and knowledge of the procedures and judgement required to run an architectural practice and provide a full range of architectural services.

### **Recognition of Prior Learning and the RIAI**

RPL is most commonly used in meeting the requirements of the Technical Assessment which stems from Section 14 of the Building Control Act 2007. The assessment is specifically required in reference to access the register of Architects in Ireland. Prior to the inception of the Building Control Act it was possible to perform duties commensurate with that of the role of architect but without having an academic qualification in this specialist area. The Building Control Act aims to facilitate those performing the duties but without the necessary academic qualification to have their learning recognised against standards set out in the Act.

This approach facilitates a diverse group of people who are under this classification. The Institute trialled the process in 2008 and established a Statutory Board in 2010. To date there have been 33 applications through this process (not all complete, with five currently in the assessment process). The motivation for the development of the processes has been in response to sections 21 and 22 of the Act in particular.

An applicant must submit a complete application; there is no pre-screening process whereby permission is sought to proceed with an application. The decision on eligibility to apply and the application/assessment process are combined. There are two to three submission dates per year and the Institute holds briefing sessions for potential applicants to outline the expectations of the applicants and the process. The applicant submits a portfolio of their work against the eleven competence requirements of the role of an architect as set out in Article 46 of the Qualifications Directive. The competences have been expanded to a

series of indicators or checklist against which the applicant must demonstrate their learning and aptitude.

Each application is assessed by three registered architects; the RIAI has a panel of fifteen assessors. Initially the assessors work independently, and then collectively consider the particulars of the application. If there are particular criteria which are not addressed in the application these are identified. The process includes an interview which allows the assessment panel to seek clarifications and further details when and where required.

### **Assessment**

Article 46 contains eleven statements across knowledge, skill and competence against which the applications are assessed. These eleven statements are further expanded into over sixty indicators which are not equally weighted. It is not necessary for the applicant to demonstrate competence in all of the sixty indicators or the eleven criteria. The Board is empowered to explore overall balance in an application and to make a holistic decision.

A restructuring of the process to disentangle the eligibility stage from the portfolio application/assessment process is under consideration by the RIAI.

### **Key learning**

- The approach of the RIAI shows the reaction of a professional body to a regulatory change which had substantive outcomes in terms of sector development and professional title designation.
- It also outlines a competency approach to identifying, capturing and measuring learning.

#### *4.5.4 Institute of Professional Auctioneers and Valuers*

The Institute of Professional Auctioneers and Valuers (IPAV) was established in 1971 as a representative professional body for qualified, licensed auctioneers, valuers and estate agents throughout Ireland. IPAV currently represents over 800 Members and has a National Council which consists of 19 elected Members representing all four provinces.

The objectives of the Institute include:

- To provide an organisation for Auctioneers, Valuers and Estate Agents to protect, advance and promote the professional standards of Auctioneers, Valuers, Estate Agents, Property Managing Agents, Letting Agents and Property Professionals and the promotion in the public interest of the professional competence and to protect the interest of Members as between themselves and as between Members, non-Members and the General Public



- To watch over, promote and protect the mutual interests of the Members, to promote honourable practice, to suppress malpractice and to decide all questions of professional use or courtesy between or among Members
- To provide a system of professional education to achieve the aforesaid objects
- The ethos of IPAV ensures education plays a continuous and significant part in its Members professional development
- IPAV education courses are available to educate aspiring Property Service Providers to the high professional standards expected of an IPAV Member
- IPAV education programmes are delivered to ensure best practice and the highest international standards are achieved. Courses are subject to continuous review and updated to reflect changes in the industry

### **Recognition of Prior Learning and IPAV**

In order to meet new requirements set down by the Financial Regulator for members, the Institute undertook a mapping exercise which links the learning gained through the previous IPAV qualification to 90 credits of learning at Level 6 on the NFQ. In an effort to ensure members could gain a 120 credit Higher Certificate award, two modules were identified as being suitable. One such module is a 'Professional Practice' Module with 25 associated ETCS credits which could be gained through part-time traditional learning or claimed by appropriate evidence of professional practice through the RPL route.

This enables those with the previous qualification to work through a recognised pathway to gain the qualification required to meet current standards. The programme development work was completed in collaboration with Institute of Technology Tallaght, Dublin (ITTD) who also instigated the use of Student Diary Pro, an e-portfolio system developed by ITTD during the REAP project, for individuals to record their learning .

In designing the professional practice module considerable mapping and comparison was undertaken. The core skills and competences for professional practice were identified and specified and a supportive framework is in place to allow those with considerable practitioner experience to map their learning to evidence attainment of the standards.

There has been a considerable learning process in the implementation and refinement of the structures to ensure that it is accessible, repeatable and meets standards. The structures include a lecturer with designated responsibility to support the interactions with the applicants and their portfolio development. The structures ensure flexibility in terms of availability and accessibility and also interim feedback for the applicants.

For IPAV the partnership with ITTD was very important and it recognised the willingness and investment in time and energy from ITTD. In choosing an institution with which to partner, IPAV identified a Dublin-based one as geographically most convenient.

In the three years that the course has been running 25 learners successfully completed the recognition of experience route for professional practice and nine are currently in the

process of doing so. In addition to obtaining the qualification which enables them to continue working in the industry, progression routes have also opened up for graduates.

*... as much flexibility as possible in the system to facilitate all learners is extremely important. In addition, reflecting on the process and systems in place to ensure the best approach is being adopted is also necessary...*

**Peter Brady, Education Director, IPAV**

### **Key learning**

The IPAV case study highlights

- the importance of self-reflection and re-evaluation of processes to ensure they are the most appropriate to facilitate all learners and learning. In the case of IPAV the particular focus was on members with legacy awards which needed updating due to regulatory changes.
- the need of carefully selecting a partner who is willing to work on developing a system which is fit for purpose and maintains academic standards.
- the importance of appropriate tools to assist in gathering and documenting learning in an accessible and structured manner, such as e-portfolios or portfolio templates.

#### 4.6 Limitations of the research

There are some limitations to the research that should be considered here. The findings in relation to the higher education institutions are not complete as not all institutions responded to the invitation to participate in the interview process. However, in terms of student numbers, the respondents represent the majority of higher education in Ireland. Care should be taken in extrapolating the findings for the whole sector based on the participant sample. The research in relation to the information available to potential applicants is comprehensive; however, the timing of the research in terms of both the academic calendar and available time frame meant that the participation of students themselves was very limited.

The employer perspective, developed through in depth explorations of practice with four organisations is limited in terms of the numbers of sectors addressed and does not allow for comparative analysis between different sectors or indeed different organisation sizes in terms of the importance of experiential learning and the links to professionalisation and regulation which might be of interest in developing a national strategy.

#### 4.7 Conclusions

In summarising the key findings from the researchers' review of practice, the following considerations have emerged from the research. These align well with the RPL reports of FIN, EIE and the QAA Scotland guidelines for RPL.

## Key elements of RPL practice in Higher Education

- Clearly defined learning and programme outcomes provide the attainment and assessment structure
- Appropriate collaboration between departments, faculties, and institutions supports consistency in practices and a coherent experience for the learner/applicant
- Clear points of contact, accessible information and adequate supports for the learner/applicant
- Clarity of roles and adequate training and supports for staff involved in the process
- Consistent systems to assist in structuring applications such as paper based portfolio templates and e-portfolios
- Collection of data supports the ongoing development of practice and informs strategy

## 5 Conclusions and Recommendations

Building on the literature review and primary and secondary research phases, this chapter distils the findings into some actionable conclusions and develops some recommendations for practice.

### 5.1 Conclusions

Some of the most significant conclusions from the research are:

- Some notable organic developments of practice in higher education of RPL already exist which can provide benchmarks and guidance for others with less developed processes
- Development of RPL nationally is not limited to higher education as was evident within the professional bodies and employer representative organisations
- There is a general understanding of what constitutes RPL however there is an absence of clarity and a commonly agreed definition of RPL in higher education in Ireland
- Records are maintained by some providers but comparable data and measurable indicators of activity are not currently available across the sector
- There are positive developments at a national and institution level, however alignment between national level and individual institution efforts is not clear
- Institutions have invested time in developing systems to support RPL internally. In some cases there is a variation between stated policies and actual implementation
- In maintaining the quality assurance and robust systems of assessment, staff development for the implementation of RPL is not as proactively supported as it could be

RPL for staff CPD is a positive development however its application could be broadened. In general it is considered in the context of destination awards as opposed to broader learning attainment and professional and self-development as an academic. These conclusions are considered in some more detail below.

#### 5.1.1 Organic development of practice

It is evident from the research that there has been a development of practice within institutions which may, in part, be due to the broader national and international developments and proposals put forward through position papers such as OECD 2008, EGFSN 2011 and Cedefop 2014 and the Springboard initiative. However, as noted in the EGFSN report (2011) practice can 'largely be *ad hoc* and activity can vary widely between education providers'.

#### 5.1.2 Development beyond higher education institutions

In examining the variety of practice it was evident from the research that professional bodies and employer representative organisations are also developing their own systems of

recognition and validation which considers prior learning in the context of established standards and associateships. This finding is reflected in the literature which notes the increased linkages between education, training, labour market and third sector (Cedefop 2014).

### *5.1.3 Absence of clarity and lack of commonly agreed definition*

It is clear from the research that there is general understanding but there is no one, consistent and universally agreed definition of RPL across Irish higher education providers. The respondents provided general statements on their understanding and awareness of RPL in an Irish context, including concepts of informal, non-formal and formal learning and it was generally suggested that it can be used to facilitate more flexible pathways for learners. This is consistent with the literature of the EGFSN 2011 which identified the key areas included in the understandings of what RPL was. However, it is evident from the research that the interpretation of what does or does not constitute RPL varies substantially within and between institutions, with some institutions including internal transfers within RPL and others focusing more on experiential learning recognition. This has implications for developing comparable data across higher education in Ireland.

At a European level, the focus of the literature of Cedefop and European Commission is more on the validation or recognition of informal and non-formal learning and less on prior formal learning. In Ireland, both the review of literature and the empirical research point to the inclusion of all forms of prior learning. However, the limited data available illustrates that Irish higher education institutions recognise prior formal learning more readily and more frequently than experiential learning.

### *5.1.4 Data and measurable indicators*

Linked to the lack of common understanding is the deficiency of comprehensive and comparable data at a national level in the area of RPL. The call for more accurate data collection is reflected in the recommendations of the EGFSN 2011 and the QQI Green paper on RPL 2013.

Institutions could benefit from processes which can assist them to accurately report on the number of claims processed annually.

Without this data set, it is difficult to argue for further resources or support for RPL. In the interviews, respondents made clear that this information is not generally collected. There is also no comprehensive collection of case studies of institutional and organisational practice to support peer learning, development of precedence data, or sharing of practice. Generally, with few exceptions, each institution develops its practice largely in isolation from others and without the benefit of organisational learning that might accrue from the sharing

of experiences. There have been some nationally funded initiatives, such as the Strategic Innovation Funded projects which have supported the exploration and development of practice, as well as sharing guidelines and frameworks for RPL. The continuation of this collaborative work and sharing of practice is supported in the recommendations of the EGFSN report.

In 14 institutions where estimates of activity were available, a total of 1,300 formal learning claims and 450 claims based on experiential learning were processed annually.

#### *5.1.5 National and Institutional level governing structures*

From the perspective of the institutions, the higher education sector is quite fragmented in terms of reporting structures and authority. The role of the HEA as funding agency extends to most but not all of the higher education institutions. QQI has a significant role in relation to quality and awards across further and higher education, however, institutions have varying levels of autonomy in relation to QQI's position papers. Therefore, implementation of a consistent approach is problematic across the institutes of technology, university and other higher education providers. It is unclear from the research if there is a single agency with both the responsibility and the authority to drive the structural reforms needed to ensure that institutions have a common and consistent approach which does not disadvantage one student cohort over another.

The EGFSN supports the idea of a multi-agency approach to drive the development of RPL nationally.

#### *5.1.6 National drivers and initiatives for widening participation*

At the national level, it is apparent that there are many strategic position papers and recommendations pointing to RPL as a way forward to address those disenfranchised by the economic downturn and in meeting the needs of the workplace for the future. RPL is also discussed nationally as a way to reengage those disadvantaged or on the outskirts of education. As a sector, higher education in Ireland appears to have embraced these suggestions in terms of, for example, the Springboard initiatives and in the development of strategic compact agreements incorporating access, transfer and progression. However, maturity of the RPL processes, commitment of resources to the support of the learners, and availability of student and employer guidance varies considerably across institutions. The

To widen participation in education and training the Springboard process requires that participating institutions upload their RPL policy at proposal stage.

inclusion of RPL in the Springboard submissions and the requirement that learners are facilitated demonstrates the effectiveness of this top-down approach.

This view is supported by the literature of the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (Department of Education and Skills, 2011) and the HEA system performance framework 2014-16.

#### *5.1.7 Institutional commitment to RPL*

At an institutional level, although 22 out of the potential 38 institutions, who took part in the study, reported that a high level policy is in place, the autonomy of departments or schools in implementing this policy means that the practice varies considerably within and between institutions. Therefore, it could be argued that while there is a commitment to RPL, implementation is varied and somewhat inconsistent. This provides a very complex landscape for the RPL applicant.

Again, the lack of accurate data across institutions makes it difficult to link take up by the

There is a noteworthy gap between the policy and the practice in many organisations.

applicant to proactive information, guidance and supports. In practice, many institutions fail to make the availability of RPL clearly visible to potential applicants through webpages or prospectus.

Half of the mission-based performance compacts between higher education institutions and the HEA mention RPL.

Some institutions and disciplines report that limitations are placed on RPL due to external professional body requirements. However, as evident through the research, professional bodies have themselves, in some cases with the support of higher education RPL expertise, developed well-thought out systems to recognise and evidence experiential and work-based learning. Another indicator of institutional uneasiness with RPL is evident in the upper limits placed on applications with non-formal and informal learning, and for particular stages of courses.

#### *5.1.8 Staff development on supporting and assessing RPL*

The research considered the training and development of staff in academia in developing competences and capabilities to support the RPL process. The results have shown significant variation in levels of understanding, expectations and the need for staff training for RPL

assessment and support. The research has shown that in many instances training is not structured or planned, and is predominantly driven by individuals as opposed to an organisational approach. Staff development activities that support RPL and, in particular, assessment of prior learning are available on a regular basis in a minority of the higher education institutions who took part in the study. The findings indicate that for many institutions staff development activities were undertaken at the point of implementation of the RPL policy but not more recently. In a minority of institutions it is an activity which is conducted periodically in an effort to ensure appropriate levels of staff awareness and ability to respond to student queries.

These findings are consistent with the findings of the EGFSN 2011.

#### *5.1.9 RPL for staff CPD*

As illustrated in the empirical research findings there exists a lack of realisation of the potential of RPL for staff in academia. The responses received point to the general view of RPL as a path to an accredited award. In the situation where a staff member is enrolled on a certified course within the institution there was a generally held view that RPL would be available in the same way to them as to any other student. However, the potential for recognising, evidencing and valuing informal and non-formal learning within the workplace outside the confines of a formal accredited qualification pathway was not at all evident in the responses of the higher education representatives.

In considering the structure of a CPD framework for higher education it is necessary to reflect on the variety of roles which might be assumed. These include managing, supporting and measuring relevant learning, the development of staff and as a mechanism to encourage staff to engage in activities which contribute to their own personal and professional advancement. At a top level such a CPD framework can support and drive the enhancement of the higher education sector.

Developing a supportive framework will require identification of the potential learning in the form of knowledge, skills and competences and of desirable attributes of staff in higher education. There must be an acknowledgement of the existing systems of recognising and structuring CPD within individual institutions and collaboratively through mechanisms such as the Learning Innovation Network (LIN). As emphasised through the extensive National Forum CPD consultation process, the benefit of a national approach to CPD would contribute to consistency, transferability of learning and mobility of staff across the sector. While the output of the consultation process is still awaited, it is anticipated that such an approach could provide supportive pathways for all staff in higher education and not just those directly involved in the teaching process.



Considering professional development in the context of practitioner learning in higher education learning outcomes may be achievable and evidenced in the following areas:

- Knowledge, skills and competence related to the field of study or the particular discipline,
- Knowledge, skills and competence related to the process of teaching and learning including learning developments and technology enhanced learning,
- Knowledge, skills and competence related to reflective personal development and communication skills,
- Knowledge, skills and competence contributing to the collegiate development of practice and interactions with colleagues and external organisations

(Adapted from Postgraduate Certificate in Professional Practice development documents, (CIT, 2014)

Experiential learning may well have a role to play in the development and evidencing of attainment relating to teaching and learning or technology-enhanced learning. However, it might be anticipated that this would be in the context of a defined destination award such as a Level 9 or Level 10 award in Teaching and Learning. Many of these awards are available to staff in academia in various modes, including the modules offered by the Learning Innovation Network (Learning Innovation Network, 2011) in partner institutions. In examining the broader research context, practices adopted by professional bodies based on workplace specific and, in some cases, role-specific competency models, provide a standards-based model which could also be adapted and used by higher education providers.

## 5.2 Recommendations

The following recommendations are intended to identify means by which RPL can be further developed and more consistently embedded in existing higher education systems.

### 5.2.1 *Common definition and National policy*

In order to support coherence and consistency in the development of RPL nationally, a national policy and strategy which can guide institutions, training organisations, employers, social partners, and individuals is required. The development of the policy should be driven by the Department of Education and Skills with input from other stakeholders including, but not limited to, HEA, QQI and institutional representative bodies. This policy should not be confined to a particular sector or cohort of learners and should span the boundaries beyond higher education providers and consider the transitions between and into further education and workplace learning.

The impact of developing a national policy is to drive consistent development of RPL in meeting the EU recommendation 2012.

An additional recommendation is the adoption of a nationally agreed common definition and understanding of what constitutes RPL within a higher education context. The definition would facilitate meaningful data collection, benchmarking and comparative analysis of practice institutionally, nationally and internationally. In finalising a definition, due consideration should be given to European and international definitions and developments. In addressing the need for an agreed definition, the Recognition of Prior Learning National Framework for Scottish Higher Education asserts:

*It would be helpful if a consensus could be reached with regard to the definition of RPL used by all Scottish HEIs. A common definition helps engagement by external stakeholders (including students and employers) with RPL and helps practitioners develop, share and embed good practice (QAA Scotland, 2014)*

The development of the definition could be facilitated through a national RPL policy working group headed up by the Department of Education and Skills and include representatives from the IUA, IoTI and private college providers. The development of the definition should be considered within the broader RPL policy and strategy developments nationally and this would facilitate transitions between all levels of education and training and the workplace this definition should support all learners and all relevant forms of learning.

### 5.2.2 Data collection

Data collection mechanisms to capture activity based on the common definition should be established within each higher education institution and fed into a national repository of data. At an institutional level, the data would provide the opportunity to develop a precedence database and a baseline for continuous improvement and organisational learning. At a national level data collection would inform policy directions and support benchmarking.

It could be argued that without data collection and strategic development of capacity and capability for RPL, it is difficult to see how continuous improvement can be achieved.

This recommendation would include the development of a robust and comprehensive system to capture RPL activity in terms of levels of demand, application, and granting of recognition for prior formal, informal and non-formal learning. At an institutional level it may be appropriate to locate the data collection activity in a central location such as the office

with overall responsibility for academic affairs or to distribute responsibility to various schools and units depending on the management and governance structures in place.

In addition, a system similar to that adopted in France, whereby local government and government departments assume a role in gathering data might be considered to support clearer visibility of RPL practice in higher education (Ministère du travail, 2014). The momentum achieved through the SIF and Lionra projects which had a particular focus on RPL should be maintained or re-energised through a practitioner network supported through QQI and National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, and strategically informed by the HEA and the Department of Education and Skills.

### 5.2.3 *Good practice guidelines*

To further develop and maintain RPL nationally, higher education providers need to develop and share good practice guidelines which are informed by existing practice at national, European, and international levels and subject to regular review. Good practice at an institutional level will also include the necessary supports required for learners, mentors, assessors, and managers within the system. To develop the area nationally there should be greater visibility of the processes of RPL and clear opportunities for the development of organisational learning in facilitating all learners in terms of access, transfer and progression.

The good practice guidelines should include references to:

- Appropriate staff development in RPL and the associated processes and roles, including the advisory, mentoring and assessment activities
- Consideration of non-traditional pathways of learning at module and programme development stages, including the writing of learning outcomes to facilitate recognition of attainment of learning in a variety of contexts
- Shared developments and scholarship in assessment methodology, including the assessment of varied portfolios of learning and the process of reflection within the evidencing of learning
- Opportunities to share experiences and expertise on RPL within and between higher education providers through appropriate platforms
- The establishment of platforms of practice across higher education providers, further education and training, professional bodies, employer representative organisations, student representatives, and other relevant representative bodies
- Clearly signposted information for potential applicants on externally facing media regarding the availability of RPL within an institution and clear information as to how they can access the service within the institution, and its academic units.

The development of the good practice guidelines should build on existing and developed practice and reports and be coordinated through a national RPL working group with inputs from the legislative, policy and practice perspectives to ensure appropriate and realistic outputs.

#### *5.2.4 RPL staff training and development*

As evidenced by this research, staff training and development of competences to support and assess RPL vary considerably within and between institutions and often reside in one or a small number of individuals. It is recommended that institutions through their teaching and learning departments or staff development units should develop more regular staff training and development in RPL practice, assessment, supporting the non-traditional learner, flexible curriculum development in terms of learning outcomes, and assessment method selection. In order to limit the risk associated with isolated pockets of expertise it is recommended that consideration be given to developing some level of expertise in all staff as well as to embedding this type of awareness into the general induction processes for all staff.

From a national perspective the development of a national practitioner network supported by QQI and the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in higher education in Ireland would aid in cross institutional learning and would support continuous improvement in RPL development.

#### *5.2.5 RPL and the CPD Framework*

If non-formal and informal learning, which is gained by staff in academia at, and through their work, is to be identified, recognised and valued, it ideally should be in the context of some form of measurement or recognition structure and linked with CPD. The extensive consultation process conducted by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education in 2014 of a CPD framework for staff in higher education explored this possibility.

The following suggested structure is adapted from the development of a flexible work-based learning postgraduate award in professional practice (CIT, 2014).

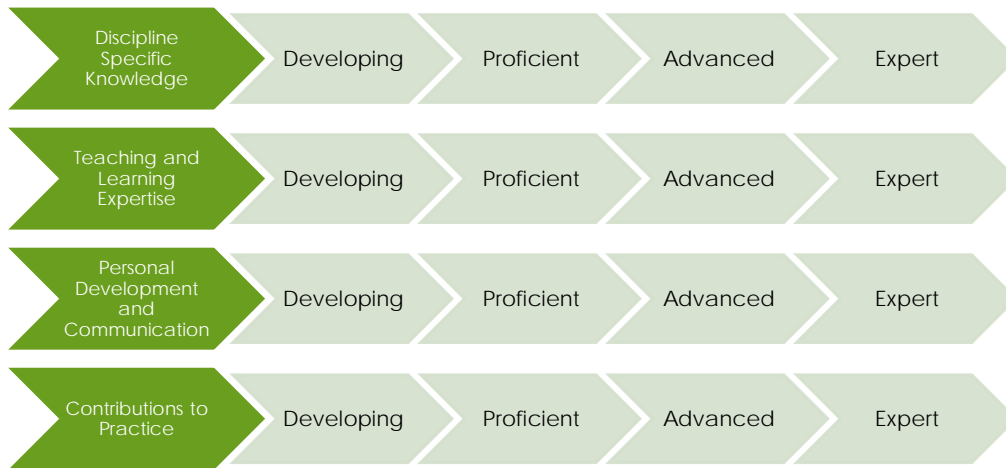


Fig. 15 Types of learning and Levels of attainment

Learning from the processes in place in other professions, the linkage of levels of attainment to progression processes might be appropriate. Much could be learned, for example, from the work of the RIAI in identifying a series of attributes within the profession and supporting the individual through diverse means of achieving and evidencing these attributes.

There is also an opportunity to link these potential fields of attainment to the diverse missions of the institution. In this way a research-focused institution may place a higher value on the discipline specific knowledge and contributions to knowledge through peer-reviewed research. Likewise, an institution with a greater emphasis on teaching and learning could place more emphasis on attainment in the development of learning technologies. Where external engagement ranked higher on the institutional mission, attainment in terms of practice development and the engagement interactions would be of greater interest.

The challenge for higher education providers is in the development of a system which is implementable by all higher education institutions and facilitates all employees while still providing a transparent and transferable national structure. The consideration of RPL should inform the process of identifying and specifying the attributes or competences and the levels of attainment, and also inform what constitutes appropriate evidence of learning and activity. Recognition of prior learning, in particular recognition of practitioner learning, should be viewed as a valid mode of demonstrating competence within the framework. Consideration of the variety of contexts within which the required knowledge, skills and competence can be attained at the development stages of the framework will enhance accessibility through formal, non-formal and informal pathways. Such context-sensitive pathways should recognise the diversity of individual experiences and aspirations and the

value of mechanisms such as reflective learning journals in identifying learning events, reflecting on learning gained, and collating evidence of learning.

Responsibility for the management of a professional development framework and the development of useful reporting from the framework raises a number of questions. At an individual level within an institution the CPD processes are likely to link well with the HR function. However, there is both a supporting and a strategic role for the heads of function in contributing to the individual goal setting and in terms of visibility of the overall capacity and capability within the academic unit. For the individual staff member it would be important that progression activity and evidence of attainment be transferable and contribute to national and ultimately international mobility. From a national viewpoint in terms of the system as a whole, and the setting of benchmarks and targets to provide markers for continuous improvement, there is a role for a central agency, such as the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, to be in a position to both 'round up' information and generate reports and to review progress, identify gaps and provide strategic direction to support efficient and effective collaboration and quality assurance measures.

### 5.3 Summary

This report acknowledges the complexity of higher education in Ireland and considers how RPL sits within this landscape. The personal and individual nature of recognition of prior learning as a process, coupled with the diversity in higher education institutions and their missions contributes to the difficulty in developing a simplified overview. Through a review of literature and primary research this report details the current situation with regard to recognition of prior learning in Irish higher education. It provides a number of perspectives and develops some useful recommendations which would ensure a more transparent and coherent process and would position Ireland well in relation to meeting the relevant EU Recommendations.

While this research explored RPL in higher education in Ireland there would be considerable benefit from extending the research remit and exploring in greater detail the continuum of practice across the further, higher and workplace learning boundaries. Such informed enquiry processes could support the development of policy and practice and a national approach which would enhance the agility and robustness of our responses to changing global employment challenges and evolving technological and social realities.

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## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A: CRITERIA USED TO ANALYSE INSTITUTIONAL PUBLIC MEDIA SOURCES ON RPL

### **General analysis information**

In analysing the public sources of information and media used to promote awareness and accessibility to RPL and higher education the institutions of the designated contact list of the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning was used as the parameters of the focus of the study.

In comparing the provision available from providers in terms of the public facing information available on RPL the following questions were used.

1. Is RPL on the college / university website?
2. Is the RPL policy available?
3. Is RPL mentioned on the prospectus?
4. Is there signposting for initial information on RPL?
5. Are student supports visible for RPL?

## APPENDIX B: INSTITUTIONAL Interview Guide

### General Interview Information

This guide was part of a study on RPL in higher education in Ireland. The study was conducted by Deirdre Goggin ([Deirdre.goggin@cit.ie](mailto:Deirdre.goggin@cit.ie)) of Cork Institute of Technology (CIT) .

The interviews were approved through the ethics committee of CIT and the NFTL and participant consent forms were administered in the study.

### Definition used for research purposes

For the purposes of this research the following definition of the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) as detailed in the European Inventory on validation of informal and non formal, Country report Ireland 2014 is used; "RPL incorporates prior formal, informal and non-formal learning and that which is validated within the context of a specified destination award from level one to ten on the national framework of qualifications'.

### Explanatory note

This research on RPL in Higher Education in Ireland is being conducted on behalf of and with the support of the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning.

The research focuses on a number of different aspects regarding the implementation of RPL in Higher Education. Each section will be identified and explained in advance of the subsequent questions.

### Name of Institution:

Could you please define for me or outline the institution's understanding of RPL. Does not include transfer students, internal transfers, interviews, etc . . . .?

### Policy overview

The purpose of this question is to ascertain the extent to which RPL is integrated into higher education institutions.

1. Do you have an RPL policy within your institution?      Yes  
No (please go to question 9, 13-17)
  - a. If yes, is it embedded in the formal assessment policies and procedures of your institution, including appeals processes?
  - b. If it is not embedded, where does it sit?
  
2. How is RPL applied within your institution      Non- standard entry

(Please indicate all that apply)

Advanced entry (beyond year 1)  
Module exemptions  
Gain credit for module  
Partial fulfilment of academic awards  
Full academic awards

3. Is there a limit to the percentage of RPL which an applicant can gain in a stage of a programme?

Does this vary in an award year or for modules that contribute to an award classification?

4. Is RPL possible within

- a. all disciplines within your institution?
- b. some of your programmes, due to educational reasons or others

5. Is it applicable at all levels of the framework of qualifications?

6. Could you estimate please how many applications are submitted in an academic year based on

- a. Formal learning
- b. Informal and non formal learning
- c. A combination of all types of learning - prior formal, informal and non formal learning to substantiate a claim for RPL

#### Assessment

This section seeks to explore the practice of assessment of RPL material in your institution and in particular of the evidence supplied in RPL cases.

7. Are there instances where a grade for RPL is assigned?
8. Is staff development offered on portfolio assessment / RPL assessment?
9. Is the possibility of non-standard learning evidence considered in the design of modules and assessment methods?

#### Management

10. Can you provide me with an insight into how RPL is organised within your institution in terms of roles and responsibilities?

#### Student supports

11. Are there specific staff who support students through the information and application process?
12. Are staff information sessions and training provided on how to assess/ support for RPL, if so how many and how often?



Staff CPD: These questions are being asked on behalf of the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning to inform the development of their CPD model for academic staff in higher education.

13. Can RPL be used by staff as part of their own CPD?
14. Can RPL be used by academic staff as part of their CPD and if so in what ways?
  - a. If yes, does it result in an accredited destination award?
15. What kinds of evidence can staff use to support their application for CPD?
16. Does RPL for staff CPD occur at all levels of the framework?
17. Can all forms of learning be considered within staff CPD? This would encompass learning from training courses, on the job learning and learning which has previously been certified.

## APPENDIX C: CRITERIA USED TO ANALYSE INSTITUTIONAL PERFORMANCE COMPACTS

The criteria used to analyse the institutional performance compacts for the period 2014-2016 was a search of the words

<http://www.hea.ie/en/policy/national-strategy/higher-education-system-performance-2014-16>

### Search terms used

- Recognition of prior learning
- Prior learning
- RPL
- Accreditation of prior learning

## APPENDIX D: PROFESSIONAL BODY Interviews

### General interview Information

This guide was part of a study on RPL in higher education in Ireland. The study was conducted by Deirdre Goggin ([Deirdre.goggin@cit.ie](mailto:Deirdre.goggin@cit.ie)) of Cork Institute of Technology (CIT) .

The interviews were approved through the ethics committee of CIT and the NFTL and participant consent forms were administered in the study.

### Definition used for research purposes

For the purposes of this research the following definition of the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) as detailed in the European Inventory on validation of informal and non formal, Country report Ireland 2014 is used; "RPL incorporates prior formal, informal and non-formal learning and that which is validated within the context of a specified destination award from level one to ten on the national framework of qualifications'.

### Explanatory note

This research on RPL in Higher Education in Ireland is being conducted on behalf of and with the support of the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning.

The research focuses on a number of different aspects regarding the implementation of RPL in Higher Education.

Are you familiar with the concept of the recognition of prior learning? (academic exemptions)

If yes, are there processes which you have used with your members in recognising their learning? Could you please provide detail on the systems which you have used?

What has been the motivation for the development of these processes?

Are there supports provided to your members in putting an application together?

The research question put forward to the QQI was in the context of the question set put forward to the higher education institutions which are detailed in appendix B

**The QQI interview addressed the following question:**

**What is the view of QQI regarding what is sufficient to develop the area of RPL nationally?**

## APPENDIX F; STUDENT REPRESENTATIVE VIEWS

Name:

Name of Higher Education Institution:

1. In your opinion, how familiar are students in higher education in Ireland with the potential for the Recognition of their Prior Learning in the context of access, transfer and progression?
2. What do you think needs to be done by higher education generally to support learners in relation to recognising learning which they acquired prior to entering a course of study?
3. What supports are available for students seeking to access, transfer or progress beyond the CAO process