

# Developing Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

The Role of RPL In the Context of the National Skills Strategy Upskilling Objectives

April 2011



## Foreword

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is of considerable interest to the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs in the context of monitoring progress on the National Skills Strategy. RPL has also been recommended in EGFSN sectoral reports such as the Wholesale and Retail sector as a mechanism to assist in upskilling staff within enterprises and in delivering education and training more effectively. This report, initiated at the request of the Department of Education and Skills as part of the National Skills Strategy implementation statement, examines how RPL can be further developed in Ireland, particularly in its role in upskilling and engaging people in education and training.



RPL is about giving value to the skills and competencies people have gained, whether acquired through formal or informal learning. RPL can be used by people to gain access to qualifications where they do not meet the entry criteria on the basis of formal qualifications alone, to gain exemptions from certain modules of qualifications and, in some instances, to gain full awards.

RPL is important in ensuring that education and training resources are utilised effectively, particularly in a time of scarce resources. For individuals, RPL can ensure that learners only receive the education and training that they need and avoid duplication of learning. RPL can help employers to tailor training more effectively and better match employees to tasks. More widely, RPL can play a role in the upskilling objectives of the National Skills Strategy, by ensuring that individuals engage in upskilling at the most appropriate level on the National Framework of Qualifications. In addition, from a labour market activation viewpoint, while many people that are currently unemployed may not have high levels of formal qualifications, they may have developed many skills through work and life experience, which can also be valued and recognised.

This report highlights that while significant experience and practice of RPL has been developed in Ireland, a co-ordinated approach is required. The recommendations in the report, targeted across the National Framework of Qualifications, provide a basis for a more integrated, national RPL policy in Ireland. International evidence indicates that while RPL can have significant upfront costs, these can be recouped over time through more effective delivery of education and training. Achieving results requires action from a range of stakeholders across the education and training sector, including providers, government departments, guidance professionals, RPL practitioners, adult education organisations and qualifications bodies. Unions and employers also have a central role in stimulating demand for RPL by communicating its benefits and interacting with RPL providers.

On behalf of the Expert Group, I would like to thank the wide range of organisations and individuals who contributed to this report through submissions and consultation, and helped to shape the recommendations. I would also like to thank the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland Executive, who worked with the EGFSN Executive on this project from the outset, and contributed a considerable amount of time, advice and material to the report.

Una Halligan  
Chairperson, Expert Group on Future Skills Needs



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# Executive Summary

## E.1 Introduction

This project was initiated by the Department of Education and Skills as part of the National Skills Strategy Implementation Statement, which requested the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN) to investigate the potential of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in assisting in the upskilling objectives of the National Skills Strategy. In addition, RPL is also highly relevant in a number of important current policy contexts, including:

- The need to reduce unemployment, particularly those that are long-term unemployed and those with relatively low levels of qualifications. While many people that are unemployed may not have high levels of qualifications, they may have developed many skills through extensive work, voluntary, community and life experience, which can also be recognised and valued.
- The need to utilise education and training resources as efficiently as possible at a time of huge demand.
- The need to ensure that individuals and enterprises have access to an education and training system that is relevant and flexible to their needs. RPL is a means by which learners and enterprises need only access the education and training that they require and avoid duplication of learning.

This paper has been prepared by the EGFSN Executive in Forfás with significant input and material from the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) Executive. In addition, a wide range of stakeholders were consulted in the process (education and training providers, unions, qualifications bodies, guidance/adult education organisations and the Department, employer organisation - a list of the organisations that provided submissions is appended).

The main finding of the report is that while significant experience of RPL has been developed in Ireland, a co-ordinated national policy approach is required. The recommendations in this paper aim to provide the basis for a more integrated and national policy for RPL in Ireland.

## E.2 Defining RPL

Prior learning encompasses:

- Formal learning which takes place through programmes of study or training that are delivered by education or training providers, and which attract awards.
- Non-formal learning that takes place alongside the mainstream systems of education and training. Examples of non-formal learning are: learning and training activities undertaken in the workplace, voluntary sector or trade union and in community-based learning.
- Informal learning that takes place through life and work experience. This is sometimes referred to as experiential learning. Often, it is learning that is unintentional and the learner may not recognise at the time of the experience that it contributed to his or her knowledge, skills and competences.

RPL is defined as: 'the process by which prior learning is given a value. It is a means by which prior learning is formally identified, assessed and acknowledged'. The key terms associated with RPL are a) 'prior', i.e., learning already achieved; and b) 'process' i.e., the distinct stages of identification, assessment and certification. Prior Learning can be assessed through a number of different tools such as challenge exams, interviews, a 'skills audit', practical demonstrations,



interviews. Assessment for the purposes of certification often involves a combination of assessment methods. Appropriate guidance supports are critical for the individual engaged in the RPL process.

### E.3 Benefits of RPL

A recent review by the OECD of RPL policies and practices in 16 member countries found that RPL has significant potential benefits for individuals, enterprises, education and training providers and governments. These benefits include better matching of employees to tasks, improved transparency in terms of competencies of workers, meeting regulatory requirements for qualifications, reduced time needed to attain qualifications, better labour market mobility, increased capacity and flexibility for education and training providers, and contributing to lifelong learning policy.

There is also evidence of significant potential returns on investment from RPL for the individual, in terms of better graduation rates and savings in tuition fees, and for employers in terms of lower training costs and reduced need for absences from the work place.

### E.4 RPL Infrastructure and Practice in Ireland

The potential market for RPL in Ireland is substantial. The AONTAS referral service survey 2009 shows that 81% of their clients had more than 10 years experience since formal education.

International experience of RPL shows good complementarities between suitable target RPL candidates and the priority cohorts of the unemployed (those with low qualifications; those in vulnerable sectors and; the long term unemployed).

RPL infrastructure and services require the input of a variety of different stakeholders including: employers, unions, education and training providers, adult education services, guidance practitioners and relevant policy actors (Government departments and agencies). In Ireland, there are a number of examples of good RPL practice at the level of provider (e.g. developed by Fáilte Ireland, FÁS, Skillnets, DIT, CIT, and NALA). There have also been a number of specific RPL pilots and projects (e.g. Lónra, SIF Education in Employment, Framework Implementation Network). The awarding bodies (NQAI, HETAC, FETAC, DIT, Universities) all have RPL policies and procedures in place. RPL practice, however, is largely ad hoc and level of activity can vary widely between education providers. A number of issues around further development of RPL were identified in consultations such as gaps in information and communication on RPL, lack of data of the costs and availability, limited evaluation of practice, lack of dedicated funding and uncertainty around relevant roles of actors. In short, a significant amount of positive experience has been amassed through a bottom-up approach, however, a national approach to RPL policy needs to be developed.

### E.5 Costs of RPL

The costs of RPL are highly dependent on the assessment procedure. For example, assessment tools such as a challenge exam, assignment or a practical demonstration appear to be less costly than, for example, a portfolio assessment. A combination of assessment procedures is usually employed. International experience indicates that development costs will decrease over time as up-front investment is recouped over time through more efficient delivery of education and training.

The OECD review of RPL practice in Ireland found information on costs difficult to establish. The review team estimates RPL costs in Ireland range between €600 and €2000 for each individual, depending on the type of RPL procedure, with an estimated average cost of €1,250 per individual.



This figure is broadly in line with estimated RPL costs in the Netherlands where RPL is widely practiced (approx 20,000 learners undergo RPL each year). The review of global RPL highlights the variety of models and approaches. Consultations with stakeholders highlighted that, RPL realistically requires a diverse range of costing models for a diverse range of contexts.

## E.6 Policy Objectives and Targeting RPL

One of the main findings of this report is that the potential benefits of RPL outweigh its costs. There is significant support for developing RPL more widely among those consulted. However, a more integrated and national approach requires targeting and co-ordination. Pragmatically, the development of RPL is likely to be a long term rather than short term priority and will only work effectively where there is an identifiable demand and sustained leadership or drive. It is suggested that the next steps in developing RPL should focus on areas of identified demand. From a national perspective, RPL has a role in meeting the following objectives:

- Labour Market Activation - the need to reduce unemployment, particularly those that are long-term unemployed and those with relatively low levels of qualifications as outlined in the National Skills Strategy Implementation Statement, 2010.
- The need to utilise education and training resources as effectively as possible at a time of unprecedented demand.
- The need to continue to upskill the labour force (employed and unemployed) as other countries continue to do so, and facilitate access and participation in lifelong learning.
- The need to provide an education and training service for people and enterprises that is flexible, relevant and appropriate to their needs.
- Contribute to targets to increase retention/participation rates in education and training, driven by the National Skills Strategy, the National Plan for Equity of Access in Higher Education and the National Plan for Social Inclusion.

A number of areas of demand are related to these objectives. These are summarised in the chart below and provide the basis for recommendations. In making these recommendations it is acknowledged that not all education and training providers should be immediately required to provide RPL. Education and training providers should be encouraged and enabled to co-ordinate on a regional or sectoral basis to ensure most effective use of resources, that capacity is allowed to develop and that the cost-benefits of specific RPL interventions are evaluated ex ante and ex post.



## E.7 Policy Recommendations

The following recommendations are targeted across the National Framework of Qualifications, different cohorts and relevant stakeholders. A significant volume of work and experience of RPL has already been accrued from a 'bottom-up' perspective. However, the success and implementation of these recommendations cannot be achieved without sustained 'top-down' support and commitment to drive change at a national level, which ultimately must derive from the Department of Education and Skills. Successful implementation will require co-ordination across existing agencies, organisations and Departments in the areas including guidance, information provision, programme provision, job referrals and standard setting for qualifications.



## Recommendation 1 - NFQ Levels 1-3

### Target groups:

The main target group should include:

- Those with no formal/primary level qualifications
- Long-term unemployed
- Those that are inactive or seeking to join/return to the labour market
- Those in-employment with no formal / low levels of educational achievement

### Actions:

- Given that those whose level of educational attainment is at NFQ levels 1-3 are more vulnerable in terms of unemployment, retaining employment and accessing the labour market, the Department of Education and Skills should consider providing an entitlement for all adults/individuals to an assessment of core skills with a view to making their prior learning visible, providing, where relevant, credit/exemptions from core skills training and promoting their participation in further education/training and facilitating mobility and employability across sectors. The Department of Social Protection could refer individuals for assessment, or consider integrating RPL assessment tools into its referrals work with the unemployed.
- The Department of Education and Science should consider leading the development of an integrated RPL service to be developed and delivered at levels 1-3 through the National Steering Group for the FAS-IVEA National Co-operation agreement, with the input and support of NALA. This is proposed on the basis of their current functions, organisation, geographical scope and capacity to identify and meet local as well as national needs. The targeting of 'core skills' for RPL should form part of a wider career plan or further specific skills training for individuals, and should therefore be integrated with adult guidance and employment services, i.e. that individuals that come in to contact with these services have access to the relevant information about RPL and its availability. Guidance organisations/initiatives such as the IGC, the AEGI and adult education organisations such as Aontas have a significant role in informing, guiding, preparing and communicating to RPL candidates in this context, with the NCGE responsible for policy co-ordination.
- With a view to maximising capacity and meeting learner needs, the Department of Education and Skills should review the writeon.ie assessment as well as its potential to be translated to other education and training settings (e.g. classroom). This is particularly important for those that either do not have access to or are unable to use IT facilities.
- Enterprise and trade unions should explore, in conjunction with Skillnets and education and training providers, how they can develop, deliver and promote RPL at a sectoral level (e.g. through distance learning) for employees with very low/no formal qualifications.

**Responsibility:** Led by Department of Education and Skills; FÁS; VECs in consultation with: NALA; Employment/Guidance Services and Department of Social Protection; Skillnets; Employers; Unions; Aontas; Guidance Organisations; NCGE





## Recommendation 2 - NFQ Levels 4-6

### Target group:

- Those unemployed whose highest level of educational attainment is between NFQ levels 3 - 6 seeking to upskill within a sector in which they already have competencies and experience.
- Individuals and employers seeking to upskill due to e.g. regulatory requirements where minimum competency levels / mandatory qualifications are required. (e.g. Childcare, Healthcare)
- Employers seeking to upskill staff due to, for example, new technologies/work practices (e.g. manufacturing operatives, clerical workers, and green economy skills).
- Individuals seeking to move to a new sector and have significant work experience that could help that transition through the assessment of core skills.

### Actions:

- At NFQ levels 4-6, education and training providers, as part of or alongside the integrated RPL service, should aim to ensure that individuals upskilling within sectors in which they already have significant experience should have the option of undertaking assessment for credit/exemptions from modules. This could be done through challenge exam (i.e. that an individual can demonstrate their knowledge through examination without formal classroom learning)/assignments/skills demonstrations/skills audits which are relatively cost effective compared to full participation in programmes. Where individuals do not meet the relevant standards through RPL they would be required to participate fully in programmes and meet any training deficits.
- In addition, there may be many soft skills that people have acquired through work and community/voluntary experience (but do not have those competencies documented or certified) that are useful across sectors such as project management, organisational skills, communications skills, administration skills, IT skills, sales and marketing skills etc., which should also be considered for assessment through RPL by education and training providers or competent authorities. A system of RPL to support literacy, numeracy, and ICT should develop progression options at Level 4 to facilitate the development of core and generic skills and contribute to access, transfer and progression.
- Where minimum qualification or competency standards are introduced up to NFQ level 6 in a sector or occupation, the relevant regulatory/standard setting body and providers should endeavour to provide an RPL service.
- Further education and training providers should seek to engage at a local level with employers/unions that have upskilling requirements. To act as an incentive for enterprises, there must be a demonstrable cost saving to the employer/employee (for example, through reducing out-of-work training hours) compared to full programme provision. For this to operate most effectively with education and training providers, employers would have to maintain good records of training and personal development of staff and would need to commit relevant time and resources.



- A targeted sectoral/regional approach to delivering RPL should be adopted where appropriate to meet needs. The EGFSN reports on the Bio-pharma sector and the Food sector signalled significant demand for upskilling operatives. The Wholesale and Retail sector also has significant potential to engage in RPL as indicated by the report of the EGFSN. These sectors could be considered as targets for RPL in the first instance. This would be part of an integrated approach to skills/competency profiling, identification of qualification needs, RPL assessments and programme/module design. Building on their experience, FÁS/VECs and Skillnets would have main co-ordinating roles. RPL for exemptions/module credits rather than for full awards may also be most practical approach initially.

**Responsibility:** Led by FÁS, VECs and Skillnets under the direction of the Department of Education and Skills in consultation with: awarding bodies, NALA; Employer Representatives; Unions; Skillnets and Guidance Services

### Recommendation 3 - Higher Education NFQ Levels 6-10

#### Target groups:

- Those with qualifications at NFQ levels 4/5 and above with significant work or voluntary experience who seek to upskill or transfer to new areas.
- Those that are unemployed from specific sectors such as construction and need to re-skill.
- Those working in sectors with minimum qualification or CPD requirements.
- Enterprises with specific training and skills needs at NFQ levels 6-10.

#### Actions:

- RPL for the purposes of entry or advanced entry should continue to be the primary function of RPL in higher education.
- In principle, RPL should be available where appropriate to learners. Consultations have indicated that there is no requirement/desire for additional RPL structures (e.g. external assessment centres) for higher education, rather that RPL should remain and be developed at the level of the academic department/unit with the support of internal RPL officers/resources.
- Sharing practice, networking and increasing the visibility and availability of RPL within and across institutions should be the primary focus for higher education institutes. Under the SIF RPL and REAP projects and the Framework Implementation Network, there has been significant work done on staff development in building awareness, capacity and capability in relation to RPL within the higher education sector through workshops and practice exposition among a wide range of higher education institutes. DIT has for some years operated a CPD programme for higher education practitioners in RPL and has developed detailed RPL procedures. These types of activities need to be supported and extended throughout the higher education sector.
- The IOTI, IUA and DIT should support and coordinate activity by building on platforms such as the SIF RPL project and REAP and the Framework Implementation Network. Those who are actually responsible for RPL administration (particularly those who are responsible for making the final academic decisions at programme level) should lead this activity. That way those who have to actually implement the practice have an input in how it is subsequently managed. The IOTI, IUA and DIT, with the support for HETAC and the NQAI, should consider developing a



toolkit/manual and agreements on accepted practice in RPL, at a national, regional and disciplinary level. This would build on existing practice and share practice through for example web-based advice, tools and a network of practitioners. This could facilitate responses to specific industry/sectoral demands for RPL, channel information and advice and enhance transparency. Already the SIF RPL, FIN and REAP projects demonstrate the value added of cross-institutional collaboration.

- Mature Student Officers/Access Officers in higher level institutions have a key role in creating awareness and understanding of the potential of RPL for potential and current mature students. RPL should be incorporated in to information sessions and induction sessions for mature students.
- The Department of Education and Skills and the HEA should consider facilitating RPL activity (HEA may also provide targeted funding through SIF and funding of Access initiatives). They could also consider with the IUA and IOTI the funding implications of expanding RPL. The partnership of the IOTI, universities and DIT would also liaise with awarding bodies, EGFSN, funding agencies, external quality assurance bodies as appropriate.
- Higher Education Institutes, in conjunction with Skillnets, should consider how they can enhance their offering through making RPL more widely available to private and public sector employers as part of highly tailored offerings. A demonstrable saving would have to be provided. Availability of RPL would also require employers to ensure that good records of staff training and personal development are maintained.

**Responsibility:** Led by Department of Education and Skills and HEA, in consultation with: IOTI; IUA; DIT; HEIs; Skillnets; Employer Representatives; Guidance Organisations

## Recommendation 4 - RPL, Quality Assurance and Risk Assessment

### Quality Assurance

Quality Assurance is paramount in the development of RPL in Ireland. RPL procedures must continue to be fully embedded within the quality assurance procedures of providers, awarding bodies and in any assessment centres/networks/bodies that may develop through the partnerships proposed above for NFQ Levels 1-6 and 6-10. Staff involved in all stages of RPL will need to be trained appropriately. Awarding bodies have responsibility to set standards for qualifications and assessment and in this context to oversee any arrangements for Quality Assurance, specific to RPL.

### Risk Assessment and Governance

Consultations on this paper have yielded significant support for the further development of RPL in Ireland. These consultations also caution, however, of the need to ensure as is necessary for all education and training provision and accreditation, that appropriate risk assessment and good governance procedures are put in place for RPL.

**Responsibility:** Led by Department of Education and Skills Providers and Awarding Bodies



## Recommendation 5 - Data Availability on RPL

### Action:

Over the next 3-5 years, the partnerships identified above in cooperation with the HEA and DES and other actors relevant to collation of key education and training statistics, should consider putting in place procedures for the collection of RPL data related to costs, the availability of RPL and the use of RPL by learners for assessment and qualifications purposes (i.e. summative RPL activities only). Care must also be taken to protect the identity of learners.

**Responsibility:** Led by HEA and Department of Education and Skills in consultation with Education and Training Providers and the integrated RPL service (Recommendation 1).

## Recommendation 6 - Communication and Guidance

### Actions:

- The potential of RPL should be communicated to adult learners by guidance services including in relation to referrals by employment services. The ESRI work in conjunction with the Department of Social Protection on profiling of the Live Register may provide an opportunity to channel demand for RPL more effectively.
- All providers with RPL offerings should actively promote their RPL arrangements. RPL policies and procedures should be clearly articulated by education and training providers and easily accessible to interested parties. Information/communication resources should be pooled and co-ordinated where RPL initiatives are advanced on a sectoral or regional basis. Employer representative organisations such as IBEC, ISME, SFA and Chambers of Commerce and Unions etc. should also disseminate information on RPL to employees.
- Information and guidelines targeted at learners and employers need to be developed. RPL providers, FETAC, HETAC and the NOAI (and their successor) have a primary role in this regard. Web based guidance services targeted at assisting people to develop career pathways such as Bluebrick, Qualifax, Careerdirections and Careersportal have a role in promoting RPL as a potential option to learners with experience and employers. Consideration could be given to integrating publicly funded databases. The partnerships identified in recommendations 1-3 should work to develop and exploit these resources.
- In order to provide information about learning opportunities for adults, there must be relevant course information from education providers available to guidance services. Guidance practitioners and services can provide information for adults on the existence of an RPL process and facilitate the individual to explore the process. It is essential therefore, that the education providers and national qualification authorities (i.e. HETAC, FETAC and NOAI) clarify, within their contexts, RPL requirements for providers. It is suggested that the relevant stakeholders - NCGE, FÁS, various Guidance Organisations, Local Employment Services and Education and Training Providers should co-ordinate nationally and regionally on this. In the longer term, RPL and Adult Learning Processes should be integrated into training programmes for teachers/lecturers and other staff, guidance professionals and HR professionals.

**Responsibility:** Led by Education and Training Providers/RPL providers and Guidance Organisations in consultation with: Awarding bodies, Employment Services; Department of Education and Skills; Department of Social Protection; NALA; Aontas



## E.8 Funding options

The approach outlined above would provide the basis for long term development and sustainability of RPL. Any mainstreaming of RPL could require using existing infrastructure to develop assessment facilities, to further train RPL personnel and embed RPL in programmes and qualifications development at all NFQ levels. The approach recommended is to largely re-configure existing services and interventions and to develop RPL on the basis of the existing/emerging education and training and qualification systems.

Consultations have indicated that because funding to date has been largely project-based, demand for RPL may be stifled due to uncertainties around future funding. The long term development of RPL may have to consider a more structured funding model based on efficient RPL practices and positive education/labour market outcomes (e.g. employment, progression, further participation and upskilling).

In terms of funding in the short term, the following could be considered:

- If possible, there may be an opportunity to include RPL as a limited part of future competitive tendering for labour market activation education and training, provided it is tendered for at a competitive average cost per participant compared to formal provision at a similar NFQ level. At NFQ levels 1-6, this would most likely involve guidance services working in conjunction with education and training providers to target candidates for RPL and provide assessments. Within higher education, this would most likely involve institutes targeting candidates mainly for advanced entry to programmes (which was widely practiced to good effect in the 2009 labour market activation fund for higher education). The labour market activation fund could also be a means of stimulating supply in the market place by encouraging providers to engage more widely in RPL.
- The experience of the use of the European Globalisation Fund in Ireland could also be considered as a possible platform for an integrated approach to RPL. For those that have been made redundant and come under the terms of the EGF, the EGF offers the potential to integrate RPL into the career guidance, education and training services for individuals. This may help to short circuit the funding of education and training interventions demanded by those affected. Again, this may only be relevant for certain individuals (depending on experience and competencies) and the desired education/training programme (depending on its content and relevant experience of the individual). The Department of Education and Skills should consider how the EGF has been employed to date in the context of integrated supports for individuals/target groups and how these could be built upon to develop RPL.

In the event that these funding streams are made available to encompass or promote RPL, actions should be guided by the recommendations above. Subsequent investment should not be made prior to an evaluation of costs and outcomes of the Labour Market Activation and EGF initiatives.



## E.9 Co-ordination and Implementation

While there are a significant number of stakeholders, the primary driver of implementation will originate from the Department of Education and Skills. Under the direction of the Department of Education and Skills, the Steering Group for the FÁS-IVEA National Co-operation Agreement could be tasked with implementing recommendations in relation to NFQ levels 1-6, with Skillnets taking a lead role for co-ordinating the process with the enterprise sector. NALA has a critical role at levels 1-3 and in providing progression options at Level 4. The development of RPL at NFQ levels 1-6 will require input from employment and guidance services and from the Department of Social Protection with regard to informing and directing individuals towards RPL. Guidance services (e.g. AEGI, IGC), facilitated by NCGE, have a significant practical role in identifying and preparing individuals for RPL assessment and in guiding them after towards education and training or the labour market. The Department of Education and Skills and the HEA should facilitate the development of RPL within higher education, driven by IUA; IOTI; DIT and building on platforms such as the REAP and FIN initiatives and effective practice by individual institutes. Additionally, any action in this regard would have to take place on a relatively small level initially with a view to a evaluating the potential for a more scalable approach. The Department of Education and Skills should consider establishing a feedback loop (e.g. through the National Steering Group for the FÁS-VEC National Co-operation Agreement and through the HEA for higher education) to enable decision making on the overall coordination and scale of RPL activity.

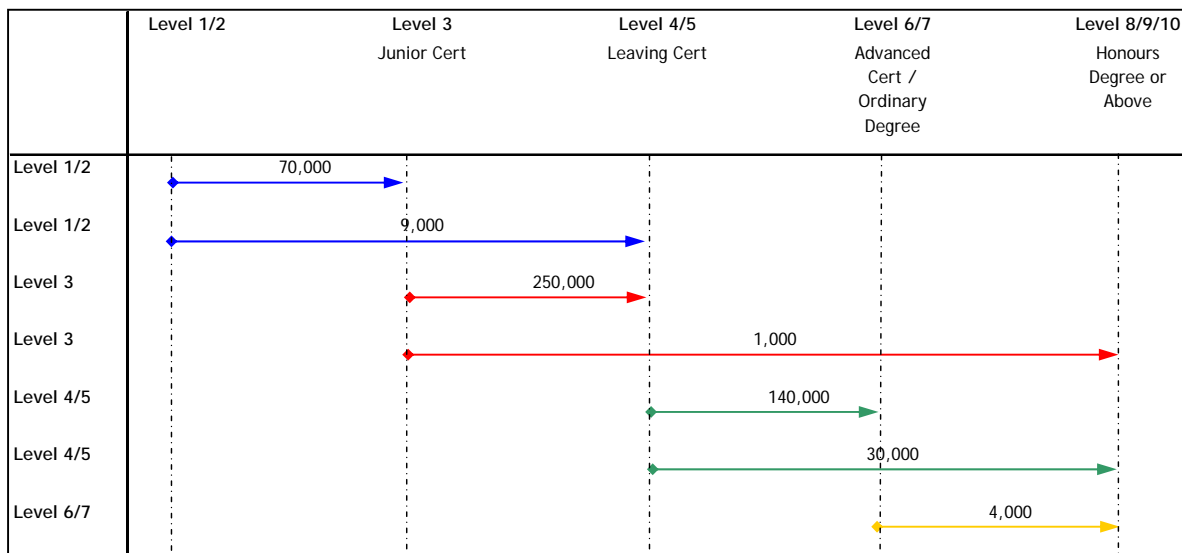


# 1. Introduction

The National Skills Strategy put forward a vision for the labour market in 2020 that will put Ireland at the fore internationally in terms of having a workforce capable of dealing with skills demands across all levels of occupations. Specifically, the report proposed that this vision would by 2020 see:

- 48% of the labour force with qualifications at National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) Levels 6 to 10 - from National Certificate to PhD level;
- 45% of the labour force with qualifications at NFQ Levels 4 and 5 - awards equivalent to Leaving Certificate Examination;
- The remaining 7% of the labour force would be likely to have qualifications at NFQ Levels 1 to 3 (i.e. up to Junior Certificate) while aiming to transition to higher levels.

Figure 1 Additional upskilling within labour force to achieve the vision for skills to 2020



In order to achieve these objectives, the National Skills Strategy recognised that action would be required at a number of levels: an additional 500,000 individuals within the labour market (employed and unemployed) would need to progress by at least one level on the National Framework of Qualifications. More specifically, the targets entail upskilling 70,000 from NFQ Levels 1 & 2 to Level 3; an additional 9,000 from Levels 1 and 2 to Levels 4&5; 250,000 at Level 3 up to Levels 4 & 5; 140,000 at Levels 4 and 5 to Levels 6 and 7; an additional 30,000 from Levels 4 and 5 to Levels 8, 9 and 10; and 4,000 from Levels 6 and 7 to Levels 8, 9 and 10.

The growing emphasis on lifelong learning and upskilling in Ireland and internationally has given increased prominence to the potential of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) as a mechanism that can contribute to a range of social and economic goals. Over the past decade, education and training policy has increasingly recognised that learning and its resulting value is a 'whole-of-life'



experience that encompasses formal, non-formal and informal learning as well as experiential learning.<sup>1</sup>

This holistic perspective on learning complements the view laid down by the Expert Group in the National Skills Strategy that any definition of skills must give explicit reference to outputs and/or outcomes, and focus less on inputs. Incorporating these tenets, the Expert Group understands skills as emanating from and developing through:

- Innate ability and socialisation;
- Formal, informal and non-formal education and training; and
- Experience, both from the workplace and other voluntary activities.

Recognition of Prior Learning is therefore a policy sphere that is highly relevant to the understanding of skills as established in the National Skills Strategy. In referring to medium term priorities, the National Skills Strategy Implementation Statement (March 2010) stated that “the Expert Group will be asked to examine possible models for an effective Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) process to particularly assist in recognising the skills levels of those at Levels 1-5”.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to the National Skills Strategy upskilling targets, RPL is also highly relevant in a number of important current policy contexts, including:

- The need to reduce unemployment, particularly those that are long-term unemployed and those with relatively low levels of qualifications. While many people that are unemployed may not have high levels of qualifications, they may have developed many skills through extensive work and life experience, which should also be recognised and valued.
- The need to utilise education and training resources as efficiently as possible at a time of huge demand.
- The need to ensure that individuals and enterprises have access to an education and training system that is relevant and flexible to their needs. RPL is a means by which learners and enterprises need only access the education and training that they require and avoid duplication of learning.

This paper has been prepared by the EGFSN Executive in Forfás with significant input and material from the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) Executive. In addition a wide range of stakeholders were consulted in the process (education and training providers, unions, qualifications bodies, guidance/adult education organisations and the Department, employer organisations - a list of the organisation that provided submissions is appended).

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<sup>1</sup> NESC, (1999), *Opportunities, Challenges and Capacities for Choice*

<sup>2</sup> Department of Education (March 2010) *National Skills Strategy Implementation Statement*





### **Box 1. Defining Recognition of Prior Learning**

#### **What is Prior Learning?**

Learning is the acquisition of knowledge, skills and competence. Prior learning is the knowledge, skills and competence that an individual already has. Prior learning encompasses<sup>3</sup>:

- Formal learning which takes place through programmes of study or training that are delivered by education or training providers, and which attract awards.
- Non-formal learning that takes place alongside the mainstream systems of education and training. It may be assessed but does not normally lead to formal certification. Examples of non-formal learning are: learning and training activities undertaken in the workplace, voluntary sector or trade union and in community-based learning.
- Informal learning that takes place through life and work experience. (And is sometimes referred to as experiential learning.) Often, it is learning that is unintentional and the learner may not recognise at the time of the experience that it contributed to his or her knowledge, skills and competences.

In the *Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning in Further and Higher Education in Ireland* (NQAI, 2005), RPL is defined as: 'the process by which prior learning is given a value. It is a means by which prior learning is formally identified, assessed and acknowledged'. The key terms associated with RPL are a) 'prior', i.e., learning already achieved; and b) 'process' i.e., the distinct stages of identification, assessment and certification. In contrast with some international practice, RPL policy in Ireland is confined to the achievement of qualifications.

RPL can be used by the learner to:

- 1 Gain entry to a programme: a Learner may gain a place on a programme, based on the Learner's knowledge, skill and competence, gained through relevant life and work experience or through previous certification.
- 2 Gain exemptions within a programme: for example, a Learner may be granted exemptions from completing elements of a programme, on the basis of relevant learning that they already have, but for which they do not have a formal qualification. The Learner will still be required to produce a portfolio of Learner evidence for assessment purposes.
- 3 Gain credit towards an award: a Learner may gain a credit towards an award using previous certification.
- 4 Attain an Award: a Learner may be awarded a Major or Minor Award on the basis of previously acquired learning for which they do not have a formal certificate.<sup>4</sup>

#### **Forms of Recognition of Prior Learning**

Internationally, assessment and interpretation of prior learning is discussed in many different guises and acronyms. In Ireland it is known most commonly as Recognition of Prior Learning. The lack of a common definition of RPL makes international comparisons and discourse on the topic rather

<sup>3</sup> From NQAI, *Principles and operational guidelines for the recognition of prior learning*, 2005, p.3

<sup>4</sup> Further Education Support Service - Recognition of Prior Learning Information Note



complex. The OECD has recently completed a report *Recognition of Non-Formal and Informal Learning (RNFIL) - Outcomes, Policies and Practices (2010)*, which drew upon the findings of 22 country background reports and thematic reviews of RPL policies in 16 OECD countries, including Ireland. The report of the work points to the difficulties in arriving at a common understanding of RNFIL due to factors such as differing pedagogical viewpoints, differing regulatory environments or the degree to which RPL has societal acceptance and legitimacy as having true labour market and social value. The term ‘recognition’ is understood to have different meanings in different countries. For example, ‘recognition’ in some countries may apply specifically to qualifications whereas in others ‘recognition’ refers to the holistic acceptance of formal, non-formal and informal/experiential learning by society as a whole. Although there are many different interpretations and systems of RPL, the OECD has identified the most common features of RPL processes across the participating countries in terms of the following stages:

Table 1. Common Features of RPL Processes

Stages	Definition
Identification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identifying what someone knows or can do, and possibly recording it. (Personal stage, possibly with supervision)</li> </ul>
Assessment (Measurement)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establishing what someone knows or can do. This is a measurement stage. (This may be a personal stage or, where there is significant formalisation, involve reliance on an external evaluator.)</li> </ul>
Validation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establishing that what someone knows or can do satisfies certain requirements (points of reference, standards). A level of performance is set and requires the involvement of a third party.</li> </ul>
Certification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Stating that what someone knows or can do satisfies certain requirements, and awarding a document testifying to this. (Necessitates the involvement of an accredited authority to certify performance and possibly its level.)</li> </ul>
Social Recognition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Acceptance by society of the signs of what someone knows or can do</li> </ul>

Source: OECD (2010) *Recognition of Non-Formal and Informal Learning - Outcomes, Policies and Practices*

In Ireland, RPL is generally discussed as either ‘formative’ or ‘summative’. Formative approaches to assessment do not aim for formal certification of learning outcomes, but provide feedback to the learning process or learning career, indicating strengths and weaknesses and providing a basis for personal or organisational improvement. Formative assessment fulfils a very important role in numerous settings ranging from guidance and counselling to human resource management in enterprises. Summative approaches to assessment and validation aim explicitly at the formalisation and certification of learning outcomes by institutions and bodies authorised to award qualifications.<sup>5</sup> An example of a typical RPL procedure (FETAC level 6) is provided in Appendix I. The primary instruments used in undertaking formative and summative RPL are provided in the following table:

<sup>5</sup> CEDEFOP (2009) *European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning*



Table 2. Recognition of Prior Learning Assessment Instruments

Formative Use		Summative Use	
Instruments	Countries	Instruments	Countries
Interview	Australia, Chile, Denmark, Ireland, Netherlands, Norway (dialogue based), South Africa	Written exams/e-testing	Australia, Austria, Chile, Czech Republic, Denmark, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Mexico, Slovenia, South Africa, Korea, Spain UK
Portfolio/e-portfolio	Australia, Chile, Czech Republic, Denmark, Ireland, Mexico, Netherlands, Norway, UK	Practical exams/Skills tests, Demonstration	Austria, Belgium, Chile, Denmark, Hungary, Ireland, Mexico, Norway, Slovenia, South Africa, Spain, UK
Observation	Australia, Chile, Netherlands, Spain	Oral exams	Denmark, Greece, Mexico, Slovenia, Spain, Italy
Self evaluation	Belgium, Greece, Spain	Declarative/Portfolio/e-portfolio	Hungary, Ireland, Netherlands, Norway, Slovenia, Spain, Italy
		Simulations	Chile, Denmark, Netherlands, Spain
		Project Evaluation	Greece, Ireland, Mexico
		Interview	Ireland, Netherlands (criterion directed)
		Multiple choice exams	Chile, Greece
		Group Evaluation/ Debate	Greece, South Africa

Source: OECD (October 2008) Thematic Review and Collaborative Policy Analysis Recognition of Non-Formal and Informal Learning - Ireland Country Note.

In the formative approach, RPL is used, amongst other things for personal and career development. It does not necessarily lead to formally recognised qualifications. An example of this where an individual develops a portfolio in which his/her skills, competences, experiences are described. This can be used to develop a personal development plan and identify possible career or education choices. The formative dimension is seen as particularly beneficial for those with very low-levels of qualifications. It assists them to identify and make visible their skills and competencies and appropriate education and training options. Formative RPL activities already take place through, for example, referrals to FÁS from the Department of Social Protection, through Adult Guidance services provided through VECs or through the Back to Education Initiative. These activities are not explicitly or consistently standardised as ‘formative RPL procedures’. This is not in itself necessarily a weakness: it merely serves to highlight that RPL is not currently formalised within the system.

At the June 2010 meeting, the Expert Group advised that the emphasis on future work should be on “summative RPL”, i.e. the RPL process leading to exemptions, credit or full attainment of award. In the context of the upskilling focus of the National Skills Strategy, the EGFSN also advised that future study should cover all NFQ levels. Critical to summative RPL is that RPL procedures must be developed in line with standards, quality assurance and assessment policies that apply to the formal system. Summative RPL is known by a range other acronyms internationally such as APL (Accreditation of Prior Learning), APEL (Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning) or PLAR (Prior



Learning Assessment Recognition). Notwithstanding the policy focus in this paper on summative RPL, in practice it is likely that future activity will also naturally encompass formative RPL given that it is seen as particularly beneficial for people with low levels of qualifications in accessing education and training. Statistics from the AONTAS Information Referral Service in 2009 show that that 81% of unemployed individuals contacting the service stated that it had been more than ten years since they have been in education. 52% of these individuals have been out of education for more than twenty years and a further 4% stated that it had been more than 30 years since they were in education. Many people with low qualifications have also had poor experiences of formal education and may be reluctant to engage in further education and training. Using an initial formative approach and moving to a summative approach when confidence building has taken place could be a useful way to proceed with this cohort of people.

***Box 2. The role of guidance in the RPL process***

Guidance is provided in Ireland in both the labour market and education sectors. The National Guidance Forum report (2007) defines Guidance as facilitating people throughout their lives to manage their own educational, training, occupational, personal, social and life choices to that they reach their full potential and contribute to the development of a better society. Guidance practitioners facilitate the individual to reflect on their current abilities and complete an RPL process if appropriate. Providing group and/or 1-1 support to the individual to identify their skills, strengths and learning achievements and to reflect on their formal and non-formal learning history and experience is central to the guidance process, irrespective of the education or training level in question - post-primary, further education or higher education.

Since RPL is a highly individualised process, appropriate guidance for the individual is required. The 2009 CEDEFOP *European Guidelines for Validating Non-Formal and Informal Learning* highlight the crucial role of counsellors and advisers for the individual, for both orientation (providing information about RPL) and for preparation for assessment. Similarly, in consultations on this paper, the National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) highlighted the need for information on RPL processes and procedures to be made available by providers to guidance practitioners in order for RPL to operate effectively.

The CEDEFOP guidelines indicates what the role of guidance in the different stages of an RPL process (in the Irish context, identification of learning, assessment and certification) as follows:

- Potential candidates and those engaged in an RPL process should have access to impartial and informed advice. It is not possible to establish a single process for RPL that will accommodate the needs of all candidates. It is widely accepted that RPL needs careful tailoring to the needs of the individual and this is, at least partially, achieved by providing information, advice and guidance at the right times. It is clear that even before a decision is made to undergo an RPL process, candidates need to know what the added value is, what to expect, what standards have to be met and what form the evidence of prior learning needs to take. Prior to any assessment, candidates will need information, advice and guidance on such things as: timelines for validation; costs; procedure; sufficiency of evidence; quality and standards; presentation of evidence; assessment methods and how best to approach the process; support available and information on procedures for appeal.



- Similarly, once the assessment or certification stage is completed, evidence suggests a candidate will want to know of potential routes to further qualifications or programmes that are available.
- Timely access to information, advice and guidance is essential: ICT-based systems offer many advantages to users as well as providing effective tools for information exchange between candidates and guidance counsellors. The 2007 European inventory<sup>6</sup> shows that a continuing trend towards developing ICT solutions for guidance within validation systems continues.

### Orientation through RPL

This is a broad area of activity for advisers, guidance practitioners/counsellors, and other significant actors such as employers. It covers all aspects of producing and distributing information, motivating potential candidates followed by individualised advice and guidance on the whole process from identification of prior and relevant learning through to certification. Guidance practitioners facilitate the individual to reflect on their current abilities and complete an RPL process if appropriate.

Guidance offered at appropriate points can make the RPL process efficient and effective for all partners. The provision of appropriately trained and qualified guidance practitioners contributes significantly to the overall cost of the validation process. The guidance aspect of this stage is crucially important as it extends through the next stage, that of assessing a person's knowledge, skills and competence against predefined standards.

### Validation and Assessment

There is evidence to suggest that providing information and appropriate guidance to individuals is crucial to successful outcomes. The role of the counsellor can often include working with the candidate to appraise the breadth and depth of evidence of learning in relation to assessment criteria/standards. Some would refer to this as competence mapping. To carry out this process the counsellor has to have a clear understanding of the standards involved.

In relation to assessment and post-assessment, the counsellor is independent of the actual assessment process and can offer impartial but useful advice. To fulfil this role counsellors should have:

- a thorough knowledge of the education and training system;
- a thorough knowledge of the validation and assessment process;
- an understanding of the labour market (e.g. competency or standards requirements);
- access to key sets of information.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.ecotec.com/europeaninventory/2007.html>. This is currently being updated.



## 2. Benefits of RPL

The following table summarises the main benefits of RPL documented in the OECD's *Recognising Non-Formal and Informal Learning - Outcomes, Policies and Practices* report. RPL benefits are multifaceted and in most cases complementary for various stakeholders and can apply to the enterprises, Governments, individuals and education and training providers.

Table 3. Summary of RPL benefits as reported by participating OECD countries

Benefits for employers	
Economic benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Formal recognition of work acquired competencies - more practical and functional for employers. (Czech Rep).</li> <li>Saving on costs of formal learning, reduced training needs. (Czech Republic).</li> <li>Better matching of employees to tasks.</li> </ul>
Improving links between enterprise and training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improved documentation of employee competencies as enhancing business strategy (Austria, Denmark, Italy)</li> <li>Improved productivity (Canada)</li> <li>Austria - established system of competence appraisals and learning portfolios in enterprises.</li> </ul>
Regulation and quality assurance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Easier for employers to satisfy regulatory requirements, particularly in Health, Care and Security sectors (Canada)</li> </ul>
Recruitment and work organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improved understanding of quality of applicants (Denmark, Chile, Belgium)</li> <li>RPL as a means for fulfilling sectoral training agreements (Netherlands)</li> <li>More dynamic HRM methods - diagnostic tool for fast-changing professions (Switzerland)</li> <li>Decrease in absenteeism from RPL employees (Norway)</li> </ul>
Benefits for governments	
More competitive economy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Meeting objectives of knowledge economy/society (EU).</li> <li>Meeting lifelong learning targets (EU)</li> <li>Supporting upskilling - Ireland</li> <li>Australia - increase participation, particularly women, inactive population, early school leavers</li> </ul>
Democracy and citizenship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improved quality of life, equity</li> </ul>
More effective systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improved co-ordination between State institutions (Switzerland, Czech Republic)</li> <li>More flexible education and training system = more flexible workforce (Italy)</li> <li>Addressing unemployment, particularly long term (Italy)</li> <li>Maximising/using all talents (Netherlands, Ireland)</li> <li>Transforming tradition learning systems (Slovenia)</li> <li>Spread learning more evenly throughout age groups (Netherlands)</li> <li>Meeting skills needs / labour market shortages (Canada, Scotland, Netherlands)</li> <li>Integration of immigrants (Spain)</li> <li>Stimulate innovation among education/training providers (Netherlands)</li> <li>Reducing drop outs (Australia, Netherlands)</li> </ul>
Benefits for the Individual	
Economic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Decrease in direct costs of formal learning and opportunity cost arising from potential loss of resources for individuals during time they are engaged in RPL. (Canada, Australia)</li> <li>Time (Almost all countries)</li> <li>Labour Market Currency, Qualifications Matter (Spain, Norway, Italy)</li> <li>Return to Lifelong Learning (Denmark)</li> <li>As a mechanism for avoiding long-term unemployment, finding a job faster (Norway)</li> <li>Better pay, chance of promotion (Netherlands)</li> <li>Increasing visibility of hidden knowledge, skills and competencies (Scotland, Australia)</li> <li>Increasing occupational mobility (Australia, Spain)</li> </ul>



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Minimises drop-outs (Canada)</li> </ul>
Educational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Raise Awareness / Return to Lifelong Learning (All countries)</li> <li>Access to further and higher education programmes (Germany)</li> <li>Identifies skills strengths and deficits (All)</li> <li>Shorter career paths/exemptions from modules/credits</li> <li>Reduces fear of returning to formal learning (Belgium)</li> <li>Career Development (Australia, Chile)</li> <li>More flexible access to qualifications</li> </ul>
Social benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Social Cohesion, improving equity of access to education (Slovenia)</li> </ul>
Other personal benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improved confidence and self image - 'you know more than you think!' (Norway).</li> </ul>
<b>Benefits for education providers/awarding bodies</b>	
Meeting policy and regulatory needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increase student numbers (Netherlands)</li> <li>Enhances attractiveness of education institutes (Australia)</li> <li>Brings providers closer to labour market needs, address employer needs (Australia, Netherlands)</li> <li>Provide career paths for those with partial qualifications (Czech Republic)</li> <li>Transfer between qualifications (Scotland)</li> <li>More diverse provision, equity of access policies (Czech Republic, Austria)</li> <li>Satisfying regulatory requirements established down by Qualifications Authorities (Australia).</li> <li>Enabling the learner to start from 'higher up' and progress faster through credits/exemptions (South Africa, Norway)</li> </ul>

OECD (2010) *Recognising Non-Formal and Informal Learning - Outcomes, Policies and Practices*

### 3. RPL and the National Skills Strategy

As shown in Table 3 above, RPL can contribute to a range of social and economic goals. While these goals are to a large extent intrinsically linked, the interest of the Expert Group of Future Skills Needs in RPL stems primarily from the upskilling objectives of the National Skills Strategy and the need to improve the skills and qualifications profile of the labour force. This places the emphasis on summative RPL from the perspective of the Expert Group i.e. RPL for acquisition of credit, exemptions or full qualifications/awards, although, as mentioned previously, future activity is likely to naturally encompass formative RPL, particularly for those with no formal/low levels of qualifications.

This is within the context of current high unemployment that has particularly affected sectors such as construction, manufacturing and retail. RPL is also a means of achieving more flexible and demand-led provision, which also featured as a strong objective in the National Skills Strategy. Furthermore, RPL can also contribute to meeting enterprise and labour market skills needs by improving the understanding of employee competencies, better matching of employees to tasks and enhancing training strategies or meeting regulatory requirements for specific qualifications.

The National Skills Strategy Implementation Statement showed that substantial progress has already been made since the base year of the NSS towards the 2020 vision for the labour market. (See Appendix II for further details on progress). While progress towards the National Skills Strategy emphasises that the most significant gap remains in relation to upskilling those below NFQ levels 4/5, this should not preclude the further development of RPL across NFQ levels including higher education. If RPL is to evolve as a more prominent feature of education, training and lifelong learning, it is important that it is available to learners at all levels.



## 4. The Potential Market for Recognition of Prior Learning in Ireland

Internationally, RPL systems operate with differing objectives or are embedded in educational rights, hence therefore can either have a ‘whole of labour market’ approach or be more targeted at certain labour market cohorts (see Appendix III for further detailed country notes on RPL in Portugal, France and Denmark).

- For example, in Norway RPL is seen as “a way of redistributing human capital and solve the issue of skills mismatch and skills shortage and, therefore, a way to drive economic development”. In accordance with Norwegian legislation “the right to the recognition of non-formal and informal learning applies to all individuals notwithstanding”<sup>7</sup>. In France, a similar legal entitlement exists for any individual to undergo an RPL process.
- In Canada, the system of Prior Learning Assessment Recognition (PLAR) is targeted broadly across adult learners with a view to primarily enabling adults gain access to, credit or exemptions from higher qualifications. It is also used more specifically as a means of recognising the skills of immigrants and promoting integration, which is also a feature of RPL in countries such as Spain and Mexico.<sup>8</sup>
- In other countries, RPL is used as a way to target certain groups in the population. In the Netherlands, RPL has a strong social inclusion focus and is found to be beneficial for a range of groups including those with significant voluntary experience in the fields of care, schools, politics, and sports; those re-entering the labour market and; as a solution for the problems on the labour market experienced by target groups such as the unemployed, non graduated dropouts, employees threatened by unemployment and starters in the labour market.<sup>9</sup>
- In many OECD countries, due to ageing populations, RPL is viewed as an important mechanism for recognising the skills and raising the employability and mobility of older cohorts in the labour market. In Australia, one RPL project is targeted at maximising participation in the labour force by women, early school leavers and the inactive population.

The National Skills Strategy Implementation Statement highlighted that, given the dramatically changed economic and employment landscapes since the publication of the National Skills Strategy, there are certain priority groups to be targeted in terms of focussing on upskilling.

### Priority Groups among the Unemployed

In the 2010 Budget, priority regarding training and education places for the unemployed is given to those in the cohorts set out below, as they are most at risk of drifting into Very Long Term Unemployment. The priority cohorts are:

- those with lower skills or education levels i.e. those unemployed who do not have a Leaving Cert qualification or equivalent.
- those on the Live Register for longer periods of time, especially those on it for over 1 year.
- those up to age 34 years, especially those aged under 25 years.

<sup>7</sup> OECD (2006) Thematic Review on Recognition of Non-Formal and Informal Learning – Norway Country Note

<sup>8</sup> OECD (2010) Recognition of Non-Formal and Informal Learning: Country Practices

<sup>9</sup> OECD (2007) Recognition of Non-Formal and Informal Learning – Netherlands Country Note





- those who were previously employed in sectors that have been most affected by restructuring and where recovery to previous activity levels is not in prospect (mainly construction, manufacturing, and the wholesale and retail trade).

### Priority Groups among those in Employment

The NSS Implementation Statement also stated that public funding of training for those in employment is focussing on those who are on short-time working, or the lower skilled, or those in vulnerable employments. Education and training measures targeted at these vulnerable groups in-employment aims to prevent them falling into unemployment. Recent unemployment trends show that those with low levels of qualifications have much higher unemployment rates. In addition, research has shown that lower-skilled employees are much less likely to have their training provided by employers. So publicly funded training focuses on those who would not otherwise have the opportunity to upskill.

Where appropriate, there is potential to couple RPL policy development initially with the priority groups established by government in the National Skills Strategy implementation statement. This largely complements the findings of the OECD thematic review of RPL in Ireland (2008), which recommended that it is logical to firstly direct resources towards certain priority groups such as the low-skilled individuals, the unemployed, immigrants and older people. The following table quantifies the priority cohorts as outlined in the National Skills Strategy Implementation Statement.

Table 4. Priority Groups in the National Skills Strategy Implementation Statement

<b>Unemployed (Q1 2010)</b>	<b>275,000</b>
Those with below leaving certificate	82,700
Long-term unemployed (more than 1 year)	112,600
Up to 35 yrs (particularly under 25's)	150,700
Sectors:	
Construction*	83,300
Manufacturing*	31,400
Retail*	29,100
<b>In-employment</b>	<b>1,857,600</b>
Those with below leaving certificate or equivalent	316,400

Source: CSO QNHS Q1 2010 \* Sectoral data relates to Q4 2009 - Source: National Skills Bulletin 2010



## 5. RPL Infrastructure and practice in Ireland<sup>10</sup>

There is no separate or dedicated infrastructure for RPL in Ireland. Instead, it is practiced and largely understood in the context of education and training, awarding bodies, providers and institutions. They use RPL in relation to accessing qualifications (through assessing prior learning for entry to programmes, credit, exemptions or full awards). They evaluate prior certificated as well as prior experiential learning. The recognitions service of the NQAI provides advice and comparisons of Irish and international qualifications.

A number of actions recommended in the White Paper on Adult Education (2000) for RPL have been or are being implemented. These include the development of:

- credit systems
- modularisation
- flexible delivery
- new forms of assessment, and
- the use of learning outcomes.

The development of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) and new types of qualifications also supports RPL. Limited progress has been made on the White Paper's recommendations to provide systemised supports to guide learners through these processes. Its recommendation to establish independent assessment centres for RPL has not been followed up.<sup>11</sup>

The following bodies play a role in developing and operating RPL - the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (the Authority), awarding bodies including the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC), the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC), the universities and the Dublin Institute of Technology, and providers of education and training. Their roles are set out in the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 and in the Authority's policies in access, transfer and progression (2003).<sup>12</sup> Their roles are set out below.

### *The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland*

The Authority's role is to encourage the development of processes for recognising prior learning and to promote co-ordination and harmonisation of these by providers and awarding bodies. It does this through the National Framework of Qualifications and specific actions including the development of Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning in Further and Higher Education and Training (2005), and participation in EU and OECD RPL activities.

The 2005 principles and operational guidelines concern the implementation of RPL in relation to qualifications.<sup>13</sup> They address the use of RPL for the purposes of entry, credit, exemptions from

<sup>10</sup> This section is largely taken from NQAI Strategic options for the Recognition of Prior Learning, September 2010, unpublished

<sup>11</sup> It was expected that the new Workplace Learning Unit (of the then to be established National Adult Learning Council) would explore the feasibility of this with the NQAI. This recommendation was not followed up, in part because the proposed National Adult Learning Council was not firmly established and in part as the Authority concentrated its work on developing and introducing the NFQ and policies for access, transfer and progression, which included RPL.

<sup>12</sup> Policies, actions and procedures on access, transfer and progression for learners, 2003, pp.22-26, [www.nqai.ie](http://www.nqai.ie)

<sup>13</sup> [http://www.nqai.ie/framework\\_policies\\_criteria.html](http://www.nqai.ie/framework_policies_criteria.html)



course requirements and, in limited cases, as a basis for gaining qualifications. Currently, Qualifax (the national learners' database operated by the Authority)<sup>14</sup> is building its information provision on the availability of RPL for programmes.

***Box 3: The National Framework of Qualifications and RPL***

The National Framework of Qualifications and the related policies on access, transfer and progression have, since 2003, been the main vehicles through which RPL has been promoted in Ireland. The Framework explicitly aims to recognise all learning achievements including prior learning. It does so by: establishing a single national point of reference for RPL - learning outcomes, alternative pathways to qualifications and a more flexible and integrated system of qualifications.

The Framework and the new architecture of awards - major, minor, supplemental and special purpose awards - are also more conducive to RPL. They extend the number and size of reference points for recognising prior learning. Modularisation/unitisation, which is now a main feature of higher education and training, also supports RPL.

The Authority's policies on access, transfer and progression set out a range of policies and procedures which are designed to improve learner mobility. These address entry requirements, the development of transfer and progression routes, credit and information provision. They state that RPL can be used for the purpose of programme entry, credit, exemptions or eligibility for a whole award. The Authority, awarding bodies and providers have responsibilities to implement RPL procedures.

### **Awarding Bodies**

Awarding bodies, including the universities, the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), Institutes of Technology with delegated power to make awards, the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) are responsible for developing RPL policies and procedures. HETAC and FETAC are responsible for ensuring that providers implement procedures, provide statements on arrangements for RPL and monitor practice. Since 2001, both Councils have developed and/or revised their policies and procedures for RPL. RPL is embedded in their quality assurance arrangements for providers.

The 1999 Qualifications (Education and Training) Act sets out that learners may seek awards directly from HETAC and FETAC on the basis of RPL alone. The Act introduced the concept of a right for an individual to apply for RPL. HETAC has made a small number of awards on this basis. FETAC ran a pilot project in 2006/07 through which 50 learners gained awards via RPL. In practice, both Councils have delegated responsibility to offer RPL for whole awards to providers. They do not actively promote this activity.

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<sup>14</sup> [www.qualifax.ie](http://www.qualifax.ie)



### *Further education providers*

All providers who register with FETAC to access its awards are required to offer RPL for access, credit and/or exemptions. Providers who wish to offer RPL for the purposes of achieving a FETAC award must agree an additional sub strand of quality assurance for RPL.<sup>15</sup> As at June 2010, 12 providers were quality assured to offer RPL for full awards. Data on the practice of RPL by providers and on learner use of RPL for entry, exemptions or full awards is not systematically gathered or published by FETAC or individual providers.

A recent example of an effective RPL mechanism is the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA)'s cost effective distance learning tool that can also be used to provide national certification with respect to NFQ Level 2 awards. In operating this Distance Learning Service, it became clear that the process could be used to recognise prior learning. First, learners accessing the "Words and Numbers in Everyday Life" programme on the website [www.writeon.ie](http://www.writeon.ie) undertake an initial or pre-assessment process, which identifies particular sets of knowledge, skill and competence against national standards set out in named awards. Second, if a learner has demonstrated that he/she already meets the standards for a component certificate, the learner is directed to a second or summative assessment process, the results of which are used for accreditation purposes. Additional summative assessment requirements must also be completed to add to the e-portfolio.

This RPL process ensures that all learning outcomes for an award are assessed and fully met twice. The process is subject to all stages of the quality assurance process, including verification and authentication. On 12<sup>th</sup> October 2010, FETAC validated a NALA NFQ Level 3 distance learning programme which also uses the website [www.writeon.ie](http://www.writeon.ie). This is the first Level 3 programme to be validated under FETAC's new Common Award System, and NALA is currently applying to FETAC to officially register as an RPL provider at Level 3.

Another good example of effective RPL in practice is the work by FETAC and Higher Education Institutes to provide progression and advanced entry opportunities/exemptions for crafts persons a range to higher education programmes (for example, electricians converting to electrical engineering). This encouraged broader provision of progression routes into higher education (figures on uptake and impact are not yet available).

### *Higher Education institutions*

All HETAC registered providers are required to have RPL policies in place. They also assist HETAC in undertaking RPL for whole awards (in line with the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999<sup>16</sup>). The scale of practice is difficult to ascertain as HETAC and providers do not publish data on RPL activity. Most higher education institutions practice some form of RPL and have institutional policies which support this activity. Most universities also have institutional policies in place, although some of these are limited to the recognition of certified learning. The focus, scale and organisation of RPL vary from institution to institution<sup>17</sup>. It is largely restricted to access and to

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.fetac.ie/fetac/providers/tools/rplupdate.htm>

<sup>16</sup> Note that HETAC has made a small number of awards on this basis, in part due to financial constraints. Most higher education institutions have credit ceilings of 50% on the volume of prior learning that can be achieved towards an award.

<sup>17</sup> Recognition of Prior Learning: a focus on practice, Cork Institute of Technology, p.19



certain disciplines of learning (e.g. nursing, adult education and social care) and to design programmes for the workplace. Dedicated RPL officers and support staff are in place in some institutions (e.g., Cork Institute of Technology, DIT, Letterkenny Institute of Technology, and NUI Galway). DIT has developed comprehensive RPL implementation arrangements and offers a CPD programme for RPL in Higher Education at Masters Level. Except in the single case of awarding doctorates on the basis of published work, a long standing practice of the National University of Ireland, the universities and their associated colleges do not, as far as it can be discerned, make awards solely on the basis of RPL.

In 2010, the Framework Implementation Network (FIN) for universities and associated colleges commenced work on RPL.<sup>18</sup> It aims to develop guidance for practitioners and to present case studies of practice. It will also be informed by the outcomes of the RPL Strand of the Education in Employment SIF-funded project.<sup>19</sup> The main focus of its work will be on experiential learning. A handbook will be produced for dissemination to colleagues in higher education reflecting the outcomes of the network's work. The outcomes of this work are expected to be finalised in the first quarter of 2011. Consultations on this paper with the IUA indicated that demand for RPL has risen substantially in the past 3 years, driven primarily by labour market challenges and greater awareness of the need for upskilling. This underlines the need to provide greater information and transparency about the current offering of RPL given present high unemployment and the need to improve labour market mobility.

### *RPL and the workplace*

In the past two decades, a number of partnerships of education and training providers and workplace representatives have used RPL to encourage participation in training, to increase professionalisation, to access to relevant qualifications, to identify workplace needs, and to design and deliver appropriate programmes.<sup>20</sup> Partnerships with providers have included Skillnets, SIPTU, the Construction Industry Federation as well as individual companies. Some of these activities are long-standing whilst others are recent and project based (e.g. Lionra). For example, Fáilte Ireland has for some years operated RPL, involving, with the support of an RPL mentor, a 'skills and knowledge audit' (a highly detailed checklist which an individual completes to demonstrate relevant knowledge and competencies against the award standard), interviews and practical demonstrations to enable individuals to access qualifications in relation to chef, bar tender/supervisor, waitress/waiter, restaurant supervisor, accommodation assistant/supervisor (NFQ Levels 4-6). In 2009 Skillnets worked in conjunction with Letterkenny Institute of Technology (LYIT), a leading educational institute in the area of RPL, to develop a Level 7 certificate programme in Managing and Mentoring People specifically for Skillnets staff. 15 staff members participated on the course and completed a number of modules on the basis of RPL.

There is demand from enterprise and public sector employers for RPL as a basic building block in the development of specific or targeted programmes for the workplace. For example, this has

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<sup>18</sup> In 2007, the Authority and the Irish Universities Association established the university sector Framework Implementation Network in late 2007. The purpose of the network is to deepen the implementation of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) within the university sector; in 2009 it published a report on outcomes, <http://www.nfqnetwork.ie/>.

<sup>19</sup> <http://eine.ie/?cat=9>

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, see discussion of RPL in Work-based learning, graduating through the workplace, Cork Institute of Technology, 2008, <http://eine.ie>



been integral to the development of programmes in the IBEC Retail Skillnet, the Citizens Advice Bureau, Thomas Crosbie Holdings and in the tourism and hospitality sector. The scale of demand is difficult to estimate as this is largely directed towards education and training providers, in particular, the Institutes of Technology. The integration of RPL in programme design and involvement of employers in this can involve employer support for certain RPL activities such as learning mentors in the workplace.

An internal Skillnets RPL Task Group undertook a survey in 2009 with all networks to ascertain the degree of interest and involvement in RPL.

Some of the key findings were:

- Two thirds of networks have some involvement in RPL.
- FETAC, private training providers and third level institutions are the organisations most frequently contacted by networks in relation to RPL.
- One in ten networks indicated that they were involved in some form of training delivery using RPL.
- 70% of all networks are interested in RPL and are seeking further information.
- 37% of networks were found to have general plans to explore RPL opportunities and 25% have specific training activity plans.
- 20% have plans to collaborate with specific stakeholders whereas 18% have already developed relationships with stakeholders.

The results of the survey will guide the Skillnets RPL Task Group in providing assistance to networks in the 2010-2011 funding round.

### *Funding of RPL in Ireland*

Dedicated funding of RPL is provided through a limited number of nationally and EU-funded projects. In some instances, public funds have supported collaboration amongst providers. A total of €2m (made up of a Higher Education Authority allocation of some €680 000 and matching funds from participating institutions) was spent under the RPL Strand of the Education in Employment SIF-funded project over the period 2006-2010. Since then, the project has since been merged with the REAP (Roadmap for Employment-Academic Partnership) project which focuses on a broad range of partnership interactions between higher education institutions and enterprises.

In other cases, funding streams have allowed for RPL as part of training interventions e.g. the *FÁS Training of people in employment initiative* channelled funding to the Lónra Accreditation of Prior Learning Project (2006-07), Equal project funding for the Construction Industry Federation and certain Skillnets networks. The IBEC Retail Skillnet, registered with FETAC to offer RPL for specific qualifications, has used RPL in the delivery of education and training programmes.<sup>21</sup> The project-based nature of this funding creates a risk that the relevant RPL practice may not be sustained beyond the life of the project, and that experience can be lost. On the other hand, projects can be a catalyst for RPL and the relevant bodies may generate alternative means to finance RPL once

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<sup>21</sup> <http://www.ibecretailskillnet.com/>



projects have finished.<sup>22</sup> Some higher education institutions generate income through charging fees to individuals who undertake an RPL assessment.<sup>23</sup> In further education and training sector, Fáilte Ireland and Teagasc, for example, charge fees to applicants. There is little publicly available information on financing models used for RPL. In some cases, employers contribute by providing workplace mentors.

## Issues Arising

### *Scale of RPL activity is difficult to estimate*

There is little systematic data collection on the availability and use of RPL in Ireland by providers, awarding bodies or other agencies. This makes it very difficult to estimate the demand for RPL, the number of individuals availing of RPL, in what areas and for what purposes or to gauge the level of institutional activity. Evidence gathered by the SIF RPL project indicated that the level of activity varied considerably between the nine project partners. In one academic year, applications for RPL ranged from less than 10 applications to over 500 amongst the higher education institutions<sup>24</sup>.

RPL practice has become more widespread in both further and in higher education and training since the 1990s (*Country report on RPL for OECD activity, RPL - a focus on practice, Cork Institute of Technology, 2009*). This is focused on RPL for entry, exemptions or credit. As the country report on RPL for the OECD activity (2007) showed, much of this practice is localised within particular institutions and providers of education and training, and is specific to certain groups of learners.

### *RPL is largely focused on qualifications*

To-date, the focus of RPL policy and practice has been on the achievement of qualifications. This is logical to a great extent, especially within higher education where qualifications and awards are the primary function. At the lower end of the NFQ Considerable progress has been made in putting in place building blocks for RPL. The main ones for this are the introduction of the NFQ; of qualifications based on learning outcomes (which create a common reference point for the assessment of prior learning); of new award-types which stimulate the development and recognition of more diverse kinds and sizes of qualifications; the inclusion or alignment of professional and international qualifications in the NFQ, the work of qualifications recognition services, specific project funding and the introduction of workplace requirements for qualifications.

### *Funding of RPL*

Education and training providers and institutions are not directly funded to provide RPL. FETAC and HETAC also face considerable resource constraints in assessing an individual's prior learning in relation to whole awards. As a result, they do not actively promote this option to learners. This must be funded from within existing budgets and projects. However, all FETAC and HETAC

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<sup>22</sup> For example, RPL activity in Cork Institute of Technology stemmed from the ADAPT project and led ultimately to putting in place a centralised unit and dedicated RPL support staff now funded from a mix of sources.

<sup>23</sup> The cost of providing RPL depends on what type of RPL is in question, what the purpose is (to gain access to courses, exemptions or assessment for awards) and the context in which it is provided. There can be returns to scale where cohorts of learners rather than individuals are involved.

<sup>24</sup> Recognition of Prior Learning: a focus on practice, Cork Institute of Technology, p. 21. The year is not given. Activity expanded over the lifetime of the project (to end 2009). The reasons for this are not clear. It is likely to be due to a mix of factors including increased awareness of RPL, increased capacity to deliver and economic recession which has encouraged individuals to return to education.



providers are required to have RPL policies and procedures in place. This can create an expectation that RPL is or should be available. The SIF RPL project finds that 'the costs associated with RPL, both in time and budgets, appear to be significant disincentives both for learners and higher education providers and may help to explain why the service is underutilised'. Conversely, working group members argue that 'benefits to both the individual and the institution outweigh costs' and that 'a dedicated RPL resource in each institution should play a strong role in the process'.<sup>25</sup> Any significant expansion of RPL activities would need to take into account resource costs and knock-on effects in relation to current funding models for institutions and students to ensure that anomalies or barriers to practice do not emerge.

### ***RPL and broader implications for operations and allocation of places in higher education and training***

One obstacle to the development of RPL which was identified in consultations is the workflow implications at an institutional level of a more mainstream RPL system. For the most part, the processing of RPL applications lies with Department Heads or Programme Leaders. Relative to standard application procedures, RPL processes by their nature are time intensive. Any significant expansion of entry routes via RPL would have implications for managing workflow. This may also have implications for the overall reservation and allocation of places to different learner cohorts including Leaving Certificate holders.

### ***Monitoring and reporting on RPL by providers and awarding bodies***

There is limited systematic gathering of information or monitoring of RPL practice and processes by HETAC and FETAC, although it is addressed in their arrangements for institutional review and monitoring of providers respectively. Similarly, although they generally have policies and procedures for RPL in place, most providers and institutions do not themselves report directly on their RPL activities. Generally, RPL is made available in the context of specific programmes and interventions, which can partially explain this.

A limited number of evaluations of RPL practice have been carried out. These have generally been conducted within the context of overall project evaluations/reporting requirements and are not widely available (e.g., a report on the Lionra project to FÁS (2007); reports to the HEA on the implementation of the SIF Education in Employment RPL project strand). FETAC's evaluation of its pilot project on RPL (2007) informed its policies and practice. The absence of evaluations means that there is a small evidence base and limited exchange of knowledge on the impact and effectiveness of RPL. The absence of data and comprehensive information on RPL activity at a national level makes it difficult to gauge the scale of demand and to direct individuals and others to appropriate sources of guidance.

### ***Gaps in information and advice on RPL***

While many providers have comprehensive information about RPL at an institutional level, there is no centralised information point nationally for learners, employers, education and training providers and others interested in developing or accessing RPL. This makes it difficult for those who

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<sup>25</sup> Recognition of Prior Learning: a focus on practice, Cork Institute of Technology, p.40





want to examine the potential of RPL to meet their needs or to access relevant information and advice on options, availability, costs, staff training, examples of relevant practice etc. This has implications for the provision of effective guidance on RPL to potential users (section 1 above).

There are some deficiencies in the information made available by awards councils and education and training providers/institutions on RPL. The OECD review team examined the difficulties in matching supply and demand for RPL which largely lie behind these information gaps. On the one hand, providers are reluctant to raise awareness, as RPL is not generally available. On the other hand, the availability of RPL is limited due to lack of demand and funding. The review team suggested that this potential deadlock could be addressed by inter alia simultaneous execution of communication and development of RPL, staff training and promotion/communication of RPL in the context of the objectives and goals with which it is associated (rather than as an end in itself).<sup>26</sup> Qualifax is making a useful contribution to making available information on programmes to which RPL applies.

#### *Uncertainty about who has a responsibility to provide RPL for specific workplace needs*

Increasingly, qualifications requirements are introduced for specific roles in the workplace or in relation to access to funding schemes (such as the Early Childhood Education Scheme), by Government Departments or other competent/regulatory bodies. The question of how those who are already performing these roles but who do not have the newly-specified qualifications can demonstrate that they meet the qualifications requirements or complete any gaps in their learning arises, i.e. how their prior learning can be recognised. It is not clear which body (such as the body which introduces qualifications requirements, awarding bodies or providers of education and training) has a responsibility to investigate demand, deliver and determine funding arrangements for RPL for these individuals. Expectations that providers and awarding bodies can act on this are often, for reasons of funding and capacity, unrealistic.

Other detailed issues and recommendations concerning transparency of procedures, quality assurance and funding were identified in the Lionra project<sup>27</sup>, *Framework Implementation and Impact Study* (2009) and in the *RPL: a focus on practice report* (2009). These are summarised in Appendix IV.

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<sup>26</sup> OECD review team, Ireland Country note, p.55 and 59. The issue of communication is discussed on pp.52-63

<sup>27</sup> OECD Country Background report Ireland, pp.68-71



## 6. Expenditure and Costs of RPL - International Evidence

The OECD thematic review of RPL policies and practice in 16 member countries showed that it is difficult to estimate the costs of RPL. In many countries, data is not collected specifically on RPL in terms of time, resources and funding that is required. Instead, it is generally counted within the overall costs of education and training provision. Where data is available, it appears that RPL accounts for a relatively minor proportion of total public expenditure on education and training in comparison to overall provision. The following statistics are available for Norway and the Netherlands in relation to estimated expenditure on RPL. This includes total costs (e.g. infrastructure, policy, guidance and personnel in addition to the cost of assessing the individual).

Table 7. Data on RPL expenditure in Norway. Note, figures do not include estimates for expenditure on recognition in higher education

Year	2003
Total public expenditure on recognition	45million NOK (€5,440,000)
Expenditure on recognition as a % of GDP	0.003%
Expenditure on recognition as a % of total public expenditure	0.006%
Public expenditure on recognition as % of total public education expenditure	0.04%
Average expenditure per participant in recognition	4,300 NOK (€521) - equates to approx 10,500 participants

Source: OECD Thematic Review on Recognition of Non-Formal and Informal Learning - Norway

Table 8. Data on RPL expenditure in the Netherlands

Year	2006/2007
Public expenditure on recognition	€35,000,000
Trade Union expenditure on recognition	€8,750,000
Private expenditure on recognition	€8,750,000
Total expenditure on recognition	€52,500,000
Total expenditure as a % of GDP	0.0104%
Public expenditure on recognition as % of all public expenditure	0.0175%
Public expenditure on recognition as % of GDP	0.0069%
Public expenditure on recognition as % of all public expenditure on education	0.1735%
Average public expenditure per participant	€1,750 - equates to a roughly estimated 20,000 participants

Source: OECD Thematic Review on Recognition of Non-Formal and Informal Learning - Netherlands

Translating the expenditure figures on a GDP basis from Norway and the Netherlands to Ireland (on a GNP basis, 2009):



- Ireland would have an expenditure of approximately €4.1m on RPL on the basis of expenditure in Norway (note, not including higher education); and
- Approximately €14.4m on the basis of expenditure in the Netherlands.

## Individual Fees and Costs

The costs of RPL depend on a range of factors such as the assessment methods used (e.g. portfolio assessment vs. challenge exam), and the scale and maturity of the RPL system. Appendix V provides examples of a range of the different costs/fees charged in various countries or education institutes. It should be noted that fees for RPL do not necessarily reflect total RPL costs. Total costs would include developing systems, training staff, mentoring, dealing with queries, processing applications, verification, knowledge centres, guidance or other support structures. Specific costs are also pertinent to employers - staff training (mentors, assessors), time spent by employees in undertaking RPL. The following features emerge in relation to RPL fees to individuals:

### Further Education and Training

- Up to and including certification equivalent to upper secondary/vocational education, user fees are generally free of charge or absorbed by the provider as part of the overall budget, or are relatively inexpensive for the user. This makes RPL costs for those in adult education/vocational education and training relatively difficult to assess.
- In Norway, RPL procedures equivalent to upper secondary qualifications, prices are generally estimated at €120 to €300 per academic/general subject; €300 for a vocational subject and €1,800 for vocational testing.
- New Brunswick Community College (Canada) charges a base rate for Prior Learning Assessment Recognition (PLAR) of \$50 (€37) for a course, module or group of units of instruction with durations up to 30 hours. There is an extra fee of \$25 (€19) for each additional 15 hours up to a maximum of \$400 (€298). The methods of assessment are not programme specific and can include testing, demonstrations, and portfolio assessment.
- In South Africa, national guidelines for RPL costs state that: RPL services and assessment should not cost more than a full-time face-to-face programme, particularly if such services are integrated into the existing infrastructure. The cost of developing a system and the necessary capacity to support the system is not unlike the costs involved in the development of a new learning programme. This means that the initial start-up costs may be relatively high, but increasingly, with learners entering such a programme, the costs are reduced and spread over a period of time. In principle, RPL should be more cost-effective for candidates, employers and employees by reducing the cost of training in terms of those parts of the qualification for which the candidate already meets the requirements. The cost of developing RPL systems and capacity are seen as an investment in the development of a credible lifelong learning system in South Africa.

### Higher Education

Within higher education, RPL is generally only used in a partial manner, either for access to a higher education programme where insufficient formal certification exists, or for partial credit towards a higher education award (generally up to a maximum of 50%), which means the learner must complete the remainder of the programme (e.g. through part-time, full-time, or distance



learning). The fee structure of RPL differs significantly across countries and education and training providers.

- **A flat rate fee for assessment regardless of assessment methods.** For example, in Canada, in Brandon University, a Prior Learning Assessment Recognition (PLAR) application fee of \$300 is levied irrespective of the number of courses to which an applicant is seeking to apply for PLAR. The flat rate fee is \$400 in University of New Brunswick, and \$750 in the University of Athabasca.
- **A flat rate assessment fee plus a set fee per module/credit.** For example, University of East Anglia (UK). An initial Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning assessment fee of £120 is charged. If successful, the candidate is charged a fee for the award of exempted credit e.g. £20 per 20 credit exemption. For part-time students in the University of Staffordshire, Accreditation of Prior Certified Learning (APCL) is charged at 10% of the standard module fee and Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) is charged at 40% of the standard module fee. In the University of West Scotland, the APEL procedure for the Chartered Teacher programme is charged at £100 for the initial registration and consultation fee with a charge of £100 per module assessed through APEL. Assessment is through written assignments plus portfolio evidence.
- **Fee is dependent on the number of hours that would have been required to complete course/module.** For example, Red River College (Manitoba Canada) charges a \$75 fee for portfolio assessment related to courses up to 20 hours, rising to \$250 for courses over 61 hours. For challenge examinations, the fee is \$35 per hour of assessment up to a maximum of \$250.
- **Fee is the equivalent to the full cost of the module sought for exemption.** For example, the University of Staffordshire does not provide a reduction of fees for full-time students that undertake an Accreditation of Prior Learning procedure.
- **Information from the Netherlands indicates that in higher education for electrical engineering, the costs of RPL range from € 750 to € 1,900 per participant.** Here the use of RPL is mostly summative: the participant's competencies are measured, so that the participant can enter higher education programmes. Methods used are mainly portfolio and tests.



## 7. Return on Investment from RPL

The following section highlights some examples of evidence of return on investment from RPL compared to formal provision. It is difficult to find comprehensive reviews of RPL and return on investment data.

### Returns to the Individual

A study on Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) and student outcomes by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) in the US was published in March 2010.<sup>28</sup> It compared the outcomes for adult learners (over 25) that had gone through some form of PLA process (portfolio, evaluation of military experience, voluntary experience, customized exams or standardized exams) where students had gained some credit towards their degree programmes against other adult learners (over 25) that had not undertaken a PLA process. Data was collected from 48 postsecondary institutions and an adult learner population of 62,475, who were enrolled in the academic year 2001-2002, of which 15,594 (25%) had some form of PLA credit towards their programme. The study followed up on their progress 7 years later. The headline results of the study are:

More than 56% of PLA students earned a postsecondary degree within seven years, while only 21% of non-PLA students did so. PLA students had better graduation rates:

- Regardless of institutional size, level (two-year or four-year) or control (private for-profit, non profit, or public);
- Regardless of the individual student's academic ability or grade point average;
- Regardless of the individual student's age, gender, or race/ethnicity; and
- Regardless of whether or not the individual student received financial aid.

There were also significant savings for the student in terms of time required to complete programmes.

- PLA students earning bachelor's degrees saved an average of between 2.5 and 10.1 months of time in earning their degrees, compared to non-PLA students earning degrees. PLA students earning 13-24 PLA credits saved an average of 6.6 months, and those earning 49 or more PLA credits saved an average of 10.1 months.
- PLA earners with associate's degrees saved an average of between 1.5 and 4.5 months of time in earning their degrees, compared to non-PLA students earning associate's degrees.

Finally, the study found significant cost savings in relation to PLA students compared to the full tuition costs.

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<sup>28</sup> Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, US (March 2010), *Fuelling the Race to Post Secondary Success*



Table 9. Prior Learning Assessment Tuition Cost Savings at Five Sample Institutions, 15 Credit Scenario

Institution	Tuition Needed for 15 Course Credits (2009-2010)*	Cost of 15 PLA credits**	Difference (Dollars saved by students)
Large public university no.1	\$149 per credit hour x 15 (\$2,235)	\$20 per challenge exam x 5 (\$100)	\$2,135
Large public university no. 2	\$207 per credit hour x 15 (\$3,105)	\$300 per assessment x 5 (\$1,500)***	\$1,605
Mid-sized private college, adult programme	\$312 per credit x 15 (\$4,680)	\$530 per portfolio evaluation x 5 (\$2,650)***	\$2,030
Large private university, adult programme	\$455 per credit hour x 15 (\$6,825)	\$150 per assessment x 5 (\$750)	\$6,075
Small private university	\$1,680 for 3-unit course x 15 (\$8,400)	\$500 for credit for work experience x 5 (\$2,500)	\$5,900

\* Current tuition rates taken from institutional websites. Does not include other fees.

\*\* PLA rates taken from information provided by the institution in an online survey. Most expensive option used; assumed 3 credits hours earned per evaluation/assessment.

\*\*\* At these institutions, only the portfolio evaluation has a fee; all other PLA options are free of charge. Therefore, this calculation may be underestimating the average cost savings.

The OECD thematic review of RPL in Ireland also highlighted some examples of return on investment from RPL as experienced in the Netherlands.<sup>29</sup>

#### *A short pathway to the teaching profession (Netherlands)*

To address the shortage of teachers, the government attempted to provide incentives to those professionals working within other occupations to switch to a teaching profession by enabling them to gain the relevant qualification through an individualised bachelor-level study program. To this end, RPL was made a legal obligation as a gateway to a personalised learning route. Using this legal framework, alternative routes - shorter and less costly - are offered in to the profession. Although there was no information on the average time it takes for a candidate to prepare a portfolio, the average time taken by assessors is estimated at 12 hours per candidate. Costs of 2,000 Euro are covered by the employer. This kind of legislative arrangement does not yet exist outside the teaching profession; however discussions have started about applying this framework to the health care and engineering sectors.

<sup>29</sup> OECD (2008) Thematic Review and Collaborative Analysis – Recognition of Non-Formal and Informal Learning – Ireland Country Note



## Returns to the Employer

### *Reducing costs of up skilling workers*

Corus, a steel manufacturing company in the Netherlands, developed an RPL-procedure and a training course “Practical Craftsmanship” for low skilled employees. Costs and returns of RPL to Corus are in the table below.

Table 10. Opportunity Cost of RPL vs. Formal Training in Practical Craftsmanship, Netherlands

Workers at comparable level to NFQ Level 5/6, costs €		
	Without RPL	With RPL
Leave of absence	€12,000	€2,000
Study costs	€10,000	€1,400
RPL costs	-	€4,600
<b>Total</b>	<b>€22,000</b>	<b>€8,000</b>

Source: OECD (2007) Thematic Review on Recognition of Non-Formal and Informal Learning - Netherlands

The estimates are based on a working professional who takes leave to study. Whether he/she goes through RPL or not makes a difference in total costs. If the person does not participate in an RPL procedure, the cost will be 2.75 times higher. This is due to the high opportunity cost and the high costs of the study programme (€ 12,000 and €10,000 respectively). Therefore, the investment in RPL (€ 4,600) proves to be a good cost-saver, and thus can be expected to yield higher returns on investment. The example shows, that developing RPL in a company setting, on a considerable scale, can reduce the costs of up skilling workers.



## 8. Information on RPL costs in Ireland

The OECD review of RPL in Ireland found that there is little information available on the cost of RPL projects and activities and it is not mainstreamed into general funding arrangements for education and training. Where RPL is practiced, it is generally funded by:

- Seed and project based funding by the government or EU;
- Education and training providers pay for RPL activities from their regular budgets; and
- Fees charged to individuals for assessment.

Institutions invest in informing teachers, training assessors and mentors and developing procedures, establishing structures within the institution, exemption policies, et cetera. During the working visit, some examples of investment requirements were given by providers: the estimated cost of operating RPL for each individual varies from €600 to €2,000. The OECD team found it difficult to obtain details of costs. Costs will differ according to the type of procedures that are followed, focus of the RPL activity, overall scale of RPL activity and maturity of RPL systems. However, the OECD team found it difficult to acquire details of costs and costing models used by providers and awarding bodies. The amount of time necessary for mentoring and assessing RPL participants may vary from 10 to 40 hours. Also in many cases voluntary work by teachers, mentors and assessors is involved.

### Further Education and Training

As with international evidence, information on costs of RPL within further education and training is particularly difficult to establish. On the basis of international experience, according to the OECD Country Background Report on RPL for the Netherlands, the average costs of an RPL-procedure for (translated to the Irish system) levels 4 through 7 of the National Framework of Qualifications range from €1,000 to €1,250 per participant, including the costs of assessment and recognition of the results.

OTIB, the schooling fund for electrical engineering, plumbing and climate technology in the Netherlands, keeps a register of providers of RPL for this sector. The information in the register is updated twice a year. An analysis of the price levels here shows that the cost of one RPL procedure, at levels roughly equivalent to levels 4, 5, and 6 of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications, range from €800 to €1,350. Generally this concerns formative assessments. The participants' competencies are measured and possibilities for further education are made transparent. Methods involve portfolio and practical assessments (performing professional tasks). The results are mostly used to award employees certificates for the competencies measured and to give the employee access to education and training.

Within Ireland, a) information provided by IBEC Retail Skillnet indicates that for one person to achieve their full Level 5 FETAC certificate in Retail Operations through RPL it costs approximately €500 and b) Fáilte Ireland's Accreditation of Prior Learning process involves a fee of €85 to candidates. Assessment is carried out through a combination of a Skills Audit with the guidance of a





mentor and practical and oral tests. A portfolio assessment is also used for assessment in relation to advanced certificates (NFQ Level 6).

### Higher Education

As mentioned previously, the SIF project *Education in Employment* led by Cork Institute of Technology, included a strand on Recognition of Prior Learning and the results of the study were published in 2009. In relation to costs, the report found the following:

#### **Box 4. Information on Costs of RPL - Education in Employment RPL project**

There are a number of perspectives on the issue of costs. From an institutional perspective a clear picture of the cost of providing an RPL service is difficult to arrive at for a number of reasons.

- First, many of the costs associated with the process are hidden or absorbed into other cost centres (e.g. staff training, capacity-building.)
- Second, most institutions do not gather information on RPL activities centrally and where this information is gathered centrally it is generally only the number of processed applications for exemption that are counted and not the number of enquiries or engagements that do not yield a completed application.
- Third, an exact measure of the administration processing, guidance, mentoring, and assessment associated with each learner is not captured in any institution within the partnership. In the case of RPL for entry there is even less information available.

From the perspective of the learner and costs associated with the RPL process, the learner usually pays less for an application based on certified learning than for an application based on experiential learning. The learner applying for entry based on RPL usually does not pay a separate fee for application. The fee for assessment is of the order of the examination fee for the module from which exemption is sought. The fee charged for exemptions based on experiential learning can range up to the full module tuition fee. In some cases there is a separate 'processing' fee charged. These fees generally apply to part-time learners only, with no fees applied in most cases for full-time learners who apply for exemptions. Another issues identified in consultation on this paper is that fees are primarily collected on an annual rather than a modular basis, making fee reductions technically difficult to administer for RPL candidates.

In the case of some of the partner institutions, a fee is paid to assessors for RPL assessments. This practice would reflect practices developed by institutions previously involved in the Lónra project. In other institutions there is no separate fee for assessment. In discussions on payment for portfolio assessment, the *Education in Employment* working group proposed that the assessment of experiential learning should be viewed in line with the assessment of project material at the appropriate level, and be remunerated accordingly. The working group agreed that, ideally, RPL processes should be aligned between the various institutions. Any future reintroduction of fees for fulltime students might also have implications for the costing of RPL processes within institutions.

### Conclusions on Costs

The OECD review team, which reviewed policy in Ireland in 2007, found that information on expenditure in the Netherlands are more or less in line with that found during the working visit in



Ireland (€600 to €2,000 per participant). Based on these findings, the average cost of an RPL procedure in Ireland seems to be approximately €1,000 to €1,500 per participant. The OECD Review estimates that if a considerable effort were made by all partners involved (government, providers, employer's organisations and labour unions), the number of participants in RPL could amount to 5,000 to 6,000 a year, after 3 or 4 years. Multiplied by an average cost level of some €1,250 per participant, this would demand an investment of approximately €6.875 million. Important points need to be made about the investment needed:

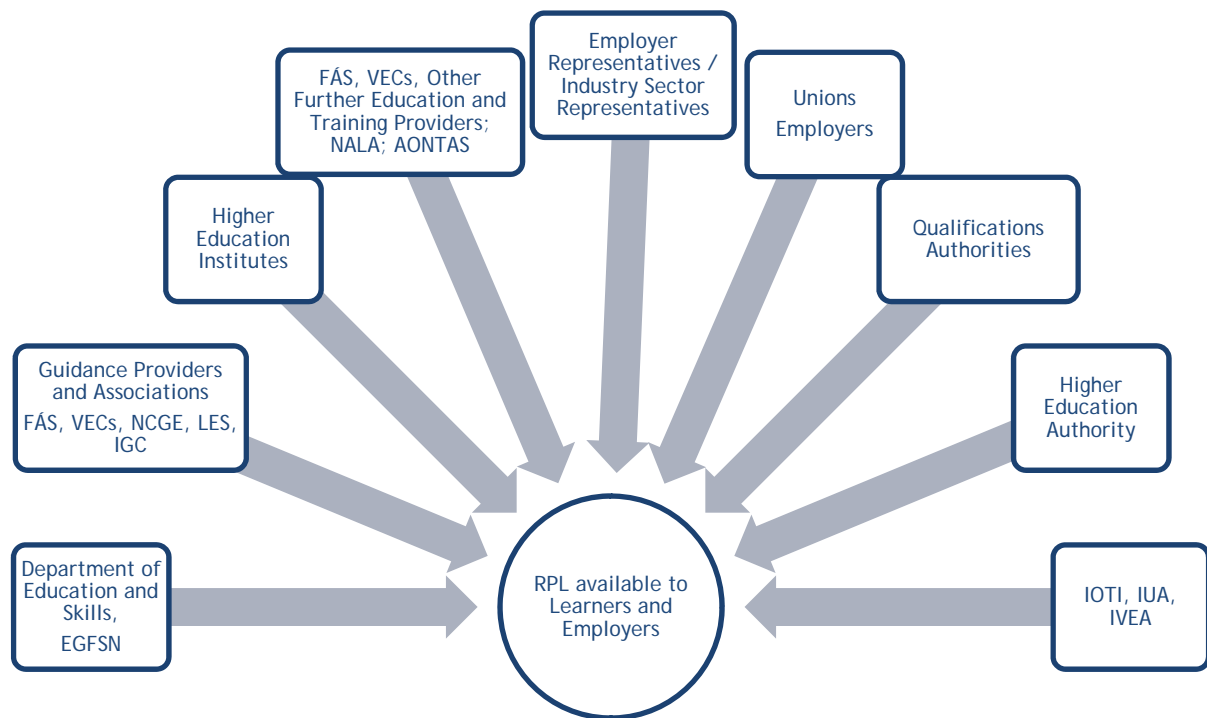
- The amount of money required to fund RPL will depend on the approach taken and on the focus of RPL activity. Given the variation in costs of operating and delivering RPL in Ireland, cited above, it is suggested that further work be undertaken to determine costs of different kinds of RPL interventions e.g. RPL for access to education and training programmes, professional practice, or for accessing the labour market. If an approach is taken where RPL is introduced gradually, sector by sector, or region by region, the costs will develop accordingly (slowly and in a controlled manner);
- Development costs will decrease over time.
- At present, it appears that several hundred persons go through RPL-procedures each year (exact statistics are not available). In most cases the *learners* themselves pay for the process or alternatively their employer pays where an arrangement has been made. Costs are often shared effectively where the institution through its core budget or project-funding pays for a general support service for RPL and the learner pays a fee for assessment. Fees can escalate from an examination fee for the recognition of prior certified learning (which involves recognition) and up to that of a module fee for the recognition of prior experiential learning (which involves assessment). In many cases RPL work is funded by an employer as part of their training and development budget where they seek to build a new focused targeted programme with a HEI as a strategic partner.
- Greater transparency about the costs of providing RPL is needed.
- The review of global RPL highlights the variety of models and approaches. Realistically, RPL requires a diverse range of costing models for a diverse range of contexts. The search for a one-size-fits-all solution is counter-productive and likely to set RPL back rather than to assist it.
- Information on user fees for RPL do not indicate the true cost of RPL, much of which is required upfront, which includes developing systems, training staff, mentoring, dealing with queries, processing applications, verification, guidance or other support structures.

To date, Irish providers have been able to cover the costs of RPL, partly because, in many cases, this has been done in the context of specific funding projects (e.g. SIF RPL, *Líonra*) or where numbers of participants have been relatively small. If the number of participants were to increase considerably and quickly, providers would not be able to cope because of a lack of personnel and resources. The OECD review team found that supply and demand need to be addressed/stimulated at the same time. It also found that for other parties, like employer's organisations and labour unions, the provision of dedicated funding for RPL is not a priority. Moreover, they are concerned that any increase in funding of RPL should not be at the expense of investment in goals, for example, provision of more flexible education.



## 9. Stakeholders and Policy Objectives

The following chart provides an indication of the actors that are responsible in driving progress in RPL to varying degrees.



It is clear from the above chart that, given the variety of actors and organisations, there are significant co-ordination and communication challenges involved in the functioning of RPL. For example, unless RPL is advised as an avenue to learners through guidance or employment services and learners are directed towards RPL providers, demand may be subdued. Alternatively, clear direction from the level of Department of Education and Skills as to if and where RPL should be prioritised and linked to policy objectives, will avoid the largely ad hoc nature of RPL practice.

As described in section 5, there has been significant work done to date on Recognition of Prior Learning involving these actors/organisations through various research and policies. There is also evidence that many lessons and experiences have been gained from practice of RPL in Ireland (though the estimated numbers are not substantial) across a range of sectors and education and training institutes. Examples include:

- The OECD thematic review of RPL in Ireland supported by the NQAI (2007/2008)
- The FETAC Pilot Project on RPL and evaluation (2007)
- The Education in Employment SIF Project strand on RPL practice in Higher Education (2009) and ongoing work under the SIF Roadmap for Employment-Academic Partnerships (REAP) project.
- The ongoing work of Framework Implementation Network on the practice, design and management of RPL.



The main policy questions to emerge from these projects include:

- Should RPL be a discrete or mainstream policy? Mainstreaming involves making RPL part of the regular provision of education and training.
- Should RPL be open to all individuals or certain target groups (e.g. low skilled, unemployed, certain sectors?)

Amongst the key findings of these projects are:

- The need for supporting documentation, tools and advice to providers, learners and other potential users about the RPL process.
- The need to clearer designation and clarity of the roles of mentors, assessors and learners.
- The need for dedicated resources within education and training providers to undertake RPL.
- The level of the award being sought has important consequences for assessment methodologies.
- The RPL process can be time intensive and RPL candidate is often not aware of the amount of work required.
- The need for greater alignment between providers on RPL practices.
- The importance of guidance to learners in the preparation of evidence of prior learning.

The issues and barriers around the development of RPL seem to be well established at the level of the education or training providers and awarding bodies. The main policy choice appears to be around how significant a role RPL should have within education and training provision. This requires action primarily at a national policy level. The choices range from a 'let the market decide' approach to the full mainstreaming of RPL as a valid and widely accepted practice - for entry, exemptions and access to whole qualifications - and which is embedded in public policy, in particular education and training and labour market policy.

### Risks and Benefits of Mainstream Development

Based on international practice in countries such as Denmark and the Netherlands, mainstreaming RPL would most require:

- Additional dedicated RPL resources and training of personnel across further and higher education and training institutes;
- One-stop-shops across regions with regard to further education and training (e.g. possibly located within FÁS centres or VECs, based on the FÁS-VEC national co-operation agreement and with the involvement of guidance professionals) to provide guidance, RPL advice and assessments) and expansion of existing RPL practice within higher education;
- A dedicated 'RPL knowledge centre' for the dissemination of RPL policy and practice, to provide guidance and to promote RPL to employers, learners, stakeholders and practitioners.

The OECD review of RPL in Ireland highlighted that there are certain risks with mainstreaming RPL:

- International experience shows that mainstreaming RPL into education and training activities takes time. It requires a structural, long-term and labour intensive approach and appropriate levels of funding.



- Tenacity on the part of the government, providers, employer organisations and unions is crucial. Demand and participation will not immediately take off in large volumes.
- It is to be expected, that larger businesses, sectors with high rates of innovation and sectors who are short on qualified workers, will be the first to engage in RPL on a substantial scale. Small businesses and businesses with a slow pace of innovation will be harder to reach. Obtaining substantial results may take 5 to 10 years (OECD estimates, 2008).
- As highlighted previously, there are significant funding, places allocation and institutional workflow implications arising from a more mainstream system of RPL. Some institutes, for example DIT and Cork Institute of Technology, have taken highly proactive approaches to using RPL as a standard dimension of programme entry, advanced entry and exemptions, which could in itself be regarded as mainstreaming. However, as noted previously RPL activity can differ significantly across institutes.

The above findings highlight the importance of leadership and sustained commitment to implementing a fully-fledged RPL system. Given the difficulties outlined by the OECD around mainstream development, current resource constraints and the length of time required estimated to get results, future development of RPL in Ireland will most likely be incremental and to some extent iterative in terms of identifying what works best. Furthermore, even where RPL does operate on an established basis internationally, the numbers of participants and overall expenditure appears to be relatively small in comparison to learner participation in overall education and training. These risks, however, should not undermine the potential of RPL as a policy lever to deliver on national labour market and skills priorities.

Pragmatically, the development of RPL is likely to be a long term rather than short term priority and will only work effectively where there is an identifiable demand and sustained leadership or drive. RPL could however be one means to meet the National Skills Strategy targets and activate the labour market in particular for those most vulnerable to long term unemployment. Other policy justifications to develop RPL more widely are that RPL:

- Incentivises adults to return to education and training - by avoiding unnecessary duplication of learning and improved guidance to re-enter education and training at the appropriate level.
- It acknowledges the manifest reality that people learn other than in educational institutions and that this learning is every bit as valuable as the learning that takes place in such institutions.
- It saves scarce resources by not requiring adults to attend courses to acquire knowledge, skills and competences that they already possess - sometimes in abundance. This also enhances the perceived relevance of education and training programmes.

In addition, Ireland does have an advantage of a relatively centralised education and training system. The integration of responsibility for policy and funding of further education and training provision into the new Department of Education and Skills, the re-organisation of FÁS and the forthcoming amalgamation of the qualifications bodies provides a good opportunity to use and develop RPL more widely over time where it is found to be most effective.



It is suggested that the next steps in developing RPL should focus on areas of identified demand. RPL policy should be linked to national objectives. From a national perspective, RPL has a role in meeting the following objectives:

- Labour Market Activation - the need to reduce unemployment, particularly those that are long-term unemployed and those with relatively low levels of qualifications as outlined in the National Skills Strategy Implementation Statement, 2010.
- The need to utilise education and training resources as effectively as possible at a time of unprecedented demand.
- The need to continue to upskill the labour force (employed and unemployed) as other countries continue to do so, and facilitate access and participation in lifelong learning.
- The need to provide an education and training service for people and enterprises that is flexible, relevant and appropriate to their needs.
- Contribute to targets to increase retention/participation rates in education and training, driven by the National Skills Strategy, the National Plan for Equity of Access in Higher Education and the National Plan for Social Inclusion.
- A principled approach whereby a learner should be able to gain value (credit, exemption) for relevant learning achievements (formal, non-formal and experiential) and avail of an RPL process to assess such achievement against relevant module, programme or award requirements or other relevant standards e.g. sector standards or competency requirements.

A number of areas of demand are related to these objectives. These are summarised in the chart below and provide the basis for recommendations. In making these recommendations it is acknowledged that all education and training providers should not be immediately required to provide RPL. Education and training providers should be encouraged and enabled to co-ordinate on a regional or sectoral basis to ensure most effective use of resources, that capacity is allowed to develop and that the cost-benefits of specific RPL interventions are evaluated ex ante and ex post.



Figure 2. Demand for RPL





## 10. Recommendations

The following recommendations are targeted across the National Framework of Qualifications and relevant stakeholders. As pointed to previously, a significant volume of work and experience of RPL has already been accrued from a 'bottom-up' perspective. However, the success and implementation of these recommendations cannot be achieved without sustained 'top-down' support and commitment to drive change at a national level, which ultimately must derive from the Department of Education and Skills. Successful implementation will require co-ordination across existing agencies, organisations and Departments in the areas including guidance, information provision, programme provision, job referrals and standard setting for qualifications.

### 10.1 NFQ Levels 1-3

Lack of formal qualifications and recognition of experiential learning may effectively impede many individuals from accessing qualifications at higher levels and from full participation in work and society.

In 2009, virtually all the 810 awards made by FETAC at NFQ levels 1-2 and 40,000 of the 69,000 awards made at level 3 were in 'core skills' field of learning. In line with the nature of provision, RPL activity at NFQ levels 1-3 should primarily target core skills units/modules or awards. The NALA writeon.ie initiative provides a tool whereby learners can be assessed for certain core skills through RPL. Its potential to inform possible approaches to RPL for those with very low levels of qualifications should be considered.<sup>30</sup> Writeon covers Levels 1-3 and it is intended from 2011 to 2013 to develop the initiative to cover Levels 1-3, with progression options at Level 4, including on the basis of RPL. It is recommended that this initiative be assessed with a view to determining whether it can be expanded to further education and training providers and to the assessment and provision of other core skills beyond the learning areas of words, numbers, learning to learn and technology. These could include, for example, communication skills, IT literacy, interpersonal and social skills, and preparation for work. This would provide a platform for developing other core skills at higher NFQ levels identified by the National Skills Strategy include teamworking, problem solving, customer service, planning and organisation skills. This approach may well prove cost-effective, reduce the burden on providers in setting up RPL systems and could operationalise the policy to maximise the public resources allocated to education and training at lower NFQ levels.

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<sup>30</sup> The following description is based on information provided by NALA. Users of the site can have their skills assessed across a number of areas and are prescribed an individual learning plan to meet the needs identified in these areas. At the end of the learning phase, users are presented with an opportunity to have their skills assessed again and, if successful, request a national qualification. By the end of 2009, 153 learners achieved 712 NFQ Level 2 minor awards, and 84 Level 2 Major awards. By the end of 2010, 343 learners achieved 1,679 NFQ Level 2 minor awards, and 84 Level 2 Major awards. In operating this Distance Learning Service, it became clear that the process can be used for the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) to provide for national certification with respect to Level 2 component certificates. Learners accessing the "Words and Numbers in Everyday Life" programme on the website [www.writeon.ie](http://www.writeon.ie) undertake an initial or pre-assessment process, which identifies particular sets of knowledge, skill and competence against national standards set out in named awards. If a learner has demonstrated that they already meet the standards for a component certificate, the learner is directed to a second or post-summative assessment process, the results of which are used for accreditation purposes. Additional summative assessment requirements must also be completed to add to the learner portfolio. This RPL process ensures that all learning outcomes for an award are assessed, and fully met, twice. The process is subject to all stages of the quality assurance process, including verification and authentication. The website [www.writeon.ie](http://www.writeon.ie) is operational for Level 3 awards since October 18th 2010.





The main target group should include:

- Those with no formal/primary level qualifications
- Long-term unemployed
- Those that are inactive or seeking to join/return to the labour market
- Those in-employment with no formal / low levels of educational achievement

The ESRI/Department of Social Protection work on profiling of the Live Register and the potential of the referral system could be explored as potential mechanisms for identifying and targeting RPL candidates for assessment (formative and summative).

### Recommendation 1 - NFQ Levels 1-3

#### Actions:

- Given that those whose level of educational attainment is at NFQ levels 1-3 are more vulnerable in terms of unemployment, retaining employment and accessing the labour market, the Department of Education and Skills should consider providing an entitlement for all adults/individuals to an assessment of core skills with a view to making their prior learning visible, providing, where relevant, credit/exemptions from core skills training and promoting their participation in further education/training and facilitating mobility and employability across sectors. The Department of Social Protection could refer individuals for assessment, or consider integrating RPL assessment tools into its referrals work with the unemployed.
- The Department of Education and Science should consider leading the development of an integrated RPL service to be developed and delivered at levels 1-3 through the National Steering Group for the FAS-IVEA National Co-operation agreement, with the input and support of NALA. This is proposed on the basis of their current functions, organisation, geographical scope and capacity to identify and meet local as well as national needs. The targeting of 'core skills' for RPL should form part of a wider career plan or further specific skills training for individuals, and should therefore be integrated with adult guidance and employment services, i.e. that individuals that come in to contact with these services have access to the relevant information about RPL and its availability. Guidance organisations/initiatives such as the IGC, the AEGI and adult education organisations such as Aontas have a significant role in informing, guiding, preparing and communicating to RPL candidates in this context, with the NCGE responsible for policy co-ordination.
- With a view to maximising capacity and meeting learner needs, the Department of Education and Skills should review the writeon.ie assessment as well as its potential to be translated to other education and training settings (e.g. classroom). This is particularly important for those that either do not have access to or are unable to use IT facilities.
- Enterprise and trade unions should explore, in conjunction with Skillnets and education and training providers, how they can develop, deliver and promote RPL at a sectoral level (e.g. through distance learning) for employees with very low/no formal qualifications.

**Responsibility:** Led by Department of Education and Skills; FÁS; VECs in consultation with: NALA; Employment/Guidance Services and Department of Social Protection; Skillnets; Employers; Unions; Aontas; Guidance Organisations; NCGE



## 10.2 NFQ Levels 4-6

Learning outcomes at NFQ levels 4-6 recognise independent learning and theoretical understanding. Awards at these levels by nature cover a much greater variety of vocational fields of learning than levels 1-3 along with core skills. This is also where the bulk of additional upskilling under the National Skills Strategy is envisioned, with approximately 260,000 people targeted for upskilling to NFQ levels 4/5 by 2020. There may be many people in or seeking entry to the labour force without formal accreditation but whose experiential learning and skills may match qualifications at levels 4-6. Here, the role of summative assessment is critical.

In 2009, FETAC awards at levels 4/5/6 were predominantly in the fields of Business (17,543), Administration (30,844), Core Skills (26,774), Education and Training (28,948), Health and Welfare (16,320) and Security (56,279). Many of these award holders may already have significant experience in these sectors but their competencies may not be visible to the individual and to potential employers. RPL can be used to identify those competencies and assess them against programmes, qualifications and NFQ levels. The latter would mean that assessment need not be offered solely in the context of access to qualifications. For example, the need to demonstrate that individuals meet competency requirements in order to undertake specific roles in the workplace could be met through cooperation between the regulatory/competent authorities, trained RPL assessors and mentors. Some aspects of this could be delivered through the FÁS/VEC partnership work and Skillnets. Assessment methods such as assignments, project work or exams could be developed. The Fáilte Ireland 'Skills Audit' RPL process could also provide a good template for application in other sectors. These types of assessment techniques have been shown to be relatively cost effective compared to formal provision. The longer term objective is to encourage learning portfolio maintenance by individuals throughout lifelong learning.

### Target group:

- Those unemployed whose highest level of educational attainment is between NFQ levels 3 - 6 seeking to upskill within a sector in which they already have competencies and experience.
- Individuals and employers seeking to upskill due to e.g. regulatory requirements where minimum competency levels / mandatory qualifications are required. (e.g. Childcare, Healthcare)
- Employers seeking to upskill staff due to, for example, new technologies/work practices (e.g. manufacturing operatives, clerical workers, and green economy skills).
- Individuals seeking to move to a new sector and have significant work experience that could help that transition through the assessment of core skills.



## Recommendation 2 - NFQ Levels 4-6

### Actions:

- At NFQ levels 4-6, education and training providers, as part of or alongside the integrated RPL service, should aim to ensure that individuals upskilling within sectors in which they already have significant experience should have the option of undertaking assessment for credit/exemptions from modules. This could be done through challenge exam (i.e. that an individual can demonstrate their knowledge through examination without formal classroom learning)/assignments/skills demonstrations/skills audits which are relatively cost effective compared to full participation in programmes. Where individuals do not meet the relevant standards through RPL they would be required to participate fully in programmes and meet any training deficits.
- In addition, there may be many soft skills that people have acquired through work and community/voluntary experience (but do not have those competencies documented or certified) that are useful across sectors such as project management, organisational skills, communications skills, administration skills, IT skills, sales and marketing skills etc., which should also be considered for assessment through RPL by education and training providers or competent authorities. A system of RPL to support literacy, numeracy, and ICT should develop progression options at Level 4 to facilitate the development of core and generic skills and contribute to access, transfer and progression.
- Where minimum qualification or competency standards are introduced up to NFQ level 6 in a sector or occupation, the relevant regulatory/standard setting body and providers should endeavour to provide an RPL service.
- Further education and training providers should seek to engage at a local level with employers/unions that have upskilling requirements. To act as an incentive for enterprises, there must be a demonstrable cost saving to the employer/employee (for example, through reducing out-of-work training hours) compared to full programme provision. For this to operate most effectively with education and training providers, employers would have to maintain good records of training and personal development of staff and would need to commit relevant time and resources.
- A targeted sectoral/regional approach to delivering RPL should be adopted where appropriate to meet needs. The EGFSN reports on the Bio-pharma sector and the Food sector signalled significant demand for upskilling operatives. The Wholesale and Retail sector also has significant potential to engage in RPL as indicated by the report of the EGFSN. These sectors could be considered as targets for RPL in the first instance. This would be part of an integrated approach to skills/competency profiling, identification of qualification needs, RPL assessments and programme/module design. Building on their experience, FÁS/VECs and Skillnets would have main co-ordinating roles. RPL for exemptions/module credits rather than for full awards may also be most practical approach initially.

**Responsibility:** Led by FÁS, VECs and Skillnets under the direction of the Department of Education and Skills in consultation with: awarding bodies, NALA; Employer Representatives; Unions; Skillnets and Guidance Services



Regarding co-ordination and implementation of Recommendations 1 and 2, as trust in RPL is critical to the acceptance/recognition of outcomes in the workplace, education and in society, FÁS and the VECs must work to stimulate demand for RPL in partnership with institutes/organisations such as qualifications bodies, IoTs, Skillnets, NALA; NCGE, AGEI, IGC Chambers of Commerce, IBEC, ISME, trade unions, community groups, sectoral bodies or skills groups etc. at regional, local and national level to support RPL practice in the specific areas of:

1. Developing agreed methodologies for formative and summative assessment at Levels 1-6 which may include:
  - a. In order to provide learners with sufficient support in the RPL process, a group approach could be taken rather than viewing RPL solely as an individual endeavour. Benefits of a group approach include: reduced costs in facilitating the process; peer support; and as a learning activity in itself. Through the process of group learning agreed assessment methods could be identified in order to provide the most effective approaches to competence identification.
  - b. The Skills Audit approach employed by Fáilte Ireland should be examined with a view to transferring across sectors. In a similar manner, suggestions received in the consultation on this paper include that the design and specification of standards for awards (and programmes) should allow for RPL assessments. This may require clear guidance about how learners could demonstrate their knowledge, skill and competence. Providers and qualification/awarding bodies could cooperate (at a regional or sectoral level) to share resources such as assessment methods, case studies, practice guidelines and self-assessment tools.
  - c. Clear guidance about the documentation that applicants for RPL would need to provide in support of claims about the level of their knowledge, skill and competence. Examples of such evidence could be developed and shared e.g. this might include education and training certificates, statements from employers or work supervisors to the effect that the applicant has successfully undertaken specified functions/tasks satisfactorily over a period of time.
  - d. Such resources could then be made available, to all providers, via the internet, so that learners, irrespective of location or area of education/training could have their prior learning recognised.
2. Developing efficient and flexible modes of delivery (including cooperation with providers of education and training in designing programmes); Flexible forms of learning that can stimulate demand for RPL such as e-learning, distance learning, work based coaching and learning and modular-based rather than term-based learning should be expanded upon.
3. Developing a toolkit or manual to assist those bodies and individuals who wish to explore/apply RPL.
4. Bringing together guidance, assessment and advise on career/employment/further education options for individuals.
5. Advising employers, voluntary sector bodies etc. on accessing and using RPL.
6. Explore options to access EU project funding for RPL activities (e.g. through the Leonardo Da Vinci programme) or through funding of Labour Market Activation initiatives.
7. Stimulating demand for RPL, particularly with regard to information provision, guidance and promotion.



The CEDEFOP 2009 Guidelines for Validating Non-Formal and Informal Learning provide a strong practical basis for RPL practitioners/policy makers in driving forward implementation.

### 10.3 NFQ Levels 6-10

International practice indicates that adult learners that have undergone prior learning assessments have better graduation rates and have relatively lower tuition costs. There is clearly a role for RPL in higher education and training where appropriate.

Significant work has already been and continues to be undertaken at provider level such as the Education in Employment SIF Project on RPL, the University Sector Framework Implementation Network (FIN) and the Roadmap for Employment-Academic Partnerships (REAP). It is important that the findings and recommendations of these initiatives, many of which are also relevant for RPL at other Framework levels, are implemented. These include recommendations to:

- Design user-friendly approaches for the recognition of prior learning and continuous professional development.
- Encourage collaboration between different institutions in order to meet the needs of the learner more effectively.
- Provide appropriate training and support to staff involved in managing and supporting the RPL process.
- Provide guidance on portfolio preparation, including advice on clarity of language to be used, and volume of evidence to be included.
- Recognise that RPL is an integral component of any work-based learning programme.
- Promote awareness and knowledge of RPL arrangements widely to potential learners.
- Monitor and review policies and procedures for the recognition of prior learning.
- Make available information on the availability of RPL by institutions.
- Provide effective, timely, and appropriate feedback to learners in the RPL process.
- Work in partnership with employers, where appropriate, to develop negotiated pathways to learning for cohorts of workers which takes account of their relevant prior learning.

While higher education institutions ultimately control admissions policies and RPL procedures, this does not preclude collaboration to develop RPL practice and, in line with their responsibilities for making awards, to develop standards and guidelines for good practice. Such collaboration would help develop and sustain practice and overall trust in RPL. Consultations have indicated that there is no requirement or indeed desire for external RPL structures relevant for higher education and that RPL should continue to be developed and implemented at the level of academic department, supported by internal RPL resources/officers. While policy, knowledge and best practice of RPL can be disseminated across higher education institutes, RPL activity should be largely undertaken locally in the context of programme provision.

Demand for RPL within higher education will be driven by factors such as:



- Individuals re-skilling in new fields of learning, but who already meet certain programme requirements in, for example, management practice, finance, research methods, information technology. The option of a challenge exam or assignment to demonstrate that they meet such requirements should be available.
- Those that are in occupations with rising levels of qualification requirements for entry or mandatory qualifications, for example Healthcare or industry bodies with Continuing Professional Development requirements.
- The development of more diverse methods of provision such as modularisation, distance learning, work-based learning and blended learning.
- Forecast increases/targets for increasing participation in higher levels of education and training, particularly for mature students.
- Sectoral approaches to targeting large groups of people, for example, unemployed crafts workers who may gain advanced entry to higher level engineering programmes on the basis of relevant prior learning (for example, this approach was used under the 2009 higher education labour market activation proposals).
- Employers that require specific and highly tailored education and training from higher education institutes.


#### Target groups:

- Those with qualifications at NFQ levels 4/5 and above with significant work or voluntary experience who seek to upskill or transfer to new areas.
- Those that are unemployed from specific sectors such as construction and need to re-skill.
- Those working in sectors with minimum qualification or CPD requirements.
- Enterprises with specific training and skills needs at NFQ levels 6-10.

### Recommendation 3 - Higher Education NFQ levels 6-10

#### Actions:

- RPL for the purposes of entry or advanced entry should continue to be the primary function of RPL in higher education.
- In principle, RPL should be available where appropriate to learners. Consultations have indicated that there is no requirement/desire for additional RPL structures (e.g. external assessment centres) for higher education, rather that RPL should remain and be developed at the level of the academic department/unit with the support of internal RPL officers/resources.
- Sharing practice, networking and increasing the visibility and availability of RPL within and across institutions should be the primary focus for higher education institutes. Under the SIF RPL and REAP projects and the Framework Implementation Network, there has been significant work done on staff development in building awareness, capacity and capability in relation to RPL within the higher education sector through workshops and practice exposition among a wide range of higher education institutes. DIT has for some years operated a CPD programme for higher education practitioners in RPL and has developed detailed RPL procedures. These types of activities need to be supported and extended throughout the higher education sector.

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- The IOTI, IUA and DIT should support and coordinate activity by building on platforms such as the SIF RPL project and REAP and the Framework Implementation Network. Those who are actually responsible for RPL administration (particularly those who are responsible for making the final academic decisions at programme level) should lead this activity. That way those who have to actually implement the practice have an input in how it is subsequently managed. The IOTI, IUA and DIT, with the support for HETAC and the NQAI, should consider developing a toolkit/manual and agreements on accepted practice in RPL, at a national, regional and disciplinary level. This would build on existing practice and share practice through for example web-based advice, tools and a network of practitioners. This could facilitate responses to specific industry/sectoral demands for RPL, channel information and advice and enhance transparency. Already the SIF RPL, FIN and REAP projects demonstrate the value added of cross-institutional collaboration.
  - Mature Student Officers/Access Officers in higher level institutions have a key role in creating awareness and understanding of the potential of RPL for potential and current mature students. RPL should be incorporated in to information sessions and induction sessions for mature students.
  - The Department of Education and Skills and the HEA should consider facilitating RPL activity (HEA may also provide targeted funding through SIF and funding of Access initiatives). They could also consider with the IUA and IOTI the funding implications of expanding RPL. The partnership of the IOTI, universities and DIT would also liaise with awarding bodies, EGFSN, funding agencies, external quality assurance bodies as appropriate.
  - Higher Education Institutes, in conjunction with Skillnets, should consider how they can enhance their offering through making RPL more widely available to private and public sector employers as part of highly tailored offerings. A demonstrable saving would have to be provided. Availability of RPL would also require employers to ensure that good records of staff training and personal development are maintained.

**Responsibility:** Led by Department of Education and Skills and HEA, in consultation with: IOTI; IUA; DIT; HEIs; Skillnets; Employer Representatives; Guidance Organisations

#### 10.4 Quality Assurance, Data and Communication of RPL

Quality Assurance is embedded in RPL policy and practices across further and higher education. Learners and employers need to have full confidence that RPL for the purposes of competence/skills assessment or for awards/exemptions or credit has both labour market currency and matches the standards for formal learning. Already RPL is integrated into quality assurance arrangements of awarding bodies and providers (including HETAC, FETAC, universities, institutes of technology and related providers) Where RPL capacity is further or newly developed, it is vital that at all stages quality/standards must be maintained and monitored so that confidence in standards and the fair treatment of learners is maintained. All providers have primary responsibility for quality assurance of their programme provision including assessment. Consultations with education and training providers have indicated that awarding bodies need to monitor the need for quality assurance arrangements specific to RPL if and when required. For its part, the Department of Education and Skills has responsibility to ensure that there are appropriate risk assessment procedures in place with regard to public expenditure on RPL.



## Recommendation 4 - RPL, Quality Assurance and Risk Assessment

### Quality Assurance

Quality Assurance is paramount in the development of RPL in Ireland. RPL procedures must continue to be fully embedded within the quality assurance procedures of providers, awarding bodies and in any assessment centres/networks/bodies that may develop through the partnerships proposed above for NFQ Levels 1-6 and 6-10. Staff involved in all stages of RPL will need to be trained appropriately. Awarding bodies have responsibility to set standards for qualifications and assessment and in this context to oversee any arrangements for Quality Assurance, specific to RPL.

### Risk Assessment and Governance

Consultations on this paper have yielded significant support for the further development of RPL in Ireland. These consultations also caution, however, of the need to ensure as is necessary for all education and training provision and accreditation, that appropriate risk assessment and good governance procedures are put in place for RPL.

**Responsibility:** Led by Department of Education and Skills Providers and Awarding Bodies

There are significant data deficits related to RPL. There is no consistent information available about the scale of RPL practice across NFQ levels. This data could play a significant role in future decision-making with regard to RPL policy and practice.

## Recommendation 5 - Data Availability on RPL

### Action:

Over the next 3-5 years, the partnerships identified above in cooperation with the HEA and DES and other actors relevant to collation of key education and training statistics, should consider putting in place procedures for the collection of RPL data related to costs, the availability of RPL and the use of RPL by learners for assessment and qualifications purposes (i.e. summative RPL activities only). Care must also be taken to protect the identity of learners.

**Responsibility:** Led by HEA and Department of Education and Skills in consultation with Education and Training Providers and the integrated RPL service (Recommendation 1).

In relation to communication, all stakeholders have a role in communicating the suitability and availability of RPL to learners. Employers have signalled that there are difficulties in finding out information about RPL and its potential benefits for enterprise. In addition, learners have reported a lack of information about RPL and understanding of its procedures and uses. The OECD and the Framework Implementation and Impact Study underlined the need to address this from the perspective of fairness and of stimulating demand for RPL. Similarly, highlighted previously, the CEDEFOP guidelines on validation of non-formal and informal learning stressed the role of guidance in providing information and in supporting the assessment and post-assessment stages of RPL. In





addition, the National Centre for Guidance in Education has stressed the need for education providers and qualifications authorities to clarify RPL processes and procedures.

## Recommendation 6 - Communication and Guidance

### Actions:

- The potential of RPL should be communicated to adult learners by guidance services including in relation to referrals by employment services. The ESRI work in conjunction with the Department of Social Protection on profiling of the Live Register may provide an opportunity to channel demand for RPL more effectively.
- All providers with RPL offerings should actively promote their RPL arrangements. RPL policies and procedures should be clearly articulated by education and training providers and easily accessible to interested parties. Information/communication resources should be pooled and co-ordinated where RPL initiatives are advanced on a sectoral or regional basis. Employer representative organisations such as IBEC, ISME, SFA and Chambers of Commerce and Unions etc. should also disseminate information on RPL to employees.
- Information and guidelines targeted at learners and employers need to be developed. RPL providers, FETAC, HETAC and the NOAI (and their successor) have a primary role in this regard. Web based guidance services targeted at assisting people to develop career pathways such as Bluebrick, Qualifax, Careerdirections and Careersportal have a role in promoting RPL as a potential option to learners with experience and employers. Consideration could be given to integrating publicly funded databases. The partnerships identified in recommendations 1-3 should work to develop and exploit these resources.
- In order to provide information about learning opportunities for adults, there must be relevant course information from education providers available to guidance services. Guidance practitioners and services can provide information for adults on the existence of an RPL process and facilitate the individual to explore the process. It is essential therefore, that the education providers and national qualification authorities (i.e. HETAC, FETAC and NOAI) clarify, within their contexts, RPL requirements for providers. It is suggested that the relevant stakeholders - NCGE, FÁS, various Guidance Organisations, Local Employment Services and Education and Training Providers should co-ordinate nationally and regionally on this. In the longer term, RPL and Adult Learning Processes should be integrated into training programmes for teachers/lecturers and other staff, guidance professionals and HR professionals.

**Responsibility:** Led by Education and Training Providers/RPL providers and Guidance Organisations in consultation with with: Awarding bodies, Employment Services; Department of Education and Skills; Department of Social Protection; NALA; Aontas

## 10.5 Co-ordination and Implementation

While there are a significant number of stakeholders, the primary driver of implementation will originate from the Department of Education and Skills. Under the direction of the Department of Education and Skills, the Steering Group for the FÁS-IVEA National Co-operation Agreement could be tasked with implementing recommendations in relation to NFQ levels 1-6, with Skillnets taking a lead role for co-ordinating the process with the enterprise sector. NALA has a critical role at levels 1-3 and in providing progression options at Level 4. The development of RPL at NFQ levels 1-6 will



require input from employment and guidance services and from the Department of Social Protection with regard to informing and directing individuals towards RPL. Guidance services (e.g. AEGI, IGC), facilitated by NCGE, have a significant practical role in identifying and preparing individuals for RPL assessment and in guiding them after towards education and training or the labour market. The Department of Education and Skills and the HEA should facilitate the development of RPL within higher education, driven by IUA; IOTI; DIT and building on platforms such as the REAP and FIN initiatives and effective practice by individual institutes. Additionally, any action in this regard would have to take place on a relatively small level initially with a view to a evaluating the potential for a more scalable approach. The Department of Education and Skills should consider establishing a feedback loop (e.g. through the National Steering Group for the FÁS-VEC National Co-operation Agreement and through the HEA for higher education) to enable decision making on the overall coordination and scale of RPL activity.

## 10.6 Funding and Future Strategic Options

The approach outlined above would provide the basis for long term development and sustainability of RPL. Any mainstreaming of RPL could require using existing infrastructure to develop assessment facilities, to further train RPL personnel and embed RPL in programmes and qualifications development at all NFQ levels. The approach recommended is to largely re-configure existing services and interventions and to develop RPL on the basis of the existing/emerging education and training and qualification systems.

In the short term, the most logical starting point for action is to expand RPL on the basis of existing effective RPL practices, targeted at demand. This would most likely involve different providers with RPL practices sharing information on practice, resources, methodologies and procedures. The information presented previously on international data would suggest that assessment procedures such as challenge exams, skills audits, assignments and practical demonstrations are relatively more cost efficient in terms of time and resources relative to, for example, portfolio assessment. In Ireland, there is significant expertise already built up, for example, in Fáilte Ireland, Skillnets, Higher Education Institutes, and various projects (e.g. Lónra).

Providers would need to assess existing provision and highlight areas that could be targeted for providing relatively cost effective methods of summative RPL, i.e. for exemption/qualification purposes. For example, the IBEC Retail Skillnet, NALA and Fáilte Ireland experiences indicate that relatively cost efficient methods are already working and could be developed and expanded upon. The recommendations above, which include that of more integrated RPL service for NFQ levels 1-6, could inform this process. RPL providers would need careful selection criteria to determine the suitability of candidates to proceed directly to the assessment stage, a point which underlines the importance of effective guidance, information and transparent procedures.

The main benefits for providers could include more effective and attractive design and delivery of programmes/qualifications to learners, and greater capacity, especially within Higher Education where participation is expected to increase substantially over the next decade, and within Further Education and Training, where capacity is currently strained through demands from high unemployment. Consultations have indicated that because funding to date has been largely



project-based, demand for RPL may be stifled due to uncertainties around future funding. The long term development of RPL may have to consider a more structured funding model based on efficient RPL practices and positive education/labour market outcomes (e.g. employment, progression, further participation and upskilling).

In terms of funding in the short term, the following could be considered:

- If possible, there may be an opportunity to include RPL as a limited part of future competitive tendering for labour market activation education and training, provided it is tendered for at a competitive average cost per participant compared to formal provision at a similar NFO level. At NFO levels 1-6, this would most likely involve guidance services working in conjunction with education and training providers to target candidates for RPL and provide assessments. Within higher education, this would most likely involve institutes targeting candidates mainly for advanced entry to programmes (which was widely practiced to good effect in the 2009 labour market activation fund for higher education). The labour market activation fund could also be a means of stimulating supply in the market place by encouraging providers to engage more widely in RPL.
- The experience of the use of the European Globalisation Fund in Ireland could also be considered as a possible platform for an integrated approach to RPL. For those that have been made redundant and come under the terms of the EGF, the EFG offers the potential to integrate RPL into the career guidance, education and training services for individuals. This may help to short circuit the funding of education and training interventions demanded by those affected. Again, this may only be relevant for certain individuals (depending on experience and competencies) and the desired education/training programme (depending on its content and relevant experience of the individual). The Department of Education and Skills should consider how the EGF has been employed to date in the context of integrated supports for individuals/target groups and how these could be built upon to develop RPL.

In the event that these funding streams are made available to encompass or promote RPL, actions should be guided by the recommendations above. Subsequent investment should not be made prior to an evaluation of costs and outcomes of the Labour Market Activation and EGF initiatives.



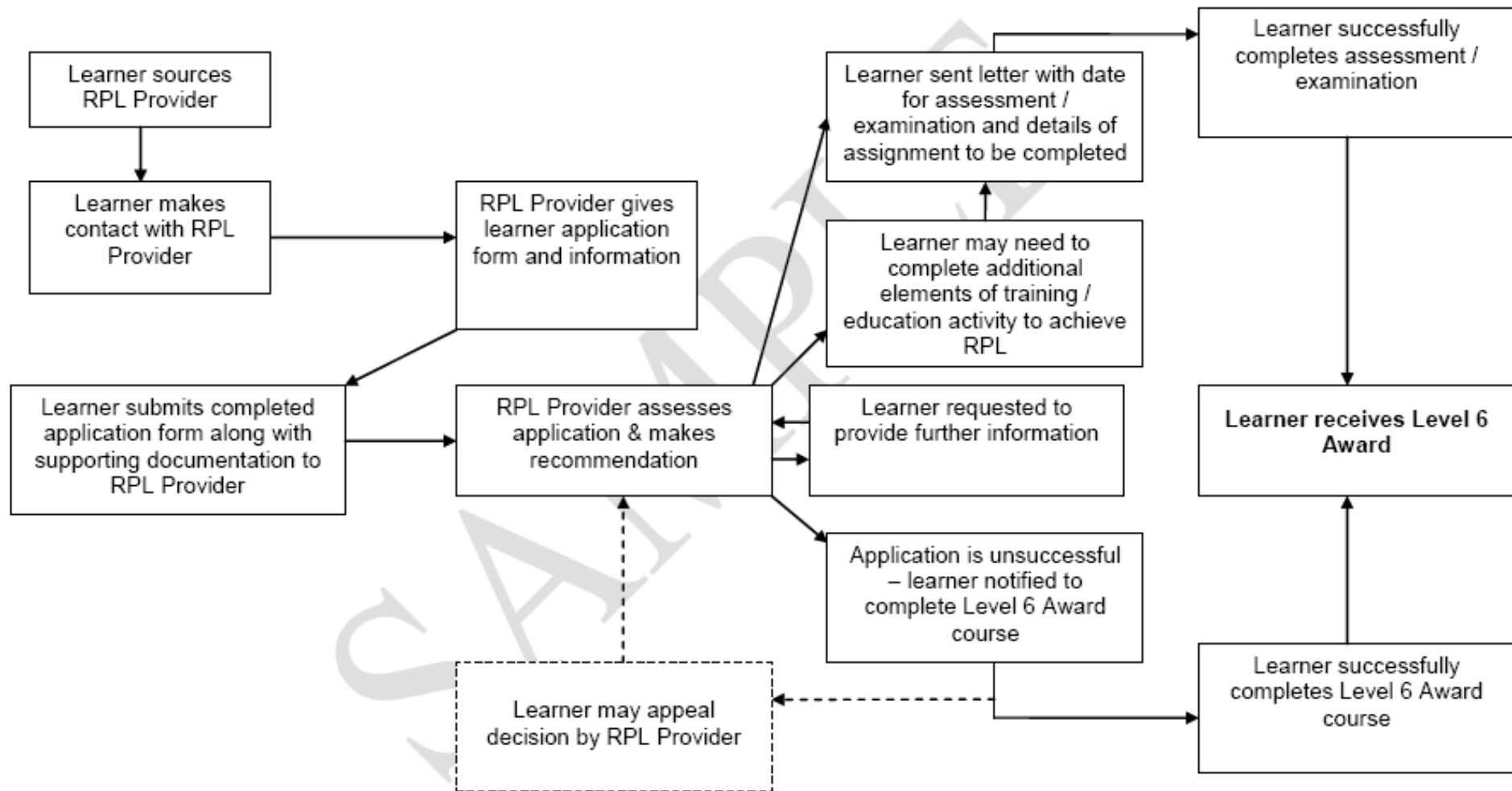
## 10.7 Conclusion

The recommendations have been made within the context current challenges and opportunities for RPL in the meeting skills/labour market needs, particularly at a time of high unemployment and demand for education and training. It is opportune at a time when education and training and qualifications systems are being re-oriented (e.g. re-organisation of FÁS, the amalgamation of the qualifications and quality assurance bodies) and as Departmental responsibilities for skills and related employment and job referrals services are being re-assigned, to consider to develop RPL as a mechanism to meet education and training and labour market objectives. Specifically, coordinated/integrated approaches to RPL should be considered as a way to meet the needs of those most vulnerable to long term unemployment.

In summary:

- RPL can meet specific upskilling, labour market needs and policy objectives.
- Based on the evidence of RPL activity (OECD review, SIF projects etc.), there has clearly been substantive experience of practice but there are many gaps in the availability of RPL and crucially in the linkage between RPL and education and training policy, provision and funding and labour market activation.
- It is timely to build on existing practice and momentum.
- Successful or additional intervention, particularly at NFQ levels 1-6 requires sustained, dedicated leadership and commitment on the part of the Department of Education and Skills.
- The main recommendations of this report is that, given the critical importance of raising educational attainment at levels 1-6, as foundations for additional learning and as meeting key skills shortages/needs, mitigating long-term unemployment, the Department of Education and Skills must lead in mandating and enabling in particular FÁS, Skillnets, the VECs and NALA to develop RPL for NFQ levels 1-6.
- The IOTI, IUA and DIT should lead action on RPL at NFQ levels 6-10, facilitated by the Department of Education and Skills and the HEA.
- These key recommendations are also proposed as a way to build and sustain capacity in RPL in the long term.

## Appendix I: Example of RPL Assessment Procedure at FETAC level 6





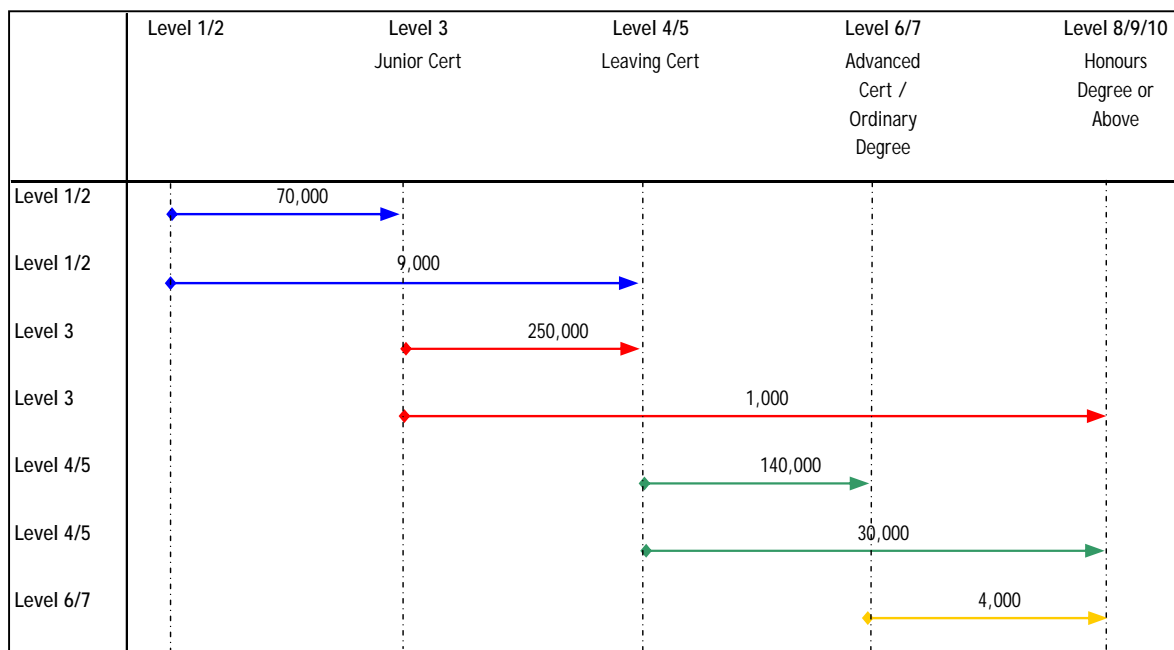
## Appendix II: Summary of Progress towards the National Skills Strategy

(Source: National Skills Strategy Implementation Statement)

The National Skills Strategy put forward a vision for the labour market in 2020 that will put Ireland at the fore internationally in terms of having a workforce capable of dealing with skills demands across all levels of occupations. Specifically, the report proposed that this vision would by 2020 see:

- 48% of the labour force with qualifications at National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) Levels 6 to 10 - from National Certificate to PhD level;
- 45% of the labour force with qualifications at NFQ Levels 4 and 5 - awards equivalent to Leaving Certificate Examination;
- The remaining 7% of the labour force would be likely to have qualifications at NFQ Levels 1 to 3 (i.e. up to Junior Certificate) while aiming to transition to higher levels.

Figure 1 Additional upskilling within labour force to achieve the vision for skills to 2020



In order to achieve these objectives, the National Skills Strategy recognised that action would be required at a number of levels:

- An additional 500,000 individuals within the workforce would need to progress by at least one level on the National Framework of Qualifications. More specifically, the targets entail upskilling 70,000 from NFQ Levels 1 & 2 to Level 3; an additional 9,000 from Levels 1 and 2 to Level 3; 250,000 at Level 3 up to Levels 4 & 5; 140,000 at Levels 4 and 5 to Levels 6 and 7; an additional 30,000 from Levels 4 and 5 to Levels 8, 9 and 10; and 4,000 from Levels 6 and 7 to Levels 8, 9 and 10. The proportion of the population aged 20-24 with NFQ Level 4 or 5 awards

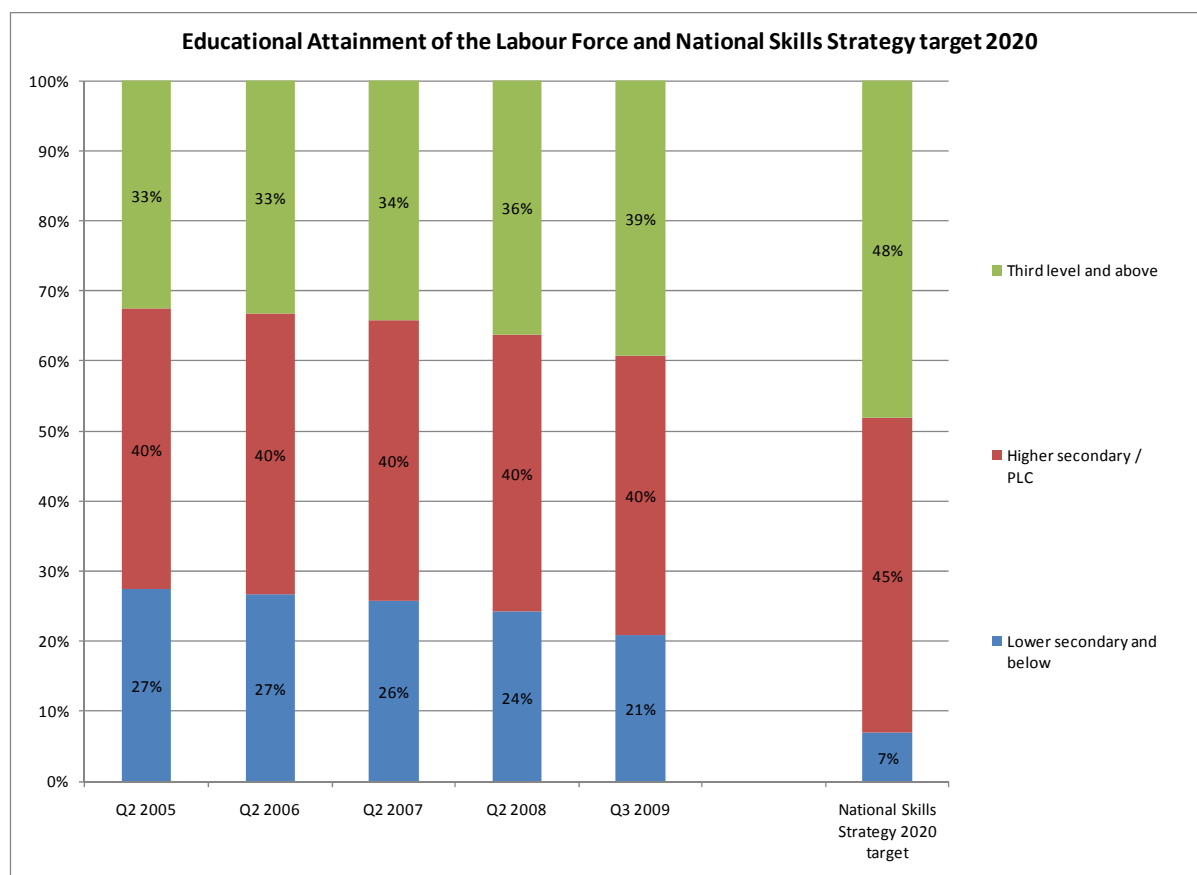


would also need to be increased to 94%, either through completion of the Leaving Certificate or through equivalent, more vocationally oriented programmes. The retention rate at Leaving Certificate would need to reach 90% by 2020.

- The progression rate to third level education would have to increase from 55% to 72%.

Significant progress has already been made towards meeting the objectives set out in the National Skills Strategy for the period to 2020. This is particularly the case in relation to higher level. However, there remains a significant gap to close especially in relation to the targets aimed at the Leaving Certificate equivalent and lower levels of the NFQ (see Figure 2 below).

Figure 2 Progress towards the National Skills Strategy Vision 2020



Source: CSO Quarterly National Household Survey, EGFSN National Skills Strategy

The percentage of those in the labour force with Higher Education qualifications (NFQ Levels 6-10) has increased from 33% in 2005 to 39% in 2009. Specifically, there are 186,300 more people in the labour force in Q3 2009 with Higher Education Level qualifications than there were in 2005. The recently published FAS/ESRI Occupational Forecasts 2015 estimated that the percentage will by 2015 have increased to 46% of those *employed*.<sup>31</sup> So the prospects for meeting the target of 48% of

<sup>31</sup> Note, the FÁS/ESRI projections are for those in-employment as opposed to the NSS targets which are for the labour force, which includes the employed plus unemployed. The educational profile of those in-employment is likely to be slightly better than for the labour force as a whole, given the fact that lower-skilled cohorts are likely to have much higher unemployment rates.



the labour force possessing a Higher Education Level qualification by 2020 set out in the National Skills Strategy would appear to be good based on current trends.

In relation to Levels 4 & 5 (Upper Secondary including Leaving Certificate), the percentage of the labour force with this educational level between 2005 and 2009 remained at 40%. In absolute terms, the number of those within the labour force with Upper Secondary/PLC level education has increased by 55,500 since 2005. The FAS/ESRI projections indicate that the overall position in relation to Upper Secondary could fall to 35% of those employed by 2015. This would be mostly due to the numbers moving up from Levels 4 & 5 to higher Levels greatly exceeding the numbers moving up to Levels 4 & 5 from lower Levels. This would leave a significant gap to be closed to reach the 2020 target of 45% of the labour force possessing qualifications at Levels 4 and 5.

There has been some progress at Levels 1-3 (Junior Certificate and below) with the percentage of the labour force at these levels falling from 27% to 21%. Specifically, there are 97,800 less people in the Labour Force with only a Junior Cert qualification or below compared with 2005. The FAS/ESRI projections indicate that the position will have improved further to 19% of those employed by 2015 (see Figure 2 below). However, this implies that significant progress will need to be made to upskill enough people to higher Levels so that the target 7% of the labour force possessing qualifications at Levels 1-3 is met. The progress made so far regarding the implementation of the Skills Strategy indicates that the most significant challenge for the period to 2020 is upskilling those at Levels 1-3 to Levels 4 and 5.





## Appendix III: Notes on RPL in Portugal, France Denmark & the Netherlands

### Information compiled and provided by NQAI

These notes contain brief descriptions of RPL systems, which could inform the future direction of RPL in Ireland. They are not authoritative accounts of practice. References to sectors/levels of education refer to those used in the countries concerned.

#### Portugal

In Portugal, a fresh impetus was given to RPL in 2006 by the introduction of a network of New Opportunities Centres.<sup>32</sup> They built on the existing Recognition, validation and certification of competences (RVCC) Centres. Their main aim was to raise the educational attainment levels of the adult population (those over 18, who have not completed compulsory education) and of young people with a view to training for employment and achievement of qualifications.

By 2009, some 456 New Opportunities Centres were established across Portugal in a diversity of settings - schools, enterprises and job centres. They a) offer individuals guidance and counselling in terms of suitable training pathways, qualification and certification opportunities, and b) identify the options for validation and certification of existing competences that workers have acquired. By embedding the Centres in education and training bodies, options for certification and for further education can be more easily identified for individuals.

The Centres are part of a wider effort to raise educational attainment levels, reform vocational education and training and to integrate the various sub-systems of qualifications.<sup>33</sup> The Centres enable an individual's prior learning to be validated against formal educational qualifications. A national framework of key competences is used as a basis for guiding, assessing and certifying an individuals' prior learning. The process can lead to the award of either one of two certificates, based on distinct sets of competence. These certificates are equivalent to the schools certificates that mark the completion of compulsory education and of upper secondary education respectively.<sup>34</sup> The Centres also use the National Catalogue of Qualifications, which in 2009

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<sup>32</sup> See Case study on the New Opportunities Initiative, in 'enabling the low skilled to take their qualifications "one step up": implementation of Action plan on adult learning: final report: case study reports, University of Florence et al, 2010, <http://ec.europa.eu/education/more-information/doc/2010/lowskill1.pdf>. An evaluation of the centres was carried out in 2009. They fall within the remit of the newly established National Qualifications Agency. Its brief includes that of developing a national catalogue of qualifications for non-higher education and the coordination of sectoral and professional skills bodies

<sup>33</sup> The reform of vocational education and training, including the role of the new opportunities centres, was agreed by the social partners in 2007. See National Report, Portugal, on achievement of the Lisbon Strategy, 2009, Section 3.5. 1 on investing in education and improving the qualifications of the Portuguese population, [http://ec.europa.eu/archives/growthandjobs\\_2009/pdf/nrp2009/pt\\_nrp\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/archives/growthandjobs_2009/pdf/nrp2009/pt_nrp_en.pdf)

<sup>34</sup> These are, for certificate equivalent which are comparable to a school leaving certificate after the 9th year (end of compulsory education), the following four areas of competence have to be covered:- Language and Communication; Mathematics (for everyday life)  
- Information and Communication Technology; Citizenship and Employability. For the certificates which are comparable to a school leaving certificate



contained 240 qualifications in 40 areas, as a basis for assessment and ultimately certification. These qualifications specify the relevant occupational profile, standards and training components.

Adults who wish to have their competences and prior learning identified and certified can register in one of the Centres. From 2006-2009, over 761, 000 people registered at the RCVV/New Opportunities Centres. Over half of these achieved a qualification above the level of completion of compulsory education. The national target is that 1million people will have been facilitated to engage in further education or achieve certification. In 2009, the Centres employed some 9000 counsellors. Specific training is provided to these counsellors. The majority of centres are co-financed by the European Social Fund and the national government and the rest are self-financing.

### *France*

There is a long tradition of recognising prior learning in France. This involves both formative and summative approaches to RPL. Since 1985, RPL has been used as an access route in to higher education and, since 1992, it could be used to gain parts of a higher education qualification.

Since 1991, all workers with five years experience have a legal right to obtain a '*Bilan des competences*'. They have a right to paid leave to undertake the Bilan in an accredited centre. Accredited centres, established throughout the country, work with individuals to analyse, document and advise individuals on steps to achieve their objectives. The Bilan documents the individual's competencies, skills, abilities and interests. The process is seen as a useful first step for individuals who may seek to be assessed against qualification/occupational standards. The costs of the process are borne by the employer or in some cases by the individual. A *Bilan des competences approfondi* may be obtained by job seekers who have work experience. This aims to facilitate their return to work.

Since 2002, individuals have a legal right to recognition with a view to gaining exemptions or full qualification. This is known as the *Validation des Acquis des Experiences* (VAE). This is available to those in paid, unpaid or voluntary activity for at least three years). VAE is available in respect of all qualifications - school, vocational, professional, higher education, those made by the Ministries and those developed by private bodies such as Chambers of Commerce. The relevant qualification must be registered in the Repertoire National des Certifications Professionnelles (RNCP), which in 2008 contained some 4100 qualifications.

Under the VAE, individuals apply directly to the institution which offers a qualification for assessment. A jury, which must include representatives of the social partners, is established to undertake assessments. It can decide to offer a full qualification or exemptions. In the latter case, it also recommends a learning path to the candidate who then has 5 year to present for the full

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(cont. from page 62) After the 12th year (upper secondary education), the following areas of competence have to be covered: Citizenship and Vocational Training; Sociology; Technology and Research; Culture; Language and Communication Language and Communication; Mathematics (for everyday life); Information and Communication Technology and Citizenship and Employability.



award. The VAE process is backed by a network of advice/ information points across France (*Points Relais*) and regional level training/advice and mentoring services.

In 2005, some 76 000 applied for a VAE and, of these, 60,000 were accepted. Over 42,000 dossiers were presented to a jury and over half of those who presented achieved a full qualification. In 2008, 53 000 applications were made and 30 000 dossiers were submitted for validation. Some 22,000 were assessed. Of these, 19, 400 achieved partial or full qualifications (some 14 000 achieved full qualifications)<sup>35</sup>.

The RPL processes are financed in a number of ways: by enterprises; through paid leave taken by employees; by state/region financing of the unemployed and by individuals.

### *Denmark*

Since 2004, significant steps have been taken to expand opportunities to recognise prior learning in the context of adult education, which has a long tradition in Denmark. RPL is a main element of Denmark's lifelong learning strategy (2006). In 2007, a coordinated RPL strategy of legislation, quality assurance, tools to document prior learning and an information campaign was launched.<sup>36</sup> The focus was placed in extending RPL to more areas of adult education, with the intention of extending this to other areas of the education system in the long term.<sup>37</sup> The 2007 legislation extends the scope of RPL. It provides an individual right to RPL for adults in the areas of: vocational training, single courses in adult education and general upper secondary education, vocational education and training, basic adult education, and liberal adult education. RPL is also available in relation to the voluntary sector.

An RPL process can be used to obtain a) a certificate of entry (for admission to programmes); b) a certificate of competency (where competencies are the same as those obtained by completing part of a qualification; or c) a certificate of education, where the skills achieved are the same as those obtained by completing a programme. There are restrictions on the education and training domains in which these certificates can be issued. The RPL system is underpinned by agreements with the social partners to raise awareness and promote RPL, develop skills portfolios and industry-specific practice guidelines. In addition, a National Knowledge Centre for Validation of Prior Learning has been established ([www.nvr.nu](http://www.nvr.nu)). It disseminates information, develops methods of assessment and shares knowledge with Jobcentres, training/education institutions and other stakeholders.

An evaluation of the RPL programme (2009)<sup>38</sup> found that RPL was mainly used for the purposes of access to education programmes which institutions themselves provide. RPL is offered by education

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<sup>35</sup> [http://media.education.gouv.fr/file/2009/95/5/RERS\\_2009\\_FINAL\\_WEB\\_117955.pdf](http://media.education.gouv.fr/file/2009/95/5/RERS_2009_FINAL_WEB_117955.pdf) p. 264;

<http://www.education.gouv.fr/cid51224/la-demande-validation-des-acquis-experience-stabilise-2008.html>

<sup>36</sup> See summary of national action lines for RPL at <http://pub.uvm.dk/2008/priorlearning/index.html>

<sup>37</sup> See Validation of prior learning within adult education in Denmark, Status report regarding Act no. 556 of 6 June 2007, Summary and perspectives, Danish Evaluation Institute (EVA), 2010 ([www.eva.dk](http://www.eva.dk))

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, p.9.



institutions, but not by all. The process of RPL involves counselling, guidance and documentation of competences. A number of financing arrangements for RPL are in place. These include state support for target groups (such as the low-skilled); individual contributions and state support to institutions (through the general financing system).

### *Netherlands*<sup>39</sup>

The notable features of the Netherlands system are:

- a joint coordinated strategy on the part of the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment was put in place in 2007 to drive and support RPL.
- a joint ministerial project, with dedicated funds of €4.2m in 2005 and €12.2m in 2006 for RPL, was agreed.
- an RPL support infrastructure was developed based on supporting collaboration between stakeholders at regional level and within sectors, developing the role of the Knowledge Centre and providing subsidies to incentivise the availability of RPL.
- an expanded role for the Knowledge Centre to support RPL for sectors and develop a quality code for RPL.
- a comprehensive web-based portal with information for all users.

RPL is promoted in the Netherlands as part of its lifelong learning strategy (1998) and plans for a knowledge society. It relates to objectives to raise the qualification levels of the working population (so that 80% have at least a basic qualification by 2010); raise participation rates in education and training amongst the adult working population; and to raise the level of qualifications of young people.<sup>40</sup> In this context, RPL “provides not only an added incentive for continuous learning, but also for improving the match between education and the labour market, since it will now centre not only on supply but also demand. The skills acquired, can after all lead directly to awarding certificates and to exemptions from diploma requirements. They can also form part of personnel policy and provide insight into individual employability”.<sup>41</sup>

In 2005, the government took a number of steps to build on practice and experience. A joint Ministerial project, *Reinforcing Learning and Working Action programme 2005-2007*, identified RPL as one of a number of key mechanisms to deliver lifelong learning. The broad aim was to encourage support and buy-in to RPL by ensuring quality, providing information, and developing regulation, as appropriate at the national level. A budget of €16.4m was provided for 2005-2006. This was intended to support a bottom-up approach, at regional level, to the provision of advice, assessment and education and training programmes for individuals. Since 2005, the main actions taken were to develop a quality code for RPL, a register of accredited providers, agreements with providers to

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<sup>39</sup> Description of the development of the system, see <http://www.kenniscentrumevc.nl/apl-english/6-valuing-learning-in-the-netherlands>. See Country background report, Netherlands, 2007, at <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/4/22/41680313.pdf>

<sup>40</sup> Reinforcing Learning and Working Action programme 2005-2007, an interdepartmental project, p.12

<sup>41</sup> EVC-report ‘The Glass is half full’, Ministry of Economic Affairs, 2001, p. 10), cited in Country background Netherlands, p.109



complete a given number of RPL processes and one-stop-shops for information and advice and projects for certain target groups.

The Knowledge centre for RPL (*Kenniscentrum*)<sup>42</sup> was mandated to develop a quality code for RPL and to support the development of RPL in sectors (in cooperation with employers, employees and training centres). The inter-departmental project directorate, *Learning and Work*, would enter into agreements with regional and sectoral organisations to deliver a certain number of RPL procedures. It set targets for RPL: by 2010, it aimed to have 50,000 RPL procedures, building up from 7,500 in 2005 and 12,500 in 2007. In 2007, the directorate had entered into 45 agreements to deliver RPL<sup>43</sup>.

An individual who completes an RPL procedure receives an *Ervaringscertificaat (EVC)*. This is a standard report which documents an individual's learning in relation to entry to/exemptions from existing programmes; the achievement of qualifications, occupational or sectoral standards which are accredited by the relevant government or sector. The EVC can contain recommendations for career development. Assessments are based on the relevant benchmark of occupational standards (in VET), national or sectoral standards or qualifications. The EVC can encompass a formative and a summative dimension. In late 2009, additional steps were taken to strengthen the EVC issued to an individual.

The quality code for RPL 2006, was agreed by a wide number of bodies responsible for education and training provision – including universities of applied science, vocational education and training, education and training centres and the Open University. The aims of the code are to build transparency, reliability and comparability for everyone involved. For example, one way in which comparability of EVCs is to be achieved is through the provision of information on the assessment methodologies and benchmarks used.

One of the uses of the Code is that education and training institutions that agree the Code and are evaluated enter a Register of accredited providers. This entitles them and individual clients to tax subsidies for RPL. These providers enter into agreements with government to provide a targeted number of RPL processes. The Register is available on the website of the Kenniscentrum. It also enables an individual to search by sector, profession, training and provider for details concerning the RPL processes that are available.

An information portal on RPL has been developed (<http://www.ervaringscertificaat.nl/>). This searchable database provides information on the EVC, providers of EVCs and sectoral initiatives.

The majority of RPL providers are in the vocational training and higher professional training areas as well as in private schools. Any organisation/institution/centre which signs up to the quality code and is evaluated can offer RPL.

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42 [www.kenniscentrumevc.nl](http://www.kenniscentrumevc.nl). It is funded by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment. It was set up in 2001 to share practice and experience and promote RPL

43 Funding of up to 75% of the costs was available from the Learning and Work programme. In 2008, it had a budget of €10m. OECD Country Note, p.49



An individual RPL process, estimated to cost an average of €1000, is financed in a number of ways:

- tax subsidies for providers
- tax relief for individuals
- state funding for target groups
- collective labour agreements
- sectoral training funds.

RPL is mainly used in relation to upper and post-secondary vocational education. Practice in universities is difficult to estimate but it is estimated to be small and limited to programme entry and exemptions<sup>44</sup>. There are instances of the use of RPL for specific sectors/target groups. For example, it used to enable individuals take non-traditional routes towards teaching qualifications.<sup>45</sup> There are also cases where large companies integrate RPL into human resource management such as Corus (steel manufacturing) and Heinz. RPL is included in a number of collective labour agreements (between employers' organisations and trade unions)<sup>46</sup>, including in some areas of retail, childcare, the metal industry and social services.

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<sup>44</sup> According to the European Inventory report for Netherlands, 2007

[http://www2.cedefop.europa.eu/etv/Information\\_resources/EuropeanInventory/publications/inventory/chapters/2007/netherlands.pdf](http://www2.cedefop.europa.eu/etv/Information_resources/EuropeanInventory/publications/inventory/chapters/2007/netherlands.pdf). The Open University is an exception to this (Country Note, Ireland, 2007, p.37-38).

<sup>45</sup> Introduced in 2004, see Inventory above, p.11-12 and OECD Country Note, Ireland, 2008, p.47 which states that RPL was introduced, under legislation, to encourage take up of teaching. Costs are borne by the employer.

<sup>46</sup> These involve a proportion of employees' gross wages being set aside for training and development such as in the electrical and civil engineering sector (OTIB). Under this, every employee has a right to an RPL process, Country note, Ireland, p.49



## Appendix IV: Specific Issues and recommendations on RPL in education and training

### Information compiled and provided by NQAI

The following recommendations were made in the Framework Implementation and Impact Study (2009):

- The Qualifications Authority, awarding bodies and providers should work to improve transparency and consistency in the interpretation and application of prior learning and in the communication of pathways other than the Leaving Certificate into higher education and training.
- Inconsistencies in the operation and application of RPL that present barriers to progression should be addressed. Action should be taken by the Qualifications Authority and awarding bodies to:
  - encourage institutions and providers in further and higher education and training to clarify the contexts and circumstances in which RPL is available.
  - promote awareness and knowledge of institutional and sectoral arrangements for RPL amongst users.
  - explore the potential to develop cross-sectoral and cross-institutional brokerage services for RPL for learners.
  - develop and implement transparent sector-wide approaches to RPL.

The SIF RPL project report RPL - a focus on practice, Cork Institute of Technology, 2009 noted that: 'an attitudinal and cultural shift must be engaged with to overcome the barriers and negative myths associated with recognising prior learning in order to successfully address learner requirements in the twenty-first century'. It recommended action on user-friendly approaches to RPL, collaboration between institutions, quality assurance, staff development, mentoring, awareness and information and partnerships with employers.

Recommendations in the Lónra report to FÁS included:

- targeted initiatives for individuals (advice, assistance on RPL and in going through the process) which could be linked to the national skills strategy, provide through FÁS, Skillnets and initiatives supported by the then Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment.
- an RPL function to be set up by education and training providers which is linked to the needs of local industry and funded by industry bodies.
- national level funding for training RPL practitioners, companies and individuals for implementation.
- The report also included recommendations to the FETAC and HETAC to develop more awards in different fields of learning, develop minor, supplemental and special purpose awards at higher levels of the NFQ, put in place clear processes for learners, resource and support learners and offer flexible assessment periods.

## Appendix V: International examples of RPL Fees and Costs in Further/Higher Education

Institution/ Country	Purpose	Assessment Method	Cost/Fee	Notes
Province of New Brunswick Canada)	Apprenticeship Programmes	The Program Standards Officer assesses the prior learning. The assessment is validated by the Program Standards Officer responsible for the particular occupation. The length of time the assessment procedures take depends on availability of curriculum and the complexity of learning that is being assessed.	No fee for applicants	
New Brunswick Community College Programmes	Further education and training	The Department Head and/or teaching staff in the relevant program area assess the prior learning. The length of time the assessments procedures take depend on the type and amount of learning that is being assessed. The College does not have program-specific procedures for prior learning assessment. The methods of assessment can range from testing, to portfolio, to demonstrations.	Base rate of \$50 for a course, a module, or a group of units of instruction with durations of up to 30 hours. There will be an extra fee of \$25 for each additional 15 hours, up to a maximum of \$400 per school year.	
University of New Brunswick	Higher education	Initial meeting with Prior Learning Assessment Co-ordinator. Faculty-based assessment committee needs to understand the following components. It is the individual responsibility to provide documentation outlining: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prior knowledge/skills</li> <li>• Relevance of your learning related to the desired outcomes of the program/course(s) for which the Prior Learning Assessment credit is being sought <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Analysis and evidence of learning is presented and assessed through one or more of the following methods determined by the faculty: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Portfolio of learning experiences</li> <li>○ Interview with content specialist</li> <li>○ Challenge exam</li> <li>○ Product or skill demonstration</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> </ul>	There is a <u>non-refundable</u> service fee of \$400.00 per application. The PLA fee is for the assessment process and is not related to the amount of credit awarded or not. Once you have met with the PLA Coordinator and finalized your PLA submission, you will then complete the PLA application form and pay the fee in order to have your learning assessed for academic credit.	Maximum of 50% of programme credits can be gained through Prior Learning Assessment Recognition



Institution/ Country	Purpose	Assessment Method	Cost/Fee	Notes
Manitoba Province (Canada)	Adult Learning Centres (basic education)	PLAR advisory services	Free to individuals	
Brandon University		Portfolio/Challenge Exams	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Brandon University - A PLAR application fee of \$300.00 is levied irrespective of the number of courses to which an applicant is seeking to apply PLAR.</li> </ul>	
University of Winnipeg		Portfolio/Challenge exams	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students will be charged a fee equal to one half of the tuition fee normally associated with the course(s) they are seeking to challenge. This fee is prorated against the total number of credit hours involved (1, 3, or 6).</li> </ul>	
Red River College		<p>The maximum fee charged to any student for Prior Learning Assessment at RRC in any one year will not exceed the full-time program fee as determined by the Registrar. The PLAR fees are non-refundable and non-transferable. Assessment methods -Portfolio, Challenge Exams, Programme Outcomes</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><u>Assessment of Educational Documents for Transfer Credit</u> Transfer of Credit from publicly funded Manitoba Post-secondary institutions - No Fee Transfer of Credit from other Canadian Post-secondary institutions - \$15.00 per course (maximum \$75.00 per application) Transfer of Credit from International Post-secondary institutions - Fee to be considered on an individual basis (minimum of \$50.00 up to a maximum \$250.00 per application)</li> <li><u>Portfolio Assessment Fees</u> Portfolio assessment fee for each course in which a portfolio assessment is requested. Portfolio assessment fee for courses up to 20 hours - \$75.00 Portfolio assessment fee for courses 21-60 hours - \$150.00 Portfolio assessment fee for courses 61+ hours - \$250.00</li> <li><u>Challenge Process Fees</u> * Challenge Examinations (i.e. written/oral examinations, projects, assignments or a combination of) - \$35.00 per hour of assessment up to a maximum of \$250.00 per course (includes cost of consumables) Practical Examinations, Skill Demonstrations, Simulations - \$35.00 per hour of assessment up to a maximum of \$350.00 per course (plus cost of consumables)</li> <li>Full time students enrolled in full time programs will be assessed a PLAR fee of \$100 per course for a Challenge Examination process (i.e. written/oral exams, projects, assignment or combinations of) or a course portfolio assessment. If the designated course PLAR fee is less than \$100, students will pay the lower PLAR course fee. For PLAR assessment involving Skill Demonstration/ Practical Skill examinations/Simulations, full time students will pay the designated PLAR fee as determined by the program area, based on the PLAR Fee Range Guidelines.</li> </ul>	

Institution/ Country	Purpose	Assessment Method	Cost/Fee	Notes
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fees for Assessing PLAR for Program Outcomes: In programs where PLAR is conducted on a program outcomes basis, the PLAR fees will be based on \$35.00 per hour of assessment (plus cost of consumables if any) for each program outcome. The maximum amount charged to conduct PLAR for all program outcomes in a program will not exceed the full time program fee as determined by the Registrar.</li> </ul>	
Netherlands	National - Further and Higher Education	<p>The prices of EVC programmes vary from zero up to more than a few thousand Euro. Sometimes EVC providers do not charge a consumer of the programmes when he/she - beforehand or after finishing the EVC program - give notice of his/her willingness to enrol in a regular course of the same institute.</p> <p>The most expensive EVC procedures are the procedures in which an EVC organisation uses a lot of time and expertise in organising visits at the workshop, practical tests or career advising. In fixing a price of a EVC procedure it is also important to take into account the number of hours it costs an employee to participate, generally between 8 and 20 hours, as well as the time needed by his/her manager and/or portfolio drafter.</p>	<p>According to the Knowledge Centre EVC, EVC procedures carried out by institutions for higher education and by the KBB's, averagely cost an amount of € 1.000,- up to € 1.250,- per participant, including the costs of assessment and recognition of the results. EVC procedures carried out by MBO institutions (senior secondary education) averagely are cheaper. This is possible because part of the costs is compensated for by the enrolment of the participant in regular training programs.</p>	Note EVC is the acronym for Recognition of non-formal and informal learning assessment in the Netherlands.
UK University of East Anglia		<p>Applicants are advised to allow 10 weeks for APEL procedure. Portfolio of evidence using:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>where applicable, confirmation by line-manager of job responsibilities and job description;</li> <li>a record of achievements;</li> <li>where applicable, details of specialist training/skills;</li> <li>contact details of two referees, who can comment on the candidate's achievements;</li> <li>documentation to demonstrate the learning outcomes achieved and the candidate's personal reflection of how</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The University will charge an APEL assessment fee (a flat rate of £120). If the APEL application is successful, the candidate will be charged a fee for the award of exempted credit, e.g. £20 per 20 credit exemption. Therefore: Total Cost = Tuition fee for the outstanding credits/modules required + Fee for the award of credit + The APEL assessment fee. The APEL assessment fee is not refundable.</li> </ul>	For postgraduate applicants, APEL exemptions may not be granted for more than 25% of the total number of credit points required for an award. For undergraduate applicants, APEL exemptions may not be granted for more than 60 credits of the total number of

Institution/ Country	Purpose	Assessment Method	Cost/Fee	Notes
		the experience has furthered his/her understanding of the relevant subject area; (6) a completed application form.		credit points required for an award.
University of Staffordshire		Multiple modes of assessment - responsibility of RPL assessor/tutor. Combination of exams/interviews/written assignments/portfolio.	Once the applicant is enrolled on the course the fee may be incorporated into the course fee. There will be no reduction in fees for full-time students; however, the fees for part-time students are as follows. Accreditation of Prior Certified Learning (APCL) will be charged at 10% of the standard module fee and Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning at 40% of the normal module fee.	
King's College, London		When applying for a programme, a student may recognise that the subject content of a module is already familiar to them, but that their learning has not been formally assessed (i.e. they have learnt from experience). If this is the case, the student may wish to claim credit for that module and would need to apply for Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning.	APEL applications are normally made to the department's APEL committee after being accepted on a programme and before starting on that programme. There is a non-refundable APEL fee: the current cost per 20 credit module is £400, and payment must be received together with the application.	
Scottish Higher Education Institutes			Some universities do not charge for RPL. The RPL process, whether for entry or credit, is regarded to be part of the admissions process. It is also viewed as part of widening participation strategies through providing a route of entry into the university for non-traditional learners. At other universities, fees are not normally charged for RPL for entry into a programme, as this is regarded as part of the admissions process. Fees however are charged for claims for RPL for credit. These fees vary across institutions but include the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• up to £60 for RPL or RPL and credit transfer claims</li> <li>• 50% of the module cost.</li> <li>• full module cost</li> </ul>	
University of West Scotland	RPL for Chartered Teacher programme	Within the university system you can claim credit for up to six modules and depending on individual circumstances to make such a claim should take one semester to complete.  There is a clear outline of the principles and mechanisms for making claims in the materials for Chartered Teachers provided on the GTCS website and we would encourage you to read what is stated there as this sets out the General Teaching Council's requirements which	<b>Cost and Support</b>  <i>The initial registration and consultation fee is non refundable</i> and is set at £100. This payment is requested at the time of your formal enrolment to the process. The cost of making the actual APL/APEL claim is £100 per module worth of credit awarded. Therefore the cost of an award of one module will be £100, an award of six will be £600 in addition to the non-refundable initial consultation and registration fee. The final fee will be invoiced once your claim has been assessed and an award made. Individuals who are awarded less credit than they claim. If an individual claims for 6 modules but is only awarded 4 then	

Institution/ Country	Purpose	Assessment Method	Cost/Fee	Notes
		<p>govern our assessment of claims.</p> <p>The relevant publication entitled "Achieving the Standard for Chartered Teachers - Guidance for Teachers" is available from the GTCS site. Download, print off or open the relevant PDF file and locate Section 4 which pertains to APL/APEL. In particular please note the word counts outlined by the GTCS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 module equivalent 2500-3500 words plus evidence</li> <li>• 2 module equivalent 3500-4500 words plus evidence</li> <li>• 3 module equivalent 4500-5500 words plus evidence</li> <li>• 4 module equivalent 5400-6600 words plus evidence</li> <li>• 5 module equivalent 6500-7700 words plus evidence</li> <li>• 6 module equivalent 7200-8800 words plus evidence.</li> </ul>	<p>they will be charged £400 (in addition to the initial £100) however the individual will not be entitled to make a further claim with us. This is because (in this example) the individual will have made a claim for the maximum number of APL/APEL modules allowed via the partial APL route in line with GTCS guidelines for providers.</p> <p>On the other hand, if an individual makes a claim for 4 modules but is only awarded 2, then they will be charged £200 (in addition to the initial £100) however this individual would be entitled to undertake a further claim for 2 modules worth of APL/APEL (the original 4 plus the further claim for 2 which makes up the maximum of 6).</p> <p><b>Support</b></p> <p>You will have access to an online tutor who will provide you with materials, activities and advice on how to put your claim together, plus comment and feedback on a draft claim. Thereafter the claim will be submitted and assessed independently of the tutor.</p>	
Norway	Further and Higher Education	<p><b>RPL equivalent to Upper Secondary</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dialogue/Interview</li> <li>• Assessment of Portfolio</li> <li>• Vocational testing - theoretical and practical testing of trades</li> </ul> <p><b>Higher Education</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognition of prior certified learning</li> <li>• Self Declarations</li> <li>• Portfolios</li> </ul> <p><i>Recent Norwegian survey found that higher education institutions lack procedures for granting exemptions to candidates from modules.</i></p>	<p>Recognition related to the upper secondary educational system is to a certain extent related to individual legal rights, and for the individual the procedure is for free.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If you are born before 1978 and do not have a general or vocational certificate from upper secondary level, the recognition procedure (guidance, assessment and documentation) is for free. The costs are included in the county councils "adult learning budget". The size of this budget is decided locally in each county.</li> <li>• If disabled to work, the social security office can pay for the recognition procedure.</li> <li>• If you are unemployed, the employment office can pay for the recognition procedure. In 2005 Vox and the Directorate of Labour have started a national project for improving the dialogue between the employment offices and county councils. It seems that it is not the price of the recognition that prevents unemployed persons to seek the assessment centres. It is more a</li> </ul>	

Institution/ Country	Purpose	Assessment Method	Cost/Fee	Notes
			<p>challenge connected to know about the assessment and the capacity of the assessment centres.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>If you do not fill the criteria for getting the recognition for free, you have to pay yourself.</li> </ul> <p>The county councils who are responsible for recognition related to criteria in upper secondary education charge more or less the same prices. The prices vary from €120 to €300 for an academic/general subject, €300 for a vocational subject and €1,800 for vocational testing.</p> <p>Recognition related to the higher education system is a procedure that is free for the individual applicant. The costs must be covered by the budget of the university or university college. The Act relating to Universities and University Colleges (§3-5, 3-6, 3-7) states that the institutions may grant applicants who are 25 years of age or older admission to specific courses if they on the basis of their prior learning (formal and non-formal) hold the necessary qualifications for the course concerned. Documentation of prior learning may also provide a basis for exemption from an examination or test.</p>	
Denmark	All levels		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Assessment of basic skills</i> Participants in adult vocational training and single subject courses that are included in a common competence description in the adult vocational training system have the right to assessment of their basic skills in reading, writing, spelling, arithmetic, and mathematics. No user fees will be charged for this assessment.</li> <li><i>Adult vocational training (GVU and AMU)</i> Persons with qualifications up to and including upper secondary vocational level have the right to assessment of their competences. This assessment can be used as the basis for issuing competence documentation, and as the basis for the preparation of a personal education plan. No user fees will be charged for this assessment. Policy goal is to raise participation rates in adult vocational training, so the model may therefore not be cost neutral.</li> <li><i>General adult education</i> The assessment of non-formal and informal learning in general adult education will be introduced without user fees and with taximeter funding to those competence clarification programmes with the goal of issuing competence certificates and documentation. Since opportunities for competence clarification and program length shortening</li> </ul>	

Institution/ Country	Purpose	Assessment Method	Cost/Fee	Notes
			<p>currently exist in placement procedures in adult education and higher preparatory single-subject courses, there will be no overall cost savings resulting from shortened programme length.</p> <p><i>Tertiary education</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The introduction of the assessment of non-formal and informal learning in tertiary adult education and diploma programmes presupposes a degree of user fees and state subsidy for competence assessment that results in shortened programme length of 15% or more or the issuance of a certificate or diploma. The model is cost-neutral, in that additional state subsidy is balanced by savings in taxpayer funding due to shorter programme length. User fees are only applicable for individuals with qualifications above upper secondary vocational level.</li> </ul>	
Belgium	All levels	<p>Multiple assessment methods ("competence passports", practical testing, theoretical testing, leading to various certification of previous learning including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Certificate of competencies</li> <li>Certificate of experience</li> <li>Certificate of education (based on previous certified learning)</li> <li>Certificate of function (certificate based on voluntary experience)</li> </ul>	<p>The procedure for recognition of acquired competences or qualifications in higher education does not involve any costs, unless it relates to certificates for which the institution does not know the 'value' and considers it necessary to order an additional proficiency test. This is the case for competences acquired outside formal education. In that case, the associations are responsible for recognition and assessment and the cost price of the proficiency test. The maximum cost for the assessment varies (VLOR, 2007):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>590 euro for a proficiency assessment at academic or professional bachelor level</li> <li>770 euro for a proficiency assessment at master level if the individual has no bachelor degree</li> <li>230 euro for a proficiency assessment at master level if the individual has a bachelor degree</li> <li>55 euro administrative cost for a proficiency assessment for partial elements of a study + cost depending on the number of competence assessments to be undertaken</li> </ul> <p>The procedure for recognition of acquired competences or qualifications in adult education does not involve any costs. There are two exceptions to that rule:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>15 euro for students who have enrolled in a distance course and want their competences assessed</li> <li>15 euro for students who take up the procedure of assessment through the decentralized examination boards in order to obtain a secondary education diploma.</li> </ul>	
South Africa			National Guidelines: RPL services and assessment should not cost more than a full-time face-to-face programme, particularly if such services are integrated into the existing infrastructure. The cost of developing	

Institution/ Country	Purpose	Assessment Method	Cost/Fee	Notes
			<p>a system and the necessary capacity to support the system is not unlike the costs involved in the development of a new learning programme. This means that the initial start-up costs may be relatively high, but increasingly, with learners entering such a programme, the costs are reduced and spread over a period of time. In principle, RPL should be more cost-effective for candidates, employers and employees by reducing the cost of training in terms of those parts of the qualification for which the candidate already meets the requirements. The cost of developing RPL systems and capacity must be seen as an investment in the development of a credible lifelong learning system in South Africa.</p>	



## List of submissions received

AONTAS

Department of Education and Skills

Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT)

Fáilte Ireland

FÁS

IBEC Retail Skillnet

Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC)

Institutes of Technology, Ireland (IOTI)

Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU)

Irish Small and Medium Enterprises (ISME) Association

Irish Universities Association (IUA)

Irish Vocational Education Association (IVEA)

Mandate

National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA)

National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE)

National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI)

Roadmap for Employment Academic Partnerships (REAP)

Skillnets

Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI)

University of Ulster





## Members of the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs

Una Halligan, Chairperson, Director, Government & Public Affairs for Ireland, Hewlett Packard

Marie Bourke, Department Manager, Education, Skills and Labour Market Policy Department, Forfás (Head of Secretariat)

Inez Bailey, Director, National Adult Literacy Agency

George Bennett, Departmental Manager, Clean Tech, IDA Ireland

Liz Carroll, Training and Development Manager, ISME

Terry Corcoran, Director of Planning and Research, FÁS

Ned Costello, Chief Executive, Irish Universities Association

Margaret Cox, Director, I.C.E. Group and Pitman Training

Tony Donohoe, Head of Education, Social and Innovation Policy, IBEC

Brendan Ellison, Principal Officer, Department of Finance

Anne Forde, Principal Officer, Department of Education and Skills

Pat Hayden, Principal Officer, Department of Education and Skills

Gary Keegan, Director, Acumen

Enda McDonnell, Policy and Corporate Development, Enterprise Ireland

John Martin, Director for Employment, Labour & Social Affairs, OECD

Dermot Mulligan, Assistant Secretary, Department of Education and Skills

Frank Mulvihill, Former President, Institute of Guidance Counsellors

Dr Brendan Murphy, President, Cork Institute of Technology

Alan Nuzum, CEO, Skillnets

Muiris O'Connor, Higher Education Authority

Peter Rigney, Industrial Officer, ICTU

Martin Shanahan, Chief Executive, Forfás

Jacinta Stewart, Chief Executive, City of Dublin VEC



## Recent Publications by the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs

Report	Date of Publication
Vacancy Overview 2010	March 2011
Future Skills Needs of Enterprise within the Green Economy in Ireland	November 2010
Future Skills Requirements of the Biopharma-Pharmachem Sector	November 2010
Monitoring Ireland's Skills Supply - Trends in Education and Training Outputs 2010	July 2010
National Skills Bulletin 2010	July 2010
Future Skills Needs of the Wholesale and Retail Sector	May 2010
Future Skills Requirements of the Food and Beverage Sector	November 2009
Skills in Creativity, Design and Innovation	November 2009
Monitoring Ireland's Skill Supply - Trends in Education and Training Outputs 2009	November 2009
National Skills Bulletin 2009	July 2009
A Quantitative Tool for Workforce Planning in Healthcare: Example Simulations	June 2009
A Review of the Employment and Skills Needs of the Construction Industry in Ireland	December 2008
Statement on Raising National Mathematical Achievement	December 2008
National Skills Bulletin 2008	November 2008
All-Island Skills Study	October 2008
Monitoring Ireland's Skills Supply: Trends in Education/Training Outputs 2008	July 2008
The Expert Group on Future Skills Needs Statement of Activity 2007	June 2008
Future Requirement for High-Level ICT Skills in the ICT Sector	June 2008
Future Skills Needs of the Irish Medical Devices Sector	February 2008
Survey of Selected Multi-National Employers' Perceptions of Certain Graduates from Irish Higher Education	December 2007
The Future Skills and Research Needs of the International Financial Services Industry	December 2007
National Skills Bulletin 2007	November 2007
Monitoring Ireland's Skills Supply: Trends in Educational/Training Outputs	June 2007
Tomorrow's Skills: Towards a National Skills Strategy	March 2007



Expert Group on Future Skills Needs  
c/o Forfás  
Wilton Park House  
Wilton Place  
Dublin 2, Ireland

Tel: +353 1 607 3000  
Fax: +353 1 607 3276

[www.skillsireland.ie](http://www.skillsireland.ie)

